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HANDEL'S ACIS & GALATEA PROGRAM NOTES

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Acis and Galatea, HWV 49 (1718)

Shortly after Handel's arrival in London in 1712, he was invited to stay at Burlington House (Piccadilly), the estate of Richard Boyle, the Earl of Burlington. There he met the great poet Alexander Pope, the poet and dramatist John Gay (author of *The Beggar's Opera*), and the Queen's physician and Tory wit John Arbuthnot. With them and other luminaries he must have enjoyed the same sort of environs and social activities as he had experienced in Rome with the Cardinals Pamphili and Ottoboni, and the Marquis Ruspoli. Then, a few years later, after the famous *Water Music* performance on the River Thames for King George I in July 1717, Handel traveled to Cannons, a mansion near Edgware owned by James Brydges, Earl of Carnarvon and later Duke of Chandos.

Cannons was a spectacular home, constructed at a cost then of more than £200,000, which is equivalent to nearly \$50,000,000 today. At least five architects worked on the designs, responding to Brydges' regularly shifting ideals, ultimately leading to a synthesis of both Palladian and Baroque styles. The house was situated on an estate comprised of 105 acres of magnificently manicured and landscaped gardens, including water gardens that required the development of new technologies to support the ornamental fountains, a canal, and a water basin. Brydges filled the main structure with an extravagant collection of art, some of it acquired during his own expeditions of what was known then as the "Grand Tour," a European pilgrimage that was something of a rite of passage for young men of the British aristocracy and landed gentry. Other works were acquired through commissions, and some were purchased sight-unseen. Brydges also maintained a very fine orchestra of some thirty musicians, including a few from important European musical families. Among them were Johann Christian Bach (the youngest son of Johann Sebastian) and Francesco Scarlatti (brother of Alessandro). The German-born composer Johann Christoph Pepusch — known in England as "Dr. Pepusch" — served as music director, but the most notable composer to spend time there was, of course, Handel.

Thus, Brydges became known as "The Apollo of the Arts," and Handel was able to "soak it all in" as he had done just a few years before during his extended trip to Italy, where he socialized with the highest-ranking members of society and the Church. At Cannons, he was able to collaborate with various librettists in two works that were first presented as masques — a form of courtly entertainment that flourished in England from the time of Henry Purcell and remained popular even during the onslaught of Italian opera in London — certainly with costumes and sets to further illuminate the magnificence of the house venue. Those works were *Esther* and *Acis and Galatea*. Unbeknownst to Handel at the time, *Esther* would be revived fourteen years later and would gain nothing less than the distinction of being the first English oratorio, a genre that would ultimately be defined by works such as *Messiah*, *Israel in Egypt*, and *Judas Maccabaeus*. Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, a pastoral drama in two short acts, would see more performances in the composer's lifetime than any other of his dramatic works.

The story comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and its portrayal of the simplicity of rural life spoke well to the Arcadian ideals of Brydges and his circle. Requiring as few as five singers and only seven instrumentalists, it displays a wide range of affects, from pastoral imagery (exposition of scene and characters) to melodramatic tragedy (death of Acis) to grotesque humor (character of Polyphemus), and it shows Handel's insights into human joy, pleasure, suffering, and

redemption. The music is melodically and harmonically inventive, and has a surprisingly rich and refined texture, especially considering the economy of its scoring. The musical structures Handel uses are those of the operatic stage: simple and accompanied recitative and da capo arias are his mainstay, supplemented by choruses. The libretto, while hardly high literary art, provides an ample store of suggestive images for musical elaboration: cooing doves, flowing streams, and, of course, the raging giant. However disagreeable he may be, Polyphemus clearly appealed to Handel's gifts for musical characterization. From his first mention in the chorus that opens Act II until his inexplicable disappearance from the proceedings after the murder of Acis, he dominates not only dramatically, but musically. We can smile at his blustering, as well as shudder. But, whether in the accompanied recitative with which he enters the action, or in "Cease to beauty to be suing," with its perpetual metrical surprises, Polyphemus is a scene-stealer: only once he is out of the way can Galatea and the pastoral chorus reclaim center-stage, to bid the gentle Acis farewell.

It is ironic that Polyphemus proves to be one of the more "human" characters in the drama. Handel's omnipresent talent to reveal the humanity in his characters seems to thrive in his portrayal of the rather pathetic monster. We feel sorry for his clumsiness, his awkwardness, and his loneliness. Even his murderous act seems almost understandable considering his embarrassment and frustration. Damon, too, exhibits compassionate traits of concern for not only his friend, Acis, but also for the pain that he perceives to be felt by Polyphemus. But it is the message of transformative love that makes a lasting impression on us. The sacrifice of Acis at the hands of a monster's deranged passion and rage inspires Galatea to immortally share the shepherd's pure love with the world.

— Jeffrey Thomas & Alan Lewis