

# Handel at Boughton

George Frederick Handel 1685 - 1759



*Handel c 1710 by Georg Platzer.*  
© Händel-Haus, Halle

Inspired by the Montagu Music Collection here at Boughton, we are presenting just a few facets of Handel's well-documented trajectory, from his earliest musical stirrings to the rise of the tall, handsome young composer and keyboard virtuoso. He moved easily in the highest circles, his fame preceding him wherever he went.

The epitome of a successful migrant, he became a national icon, unleashing a sublime cascade of music on the public, fully living up to the title "The English Orpheus". He made London a great music capital and created a legacy that would transform music in England, confirming it as the most powerful of the arts, out-rivalling poetry in its ability to express the inexpressible.

We refract the story in part through the highly musical Montagu family who knew the composer from his earliest days as a British resident and amassed a fine collection of his music. At nearby Warkton church John, the second Duke of Montagu, and Mary his Duchess are commemorated in marble by the great Huguenot sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac. In London he created at least 4 major life-size sculptures of Handel, ensuring perfect likenesses by taking his life mask.

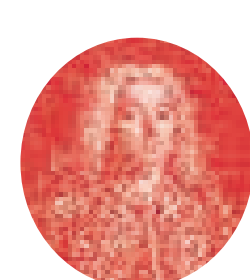
Handel's reputation down the centuries rested mainly on Messiah and other oratorios, but many of his works have now been re-evaluated, their sounds liberated by the period instrument revival. Even today some of his lesser-known operas are just emerging into the repertoire, while his cantatas remain almost unknown.

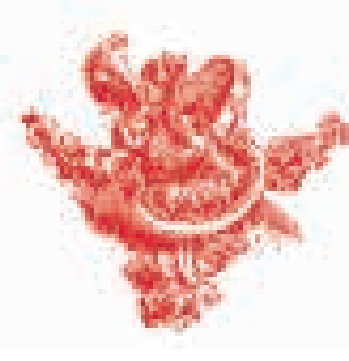
Important anniversaries have been publicly marked since the centenary of Handel's birth, when there was a major concert at Westminster Abbey in 1784 (old-style calendar).

A massive commemoration of his death took place in 1859 in the Crystal Palace, when an audience of nearly 27,000 witnessed Messiah performed by a choir of nearly 3,000 and an orchestra of 460.

In 1959 a series of performances at the Royal Opera House and at Sadler's Wells Theatre confirmed his status as an opera composer for all time.

The museum at Handel's house in Brook Street, London was established in 2001. The Gerald Coke Handel Collection of music and memorabilia was given to the nation in 1996 and is at the Foundling Museum, Brunswick Square, London. The Montagu Music Collection at Boughton holds 35 early volumes of opera and oratorio by Handel along with many other vocal and instrumental works and contemporary arrangements.





# Beginnings

**G**eorg Friedrich Händel was born in 1685 in Halle, eastern Germany, to Dorothea, the young wife of 60 year-old Georg Händel, doctor to the Prince of Saxony. He practiced the clavichord in secret, was finally allowed music lessons at 7 and later became organist at the city's Calvinist church which served the Huguenot migrants. He left for Hamburg in 1703 aged 18, becoming a second violinist at the opera house, where he first encountered the French-style ballet and the florid Italian singing style which later became his stock-in-trade.

An exceptionally gifted keyboard player, he rapidly rose from the ranks to direct his own first two operas, *Almira* and *Nero*, from the harpsichord.



Gian-Gastone de Medici.

In Hamburg he made useful contacts – most importantly the music-loving and openly gay Prince Gian-Gastone de Medici (the last Grand Duke of Tuscany) who became a friend and shared with him his enthusiasm for Italian music. He persuaded Handel to travel to Italy rather than be buried in a German provincial court orchestra.

Using their formidable connections, the Medici family facilitated the arrival of the young Lutheran musician into Catholic Rome, at a time when religious affiliation was all-defining.

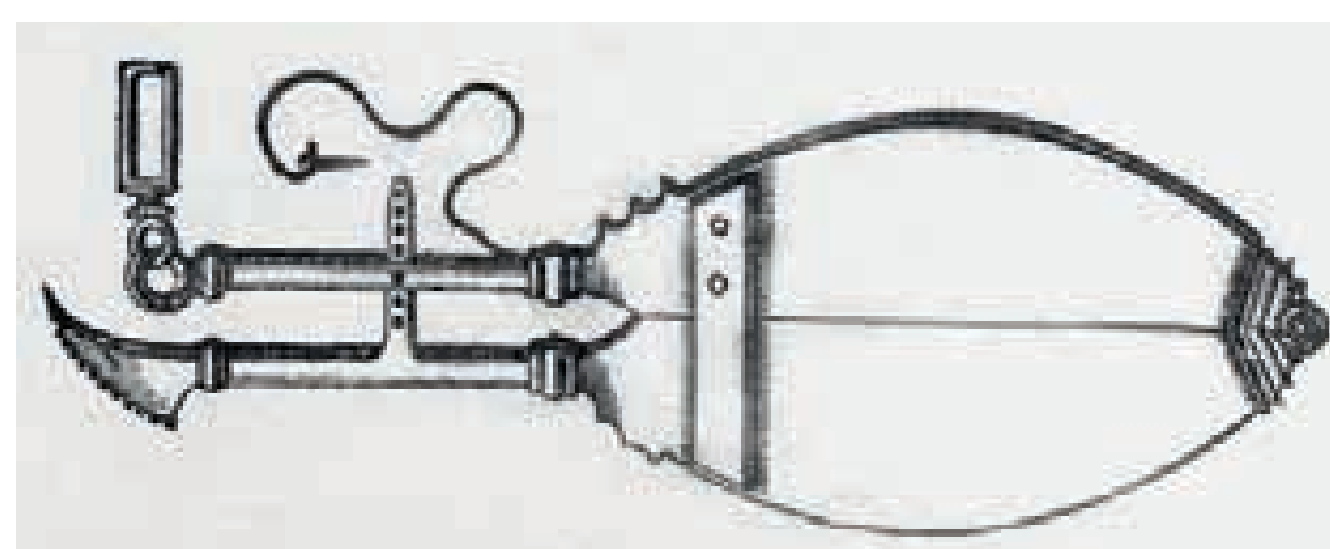
The talented, handsome Saxon caused a stir wherever he went. In 1706 aged 21 he arrived into an intensely creative, musical capital. His reputation had preceded him and he entered Roman society at the highest possible level, attracting the wealthiest and most influential patrons.

Publicly the Pope upheld an atmosphere of sobriety, banning opera for moral reasons, but privately many of his cardinals lived lives of splendour, excess and debauchery. Women had been banned from the stage on pain of exile, leaving the high vocal parts to castrati (male vocalists who had sacrificed their genitalia in boyhood).



Handel c 1710. G. Platzer.  
© Handel House, Halle

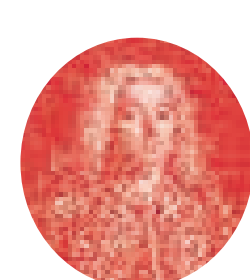
Castrating device 18th century.

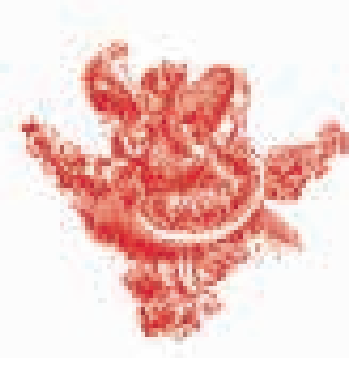


Faced with Papal restrictions composers simply changed from writing operas to cantatas (short operatic scenes), their political or private messages thinly disguised in the passionate love stories of classical allegory. Cutting his operatic teeth by stealth, Handel composed many cantatas for private performance and, ironically, wrote music for the Roman Catholic liturgy, including a magnificent Vespers for Cardinal Colonna's Carmelite festival in 1707.



Circle of Vanvitelli 1652/3 - 1736  
A View of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.  
© Sphinx Fine Art, London





Palazzo Ruspoli.

Handel became the guest of one of Rome's richest men, Prince Francesco Maria Ruspoli, who had a large orchestra at his disposal. The Prince's young protégé composed and performed numerous cantatas for the weekly musical gatherings at the Ruspoli Palace.

Handel also wrote sacred music for Ruspoli, notably the Easter oratorio *La Resurrezione* which was sumptuously staged in 1708 with an orchestra of 42 and 5 solo singers including, to the Pope's disapproval, a woman (Margarita Durastanti) who sang the soprano role of Mary Magdalene.

Described by a French diplomat as "without morals... debauched, decadent, a lover of the arts" Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni (1667-1740), grand-nephew of Pope Alexander VIII and vice-chancellor of the

church, loved "pomp, prodigality and sensual pleasure." He was one of the most important patrons of the 18th century, almost bankrupting himself in the process. His reputation as a patron extended as far as England.

He lived in splendor at the vast Palazzo della Cancelleria, where he constructed a theatre and wrote libretti for several of the cantatas performed there. Pictured here by one of his resident artists c 1690 the Cardinal wears a watered-silk mozetta over a flounce of Venetian needlepoint lace.

Montesquieu may have exaggerated when he suggested that the cardinal had over 60 illegitimate children with various mistresses, for his long-term companion was the castrato Andrea Adami, choirmaster of the Sistine Chapel, his "favoritissimo". He surrounded himself with artists and musicians, among them Arcangelo Corelli, who led many of Handel's concerts for the cardinal and lived at the palazzo with his partner the violinist Matteo Fornari.



Francesco Trevisani (1656-1746), Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni c.1690.  
© Bowes Museum

Handel performed several times for Ottoboni and composed cantatas for him. The cardinal famously brought the two virtuosi, Handel and Domenico Scarlatti together for an inconclusive trial of keyboard skills. The two became good friends and travelling companions.



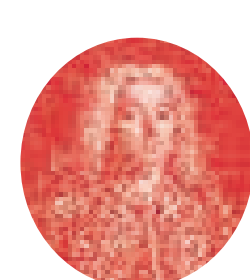
Palazzo Pamphili, Piazza Navona. G. Vasi.  
© Buccleuch Collection

Cardinal Pamphili, poet and patron of the arts, hosted weekly musical gatherings and wrote suggestive texts for several of Handel's cantatas. The titles give a flavour— *Amid the Flames*, *Phyliss' Night Thoughts*, *The Ecstasy of Love*. Several have homoerotic subtexts cloaked in mythology. Pamphili considered Handel his very own "Orpheus" and in his text for the cantata *'Il Trionfo del Tempo'* pays him a fulsome compliment:

*"A youth with more than Magic Might,  
The Soul awakens to Delight,  
With his harmonious strains.  
And as his bloom enchants the Eye,  
The hearing by his Harmony,  
Its share of Pleasure gains.  
His artful Fingers seem to fly,  
So well the Sounds his Touch obey,  
'Tis more than Mortal Harmony."*

From Rome Handel travelled to Naples, Florence, the very cradle of opera where, encouraged by de Medici, he wrote his first all-Italian opera *Rodrigo* - and to Venice where *Agrippina*, his first great masterpiece, had 27 consecutive performances in 1709 and was even reported in the English press. Here he made useful contacts amongst the visitors including Prince Ernst August of Hanover and the English ambassador Lord Charles Montagu, later Duke of Manchester, whose son married the Duke of Montagu's daughter Isabella.

In 1710 Handel finally left Italy for Hanover where he was appointed Director of Music to the Elector Georg Ludwig, the future King George I of England, and wrote music for Princess Caroline, George II's future Queen. Prolific and famous in Rome, "Giorgio Federico Hendel's" intensely formative years are memorable for his Italian cantatas, eloquent with the vocal and instrumental energy absorbed from composers and performers like Scarlatti and Corelli.





# London

By 1711 Handel was in England, where his first London opera Rinaldo was dedicated to Queen Anne and given at the Queen's Theatre. It had a successful run of 15 performances, but in *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison criticised the extravagance of the staging and ridiculed the castrato Nicolini braving a pasteboard ocean in an ermine cloak, and the swarm of sparrows released at the end of the first act.



Queen Anne Stuart.  
© Buccleuch Collection

In 1712, after a brief return to Hanover, where he began to learn English, Handel, already known as "the Orpheus of our Century" and a legendary organist and harpsichordist, settled with perfect synchronicity into the fertile ground of London. Opera was still in an experimental stage, waiting for a genius to step in and transform the medium into the all-sung Italian drama that quickly became the rage.

On the strength of Rinaldo and the music written for her birthday, Queen Anne granted him a life pension of £200 p.a. in 1713 (c £15,000 in today's money), which was continued by King George I on his accession in 1714.

Initially Handel lived for 3 years at Burlington House, Piccadilly as guest of the young, music-loving Lord Burlington, who with his life-long friend William Kent imported from Italy the neo-Palladian architectural style. Handel composed three French-infused, Italian-style operas there and met the great poet Alexander Pope and the celebrated author Jonathan Swift, who, much later, witnessed the first performance of *Messiah*.



