



# Agrippina

Matthew Dirst / Artistic Director

Friday, November 16, 2018 at 7:30 pm  
& Sunday, November 18, 2018 at 2:30 pm

Zilkha Hall, The Hobby Center  
for the Performing Arts

Welcome to the Houston debut of *Agrippina*, George Frideric Handel’s first operatic masterpiece. At these performances we’re thrilled to be able to share Ars Lyrica’s first full-length Baroque opera with our home audience. This production also inaugurates a new seasonal rhythm for Ars Lyrica: a fully-staged Baroque opera every other year. Such things would not be possible without you, our patrons, and we’re profoundly grateful for your generous support.

Next on Ars Lyrica’s 2018/19 “Out of the Box” season is Houston’s most elegant New Year’s Eve celebration. Our annual year-end bash at the Hobby Center includes a festive dinner, concert, and gala—choose one, two, or all three and come get your “Baroque Razzle-Dazzle” on with us! Our program features the second installment in a season-long survey of Bach’s “Brandenburg” Concertos plus works by Georg Philipp Telemann and Giuseppe Antonio Brescianello.

One other piece of good news to share. Ars Lyrica’s latest recording was released in September, and copies are available for purchase in the Zilkha Hall lobby at these performances. *The First Organ Concertos: Reconstructions of Works by G. F. Handel and J. S. Bach* on the Loft label features yours truly plus core members of the ensemble. You can never have too much Bach and Handel, after all.



MATTHEW DIRST  
Artistic Director

DESIGN BY FIELD OF STUDY

## AGRIPPINA

Music by George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

Libretto attributed to Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani (c1655–1710)

First performed in Venice, December 26, 1709

Performed in the original Italian with English surtitles.

*The performance runtime is approximately two hours and twenty minutes, and there will be one intermission.*

### CAST (in order of appearance)

<b>Sofia Selowsky</b>	<i>Agrippina</i>	a noble Roman, married to Emperor Claudius
<b>John Holiday</b>	<i>Nerone (Nero)</i>	Agrippina’s son from a previous marriage
<b>Brian Shircliffe</b>	<i>Pallante (Pallas)</i>	freedman of the imperial household
<b>Cecilia Duarte</b>	<i>Narciso (Narcissus)</i>	freedman of the imperial household
<b>Eduardo Tercero</b>	<i>Lesbo (Lesbus)</i>	a household servant
<b>Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen</b>	<i>Ottone (Otho)</i>	a noble officer in the imperial army
<b>Camille Ortiz</b>	<i>Poppea (Poppæa)</i>	a beautiful and ambitious young woman
<b>Timothy Jones</b>	<i>Claudio (Claudius)</i>	Emperor of Rome

*Special thanks to St Philip Presbyterian Church for providing rehearsal space for this production, to Bruce Brogdon for the loan of his Baroque guitar, and to St Philip and the Moores School of Music at the University of Houston for use of their John Phillips harpsichords.*

*Special thanks to Houston Grand Opera, Stages Repertory Theater and University of Houston School of Theatre & Dance for generously lending us the use of their properties and furniture.*

## PRODUCTION TEAM & STAFF

Tara Faircloth	<i>Stage Director</i>
Matthew Dirst	<i>Conductor/Artistic Director</i>
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Frank Vela	<i>Technical Director &amp; Lighting Designer</i>
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Jenna Wallis	<i>Surtitle operation</i>
Lauren Miller	<i>Intern</i>
Dejah Smith	<i>Intern</i>

## ORCHESTRAL PERSONNEL

<i>Baroque oboe/recorder</i>	<i>Viola</i>
Kathryn Montoya	Erika Lawson
Stephen Bard	<i>Cello</i>
<i>Baroque bassoon</i>	Barrett Sills‡
Benjamin Kamins	Eric Smith
<i>Natural trumpet</i>	<i>Violone</i>
Wes Miller	Deborah Dunham
Amanda Pepping	<i>Theorbo/Baroque guitar</i>
<i>Timpani</i>	Michael Leopold‡
Craig Hauschildt	<i>Harpsichord</i>
<i>Violin I</i>	Matthew Dirst‡
Stephanie Raby*	Jeffrey Cooper
Brandi Berry Benson	
Maria Lin	
<i>Violin II</i>	* concertmaster
Alan Austin	‡ recitative continuo
Hae-a Lee	
Kana Kimura	
Joanna Becker	

