



THE HANDEL INSTITUTE
NEWSLETTER

In this issue we have excellent news about the funding of the Handel House project, reported by its Director, Julie Anne Sadie; Rosemary Dunhill, the Hampshire County Archivist, gives an account of recent research into the papers of James Harris (1709-80), father of the 1st Earl of Malmesbury, with the

mouth-watering prospect of full publication in the near future; and Winton Dean discusses an important new book on the political and moral background of the oratorio librettos.

Terence Best

BROOK STREET SECURED

After negotiations stretching back over nearly five years, the Handel House Trust (HHT) is at last in a position to exchange contracts with the Co-operative Insurance Society for the Handel House in Brook Street. The Trust is acquiring a 999-year lease on 25 Brook Street and an initial 99-year lease on the upper floors and part-basement of No. 23.

The purchase has hinged on two key elements: the readiness of the CIS to enter into a sale, and the ability of the HHT to raise the necessary funds.

Readers will recall from my report in the Spring 1994 issue of this *Newsletter* that Handel's house is one of several dozen properties owned by the CIS in an area bounded by Brook Street, Bond Street, Lancashire Court and Avery Row, which they are currently redeveloping and leasing as shops, offices and restaurants. They were reluctant to make an exception of Handel's house and had to be persuaded to do so. Mayfair properties, even dilapidated ones, do not come cheaply. The extremely reasonable price that the HHT has negotiated is still very substantial. Moreover, it takes money to raise money, and so, inevitably, the members of the Board have expended much energy and such expertise as they could muster over the past year on fundraising. The Trust appointed a fundraising consultant, Edwina Sassoon, who successfully oversaw the first phase of our £3.9m campaign, which has been directed at family trusts and friends and music-lovers who share our vision of a living memorial to Handel.

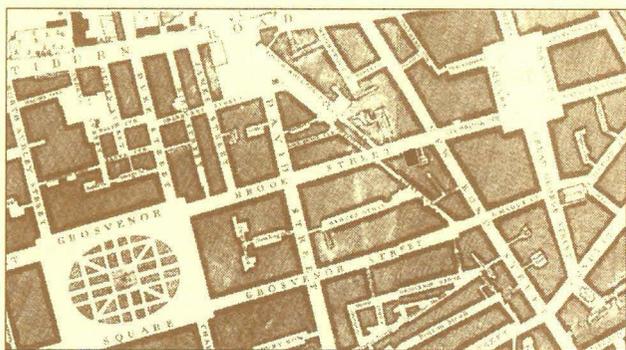
Even so, the acquisition of the Brook Street properties would not have been possible without the generosity of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, which has just awarded the HHT a Lottery grant of £500,000 towards their purchase, and is holding out the possibility of a further award of three-quarters of the renovation costs, subject to matching funds. The Trust appointed the highly respected firm of Julian Harrap Architects, who have recently restored Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields and the case of the 'Handel organ' at St Andrew's, Holborn Circus, to draw up plans. The Trust has been awarded planning and listed building permission by Westminster City Council and is working closely with English Heritage and the Georgian Group.

There has always been a strong feeling within the HHT that the project should attract wider support from Handel-lovers at large. In Spring 1995 the Trust began producing a leaflet (a copy of which was included with the previous issue of this *Newsletter*) which provides opportunities to express interest and support. The response has been very gratifying – we have had gifts ranging from £5 to £5000 – and we hope very much that the Friends of the Handel Institute will want to be counted among our Friends too.

In it we make reference to the 1996-7 'Sing for Handel' season, which is bringing us in close touch with professional musicians, amateurs, school music departments and music colleges who are keen to save and preserve Handel's

house. Dame Joan Sutherland has kindly agreed to serve as patron. If you know of a choir which has not yet signed on, please be in touch with our co-ordinator, Bridget Whyte (4 Lucerne Court, Abbey Park, Beckenham, Kent BR3 1RB; tel 0181 639 0060; fax 0181 658 6261). The season features a Handelian raffle and ends with a performance of *Jephtha* at Westminster Abbey on 29 April 1997 which will be broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

But what of the Handel House itself? Empty and without services for several years, it is suffering from neglect. Nevertheless, renovation work will not begin until the architects can make a detailed 'archaeological' study with detailed costings of every element of the renovation and restoration. The ground floor and basement of No. 25 Brook Street have been an antique shop throughout the 20th century, while the upper storeys have served as offices. Wooden wall panelling and fireplaces from other properties have been installed throughout the ground, first and second floors which at present obscure original features. Because Handel was the first resident of the house, paint scrapings will be taken and the earliest evidence of colour and wear will be sought and analysed. No. 23, which has been much less altered (if even more neglected), provides invaluable models for restoring lost features in No. 25. The building work will require eighteen months to complete.



