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Handel's Bestiary: In Search of Animals in Handel's Operas

Donna Leon

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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.

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