

**Baroque Idol:  
The Little-Known, Barely Remembered,  
Oft-Disregarded Origins of Reality TV**

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This paper is dedicated to Brian Dickie,  
who knows what it takes to put on an opera

The bubble burst. And with it banks failed, investors large and small lost everything, and the government—responsible in part for the financial debacle—stepped in to try to limit the damage. There were charges of fraud and bribery, followed by trials and even some suicides, though many of those who were surely complicit were never held accountable. The United States, 2008? No. England, 1720. The South Sea Bubble.

Formed in 1711 by an act of Parliament, the South Sea Company was given a monopoly to conduct England's trade with the Spanish colonies in South America; the company was also set up as a means to deal with £9 million of national debt, through conversion of the debt into South Sea Company shares, available to the public. The early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England saw enormous growth in joint-stock investment opportunities and—not coincidentally, just as the publishing industry exploded—everyone wanted to be in on the speculative action. Through the stock market, anyone with a little extra cash now had a chance to earn back the amount many times over; in the coffee houses, people traded investment tips fished from a flood of newspapers and pamphlets. Aristocrats and merchants, men and women, scientists and artists—everyone dreamed of making a fortune with the right stock pick.

The South Sea Company was not successful in trade, but through fabulous marketing, creative financing, and political maneuvering, the company's directors *were* successful in driving up share value. The mania came to a head in 1720: On January 1, the price of a South Sea share was £128; by June 24 it was £1,050. With investor confidence suddenly spooked, a rapid sell-off began in early July and by September the stock had crashed.

While 1720 saw many smaller bubbles burst, the South Sea Bubble had widespread and devastating effects, reflected even in popular culture. Playing cards were sold depicting South Sea ruination: the jack of spades with a picture of a stockjobber throwing himself from a window, the six of diamonds showing a lady who has had to pawn her “fine Brocades,” and so the deck goes. Songs and poems were written and, this being the 18<sup>th</sup> century, cartoons and satires were circulated pillorying South Sea investors for not knowing better.<sup>1</sup> One of those investors who supposedly should have known better was none other than the genius Sir Isaac Newton, who lost £20,000 (at the time, £200 a year would have been sufficient income to maintain a middle-class household). As Sir Isaac supposedly said in regard to the South Sea Bubble, “I can calculate the motions of the heavenly bodies, but not the madness of people.”<sup>2</sup>

Another South Sea investor whose name is well known to this day is the composer George Frideric Handel. Handel first came to London in 1710, where he eventually took up permanent residence. In 1715, he bought £500 of South Sea stock and it has been generally assumed that he lost significantly in the crash, though research has revealed that he must have sold his shares by then, as his name does not appear on any of the subscription lists from 1720.<sup>3</sup> But the crash would have worried Handel, if not personally, then professionally, since he was not just a composer, but also one of the managers of the new Royal Academy of Music, created to present Italian opera: He had

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<sup>1</sup>Some of these artifacts can be found in the South Sea Bubble Collection of Baker Library at Harvard Business School.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Christopher Reed, “‘The Damn’d *South Sea*’: Britain’s Greatest Financial Speculation and Its Unhappy Ending, Documented in a Rich Harvard Collection,” *Harvard Magazine* (May/June 1999).

<sup>3</sup>Ellen T. Harris, “South Sea Company,” in Annette Landgraf and David Vickers, eds., *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 612.

tickets to sell, seats to fill! As anyone producing opera in the United States during the past three years has learned, the tickets are harder to sell, the seats harder to fill, after a big bubble bursts and patrons are feeling the pinch.

The Royal Academy of Music was itself a joint-stock company, incorporated on July 27, 1719. Initially there were sixty-three shareholders, all wealthy aristocrats, many of whom were closely tied to the Hanoverian monarch George I. These investors received season tickets, of course, but they also acted as a board of directors and were involved in management decisions, and if there were ever to be any profits, they would share in them.

