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# OPERA NEWS

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**Andreas Scholl**

BY ADAM WASSERMAN

*Brave Old World: The Infinite Variety of Baroque Opera*

Countertenor

**Andreas Scholl's** thrilling  
musicianship rivals that of any singer,  
regardless of fach.

Adam Wasserman reports.



# Andreas in Excelsis

When Andreas Scholl took the stage of London's Royal Albert Hall on the Last Night of the Proms in 2005, he not only became the first countertenor to perform at the popular annual event, but given the estimated TV, radio and Internet audience of nearly 400 million people, he was also the first countertenor to sing before such an enormous crowd. By the time he had finished a trio of Handel arias with the BBC Symphony Orchestra during the program's first half, any lingering questions about the expressive capacities or popular appeal of a countertenor voice seemed irrelevant. Coming back later to ice the cake with a folk song and a Purcell air accompanied by guitarist John Williams, Scholl stole the show, in the process bringing a pristine Baroque aesthetic to an evening that has historically been devoted to brassy, populist fare. "Heaven knows what [inaugural Proms conductor] Sir Henry Wood would have said," wrote one columnist from the *London Times*, "had he imagined that the biggest cheers at the Last Night of his Proms would go not to his sturdily patriotic *Fantasia on British Sea Songs* but to a young German chap, warbling in falsetto."

Three hundred years after the opera debut of the castrato Senesino in Ruggieri's *Armida Abbandonata* — and a quarter-century after the release of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* — the prospect of a man singing in a treble voice has lost none of its potential to shock and awe unsuspecting listeners. For Scholl, who has emerged as one of the most potent and thrilling countertenors of the twenty-first century, the visceral effect of his voice and the seeming contradictions that he embodies (he is straight; has an ex-wife and daughter; is a self-described "gadget freak" who's built his own home recording studio; and is something of an outdoorsman) are not beyond explanation. While other countertenors insouciantly count their voices as one more reason for opera audiences to suspend their disbelief, Scholl betrays a fastidious self-awareness and sense of purpose that borders on the cerebral. He's the type that would rather converse about the rush of adrenaline he gets from hearing the Sanctus of Bach's B-minor Mass than kvetch about the challenges of a career that keeps him constantly traveling. Speaking with him at his home in Basel in late April, the day after he's returned from a pair of Copenhagen recitals, one gets the sense that Scholl is delivering a discourse that's been honed to perfection over many recitations.

"I've never had an identity crisis because I am a countertenor. I think that mainly if you have a healthy self-confidence you can be one — it doesn't express



In concert at the Last Night of the Proms, 2005

PHOTOGRAPHED IN BASEL, SWITZERLAND BY JOHANNES IFKOVITS  
at the Münster von Basel  
Grooming by Evelyn Rillé

much about whether you are gay or hetero, or whether you can be dramatic on an opera stage. Our norms, our roots of society associate certain kinds of standardized behavior for men and women. So if there is someone who does not do what we expect of him, that creates ... a moment of surprise," Scholl says in a precise, placid speaking voice that sits comfortably in the baritone range. He goes on to cite French author Dominique Fernandez's novel *Porporino, ou les Mystères de Naples* as something of a credo and elaborates on the power the castrato instrument had to articulate the heroics of opera seria. "These kinds of rules of what we *should* do mean that we constantly exclude a part of our humanity. Because [the castrato] transcended the limitations of men and women, he was a [total] human being. They went onstage and they were supernatural, they were superheroes — because they were human beings. They transcended this silly concept that the hero needs to belt high Cs or give us the cliché of a baritone or bass. It is about human feelings — disappointment, hate, anger, love — that are not limited to just men or women. The fascination with countertenors today, and back then the fascination with *castrati*, is that they cross that threshold."

To my ear, Scholl's voice defies the inevitable comparisons to castratos by standing apart from the current pack of countertenors, evincing more masculinity and musicality than many of his contemporaries. Scholl describes his voice, which sits firmly in the alto register and tops out at an E or F, as "the continuation" of his boy soprano and says it is "definitely a head voice." (Many countertenors have taken semantic, if not technical, offense with the term "falsetto"; only a few — most notably Russell Oberlin, one of the first countertenors to emerge in the '50s and '60s — qualify as actual haute-contres, whose chest voice lies naturally in a treble range.)

Fortuitously, any piece of music written for Senesino sits perfectly for Scholl's voice; he has recorded a Decca album of arias associated with the famed castrato. While the uppermost extension of Scholl's instrument seems capable of producing floated notes of a hieratic purity, one can also hear a particularly satisfying resonance in its middle and lower reaches, a kind of laryngeal harmonic that sounds more like a cornet than a flute. Listen to his recording of Cesare's "Al lampo dell'armi," or "But who may abide the day of His coming?" on the William Christie-conducted *Messiah*, for a sense of the thrilling precision and muscle behind his coloratura technique. What's most obvious to the ear is the instrumental refinement of Scholl's sound — not the mechanism used to produce it.

"His voice is so special. It is much more than just a countertenor," says lutenist Edin Karamazov, a friend and frequent collaborator of Scholl's, who met the singer when they both attended the early-music mecca Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in the late 1980s. "His voice is not what people think, that it's just this gift from heaven. I think that he is a sincere musician, a very hard worker. It is so difficult to be a countertenor, especially one who has such a pure and warm voice. But that's just the Andreas voice. Whatever it is, feminine or masculine — it is his trademark."

