London Handel Festival 2026 Autumn Season

Handel and the New Society
St George's, Hanover Square
3 November 2026

INFORMATION SHEET

Moved by the plight of impoverished and ailing colleagues, a group of London's foremost musicians, including Handel, Boyce, Arne and Greene, came together in 1738 to establish a new society: the Fund for Decay'd Musicians. A charity that still exists today, now known as the Royal Society of Musicians, this nearly 300-year-old organisation remains the UK's oldest musical charity.

Regarded as one of the most exciting ensembles to emerge in recent years, Spiritato makes its London Handel Festival debut with a programme of joyful and evocative instrumental treasures by key members of the Fund, alongside music by Pietro Castrucci, the virtuoso leader of Handel's orchestra. Himself a 'Decay'd Musician', Castrucci has largely been forgotten by history, though not by his friends. This special debut performance offers audiences the opportunity to deepen their understanding of Handel, his peers, and the musical world they shaped together.

PROGRAMME

Boyce: Overture from The Charms of Harmony Display, Ode for St Cecelia, 1738
Handel: Trio sonata in Bb major (Op 2 no.3)
Festing: Concerto Grosso in G minor (Op 3, no.1)
Handel: Overture from Alessandro Severo
Castrucci: Concerto Grosso in G major (Op 3 no.7)

Interval

Boyce: Overture from (part II) Ode for St Cecilia's Day, 1739
Arne: Overture in 8 Parts No 8 in G minor
Handel: Trio sonata in A major (Op 5 no.1)
Greene: Overture in 7 parts No 5 in D major
Castrucci: Concerto Grosso in G minor (Op 3 no.6)
Boyce: Symphony No 5 in D major

SPIRITATO

United by a passion for exploring rare pieces of music and little-known composers, Spiritato has gained a reputation for excellence with imaginative programming and engaging performances. In recent years the group has produced an exciting range of innovative projects including; Inspiring Bach – a pioneering new approach to period performance using real natural trumpets and equal tension strings; Sonatas from the Düben Collection – A recording of rare works discovered in the Düben Collection library at Uppsala University; Music to her Majestie - exploring Royal odes by Purcell, Handel and Eccles in collaboration with lutenist Elizabeth Kenny and soloists including Nicholas Mulroy, Charles Daniels and Nardus Williams. The group will release their next recording for Delphian Records, next summer – the complete Concerti Grossi of Handel's first violin, Pietro Castrucci.

Violin
Kinga Ujszászi (director)
Henry Tong
Maxim Del Mar
Huw Daniel
Elizabeth MacCarthy
Karin Björk

Viola
Nichola Blakey
Joanna Patrick Taffs

Oboe
Joel Raymond
Oonagh Lee

Trumpet
Russell Gilmour
William Russell

Timpani
Keith Price

Bassoon
Inga Maria Klaucke

Cello
Sarah McMahon
Jacob Garside

Double Bass
Kate Brooke

Harpsichord
Nicolás Mendoza

This project is Generously supported by Continuo Foundation, the Golsoncott Foundation and the Friends and Patrons of Spiritato. They are grateful to Peter Holman and the Trustees of Leeds Baroque for the edition of Boyce's music to The Charms of Harmony Display, commissioned by Leeds Baroque from Zachary Kleanthous.

THE NEW SOCIETY

The founding of the Royal Society of Musicians (RSM) during the spring of 1738 was a pivotal moment in 'British' music philanthropy. The story, as relayed through the centuries via programmes, newspaper columns and other published documentation, recounts that Michael Christian Festing, Carl Weidemann and one of the Vincent family of musicians (probably Thomas the oboist), were standing outside the Orange Coffee House in the Haymarket. Apparently, they saw two young boys herding asses; they were the sons of one of their colleagues, the oboist Jean Christian Kytch who must have been very ill as his burial is recorded later that year. In an era without welfare state for support, the three musicians formed the idea of a philanthropic charity for musicians and their families in distress.

An advertisement was placed in The London Daily Post, and General Advertiser of 19 April 1738, announcing
"Subscribers to a Fund, for the Support of decay'd Musicians, or their Families, are desired to meet at the
Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand
on Sunday Evening next, at Seven o'Clock"

That first meeting, on 23 April, was followed just two weeks later on 7 May with another in which the fourteen founding resolutions of the Society were settled upon and the name "Society of Musicians" was endorsed. Those fourteen rules detail the overall objectives of the Society including such things as the amount and timing of subscriptions, the calendar of discussions of monthly and annual general meetings, the banking and investments, and the reasons and entitlements of those calling upon the Society for financial help, as well as the amounts which might be paid on those occasions of need. These objectives were legally ratified in 1740 in a document known as "The Declaration of Trust".

The Declaration established the Society in both legal and financial terms, but also included a listing of the 230 professional subscribers at that time, revealing much of the musical world of London and environs at this period. The names show the wide representation of musicians from the continent, and those of Catholic background, and reveal how London's (and Britain's) musical community has included, encouraged and grown from an extensive 'immigrant' population.