## STAGE DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Hailed as a great success at its 1709 premiere in Venice, Handel's *Agrippina* gives us a peek at the sordidly imagined personal and political machinations of some of the most famous personalities of Ancient Rome. Agrippina, already married to the Emperor of Rome, will stop at nothing to see her son Nerone on the throne. Her ambition sets off a series of political/sexual negotiations that, sadly, seem perfectly at home in almost any era or domain where power is in play. The stakes are high, but Handel has let comedy be the guiding force. In this rare combination of sublime music and vulgar impulses, we are reminded that for both lovers and kingships, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

—TARA FAIRCLOTH

## SYNOPSIS

This opera opens with the first of its many lies: Agrippina reports to her son Nerone that Emperor Claudio has drowned at sea. Agrippina wastes no time taking advantage of this bit of “fake news,” flirting shamelessly with Pallante and Narciso individually, inducing them each to back her son's bid for the throne. A quick coronation is arranged, and Nerone magnanimously tosses coins to the needy before being proclaimed emperor by his mother and her henchmen. His reign proves short-lived: Claudio's servant Lesbo interrupts this scene with the news that Claudio is alive, thanks to Ottone, and that the real Emperor is on his way home. A grateful Claudio has decreed that Ottone will be his successor, but foolishly, Ottone reveals to Agrippina that he would rather marry Poppea than take the throne. Agrippina considers a new course of action.

The object of desire for at least three powerful men (Ottone, Claudio and Nerone), beautiful Poppea is only just learning the

ways of deception. Agrippina visits her bedroom, telling her that Ottone has betrayed her love for the throne. She must use Claudio's affections against him: when love-struck Claudio appears in her bedroom, she makes him promise to punish Ottone in exchange for her favors. Agrippina and Poppea congratulate each other and plot their next move. As the coronation begins, Pallante and Narciso have begun to suspect they've been had. Entering with great bluster, Claudio winks at Poppea while accusing Ottone of treason. Suitably outraged, everyone turns against Ottone, who is left quite alone to lament his cruel fate.

Alone in the garden, Poppea wishes she could believe Ottone innocent, when she sees him approach. They are quickly reconciled but realize that they must continue the game to expose Agrippina. Poppea therefore accepts Lesbo's request for a visit to her bedroom from Claudio and, for good measure, also agrees to entertain Nerone. Agrippina, by contrast, has grown nervous about her tenuous house of cards; she approaches Claudio with all guns blazing. Securing his promise to name Nerone as successor, she rejoices as her husband goes to Poppea.

The next few moments in Poppea's bedroom are a dizzying series of events: Poppea welcomes and then hides in turn both Ottone and Nerone. When Claudio arrives, she exposes Nerone, whose promised throne is yanked away for the second time. Left alone at last, Poppea and Ottone celebrate their love.

The final scene pits Agrippina's deceptions against those of her husband. Calling everyone together, Claudio offers a test to see where their true ambitions lie. Learning that Nerone prizes the throne, while Ottone seeks only the love of Poppea, Claudio agrees to let the matter rest. Poppea will marry Ottone, Agrippina will remain with Claudio, and Nerone will one day be crowned.

—TARA FAIRCLOTH & MATTHEW DIRST

## ABOUT THE OPERA

Among other things, *Agrippina* is a satire of a scheming woman, her arrogant and lazy Emperor spouse, her smarmy son, and a pair of affecting lovebirds, only one of whom seems to have a moral core. For its initial Venetian audience, Handel's opera also may have served as an ironic broadside against Pope Clement XI, whose politics during the War of the Spanish Succession were opposed to those of the Serene Republic and the likely librettist. Like Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, which features many of the same historical characters, *Agrippina* is an "anti-heroic comedy," a work that blends deception, humor, and pathos as it illuminates common human foibles. All its characters save one are drawn from Roman history, as recorded in Tacitus's *Annals* and in Suetonius's *Life of Claudius*, though the sparkling libretto attributed to Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani twists them into a timeless allegory.