Handel was central to the creation of the academy, serving in many roles: as “Master of the Orchester”; as one of the company’s primary composers; and as “Master of musick,” in which role he was active in the recruitment of singers. One of the shareholders’ first decisions was to send Handel to the continent to engage well-known singers to help ensure the company’s success in its first season. In particular, he was tasked with recruiting Senesino, an Italian castrato with a rock-star reputation. Handel tracked down Senesino in Dresden in the summer of 1719 where he was performing in Antonio Lotti’s *Teofane* for the Electoral Prince of Saxony. While not quite as suspenseful or well publicized as last year’s recruitment of LeBron James by the Miami Heat, the negotiations did not go smoothly and Senesino signed with the Royal Academy only after being dismissed from Dresden in early 1720 after a quarrel. The singer did not arrive in London until the end of the Royal Academy’s first season, in September 1720, just as South Sea stock was plummeting.

The Royal Academy shareholders felt confident going into the second season, though: Not only had Senesino arrived, but also Giovanni Bononcini, an Italian composer of note. Lord Burlington, one of the academy's shareholders, had gone to Italy with specific instructions to engage Bononcini, whose "light, natural and tuneful" musical style would provide a perfect contrast to Handel's "virtuosic and dramatic style."<sup>4</sup> To open the Royal Academy's second season in November 1720, Bononcini revised his opera *Astarto*, which was a huge success with the London audience and played for twenty performances.

The Handel biographer Jonathan Keates has written:

The presence of a genuinely talented composer of international repute, with the psychological advantage, among the singers, musicians and theatrical hangers-on, of being Italian, must have given Handel considerable pause. He was never one easily 'to bear a kinsman near the throne'. . . . The presence of Bononcini on his very doorstep was enough to raise the hackles of the habitually competitive Saxon.<sup>5</sup>

The emerging rivalry between Handel and Bononcini carried over to the shareholders and audience, and not just along lines of musical taste. In Handel's camp were Hanoverian courtiers allied with George I, while Bononcini's supporters included many of England's prominent Roman Catholic and Jacobite aristocrats, who were not on good terms with the royal family. The Prince of Wales, though later a strong supporter of Handel, early

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<sup>4</sup>Melania Bucciarelli, "Giovanni Bononcini," in Landgraf and Vickers, *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, p. 98.

<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Keates, *Handel: The Man & His Music* (London: Pimlico, 2009), p. 114.

on appears to have been in Bononcini's camp, probably to antagonize his father, since he and the king were famously estranged at the time. The two factions were vociferous enough to inspire the poet and satirist John Byrom to write:

Some say, compar'd to Buononcini  
That Mynheer Handel's but a Ninny.  
Others aver, that he to Handel  
Is scarcely fit to hold a Candel:  
Strange that this difference there should be  
'Twi't Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee!<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps recognizing that the rivalry could serve as a powerful marketing device, early in that second season someone suggested that the academy's next new opera should be composed by both men, each taking an act. We do not know if it was one of the shareholders who suggested this compositional showdown or if it was Handel or Bononcini or even both men together. The subject chosen for the opera came from Livy's *History of Rome*—Romans versus Etruscans during the time of the early republic, with some love stories thrown in—which Bononcini had already twice turned into an opera. This version was to be called *Muzio Scevola*—Muzio being a young Roman soldier—with Senesino to sing the lead.

Since Italian opera of the time always had three acts, a third composer had to be found. Filippo Amadei, the Royal Academy's excellent cellist, was given the first act, though everyone knew he would not be real competition for the other two composers. Bononcini

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<sup>6</sup>Quoted in John Ostendorf's program notes for the privately funded recording *Muzio Scevola* (Providence, RI: Newport Classic, 1992), p. 4.

was to compose Act II, with Handel getting Act III. Each act was to be a self-contained mini-opera that, according to the rules, could begin with a full-scale overture and end with a chorus supported, if desired, by trumpets and timpani. While such an arrangement—that is, different composers taking on different acts of a single opera—was not unknown in Italy, it would have been unusual to the London audience and in this particular case would have played off the loyalties of the musico-political factions. Audience members would not actually be voting on the best act—in the manner of today’s *American Idol* or *Dancing with the Stars*—but given Handel’s and Bononcini’s highly partisan admirers, public judgment was inevitable.

