

BOOK REVIEW

Ursula Kirkendale (2017). *Georg Friedrich Händel, Francesco Maria Ruspoli e Roma* (Libreria Musicale Italiana, ISBN 978-88-7096-906-1)

Reviewed by **Ivan ĆURKOVIĆ***

© 2020 Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest



It would appear that certain fields, as well as certain research methodologies in historical musicology, produce results that are more and others that are less prone to debates. On the surface, the study of primary sources and their dating or the study of a professional trajectory of an artist seem to be governed by common sense, by the sound examination of evidence and by the establishment of causal relationships between historical agents and events in time. By all accounts, its clearly outlined subject matter and methodology should have placed the monograph reviewed here in the first group, the one consisting of scholarly works that give little reason for disagreement. The fact that certain of its aspects may after all contribute to a lively exchange of opinions in the scholarly community only proves that even the more traditional, well-trodden paths of historical musicology such as the research of George Frideric Handel and his music remain exciting and dynamic.

There is no doubt whatsoever that Ursula Kirkendale's article *The Ruspoli Documents on Handel*, originally published in 1967 in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, revolutionised Handel studies, especially the understanding of the Italian sojourn of the composer in the first decade of the eighteenth century and the essential role that Prince Francesco Maria Ruspoli played as the composer's Roman patron. Kirkendale's work on this subject comprises three studies. The first is the aforementioned seminal article, the second a much shorter one, originally published in *Die Musikforschung* in 1988 in German and dealing with reports of Handel impressing Roman audiences with his playing of the organ and harpsichord. The third one was published for the first time in *Studi musicali* in English in 2003. Equally ambitious in scope and aim as the first one, this article discussed new sources concerning Ruspoli at the Archivio Segreto Vaticano and as such supplemented and sometimes corrected discoveries first presented in 1967, while adding new interpretations of some of the phenomena. Revised and updated, all three studies were published in English in *Music and Meaning: Studies in Music History and the Neighbouring Disciplines* (Leo S. Olschki, 2017), an extensive collection of essays by Ursula and her husband Warren Kirkendale. *Georg Friedrich Händel, Francesco Maria Ruspoli e Roma* consists of an excellent Italian translation by Giorgio Monari of the three aforementioned articles, updated anew with commentaries and footnotes by Warren Kirkendale, as well as some additional appendices, plates (including some modern-day photographs) and indices that were not part of the 2007 edition.

* Corresponding author. E-mail: icurkovic@muza.hr

The sense of collaboration between the two musicologists thus continued even after Ursula Kirkendale's death in 2012. The revisions and updates in the 2017 edition are by Warren Kirkendale only, and as such the volume presents a touching posthumous tribute to Ursula. Given the subject matter and the long presence of the Kirkendales in the Eternal City, it is fitting that these essays saw the light of day in Italian, and their pronounced attentiveness to more recent Handel research resulted in a wide array of references to almost everything that was published on the matter, both in 2007 and in 2017. A meticulously precise scholarly style makes it possible to tell the different versions of the papers apart from each other. The revisions are always in square brackets, the 2007 one marked by PS and the 2017 ones by PPS. Occasionally, some confusion is caused by remarks that the following sentence needs to be disregarded because a more recent comment refutes it, but otherwise the strict, almost philological attention to detail enables a clear comparison of the development of the texts in time and of the scholarly output of Ursula (and Warren) Kirkendale. At times questions of authorship arise, since as Warren Kirkendale himself admits in the Preface (p. xxv), the 2007 revisions are by both Ursula and Warren.