The front elevation of No. 25 will be restored, though not absolutely to the appearance of 1723, when Handel moved in – to achieve that, the top storey would have to be reduced to an attic. Instead, the house will appear much as it did in the well-known 1859 engraving, with an area (*i.e.*, a well to the front), iron railings, a door with fanlight and properly proportioned windows with small panes.

The principal rooms in which Handel lived and worked will be re-created to the best of our ability and knowledge. All the evidence seems to point to the first-floor front parlour as the room where he rehearsed and performed: the normal custom of the time was to entertain upstairs, and the room's contents as described in the inventory would seem to indicate that function. Burney's anecdotes about rehearsing at Handel's house, and Mrs Delany's various remarks about visiting him and hearing him play, surely refer to this room. Soon it will again resound to live music. The intention is that it will be available, selectively, for use

for open rehearsals, but the main site for music-making will be in what was originally Handel's kitchen, in the basement, which will house a separate recital hall seating 70: this will open on to Horse Shoe Yard, where there will be shops and restaurants.

Handel's back parlour must be the room where he entertained his friends to dinner: the famous anecdotes from Burney and Goupy about his swigging the best burgundy (or was it champagne?) in a back room while his guests made do with the Georgian equivalent of plonk make sense in the context of the layout of that room in relation to the closet – the closet is now (and has been since soon after Handel's day) part of a larger room, but the original layout and analogy with No. 23 make clear how he could have been observed in his indulgence. His second-floor bedroom, at present partitioned, will also be re-created. Some of the rear extensions will be retained, although the cloakrooms at present awkwardly attached at the half-landings, and protruding in ungainly fashion as well as obscuring the light at the rear, will be removed from both No. 25 and No. 23. The extra rooms in No. 25, together with the whole of No. 23, will enable the museum to offer a wide array of displays, addressing all aspects of Handel's life and works. In addition to the recital hall, there will be dedicated education facilities in the basement, a lift and other aids for the disabled, a working library, regular changing exhibitions and a shop.

To meet the challenges of the project, the HHT Board has expanded. The new Trustees are Sir Alan Bowness, former Director of the Tate Gallery, who is also serving as curatorial adviser; the Rt Hon Peter Brooke CH, MP; John Chown, who is a patron of the Handel opera performances in Cambridge; Dan Cruickshank, the writer and leading authority on Georgian architecture; Alison Meyric Hughes, a former curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum and currently a lecturer at the City University Department of Arts Policy and Management, who is Vice-Chairman of the HHT; Giles Ridley, a solicitor and passionate amateur choral conductor; Kimiko Shimoda, an arts and fundraising consultant; and Jeremy Warren, Assistant Director of the Museums and Galleries Commission, who chairs the HHT Collections Development Committee.

Dame Janet Baker, William Christie and the philanthropist Donatella Flick have now joined the HHT Committee of Honour. Friendly links have been forged with the London Handel Festival (who recently hosted a benefit concert for the Museum as part of their 1996 season), the Händel-Haus in Halle, the American Handel Society and the Boston Handel and Haydn Society. Because of the particular interest and support for the project in the United States, a Handel House Foundation of America is being established and a fundraising campaign undertaken there by the Anne Butterfield Company in Boston.



With the Handel House itself now secured, the HHT is setting about developing a collection. Thanks to a generous and enlightened award from the Foundation for Sport and the Arts, which is being matched by gifts from musical and other institutions and private donors, the Trust is seeking to acquire through purchase, as well as gift, loan and bequest, Handelian, items relating to 25 Brook Street and Handel's wider context, musical instruments and a general Handelian library.