George I (1660-1727), c 1720  
by Bernard Lens. © Buccleuch Collection



Burlington House, Piccadilly. Engraved by J. Kip. © Buccleuch Collection

Alexander Pope to Mrs Blount:

*"I am to pass three or four days in high luxury, with some company, at my Lord Burlington's. We are to walk, ride, ramble, dine, drink, and lie together. His gardens are delightful, his music ravishing."*

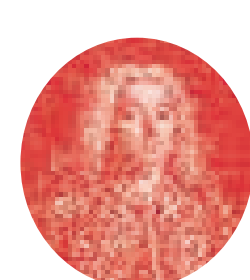
Inspired by Italy and therefore viewed with some suspicion for possible Catholic, and therefore Jacobite, influences, Burlington House was a hothouse of artistic creativity – decorative, architectural, musical and poetical. The English also associated Italy with homosexuality - a reason for many travellers to spend time there. Part of the same circle was the poet and playwright John Gay, a close friend of Pope, protégé of the Duke of Queensberry and author of the subversive *Beggar's Opera*.

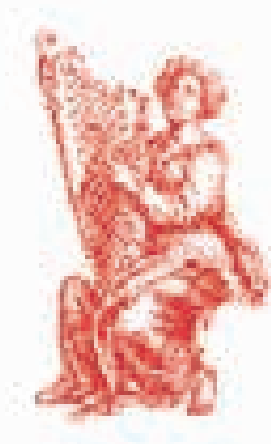
From 1717 – 1719 Handel lived at Cannons Palace in Edgware, the spectacular home of the Duke of Chandos, who had a choir, a fine organ and an orchestra of 24 at his disposal. The house was later demolished to pay debts, but its classical columns were reclaimed for the façade of the National Gallery in London. Handel produced much memorable music for Chandos including a series of anthems, the opera *Acis and Galatea* and the first English oratorio *Esther*.

Living under constant private patronage Handel had produced over 100 cantatas, much keyboard music and 14 operas by 1723, when he finally moved into a house of his own at 25 Brook Street. He became naturalised in 1727 - having first had to declare himself a good Protestant - though as a foreign national he could not own property or take a long lease.



Handel in 1737 by G. Wolfgang.  
© Montagu Music Collection



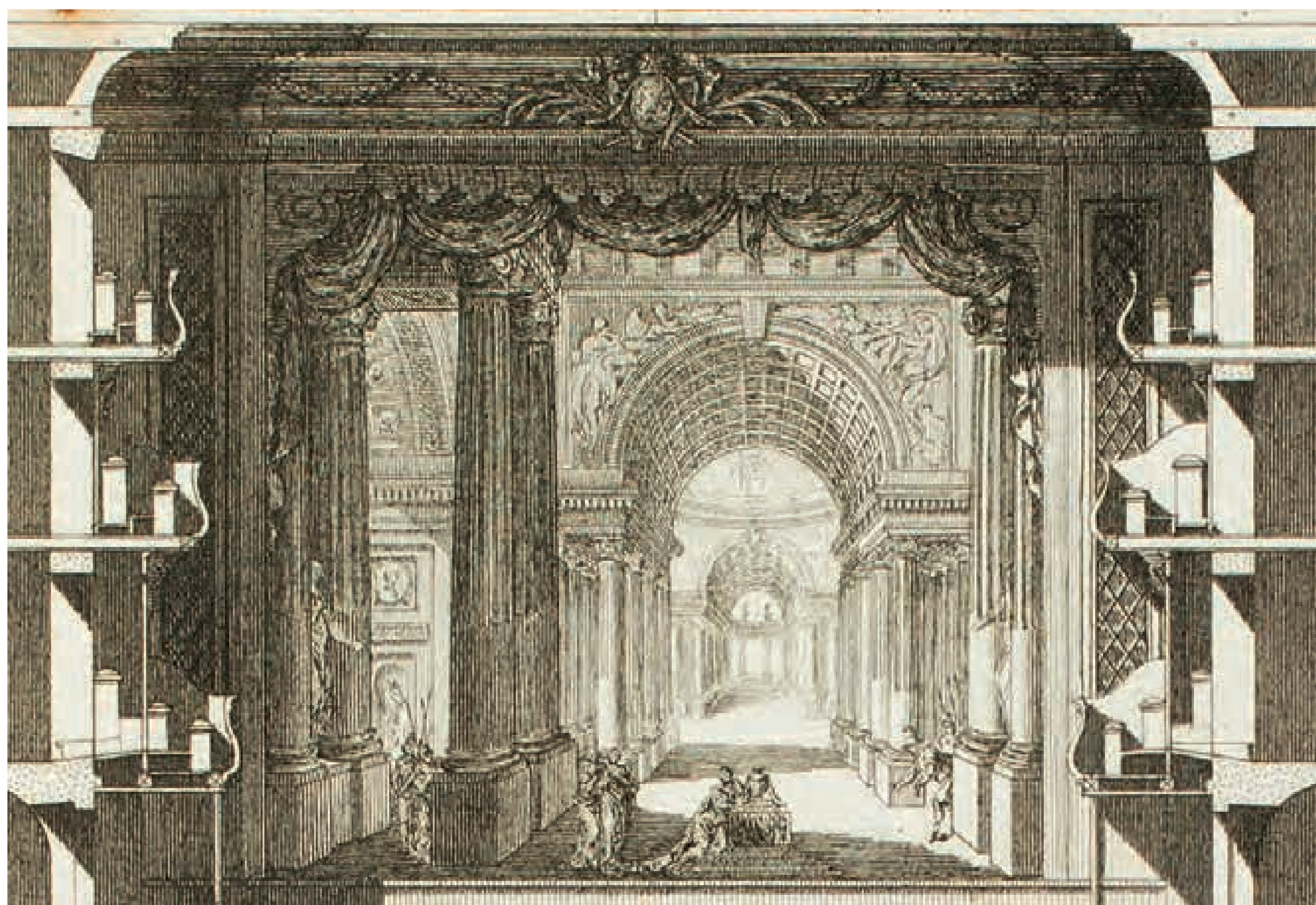


# Opera

**A**n opera is a poetical tale or fiction, represented by vocal and instrumental musick, adorn'd with scenes, machines and dancing. The suppos'd persons of this musical drama are generally supernatural, as gods and goddesses and heroes... The subject therefore being extended beyond the limits of humane nature, admits of that sort of marvelous and surprising conduct which is rejected in other plays." (Dryden's preface to *Albion and Albanus*, 1685)



From Bickham's 'Musical Entertainer'. © Montagu Music Collection



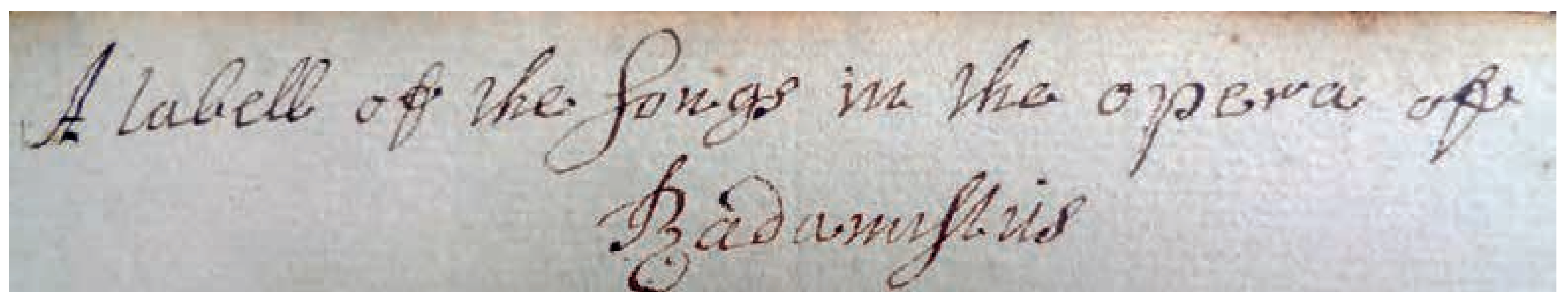
The proscenium and stage would have looked very similar to this Italian theatre.  
© Royal Academy of Arts, London

Cloaked in classical mythology, opera often referred to contemporary issues. The recitative drove the action, the arias pleased the ear and reflected on the drama, the dance mirrored the prevailing mood.

In 1705 the first Duke of Montagu had helped to finance Vanburgh's new Queen's Theatre on the Haymarket, where some of London's first all-sung Italian opera was unveiled. Typically it involved elaborate stage effects, frequent scene changes, dancers if possible and singers including the sensational castrati, who were crucial box-office draws while subverting contemporary gender and religious norms.

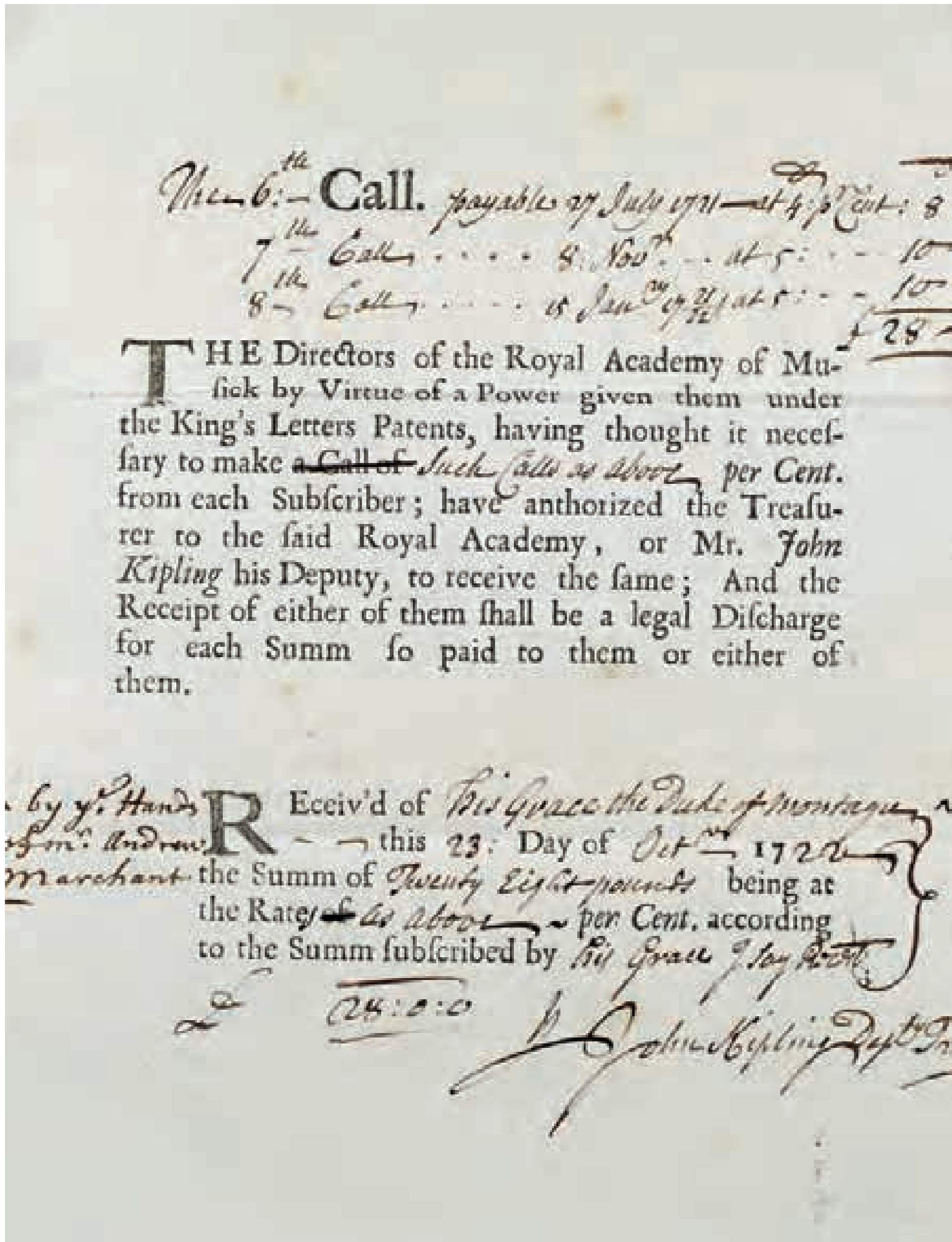
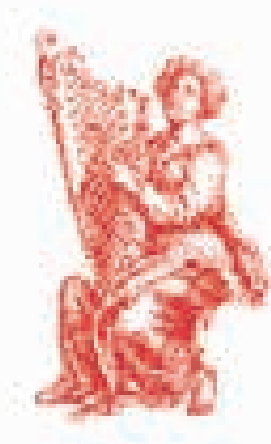
To achieve Handel's aim of establishing a top class Italian opera company in London, the Royal Academy of Musick was set up in 1719 as a joint stock company with shares limited to subscribers including 7 dukes and 13 earls. King George I granted a subsidy of £1000 for 5 years and Handel's first Academy opera, *Radamisto*, was dedicated to him in 1720. It was Handel's first opera to include horns. The 1720/21 season of 57 performances cost an alarming £12,800 (£1m in today's money). The dance budget alone was £1000 (£85k) with £7400 (£630k) for the singers.

The company ran in profit only once and ended in acrimonious disarray in 1728 having entirely run out of money, partly a victim of the runaway success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which "borrowed" 3 numbers directly from Handel, who frequently found his music being disseminated via popular ballad operas.



Inscription in the 1720 score of *Radamisto*.  
© Montagu Music Collection





Montagu's 1722 call for subscription to the Royal Academy of Music. © Boughton archive

In order to qualify as a director of Handel's Academy, the second Duke of Montagu was obliged first to possess a certificate of conformity to the sacrament of the Church of England and to swear three oaths: allegiance to King George I, acknowledgement of the supremacy of the King over all other rulers (especially the Pope), and abjuration of James Stuart, the Catholic pretender's claim to the throne. He also had to deny the occurrence of transubstantiation during Holy Communion.

