

DEREK LEE RAGIN

countertenor

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MUSIC

Memorable baroque concert capped by singing of a spiritual

WILMA SALISBURY
Plain Dealer Music Critic

The solo singing of a spiritual is a strange way to end a concert of baroque music. But that's what countertenor Derek Lee Ragin did in his extraordinary performance with members of Apollo's Fire, the Cleveland Baroque Orchestra, Saturday night at St. Paul's Church in Cleveland Heights.

At the urging of music director Jeannette Sorrell, Ragin sang as an encore, "I'm Grateful." His heartfelt interpretation of the prayerlike spiritual was influenced by childhood memories of a recording by the great Mahalia Jackson. The sublime performance revealed another dimension of Ragin's unique voice and artistry.

A graduate of Oberlin College and one of today's foremost countertenors, the gifted guest artist had shown his affinity for baroque oratorio in the Apollo's Fire performance of Handel's "Messiah" last week at Severance Hall. In the Saturday night recital, he lavished his talent on intimate songs by Purcell and solo cantatas by Handel.

Whether singing in English or Italian, Ragin gave each vowel a tone color as distinctive as individual stops on a baroque pipe organ. The "oo" sound was a marvel of flutey head resonance. Other vowels resembled a diapason with tremolo. In lower notes, Ragin sounded like a male tenor. Above middle C, his voice took on the pathos of a castrato.



ERICH HARTMANN/MAGNUM

Derek Lee Ragin played his vocal cords like a pipe organ in music by Purcell and Handel.

The first part of the program, a mini song recital with instrumental interpolations, featured some of Purcell's greatest hits: "Fairest Isle," "An Evening Hymn," "Music for a While" and "Sweeter Than Roses." Accompaniments to the beautiful singing were gently played by lutenist Richard Stone, cellist Rene Schiffer and harpsichordist Sorrell.

Between the songs, Stone performed Robert De Visse's "*Les Sylvains de Mons. Couperin*" on the velvety-sounding strings of the bass lute. Sorrell took the spotlight in J.K. Froberger's "*Lamentation pour sa Majeste Ferdinand III*," a work of extreme chromaticism that she played in memory of the victims of Sept. 11, and the war in Afghanistan. Violinist Cynthia Roberts contributed a darkly expressive interpretation of "The Annunciation" from Heinrich Biber's Mystery Sonatas.

After intermission, the repertoire focused on music by Handel plus an atypical sonata by Vivaldi. In Handel's solo cantatas,

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Ragin personified lovestruck characters, one enraged by the effects of Cupid's arrow, the other questioning a lover's sincerity. In alternation with the cantatas, Schiffer gave a dramatic performance of Vivaldi's Cello Sonata No. 5 in E minor, and he joined violinist Roberts as an equal partner in Handel's Sonata in D major, Op. 1, No. 13, with Sorrell filling in the harmonies at the harpsichord.

The printed program ended with "*Obra mai fu*," better known as the famous Largo from Handel's opera "Serse." Although text

and translation were provided for the companion recitative, Ragin did not sing it. Still, the translation was useful since it explained that the reference to *vegetabile cara* (dear vegetable) in the aria was previously defined as *platano amato* (beloved plane-tree) in the recitative. It was a delicious and soothing conclusion to a memorable recital.

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