On April 2, 1721, the following ad ran in several London papers: “At the King’s Theatre in the Hay-Market, Saturday next, being the 11<sup>th</sup> Day of April, will be perform’d a new opera call’d MUTIUS SCAEVOLA. Tickets will be deliver’d on Friday, at Mr. White’s Chocolate House in St. James Street.”<sup>7</sup> The night of the premiere, I imagine that the men and women in the audience would have been relatively inattentive during Act I, chatting, fanning, and flirting with one another as the Roman officer Orazio—sung by the castrato Matteo Berselli—held off the Etruscan invaders at the Sublician Bridge, the main action of the act. The operagoers would have been on pins and needles for Senesino, but his character, Muzio, does not figure prominently in Act I. They would have had to wait until Act II to be fully satisfied, when Muzio becomes central to the action. To music of Bononcini, Muzio tries but fails to assassinate the Etruscan king; thrusts his hand into the sacred flame in self-imposed penance for this failure; is forgiven by the king for the

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<sup>7</sup>Again, quoted in John Ostendorf’s program notes to the 1992 recording of *Muzio*. Despite the date in the advertisement of April 11 for the premiere, some sources record that the opera actually opened on April 15.



assassination attempt; and loses his betrothed, Clelia, when the king takes her hostage (and falls in love with her himself). Many, many opportunities for Senesino to show off his extravagant talents to the London audience through da capo arias, the main musical feature of Italian opera at the time.

Da capo arias have three sections: an A section in which the character's feelings about someone or something are declared; a B section that shifts to a contrasting feeling, reflected in a different key, tempo, and other musical features; and finally a repeat of the A section, which this time around is highly ornamented to heighten the emotion and showcase the singer's abilities. These often lengthy arias are linked in an opera by recitative, which furthers the action between arias. An opera from this period might also have a few duets, but larger ensembles are unusual except for the chorus that typically ends the work.

Senesino himself was an ally of Bononcini, so we can be sure that the singer did everything possible to show the composer's efforts to advantage. But he would not have been able to resist the vocal opportunities that Handel offered him in Act III, in which—after many obstacles—Muzio gets Clelia back and everyone lives happily ever after, even the Etruscan king, who gives his own daughter, Irene, to Orazio in marriage. In the final chorus, all the characters together sing, “Indeed, Love will seem even more sweet / along with our cherished liberty!”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The English translations of *Muzio* lyrics in this paper are by John Ostendorf in the program notes for the 1992 recording of the opera.

For his act, Handel composed a two-movement overture, eleven da capo arias, two duets, a battle symphony, and a fulsome final chorus; he was the only one of the *Muzio* composers to avail himself of the brass option for the finale. In his recent book on Handel, Jonathan Keates writes, “Everything about Act III of *Muzio Scevola* suggests a determined effort by the composer to establish his supremacy and to leave the audience suitably impressed.”<sup>9</sup>

And the audience *was* impressed: There appears to have been little disagreement that Handel was the winner. Apparently, his first opera for Senesino was perfectly tailored to the singer, though his music for the soprano Margherita Durastanti, who sang Clelia, is just as engaging and possibly even more difficult. Among all the singers with whom Handel worked during his career, his professional relationship with Durastanti was the longest, lasting almost thirty years. They met in Rome in 1707 or 1708, where Handel was honing his skills as a young composer and hunting for patrons, and he wrote the lead in *Agrippina* for her, which premiered in Venice in 1709 and was his first major opera success, leading to invitations from many European venues, including London.

Both Muzio and Clelia have many arias in Handel’s Act III, but only one duet, near the end of the opera when they are finally reunited, though it isn’t exactly a love duet. Clelia is not sure she can trust Muzio again, after his seeming betrayal of her when she was hostage to the Etruscan king. To escape the king earlier in Act III, with whom Muzio appeared to be collaborating, Clelia plunged into the Tiber and made her way by boat to safety in Rome and she is understandably cautious of anything Muzio says at this point.