Handel wrote 14 operas for the Academy and recruited, for enormous salaries, the finest available singers including the celebrated castrato Senesino and Margarita Durastanti, whom he had known in Rome.



1724 first edition of Tamerlano. © Montagu Music Collection

Durastanti was engaged as the first *prima donna* in the new company, creating the name-part in *Radamisto* in the 1720 season. In 1724 she sang in *Giulio Cesare*, but found herself eclipsed by the latest vocal sensation Francesca Cuzzoni (or Catzoni as reported in one broadsheet), who famously refused to sing a particular aria until Handel threatened to throw her out of the window.



From George Bickham's 'Musical Entertainer' 1740. © Montagu Music Collection

In 1726 the soprano Faustina Bordoni joined the company as a further star attraction during what proved to be the Academy's final two seasons. Fans of the rival divas Cuzzoni and Bordoni came to blows and the women were immortalised in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* as Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit.

The Royal Academy now had some of the finest singers in Europe. Handel had established London as an opera capital to rival Naples and Venice.

The castrato Senesino last appeared in London in 1736 – in a rival opera company. His final departure, with large amounts of cash, is caricatured here in George Bickham's "Musical Entertainer".

Horace Walpole met the singer in Italy in 1740 at the end of his career – "We thought it a fat old woman; but it spoke in a shrill little pipe, and proved itself to be Senesini".

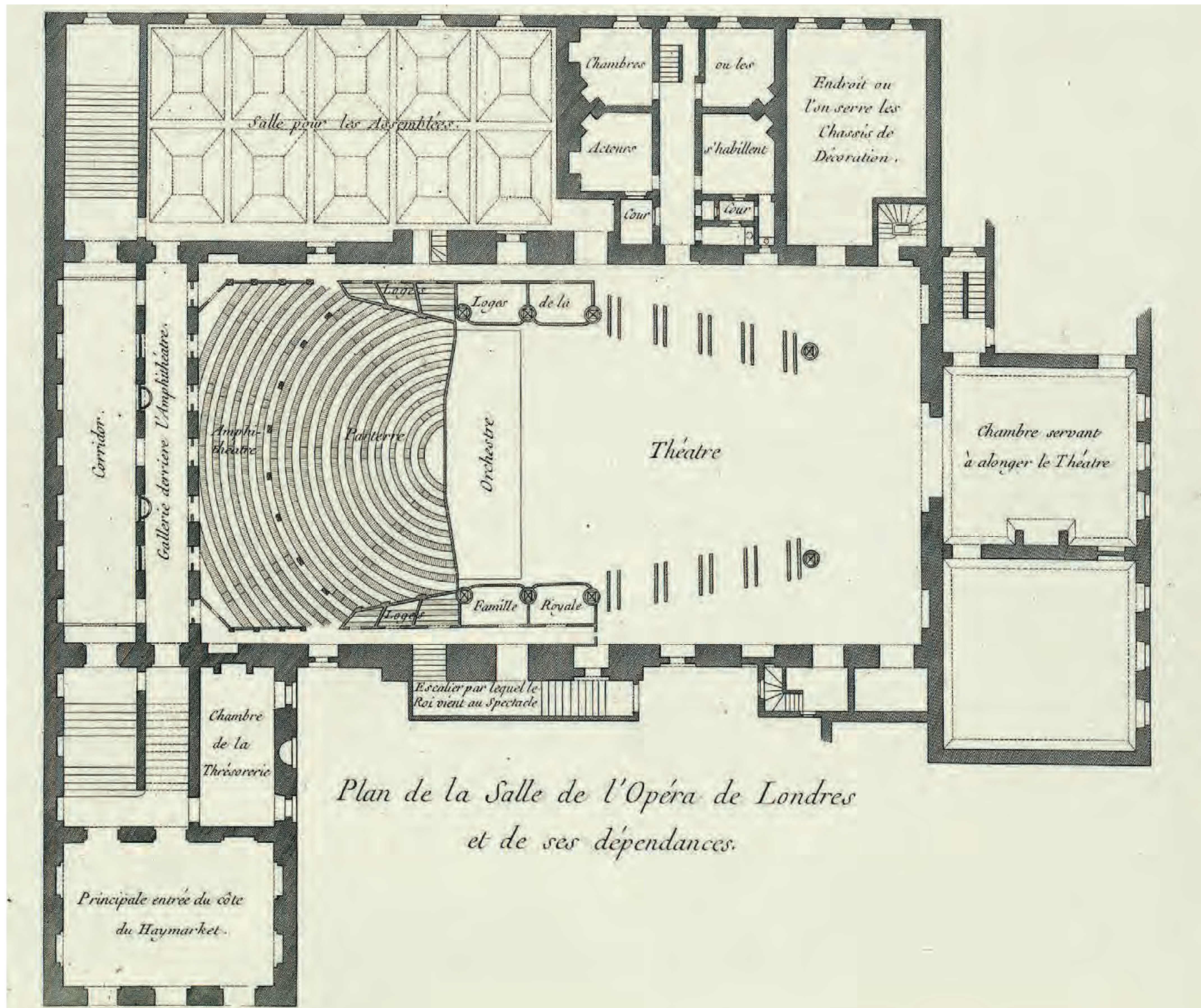


From George Bickham's 'Musical Entertainer'. © Montagu Music Collection





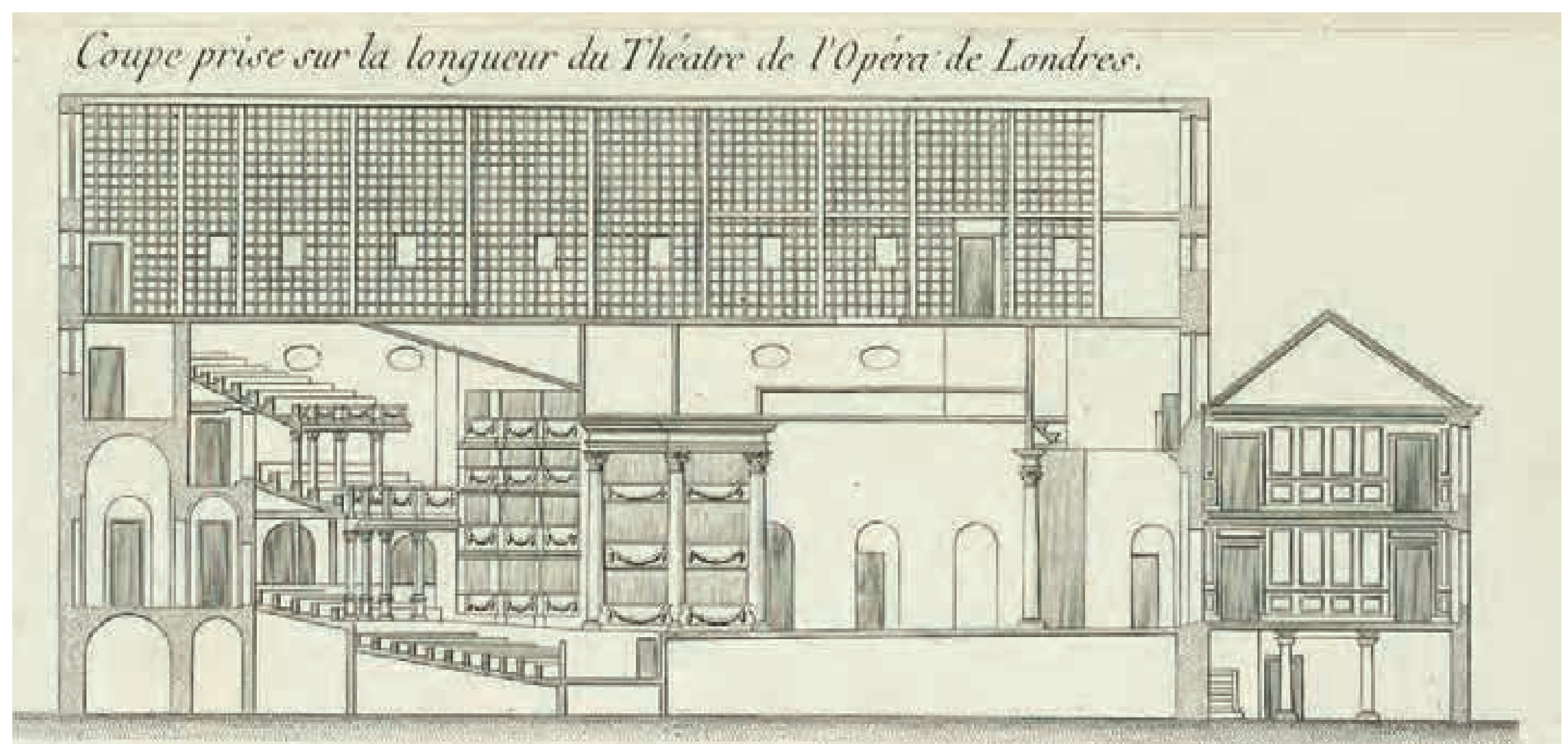
# The King's Theatre



King's Theatre. © Bibliothèque municipale de Besançon

Vanbrugh's King's Theatre survives only in a few scarce images, though its spirit glimmers on through Handel's operas.

It was by all accounts magnificent, with a lofty auditorium adorned with classical columns, statues and gilded cornices, an exceptionally large stage, 4 levels of boxes, an amphitheatre, a royal box with a separate entrance, a painted ceiling and generous entertaining and backstage areas.



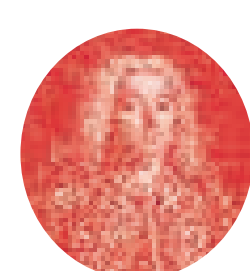
King's Theatre. © Bibliothèque municipale de Besançon



The Haymarket entrance to the Theatre before it was destroyed by fire in 1789. © British Library

Luckily the French draughtsman Gabriel Dumont included a detailed plan of the theatre in his 1770 book *Parallèle de plans des plus belles salles de spectacle d'Italie et de France*.

Servandoni, who later designed the Royal Fireworks pavilion, was one of the stage designers during the 1720's.

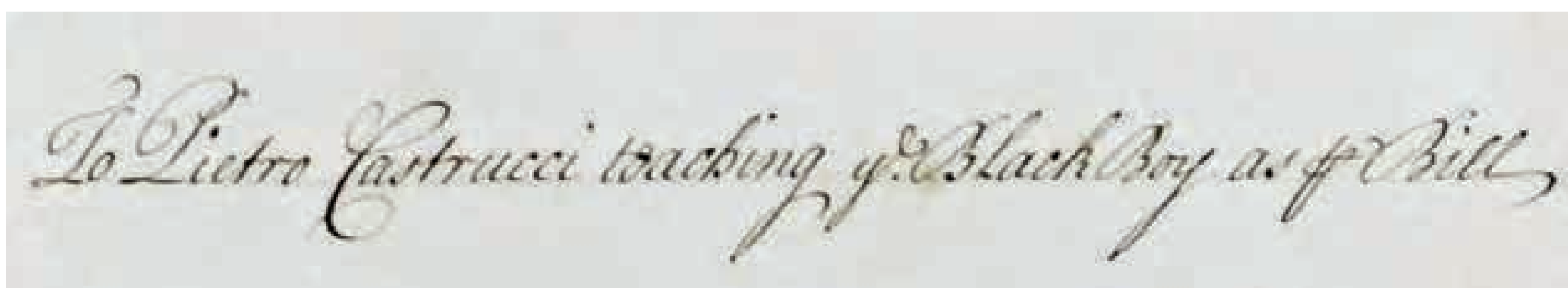




# Music Making and Society

Violinist brothers Pietro and Prospero Castrucci were pupils of Corelli and worked with Handel in Rome. They came to London in 1715 in the entourage of the Earl of Burlington. Pietro Castrucci became solo violinist of Handel's Royal Academy opera orchestra and played the solos in *Radamisto* and *Giulio Cesare*. He is a candidate for the 'enraged musician' in Hogarth's famous print.

