

February/March 2025

by Rebecca Winzenried

Ignatius Sancho (c. 1720-1780) *Twelve Country Dances for the Year 1779*

Charles Ignatius Sancho achieved a life of culture and influence almost unthinkable for a man of color in the 18th century. He is thought to have been born on a slave ship during a crossing to Cartagena, then part of the Spanish Kingdom of New Grenada (encompassing parts of modern-day Columbia, Panama, Ecuador, and Venezuela). His parents died soon afterward, and by the age of two he had been taken to England and given to the three sisters of a Greenwich household. They dubbed him Sancho, after the character Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*, a sign that they treated him with little respect as an enslaved person. A family friend, the Duke of Montagu, defied convention to teach him to read, a skill he built upon after eventually fleeing to London and becoming a butler in the home of the Duchess of Montagu. Sancho immersed himself in the arts, and became known in learned circles. He was even painted by Thomas Gainsborough, presented in the garb of a successful gentleman. Later in life, with funds left to him by the Duchess, he opened a grocery store that was frequented by major figures about London. He began publishing books, essays, and music, and became influential in the abolitionist movement. As a property owner, he was able to vote in national elections, only the second British African known to have done so. His collected letters were published after his death in a popular volume that kept his name and voice alive.

Sancho's publications included a theory of music and several self-published musical pieces, inscribed "Composed by an African." *Twelve Country Dances for 1779* include such titles as Lady Mary Montagu's Reel, Culford Heath Camp, Trip to Dilington, and Strawberries and Cream, indicating that they were likely performed at social gatherings, indeed country dances, frequented by the likes of the work's dedicatee, "the right honourable Miss North," believed to have been the daughter of then Prime Minister Frederick North. Sancho does make a larger point at the end of the work with Mungo's Delight. The title references a blackface stage character of the time, a derogatory name that some Black men had reappropriated in protest. It is not known whether Sancho ever played the harpsichord pieces, and the dances are fairly simple compositions. Even so, they represent yet another facet of a fascinating life story.

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George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)
From Trio Sonatas, Op. 5, (1739)

Trio Sonata in G Major, No. 4, HWV 399
Trio Sonata in E Minor, No. 3, HWV 398
Trio Sonata in D Major, No. 2, HWV 397

German-born George Frideric Handel had been ensconced in England for a quarter century, and had even become a citizen, by the time his Trio Sonatas, Op. 5 were published. Published, rather than composed, being the operative word, as the seven sonatas that make up the full set might better fit today's description of a mashup, or rather, of Handel sampling himself, combining elements from previously written operas, oratorios, and ballet music into arrangements suitable for small-scale and amateur performances.

It is not entirely certain how much of a hand Handel had in compiling the set issued by publisher John Walsh. In the days before copyright law it was not uncommon for publishers to cobble together a composer's (or rival publisher's) material for release, with or without their consent. The authenticity of pieces in Handel's other collection of Trio Sonatas, Op. 2, have been called into question. This time around, Handel did participate with Walsh, his main publisher, so it may be that he felt the need to put together some chamber music for retail sales, and like other composers of his day, delved into his own archives.

Of the three selections performed here, the **Trio Sonata in G Major, No. 4** (Allegro, Tempo ordinario, Passacaille, Gigue, and Menuetto) is drawn entirely from other sources.

It opens with arrangements of the overtures to his oratorio Athalia in the first movement and to his opera Parnasso in festa in the second, with ballet music from the operas Radamisto in the Passacaille, Terpsichore in the Gigue, and Alcina in the Menuetto. **The Trio Sonata in E Minor, No. 3** (Andante larghetto, Allegro, Sarabande, Allemande, Rondeau, and Gavotte) and **Trio Sonata in D Major, No. 2** (Adagio, Musette, March, Gavotte) adapt musical themes from his Chandos Anthems, ballet music from the opera Ariodante and other works, mixed with some original dance sequences such as the March and Gavotte of No. 2.

As the movement titles indicate, the Opus 5 trio sonatas are largely dance suites taken from styles of the French court, making them a complement to and compositional contrast with the country reels of Ignatius Sancho with which they are paired on this program. Handel had dabbled with the trio sonata form, a Baroque staple consisting of two melody instruments with continuo. As an established master of opera, he brings drama, variety, instrumental texture, and depth to the genre, showing off his skills at reinventing large-scale works for more intimate settings.