Given his long career in the church, Grimani's fondness for intrigue and sympathy for shady characters is hardly surprising. His plumb diplomatic and political positions (including stints as Imperial Ambassador to Rome and as Viceroy of Naples from 1708 until his death in 1710) doubtless gave Grimani even more juicy material for the occasional opera libretto. His *Agrippina*, as set to music by a twenty-four-year-old Saxon *Wunderkind*, premiered on December 26, 1709, in Venice's *Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo*, which the Grimani family owned. A sensation from opening night onwards, it ran for 27 performances during the 1709–10 carnival season and established Handel's international reputation as an opera composer.

John Mainwaring, in an early biography of Handel, described the first performance of *Agrippina* in glowing terms: "The theatre at almost every pause resounded with shouts of *Viva il caro Sassone!* ("Long live the beloved Saxon!") and other expressions of approbation too extravagant to be mentioned. They were thunderstruck with the grandeur and sublimity of his style: for they had never known till then all the powers of harmony and modulation so closely arrayed and so forcibly combined." The cast of this initial production included soprano Margherita Durastanti (one of Handel's regulars) as Agrippina, soprano castrato Valeriano Pellegrini as Nerone, soprano Diamante Maria Scarabelli as Poppea, bass Antonio Francesco Carli as Claudio, and contralto Francesca Vanini-Boschi as Ottone.

Handel probably received the commission for *Agrippina* from Grimani in Rome in 1707 or early 1708, though composition likely happened a month or two before the opening, as was Handel's custom. Subsequent productions of the work took place in Naples (1713), Hamburg (1718) and Vienna (1719), but curiously, Handel never revived *Agrippina* during his decades in London, though he borrowed a few items for other works. Like most of Handel's operas, *Agrippina* fell out of the repertory by the middle of the 18th century. Its modern revival took place in Halle (Handel's birthplace) in 1943, during the Second World War. More recently, productions by New York City Opera, English National Opera, and the Göttingen Handel Festival (among others) have played to enthusiastic audiences around the world.

Handel and his contemporaries typically composed operatic recitatives first, so that the cast could commit this text-heavy material to memory early in the rehearsal process. The arias came later and were just as often borrowed as newly composed, enabling the efficient completion of new theatrical works each season. One of the borrowed bits in *Agrippina*, the title character's "Ho un non so chè nel cor," was taken directly (without alteration to either text or music) from Handel's 1708 oratorio *La Resurrezione*. Durastanti, who sang this aria as Mary Magdalene in the oratorio, apparently liked it so much that she repeated it verbatim in Venice, this time as Agrippina! Handel's Venetian audience couldn't have cared less: in classic *opera buffa* fashion, *Agrippina* invites us not to judge but instead to enjoy.

Less a history lesson than a sendup of ancient Rome, this opera transforms historical archetypes into warm-blooded people with powerful emotions, shifting alliances, and strong survival instincts, thanks to the felicitous marriage of arch libretto to brilliant score. The two female roles, Agrippina and Poppea, make the strongest impression. The "Argument" to the 1707 libretto makes clear that Agrippina—described as "eager to reign and as ambitious as she was powerful"—wants one thing out of her marriage to Claudio: to ensure Nerone's succession to the throne, even at the cost of her own life. At once fearless and wily, Agrippina resembles Cleopatra, who fired Handel's imagination some fifteen years later in *Giulio Cesare*. In both cases Handel reserved his most sumptuous music for these domineering women—the antithesis of the vulnerable soprano

of later Italian opera. The "strong women" of his English oratorios, by contrast, are all paragons of virtue: *Esther*, *Susanna*, or *Theodora*, for example.

Not to say that Handel took less interest in the male roles, which are just as colorfully drawn. Claudio enters with great pomp, though it's quickly apparent that he'd rather pursue Poppea than rule Rome. Ottone, who serves as the lone voice of honesty throughout, sings the most deeply felt aria in the opera, after being cruelly rejected by everyone. (Here the libretto takes considerable liberty with history, for the real Otho was hardly immune to the allure of power. His long quest to become emperor resulted in a chaotic three-month reign, which ended with his suicide after a humiliating defeat.) Though today Nero epitomizes vanity and self-absorption, Handel's Nerone is a gifted if callow youth, one who under different circumstances might have turned out better. Pallante and Narciso, who suffer Agrippina's multiple deceptions, provide comic relief, while Lesbo attends to Claudio with appropriate ceremony and discretion.