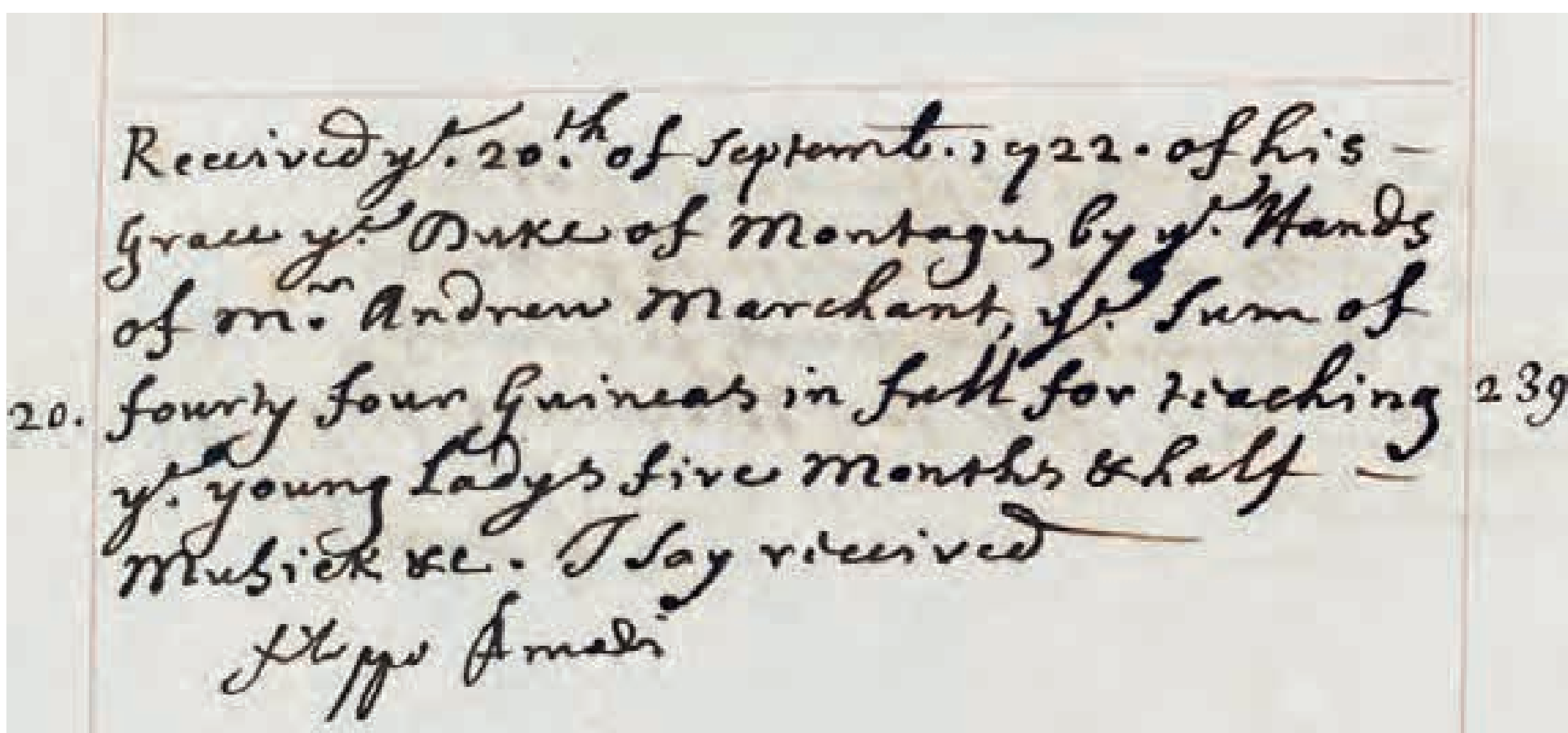
Castrucci was engaged by the philanthropic Duke of Montagu to teach music to one of his African servants - "ye Black Boy".



Castrucci's bill for Music lessons 1724.  
© Boughton Archive



Hogarth's "Enraged Musician" 1741.  
© Buccleuch Collection

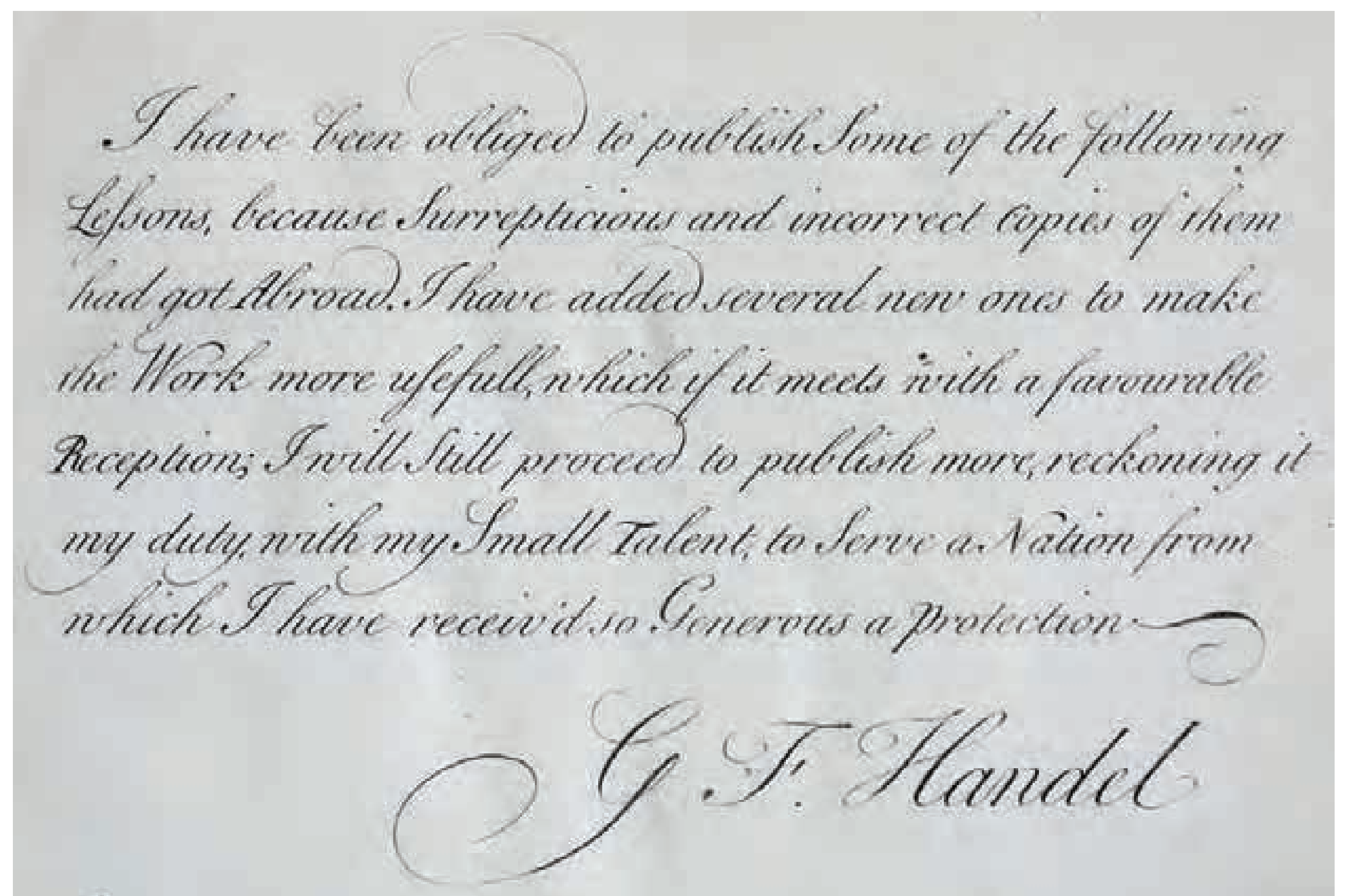


Filippo Amadei's bill for music lessons 1722. © Boughton Archive

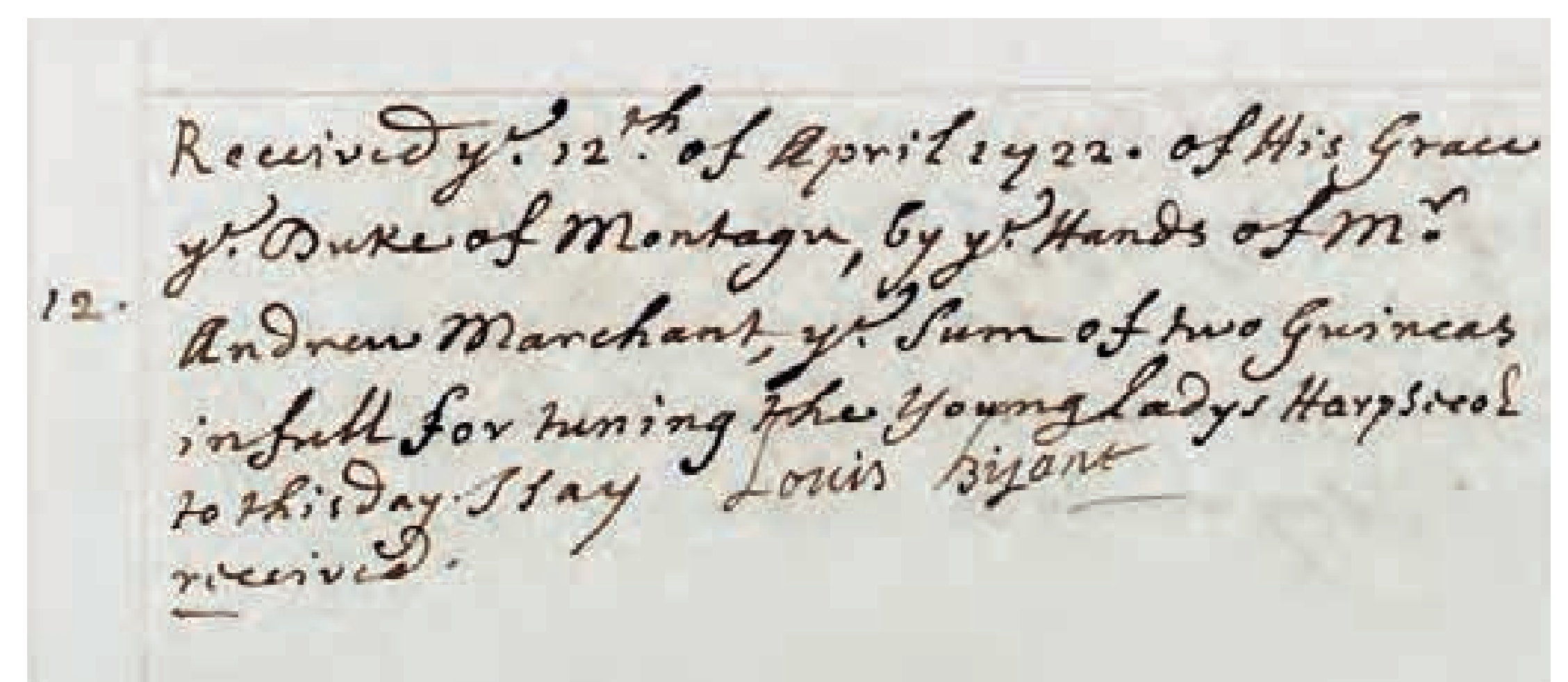
Filippo Amadei 1670 - 1725 was another Roman colleague of Handel's and worked as violone virtuoso, cellist and composer. In London he gave concerts on his violone (a large bass viol), played cello in Handel's Royal Academy orchestra and gave music lessons to the Duke of Montagu's daughter Lady Mary.

Before the legal protection of copyright, a composer's works were his only as long as he could control their copying and circulation; rogue copyists and pirate publishers were a constant threat.

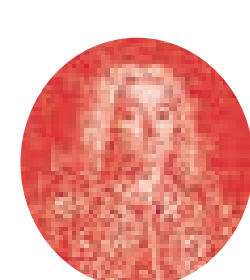
Tired of his music being misappropriated, Handel's statement in the preface to the 1720 volume of dance-inspired harpsichord suites is one of the earliest attempts at copyrighting original material.



Detail from Bickham's Musical Entertainer 1740.  
© Montagu Music Collection



M. Bigart's bill for harpsichord tuning 1722.  
© Boughton Archive







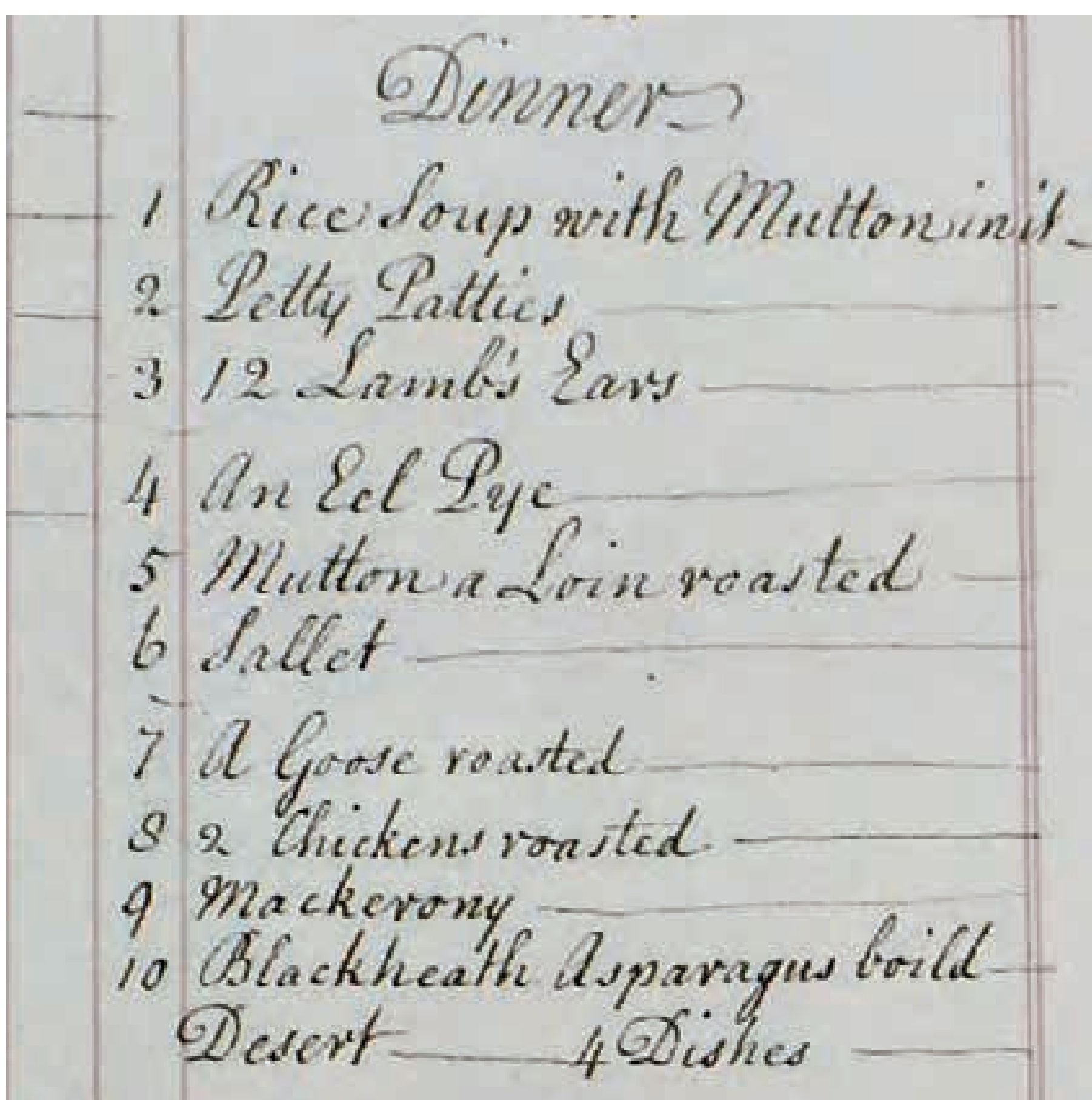
Detail from "A Music Party at Montagu House". Marcellus Laroon 1679 -1772. © Buccleuch Collection

The Duke of Montagu's London home was the luxurious backdrop for frequent music parties, captured on canvas in the 1730s by the painter Marcellus Laroon.

