The German conductor and music historian Fritz Volbach (1861–1940) was one of the leading forces in the Handel-revival in continental Europe around 1900. Inspired by groundbreaking research of Friedrich Chrysander and Georg Gervinus, Volbach’s book on Handel-performance (1899) and his active work as a conductor of Handel’s compositions were cornerstones for the understanding of the German-English composer in the early 20th century. Volbach’s task was not easy, since German music historiography focused strongly on Johann Sebastian Bach as the musical “hero.” For mainstream music historiography, it seemed to be difficult to include Handel, who combined German, Italian, and English influences (and who had “abandoned” his German heritage), into a national mythology of music.

Volbach’s approach to integrate Handel into this “myth” is remarkable. In his writings about Handel and his publications on music history he develops a picture of the 18th century as a solar-system with two suns: Bach, representing an introverted concept of music, and Handel, representing the opposite, extroverted side. By juxtaposing introversion and extroversion Volbach establishes a musical canon, in which not only Bach and Handel have their unique place, but both Bach and Handel are necessary for a complete picture of the music of the early 18th century. The paper will outline Volbach’s understanding of Handel and Bach in its development and analyze the premises of this understanding in his own concept of music history.

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