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MUSIC REVIEW

‘Fireworks’ lofted by a French countertenor

By **Jeremy Eichler** | GLOBE STAFF
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“Easily one of the most enjoyable concerts of the season.”

As male singers who make their home in the musical stratosphere, countertenors are already a rarefied bunch, but Philippe Jaroussky is something of a wild orchid among them. His voice combines a limpid purity of timbre, a weightless agility, and an elegant control of nuance that allows him to shade a single phrase with a multitude of colors.

Local audiences had their first chance to hear Jaroussky this summer, when he performed the role of Anfiene in the Boston Early Music Festival’s production of Steffani’s

“Niobe.” And fortunately, BEMF lured the French countertenor back to town Saturday night as part of his tour with the Cleveland-based Baroque band known as Apollo’s Fire, directed from the harpsichord by Jeannette



Philippe Jaroussky sang Saturday with Cleveland-based Apollo’s Fire.

Sorrell. The program at Emmanuel Church - titled "Handel and Vivaldi Fireworks" - showcased Jaroussky in the Baroque repertoire for which he is best known and was easily one of the most enjoyable concerts of the season.

The Handelian fireworks were mostly confined to the first half, with the brightest displays lofted by way of "Agitato da fiere tempeste" from "Oreste" and "Con l'ali di costanza" from "Ariodante." Here Jaroussky showed off his gift for gymnastically nimble, featherweight coloratura that he somehow managed to keep tethered to the emotional narrative of the music at hand, never allowing the florid runs to feel merely like disconnected vocal preening. Between the two selections, "Ho perso il caro ben" from "Parnasso in Festa" became a study in soulful grief limned with delicate orchestral lines and Jaroussky's flute-like high notes. And "Se potessero i sospir miei" from "Imeneo" featured some ultra-refined pianissimo passagework.

Among the Vivaldi excerpts on the second half, "Se mai senti spirarti sul volto" from "Catone in Utica" received a remarkably intimate performance, as did the moving "Vedrò con mio diletto" from "Giustino." Part of the evening's success also flowed from the sense of artistic collaboration, as Apollo's Fire here was far more than a backup band. The group without Jaroussky played two Vivaldi concertos on the first half and later pulled out Sorrell's arrangement of Vivaldi's "La Follia" trio sonata, uncorking it like a Baroque party piece, dashed off from memory. These excellent young musicians take a highly gestural approach to phrasing and bring across their music with an exuberant physicality, like wind through a forest.

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The artists were also generous with encores, offering "Alto Giove" from Porpora's "Polifemo" and the agitated "Venti, turbini" from Handel's "Rinaldo." Their final selection drew a veil of serenity over the evening. It was the tenderly sublime "Ombra mai fu," from Handel's "Xerxes."

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