Given their shared interests, Handel, who moved easily in society, was probably an honoured guest at these convivial gatherings along with other leading musicians and singers. On at least one occasion he was invited to a more formal lunch at the house.



Detail from Bickham's Musical Entertainer 1740. © Montagu Music Collection



Detail of the menu for Handel's lunch at Montagu House, April 1747. © Boughton Archive

With age Handel became progressively corpulent and walked with difficulty. As early as 1734 his size was being commented on and ridiculed. Always a heavy drinker, one of his orders in 1724 was for 12 gallons of port and 12 bottles of French wine. His secret binge eating points to a serious disorder, but this lack of control was considered his only sin and contrasted with his exacting control over his music.



Handel, by Louis François Roubiliac, 1738. © V&A

The Huguenot sculptor Louis François Roubiliac's first work in London was this marble figure of 'Handel as Orpheus' for Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens in 1738. It made a considerable impact and established his reputation as one of the great artists of 18th century.



Bickham's Musical Entertainer. © Montagu Music Collection

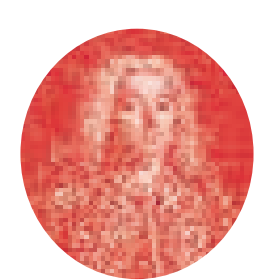
Vauxhall, launched by the entrepreneur Jonathan Tyers in 1732, was London's most popular leisure destination and the epitome of rococo alfresco entertainment. Entrance was one shilling, which permitted an easy mix of classes to enjoy music, dancing, refreshments and general socialising as well as the dark alleys and secret arbour frequented by prostitutes.

Handel's Music for the Royal Fireworks was given a public rehearsal there in 1749 and Casanova was a visitor in 1763.



Bickham's Musical Entertainer, 1740. © Montagu Music Collection

Appearing in George Bickham's 'Musical Entertainer' of 1740, Mira's Invitation to Vauxhall shows the first printed representation of Roubiliac's famous statue of Handel: "Come Mira, Idol of ye swains.... to bowr's where heav'n born Flora reigns and Handel warbles airs divine".





# Dance

**M**arie Sallé (1709-1756) was one of the most celebrated dancers of her day. Elegant and expressive she was often referred to as the very muse of dance, the French *Terpsichore*.

She was from a well-known dynasty of fairground entertainers, tumblers, acrobats and harlequins. Her uncle Francisque Moylin, was one of the dancers for the Duke of Montagu's venture at the Little Theatre on the Haymarket in the 1720's.



Detail from Bickham's *Musical Entertainer* (1740).  
© Montagu Music Collection

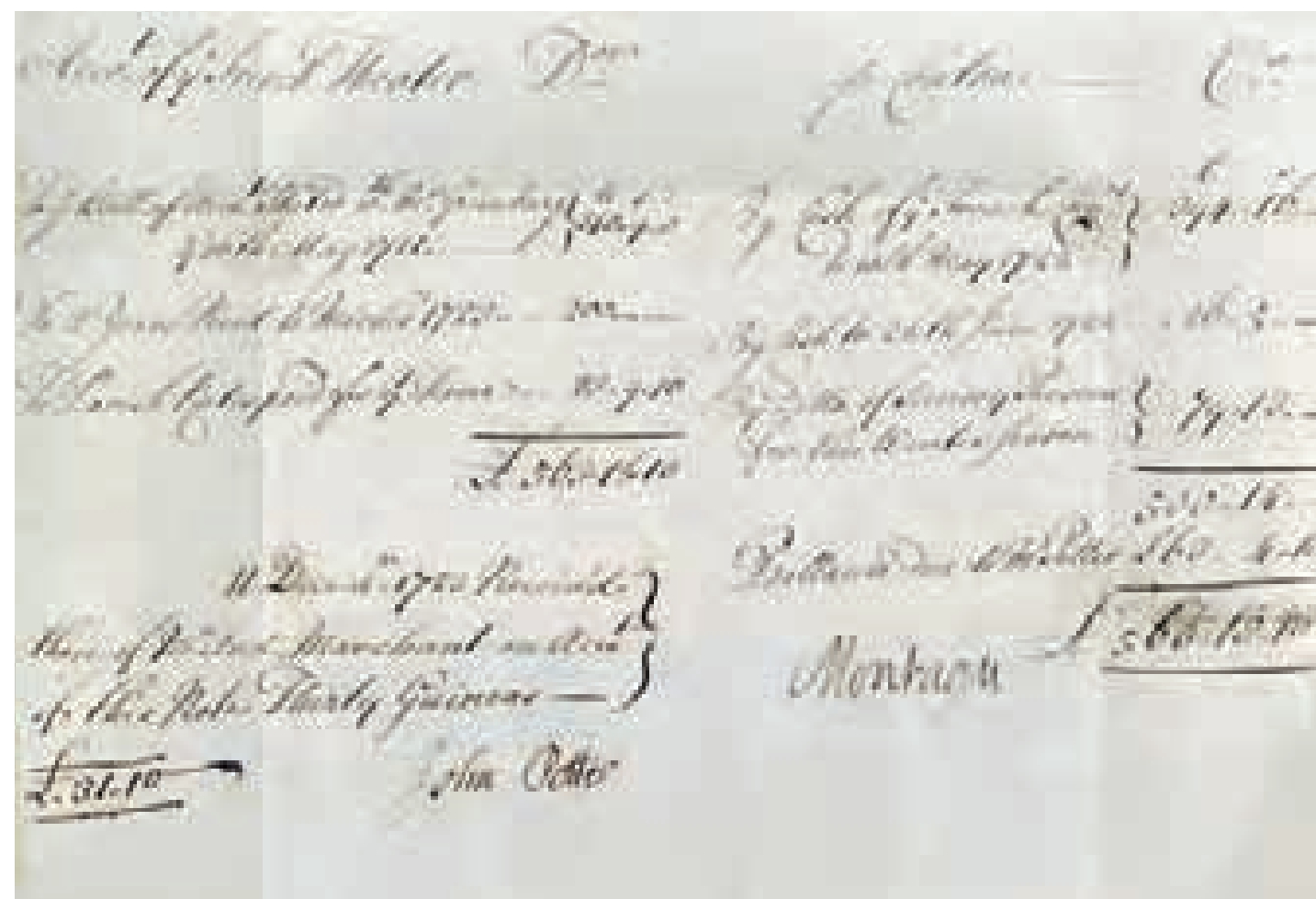
Handel first encountered Sallé in 1717 dancing in *Rinaldo* at the King's Theatre and he wrote particularly expressive ballets for her in his seasons at Covent Garden Theatre in 1730's. During one performance of *Alcina* she was hissed off stage for cross-dressing as Cupid and on another occasion there was a riot when the King stopped her from giving an encore.



Nicolas Lancret: *Portrait of a dancer (Marie Sallé)* c 1735.  
© Museum of Fine Arts Boston

Dance had long been an important component of opera even before Lully's famous works for Louis XIV, who was a keen dancer himself.

Dance traditionally reflected the mood of the scene it followed. The *passacaille*, for example, was a dance long associated with eternal love and fidelity in the face of adversity. The *rigaudon* expressed hearty rustic simplicity. The arms and hands also played a crucial part in the choreography.



1721 Montagu's Little Theatre dance bill.  
© Boughton Archive

The music-loving second Duke of Montagu was keenly involved with the King's Theatre on the Haymarket. And at Mr Potter's Little Theatre, just across the street, the Duke also retained an assorted troupe of French dancers organised by their manager M. de Grimbergue.

'Montagu's French vermin', as the disgruntled dramatist and manager Aaron Hill described them, feeding into current general suspicion of the French, consisted not only of commedia actors, tumblers and acrobats but also some serious dancers trained in the tradition of 'la belle danse', as enjoyed by Louis XIV.

In 1720/21 they provided up to 28 dancers and walk-on parts for Handel's operas being staged on alternate nights at the King's Theatre.

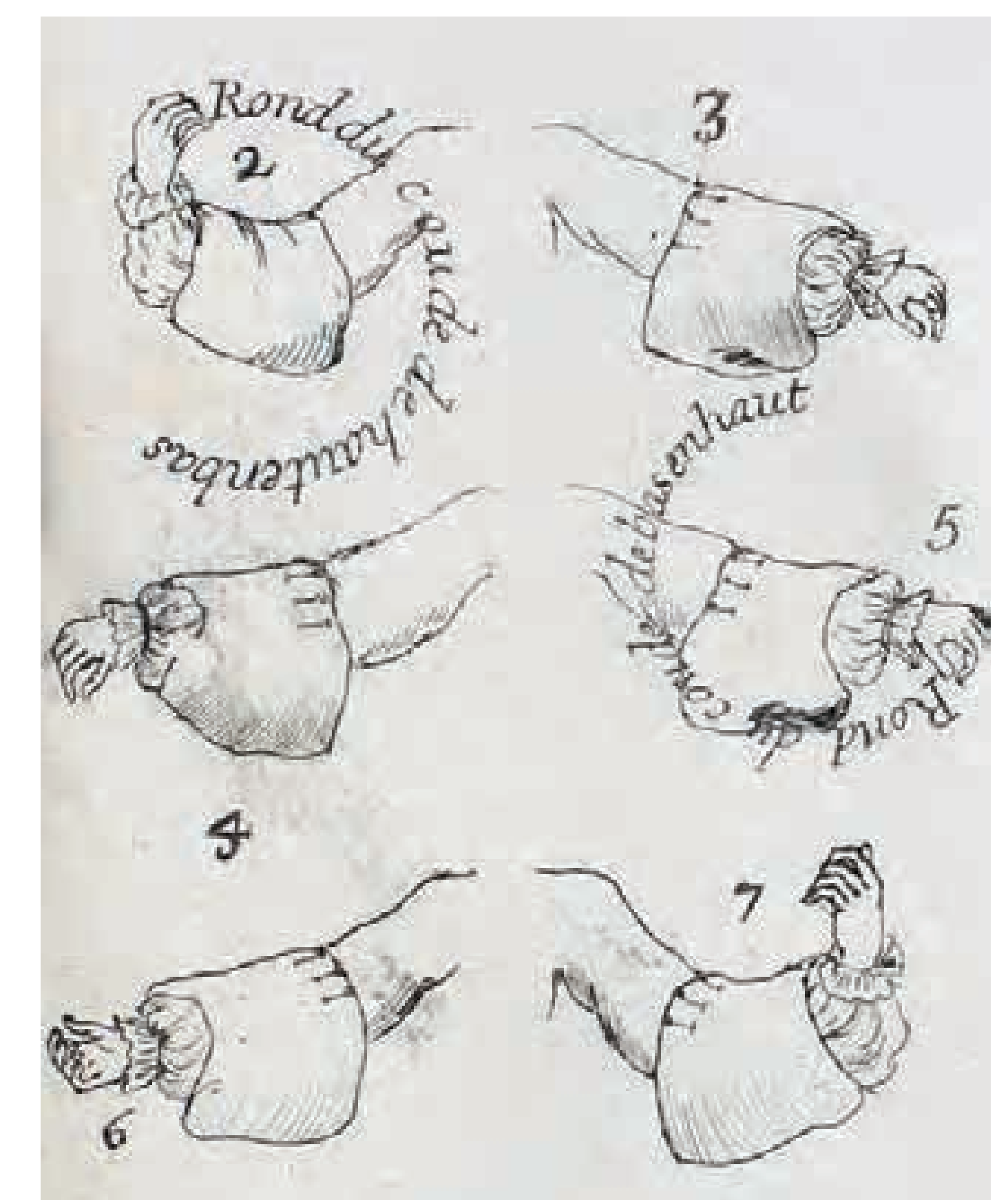
During Montagu's directorship French dance was an important part of the operas staged at the King's Theatre, until celebrity singers began to account for increasing percentages of the budget.