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<sup>9</sup>Keates, *Handel*, p. 115.

The duet is a perfect aural representation of Clelia's wariness and Muzio's determination to win her back, her doubts barely out of her mouth before he counters with excuses and entreaties, back and forth again and again, the entire exchange repeated several times, as if neither is willing to stop singing and give in. Only after witnessing the happy betrothal of Orazio and Irene does Clelia relent. "Love is rekindled in our hearts," Clelia and Muzio sing in unison (and only once!), and the opera moves quickly to the final chorus after a few chirpy notes from Orazio and Irene.

The applause at the premiere was not just for Handel and his singers, though. The performance was interrupted for an announcement of the birth of a grandson to King George I, who was in attendance. Prince William's birth was applauded loudly and at length. He would grow to be a famous military leader and a great admirer of Handel, who in turn would commemorate the prince's 1746 victory over the Jacobite rebels in the oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus*.

*Muzio* ran for ten performances during that second season of the Royal Academy of Music and was revived for several performances to kick off the third season in November 1722. After that, Handel never performed *Muzio* again, though he did cannibalize it when composing other operas—a common practice at the time. Seven numbers show up in recognizable form in *Admeto*, *Ottone*, *Partenope*, and *Scipione*, all written for the Royal Academy. Hamburg operagoers got to see *Muzio* in its entirety in 1723, produced by Reinhard Keiser, a well-known composer in his own right whom Handel knew

personally and must have greatly admired, given the number of Keiser tunes that show up in Handel's works.

Beyond these productions, *Muzio* seems to have been forgotten by the musical world until the twentieth century and, even with the explosion of interest in Baroque opera over the past couple of decades, there have been few performances. One of these few was a concert performance of selections from Bononcini's Act II and the entirety of Handel's Act III at Merkin Concert Hall in Manhattan in 1992, and it happened to be part of my subscription. Like so many productions of Baroque opera, this one resulted from lots of sleuthing by performers passionate about the repertoire. Handel's act had been published and was easily accessible, but the bass-baritone John Ostendorf and his colleagues had to search hard for the rest of the opera. They found parts of Bononcini's act in a 1722 publication in the U.S. Library of Congress, where it had been miscataloged, but it was at the British Museum that they found a 1750 copy of the complete original score for the opera. From a microfilm supplied by the British Museum emerged the program I saw that night at Merkin and a recording of *Muzio*—the only one available.

In the past twenty years, singers have gained increasing confidence and sophistication in their performances of Baroque opera, but there were some terrific singers involved in this project and, listening to my *Muzio* CD, I am amazed at how fresh the recording still sounds. That night at Merkin, the cast was having an enormous amount of fun, giving us a sense of the competitive vibe the original audience must have felt: Bononcini's music was really good, but Handel knocked our socks off. Since there weren't many

countertenors running around twenty years ago to assume what once had been castrato roles, Muzio was sung by D'Anna Fortunato and Orazio by Erie Mills. Handel himself sometimes had women sing male characters, so he would not have been confused by this casting, and women still often take on these roles, though now they have a lot of competition from the many superb countertenors who are being trained in music schools.<sup>10</sup> Julianne Baird was a clear-voiced Clelia and Jennifer Lane sang Irene, the Etruscan princess in love with Orazio. John Ostendorf, who helmed the project, sang Porsenna, the Etruscan king; in his program notes to the recording of *Muzio*, Ostendorf variously describes Porsenna as “kindly,” “simple,” and “naive”—more Colonel Klink than General Rommel as Muzio convinces him they are allies.

It was as clear to me that night in New York City as it had been at the long-ago premiere in London that Handel was the winner of the *Muzio* battle, but in 1721 the war with Bononcini was not yet over. Soon after his *Muzio* loss, Bononcini had big hits at the Royal Academy with the operas *Crispo* and *Griselda*. *Griselda* had sixteen performances in the spring of 1722 and that summer Bononcini, not Handel, was commissioned to compose the anthem for the Duke of Marlborough's state funeral at Westminster Abbey; the duke, a famed general and statesman, was one of the richest men in England and a supporter of the Royal Academy.

