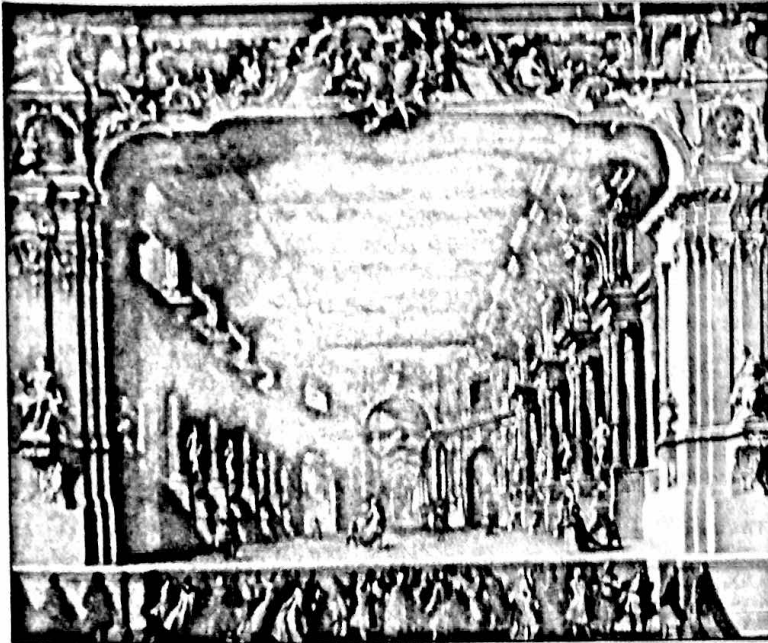


## Vocal works



This is the interior of the Farnese Theatre in Rome.

Vivaldi was interested in opera. Vivaldi's father was in the business of managing opera houses, which certainly provided a connection. He wrote about 40 operas for companies in Venice, Rome, and Vienna, as well as in several smaller centres in Italy, like Verona and Ferrara. He was very well known for his operas during his lifetime, but they are rarely if ever performed today.

His operas suffer from the same problems as all Baroque operas; from a modern perspective they seem dull, with no action, and they are difficult to stage.

Nor did he have Handel's special ability to write for the voice. Some of the sacred music he wrote has remained popular, however. The *Gloria* is performed quite often, and his *Magnificat* and the oratorio *Juditha triumphans* are well known.

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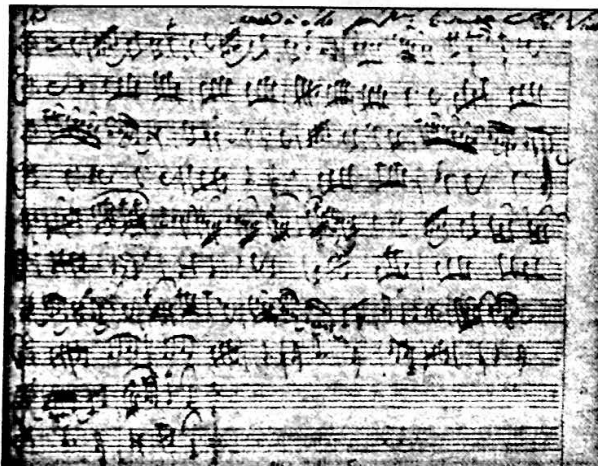
## Instrumental works

Vivaldi's reputation rests on his instrumental compositions, particularly those for the violin. He wrote more than 500 concertos for solo instrument, including over 200 for violin, and the rest for a broad range of other instruments, including cello, bassoon, viola d'amore, flute, oboe and mandolin, no doubt due to the wide variety of music students he had at the Pietà. He also composed many solo and trio sonatas for violin. His work contains all the techniques that were part of the Italian Baroque string tradition, and he had a violinist's sensitivity to what strings are able to do most effectively.

Program music, or music that tells a story, was also a feature of Vivaldi's work. He wrote a flute concerto called *The Goldfinch*, for instance, in which the flute imitates bird calls, and one for bassoon, called *The Night*, in which the deep sound of the bassoon becomes rather threatening. The most famous of his program music is the group of concertos called *The Four Seasons*, each concerto representing a season of the year.

