

DEREK LEE RAGIN

COUNTERTENOR

THE PLAIN DEALER

Countertenor's angelic voice meets demands of baroque music

by WILMA SALISBURY Friday, April 22, 2005

Renowned countertenor Derek Lee Ragin has returned to Northeast Ohio for several performances since graduating from Oberlin College 25 years ago. But his recital with the baroque ensemble Rebel Wednesday night at the Cleveland Museum of Art held special meaning for him.

"It's a homecoming," he told the audience, which included former teachers, beloved patroness Ursula Stechow and participants from a morning master class.

The program "An Angel's Voice; The Legend of Farinelli," featured music associated with the phenomenal 18th-century Italian castrato. While no contemporary countertenor commands the range and power of a castrated singer, Ragin has the technique to meet the virtuosic demands of baroque opera, and his voice was heard on the soundtrack for Gerard Corbiau's 1994 movie, "Farinelli: Il Castrato."

Singing with warm tone and fast vibrato, Ragin was at his best spinning out the long, sustained melodies of "Cara Sposa" from Handel's "Rinaldo," and a brief aria by Farinelli's brother, Riccardo Broschi. A communicative artist who performed everything from memory, he also sang showy pieces expressively. But his low notes did not always cut through the sonorities of the accompanying strings.

The six-member ensemble, which is based in New York City, plays 18th-century European music with 21st-century American energy. Phrasing is brusque. Rhythms are vigorous.

The strings – violinists-directors Jörg-Michael Schwarz and Karen Marie Marmer, violist Peter Bucknell, cellist John Moran and bassist Anne Trout – dug into a Torelli concerto with the zest of old-time fiddlers at a barn dance, and they pushed the dynamics in a large-scale fugue by Johann Adolf Hasse. Not everything was played as loud as possible on period instruments, however. The musicians shaped gentle echos in a suite from Handel's "Alcina" and the upper strings used different bows for the quieter vocal music. Dongsok Shin played the museum's Chinnery harpsichord, an Italian-style instrument well-suited to the repertoire.

Most of the music was unfamiliar. But Ragin and the ensemble added a famous encore, the Largo from Handel's opera "Serse". The concert brought the 25th season of the museum's Gala Series to a satisfying conclusion.

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