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## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

### Agrippina



**Sofia Selowsky** made her Ars Lyrica debut in the 2016 performances of Handel's *Jephta*. Familiar to Houston audiences, Ms. Selowsky was most recently heard as Rosina in Houston Grand Opera's *The Barber of Seville*. An alum of the HGO Studio, Ms. Selowsky made her mainstage debut as Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly* and has been heard as The Fox in *The Little Prince*, Nell Gwynn in *Prince of Players*, and as Eliza in *After the Storm*, among others.

She has also appeared in multiple performances with the Houston Symphony including Schubert's *The Pilgrimage of the Rose* with Music Director Andrés Orozco-Estrada in her debut, and most recently in performances of de Falla's *Three Cornered Hat*. In the current season, Ms. Selowsky also debuted with Lexington Philharmonic, North Carolina Symphony, and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and will make her Atlanta Opera and Des Moines Metro Opera debuts in the coming months.

### Nerone



Countertenor **John Holiday**, winner of the 2017 Marian Anderson Vocal Award and nominee for "Newcomer of the Year" by the German magazine *Opernwelt*, has quickly established himself as a fast-rising singer to watch, with his voice that has been praised as "a thing of astonishing beauty" (*New Yorker*).

Holiday's 2018–19 season includes a role debut as Nero in *Agrippina* with Ars Lyrica, Handel's *Israel in Egypt* with MasterVoices at Carnegie Hall, and a debut with the University Musical Society in Ann Arbor in Handel's *Messiah*. His season continues with his debut at the National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts in Taiwan, singing the role of the First Male Voice in Huang Ruo's chamber opera *Paradise Interrupted*. Other recent highlights include creating the role of John Blue in the world premiere of *We Shall Not Be Moved* with Opera Philadelphia, his Kennedy Center debut for his Marian Anderson Award Recital, and a tour with the LA Phil and Gustavo Dudamel.

Recently chosen as a 2018 Yerba Buena Center for the Arts 100 honoree, in the company of individuals such as Madeleine Albright, Glenn Close, and Janelle Monáe, John received his Bachelor of Music in vocal performance from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, a Master of Music in vocal performance from the University of Cincinnati College—Conservatory of Music and the Artist Diploma in Opera Studies from The Juilliard School.

### Pallante



Lyric baritone **Brian Shircliffe** is excited to be performing with Ars Lyrica again. The San Antonio native has sung with Dayton Opera, Lake George Opera, Utah Festival Opera, Opera in the Heights, Opera Vista, and has performed with numerous opera companies including: Houston Grand Opera, most recently seen in the world's first Mariachi opera, *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*. Brian holds a Master's of Music from The University of Houston's

Moores School of Music, and teaches voice at San Jacinto College in Houston where he currently resides. Following his performance as Dancaïro in *Carmen*, with Houston's Opera in the Heights, the Houston Chronicle said: "The best individual singing of the evening came from Brian Shircliffe as Dancaïro, one of Carmen's fellow smugglers...He had a sure vocal presence, a natural, unblemished sound and an easy delivery...."

### Narciso



**Cecilia Duarte** created the role of Renata in the Mariachi Opera *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna* with Houston Grand Opera, and has toured with it through Europe, the United States, and South America. Cecilia has created other roles for world premieres, such as Jessie Lydell in *A Coffin in Egypt*, (HGO and the Wallis Annenberg Center in L.A.); Gracie in *A Way Home* (HGO and Opera Southwest); Harriet/First Responder in *After the Storm* (HGO);

Alicia in *Some Light Emerges* (HGO); and most recently, Alma, in HGO's Web Series, *Starcross'd*.

Cecilia has often performed with Ars Lyrica Houston, Mercury Houston, The Bach Society, The Oregon Bach Festival, the Festivalensemble in Stuttgart, Germany, and the Festival de Música Barroca de San Miguel de Allende, México.

