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Music: concert review

Jaroussky dazzles in arias raised from opera's splendid shipwrecks

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Philippe Jaroussky & Apollo's Fire

At Koerner Hall

In Toronto on Tuesday

A friend was buying tickets over the phone for a Canadian Opera Company performance when the salesperson issued a warning: "You do realize, sir, that this production features two countertenors?"

That was several years ago. If acceptance of the countertenor voice has advanced since then, it's largely because of the advent of really excellent singers in that high male range, so useful in the numerous baroque opera roles written for castrati.

Philippe Jaroussky is a 32-year-old French countertenor who has quickly made a splash in 18th-century music, and also in more recent things: His latest discs include music by Gabriel Fauré, Jules Massenet and Reynaldo Hahn. The only warning that might have been posted at his Toronto debut performance was that encores would be limited to three, and not the dozen or so that his audience seemed to want.

His gifts would be exceptional in any range. He sang with a pure and focused sound, incredible virtuosity, and a kind of lyrical intelligence that brought new depth to even the simplest of melodic lines.

His program, with the Cleveland period-performance ensemble Apollo's Fire, consisted of arias raised from the splendid shipwrecks of mostly obscure *opera seria* by Handel and Vivaldi. The only chestnut in the batch was his final encore: *Ombra mai fu*, from Handel's *Xerxes*, and even this hard-worn number sounded fresh and newly meaningful.

Most of his offerings were more elaborate, from the regal, highly wrought aria *Se potessero i sospir miei* (from Handel's *Imeneo*) to the fearsome virtuoso showpiece *Con l'ali di costanza*, from *Ariodante*. If the fleet precision of Jaroussky's high-velocity tear through this jubilant aria weren't impressive enough, the exquisite final cadenza, on a single drawn-out syllable, was perfection itself.

Vivaldi's 49 operas are much less visible these days than his instrumental music, but his aria *Vedro con mio diletto*, from his 1724 opera *Giustino*, was one of the highlights of an outstanding program. Jaroussky's well-articulated phrasing expanded the aria's melodic amplitude without ever disturbing its effortless forward motion, and his *da capo* variations were both bold and convincing.

Apollo's Fire, which in Cleveland performs as a full baroque orchestra, fielded 13 string players plus music director Jeannette Sorrell, who conducted from a big double-manual French harpsichord – an unusual choice of instrument for this mostly Italian program, but appropriate for Sorrell's tasty solo turn in a French-style prelude by Handel.

The group's flair for drama was perhaps best displayed in a grand rumpus performance of Sorrell's arrangement of *La follia*, from a Vivaldi trio sonata (Op. 1, No. 12). This party piece, played from memory, featured many steep and rapid changes in tone, texture and rhythmic character.

Vivaldi's *Violin Concerto in E-flat major* featured a solo performance by Montreal-born concertmaster Olivier Brault, who after Sorrell herself seemed to personify the group's ethos. Brault, sporting a wide lemon satin ribbon in his long hair, foregrounded gesture and effect above all, often letting the details take care of themselves. It was an entertaining performance by a born showman, even if the work's nimbler sections were sometimes hazily approximate.

The group overwhelmed Jaroussky a little in his stormy first aria, Handel's *Agitato da fiere tempeste* (from *Oreste*), but were good accompaniment partners thereafter. They were particularly adept in Vivaldi's *Se mai senti spirarti sul volto* (from *Catone in Utica*), with its pulsing pizzicato violas.

Koerner Hall wasn't quite full, which seemed reason only to pity vocal fans who were missing one of the most interesting and rewarding recitals of the season. They should have been warned.