



Left: A life mask of composer George Frideric Handel by Louis-Francois Roubiliac is displayed at the Handel House Museum in central London. PHOTO: AFP
Above: A visitor to the Handel House in Halle an der Saale, Germany, eyes hand-written notes. PHOTO: EPA

Below: A visitor to the Handel House in Halle an der Saale looks at a positive organ near a bust of the composer. PHOTO: EPA
Bottom: A portrait of Handel by Thomas Hudson is displayed at the Handel House Museum in London. PHOTO: AFP



Remixers get a handle on Handel

High-profile composers are busy 'remixing' Handel — a prospect that could thrill or horrify fans of his music. But, say the artists, the invitation was irresistible

BY IMOGEN TILDEN
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

“What I like about this is that I’m not even sure it’s a good idea in all honesty. It’s going to be beautiful though,” says Nico Muhly. That’s the one thing everyone involved agrees on — the beauty of Handel’s music. Muhly, one of five composers commissioned to mark the 250th anniversary of Handel’s death by reinterpreting one of his works for performance at the Barbican arts center in London on Saturday, explains: “If you love something a lot you don’t want to touch it.” David Daniels, the counter-tenor charged with bringing these new interpretations to life, agrees. “My first reaction was: Why mess with perfection?” he says.

But Daniels and Muhly — along with Michael Nyman, Craig Armstrong, John Tavener and Jocelyn Pook, the other composers involved — all put aside initial doubts. The opportunity to simply pay tribute to the composer Tavener calls “the greatest melodist of all time” was unmissable.

The project is the brainchild of Robert van Leer, head of music and arts projects at the Barbican, and Gill Graham, of the publishers Music Sales. “We wanted, in Handel’s anniversary year, to bring something more contemporary into the picture, amid what we knew would be a sea of Handel operas and presentations,” Van

Leer says. And so Handel Remixed was born, giving musicians and audiences alike the opportunity to re-examine and reappraise his music, to hear familiar works with fresh ears.

Craig Armstrong — best known for his film scores — has taken a 16-bar passage of *The Water Music* as his starting point. “What really was exciting about the process was taking the time to analyze a piece of his music and look at all the chords one by one and really just look at the progressions,” he says. “The funny thing with Handel is that it sounds very fluid — like you turn a tap on — and quite simple, but when I actually analyzed the chords I realized it’s incredibly complicated and clever. The first variation just goes up a semitone all the way until it gets to the next octave. He’s an amazing composer. It made me want to go back and listen to more of his music.”

Muhly felt the same impulse, and acted on it in his own reinterpretation. One of the two works he chose is the aria *O Lord Whose Numbers Merciless*, from *Saul*. “It’s the most beautiful thing in the world,” he says. “What I always want is for it to last for ever. To live in the music. So that’s what I did.”

Muhly has slowed the aria down — in fact he’s made it around four times slower. “I took the original orchestration and extended it almost into eternity. The orchestra is

playing the same notes, basically, but they’re each slower by a different proportion. The vocal line, note for note, is the same. It’s like putting the pedal down on the piano and it just goes through, and makes this cloud.” Handel’s original aria is, of course, a prayer, and Muhly’s treatment, with its long drones, recognizes that. He offers a less reverent, alternative take: “It feels like singing along to a vacuum cleaner.”

Nyman chose another well known and much loved aria — *Ombra Mai Fu*, from *Xerxes*. “Handel’s *Largo*, as it was always known, must have been the first and only Handel that I listened to as a child — though I must have heard the *Hallelujah Chorus* without knowing it was by Handel,” he says. “I seem to remember lying in bed and hearing Kathleen Ferrier singing it on a distant radio.”

Michael Nyman’s new version of *Ombra Mai Fu* is “trademark Nyman,” says Harry Christophers, who’ll be conducting. “There’s a repetitive pattern at the beginning and a long instrumental introduction, but he’s preserved the tune and put intricate woodwind and string patterns over the top of it. It’s his own take on it. That’s the lovely thing about this all.”

Christophers admits it will be quite a challenge to bring some kind of framework to the concert, so works by Handel in their

original form will be performed alongside the reinterpretations, commenting on and grounding, and, in some cases, pairing, the new works. There’ll be the overtures to *Saul*, and to *Xerxes*, which will lead straight into Nyman’s piece. The *Arrival of the Queen of Sheba* pairs with Tavener’s treatment, while David Daniels will be singing two “straight” arias, *Dove Sei*, from *Rodelinda*, and *Vivi Tiranno*, from *Giulio Cesare*.