Vivaldi's music is simpler than Bach's. He frequently uses melody and accompaniment, a style that was to become predominant in the Classical period. His concertos are usually written in a three-movement pattern that became quite standard by the late Baroque period. The first movement is fast, the second slow and melodic, and the third faster and livelier than the first.

This is a page from a solo concerto written in Vivaldi's own handwriting.



The viola d'amore, so called because it had a second set of strings which vibrated in sympathy with the set that was played



Vivaldi wrote a poem describing each of the seasons at the beginning of each concerto in the *Four Seasons*. Parts of the poems are written right into the score so that there is a direct connection between the words and the musical phrases.

*Young Woman Playing a Lute*, by Gentileschi, about 1626



## Operas

Handel is reported to have told the German opera composer Gluck that he took too much trouble with his music: "What the English like is something they can beat time to."



The title page from Handel's opera *Giulio Cesare*. Two musicians, one on the harpsichord and the other playing a viol, are performing for a group of angels.

Handel composed nearly 40 Italian operas. The most familiar ones to modern listeners are *Rinaldo* and *Giulio Cesare*. The operas are rarely staged any more, although they are what made him famous in his own time. Baroque Italian operas had certain conventions that make them hard to present nowadays. The chorus and orchestra did not have a lot to do, because composers focussed on the virtuosity of the soloists, with many **recitatives** and arias, and a subsequent loss in dramatic interest. The hero of the Baroque Italian opera was usually a **castrato**, and modern companies either have to use women for those roles or transpose the music for the male singers, which makes the sound quite different. Modern opera goers generally do not find these productions to their taste.

**Recitative** is vocal music with no real tune. The words are set to music that is designed to resemble the natural pattern of speech.

A **castrato** was a male singer who underwent surgery in childhood to retain his soprano voice. Women were not allowed to sing on the stage or in choirs in Italy in the 1500s and 1600s, and castratos provided voices in the soprano range.



Farinelli, one of the best known castratos of all time, is seated in the centre of this picture. He was the biggest opera star of the Baroque period, and he caused a sensation everywhere he sang.



## Oratorios

Handel's oratorios were very popular. Stories from the Bible were familiar to everyone in those days. Moreover, they were told in English. Audiences liked hearing the music in English because most of them could not understand what was being sung when they went to Handel's Italian operas. The oratorio stories were generally based on moral conflicts: deliverance from tyrants, the effort to preserve freedom, and the necessity of submitting to a higher destiny. These ideas were ones that people could link to events in their own lives and their own country's life. Handel wrote about 25 oratorios; the best-known are *Messiah*, *Saul*, *Judas Maccabeus*, *Samson*, *Solomon*, and *Israel in Egypt*.

Handel's most famous oratorio, *Messiah*, was written in 23 days for a charity performance in Dublin, Ireland. It is a little different from most of his other oratorios because it does not have a plot, and all the words come directly from the Bible. Because Handel could not expect to have the same number and quality of musicians available to him in a provincial capital as he did in London, he wrote the music for a small orchestra and within the range of most singers. Its beauty and simplicity have made it one of the best-loved and most frequently performed works of music ever.

King George II was in attendance at the first London performance of *Messiah*, and during the section called the Hallelujah Chorus he became so enthusiastic that he rose to his feet. No one may remain seated while the monarch is standing, so the rest of the audience had to stand as well. From that day on, there has been a tradition that as soon as the first strains of the Hallelujah Chorus are heard, the audience stands and remains standing until the end of the movement.

The Chapel of the Foundling Hospital, London

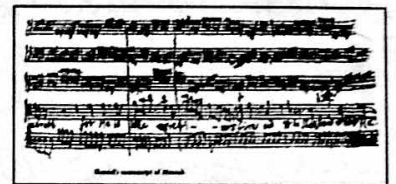
Handel directed 11 performances of *Messiah* to raise money for this hospital for orphaned children.



Handel donated the proceeds from annual performances of *Messiah* to charity. Someone at the time wrote, "Messiah fed the hungry, clothed the naked, fostered the orphan... more than any single musical performance in this or any other country."