As stated in the Preface (pp. xvii–xxv), Warren Kirkendale's aim was not a *laudatio* of the author, but an overview of other scholars' output that deals with Handel's Italian stay and to enter into debate with many of them with opposing points of view. As such, the Preface offers a foretaste of his and Ursula's criticism of Donald Burrows, Reinhard Strohm and above all Ellen T. Harris, but also of documentaries and fictional works inspired by Handel. In spite of working together closely with director Olaf Brühl, the German TV film *Händel in Rom* is criticised for giving voice to opinions contrary to the Kirkendales', whereas the documentary *Händel – Das Geheimnis eines Genies* (2007) is condemned mainly because of its taking into account the possibility of Handel's homosexuality. Although documentaries can receive some criticism for scholarly inauthenticity if that is what the filmmakers were aiming for, a work of fiction such as the novel *Mitt grymma öde* by Swedish author Carl-Michael Edenborg does not have to correspond to Kirkendale's ideas on moral decency. Since most of the more serious points of criticism are presented clearly in the more recent additions and footnotes in the course of the book, the Preface unnecessarily reveals an approach that seems too personal, even vindictive and which spills over into the main part of the book (Chapter III), doing no service to the volume as a whole.

However, even with these possible shortcomings, it is beyond doubt that this is an important reference publication when it comes to Handel's activities in Rome, doing full justice to its title by offering the most comprehensive overview of the relationship between a composer, an enticing environment, and a responsive patron. Also, readers whose first language is not Italian can make good use of it by collating it with the respective chapters of *Music and Meaning* or the earlier versions published in periodicals. Chapter I, *I documenti di Francisco Maria Ruspoli su Händel* (pp. 1–77) begins by outlining pre-1967 research on Handel's stay in Italy and Rome in particular before presenting in a clear way its main archival discoveries, bills of services provided for Francesco Maria Ruspoli by his employees, including Handel, for much longer periods during his Italian sojourn than was previously believed. Ruspoli regularly hosted in his household so-called *conversazioni*, weekly meetings of learned men. These meetings included, among others, performances of cantatas composed for the occasion by Handel.

The bills are very detailed and their importance manifold. Probably the most significant are the ones indicating the costs of copying Handel's works – mostly cantatas, but also two oratorios



and some Latin Church music – and thus furnishing a chronology of their first performances and indirectly also of the time of their composition. However, they also provide a plethora of other information, enabling a ‘thick description’ of musical and cultural activities around Handel and Ruspoli, mostly in the years 1707 and 1708, but also after the composer’s departure from the Eternal City. Kirkendale divides the documents, transcribed from the original and provided in their entirety as an appendix to the chapter, into four chronological groups, discussing them at length. Except for the manuscript sources referred to by the bills, she also traces many of the unmentioned sources preserved in the Santini collection in Münster to Ruspoli. Some convincing conclusions are presented, such as the rebuttal of claims in older literature that Handel was pampered by his Roman patrons, since his duties for Ruspoli were time-consuming and the weekly production (‘quota’) of music had to be regular. There is also no doubt that Handel created a network of professional interests and acquaintances in Rome, leading to future collaborations with Margarita Durastante, the Castruccis and Filippo Amadei. The 2007 and 2017 revisions and additions make plenty of references to Chapter III, especially to performances taking place in Rome’s surroundings. The chapter ends by encouraging future researchers to use these findings as a foundation for the exploration of the musical works themselves.

The second chapter, *Un concerto all’organo in Laterano ed altri ricordi su Händel: una relazione nel Voyage historique del 1737* (pp. 79–90), is indebted to two contemporary Roman testimonies: the diary of Francesco Valesio and the travel diary of Denis Nolhac mentioned in the title. Valesio did not name Handel, but Nolhac did, making it possible for Kirkendale to prove that it was indeed he who played the organ at San Giovanni in Laterano and the harpsichord in a private gathering to great acclaim. Both events took place on January 14, 1707, which enables Kirkendale to develop a theory of Handel’s much earlier arrival to Rome than was previously believed in Chapter III, *Händel e Francesco Maria Ruspoli: nuovi documenti dall’Archivio Segreto Vaticano, dicembre 1706 – dicembre 1708* (pp. 91–166).

