

Critical Commentary, comparisons plus borrowings or common clichés?

First movement



LH: Incipit from A01

RH: Incipit from the Trumpet movement from Pepusch's Voluntary in C for organ (possibly c.1724).



The comparison with the Pepusch organ piece is likely to be coincidental – something ‘in the air’. However, many years ago when exploring the wide range of organ stops required to play the twelve-movement Pepusch Voluntary, I concluded that the Voluntary might have been written for St Dionis Backchurch, London, perhaps for the ‘opening’ of its new organ.

In December 1722 a new organ was commissioned for the Wren church from Renuus Harris of Bristol. Parish records¹³ reveal that when the organ was completed it would be judged by ‘John Loeillet, William Babel [sic], George Frederick Handel, Dr. William Croft, and Mr. R[aphael] Courteville, all of them Professors and Masters of Music, or the majority of them’. When the organ was finally unveiled in June 1724, Babel had been dead some six months and only Loeillet, Croft (organist of Westminster Abbey) and Courteville signed off the instrument.

The movement in A01 has been accurately copied by Scribe D, apart from an errant E natural as the third note of the third beat semiquaver grouping in bar 14. The correct E flat is confirmed by the F major transposition at A02.

A02 has twice as many bars, barred in 2/4, with a time signature simply of ‘2’. It is clearly a straight transposition, down a perfect fourth, of A01, with some necessary octave adjustments made to the note placements of the bass line.

In B01, the third crotchet’s worth of bar 2 was originally shown as two demi-semiquavers and two semiquavers. See similar phrase ending in bar 5.

Compared to B01, the first movement of A01 has been lengthened by 9 bars, with long-breathed lines and rewarding sequential passages offering a coherent sense of direction. Only the first three bars and the two bars marking the return of the opening theme (upbeat to bar 16 in A01; the second beat of bar 10 in B01) are similar. Bars 6 to 9 of B01 (particularly the abrupt harmonic lurch into bar 7) suggest an initial sketch rather than a final version.

¹³ Deutsch, Otto Erich. *Handel, a Documentary Biography*, A&C Black Ltd., London, 1955, p.138

Second movement



LH: Incipit of A01

RH: Incipit of Caesar's aria *Non è si vago*, 'Sung by Sgr. Senesino', Act 1 Scene 7 of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*.



Sir John Hawkins¹⁴ noted that Babell's

first essay in composition was to make the favourite airs in the operas of Pyrrhus and Demetrius, Hydaspes, and some others into lessons for the harpsichord. After that he did the same by Mr. Handel's opera of Rinaldo, and succeeded so well in the attempt, as to make from it a book of lessons, which few could play but himself, and which has long been deservedly celebrated.

Babell's contemporary reputation, at home and in Europe, was as a virtuoso harpsichordist. A friend of Handel, Johann Mattheson (1681-1764), in his *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (Hamburg, 1739) wrote that

Handel, in particular, is not easily surpassed by anyone in organ playing; unless it should be by Bach in Leipzig ... [Handel] had a pupil in England, named Babel, of whom they said that he surpassed his master.¹⁵

It is unclear if Babell, for some years a member of George I's 'private music', was indeed a pupil of Handel, but his reputation owed everything to his published keyboard transcriptions and arrangements of Handel arias, particularly the 1717 Walsh and Hare publication of *Suits of the most Celebrated Lessons Collected and Fitted to the Harpsicord or Spinnet by Mr. Wm. Babell with Variety of Passages by the Author*. Seven airs from *Rinaldo* (1711) were included and the final one is the remarkable harpsichord solo of *Vo' far guerra*.

Even if not a Handel pupil, there must surely have been a reasonably close working relationship between the two. So is the thematic coincidence between the opening of this Babell *Solo* movement and the ritornello theme from Handel's *Non è si vago* just that – a coincidence?

The timeline does not help! Babell died on 23 September 1723 and *Giulio Cesare* was premièred on 20 February 1724.

¹⁴ Hawkins, John. *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, London 1776

¹⁵ Deutsch, Otto Erich. *Ibid.*, p.485

Non è si vago became very popular. Only one month after the première, Walsh brought out a collection of *Julius Caesar for a Flute* which included this aria melody in C major.

Interestingly the manuscript source volume for the ‘Hautboi Solo’ also has a copy of the aria, but in G major (GB-Lam MS 90 f.100, p.263).

And then there was Pepusch. Hawkins¹⁶ recalled that:

About the year 1722 Signora Margarita de l’Pine having quitted the stage with a large sum of money, Dr. Pepusch married her, and went to reside in Boswell-court, Carey-street. Her mother also lived with him. The house where they dwelt was sufficiently noted by a parrot, which was used to be set out at the window, and had been taught to sing the air ‘Non è si vago e bello,’ in *Julius Caesar*.

Winton Dean, in a letter to DB, dated 10 September 1972, wrote:

(i) It does not seem to me likely that Handel took the melody of the aria from the oboe sonata (his vocal borrowings are very seldom from instrumental works) or that the two pieces had a common source. The latter is just possible; but the melody is very closely linked with the words and the dramatic situation in *Giulio Cesare*.

(ii) *Non è si vago* was a very great popular hit; it was sung in theatre intervals and is found in many contemporary manuscript copies in a variety of different keys. Hence no doubt its appearance in the repertory of Pepusch’s parrot.

