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Music review: Apollo's Fire and Philippe Jaroussky at Royce Hall

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The French countertenor Philippe Jaroussky joined Apollo's Fire Baroque Orchestra at Royce Hall on Friday for a thrilling UCLA Live program called "Handel and Vivaldi Fireworks." The concert marked Jaroussky's West Coast debut and the orchestra's first Los Angeles appearance.

During a generous program that lasted almost 2 1/2 hours, the concertmaster, Olivier Brault, took time out to repair a broken string, and several of the ensemble's 14 players paused for repeated tunings. It was all an authentic part of the Baroque experience, which included the playing of a very long-necked lute-like instrument called a theorbo.

In the first half, conductor and harpsichordist Jeannette Sorrell, who founded Apollo's Fire in Cleveland in 1992, led an earthy account of the Allegro from Vivaldi's Concerto Grosso in D, after Concerto RV 511, and an affecting reading of his Concerto in G minor for Two Cellos, its touching Largo a highlight.

But the fireworks really ignited whenever Jaroussky took the stage. At 33, he owns a winning stage presence and a pure, radiant countertenor/soprano voice. He sang seven selections in the main program, including a passionate and finely characterized rendition of Orfeo's recitative and aria "Ho perso il caro ben" from Handel's "Il Parnasso in Festa."

Jaroussky's natural phrasing and control in coloratura flourishes were stunning, especially in "Con l'ali di costanza," from Handel's "Ariodante," where, Sorrell told the audience, "joy takes the form of many notes."

After intermission, Jaroussky turned to neglected Vivaldi arias, including "Frà le procelle," from "Tito Manlio." Apollo's Fire gave him spirited support throughout. An enthusiastic audience called the singer and ensemble back for three encores, each exquisitely rendered: Porpora's "Alto Giove" from "Polifemo"; Handel's "Venti, turbini" from "Rinaldo"; and Handel's "Ombra mai fu" from "Xerxes."

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