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<sup>10</sup>As explained by Dr. James L. Franklin in his Chicago Literary Club paper from March 1, 2010, “Sing High, Sing Low,” countertenors do not actually sound like castrati did, even though they share the same general range, because of actual physiological differences that allowed the castrati to produce a fuller and more forceful sound.

Bononcini's decline in popularity began soon after the duke's funeral, when Francis Atterbury, the dean of Westminster, was arrested and exiled for his role in a failed plot to assassinate members of the Hanoverian family. Atterbury was part of the circle of English Roman Catholics who objected to Parliament's choice of the Protestant George I to be king of England. This Jacobite circle included many of Bononcini's friends and advocates and, while he was in no way part of the plot, he was not reengaged by the Royal Academy for the 1722–23 season because of the association. In the end, politics was Bononcini's undoing, not music, though in the realm of the Royal Academy, the two could not be separated.

It looked like there might be a rapprochement in the fall of 1723, when Bononcini was hired to open the academy's new season with *Farnace*, but the audience did not take to the opera and it flopped. Handel's triumph over Bononcini was assured later that season with the premiere of *Giulio Cesare*, then as now considered one of his greatest operas.

The arc of Bononcini's career was henceforth downward, though he occasionally produced a new opera and his friends did not desert him, at least not right away. In spring 1724, the Duchess of Marlborough, daughter of the deceased duke, came to Bononcini's rescue and offered him a stipend of £500 a year to compose music and direct performances for her private concerts. This lucrative gig lasted until 1731, when the duchess and Bononcini—both testy and temperamental—argued over additional expenses on his bills.

Around the same time, Bononcini was caught up in a very public plagiarism scandal, when he was found guilty of passing off a minor work by the Venetian Antonio Lotti as his own: It was one thing to borrow an admired tune from another composer and incorporate it into a larger work; it was quite another to lift a piece wholly. Bononcini fled London in 1732, probably still declaring his innocence, and traveled around Europe for several years looking for work. In 1736, he settled in Vienna, where he lived in modest circumstances until his death in 1747 at age seventy-six, almost forgotten by the music-loving public. It was a sorry end for the composer who had once declared to Emperor Joseph I, “There are many sovereign princes and only one Bononcini.”<sup>11</sup>

With Bononcini’s exile from the Royal Academy, Handel dominated as the company composer, though others sometimes contributed to the repertoire over the years. The partisan nature of the London opera crowd needed an outlet, however, and soon found it in the phenomenon known even at the time as the Rival Queens. The soprano Francesca Cuzzoni had been the academy’s prima donna since 1723, but her supremacy was challenged by the arrival of another Italian soprano, Faustina Bordoni, early in 1726. One of Handel’s biographers wrote, “It is hard to imagine what the directors thought they were doing in bringing the two leading Italian prima donnas of the decade on to the Haymarket stage together.”<sup>12</sup> I’m guessing they knew exactly what they were doing: Just as the producers of *Jersey Shore* knew that putting Snooki and Angelina in the same house would result in can’t-miss TV, the directors of the Royal Academy trusted that putting Cuzzoni and Faustina on the same stage would lead to buzz-generating opera.

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<sup>11</sup>Keates, *Handel*, p. 185.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 144–45.

In works like *Alessandro* and *Admeto*, Handel pitted the sopranos against one another in contrasting but usually equal roles and operagoers inevitably chose sides. Lord Hervey wrote a friend, “No Cuzzonist will go to a tavern with a Faustinian; and the ladies of one party have scratched those of the other out of their list of visits.”<sup>13</sup> The rivalry became so heated that, during performances, partisans in the audience would drown out one diva or the other with hisses and catcalls.

