

Handel and Corelli

History is filled with stories of conflict between great musicians. The distinctly defined, often quite egocentric, personalities of truly great artists, may easily come to grate against each other, since these people are often socially abrasive, and hypersensitive at the same time.

Well, to set the scene for this story, we have to first give some background on Corelli. Arcangelo Corelli's traveling band of violin virtuosi were spending a year in London, performing for the king etc. Corelli's music, through publication, had been exerting an influence on the baroque musical scene all over Europe; and his chamber orchestra was one of the hottest performing groups of the time, and did very well financially. So, it was natural that they should spend some time in London; London was not really the Big Apple of the period, and the English elite were all too self-conscious of their backseat status artistically; they were, therefore, quite anxious to pay handsomely for an upgrade of the best Italian music.

Handel, was offended by it—the la-dee-dah fauning of London's musical public on Corelli, whom Handel undoubtedly considered to be a wimp. You see, Handel was a flaming fireball of a personality—intense, temperamental, loud and original; he was a classic manic depressive type, who was capable of hilarious joys and tragic depressions, tender loving moments, and violent outbursts.

Corelli, on the other hand, was a person of extreme refinement, a "just-so" kind of guy, very polite, very correct, somewhat rigid of course, and always, always understated. Corelli never raised his voice. He was a classy guy.

The only reason Handel and Corelli ever had anything to do with each other, was that Handel, as a major, established, entrepreneur of London concerts, was naturally expected to produce performances by Corelli's Italians, and to arrange for collaborations between the visiting musicians and the best English performers and composers, which of course included Handel himself.

Now, Corelli was a very civilized, very worldly professional (one time, when Handel viciously attacked him in rehearsal for his inept playing of a certain piece, he merely replied, quietly, "Mr. Handel, this piece is in

the French style, with which I am not familiar."), but he did have his knotty quirks. One in particular was well noted: Corelli was adamant in his insistence that the highest note on the violin was the high D, fourth finger, third position, on the E string. He never wrote, and he never played anything higher than high D, fourth finger, third position, on the E string. He was so rigid on this subject, that everybody knew it, including Handel.

A concert in the baroque period was very different from the serious, dignified, classical music concerts of today—it was more like a circus. For one thing, the concerts were much longer, and unlike our modern way of trying to present as note-perfect a performance as possible, the emphasis then was on creativity and personality. There was lots of improvising on the baroque concert stage, and there was even sight-reading. Sometimes, to display the performers overall musicianship, they would bill a certain performance as a demonstration of the player's sight-reading skill. On the evening of our story, Corelli was to perform at sight a sonata by Handel.

Sort of as a practical joke, and sort of as a vicious trap, Handel embedded in the final bars of the sonata, a high E—one note higher than the highest note that Corelli had vowed to God he would ever play. Corelli was performing brilliantly, and had begun to approach the forbidden note. Handel, and a few others in the know were snickering quietly. When Corelli came to the high E, he stopped, looked at the note, looked over at Handel, on the harpsichord, lifted his chin, and walked offstage. He never spoke to Handel again.

I think this story is pretty funny, and I rejoice to see a fussy, closed-minded stuffed shirt hoisted on his own petard—to see rigidity shown up by creativity. But it is also kind of a sad story, because it shows Handel willing to give up a relationship with a fine musician out of petty, arrogant egoism. It is very difficult for us gifted people to keep from flaunting it from time to time:

After the famous Mozart/Clementi playing competition (which Mozart won) Clementi came over to Mozart and open-heartedly congratulated him, and told him how much he appreciated Mozart's playing. To this, Mozart replied, "Well, I don't like your playing at all, I think you suck, I think you're a pig! Get away from me!"

Thus, do great ones sometimes indulge themselves to their detriment. I, myself, in my impetuous youth, used to play louder than everybody else in my by violin section on purpose, merely for the purposes of showing off. Really dumb. It would be so nice if we all had the inner fires of Handel, sublimated by the placid exterior of Corelli.