Julie Anne Sadie
Director, Handel House Museum

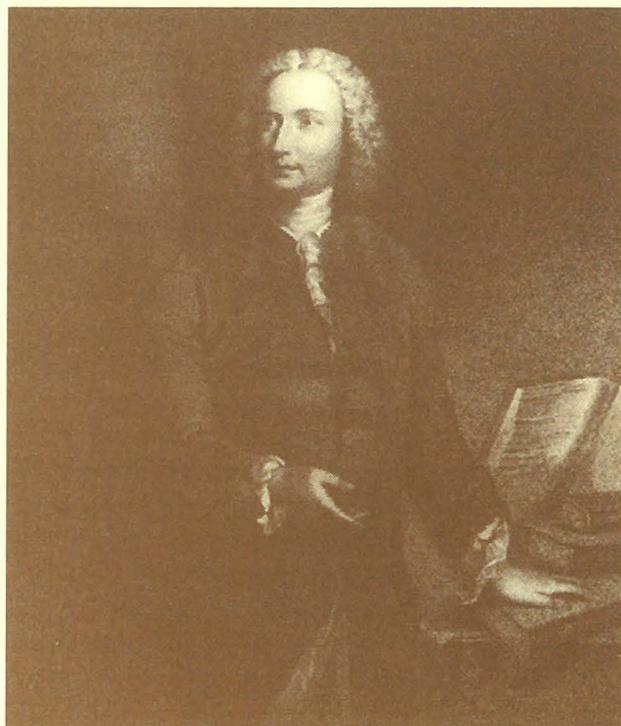
JAMES HARRIS AND HANDEL

The links between James Harris (1709-1780), father of the 1st Earl of Malmesbury, and Handel are well known to Handel scholars. A handful of letters to Harris with references – in some cases detailed and fascinating – to the composer have appeared in print. Two particular treasures have passed down through Harris's descendants: Philippe Mercier's fine portrait of Handel, and a collection of 36 manuscript volumes of his works from about 1715 to 1734, originally compiled for Elizabeth Legh of Cheshire.

Access to the music manuscripts became easier six years ago, when the Earl of Malmesbury agreed to their being microfilmed on behalf of Hampshire Archives Trust, of which he is a Vice-President, with the microfilms made available to researchers in Hampshire County Council's Record Office. This was eventually followed in summer 1994 by the deposit in the Record Office of the entire Harris/Malmesbury family archive, together with the music manuscripts; we, and the wide range of scholars to whom this astonishing collection will be relevant, owe a debt of gratitude to Lord Malmesbury and the Malmesbury Trustees for this action.

Cataloguing the collection will be a lengthy task, but the section relating to James Harris is now complete and has greatly exceeded expectations in the new light it has thrown on the 18th-century musical scene. Harris was a deeply respected scholar, the author of a number of philosophical books which, alas, are barely readable today. In the last twenty years of his life he was a Member of Parliament, keenly interested in politics at both constituency and national level, seizing his pen to record any interesting conversation he witnessed. But his passion was music. He was also a devoted family man and a warm friend, and the richness of the collection derives from the fact that several of both family and friends shared his intense interest in music and his devotion to Handel in particular.

In all, James Harris's papers include over 150 'new' references to Handel – mostly in letters to Harris, some in a series of diaries of his clergyman brother Revd George



James Harris at the age of 31, engraved by C. Bestland from the portrait by J. Highmore (frontispiece to *The Works of James Harris Esq.* 1801)

William Harris, and a handful in the small number of copies of his own letters that Harris kept. His principal correspondents on musical matters during Handel's life-time were his brother Thomas, a London-based lawyer, and his cousin the 4th Earl of Shaftesbury.

Shaftesbury's are the most enthusiastic of all responses to Handel. *Alexander's Feast* was 'the most pleasing (I think) of anything scarce he has yet made'; *Arminio* 'in every respect excellent and vastly pleasing'; 'the charming *Berenice*...full of exquisite genteel airs; *Theodora* 'as finished, beautiful and laboured a composition, as ever Handel made' [9M73/G348/3,8,12; G338/2]. Shaftesbury wrote too of performers and performances, with detailed descriptions of the voice range, delivery, and acting powers of Conti: 'all things considered, the best singer I ever heard, and they say in the world'; Annibali, singing 'with the greatest ease imaginable...in the most natural, rational way...with all the passion his voice will admitt'; and others [9M73/G348/6,8]. And he wrote of meetings with Handel, of relaxed evenings when he played or spoke of his work, including a magical account of a reading of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* in 1739, when Handel improvised music as each section was read two years before he wrote the oratorio [9M73/G349/ 29].

Other family correspondents were the third brother, George William Harris, and their half-sister Katherine Knatchbull, both of whom met Handel socially as well as attending performances. Katherine wrote to report a conversation with Handel on his plans for *Saul* in late 1738: 'He has introduced the sackbut, a kind of trumpets with



more variety of notes... seven or eight foot long & draws in like a perspective glass... Despise not this description, for I write from his own words' [9M73/G319/6]. Beyond the family circle the most regular Handel updates come from the 4th Earl of Radnor, whom the papers show to have been the source through which Elizabeth Legh's volumes came to the Harrises: Radnor was her second cousin. Harris acknowledged the gift in 1741 – 'the noblest present I ever received in my life' [9M73/G890/27].

