

The Instruments of Handels Orchestra

These soft woodwind instruments had practically ceased to exist at that time, and it is evident that Handel would have availed himself of the more usual instruments if thereby he could have obtained the particular effect that was in his mind. It was no doubt for the same reason that he employed 2 chalumeaux in "Quando uno vede," and a bass flute in the arioso of the third act of Ricardo (1727), and in Cleopatra's air "Hark, hark, hark,- he strikes the golden Lyre," and in Giustino Act 1, scene 4 "Puo ben nascer" with 2 flutes, oboe solo, 3 violins, viola and bass. In Alexander Balus (1748) he uses even a Mandolin in conjunction with a harp, two travers flutes, 2 violins, viola, 2 violoncellos, bassoons, harpsichord and contrabasses.

In Orlando Furioso the beautiful Larghetto in E flat "Gia l'ebro" is accompanied by two violette marine and bass. This accompaniment was specially written for and played by the brothers Castrucci, one of whom was the inventor of the instrument. This is the only instance where the full name occurs, though we find violette marked in the accompaniment to Zoroaster's "Sorge in fausta" from the same opera, and also in others of Handel's operas, as Ezio, Rinaldo, etc., where in one and the same work violettes appear in one place and violas in another. One might feel inclined to look upon the former as referring to the violette marine, were it not for the fact that Mattheson, Handel's friend, tells us in his book on the orchestra that the words violette and viola were used indiscriminately for the latter instrument. To Handel belongs also the credit of having introduced the horn into the Opera orchestra. The first instance occurring in Radamisto (1720) where two horns are used in the accompaniment of Tiridate's aria "Abzo al volo". In the same opera he brings a violoncello obbligato in Zenobia's aria "Deggio dunque, oh Dio." The only other violoncello obbligato in Handel's works, which occurs in Ulisses' aria "Come all unto" in Deidamia, was written for the famous Cervetto who came to London in 1728, and was for many years in his orchestra.

The serpent which was used a good deal in French orchestras of the early 18th century was introduced to London in Handel's time. When Handel saw it first, and heard its somewhat harsh and rough sound he asked: 'What do you call that instrument?' When he was told, he called out "A serpent! Ay, but not the serpent that seduced Eve!" He used it nevertheless in Samson (1742), as well as in Solomon (1748), though it does not appear in the score, and in the Fireworks music (1749).

A very interesting feature in Handel's orchestration is the division of the violins into three parts which occurs in many of his operas but was not used after him until in quite modern times. The viol d'amour, though never used by Handel in any of his scores, was nevertheless played between the acts of his opera Amadigi on July 12th, 1716, by Attilio Ariosti, the famous opera composer, who was the greatest 18th century virtuoso on that instrument, for which he wrote 6 lessons or sonatas (arranged for violin by G. Saint George, and for violoncello by A. Piatti). It was a regular custom in those days to have solo performances between the acts of an opera as well as an oratorio, and Handel himself would sometimes play solos (described as "a concerto") on the harpsichord between the acts of the opera or an organ concerto in the case of an oratorio. A Mr. Powelljun, an excellent harpist in Handel's time, played a harp concerto in Alexander's Feast, as well as an obbligato accompaniment to an aria in Esther.

Now that we have given our readers an idea of the composition of Handel's Orchestra, we shall endeavor to give him also an idea of the nature of those instruments which have since become obsolete or rarely played. First we must however, say a few words in explanation of

Handel's predilection for the oboe. This instrument did not come into existence until about the middle of the 17th century, and was greatly improved by the Hotteterre family, famous French makers of woodwind instruments. It was therefore still a comparatively new instrument with only two keys, when Handel began to study it in his early boyhood. Some of his early instrumental compositions were written for it, and afterwards the fine oboe sonatas and concertos. It is the natural treble of the bassoon both being double reed instruments, and the two were the principal woodwind instruments of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the oboe tone possessing more body than that of the flute which on the other hand required less advantages. The clarinet did not become a member of the orchestra until Haydn's and Mozart's times. Both oboe and clarinet descended from the Chalumeau, or Shawm (Germ. Schalmei), originally a shepherd's pipe, it was a reed pipe with nine soundholes, stood in the key of F, and has a compass from f to a' (see illustration). The name is still used sometimes in clarinet pieces to indicate that the notes under which it occurs should be played in the low chalumeau register, i.e., an octave lower than written. The Bass Flute which Handel employs in Ricardo, and Giustino, was probably the bassrecorder, with a compass from B flat to G'. The recorders, like the flageolet were fipple flutes, and of the latter kind he used the piccolo or ottavino flageolet in several instances for example, in Aeis and Galatea. In one instance he also used the travers bass flue in G.

The Cornet (It. cornetto, Germ. Zink) was a woodwind instrument with a cupshaped mouthpiece of ivory or hardwood, and soundholes like the old oboe. The cornet was made in three sizes. The smallest or Cornettino (Germ. Quartzink) had a straight tube with the compass d'-g''; the treble cornet, also generally straight, which Handel used in Tamerlaue, survived longest as it had a soft and agreeable tone, and a compass from a to a". There were two lower cornets with a compass of d-d" which bent in shape. They were carved from wood in two halves which were glued together and covered with leather. The largest (cornetto tortuo) had an S shaped mouthpiece like the bassoon, and this developed eventually into the Serpent (see illustration); it was of two halves carved out of wood, glued together and covered with leather and had either a snakelike form or was folded up like the bassoon. It had six soundholes, stood in B flat and had a compass of A to B flat. The sound was rough and coarse, but it was at the time the only low bass wind instrument and Mendelssohn employed it in the score of St. Paul.