### Lesbo



Tenor **Eduardo Alberto Tercero**—A native of Panama City, Republica de Panama, is described as a "dashing" performer by the Houston Chronicle and was also listed in Symphony Magazine's Guide to Emerging Artists. His concert credits include the world premiere of *Nicholas of Myra* by Robert Nelson in the role of Marcus, Piacere in the Houston premiere production of Handel's *Il Trionfo del Tempo e della Verita*, Adamo in the Houston Premiere production of *Il*

*Primo Omicidio* by Scarlatti, and *Messiah* by G. F. Handel with the Des Moines and La Cross Symphony Orchetras, Houston Chamber Choir and Bethany and Augustana Colleges, Montiverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine 1610* with Ars Lyrica Houston and his Houston Symphony debut as the Narrator in Copeland's *The Lincoln Portrait*. Most recently he has appeared in the world premiere production of *O Columbia* with the Houston Grand Opera, and is a longtime member of the Houston Chamber Choir.

#### Ottone



Countertenor **Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen** has quickly been identified as one of opera and early music's most promising rising stars. In 2017, he was named a winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, First Prize Winner of the Houston Grand Opera Eleanor McCollum Competition, a Sara Tucker Study Grand recipient from the Richard Tucker Music Foundation, and numerous other prizes. This season, he is a member of the Houston Grand Opera Studio—the first countertenor in the Studio's history—and next season, he will continue his training by joining the San Francisco Opera as an Adler Fellow. This season at HGO, he performed in productions of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* and Strauss' *Elektra*. Additional performances of the season include engagements with American Bach Soloists, The Dallas Opera, Cincinnati Opera, and recitals around the United States. In summer 2018, his first commercial recording will be released—the world premiere recording of Kenneth Fuchs' "Poems of Life" with the London Symphony Orchestra (Naxos). [aryehnussbaumcohen.com](http://aryehnussbaumcohen.com)

*Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen's performance in Agrippina is generously underwritten by Dr. Ellen R. Gritz and Milton D. Rosenau, Jr.*

#### Poppea



A native of Vega Baja, Puerto Rico, soprano **Camille Ortiz** is equally at ease on the opera and concert stages performing internationally. Recent performances include appearances as Gilda in *Rigoletto*, Micaela in *Carmen*, Valencienne in *The Merry Widow*, Marguerite in *Faust*, Maria in *West Side Story*, and Christine in *The Phantom of the Opera* as the 2018 soprano Artist in Residence for Gulfshore Opera in Naples, FL. The season continues with summer concert appearances in Florence, Paris, Leipzig, and Syros, Greece. The fall sees her return as soprano soloist to the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra in San Francisco for an all-Mozart week and her Houston debut as Poppea in Handel's *Agrippina* with Ars Lyrica Houston. Last season included a full solo recital for the Dallas Bach Society and her debut with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra in their acclaimed production of Rameau's *Le Temple de la Gloire*. She holds a DMA from University of North Texas.

#### Claudio



Bass-baritone **Timothy Jones** is one of the most respected concert singers of his generation. Timothy has soloed with the Cleveland Orchestra, Detroit Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Utah Symphony, Baton Rouge Symphony, and Boston Baroque. A favorite of living composers Jones has premiered over fifty works written specifically for his voice. He has been praised in the opera world, where he has amassed over thirty leading roles, for his passionate performances, solid vocal technique, and outstanding musicianship. Dr. Jones's first, full-time academic appointment was at the University of Texas in San Antonio back in 1994. He is currently an Professor of Music at the University of Houston's Moores School of Music.

#### Stage Director



Stage director **Tara Faircloth's** work has been seen in opera houses around the nation. The 2018–19 season finds Ms. Faircloth working on several new productions (*Il Re Pastore* with Merola Opera, *Agrippina* with Ars Lyrica Houston, *The Little Prince* with Utah Opera, *The Coronation of Poppea* with Boston Baroque), and returning to some familiar favorites: *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Rigoletto* (for Arizona Opera and Austin Opera, respectively). Ms. Faircloth has worked extensively on directing staff at Lyric Opera of Chicago, Houston Grand Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera and Central City Opera. A guest instructor at the University of Michigan in fall 2018, she has a private coaching studio in Houston, Texas, and regularly works with the talented singers at Rice University and the Houston Grand Opera Studio.

