

HILTON HEAD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
PROGRAM NOTES: APRIL 12, 2021 ORCHESTRA SERIES CONCERT

George Frideric Handel – *Water Music*, HWV 348-350

The idea of King George the First ordering grand parties to be held on the River Thames was not such a remarkable one; he did so in 1715 and 1716, possibly encouraged by the Prince and Princess of Wales. By 1717, however, tensions had developed in the Royal Family and the King decided to have his grandest social event that July without the presence of his son. The plan was to take four barges of different sizes and start out from Whitehall Palace at 8:00 at night, arriving in Chelsea for dinner and then returning to Whitehall early in the morning.

The details of the night's festivities were arranged by Baron Kielmannsegg, an officer of the Court of Hanover. The Baron also paid for the orchestra of 50 to perform music on a separate barge sponsored by the City of London. Apparently, the event, being held publicly outside, was the talk of the town. According to the *Daily Courant* (the first British daily newspaper), "Many other barges with Persons of Quality attended, and so great a Number of Boats that the whole river in a manner was cover'd." That article goes on to mention that King George enjoyed the music so much that he asked for it to be performed two more times.

Handel had been the court composer when King George was Elector of Hanover in Prussia. At that time, however, Handel's operas were becoming more and more popular in London and he decided to make a trip there, promising to return. He never did! When George ascended to the English throne in 1714, many scholars have speculated that Handel had poured his heart into *Water Music* as a way of apologizing to his master. Indeed, there is even one early biography of Handel that suggests sections of the piece were in fact first composed for those river parties in 1715 and 1716.

The instrumentation for *Water Music* is somewhat unique for the time period, but certainly not unusual: trumpets, French horns, oboes, bassoons, flutes, and recorders, plus the standard complement of strings. Handel often delights in pitting the trumpets against the horns in antiphonal sections or delicately coloring the strings with an oboe or a flute.

The order of movements is not firmly set and one can find different versions in regular use. Many people group them by key into three suites: one in F major featuring the horns, one in D major with added trumpets, and one with noticeably fewer winds in G. However, there is an early complete edition of Handel's works published in 1886 that combines the D and G major movements. Although most of the movements in *Water Music* are based on dances, there are a few more serious and substantial ones too.

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