Twelve 'Governors' were appointed each year to oversee the business of the Society: some of the musicians in this role at this early period include the violinist and composer Michael Christian Festing; organist and composer Maurice Greene; John Keeble the sometime organist of St George's Hanover Square; composer Giuseppe Sammartini; and the tenor singer John Beard. In 1755 composer William Boyce is also known to have been a Governor. Governors gave their time without recompense and were fined if they did not attend the monthly meetings. The composers represented in the programme this evening were all Members from the outset.
The Society held an annual concert from 1739 and later, an annual anniversary dinner was introduced as another source of fundraising. In recent times the Society has become essentially a friendly Society and, since a new Royal Charter in 1987 which allowed for non-Members to actively seek help, nowadays gives most of its funds to musicians who are not Members.

Pietro Castrucci (1679-1752), an Italian violinist, is thought to have studied with Arcangelo Corelli. He, and his violinist brother Prospero, came to England with Lord Burlington at a time when many Italians were beginning to gravitate to London. Pietro led the orchestra for Handel at the Royal Academy of Music opera company during the 1720s. His compositions were almost exclusively instrumental and the set of Concerti grossi Op.3 were first published in 1736 and then advertised for sale on 10 November 1738 "revised and recommended" by John Christopher Pepusch, an editor who had also advised Walsh's republications of Corelli's concertos. The publication was dedicated to Sir William Gage (1695-1744) who was a person better known for his involvement and enthusiasm for playing cricket.

On 25 February, just a few weeks before the founding of the Society of Musicians, the pasticcio Alessandro Severo by **George Frideric Handel** (1685-1759) was first performed. Handel's recent health problems might certainly have endorsed in his mind the premise of the philanthropic society. Later in life, in a codicil to his will,

he was to add a bequest of £1,000 to aid the charity; it was a significant donation which was not matched again until well into the nineteenth century.

William Boyce (1711-1779) started his musical life at St Paul's Cathedral under the guidance of Maurice Greene with whom he was apprenticed, and later studied with Pepusch. As 'Composer to the Chapel Royal' in 1736, his own compositions were regularly performed, and from 1755, following the death of his mentor Greene, Boyce became also Master of the King's Musick, with many of his compositions written for Court and Royal occasions. The charms of harmony display was composed for St Cecilia's day in 1738, and See famed Apollo written for 1739's celebration. The set of eight Symphonies, Op.2 was published in 1760; no.5 is the only one to include timpani.

Michael Christian Festing (1705-1752) was a violinist and composer, who had studied with Francesco Geminiani. Aged 21, Festing became a member of the King's Musick and acquired acquaintances in courtly and royal circles, many of which can be seen in the subscribers to his Op.3 publication of Twelve Concertos of 1734. His son, Michael, married the daughter of the composer Maurice Greene which reveals something of the small and interwoven musical world of the period. The first concerto from the Op.3 set is distinctly Corellian in style.

Thomas Arne (1710-1778) took violin lessons from Festing. Charles Burney, who was apprenticed to Arne in 1744, later in the century wrote that both Arne and Festing heard Thomas Roseingrave's 'audition' for becoming the organist at St George's Hanover Square in 1725. At the founding of the Society of Musicians, Arne was house composer at Drury Lane Theatre. On 4 March his setting of Milton's Comus was first performed and, unusually for an eighteenth-century staged work, saw multiple performances and reruns until the end of the century.

Maurice Greene (1696-1755) was the youngest son of Thomas, a chaplain of the Chapel Royal. Following his time as a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, Maurice initially played organ in city churches but was soon appointed organist at the cathedral in 1718. He oversaw the annual Festival of the Sons of the Clergy, for which the Royal Society of Musicians provided the instrumental performers from 1739; the Society received £50 for this although Members chosen to play were not paid. As a Member of the Academy of Ancient Music, Greene took the wrong side in a dispute over Bononcini's claim to have composed a work actually by Lotti; he then set up a rival series, the Apollo Academy, whose main proponents were Greene, his former pupil Boyce, and Festing. Greene was also Professor of Music at Cambridge from 1730, and Master of the King's Musick from 1735. His three-volume extensive editorial project, Cathedral Music, was unfinished at his death and was completed by Boyce. The set of Overtures in seven parts was first published in 1745 by Walsh, both in orchestral format and in keyboard solo arrangement.

Notes by Colin Coleman, Archivist; The Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain

2026 Autumn Events

This autumn, the London Handel Festival returns in partnership with Handel Hendrix House for a rich programme of performances celebrating Handel's music, life and legacy. Our annual performance of ***Messiah*** at St George's, Hanover Square, with the London Handel Orchestra, the Choir of St George's Church and an outstanding cast of soloists under Richard Gowers **is now nearly sold out, so booking is strongly recommended.**

The season concludes with ***Christmas Party, Chez Handel***, an atmospheric candlelit evening of seasonal music and festive hospitality in Handel's own home.

Book now for our 2027 Festival: Passion, Drama and Divinity

Join us for five weeks of Handel-inspired performances across London from 18 February – 18 April 2027

Bringing together some of Handel's most evocative, dramatic and visceral music with many of the world's leading baroque ensembles and interpreters, the 2027 Festival promises to be an extraordinary celebration of a composer whose music continues to move, surprise and inspire audiences nearly three centuries after it was written.

London Handel Festival
enriching lives through Handel's music

Join today as a member of the London Handel Festival and enjoy priority booking, exclusive member events and more. Be part of a growing community who believe in the power of Handel's music to enrich lives, and you can help to ensure that Handel's music continues to reach new audiences for generations to come. Annual membership options start from as little as £50 per year.

Find out more here or speak to our Front of House or Box Office team who would be delighted to help.