

Angelic presence

STEVE DOW meets the Frenchman who has put the substance back into singing castrati.

At a recent concert in Paris, the countertenor Philippe Jaroussky was introduced as "Le divin, angélique Philippe" to the adoring crowds' scream of approval. Considering his neatly coiffed hair, rosebud lips and choirboy countenance alone, the description is apt but the ethereal voice – now that is loan from the heavens.

Somewhere along the line, Jaroussky's virtuosic range from sotto voce to soaring "up by the ozone layer at the speed of sound", as one critic put it, became sexy. The 31-year-old's newest album, *La Dolce Flamma*, a collection of "forgotten" 18th century arias for castrato voice penned by Johann Christian Bach – eleventh and youngest son of Johann Sebastian Bach – has gone gold in France, while Jaroussky is also big in Japan.

His record company EMI/Virgin Classics has given him the full pop poster boy styling workhorse, "which would hardly be sensational in today's image-savvy classical arena were Jaroussky a hot tenor," noted a profile on the star late last year in London's *The Times*. "But he's not. He's a countertenor: crassly put, a man who sings like a woman."

Fresh from his New York recital debut and preparing for concert appearances with the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra in Sydney and Melbourne, Jaroussky says in his everyday masculine, charmingly French-accented English that he has mixed feelings about the focus on his handsome looks. "Of course, if you want to do a CD cover you want to be good looking," he laughs.

"Of course, I'm marketed but it's amazing sometimes people criticise this but they won't criticise the marketing of pop music... Plus ça change: the baroque era's great castrati such as Farinelli and Sensino – eunuch singers castrated before adolescence to maintain their high voices – were the pop superstars of their time. "Like Madonna and Bono," says Australian Brandenburg Orchestra artistic director Paul Dyer, "they were celebrities with mass appeal whose voices and personalities entertained and fascinated their generation."

But not even the Material Girl and the U2 Frenchman were billed as a YouTube hit with more than a million views for a 2007 Vivaldi aria performance. Jaroussky insists he has found the right balance between marketing and musical quality. "I am totally free about what I am recording. I'm not obliged to sing famous arias – I'm choosing to sing what I want to sing."

Last year Jaroussky decided to take matters higher: every day for months, he practised singing J.C. Bach's neglected arias written for the castrati, testing his highest reach as a countertenor, before finally recording them. The castrati "were like super-singers and had quite superhuman voices," he marvels. "It was the most difficult CD to record; there are so many long phrases," – especially in the 13-minute title track, penned in 1765, "but I like this type of challenge."

It has been written that Jaroussky sings high because of his history playing high notes on a violin as a teenager – as though he is aiming to use his voice to imitate the instrument – or more generally that countertenors are trying to emulate female voices.

Jaroussky however observes countertenors

tend to be boyish in the way they relate to the world and he may have subconsciously chosen the high register "because I wanted to stay a child – maybe when I am singing in concert it's a way to keep contact with my childhood, with something pure".

The singer lives in Paris but was born in February 1978 to a middle class family in Maisons-Laffitte, a housing development built around a 17th century chateau about 18 kilometres north-west of the city centre.

His father Daniel is a commercial agent and his mother Jacqueline worked on lighting design, while his brother Didier, who is 10 years older, sells computers. None of the family was musical, nor did they have a special interest in attending concerts, although Jacqueline adored Maria Callas records. As a child, Jaroussky would draw and paint. Cough masterpieces. His parents thought he would become a painter.

French children take an hour's music lesson a week in school and at 11 Jaroussky took up the violin, followed at age 15 by piano. He says he was a good musician, though various adults around him told him he had started playing at too late an age to be great.

"I was quite unhappy with instruments because everybody was saying to me, 'at the time I was too old, you know'," he says. "Finally when I started to sing everybody was saying to me, 'Oh, you're very young!'"

Everyone seems to be a critic in France but it never dismayed Jaroussky's ambition. One day, aged 18, he happened upon a baroque concert in a church, where the Martinique-born countertenor Fabrice d'Alco, then 22, was performing arias.

Jaroussky was struck by the discrepancy between how d'Alco looked physically and the clarity of his singing. "That was a shock to hear the beauty of the voice and the music," he says. "I could see myself in his place," he thought. "My God, I want to do this with my life. I want to sing like this."

His parents were supportive and he received a diploma at the Conservatoire de Paris. "My parents understood quickly that if I couldn't try to do music I wouldn't be happy."

By 20 he was giving concerts but it would take several years before he would become comfortable – his voice was too small initially, his technique was lacking and only the maturity the years would bring would allow him to be truly comfortable in emotion to an audience. "It's a problem for so many singers – when you start to sing on stage you think you have so many things to prove, no?"

"It takes years to realise people aren't going to concerts to hear artists who want to prove something... On stage, not hiding behind an instrument, he felt 'completely naked' and he had to learn to relax. Now, having made more than 20 recordings either solo, with his own ensemble Artasete or with Ensemble Matheus – conducted by French violinist Jean-Christophe Spinosi, Jaroussky received the 2007 Best French lyrical artist prize, and in 2008 the Germans awarded him an Echo Klassik award for best singer.

Remarkably little of his personal life has been reported, inevitably leading to speculation in the blogosphere and fan sites, such as that Spinosi is also his life partner. "Absolutely not!" laughs Jaroussky. "Jean-

Christophe is the father of six children. I think people thought this because of course we have a huge complexly musical life and we did so many concerts together."

As YouTube subscriber "GrifEaLkely70" asks in the more than 1200 comments under Jaroussky's video: "Indeed, how is it that some people listen to that voice and their only thought is, 'is he gay?'"

Point taken, but actually, Jaroussky does have a male partner, who is "not in music; but he's supporting me of course, a lot".

He is riding the crest of classic crossover fame right now, but how long can one stay a countertenor?

"I can live without singing, but I can't live without music," he says.

"I've seen some older singers who find it very difficult to stop and I understand that because you have dedicated your life to it." He'll like to give master classes to other singers and continue conducting ensembles. "I don't imagine me singing at 60 years old."

One day, when he gets time, he might take up painting again. "This year I started to play the violin again and it was a disaster," he laughs.

When he performs in Sydney and Melbourne with the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra – with whom he first performed in 2007 – Jaroussky will sing some arias of Handel and Vivaldi that are "so strong, such direct music".

He recently gave an interview to the French newspaper *L'Express* in which he seemed to say he was "obsessed" with his

own death and that singing helps him find answers to this anxiety. Is this a fair translation? "Not obsessed in the sense that I'm always thinking about it," he says. "But when you are travelling, you think about these things."

"I like very much to do CDs because I know the CD will survive me. I think you become an artist because you want to fight with your own death, you know? Of course that's impossible, but it's not something sad."

"I think it's a very optimistic energy... you can really enjoy each moment."

The Australian Brandenburg Orchestra's Vivaldi Olympia series featuring Philippe Jaroussky plays at City Recital Hall, Angel Place on February 19, 20, 24, 26 and 27. See www.brandenburg.com.au or phone (02) 8256 2222 or (02) 9328 7581



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Choirboy countenance... Philippe Jaroussky, 31, who's appearing with the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra in Sydney and Melbourne this month.