

Boys to Men: “Farinelli & Friends”, Theater an der Wien

By Ana Tajder

What you are about to read is not exactly a concert review. It's more like a sharing of new knowledge, knowledge inspired by a concert and learned in something close to astonishment. For once, an evening was not about freakiness or alienation, but about embracing humanity in all its splendour.

This year, from 14-23 October, Theater an der Wien hosted their first *Barocke Festtage*, a festival which promises to bring a bit of baroque *joie de vivre* to Vienna, a city that only recently began showing an interest in baroque music. Five operas and five concerts have been carefully chosen to offer a whole range of musical forays into the baroque: from joyful intermezzi to serious sacral music and opera seria. And what can be a better location for such a festival than Vienna's original baroque opera house? It is a pity that the title of the evening “Farinelli & Friends” sounded, well – a bit cheap, because under this not very promising title, many musical jewels were hidden: Max Emanuel Cencic, a Croatian counter tenor who had already starred in many renowned opera houses, I Virtuosi Delle Muse, an award winning ensemble specialized in French and German music of 17th and 18th century, and compositions of geniuses of baroque music including Vivaldi and Händl.

Visually, the evening was a kaleidoscope of centuries – the theatre's original baroque interior rich in golden plastering

and red velvet hosted a strange and confusing stage design representing a copy of Musikverein's 19th century interior. The mix of those two eras was topped by a chic audience, much younger than normally seen in Vienna's classic concert. It all resulted in a very fresh feeling to a usually dusty classical evening. And although this fantastic performance deserved a better name, it did get what it deserved even more: attention of a full theatre and standing ovations.

The program was comprised of Farinelli's favorite arias, joyful, dramatic, entertaining and serious arias that had filled his concerts. Farinelli, the most famous castrato of 18th century, was rediscovered through the 1994 movie *Farinelli*, directed by the Belgian director Gérard Corbiau. Because a castrato voice like Farinelli's does not exist today, the creators of the movie used digital technology to fuse soprano and countertenor voices, to achieve a similar quality. Still, it is interesting to learn that castratos were not, like many will believe, men who could simply sing as high as women.

Their skills were more complicated and astonishing; their voices crossed physical borders and in the same time alchemically combined manly, womanly and childish characteristics.

Reports from the time said that Farinelli's vocal range was three octaves and that he was able to sing any pitch effortlessly in both pianissimo and fortissimo. He could sing for five minutes without catching breath and his coloraturas were so lively that orchestras were often not able to keep up and would just set down their instruments to listen to Farinelli in awe.

There must have truly been something really magical in that voice, one that was “clear like bells, strong with endlessly fluid coloraturas.” Farinelli was adored by kings, courts and whole nations: “Other castrati were loved. This one was worshiped. One God, one Farinelli”

In 18th century the public and aristocratic adoration of castrati was at its peak. Many poor families had their boys castrated in hopes of securing them a life of fame and fortune – in spite of high death rates from the procedure. It has been estimated that upwards of 4000 boys were castrated annually in the service of art. Considering that 18th century population of Europe was five times smaller, this number could be translated into 20,000 annually in present time. The castration normally took place before puberty or in its early stage in order to prevent a boy's voice box being transformed by the normal developments during puberty. This resulted in keeping the vocal range of a child and the voice developing into adulthood in a unique way. As the castrato grew, his lack of testosterone resulted in his limbs growing unusually long, as did the bones of his rib cage. This, combined with intensive training, gave him exceptional lung-power and breath-capacity. All of this capacity was operating through small, child-sized vocal cords, resulting in extraordinarily flexible voices, very different from the adult female voice, or higher vocal ranges of the adult male. Castrati grew both more slowly and for longer, some still growing into their forties. This means that while very frail at an early age, they were eventually taller than average, with arms and legs too long. Many became obese, with feminine curves. In short, castrati were made into freaks. This is a very

different image from what we have seen in the “Farinelli” movie which presented us the famous castrato as a man of angelic beauty.

By the closing years of the 19th century, castration was widely forbidden, and put to a final official end on Nov. 22 1903, by Pope Pius X, instructing the employment of boys whenever high voices were needed. Alessandro Moreschi, who died in 1922, was the last known castrato, and the only one who ever made recordings.

The fact that Max Cencic is a handsome, healthy young man who happens to have an extraordinary voice turned “Farinelli and Friends” into a fantastic experience, and a valuable oasis in today’s world overfilled with freaky appearances. From skeleton-like models on runways, over monstrous muscles on film, to sportsmen defying laws of nature, we are more than ever surrounded with “not natural”. This concert proved that classical music can offer a desperately needed escape back into humanism – because although he is singing Farinelli’s favorite arias, today, this boy is a man. No freakiness needed.