“I’m starting to freak out a bit how much singing there is,” Daniels says, “but it’s only one night. It’ll be fine.” Does he know what Muhly’s got in store for him, I wonder? The concert closes with the young composer’s take on another aria from *Giulio Cesare*, the notoriously tricky *Al Lampo dell’Armì*.

“It’s like the countertenor’s Paganini — with these fabulous vocal fireworks,” says Muhly. “It’s a very fast, very complicated pitter-patter — a weird little piece of acrobatics. To be honest I’d always found it kind of annoying. So I thought, ‘This will be fun to do!’”

With the precision of a surgeon, Muhly has stripped away much of the orchestration, introduced different rhythms, and dispensed with the text, too. “I’ve got rid of everything that was in the way, so you can see exactly what’s going on — the technicality of it. I wanted to call attention to the mechanics of

the fireworks of these kind of vocal lines.” And so Daniels will be singing what Muhly calls “vocalese.”

“The thing with music like this is you want it to point towards the original,” says Muhly. “It’s like designing a building that draws the eye to another building. Or it’s like making a beautiful bench on which you can sit to see [London’s] St Paul’s Cathedral. With someone like Handel the footprint of his influence is so epic that it’s nice to see the edge of that reverberation — who’s listening to it now? What are they thinking about it? What attracts them to it?”

“Hearing new music by five composers will be fantastic,” says Daniels. “Whether everyone in the audience loves every piece it’s really not the point. We’re doing this in celebration of Handel’s life and this is an homage to him, not just from me but from the composers as well.”

Van Leer welcomes the debate the project might provoke. “Some people think it’s the freshest, best, most interesting thing ever to reimagine these great works by this great composer. Other people see it as a great affront — how could you possibly rethink someone as hallowed as Handel? I’m not looking for a homogeneous response to either the work or the reinterpretations of the work. I’m just looking for a fresh dialogue.”

[TECHNOLOGY]

Time to get serious about SSDs

BY JAY DOUGHERTY
DPA, WASHINGTON

SSDs — short for “solid state drives” — are the future of storage. And they’re available now, in capacities that are sufficient and at prices that are within reach.

So what’s stopping their widespread adoption? The main problem is that their price relative to standard magnetic platter hard drives is still high.

But another stumbling block is that many computer users are simply unfamiliar with the technology and unsure about how the drives fit in to their current computing needs. Read on for some answers.

Q: How do SSDs work? Are they a direct replacement for hard drives?

Instead of the spinning magnetic platters found in traditional hard drives, SSDs contain a type of nonvolatile flash memory. Unlike traditional computer memory, this flash memory does not lose its contents when the power is turned off. Hence it can be used to store large amounts of data, just like a standard hard disk.

A: The challenges in creating a solid state drive that could compete with conventional spinning platter disks have been creating units with enough capacity at a price point that consumers found attractive. SSD makers are moving ever closer to being competitive with the Seagates and Western Digitals of the world on both fronts.

And there are several reasons for consumers to be excited about this development. First of all, hard drive speed has long been the primary bottleneck in modern computers. CPU speed,

memory speed, and the power of your graphics card could only go so far when the entire system had to wait for data to be read from standard hard drives.

SSDs significantly outpace the data reading and writing abilities of the hard drives we’ve been using for years. Add to that the fact that SSDs are sturdier, use less power and generate less heat, and you have a storage solution that can match the prowess of today’s high-end computers. Those who have adopted SSDs typically report significantly faster boot times, application load times and file read and write scores.

And yes, SSDs are a direct drop-in replacement for today’s traditional hard drives in the sense that most modern computers will recognize them as standard hard drives.

Q: I’ve heard that SSDs wear out if a lot of data is written to them. Is this true? What is their life expectancy?

A: The original SSDs were said to be susceptible to uneven wear — or premature failure — if programs such as disk defragmenters were run on them repeatedly over a significant period of time.

Most of the current generation of SSD drives, however, employ some type of write balance or “wear leveling,” as Intel calls it, which ensures that data writing is spread relatively evenly over the NAND chips that are inside of SSDs.

With wear leveling, the life expectancy of today’s SSDs is truly remarkable. It’s not uncommon to see MTBF (minimum time before failure) ratings of 1,000,000 hours for current SSDs. That’s over 114 years. That’s

on a par with the MTBF ratings of traditional spinning platter hard drives.