A prime example is *Radamisto* in 1720, which included rigaudons, gigue, passepieds and a long passacaille.



Detail from Bickham's *Musical Entertainer* (1737). © Montagu Music Collection

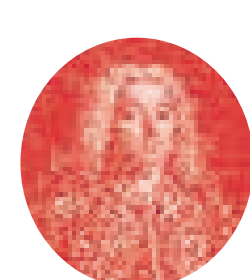
These ballets were choreographed by John Montagu's dancing master and friend Anthony L'Abbé, who had been a principal dancer at the Paris opera and was by then firmly established in London as the leading choreographer of his day, key to the introduction of French dance traditions into England.

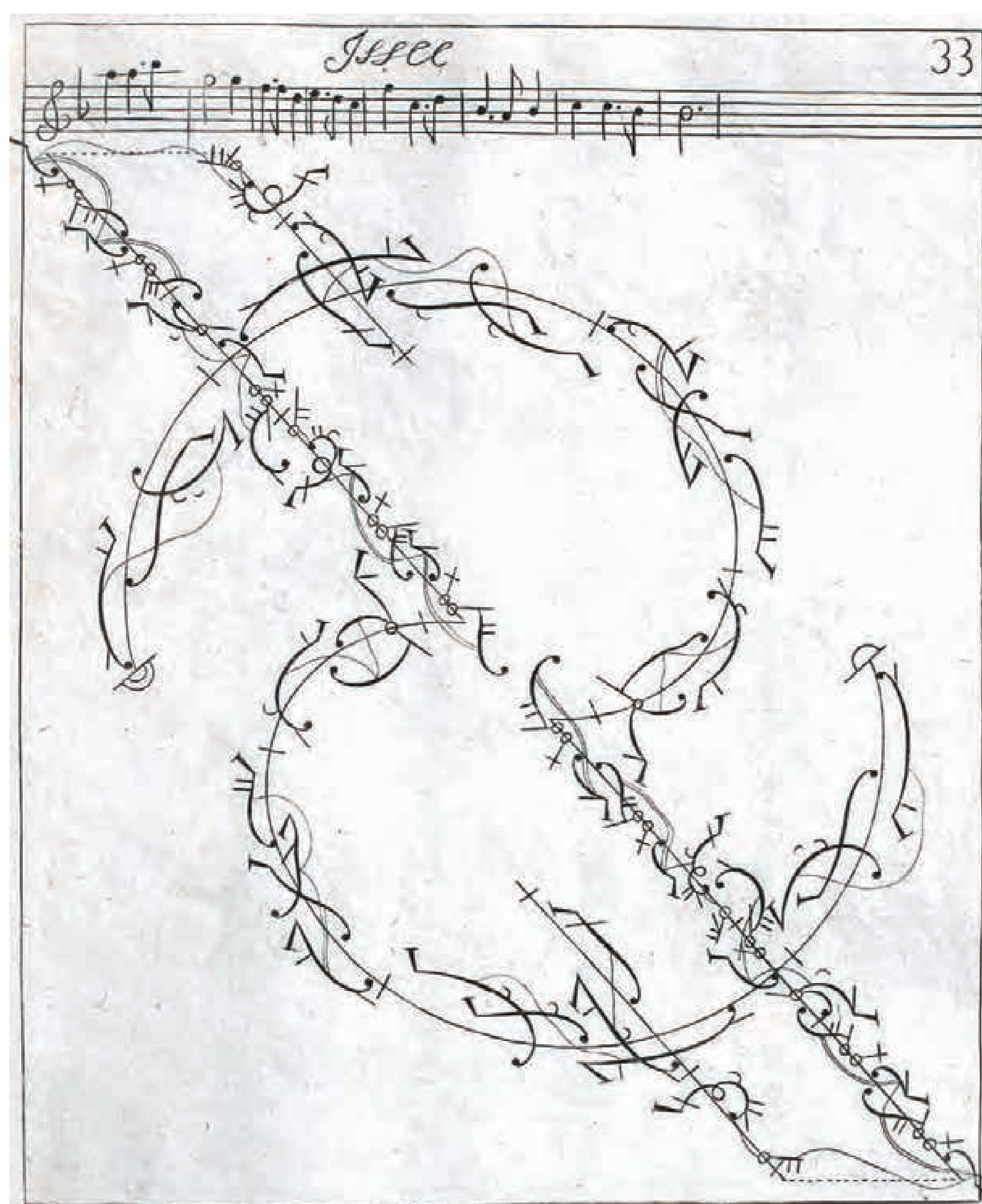
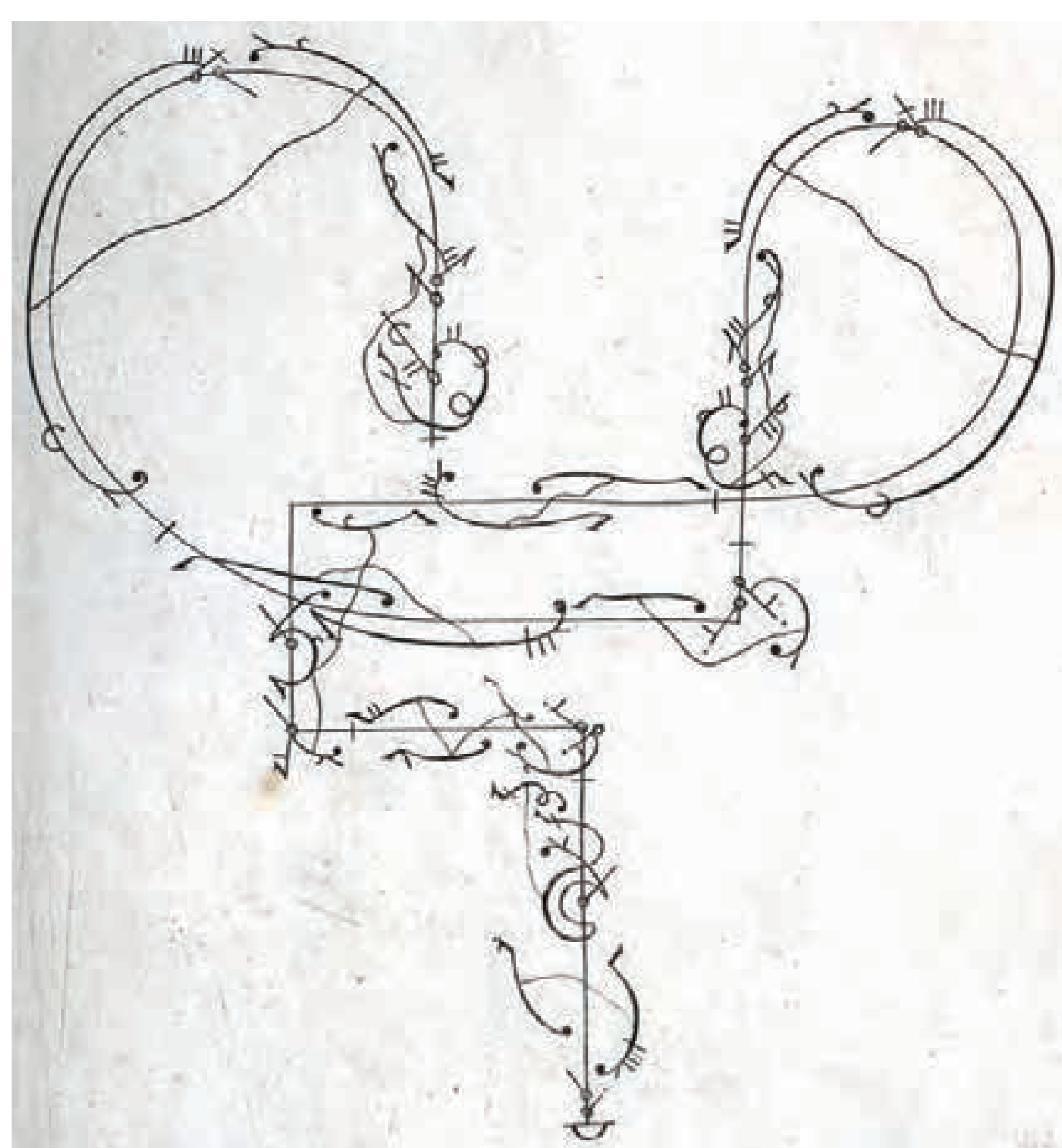
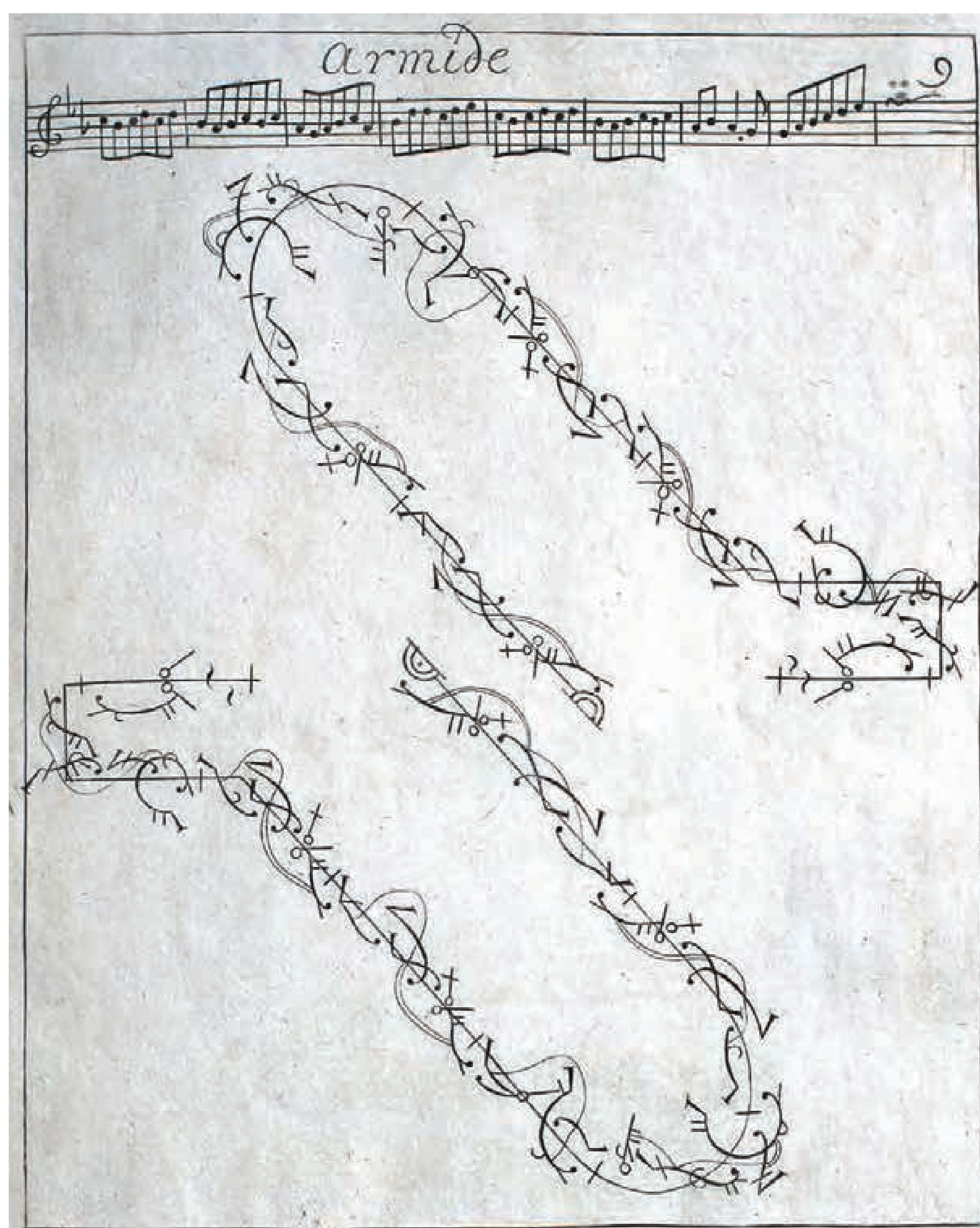


Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Le Maître à Danser*, Paris 1748. © Montagu Music Collection