(iii) It occurs (in F major) in the original version of Act I of *Giulio Cesare*, which was probably composed in the early summer of 1723 and was very different from the score as performed in 1724. If Babell was in close touch with Handel at that time he might just possibly have used the theme in the oboe sonata before his death. But in the absence of other evidence I should expect the instrumental version to be later than the production of the opera.

So is it a case of chicken or egg – or maybe just another musical coincidence?

It is also worth underlining that during this period borrowing was not considered to be plagiarism. As Mattheson wrote in *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, borrowing is permissible, but the borrowed material must be returned with interest, so that it acquires greater kudos than it had formerly. A similar scenario arises with the third movement!

Meanwhile, comparing the two versions of this *Allegro* second movement, A01 against B01, the first has more fluency and an improved bass line. With two extra bars (after bar 15) and a different ending, there’s good forward momentum to the end. Interestingly though, the Walsh version (B01) is the one which offers a recap of the opening theme.

A01, bar 14, the E naturals in both solo and bass are editorial.

B01, bar 17, the twelfth semiquaver is printed as a G.

B01, bar 21, the first notes are printed as a quaver followed by two semiquavers.

¹⁶ Hawkins, John. *Ibid.*

Third movement



LH: Incipit of A01

RH: Incipit of the *Sarabanda*, third movement of Sonata in A minor, Op.4, No.7 by Michele Mascitti



The saraband movement, for its first twelve bars, is basically the same in both sources, though with additional embellishment in B01. Thereafter each goes its own way, with A01 maintaining the running quaver bass line, but losing tension with its exposed octaves in bars 17, 20 and 22. The Walsh version, B01, is two bars shorter and arrives home more succinctly.

The second ‘crotchet’ grouping in the opening bar of B01 is shown as five semiquavers, amended here to correspond to the equivalent gesture in bar 9. Babell’s unequal groupings in more obviously ‘graced’ movements are notated with small note heads, which these are not.

Once again, there is another musical coincidence with obvious similarities between both of the sources and the *Sarabanda* of Mascitti’s Sonata in A minor, Op.4, No.7, published in Paris in 1711, and in London by Walsh and Hare a few years later, c.1714.

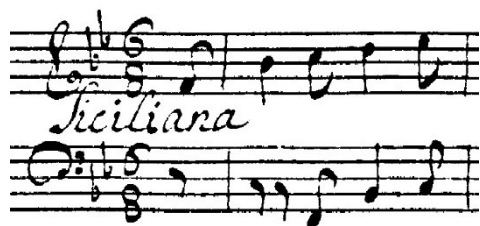
Corelli was a major figure in the lives of many of the protagonists in this story. Pepusch was perhaps the leading disciple, followed closely by Babell, Geminiani, Loeillet and, in France, Mascitti. Over many years Mascitti’s music enjoyed huge popularity in France, echoed to a lesser extent in the Low Countries and England.

Michele Mascitti (1664-1760) was a Neapolitan composer and violinist, who moved to Paris in 1704 and became a naturalized French citizen in 1739, shortly before his marriage. Michael Talbot has written¹⁷ that his ‘published works offer a competent reproduction of Corelli’s style lightly retouched to conform to French taste’.

Given William Babell’s connections to France through his parents, and his love of the Italian musical style, it should be no surprise that he would take an interest in the latest offerings from a Corellian composer from France like Mascitti, whose music was known in England beyond London. West Country physician Dr Claver Morris (1659-1727) in Wells owned

¹⁷ Talbot, M. (2001). Mascitti, Michele. *Grove Music Online*. Retrieved 7 Nov. 2020, from <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000017972>

Fourth movement



LH: Incipit from A01

RH: Incipit from B01



LH: Incipit from last movement of Sonata in C minor, Part 2, No.6, in C minor

After three movements in which A01 and B01 correspond to each other, the final movements are different, though with some family resemblances. A01 uses the finale of Part 2, No.12, with a change in tempo from *Presto* to *Siciliana*, and the addition of dotted rhythms. For comparison's sake, that original *Presto* version has been included in this edition (pp.16 and 17 of the full score).

A01 strengthens the bass line, by removing static harmonies in Sonata No.12's bars 9, 23 and 28. Along with other little alterations to the bass line (and not forgetting the dotted rhythms and decrease in tempo) A01 gains an extra bar and a significant revision across bars 8-13.

A03, the F major *Siciliana* transposition in MS 90, lacks any slurs and has some awkward leaps in the bass line to accommodate octave displacements because of the downwards transposition. Bar 39 of A03, second beat, has the equivalent of an F (i.e. written C), instead of the E flat in A01.

The incipit of the fourth movement of the C minor Sonata, Part 2, No.6, has been included above to show the strong family resemblance. If Babell had lived, might he have been more selective in choosing which sonatas and movements he would have published?

Acknowledgements

The following paragraph, penned in July 1972, is still relevant (who'd have thought it would take nearly 50 years!):

I would like to record the considerable assistance given in the preparation of this edition of the 'Hautboi Solo' by James Iliff, Dr Roy Jesson, Winton Dean and by Richard Andrewes of the RAM Library. Acknowledgements are also due to Sir Anthony Lewis, principal of the RAM, for granting permission for the edition. To them all I extend my sincerest thanks.

David Byers, 8 November 2020, Belfast.