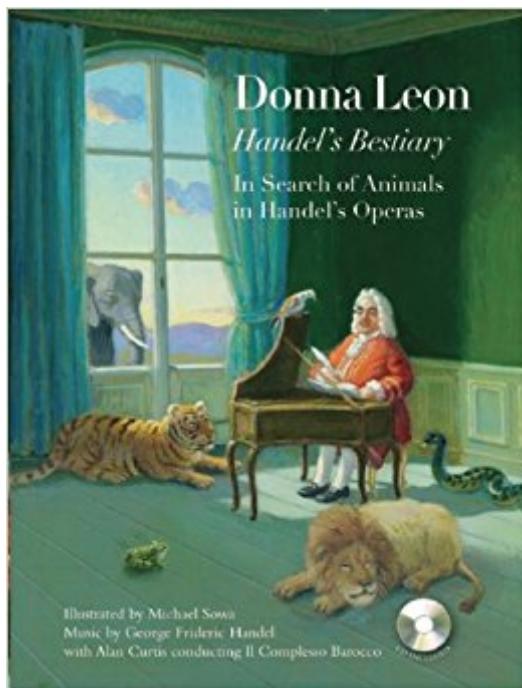


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Handel's Bestiary: In Search Of Animals In Handel's Operas



Synopsis

When acclaimed novelist Donna Leon is not conjuring up tales of crime and corruption in Venice, or reveling in delicious cuisine, she is listening to music. For Leon, patron of conductor Alan Curtis and his celebrated orchestra *Il Complesso Barocco*, that usually means the work of her favorite composer, George Frideric Handel. Over the years, Leon has noticed that the great musician filled his operas with arias that make reference to animals; rich in symbolism, the perceived virtues and vices of the lion, bee, nightingale, snake, elephant, and tiger, among others, resonate in his works. In Handel's Bestiary, Leon draws on her love of Handel and her expertise in medieval bestiaries—illustrated collections of animal stories—to assemble a bestiary of her own. Twelve chapters trace twelve animals through history, mythology, and the arias. Each is joined by whimsical original illustrations by German painter Michael Sowa, and an accompanying CD includes each aria, expertly recorded by *Il Complesso Barocco*. A fascinating, utterly original book, Handel's Bestiary springs to life with Leon's knowledge, passion, and wit.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Once upon a time, long before there were zoos and National Geographic, most people learned about animals of the wild through books called bestiaries. Often these books were more folklore than fact, created by authors and illustrators who'd never studied, or perhaps even set eyes on, the beasts they set out to portray. More recently, two American fans of the composer George Frideric Handel—Donna Leon, author of the enormously popular Commissario Brunetti detective novels, and

Alan Curtis, director of the internationally acclaimed baroque music ensemble Il Complesso Barocco--discovered that they'd each long been intrigued by Handel's use of animal lore in his operas and oratorios. Which became the inspiration for their collaboration to create this beautiful little book with a CD tucked into it. Leon uses her deep knowledge of oral tradition, folklore and medieval bestiaries to create delightful little essays about the evolution of humankind's knowledge of each of the dozen animals Handel references in his arias: lion, snake, nightingale, bee, silver dove, tiger, frog, elephant, moth, stag, phoenix and turtle dove. Each essay is preceded by a bit of libretto in both English and Italian from the opera in which the animal appears and a whimsical color illustration by the German artist Michael Sowa. Inside the back cover is Curtis's contribution--a specially created CD of each of the Handel arias in which these animals are referenced, gorgeously performed by Il Complesso Barocco. If you love opera, this beautiful little book /CD combo is something I think you'll really enjoy.

This ought to sell well among all age-groups. The detective novelist Donna Leon has had the charming brainwave of extracting arias by her adored Handel from various of his operas and oratorios and constructing a modern pastiche bestiary around them. Handel himself lived from 1685 to 1759, zoos were not common (if indeed there were any) in the Europe of his day, but the public had an understandable fascination with fabled animals. Sometimes these were perfectly familiar up to a point - doves, frogs and bees obviously come in to this category - but were still surrounded by legends. Others were mainly known by rumour, such as lions tigers and elephants; and of course a few purely fabulous creatures still haunted the popular imagination, our example here being the phoenix. The main ingredient of a traditional bestiary is the illustrations, and Michael Sowa does brilliantly with these, tongue obviously in cheek. Donna Leon herself accompanies each of these with a short text summarising some stories about the creatures in question. These are not unsuitably scholarly or heavy, but they are very interesting, and at the start of each of these little essays there are the words (with English translation if the original was in Italian) of the aria in which the given animal bird or insect features on the cd attached to inside of the back cover. When Donna Leon produces supposed 'derivations' of various names I like to think she is simply repeating what Pliny said. In the unlikely event that she believes them, please be careful not to believe them yourself.

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