But because there are no moving parts in a solid state drive — no motor to wear out, no read/write head to crash into internal platters — one could justifiably expect SSDs to in fact come close to actually living up to those life expectancy ratings. Anyone who has lived for a significant period of time with traditional hard drives knows that they do die, and their death can be hastened by shocks, overheating or improper handling. If an SSD is going to fail due to some mechanical flaw, the issue will probably surface early on in the service of the drive.

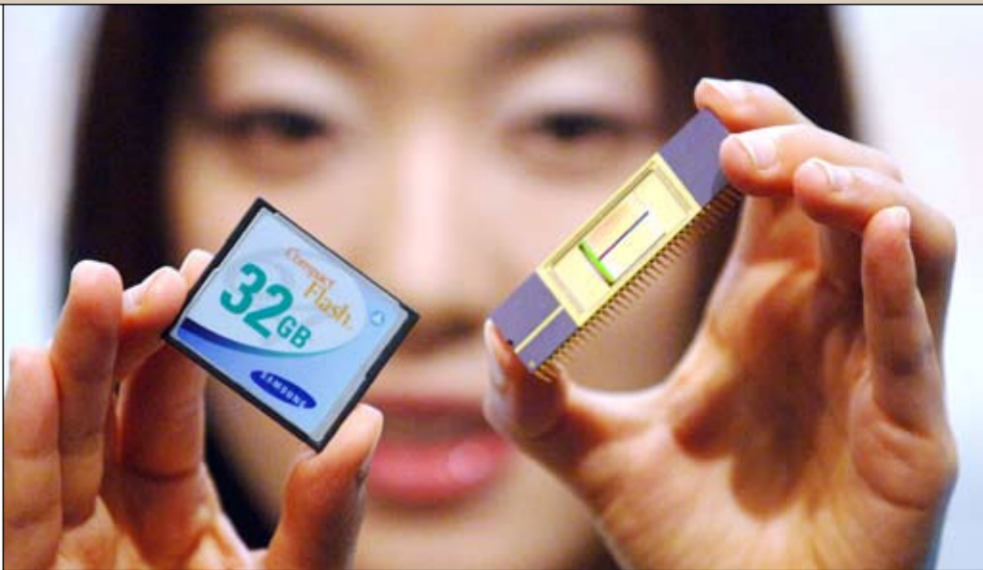
Q: Are SSDs just for notebook computers, or are there models for desktop PCs as well?

A: Current SSDs are all based on the form factor of the standard 2.5-inch notebook hard drive.

That does not mean, however, that they can be used only in notebook or laptop computers. The speed improvements, low noise, and reliability of these drives are as attractive to desktop users as they are to anyone else.

Securing the 2.5-inch hard drive inside of a desktop computer can be a problem, however, primarily because most of today’s desktop enclosures were not designed to house 2.5-inch hard drives.

There are a few solutions to this problem. First, you could look for 2.5-inch to 3.5-inch adapters at local or online computer stores. There are a range of these available. Or you could look for SSDs that come with adapters. A few of them do. Or you could adopt a low-tech



A Samsung Electronics researcher presents 32GB NAND flash memory at a press conference in Seoul. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Q: What’s the best value in SSDs?

A: The least expensive SSDs are currently 32GB models. There are SSDs with less capacity, but you probably don’t want to consider these for standard office use. 32GB SSDs retail for less than US\$100 and are sufficient to use as a boot drive in desktop computers — holding your operating system and application files. A standard, large-capacity hard drive could then be used as a secondary storage unit for application data, downloads, and other files where read-write speed is less critical.

Notebook and desktop users with more demanding storage needs will probably want to look at 64GB or 128GB SSDs. These typically run from US\$200 to US\$350, but that amount of storage could realistically satisfy the needs of most users. Again, these drives could be supplemented with less expensive but larger capacity traditional hard drives for a hybrid solution that offers both blazing speed and sufficient capacity.

Q: I have heard that defragmenting an SSD will wear the drive out. Is that true?

A: It used to be true with early-generation SSDs. Beyond that, however, it’s simply unnecessary to defragment SSDs because data is not read from them in the same way that it is from traditional magnetic platter drives. There are no read-write heads in SSDs that must travel to separate areas of the drive to read noncontiguous files, so there’s no need to try to make files contiguous within an SSD. The latest operating systems — Windows 7 included — are smart enough to recognize SSDs and turn off automatic defragmentation by default. If you install an SSD in an older operating system, such as Windows XP, turn off any automatic defragmentation for the drive. Defragmenting these drives, regardless of the wear and tear it might cause, is simply a waste of time.