

BOOK reviews

Edited by Mark Kroll

Handel's Operas, 1726-1741.

Winton Dean. 608 pages. Boydell Press, 2006. Reviewed by Wendy Heller.

In the penultimate chapter of this monumental new book, Winton Dean muses about his perspective on the viability of Handel's operas: "In the course of more than a half century devoted largely to the study of Handel's dramatic works I found my attitude changing." Although Dean was initially "disappointed" by the operas' lack of formal variety, the difficulty of casting roles intended for castrati, and the impenetrability of so many of their plots, he now not only views them as central in Handel's development as a brilliant oratorio composer, but acclaims Handel's right to "share the highest rank in the operatic firmament."

Inspired by a lifetime of research and nurtured by a veritable explosion of Handelian opera performances, this splendid sequel to Dean's *Handel's Operas, 1704-1726* (Oxford University Press, 1987) bears witness to Dean's conversion from oratorio fan to a sometimes passionate, sometimes reluctant, advocate of Handelian opera. On the one hand, this is an invaluable reference work. Dean provides a detailed examination of the sources, performance history, music, and libretto for 22 of Handel's operas written for the London stage, interspersed with four chapters that elucidate the complex economic and cultural circumstances that shaped his operatic career. These are followed by an assessment of modern Handel productions and generous appendices that supply an overview of Handel's formal procedures, instrumentation, borrowings, and the like, all of which will provide fodder for the next generation of Handel scholars.

This, however, is far more than an essential reference book. Dean's strongly held convictions about Handel's musical and dramaturgical choices, the construction of his characters, and the potentially negative influences of a bad libretto or demanding singers are engaging, witty, and often challenging, suggesting that his lifelong relationship

with Handel opera might best be described as a stormy love affair. At times Handel emerges as the hero of this narrative, successfully operating "against the grain of a narrow convention" by the force of his sheer genius. In other instances, however, dramatic inconsistencies or the necessity of catering to singers sometimes led to an "uneven score" or operas in which Handel failed to plumb the depths of a character or situation. With *Admeto* (1727), for example, Dean claims that the classic Greek setting and a skillful integration of a secondary plot compensate for obsolete 17th-century conventions and "conceal some of the cracks in the

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libretto." He feels, in fact, that *Admeto* might be counted among Handel's greatest operas, were it not for such dramatic flaws as Alceste's virtuosic jealousy aria *en travesti* in Act II that Handel possibly wrote to satisfy the soprano Faustina Bordoni. Although Dean is often correct in such assessments, a less rigid of notion of how an opera *should* have been written might have allowed still deeper insights into the aesthetic premises of the opera that Handel actually *did* write.

Readers will nonetheless delight in Dean's pithy and evocative language. Where else could they read, for example, that Tolomeo is a "damp hero," that Matilda in *Lotario* is a "veritable dragon without redeeming features," or that Handel and his collaborator did a "shoddy job" in the libretto for *Sosarme*? More important are Dean's insights into the abundant musical treasures buried in these scores, such as the unconventional sarabande that opens the overture to *Sosarme* or the marvelous soprano-alto duet at the end of Act I of *Porò*. Dean's thoughtful comments

about Handel's dramatic use of tonality and scoring in *Ariodante* should inspire scholars to investigate these features in Handel's other operas, while his musical discussions, illustrated with beautifully-produced examples, eloquently bridge the usual gaps between scholar, performer, and amateur. Dean's analyses of operatic roles may prove valuable to singers; however, it is also to be hoped that stage directors, so often perplexed by Handel's dramatic sensibilities, will at least glance at his discussions of the stage directions, pacing, and sources and come to know and trust Handel's incomparable theatrical instincts before thoughtlessly imposing "concepts" onto these extraordinary works.

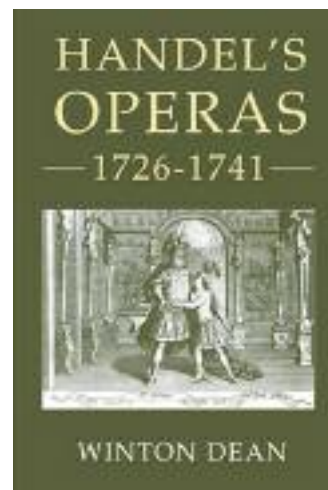
Boydell Press should be congratulated for bringing to light this elegantly produced volume that offers readers of all backgrounds and interests the full measure of Dean's expertise; it will inspire scholars, instruct audiences, and invigorate performances of Handel's operas for years to come.

Wendy Heller is associate professor of music at Princeton University.

The Performance of Italian Basso Continuo: Style in Keyboard Accompaniment in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Giulia Nuti. 164 pages. Ashgate, 2007. Reviewed by Rebecca Cypess.