*Tara Faircloth's stage direction in Agrippina is generously underwritten by Maurice Isaac.*

## Conductor



Ars Lyrica founder and artistic director **Matthew Dirst** is the first American musician to win major international prizes in both organ and harpsichord. Widely admired for his stylish playing and conducting, he was recently described in the *Washington Post* as an “efficient, extremely precise conductor who has an ear for detail and up-to-date ideas about performing Bach.” His Handel has also made the critics sing: the *Dallas Morning News* enthused that “conducting both clear and evocative by Matthew Dirst yielded a performance as irresistibly lively as it was stylish. The music danced.” Early Music America celebrated his solo recording of harpsichord works by François and Armand-Louis Couperin as a “stylish, tasteful, and technically commanding performance... expressive and brilliant playing.” As Artistic Director of Ars Lyrica, Dirst leads a period-instrument ensemble with several acclaimed recordings, one of which—the world premiere recording of Johann Adolph Hasse’s *Marc’Antonio e Cleopatra*—was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2011 for Best Opera. In addition to his work with Ars Lyrica, Dirst appears during 2018 with the Washington Bach Consort, the Portland Baroque Orchestra, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Houston Symphony, and San Francisco Early Music Society.

Matthew Dirst holds the PhD in musicology from Stanford University and the *prix de virtuosité* in both organ and harpsichord from the Conservatoire National de Reuil-Malmaison, France, where he spent two years as a Fulbright scholar. Equally active as a scholar and organist, he serves currently as Professor of Music at the Moores School of Music, University of Houston, and organist at St Philip Presbyterian Church in Houston. Dirst is the author of *Engaging Bach: The Keyboard Legacy* from Marpurg to Mendelssohn (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and the editor of *Bach and the Organ* (University of Illinois Press, 2016).

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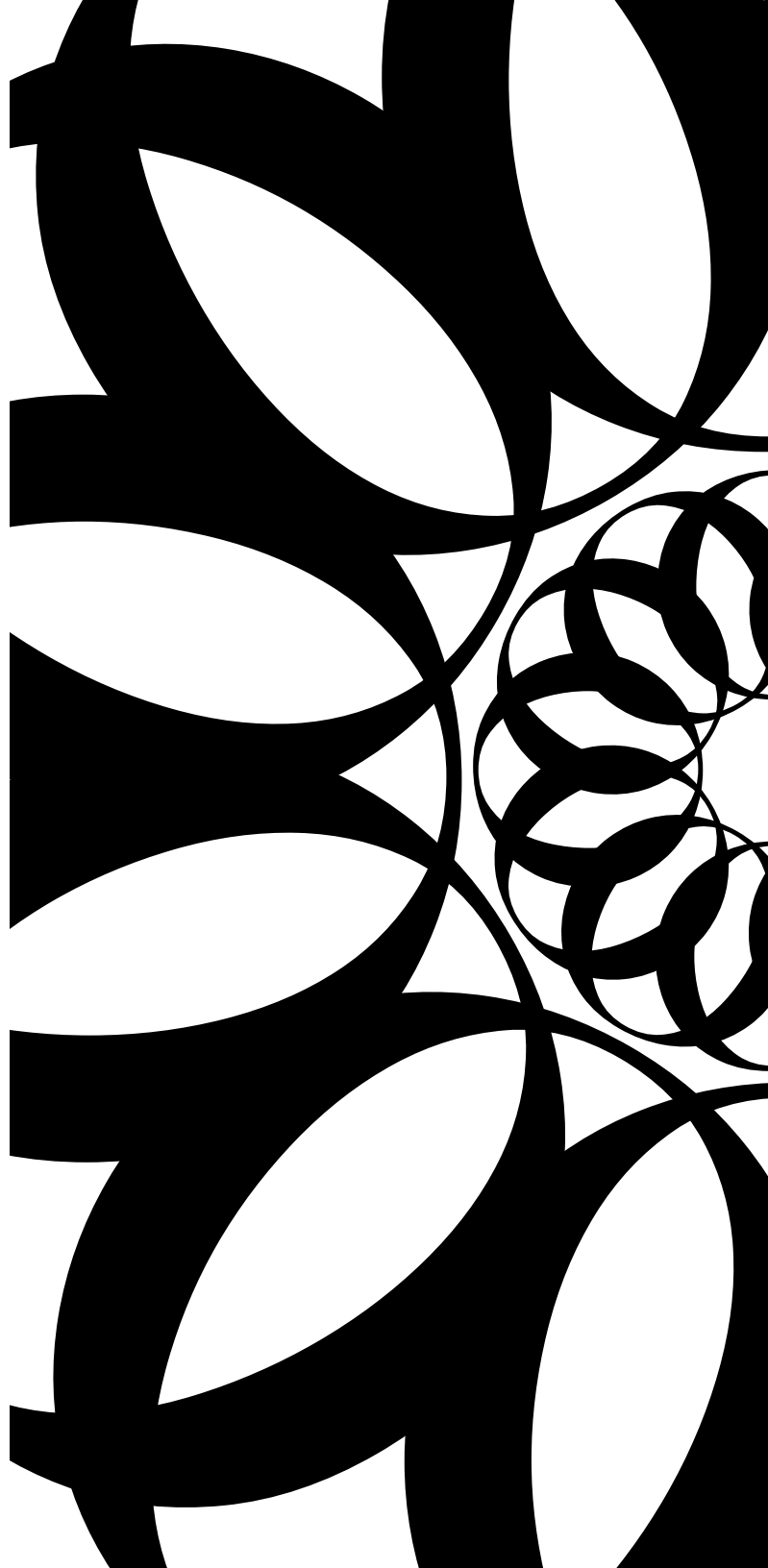
### ABOUT ARS LYRICA