Many other names well known to Handel scholars feature. Letters from Charles Jennens show that the original draft text for the setting of Milton's poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* came from Harris not Jennens, and show Handel making a much more active input into the preparation and form of his librettos than has been recognised. It was Handel who proposed that the poems should be more closely interlinked, as 'having too much of the *Penseroso* together...would occasion too much grave music without intermission & would tire the audience' [9M73/G500/2]. Other letters throw light on Handel's health and sickness, his popularity and the strong opposition he aroused, and towards the end his increasing blindness. There are many references to music copying and the lending and borrowing of texts in order to gain access to new material before it was in print; indeed, in his letter to Radnor about the proposed gift of the Elizabeth Legh volumes, Harris refers to the 'incorrectness' of many of the printed versions 'which makes manuscript copies valuable even of those works which are already printed' [9M73/G890/19].

Harris lived for two further decades after Handel's death. Less correspondence has been kept from this period. Shaftesbury, who seems to have been a one-composer music-lover, stopped writing about music completely, and Thomas became increasingly gouty. But two new sources fill the gap: Harris's diaries for the six months or so of each year that he now spent in London, and his wife's letters – rarely less than weekly – to their son at Oxford, travelling abroad, and as an increasingly important diplomat. These sources illustrate the intensity of musical life in London at the time, with performances to attend not only daily but sometimes two or three in a day, public and private. The Harrises' younger daughter, Louisa, had become a singer of quasi-professional standing and performed in many of these concerts. In Salisbury, too, where the family home in the Close can still be visited, the Harrises were at the centre of musical life; much can be learned from the papers about the annual music festival and concerts throughout the year, both public and private.

Hampshire County Council has published an account of the Handel material in the collection in its Hampshire Papers series. *Handel and the Harris Circle* can be obtained from Hampshire Record Office, Sussex Street, Winchester, SO23 8TH for £1.75 (postage and packing included). Donald Burrows and I are now working on a critical edition

of those of James Harris's papers which relate to music and drama, which we hope will appear in a couple of years. The family are anxious that this publication should not be compromised by widespread publication of material in advance of it, but every effort will be made to make material relevant to particular pieces of research available. It would be helpful if anyone wanting further information or access would contact me before arranging a visit to the Record Office, where of course all are welcome.

Rosemary Dunhill
Hampshire Record Office

BOOK REVIEW

Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought

By Ruth Smith

Cambridge University Press, £45 (US \$69.95)
ISBN 0521 40265 4

'This study', Ruth Smith says at the start, 'evaluates the librettos not as satisfactory constructs or as vehicles for the composer's skill but as reflections and embodiments of the ideas of their time'. That is a strictly limited aim, and it raises the question to what extent it is profitable to discuss librettos in those terms (would one gain much from reading about Piave's ideas without reference to Verdi?).

The book falls roughly into three parts, an introduction, an examination of the ideas current in Handel's time, and a search for their reflection in individual librettos. The introduction, dealing with the outer history of the oratorios, queers the pitch early on by implicitly aligning Handel's voice with that of the moralists, preachers and propagandists of his age. There is a touch of the aggressive-defensive in the suggestion that my statement that the English oratorio was Handel's creation gives the impression that Handel wrote the words as well as the music, and that because I chose to concentrate on the works in dramatic form I was depreciating the non-dramatic works. The tendency to prejudge a crucial issue crops up from time to time, but fortunately does not invalidate the book as a whole.

The second part, taking up a good two-thirds of the whole, is the most valuable as well as the most substantial. It is a veritable monument of industry. Starting from the premise that 'contemporary aesthetic prescription, religious discourse, moral teaching and political ideology provide the entry points' to the meaning of the librettos, Smith has read, digested and distilled an astonishing number of books (ancient and modern), treatises, pamphlets, sermons, Biblical commentaries, plays, poems, newspaper articles (of Handel's day and ours; she is evidently a reader of *The*



Independent) – anything that can throw light on the complexities of English thought in the first half of the 18th century.

