

TAFELMUSIK BAROQUE ORCHESTRA

Water Music - February 2009

PROGRAMME NOTES

Rameau Suite from *Dardanus*

Rameau's tragedy *Dardanus* was first presented at the Paris Opera in 1739. Although the 56-year-old Rameau was at the height of his career and in the previous six years had produced four very successful operas, this newest tragedy was given a mixed reception. Before reviving it in 1744, Rameau and his librettist, Le Clerc de la Bruyère, made radical changes, completely rewriting three of the five acts. This *nouvelle tragédie*, as Rameau called it, was much more successful. It also formed the basis of yet another revival in 1760, this one triumphant. For this final production, the 77-year-old composer made yet more additions and substitutions. The three versions of *Dardanus* thus encompass an enormous amount of music, including a vast amount of purely orchestral music. Indeed, an anonymous critic of the first production complained that it was "so laden with music that for three whole hours the orchestra players have not time to sneeze." We have selected a suite of symphonies and dances for tonight's programme.

Handel *Water Music*

At about eight in the evening the King repaired to his barge. Next to the King's barge was that of the musicians, about 50 in number -- trumpets, horns, oboes, bassoon, German flutes [transverse flutes], French flutes [recorders], violins, and basses, but no singers. The music had been composed specially by the famous Handel, a native of Halle, and his Majesty's principal court composer. His Majesty's approval of it was so great that he caused it to be played three times in all; twice before and once after supper, even though each performance lasted an hour. The evening was fine as could be desired for the occasion and the number of barges and boats full of people wanting to listen was beyond counting.

It was on the occasion of the royal river excursion of July 17, 1717, described above by the Brandenburg Resident in London, Friedrich Bonet, that Handel's "Celebrated Water Music" was first performed. River parties were regular occurrences during the summer season in 18th-century London, and royal excursions were important social occasions. The 1717 event was apparently the grandest, and possibly the last, of King George I's water parties. A contemporary newspaper account reported that there were so many boats, filled with "persons of quality," that "the whole river in a manner was cover'd." The barges floated up the river from Whitehall to Chelsea, riding the tide. The King and his party were served dinner at Chelsea at one o'clock in the morning, returning to St. James's Palace at half-past four.

Handel's reputation, both with the royal family and the more general public, was served well by his contribution to the "royal cruise." Movements from the so-called *Water Music* appeared in various publications for several decades, and concert performances were very popular. Throughout the work the wind instruments, so well suited for outdoor use, figure prominently. *Water Music* can be divided into three suites: an extended suite in F Major featuring the oboes, bassoon and horns; a short suite in G Major featuring the recorder; and a majestic suite in D Major featuring the trumpets and horns. For this week's programme we are performing the entire *Water Music*, in an arrangement of movements commonly used in 18th-century concert versions.