

NEWSLETTER of The American Handel Society

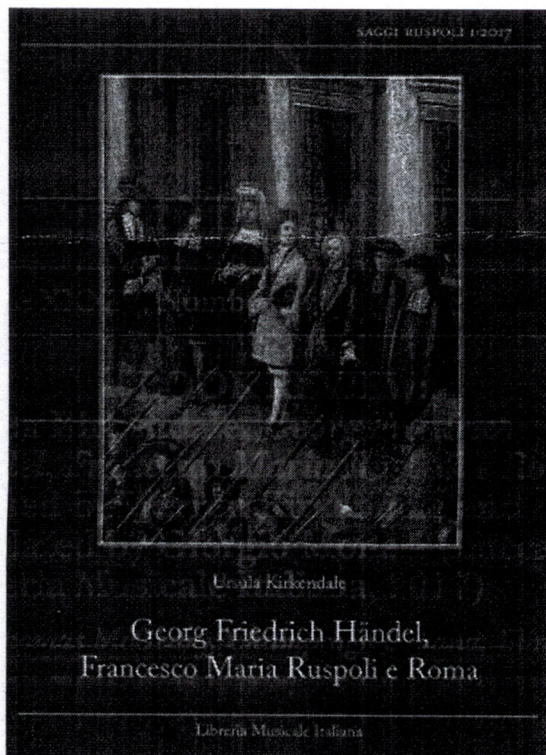
Volume XXXIV, Number 3

Winter 2019

BOOK REVIEW:

Ursula Kirkendale, *Georg Friedrich Händel, Francesco Maria Ruspoli e Roma*.
Revised by Warren Kirkendale and
translated by Giorgio Monari (Lucca:
Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2017)

Thomas McGeary, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois



The late Ursula Kirkendale (1932–2013) published but three articles about Handel; yet they transformed our knowledge of Handel's four years in Italy (1706–1710). This book will be an essential resource for Handel scholars, for it contains updated versions of her work. The articles themselves are testimony to her meticulous and persevering research in the Ruspoli and other European archives, and the no-less exacting and devoted

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“A COSMIC NOTION”: PHILHARMONIA BAROQUE ORCHESTRA & CHORALE

Graydon Beeks



Soprano Arwen Myers and Conductor Nicholas McGegan.
Photography by Frank Wing.

The 2019/2020 season marks the 34th and final year of AHS Honorary Board Member Nicholas McGegan's tenure as Music Director of the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra & Chorale. During that time the ensemble has performed more works by Handel than by any other composer, beginning with *Acis and Galatea* in February 1985 and including memorable performances of *Theodora*

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with Lorraine Hunt Lieberson in the title role and 50 performances of *Messiah*. Nic has also led the group in significant recordings of the latter two works, as well as of *Susanna, Joseph and His Brethren, and Judas Maccabaeus*.

I had the good fortune to attend the opening concert of the season entitled “A Cosmic Notion,” given at the Herbst Theatre in San Francisco on October 17, 2019 before an enthusiastic capacity audience. The program, which was given three more times in Palo Alto and Berkeley, began with Handel’s Ode for the Birthday of Queen Anne, HWV 74 (“Eternal Source of Light Divine”), most likely first performed in February of either 1713 or 1714—the date and whether the work was actually performed before the death of the Queen in August 1714 remain in doubt. The work is organized around a repeated refrain for the chorus (“The day that gave great Anna birth, who fix’d a lasting peace on earth”), which is interspersed with relatively short arias and duets for the solo voices. Outstanding among the latter were the countertenor Reginald Mobley, who coped well with the low tessitura of his lines originally written for Richard Elford. In the famous opening arioso he was partnered by the superb trumpet playing of John Thiessen. Soprano Arwen Myers, contralto Avery Amereau, and bass-

baritone Dashon Burton also acquitted themselves well, as did the chorus and orchestra.

The first half of the program closed with a suite of dances from *Terpsichore*, HWV 8b, which Handel composed as a prologue to his 1734 revival of the relatively short opera *Il pastor fido* to take advantage of the presence at Covent Garden Theatre of a French dance troupe led by Marie Sallé. The orchestra continued its distinguished work, which featured the virtuosic and stylish playing of oboists Marc Schachman and Gonzalo Ruiz and the bassoonist Andrew Schwartz.

The second half of the concert consisted of the world premiere of *The Listeners* by the young composer Caroline Shaw, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2013 for her *Partita for 8 Voices*. The new work, for contralto and bass soloists, chorus and orchestra, is the product of PBO’s *New Music for Old Instruments* commissioning initiative. Described as an oratorio, it derives from the composer’s love of the cantatas and oratorios of Handel, Buxtehude, and Bach, and consists of a mix of arias, duets, and choruses divided into separate movements. The specific inspiration came from the late Carl Sagan’s idea for the Golden Record, which was attached to the Voyager spacecraft in 1977 to carry greetings, sounds of nature, and music from a cross-section of cultures on earth to the outer parts of the universe.



From left to right: Avery Amereau, Arwen Myers, Nicholas McGegan, Reginald Mobley, Dashon Burton. Photography by Frank Wing.

Two of the movements of *The Listeners* consist of archival recordings: track 1 from the Golden Record, which presents a greeting from Kurt Waldheim, Secretary-General of the United Nations in 1977, followed by further short greetings in 55 languages; and an excerpt from Sagan's "lost lecture" given at Cornell in 1994 only rediscovered in recorded form in 2017. Most of the other movements are settings of poems by Walt Whitman, William Drummond of Hawthornden, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Yesenia Montilla, and Lucille Clifton, which the composer has chosen and arranged to "construct a journey . . . looking at the ways we see the sky and wonder about the universe and the ways that we also understand the earth and our planet." The *Prologue* and *Epilogue* set the word "Brillas" ("You shine"), while the penultimate movement, titled *Pulsar*, is a driving instrumental section reminiscent of the music of John Adams.

The Listeners received a committed and accomplished performance by all concerned, with truly outstanding contributions by the two vocal soloists, Amereau and Burton, and it was warmly received by the audience. On first hearing I was not convinced that, despite its many striking moments, the work held together as a whole, nor that it displayed an integrated musical style. I was also surprised that, apart from the distinctive sounds of the baroque oboes and bassoon, there seemed to be so little in the instrumental texture that could not just as well have been produced on modern instruments. However, first impressions are always suspect. Fortunately, we can all hear the piece for ourselves multiple times on the recording to be released by Philharmonia Baroque Productions in March 2020, which will also contain PBO's other commissioned works by the composer.

McGegan will continue his farewell season with more Handel, conducting *Judas Maccabaeus* in December and *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* in January and February. For his grand finale, the PBO will mount a fully staged performance of Jean-Marie Leclair's only surviving opera, *Scylla et Glaucus*, with performances in the Bay Area in mid-April, followed by performances at the Royal Opera House at the Palace of Versailles on April 25 and 26. Congratulations to Nic and the PBO are certainly in order, together with best wishes for more exiting projects by both in the future.