Theological controversy in particular seems to be her meat and drink: she analyses the conflicting utterances of High and Low Church Anglicans, Dissenters, Nonjurors, Deists and others and their efforts to deduce a binding religious and moral code from the discrepant evidence of the Old and New Testaments, involving (among much else) liturgical practices, Jewish and Christian, and such recondite matters as the income of Levites in the time of Moses. The political background is equally complex, and constantly shifting, dependent on many factors, notably foreign wars, taxation, and the prolonged conflict between adherents of the Hanoverian monarchy (Protestant) and the exiled Stuarts (Catholic).

All this makes stiff reading, not because the style is in any way defective (it is vigorous and clear) but for two reasons. Paragraph after paragraph is loaded with quotations, mostly dealing with abstractions, which force constant readjustment on the reader who wishes to grasp the full intricacies of meaning; and the argument keeps circling round the same points (if from different directions), which are hammered home again and again. The number of authors cited almost defies belief: there are nearly a thousand footnotes, many of them consisting of multiple references.

It is impossible in a review to pursue all the hares started here, but one trend stands out: the firm grip exercised by every branch of religion over the arts. All art had to be morally instructive, or it was useless, if not positively pernicious. Religious verse, especially that of the Old Testament, was regarded as the highest form of poetry, far superior to that of the Greeks and Romans; one writer judged Shakespeare an inferior poet to David. Music was positively dangerous because it excited the emotions and unseated reason (more than one critic likened its effect to that of gunpowder). Theatre music, especially Italian opera, was the worst of all; it was foreign, effete and degrading, and struck at British national identity. This line of argument produced some odd results. A journalist in 1735 defended *Alcina* on the ground that it supplied 'a beautiful and instructive allegory'. Isaac Watts considered the Book of Revelation 'a Prophecy in the Form of an Opera'. In picking her way through this jungle of contradictory opinions Smith keeps a level head: there is no reason to mistrust her as a guide.

It would be surprising if aspects of the debate were not reflected in the librettos, especially as two of the authors, Miller and Morell, were clergymen not averse to public controversy, and Jennens, a nonjuror and a Jacobite, was a man of trenchant views. Smith usefully brings in the non-oratorio writings of Miller and Morell and the letters of Jennens, which indicate that they inclined to the political

opposition, though Morell was something of a trimmer. The clearest conclusion that emerges from her scrutiny of the oratorio texts is that most of them, especially the early ones, carried ambiguous messages: all parties could find some encouragement for whatever cause they supported. Smith suggests that this may have been deliberate, and that is very likely. Many ideas were regarded as heretical or politically subversive, and could only be published or put on the stage in coded or allegorical form. Allegories were and are notoriously slippery, and the more listeners they could satisfy, the better for everyone, including the box office. For the most part librettists adduced parallels between contemporary Britain and ancient Israel (Smith is surely right in attributing the text of *Israel in Egypt* to Jennens), softened the Biblical stories in an endeavour to assimilate the bloodthirsty Jehovah to the Christian God of the New Testament (this greatly bothered controversialists of all parties), and moralised God in the likeness of an omnipotent Anglican divine.

What does this tell us about Handel? Smith says in the Introduction that 'in order to understand the nature of the librettos we need to understand Handel's compositional aims'. This is one subject she does not tackle. She acknowledges that we know nothing about his politics, and (at one point) that his aims may have differed from those of the librettists. But she goes no further. We know that he was a devout churchgoer, at least in his later years, and that he liked living in England because a man was free to hold his own opinions without disturbance. He came from a foreign culture strongly influenced by Italy, though he was himself a Lutheran. He was primarily a composer for the theatre, the author of forty Italian operas (and two Italian oratorios in a style indistinguishable from that of opera). He cannot have found the demeaning attitude to music in his adopted country anything but Philistine. There is no reason to suppose that he had the slightest interest in doctrinal niceties or political subtexts, even if he was aware of them.

On the other hand he had a strong moral sense of a universal, non-sectarian character. He was intensely interested in the vagaries of human character and approached the oratorio librettos as human dramas, employing the musical language of opera and annexing that of the English choral tradition for the choruses. The fusion worked perfectly when the events of the plot yielded a moral that could be enforced by the chorus, which, like that of Greek tragedy, was both participant and commentator. In claiming that the final chorus of *Saul* is dramatically unmotivated Smith misses a vital point: the chorus – the Israelite people – is the oratorio's true hero, and after Saul's sin has been purged the nation must live on. She also gives a dismissive and partial account of *Hercules* (admittedly not an oratorio), the other work in which Handel and his librettist deliver a shattering demonstration of the corrosive effects of jealousy, quoting *Othello* in the process.

