



the DIVINE

PHILIPPE JAROUSSKY

Hitting the high notes

by JACQUES BOTHA

In the 17th and 18th century it was not uncommon to castrate young boys to retain their musical voices. These boys were called “castrati” (singular castrato) or the less derogatory term “musici” was also used. By performing the procedure before puberty, it resulted in the boy's larynx not being transformed and thus retaining the vocal range of prepubescence. Luckily this type of castration was made illegal in Italy in 1870.

As the musico grew, their limbs typically would grow unusually long; including the rib bones. This resulted along with intensive training, to give the musico amazing lung power and breath capacity. Their voices were very different to the adult female voice and much higher than the normal uncastrated adult male. The most famous musico had to be Carlo Broschi who used the stage name Farinelli and whose life was depicted in a movie by the same title in 1994.

Very seldom one would find artists that can in some way emulate the voice of the musico. One such artist who has come close to doing this successfully is Philippe Jaroussky. Firstly, he is still very much intact and considers himself a countertenor who achieves the high pitch through vocal techniques, more specifically singing in a “head voice.” This is very similar to the way a female soprano would.

Jaroussky grew up as an only child of an upper-middle class family in the Parisian suburbs. His Russian surname originates from his grandfather who fled the Bolshevik Revolution. He grew up in a very serious and professional environment. At age eleven he started playing the violin with such passion that he ended up winning first prize at the Conservatory of Versailles, but he was told that he had started too late to make a career out of it. The same happened with piano.

But, at age eighteen, he went to a Baroque concert where Fabrice di Falco was performing. Fabrice, a soprano from Martinique, has a strange voice that oscillates between baritone and soprano. Philippe recalls that he was shocked by the mismatch of Fabrice's physique versus his high crystalline voice. In an interview with the *New York Times* he said that he remembered that “He had this beautifully androgynous face, and a voice like Barbara Hendricks. As soon as I heard him, I had the strangest feeling that I could do that, too. I knew right away that this was what I wanted to do with my life.”

Suddenly things started changing. Where he was told all his life that he had started too late, people now started saying that he was only eighteen and that he shouldn't rush anything! He contacted Di Falco's voice coach, Nicole Fallien, who is still Philippe's teacher, and whom he fondly describes as his second mother. Fallien thought initially that Philippe had a nice voice but way too tiny. Philippe, however, was adamant that he wanted to sing in his head voice. Fallien was not convinced that this tiny voice would be able to do it, yet Jaroussky proved her wrong.

He was enrolled into a summer course by the French counter tenor Gerard Lesne and he was invited to sing in the Scarlatti oratorio *Sedecia*. He received rave reviews and his voice was described as “liquid” and “ethereal.” Then he was asked by a French conductor specialising in Baroque music to do a Monteverdi cycle. From there it just continued to grow... People started getting more and more excited about this adult man who sang like a young choirboy in roles that are often only written for, and sung by, castrato and female mezzo-sopranos.

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In the same interview with the *New York Times*, Jaroussky recognises that this type of vocal performance is often seen as an oddity. “It's true that there is something potentially ridiculous about this voice coming out of a man's body. People talk about the countertenor being a third sex, or something quasi female, but I think for me it's more a way of staying a child.” Since his rise to fame, Philippe has recorded twenty albums. The most memorable has to be his 2009 recording of French melodies, called *Opium* and *La Dolce Fiamma*, a collection of forgotten arias for castrato voice written by J.C. Bach.

In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Jaroussky says that he doesn't believe one had to suffer in life to have the best artistry. He believes that the castrati wore their drama in their voices. “The tragedy was that they couldn't totally be men and that's there in the voice.”

Although there was much speculation about his sexuality initially, Philippe responded quite honestly and directly when he was confronted during an interview with a German magazine that he is indeed a gay man with no issues sharing that fact. Although he did not want to talk much about his sexuality in the beginning of his career, it was not a case of shame, but rather that he did not want people to associate his voice with his sexuality. On the contrary, he feels uncomfortable recognising people such as Ricky Martin as gay role models due to the fact that they were in the closet for such a long time.

Jaroussky has been in a relationship for more than ten years. He does not attribute his gay fan base to the fact that he is gay himself, but rather to the fact that the classical art has such significant gay support. It is about the classical culture and not about the singer's orientation. This hasn't stopped him from doing his bit for charities though. Philippe has been involved with the IRIS association, that helps patients with primary immune-deficiencies, as well as LINK that supports the rapid AIDS screening activities carried out by the AIDES association.

So what's next? Well, Philippe has talked openly about his interest to do some classic French songs by artists such as Brel and Piaf, but also possibly venturing into electronic music. With artists such as Adam Lopez easily crossing over into the mainstream arena with head voices, Philippe has the opportunity to really extract the best of both worlds.

