

## **Händel's *Brockespassion***

By the time Händel composed his version of Brockes's text, the composer was already well-established in London. That is not to say that he didn't keep up his connections in Hamburg, where he had found his first success as a musician. Händel had in fact originally studied law in Halle, where he and Brockes had the same tutor. Music was too strong a calling, however, and after a year playing organ in the Dom in Halle, Händel made his way to Hamburg in 1703 to join Keiser's Gänsemarkt Oper—the first public opera house in the German lands.

Händel quickly found success in the opera, where he played violin and harpsichord in the orchestra alongside Johann Mattheson. Keiser, impressed by Händel's abilities, gave the composer his first opportunity to write an opera: *Almira*, premiered in January of 1705. Other operas followed, with Keiser's inspiration and assistance. It is in fact difficult to overestimate the influence of Keiser on Händel's development, for from Keiser Händel learned how to write melodies. And those melodies paved the way for Händel's future fame.

Perhaps it was indeed the connection to Keiser that inspired Händel to compose his *Brockespassion* in the summer of 1716. Keiser was, after all, the first composer to set Brockes's text, and it was Keiser who was primarily responsible for creating the musical genre of the Passion oratorio. Marrying Italianate, lyrical arias and dramatic recitatives with operatic choruses, using dance rhythms and elaborate orchestration, Keiser created an irresistible sound capable of moving listeners to spiritual contemplation (despite the objections of the Hamburg authorities). Händel learned much from Keiser, as is clearly audible in his setting of the *Brockespassion*. Most notable in his score are the passages of great lyric beauty for the soloists, where Händel's soaring melodies communicate the strong emotions and drama of the text (for example, the duet between Mary and Jesus). This is Händel on a more intimate scale than in his later oratorios: the choruses take a secondary role and even the orchestral writing is somewhat subdued. Händel primarily utilizes the string ensemble, including the "halo" effect around the words of Jesus (a stylistic feature developed by Keiser and used most famously by Bach), though oboes are used in a few numbers.

Or perhaps Händel's version was a request of Händel's old friend Mattheson, who said that Händel sent him the manuscript of the oratorio in the fall of 1716. Mattheson in any case gave the first public performances of the work in the Hamburg Dom in 1719. Or perhaps it was even the idea of Brockes himself: there is some indication that the first performance of Händel's oratorio might have been in the home of his old acquaintance from Halle. Whatever the case, Händel's setting is today the best-known of all the Brockes settings—due to the fame of the composer, and not its famous librettist.