

STRAWBERRY FIELDS

Handel, Sancho and English Country Dances

Ruckus

featuring Emi Ferguson, flute and Rachell Ellen Wong, violin

PROGRAM NOTES

While George Frideric Handel and Ignatius Sancho never met each other, they inhabited the same world, and shared one thing for certain: the transcendent joy that comes from a life of music and dance with good company. And if there is one thing that encapsulates the joy of togetherness in 18th-century England it was the English Country Dance. These dances rose above class distinction: they were found in ballrooms, barnyards, gardens and pubs alike. The country dance, more than those formal minuets and french dances, is what the Brits wanted to dance to until the sun came up. Sweating, laughing, spinning, holding hands.... Propelled onwards by the unrelenting groove of the music.

Ignatius Sancho was a remarkable member of 18th-century London and was a pivotal figure in the abolition movement in England. He is one of the first Black musicians to publish their compositions and was likely the first British African to vote. He was born on a slave ship en route from Africa to the Caribbean in 1729, and was brought to England as an enslaved person when he was two years old. In Greenwich, England, he was given to three young girls, who decided to give the child the surname of Sancho (after the Cervantes character). Ignatius' luck began to change upon meeting a family friend, the Duke of Montagu, who fostered Ignatius' education and became his leading advocate. Ignatius eventually escaped his enslavement and was supported by the Montagu family, from whom he received a modest inheritance. This allowed him to support himself and pursue his dream of becoming an actor. Following a brief acting career, he opened a grocery and oil supply business in Westminster where he worked and created community until his death. Ignatius began to be known in wider circles when, in 1766, correspondence between himself and the popular novelist Laurence Sterne was published.

"I am sure you will applaud me for beseeching you to give one half hour's attention to slavery, as it is at this day practised in our West Indies.—That subject, handled in your striking manner, would ease the yoke (perhaps) of many—but if only of one—Gracious God! - what a feast to a benevolent heart!"

— Sancho to Sterne

The publication of Ignatius' writing on slavery in this manner had a galvanizing effect on the abolition movement, and began his life as a publicly known person and his shop became known as the place in London to gather and talk not only about politics, but also about music, dance, and the arts. Upon his death, many of his letters were collected and published, and were popular enough to go through multiple editions. They are full of humor, passion, humility, and document a vibrant life full of love, friendship, music and dance.

Ignatius' musical output is largely dances: minuets, country dances, cotillions, etc. One can imagine the social gatherings at his store, and at the houses of his friends, where dances long into the night included his newest material. Ignatius also published *A New Collection of Songs*, for voice and basso continuo, which includes settings of Shakespeare and contemporary poets. He even wrote a musical theory treatise which has sadly been lost to time.

His *12 Country Dances for the Year 1779* are dedicated to "Miss North", which scholars generally conclude must be one of the three daughters of Lord Frederick North, Prime Minister of England from 1770-1782. Sancho would have come into contact with this family through his second family of patronage, the Brudenells. This is a set of functional country dances, complete with instructions for dancers alongside each score. They are occasionally danced today in English Country Dance circles. While many of Ignatius' compositions are distinctly galant, the *12 Country Dances* are spare - with a direct, earthbound style. The melodies are ear-worms, the rhythms propulsive and the set order very considered.

The titles of Ignatius' dances in the *12 Country Dances* seem to be a mix of characters familiar to the dedicatee: these are friends, acquaintances, favorite desserts ("Strawberrys and Cream"), vacation places. However, the final

dance was most definitely for Ignatius himself: "Mungos Delight," a remarkable dance, outside of the norm of the rest of collection both in melodic style (extreme leaps), and with a mixed major/minor mode. "Mungo" likely references a character from the play *The Padlock* by Issac Bickerstaffe (1769), a part Ignatius probably performed during his acting career. There's an air of wistful melancholy to this tune, and as the last word of this collection, it makes one wonder what it meant for Ignatius.

George Frideric Handel loomed large over all English concert music of the 18th century, and is referenced in Ignatius' letters as being among his favorite composers. Though born in Germany, George became one of England's most celebrated composers both in his lifetime, and still today. George's Op. 5 trio sonatas were written in 1738, probably after constant nagging from his friends (and publisher) to publish more instrumental chamber music. In private company, George was known for showing off at the keyboard and performing arias from his operas and oratorios, but the only trios that had been published up until then was a bootlegged set cobbled together by a publisher from his early days in Italy. The Op. 5 collection shows George, decades into his time in England, at the full height of his compositional ability, creating brilliant works in the British pastoral manner. These are more dance sets than abstract *Sonatas*: they are full of musettes, gavottes, minuets and the like.

The British slave trade also touched Handel's life. Scholars are debating now about the extent to which Handel engaged in investing in the Royal African Company, as Handel was often paid for his work through receiving stock. He typically would cash out the stocks soon after receiving them — he was often cash-strapped thanks to his obsession with the never-lucrative opera business. And the objects for sale in Sancho's store? Sugar, tobacco, tea and oil.