The performance of basso continuo is a necessarily elusive subject. It has always been so, perhaps even by design. Like improvisation generally, the semi-improvised practice of continuo playing was, from the outset, a skill reserved for the musical elite—if not solely for musicians with professional status, then certainly for the amateur cognoscenti. Period treatises tell us that much of continuo realization was left to taste; critics were quick to condemn performances that strayed outside the bounds of discretion.

If mastering basso continuo performance was difficult for musicians in the 17th and 18th centuries, it is doubly so today since the oral tradition passed from teacher to student



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has long since been broken. Giulia Nuti's careful and thorough explanation of period sources will thus aid both performers and scholars as they attempt to recover this subtle art.

Nuti's book is divided by time period into three sections: first it traces the predecessors of continuo in the 16th century, especially intabulations of multi-voice music; this is followed by a section devoted to the beginnings of basso continuo in the early 17th century and another to performance practices in the early 18th century. While she refers to accompanimental techniques on lutes, theorbos, and guitars, Nuti's primary concern is continuo practice on keyboard instruments. Her study benefits from research using both written sources and early instruments.

Central to the early development of Italian basso continuo playing, with its predominantly chordal texture, is the shift in compositional style away from linear counterpoint towards harmonically conceived idioms. Basso continuo played an essential role in this shift, and one of Nuti's most substantial contributions is her organized presentation of written sources from this early period. She offers numerous excerpts from treatises, prologues to music books, and descriptions of musical events in both sacred and secular settings, all of which effectively capture the birth of basso continuo. Some of these sources will already be familiar to many readers, but Nuti reinterprets them to glean new information on the history of basso continuo. Others are presented here for the first time, demonstrating Nuti's virtuosity as an archivist as well as a performer.

The chapter on the early 18th century focuses on the importance of pre-conceived *regole*—rules for the realization of (often unfigured) bass parts—for continuo practice. The reader is advised, in order best to understand the *regole* and their implementation, to try each example at the keyboard, applying the rules in an organized, performance-oriented manner. Indeed, even the form of this chapter draws on its sources, structuring itself as a quasi-treatise. One might wonder whether the *regole* of early 18th-century Italy are related to French rules of accompaniment like the *règle de*

l'octave, in use during the same period, but unfortunately such questions lie outside the scope of this book.

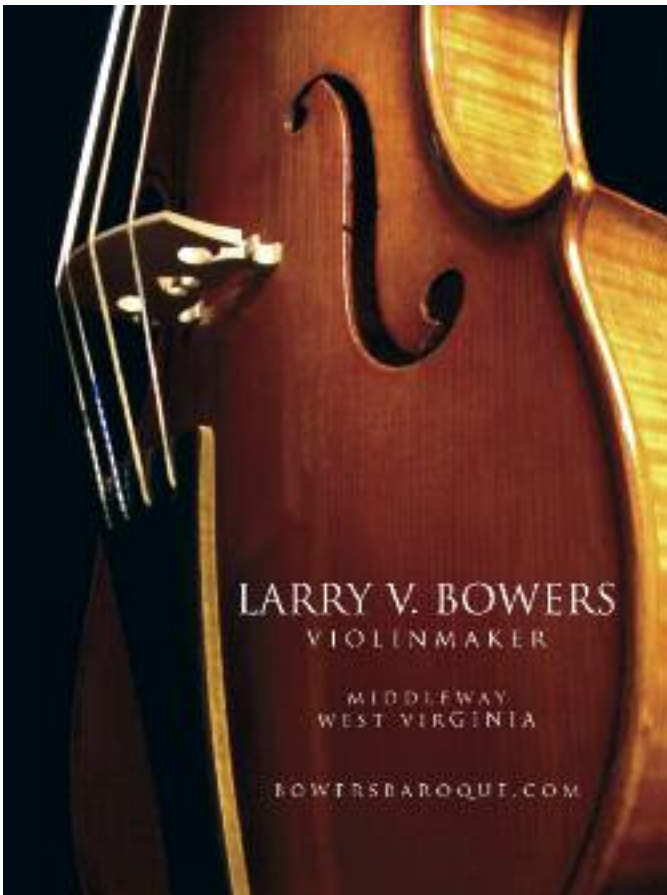
The most obvious gap in Nuti's study is a discussion of the late 17th century. This is no doubt largely due to the paucity of treatises on continuo practice from the period. Only Lorenzo Penna's *Li primi albori musicali per li principianti della musica figurata* survives; and indeed, Nuti cites it in her chapter on the early 18th century. However, Penna's work seems to have been well known in its own day, enjoying widespread circulation and numerous reprints. The introduction to Stephen Bonta's edition of Giovanni Legrenzi's *Sonate a due e tre* (Harvard University Press, 1984) applies Penna's work to Legrenzi's music; our understanding of the rich repertoire of *sonate da chiesa e da camera* from the late 17th century would surely have benefited from consideration in this new volume. Nevertheless, Nuti's meticulous scholarly approach and sensitive ear are evident throughout her book, which makes a tangible contribution to this complex field.

