

DEREK LEE RAGIN

COUNTERTENOR

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By **Rotem Gilbert** April 10, 2005

Sunday saw the period-instrument sextet Rebel, joined by countertenor Derek Lee Ragin, presenting a program titled "An Angel's Voice: The Legend of Farinelli" at Dinkelspiel Auditorium, under the auspices of Stanford Lively Arts. The program focused on arias once sung by the most famous castrato of the eighteenth century, Carlo Broschi, who went by the stage name of Farinelli. Not far from popcorn, horses, booths, and balloons, at that; Rebel's concert was a highlight of Stanford's Community Day.

The program alternated between instrumental pieces originally inserted into operas and well-known arias, such as "Cara sposa" (from Handel's *Rinaldo*), Vivaldi's "Cessate, omai cessate," and some lesser-known arias by Johann Adolf Hasse, Nicola Porpora, and Riccardo Broschi, who happened to be Farinelli's brother.

Rebel consists of director/violin players Jörg-Michael Schwartz and Karen Marie Marmer, Peter Bucknell on viola, John Moran on violoncello, Anne Trout on double bass, and Dongsok Shin on harpsichord. One of their strengths lies in their functioning as an intense small orchestra, playing one on a part. This arrangement gives them all the flexibility to range from intimate chamber colors to a grander, more orchestral sound, a switch they make with ease. The doubling of the bass and cello makes all the difference. Rebel plays with sincerity, conviction, and unrelenting determination.

The program opened with an Overture and Suite from Handel's *Alcina* (1735), a typical but not outstanding Baroque suite. It began with ornate parallel motives in the violins that didn't sound like they were easy to play together. In the Sarabande, lovely echoes were created by the bass dropping out in softer moments. The Musette benefited from similar treatment, but could have been a bit less stiff to capture the piper's lilt. An easier-going Minuet followed, and the suite was finished off with a nice brisk Gavotte/Minuet that sounded like the ensemble was starting to relax and enjoy itself.

Countertenor Derek Lee Ragin made his entrance with Antonio Vivaldi's "Cessate, omai cessate," an aria with an impressively wide range and dramatic accompaniment of strings playing pizzicato, creating the sounds of waves on the word "morire." A communicative singer, Ragin brings great stage presence and clear diction. Unfortunately, because there were no translations to the aria texts, the audience was left to guess the stories he was so beautifully expressing. I caught the intensity of "vendetta" and "morire potro" in the end of the aria with huge vocal leaps, illustrating Ragin's virtuosity and that of the legendary Farinelli. Ragin exchanged between a high soprano timbre and a

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manly boom of chesty depth. He captured that paradox of the castrati, who, despite their soprano range, were cast in masculine, heroic roles.

"Cara sposa" was a definite crowd-pleaser that elicited a big sigh when it ended. Rebel played as sensitively as a vocal choir. The aria opens with solo violin, adding one instrument at a time. Harpsichordist Dongsok Shin filled the sonority with beautiful open, rolling chords that supported the words "Cara sposa, dove sei, ritorna ai pianti miei, ritorna". Even considering the lack of translation, the crowd understood Ragin's expressive interpretation and passion on the words "ritorna" (return), and "dove sei" (where are you). He found us, and brought us along.

The first half ended with a virtuosic Concerto in A minor by Giuseppe Torelli, in which the ensemble changed bows and shifted to a more penetrating sound. The opening Presto was bright and tight, with a fast exchange of motives between the players that leaped right into a dramatic Adagio and brilliant Allegro.

The second half opened with my personal favorite of the program, a Fuga and Grave in G minor by Hasse. Although an instrumental piece, it is written like an *aria da capo*, in which the Fuga returns in its entirety after a dramatic Grave with a big flourish of a cadence. Another public favorite was Hasse's aria "Generoso risvegliati o core," from his 1731 opera *Cleofide*. Such a challenging range of leaps from highest to lowest extremes seemed effortless for Ragin. Appropriately to the title, he generously gave the crowd everything he had.

On Vivaldi's "Concerto alla Rustica" in G major, Rebel gave an excellent performance, rolling up their sleeves to dig into the rustic nature of the piece, with peasant-like themes and bagpipe drones in the last movement. The continuo section of Moran, Trout and Shin really enjoyed themselves, playing as one. Throughout the program they were as engaging to watch as they were to hear, and really blossomed in the Vivaldi. The violinists, who had been a bit more controlled, finally threw off their restraint.

The program ended with a slow, rich aria from Nicola Porpora's *Polifemo* that returned the show full circle back into intimacy. And what a flashy ending with "Rompo i lacci" from Handel's *Flavio*. I really wish I had known the words and the story, but if anyone can communicate the drama, it's Derek Lee Ragin, draped in bright instrumental clothing.

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