Therefore, the main motivation behind this chapter was both to revise and update earlier research by drawing on new archival documents such as the *libri mastri*, private records kept only for Roman patrons, and to examine the state of Handel literature dealing with the matter up to 2003 (and then again up to 2007 and 2017). Although the research methodology is very similar, one can sense a marked difference between the results in 1967 and 2003. Whereas the first article – presented in Chapter I – treads carefully, adhering strictly to the philological and causal foundations of the writing process, Chapter III appears to do the same, but with more interpretive confidence. As a result, this chapter is the most intriguing to read.

The dates, places or occasions of the first performances have been modified in relation to other literature in the case of *Udite il mio consiglio*, *Dixit Dominus*, *Il trionfo del tempo e del disinganno*, *Rodrigo* and *Agrippina*. Kirkendale’s take on the two latter operas, performed in Florence and Venice respectively, is especially daring, since she suggests that information on their performances refers to revivals, while their premieres happened before Handel’s arrival in Rome. Different allegorical readings of pieces such as *Udite il mio consiglio*, *Un’alma innamorata* and *Cor fedele* are also presented. The interpretations are in line with the author’s pronounced interest in the history of the Ruspoli family and the role it played in the political events of the time, especially the War of the Spanish Succession. Thus, they sometimes take the form of a tribute. Even though scepticism towards the – according to Ellen T. Harris – Florentine provenance of five cantatas is justified, especially when it comes to the use of paper type



and watermark, the impression of an overt emotional involvement in a celebration of everything Roman related to Handel cannot be ignored. This pride is visible also in Warren Kirkendale's derision of other authors in the Preface, e.g. Donald Burrows and the team behind the *Handel Collected Documents* for not doing archival research on the spot in Rome.

Also announced in the Preface, the criticism of others' opinions is every so often revealed as highly subjective because it relies on labelling interpretations as 'excessive', even though these authors' readings often rely on the same logic of allegoric substitution, but of a different nature. To take a paradigmatic example, a homoerotic reading by Harris of the cantata *Arresta il passo* does not seem essentially different from an allegory of a non-sexual courtship between patron (Ruspoli) and artist (Handel) that Kirkendale advocates, and therefore it is difficult to see a reason why they should be mutually exclusive. Allegories in general often lack subtlety in symbolic representation, e.g. a reading of *Udite il mio consiglio* and its performance in Civitavecchia as Ruspoli's instigation to replace the Papal galleys with sailing ships. Conjecture is often presented as evidence-based fact with surprising ease, as in the convenient dating of cantatas within the temporal lacunas unoccupied by any other known *conversazioni* because the weekly regularity of production is taken as a norm, or the equation of a certain Vittoria present at the performance of the cantata *Un'alma innamorata* with the singer Vittoria Tarquini, 'famous' for an alleged romantic relationship with Handel. On the other hand, the author invests great efforts in a criticism of Harris's writing on Handel's possible homosexuality, which is not something that this book seems to need nor something that it is methodologically equipped to research.

Regardless of these potential shortcomings it remains that *Georg Friedrich Händel, Francesco Maria Ruspoli e Roma* does a great job at presenting an argument in favor of a revised chronology and topology of the composer's stay in Rome and Italy in particular, as well as his musical endeavors in and out of service to Prince Ruspoli, outlined very succinctly at the end of Chapter III (pp. 139–140). The most interesting conclusion in this book reads: 'All of these performances had interesting liturgical, biographical, and/or political significance. This must be explicitly stated – otherwise Handel's very dramatic music will continue to fall on deaf ears.' (p. 141, quoted from the English version of *Music and Meaning*, pp. 400–401). This is a point neither the Kirkendales nor any other author whom they refer to should disagree with. The book makes many strides in that direction, for example when it considers the 'disturbing' character of *Dixit Dominus* as a *psalmus in tempore belli*, therefore questioning its Marian context of performance (p. 110), or when it speculates on a connection between a performance of *Il trionfo del tempo e del disinganno* and an artistic competition organised by the *Accademia di San Luca* and associated with the oratorio's librettist Cardinal Pamphilj. In any case, there are innumerable merits in this book, and its power to engage in dialogue is beyond doubt.