The cover for the score of *Messiah*



Handel's manuscript of *Messiah*

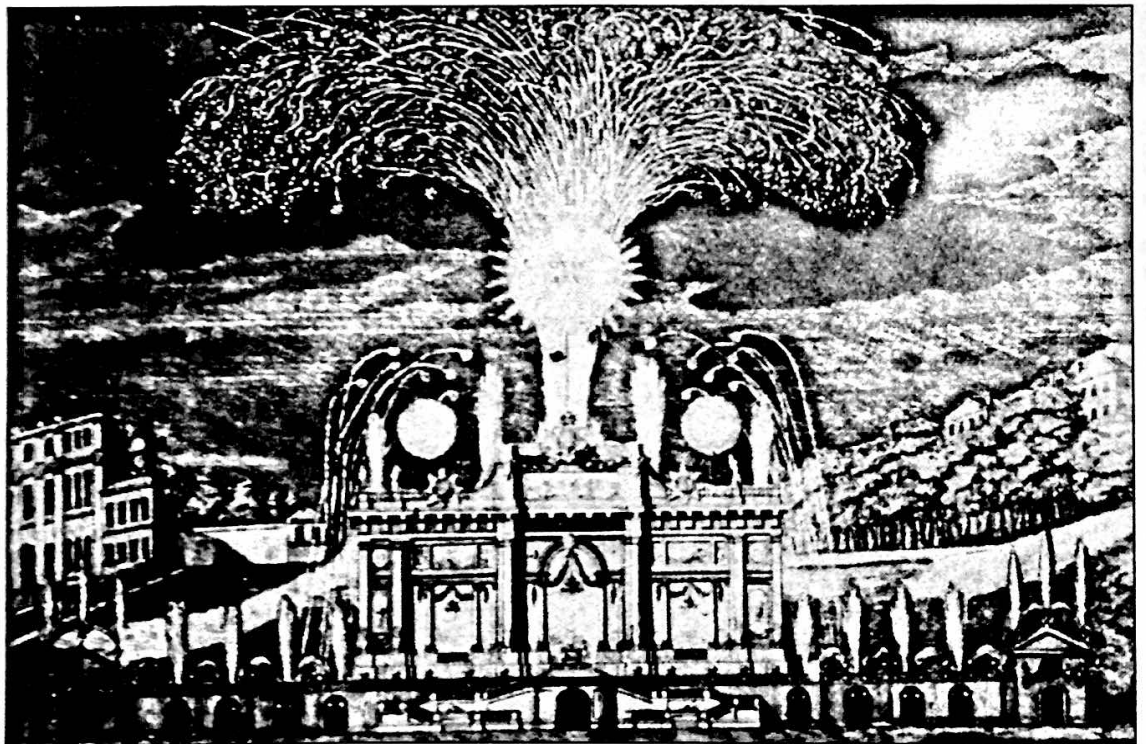
## Instrumental works

The *Music for the Royal Fireworks* was written for a big outdoor gala with fireworks. The music was a success but the event was a disaster. Some of the fireworks collapsed and people in the crowd were burned.

Handel wrote a great deal of orchestral and chamber music, including a large number of violin sonatas, trio sonatas, and ceremonial music for the court. His *12 Grand Concertos* for strings, opus 6, rank as major achievements in the Baroque concerto form. Two of his works for the British court are very well known. The *Water Music* was written for George I's orchestra to play as the King and his courtiers travelled down the River Thames on the royal barges, and it is still very popular today. *The Music for the Royal Fireworks* was written to celebrate a peace treaty and George II requested martial music with "no fiddles." It calls for 18 brass instruments, 37 woodwinds, including double bassoon, and three tympani, and it is heard less frequently due to the effort involved in gathering together so many wind instruments.

Handel's harpsichord suites remain popular as well, possibly because Handel's lyrical warmth suits the piano very well, even though the instrument did not exist in his day. Many young piano students will recognize the piece called "The Harmonious Blacksmith" from the *Keyboard Suite No. 5*.

This is an illustration of a fireworks display like the one for which Handel wrote the *Music for the Royal Fireworks*.



## Important pieces to remember

**Operas:** *Rinaldo, Giulio Cesare*

**Oratorios:** *Messiah, Saul, Judas Maccabeus, Samson, Solomon, Israel in Egypt*

**Secular vocal music:** over 100 cantatas

**Orchestral music:** *Water Music, Music for the Royal Fireworks, 6 Concerti grossi, Op. 3; 12 Grand Concertos, Op. 6; organ concertos*

**Chamber music:** trio sonatas

**Keyboard music:** harpsichord suites