John, Duke of Montagu.  
G. Kneller. © Buccleuch Collection





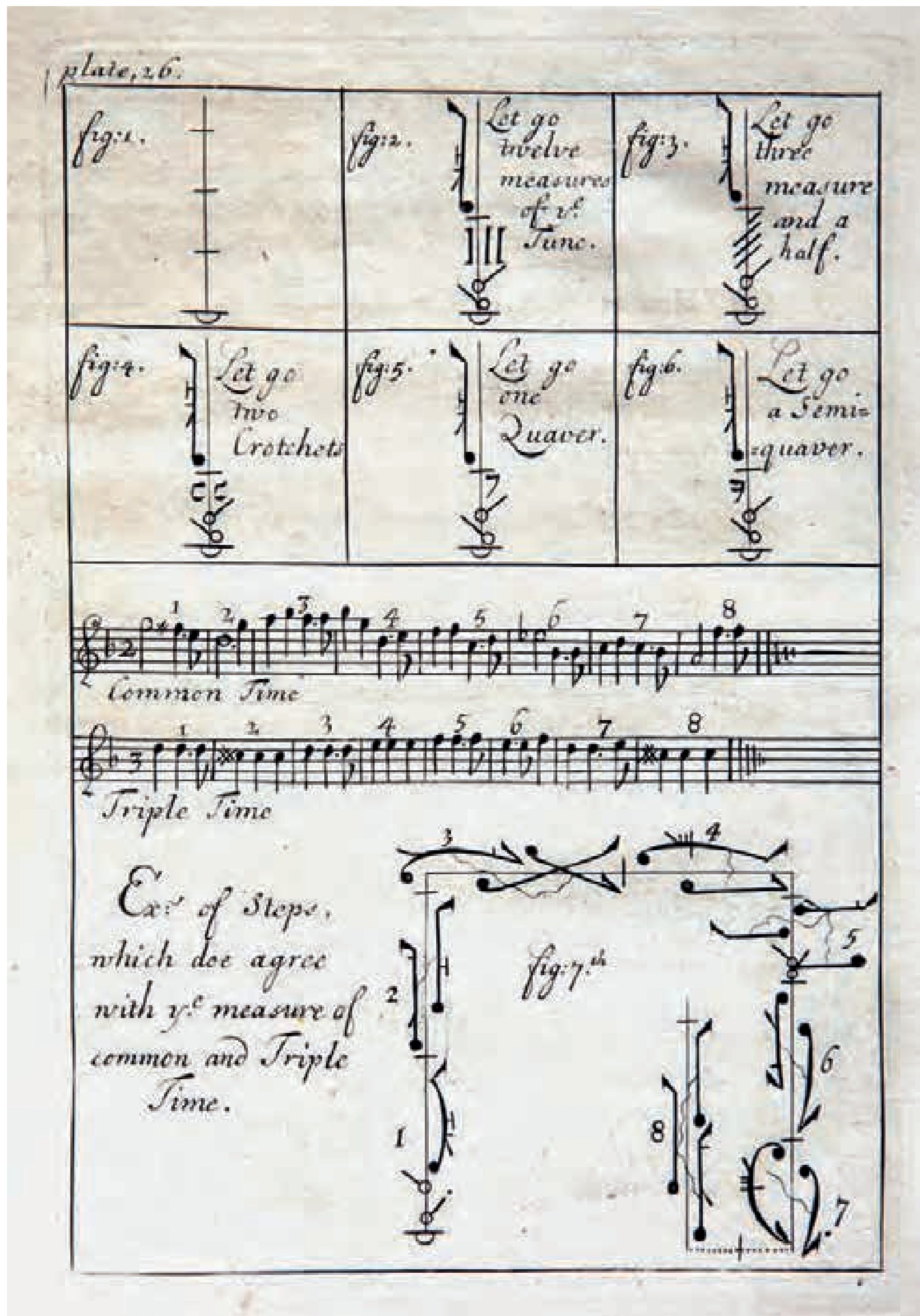
Anthony L'Abbe, *A New Collection of Dances*.  
Rousseau, London, c. 1725.  
© Montagu Music Collection

These sophisticated and expressive dances by Anthony L'Abbé are notated in the system known as Beauchamp-Feuillet, invented by Louis XIV's *compositeur des ballets du roi* Pierre Beauchamp (1631-1705), and published in 1700 by Raoul-Anger Feuillet.





Handel's very first Hamburg operas featured French style balletic interludes and during his career he incorporated over 70 choreographed French dances into his operas, 14 of which had scenes with dance, including 10 written for the London stage. There are few surviving choreographies or scenarios, but it is possible to re-create them by referring to contemporary treatises.



P. Siris, *The Art of Dancing*, London 1706. © Montagu Music Collection

The series of symbols denote the component parts of the dance steps (bending, rising, sliding, jumping, turning) which, when combined along a floor-track intersected by bar-lines, fit with the music at the top of the page and tell the dancer exactly what steps to do and what patterns to trace out on the dance floor. These seemingly abstract graphics allow us to re-create entire dances from the early-eighteenth century which otherwise would have been lost.

Dance was a crucial social asset and in order to survive in high society during the early-eighteenth century it was essential to be able to dance well in the ballroom, along with knowing how to stand and move gracefully, and how to converse with elegance and wit.

People were judged by their minuet.

It was therefore *de rigueur* to employ a French dancing-master skilled in the correct forms of dance and in all the social graces.

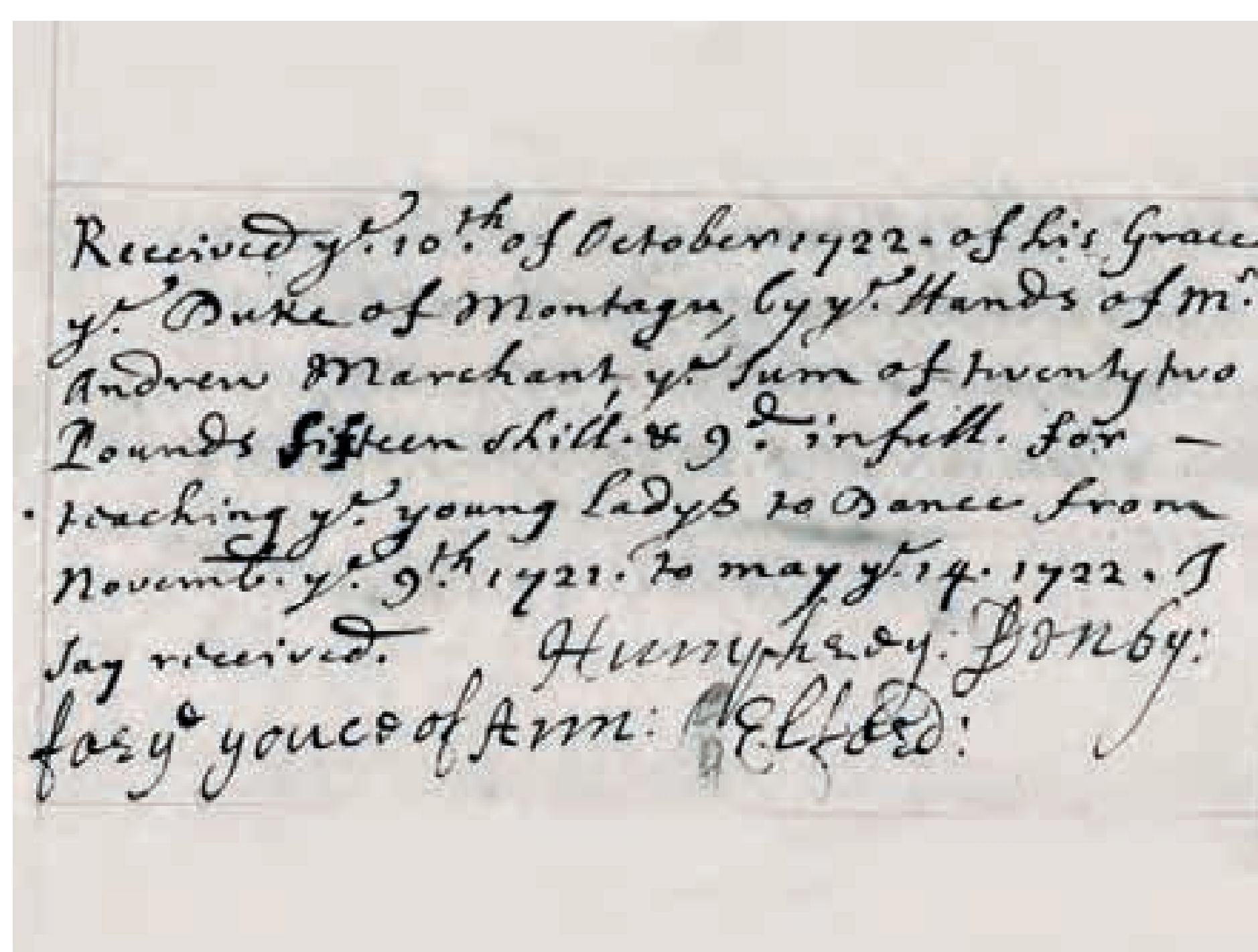
Handel wrote dozens of minuets for social dancing.



Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Le Maître à Danser*, Paris 1748. © Montagu Music Collection

The Montagus employed a succession of dancing masters for their children – Mr Isaac, Monsieur Siris and Monsieur L'Abbé, who also taught the royal Princesses.

Montagu's younger daughter Lady Mary was a keen musician, and from 1720 until her marriage ten years later she also took lessons with the distinguished stage dancer Mrs Ann Elford.



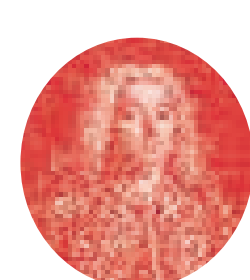
Mrs Elford's 1721 bill for Dance lessons. © Boughton Archive

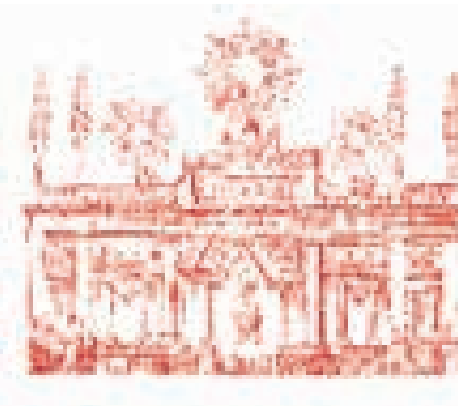


Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Le Maître à Danser*, Paris 1748. © Montagu Music Collection

*“ True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance. ”*

Alexander Pope





# Fireworks

Fireworks with music had been a popular tradition since the 16th century, providing useful political symbolism. Handel's 1736 opera *Atalanta*, written for the wedding of the Prince and Princess of Wales and performed at Covent Garden Theatre, ended with spectacular indoor display of fireworks with a ceiling-high central fountain of fire, a Catherine wheel showering blue, gold and silver rain, and rows of blue fires leading up to a temple.



Handel by Thomas Hudson.  
© Gerald Coke Handel Collection, Foundling Museum

Handel was the obvious choice as composer to help commemorate the Peace of Aix-La-Chapelle, which brought to an end the War of the Austrian Succession and confirmed the succession of the House of Hanover to the British throne.

Although the treaty was not popular, many thousands turned out on April 27th 1749 to witness the most lavish public spectacle of the 18th century staged by a government keen to bolster the royal image.

As Master-General of the Ordnance, the second Duke of Montagu was responsible for commissioning the music and organising the whole event with the help of the 'Comptroller of His Majesty's Fireworks' Charles Frederick.



2nd Duke of Montagu by Thomas Hudson.  
© Buccleuch Collection

From the correspondence between the Duke of Montagu and Mr Frederick we know that Handel's participation did not run smoothly. Both sides had a completely different idea about the music.



George II by Thomas Hudson. © National Portrait Gallery

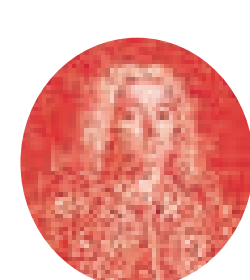
Essentially a military man, George II was unmusical but nonetheless a keen supporter of Handel, his fellow German. He originally wanted no music at all and absolutely no violins, but compromised at the suggestion of using only military instruments.

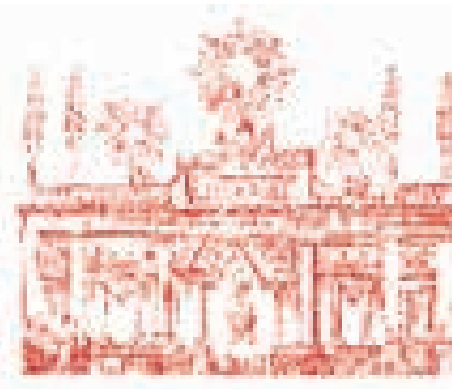
Handel, wishing an afterlife for his piece, managed to reduce the large numbers of "warlike" instruments while still pleasing the King, and deftly added string parts for a charity performance in aid of Thomas Coram's new Foundling Hospital for abandoned children one month later.

In the event there were 9 trumpets, 9 horns, 24 oboes, 12 bassoons, contra-bassoon, serpent, side drums, timpani (on loan from the Tower of London) and 18 cannon - the largest group of wind and brass ever assembled and probably the loudest music ever played.

Another point of contention was the proposed rehearsal at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, which the King and the Duke were set on but which Handel was firmly refusing. In the end Handel conceded and after a preliminary rehearsal at his house in Brook Street the full rehearsal took

place on April 21st. The public flocked to Vauxhall – a highly exaggerated 12,000 people were reported - many of them diverted from the newly built Westminster Bridge, which was closed for subsidence repairs, to London Bridge causing a serious 3-hour jam and several scuffles.