The performance of *Astiannatte* on June 6, 1727, has gone down in history, so bad was the behavior of the audience—and in the presence of members of the royal family, no less. The incident was reported widely in pamphlets and newspapers, with some declaring that Cuzzoni and Faustina even descended into onstage hair pulling and diva punching, and it was satirized immediately in a ribald short play that included Handel as a character, too. Several recent scholars contend that the fighting that evening was only among audience members,<sup>14</sup> but it is such fun to imagine the two Italian sopranos grabbing each other’s elaborate powdered wigs and colliding like bumper cars in their wide, paniered dresses.<sup>15</sup>

No amount of bad behavior and good singing could save the Royal Academy, however. Even as the Cuzzoni–Faustina rivalry made headlines, the company was running out of money. Almost all the funds originally pledged by the shareholders in 1719 had been

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>14</sup>Suzana Ograjenšek, “The Rival Queens,” in Landgraf and Vickers, *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, pp. 544–45.

<sup>15</sup>Ironically, *Astiannatte* was composed by Bononcini, one of his few returns to the London stage after being engaged by the Duchess of Marlborough.



spent by 1727, mostly on fees for famous singers and the costs of elaborate productions, and there had been a profit only once, in 1724. Late in 1727, the socialite and music lover Mary Pendarves wrote to her sister:

I doubt operas will survive longer than this winter, they are now at their last gasp; the subscription is expired and nobody will renew it. The directors are always squabbling, and they have so many divisions among themselves that I wonder they have not broken up before; Senesino goes away next winter, and I believe Faustina, so you see harmony is almost out of fashion.<sup>16</sup>

Mrs. Pendarves was right. Bankrupt, the Royal Academy ceased producing opera in spring 1728. A year later, Handel and John Jacob Heidegger, a Swiss opera impresario long based in London, constituted what has come to be known as the Second Academy, but most of the original academy shareholders had pulled out and this business endeavor failed as well. Handel went on to associations with several different companies in London, but Italian opera was never going to be financially sustainable there. He composed some extraordinary operas during the 1730s, including *Orlando*, *Ariodante*, and *Alcina*, but he also began to develop an entirely new genre, the English oratorio, and to incorporate these works into the opera season. *Esther* was performed at the King's Theatre in May 1732 and *Deborah* followed there in March 1733.

By 1741, Handel completely gave up on Italian operas and for the rest of his life—a full eighteen years—never composed or performed another. Instead, almost all of his creative energy went into English oratorios. These compositions, always on sacred or moral

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<sup>16</sup>Keates, *Handel*, p. 161.

themes, were intended to be given as concert performances, but there is so much musical drama in them, nowadays they are often presented fully staged as operas.

By the time of his death in 1759 at age seventy-four, Handel's English oratorios, including his huge hit *Messiah*, had made him a celebrity throughout Britain, way beyond the confines of the opera house. His funeral was attended by three thousand people and he was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Handel died not only with fame, but with a fortune as well. Despite the vicissitudes of producing opera in London, he had begun to build considerable wealth during the years of the Royal Academy, particularly through investment in the South Sea Company.

Having sold his initial South Sea investment before the bubble burst in 1720, probably at a huge profit, he quickly reinvested in 1723 after the government—raise your hand if this sounds familiar—deemed the company too big to fail and restructured it under the guidance of Robert Walpole as first lord of the treasury and chancellor of the exchequer. Handel continued to invest in the South Sea Company over the years and his stocks accounted for much of the value of his estate at his death, estimated at £20,000. We do not know whether Handel had a good financial adviser or simply Warren Buffett-like investment instincts, but there aren't many composers in history who ended up a millionaire through capital gains.

Handel's last will and testament shows that he knew how fortunate he had been, that a life in music does not usually end so well. Along with generous bequests to relatives,

friends, and colleagues, Handel left £1,000—a considerable sum in those days—to the Society for Decayed Musicians, a charity he had strongly supported over the years, particularly through fundraising concerts. In these acts of generosity, did his thoughts ever turn to his one-time rival Giovanni Bononcini? Did he know the circumstances in which Bononcini had died in Vienna, owning little more than some well-worn clothes and a couple of wigs, a spinet and a fiddle bow, a chamber pot and two tin lamps? Handel was indeed the winner, in the opera house and in the stock market, from *Muzio* to the South Sea, on CD as in life.