Founded in 1998 by harpsichordist and conductor Matthew Dirst, **Ars Lyrica Houston** presents a diverse array of music from the 17th and 18th centuries on period instruments. Its local subscription series, according to the *Houston Chronicle*, “sets the agenda” for early music in Houston and it also appears regularly at major festivals and conferences, including the 2014 Berkeley Early Music Festival & Exhibition. Ars Lyrica’s distinctive programming favors Baroque dramatic and chamber works, and its pioneering efforts have won international acclaim: the ensemble’s world premiere recording of Johann Adolph Hasse’s *Marc’Antonio e Cleopatra*, hailed by Early Music America as “a thrilling performance that glows in its quieter moments and sparkles with vitality,” was nominated for a Grammy Award® for Best Opera 2011.



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*Special thanks to Kathryn, Helen, and  
Brendan Godfrey for underwriting  
the post-concert reception and to Matthew  
Dirst & Sixto Wagan, Dorry & Carroll  
Shaddock, Ed & Janet Hess, Joyce & David  
Fox, Bettie Cartwright, and Elizabeth  
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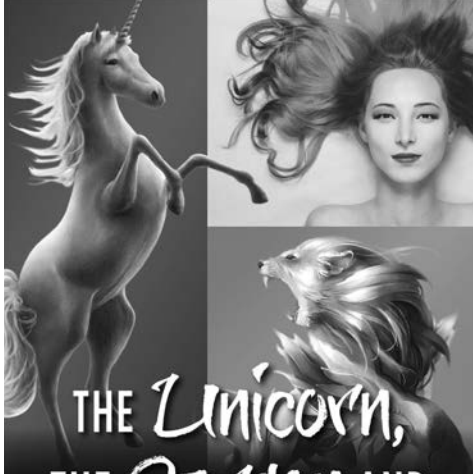


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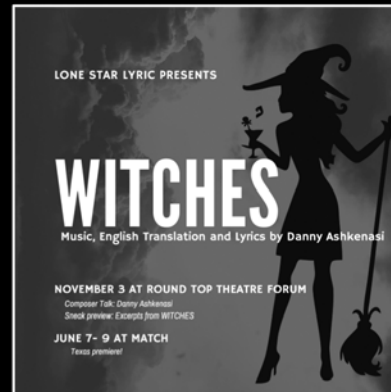
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J. S. Bach, "Brandenburg" Concertos No. 1 and No. 3

G. A. Brescianello, Violin Concerto in G Minor



Adam LaMotte  
violin

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