Rebecca Cypess, who received her Ph.D. from Yale University, presented papers at the annual meetings of the Society for Seventeenth-Century Music and the American Musical Instrument Society in 2007.

Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti: Two Lives in One.

Roberto Pagano, translated by Frederick Hammond. 381 pages. Pendragon Press, 2006. *Reviewed by Morwared Farbood.*

Given the lack of documentation pertaining directly to the lives of Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti, it is a breath of fresh air to read even the most trivial piece of firsthand information regarding the famous father and son. As Roberto Pagano puts it, "these gleams of light make us lament that such information emerging from the darkness of centuries is not more detailed." The paucity of "these gleams of light" makes it naturally more difficult to present a biography in a coherent, linear fashion. There are many gaps to be filled, and Pagano's *Two Lives* tries to fill them by providing a vivid historical and literary backdrop to the story,



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as well as an analysis of the personalities and motivations of the Scarlattis, all seen through a unique personal lens.

Pagano's book, originally published in 1985 in Italian and recently revised, is now available in an English translation by Frederick Hammond, a scholar well known for his works on Girolamo Frescobaldi. While not claiming to add much to the biographical data presented by Ralph Kirkpatrick in his seminal 1953 biography of Domenico Scarlatti, Pagano does assert that as a native of Palermo he can "read the human experience of the musician" in a way Kirkpatrick never could have, "one dictated by my intimate knowledge of [Domenico's] father's life and of a southern mentality that may have controlled—and in any case conditioned—the behavior of the Sicilian clan into which Domenico Scarlatti was born."

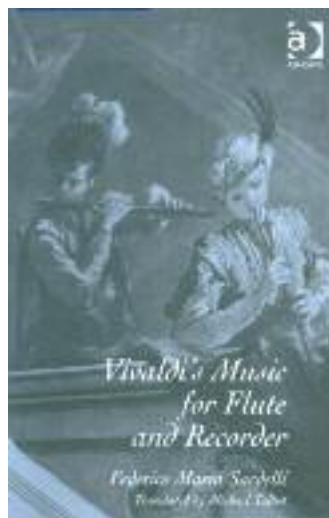
The book traces the flowering of Alessandro's career as one of the prominent opera composers of his time even as it examines the growth of his large family. Pagano takes pains to point out the unflattering aspects of Alessandro's character and how these traits might have influenced his relationship with Domenico. He discusses the importance of Domenico's legal emancipation from the *patria potestas*—the right of a father to have legal control of his children till death unless explicitly renounced. This remarkable episode serves as the centerpiece of the book and, according to Pagano, marks the beginning of Domenico's independent career.

Interspersed throughout the book are the author's sometimes fanciful speculations, such as his description of Domenico's "inferiority complex." There are also long digressions recounting the lives and imagined motivations of numerous colorful personalities ranging from contemporaries and associates who played important roles in the lives of the Scarlattis to various patrons and other more tangentially related figures. There is practically no musical analysis, and the book contains almost no musical examples. In a certain sense, this is a work of historical anthropology that reassesses some of the previous biographical scholarship while also offering some new evidence about the Scarlattis.

Although this book does have moments of captivating drama, the somewhat turgid prose coupled with the author's assumption that

the reader has at least some familiarity with the milieu of Domenico and Alessandro's time might discourage a lay reader. Furthermore, the infrequent indication of dates makes the chronology in the book difficult to follow. For serious scholars of Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti, however, Pagano's study serves as an essential contribution to the literature, now made accessible to English-speaking readers by Frederick Hammond's translation.

Harpicordist Morwared Farbood is visiting professor at New York University, where she specializes in both early music and music technology.



Vivaldi's Music for Flute and Recorder. Federico Maria Sardelli, translated by Michael Talbot. 358 pages. Ashgate, 2007. *Reviewed by Eric Haas.*

Antonio Vivaldi wrote 64 instrumental works for *flauto* (i.e., flute or recorder). They comprise solo sonatas, concerti, and chamber works, as well as vocal music with concertante flute parts, a remarkable contribution for a composer who, unlike Telemann and Quantz, was not known as a player of the instrument. Federico Maria Sardelli's thorough examination of Vivaldi's compositions for these two instruments will be of great interest not only to scholars, but also to performers and listeners.

The author places Vivaldi's music for the flute in historical context, explaining that at the beginning of the 18th century, woodwind players were invariably oboists, doubling on flute or recorder as needed. Although the transverse flute enjoyed an ever-increasing popularity in France and Germany as the

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