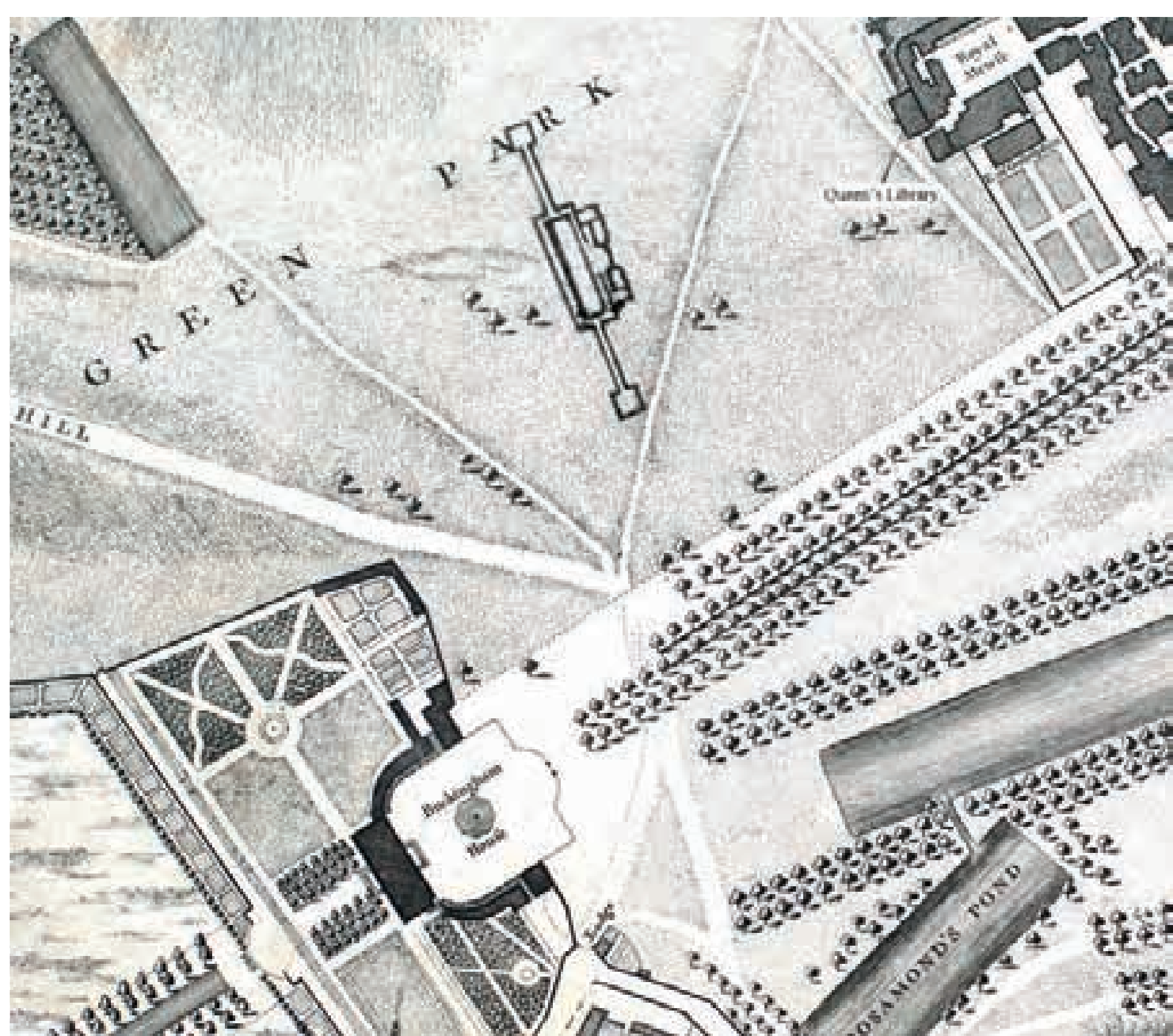


© Gerald Coke Handel Collection, Foundling Museum

Nicknamed "Cracker Castle", the elaborate structure in Green Park was constructed by the carpenters of the Royal Ordnance. The huge triumphal arch with side pavilions all in wood and canvas was 114 ft high and 410 ft wide, painted in *trompe l'oeil* and adorned with 23 statues. There was a central gallery for the musicians over whose entrance were the arms of the Duke of Montagu. Dominating the whole structure were the royal arms and a pole 50 feet high supporting a sun 30 feet wide containing the words VIVAT REX, which was planned to burn for several hours. The height from the ground to the top of the sun was 176ft.

To create this temporary fantasy palace Montagu chose the Franco-Italian architect and theatre designer Jean-Nicolas Servan, known as Servandoni (1695-1766). He had been a student in Rome and knew Cardinal Ottoboni's private theatre well. A member of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture he was chief designer at the Paris Opera, designed displays for royal occasions and ran his own theatre at the Tuileries Palace.

Servandoni's speciality was elaborate stage effects - brightly coloured light shows, water-spouts, billowing clouds, boats, flying chariots and fireworks. Less evanescent is his surviving façade for the church of St. Sulpice in Paris. He was well-known to Montagu for his stage sets at the King's Theatre, but in the lead-up to the fireworks performance the Duke complained of being 'plagued almost every day' by the neurotic Servandoni.



John Rocque's 1746 map of London showing Green Park superimposed with the position of the fireworks machine.

© Buccleuch Collection

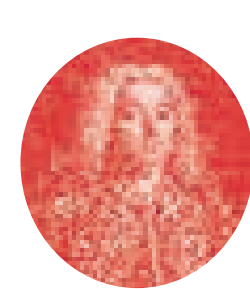
The Gentleman's Magazine of April 28th reported that the King and his entourage viewed proceedings from the Queen's Library at St James' Palace but at 7pm went to inspect the structure close up, to the accompaniment of Handel's music.

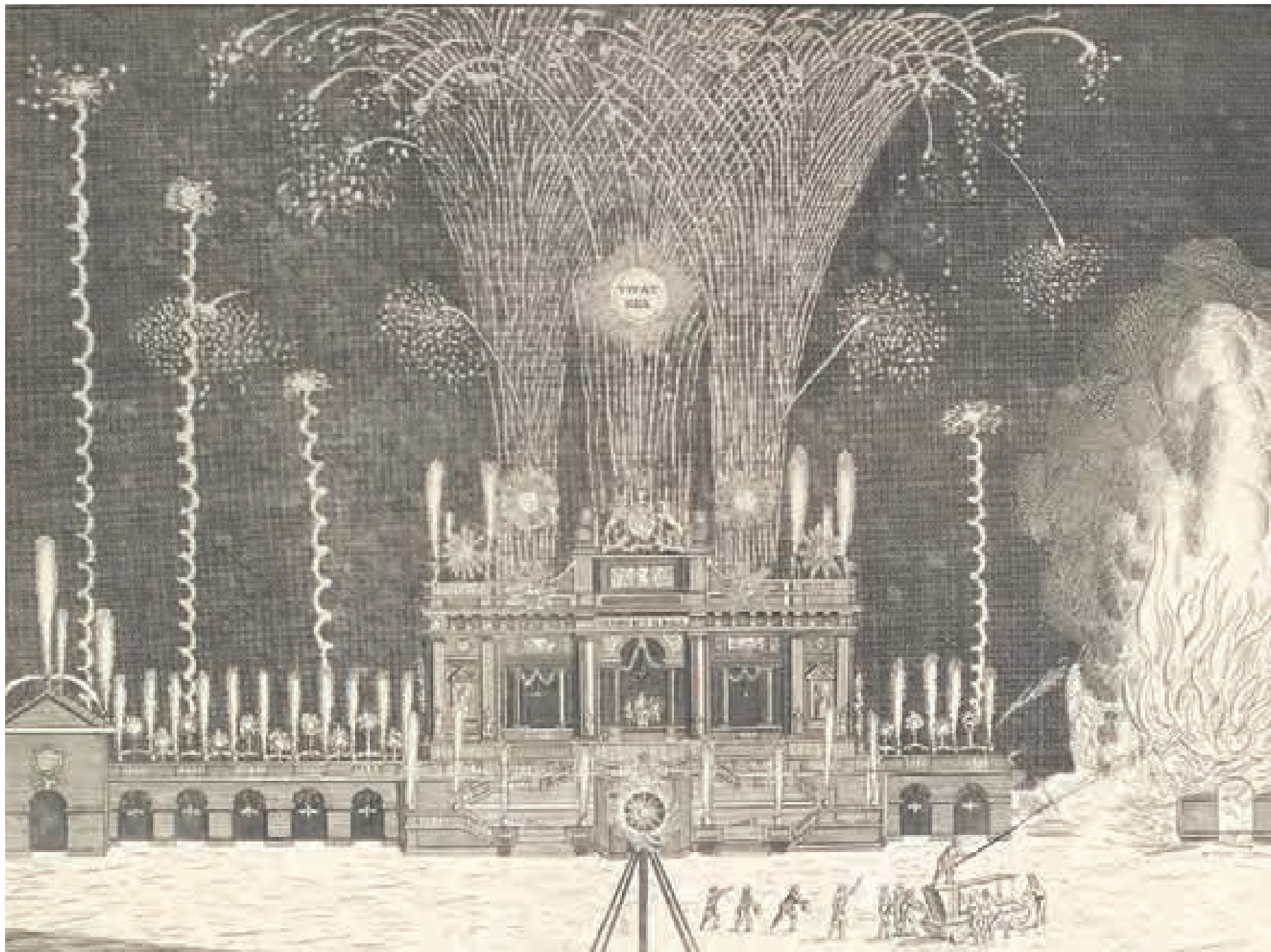
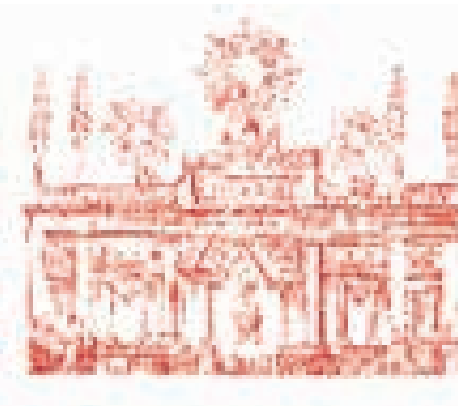
It was a warm day and the rain held off. The spectators seated in private boxes or on scaffolding experienced a magnificent but noisy and somewhat disorganised entertainment lasting several hours. Heralded by a series of cannon shots the fireworks began at 8pm.

A few stray rockets fell among the public and one entered the Duke of Montagu's box, setting fire to Miss Peachey's cap and clothes '*..which would have soon destroy'd her but some Persons present having the Presence of Mind to strip her Cloaths immediately to her stays and Petticoats, she escaped..*'



© Gerald Coke Handel Collection, Foundling Museum





"The grand whim for posterity to laugh at", T. Fox 1749  
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Soon after 9pm, just as the main display got under way, the right hand pavilion caught fire and burnt down. Though the fire was soon put out, the smoke obscured the central sun and the 'Vivat Rex', which were only visible for a short while. The highly excitable Servandoni was furious and drew his sword in the royal presence. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London until he apologised. The Royal family withdrew at about midnight.



© Gerald Coke Handel Collection, Foundling Museum

The complex and unprecedented display, involving many thousands of fireworks, was created by the best available Italian pyrotechnic specialists.

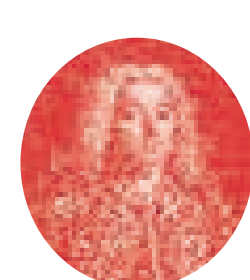
The display included: 81 Air-Balloons, 88 tourbillons (producing a vertical spiral of flame and sparks), 10,650 Sky-Rockets, 180 Pots d'Aigres, 160 Fountains, 12,200 Pots de Brin (a case which threw up serpents, stars, and crackers), 21 Cascades, 136 Wheels, 71 fixed Suns, 5,000 Marrons (which make a loud bang like a chestnut bursting in the fire), 260 gerbes (fans of coloured sparks).

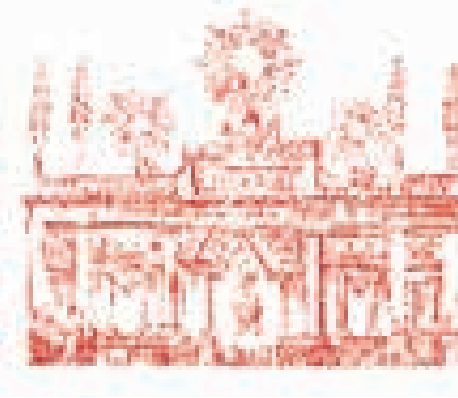
The star of the show was the rotating 'Grand Girandole', which consisted of 6,000 rockets projecting serpents, rains and stars.

The Duke of Montagu died two months after the event.



© The Trustees of the British Museum





The Music for the Royal Fireworks was one of Handel's last works, along with the oratorios *Theodora* 1749, *Jephtha* 1751, which was interrupted due to his blindness, and the b flat organ concerto 1751.

Reasonably healthy for his first 52 years, Handel's last 22 years were marked by various unpleasant and debilitating illnesses partly induced by lead poisoning - saturnine gout, headaches, rheumatic pain, palsy, colic, cognitive dysfunction, localised paralysis and finally, blindness due to a disease of the optic nerve.

***"We hear that George-Frederick-Handel Esq. the celebrated Composer of Musick was seized a few Days ago with a Paralytic Disorder in his Head, which has Depriv'd him of Sight."*** (17th August 1752 The General Advertiser)

He submitted to two crude eye operations but remained totally blind for his last few years. In 1758 he had in desperation consulted "Chevalier" John Taylor, the famous quack oculist who it later emerged had very unsuccessfully operated on J.S. Bach in 1750 resulting in his total blindness and death within a few months.



Portrait of Handel engraved by J. Houbraken after Francis Kytte, surround by H.F. Gravelot, 1738. © Montagu Music Collection

Handel died at his home in Brook Street on Easter Saturday, April 14th 1759, and his funeral at Westminster Abbey six days later was attended by 3,000 people.

He left a considerable estate of £20,000 (over £2m today) and a fine picture collection. After generous bequests to family, friends and servants he left £1,000 to the Society for the Support of Decay'd Musicians and Their Families (known today as The Royal Society of Musicians), £600 for his Westminster Abbey monument by Roubiliac, and the score and parts of *Messiah* to the Foundling Hospital, Britain's first home for abandoned children, known today as The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children.

