

Review: Daniels delivers vibrant Vivaldi, Handel in concert with Philharmonia Baroque

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David Daniels' voice is voluptuous, fleshy as an oyster. It lusciously rides on long streams of breath, making curlicues in the air, or following stepped ornamentations toward release in a single light-filled word -- way up in the countertenor's extraordinarily high range.

Over the next few days, at venues around the Bay Area, Daniels is singing works by Vivaldi and Handel with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, conducted by Nicholas McGegan. You really should hear him. The program's first performance took place Saturday night in Berkeley's First Congregational Church, where Daniels -- a singer with a humble presence -- couldn't help but display his sheer virtuosity.

But before the details, a brief explanation of "countertenor" -- that is, a male singer whose vocal range is equivalent to that of a contralto, mezzo-soprano or even a soprano. In other words, a countertenor is a guy who sings really high, like Smokey Robinson. Three centuries ago, when Vivaldi and Handel were composing, the male falsetto voice was so cherished that boys were castrated in order to ensure that they would continue to sing high-flying solo parts as adults.

Philharmonia Baroque's latest program is built around such works for castrati singers, which today are handled by countertenors. And that brings us back to Daniels: Years ago, he began his conservatory training as a tenor, but he wasn't comfortable in that range and found his release by switching to countertenor.

The move took guts, but it paid off, as today he is probably the most acclaimed countertenor in the

world.

I've already mentioned Daniels' virtuosity, which goes far beyond the technical; it is an emotional virtuosity. Singing Vivaldi's setting of the "Stabat Mater," his voice permeated the text, making the most of the composer's word-painting: Mary as the "weeping soul" and the "fountain of love" at her son's crucifixion.

The words, in Latin, were painted by Daniels in opalescent colors and drawn out through Vivaldi's long ribbons of ornamentation. McGegan led the orchestra and soloist in a performance that was exquisitely sad and appropriately restrained.

A few times, Daniels' descents to the basement of his range weren't rock-solid. That problem vanished after intermission, when he sang three arias by Handel.

The first was Insight's aria "Crede, l'uom ch'egli riposi" ("Mortals think that Time is sleeping") from the oratorio "Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno" ("The Triumph of Time and Truth"). This performance was recklessly precise -- and passionately restrained.

"Perfido! di a quell'empio tiranno" ("Deceitful one, say to the lawless tyrant") arrived in rushing waves of ornamentation; Daniels steadied himself, pressing his left hand into his left thigh. This aria is from "Radamisto," the first opera composed by Handel for London's Royal Academy of Music, which he retailored to suit the talents of the legendary castrato Senesino (Francesco Bernardi).

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Daniels and the orchestra lifted the drama further with an aria from "Agrippina": "Otton, qual portentoso fulmine... Voi che udite il mio lamento" (Ottone, what are these portentous lightnings?... You who hear my lament.") That's quite a title. It's enough to know that this richly hued lamentation was heart piercing and -- oddly, but this happens in the Baroque -- glowing with ultimate peace.

McGegan brought Daniels back for an encore -- "Qual nave smarrita," more loveliness from "Radamisto" -- and then the audience sent the singer away with foot stomping and cheers.

The program had begun nearly two hours earlier with Telemann's Concerto for Three Horns and Violin in D major. Violin soloist (and concertmaster) Carla Moore performed beautifully, the horns less so.

There was more Telemann to end the program, his Suite in F major ("Alster Overture"), a curiosity in which the composer mimics the "ribbets" of frogs and the wrong notes of country bands. Coming after Daniels' knockout performance, it felt trivial, an unneeded extension to a memorable night.

PHILHARMONIA BAROQUE

Countertenor David Daniels sings Handel arias and Vivaldi's "Stabat Mater"; music by Telemann

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Jan. 16 at Berkeley's First Congregational Church, 8 p.m. Jan. 18 at the Atherton Center for the Performing Arts, 8 p.m.

Jan. 21 at the Herbst Theatre in San Francisco

TICKETS: \$30-\$90, 415-392-4400, www.cityboxoffice.com.

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