ALTERNATE PERFORMING OPTIONS FOR HANDEL’S OP. 2 TRIO SONATAS FOUND IN CONTINENTAL SOURCES

Graydon Beeks

Handel’s first collection of trio sonatas was published in London c. 1730 by John Walsh under the title VI SONATES à deux Violons, deux hautbois ou deux Flutes traversières & Basse Continue Composées Par G. F. HANDEL, SECONDE OUVRAGE,¹ most likely without the composer’s participation. The scoring as given on the title page seems clearly to have been the publisher’s misleading attempt to increase the pool of potential purchasers, because while all six sonatas can be performed by two violins, a number of them cannot be performed by pairs of oboes or transverse flutes owing to the ranges of one or both of the upper two parts. Much has been written concerning the intended scoring of these pieces, since it seems likely that Handel had a particular instrumentation in mind. Since no autograph manuscripts survive, this must be deduced from internal evidence—specifically the keys employed and the ranges of the individual parts—and the designations given in the secondary sources. Differences of opinion remain, and modern performers generally feel free to use whatever instrumentation is practical for their ensembles.

The secondary sources also show that once these pieces were in circulation, some 18th-century musicians chose not to perform them as trio sonatas at all, but instead to adopt methods of performance that Handel would, perhaps, not have anticipated. In an important article published in 2013 and dealing with the transmission of Handel’s instrumental music in Dresden and Berlin, Mary Oleskiewicz called attention to two examples of this procedure.² The first involves increasing the number of players on each part, thereby creating a work for a larger ensemble. One such source in SLUB Dresden (D-Dlb Mus.2410-N-4) consists of a set of parts to the second movement of Op. 2, no. 4 (HWV 389) in the hand of J. G. Morgenstern, violinist at the Dresden court from 1730–1763.³ These were derived from a score in the same hand (D-Dlb Mus.2410-Q-5).

Alterations were entered in both the score and parts by the violinist Johann Georg Pisendel, Konzertmeister of the court orchestra from 1728. Oleskiewicz judges that these changes were made between 1735 and 1755. The label on the cover of the set of parts reads “Sinfonia. VVni. Oboi, Viola e Basso,” but the set as preserved consists of 4 copies of “Violino Imo,” 4 of “Violino 2do,” 6 of “Basso” (1 with figures)

¹ The publisher named on the title page is Etienne Roger, but it is generally agreed that Walsh was, in fact, responsible. See Terence Best, “Handel’s Chamber Music Sources, Chronology and Authenticity,” Birln Music 13/4 (1985): 492.
³ See digitized manuscript at https://digital.slub-dresden.de/werkansicht/dlf/1511/50.