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RTÉ NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA LIVE

FRIDAY 9 JULY 2021, 7pm
National Concert Hall

BACH Violin Concerto in E major
HANDEL *Water Music* Suite No. 1

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra
Peter Whelan conductor
Elaine Clark violin

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PROGRAMME NOTES

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH 1685-1750

Violin Concerto in E major (BWV 1042)

i. *Allegro*
ii. *Adagio*
iii. *Allegro assai*

Bach was adept at adapting: not only did he "borrow" the relatively new Venetian concept of the three-movement concerto, which we especially associate with Vivaldi, whose work was well-known in Germany at that time. But he frequently re-used his own material for new purposes. This is the case with this violin concerto, one of only two for solo violin to have survived (although there are also two "double concertos" for two violins, and the violin features as soloist in four of the six "Brandenburg" concertos). This one, in E major, was probably composed slightly later than that in A minor (BWV 1041) but we cannot be sure about the chronology.

Due to this confusion in chronology and the many variations in the catalogue due to Bach's re-working of his material, we can't be certain when this concerto was composed; many musicologists think it may date from his time in Leipzig in 1730, but the brilliance in the colouring of the work also suggests the earlier period of 1717–1723, when Bach was living in Cöthen and was in charge of the court's secular music and was putting the "Brandenburg" concertos together. Certainly the style of the work is very close to that of the Brandenburgs.

Bach himself was both a keyboard virtuoso and a fine violinist. He put this concerto to new use as a work for harpsichord (in D major, BWV 1054) towards the end of the 1730s. Both the version for violin and that for harpsichord remain firmly in the repertoire.

Scored for solo violin, strings and continuo, the work is in what we now recognise as the familiar fast-slow-fast arrangement of the three movements, but was far from commonplace at the time Bach adopted it. It's essentially "Italian" in character, especially in the virtuoso playing of the soloist and the three declamatory chords with which the work opens,

in Italian operatic style. The slow movement is notable for the gentle appearance of the cello, providing a deep resonance to the solo line which has been described as "Bach at his most exalted". The fast-moving finale never lets up, in the brilliant exchanges between soloist and orchestra, culminating in an exuberant flourish from the soloist.

Note by Richard Pine © RTÉ

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL 1685-1759

Water Music **Suite No. 1 in F major** (HWV 348)

i. Overture
ii. Adagio e staccato
iii. Allegro
iv. Andante
v. Passepied: Allegro
vi. Air
vii. Minuet
viii. Bourrée
ix. Hornpipe
x. Finale

From 1712 until his death, Handel lived mainly in London – with the famous exception of the months in 1741–1742 when he lived in Dublin and wrote *Messiah*. Life as a composer depended on patronage, and Handel's native Prussia, like many of the German principalities, offered employment to composers such as Handel's exact contemporary, J.S. Bach.

In Handel's case, he was fortunate to become *Kapellmeister* (a title not unlike "Music Director") to the Hanoverian Prince George who, in 1714, became King of England. Having decided to live in London, Handel was patronised by Lord Burlington and in fact lived in Burlington House in Piccadilly (which is now the headquarters of the Royal Academy). Later patrons included the Duke of Newcastle.

Apart from his many operas and oratorios, Handel's work was typical of a composer dependent on patronage, and in 1717 he very naturally agreed

to a royal request to write "incidental" music for a concert on the river Thames. The opera company with which he had been working had fallen on hard times and he and his regular orchestra were "available for work". On 17 July 1717 King George and his aristocratic guests were afloat on the royal barge which was to travel from Whitehall to Chelsea, where he and his companions (including three duchesses, one duke, and an earl) were to have supper at Lord Ranelagh's villa. Another barge, containing the musicians, followed, and the river was, apparently, full of other boats carrying Londoners anxious to witness the royal musical spectacle.

Handel's music pleased the king so much that he ordered the music to be repeated, and it was in fact played right through three times before the king had returned to Whitehall. The fifty musicians are reckoned to have played almost non-stop from 8pm until well after midnight, since the music as a whole lasts about three hours and the only rest the musicians had was during the time the king was ashore at Chelsea.

The music was subsequently divided into three suites, the first (which we hear tonight) in F major, the second in D major and the third in G major. As they have come down to us, the three movements, in different keys, require different instrumentation. The first features woodwind, two horns and strings. It's thought that the normal inclusion of a keyboard and/or timpani was precluded for this river journey due to the problem of balancing these instruments on the boat.

The first suite is notable for the appearance of the horns in the third movement (the *Allegro*) since it was the first time the horn had been used in England in this type of music. (In fact it is sometimes distinguished with the title "Horn Suite" because up to then horns had been incidental in orchestral music, used to suggest a hunting scene).

So effective was the *Water Music*, as it has come to be called, that many arrangements were made both during Handel's lifetime and after his death. One re-orchestration of the piece (for modern instruments) was made by the Irish composer-conductor Hamilton Harty in 1920. As a result, *Water Music* is the most popular and best-known of all Handel's orchestral music.

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