It is all to the good that Ruth Smith has devoted this scholarly book, perhaps the most concentrated treatment of the subject, to the religious, moral and political climate from which the oratorio librettos sprang. But her interest is confined to a single aspect, leaving on one side not only the music but such relevant matters as structure, characters (except in so far as they can be shown to embody an idea), language and diction – the last a crucial matter for Handel, who like other dramatic composers responded to concrete rather than abstract imagery. She is of course entitled to limit her subject, but not to snipe at those who take a wider view.

A libretto is only a basic framework which the composer can manipulate or even undermine. One of the most striking features of Handel's art, both in opera and oratorio, is the frequency with which he evokes by musical means a scene, a character, even a nation, that modifies, contradicts or subverts the verbal implications of the text. By not considering the oratorios as artistic wholes, libretto and music together (her title after all refers to oratorios, not just to librettos), she confines Handel within the narrow bounds of a morality that reduced art to secondary status. Hence she cannot see why *Joseph* and *Alexander Balus* are radically flawed (though both contain fine music) or why the first half of *Samson* is so static that it drags in performance (as Handel clearly came to accept, for he cut it ruthlessly as early as the original run).

It is true that early audiences regarded the oratorios as a source of edification and moral improvement, or even as church music. *Israel in Egypt* and *Messiah* failed originally because it was thought scandalous to bring Holy Writ into the theatre. (It would be interesting to know exactly what it was that Jennens found objectionable in Handel's setting of *Messiah*.) Some idea of contemporary taste can be gained from the number of performances each work presented 'in the manner of an oratorio' received during Handel's life, bearing in mind that the earlier ones had a considerable start. My count, not necessarily complete, gives the following totals: *Acis and Galatea* 106, *Alexander's Feast* and *Messiah* 83, *Esther* 69, *Judas Maccabaeus* 57, *Samson* 56, *L'Allegro ed il Penseroso* 38, *Deborah* 35, *Ode for St Cecilia's Day* 23, *Saul* 21, *Joshua* 19, *Athalia* 15, *Israel in Egypt* and *The Choice of Hercules* 11, *Joseph* 10. The remaining twelve had fewer than ten performances each. They include at least six major masterpieces: *Semele*, *Hercules*, *Belshazzar*, *Solomon*, *Theodora* and *Jephtha*. There was evidently a loose connection between Handel and his audience.

The book is remarkably free from misprints and errors of fact. *David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan* was set by the younger, not the elder Smith. Handel's use of the Coronation Anthems in the 1732 *Esther* and *Deborah* may, as Ruth Smith claims, have been a move to

Hanoverianise the text; it could also be due to the fact that he was pressed for time. The suggestion that Handel wrote no more Old Testament oratorios after *Jephtha* owing to the controversy over the Jew Bill in 1753 is not convincing. *The Triumph of Time and Truth* is no indication that poor health was an insufficient reason. It contains no new music and may have been assembled by the younger Smith with little or no input from Handel (see Anthony Hicks, 'Late additions to Handel's oratorios', in *Music in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Hogwood and Luckett). He had great difficulty in finishing *Jephtha*, and was almost totally blind by 1753.

Winton Dean

HANDEL CONFERENCE

A conference on 'Handel and his Rivals', organised by The Handel Institute, will take place at King's College, London, on Saturday 30 November and Sunday 1 December 1996. It will begin on the Saturday immediately after the end of the RMA meeting. The programme will embrace about a dozen papers and a concert; speakers will include Donald Burrows, Xavier Cervantes, H. Diack Johnstone, Richard G. King, Thomas McGeary, Graham Pont and John H. Roberts. A detailed programme and booking form will be distributed with the autumn issue of this *Newsletter*. Enquiries meanwhile should be sent to the Honorary Secretary (address at the foot of this page).

HANDEL INSTITUTE AWARDS FOR RESEARCH AND PERFORMANCE

Applications are invited for the next round of **Handel Institute Awards** (up to £1000) in support of **research** projects involving the life or works of Handel or his contemporaries. **Deadline 1 September 1996.**

Applications are invited also for the 1997 **Byrne Award** (up to £1000), intended to support **performance** of Handel's music and assist young professional performers at the beginning of their careers. **Deadline 31 December 1996.**

Further details on both from the Honorary Secretary (address below).

The Handel Institute is a registered charity (no. 296615). All enquiries should be addressed to the honorary secretary, Professor Colin Timms, Department of Music, The University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, England.