If Scholl's instrument inspires vaguely religious pronouncements, the drama that he creates onstage is something else entirely. "It was a completely new ballgame," Scholl says of his opera debut nine years ago, at the age of thirty, in Jean-Marie Villégier's silent-cinema-inspired *Rodelinda* at Glyndebourne. "It was still early enough that I remember [famed English countertenor] James Bowman telling me, 'Don't start opera too early. If you are thirty-five and you are singing your first opera, they will still write about you as the *young* countertenor.' Of course it was difficult in Glyndebourne, but because there are five- or six-week rehearsal periods, there was plenty of time. I think I gave them a hard time the first time around, because I was a bit stiff onstage in the beginning." The performance, preserved on DVD, highlights Scholl's remarkably artless pathos and utter believability, particularly in "Dove sei, amato bene?" Bertarido's Act I aria, here played as kind of a Handelian version of Chaplin's "Smile." Since then, Scholl's opera appearances have encompassed only a handful of Cesares and some more Bertaridos. (His 2006 Met debut in the latter role was, he says, "the best operatic experience" thus far.) In March, he took part in a staged *St. John Passion* at the Châtelet, directed by the notoriously demanding Robert Wilson — a process, Scholl says, that he "really enjoyed." In 2008, he'll sing Arsace in a new production of Handel's *Partenope* at Royal Danish Opera, as well as Cesare in Lausanne. "I think a lot about who am I when I sing," he says. "Who is the person that sings this song? What could have been the composer's idea? What kind of words do I have? What are my key words? What is the rhetorical aspect? How would I speak it? How should I dramatize it?"

"The great thing about Andreas, from every point of view, is that he has a purity of intention, of instinct, of approach to all aspects of what he does," says Stephen Wadsworth, who directed Scholl in the 2006 Met *Rodelinda* performances. "Just knowing him, and realizing that still waters run deep ... there's a lot of complexity in him. He is a very modern person. He has this beautiful blend of a rich, complex personality and this incredible purity of sound and of intention. I think, in some ways, it's a very eighteenth-century balance of a highly cultivated craft that articulates a newly complex, rich internal reality. I think that's what he does as an artist — he tells the truth. He is a complex person, uttering something simply."

Beyond the opera stage, Scholl has taken to creating his own dramatic opportunities that are at once experimental and appropriate to the idioms of Baroque and early music. Many New Yorkers first encountered him in *The Renaissance Muse*, something of a *pasticcio* put on in 2005 as part of Lincoln Center's "New Visions" festival, in which Scholl alternated English lute songs with Shakespearean sonnets recited by the American actress Laila Robins. "As a recital artist these days, I don't want to put on a dark suit, walk out on the stage in front of a podium, bow, sing, bow again and leave — especially with early-music repertoire," says Scholl. "The concert, and the song recital itself, is an invention of the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century. The early-music scene started as an alternative music scene for people who did not have contact with the classical-music

establishment. The whole way of performing early music back in the '70s was far more relaxed. People would walk out onstage unshaved, with hand-knit socks and Birkenstock sandals. While early music has arrived in the, let's call them, 'serious music' temples, I think we have to observe carefully that this ritual is not meant for our music."

One wonders, with an artist so discriminating and imaginative, if there is anything that Scholl won't sing? "I am *seriously* not interested in French baroque music," he says unapologetically. "I don't want to say that it is not good music — it is simply not my thing."

Born into a family of avid amateur musicians, Scholl began singing at the age of seven. His hometown, Kiedrich im Rheingau, a minuscule village of some 4,000 people in the German state of Hesse, is historically notable for its Riesling grapes, the oldest playable organ in Germany and the Kiedricher Chorbuben, a seven-hundred-year-old boys' choir school with a continuous tradition of performing Gregorian chant each Sunday. Attending the school was a natural choice, he says, as his father and grandfather had taken part in the choir, and the door to the Gothic church, in which the school is located, literally stood across the street from his family's home. During his time there, Scholl sang soprano, performing Schütz or Palestrina motets every Sunday, and the experience of being raised in a small village on a steady diet of liturgical music seems to have greatly contributed to his quiet, unassuming core.

At seventeen, with his choir-school education drawing to a close, Scholl briefly entertained possible vocations that included "studying theology or joining the police anti-terror unit ... like a SWAT team," but tenor/countertenor Herbert Klein pointed him toward the Schola Cantorum. After serving his compulsory

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Bertarido to Renée Fleming's *Rodelinda* at the Met, 2006

military service, Scholl auditioned for the school's admission committee, which included René Jacobs, and was accepted to the Schola despite the lack of a primary degree and little formal musical training. He fell under the tutelage of Richard Levitt, with whom he still studies today. "He says beautiful things like 'Maximum sound with minimum effort,'" says Scholl.

While countertenors were still a rare breed at the school when Scholl arrived in 1987, the voice type was never treated as

an effete instrument to be deployed only on race-day. “What I like is that in Basel you are, in principle, a singer. So you compete against an eighteen-, a twenty-, a twenty-one-year-old soprano — so there was never any bonus [to being a countertenor]. They just look for singers. There is nothing special about a high voice if it is not able to express words, emotions,



As Handel's Giulio Cesare at the Royal Danish Opera, 2005

drama.” In his second year at the Schola, Scholl began to study with Jacobs, who has become a mentor and was responsible for the young singer's professional debut, in 1993, performing the *St. John Passion* on Good Friday at the Théâtre Grévin in Paris. Jacobs, due to sing but indisposed, pushed Scholl to the fore as his substitute.

Scholl is now a visiting professor of interpretation at the Schola Cantorum, an assignment he clearly relishes. Despite the nuance he's shown on the opera stage and his affinity for the cantabile of Handel's arias, he seems never to have strayed too far from the monastic setting in which he first began singing. While Scholl says he is religious, he demurs somewhat on the nature of his personal beliefs, though he's keen to frame his faith in the context of

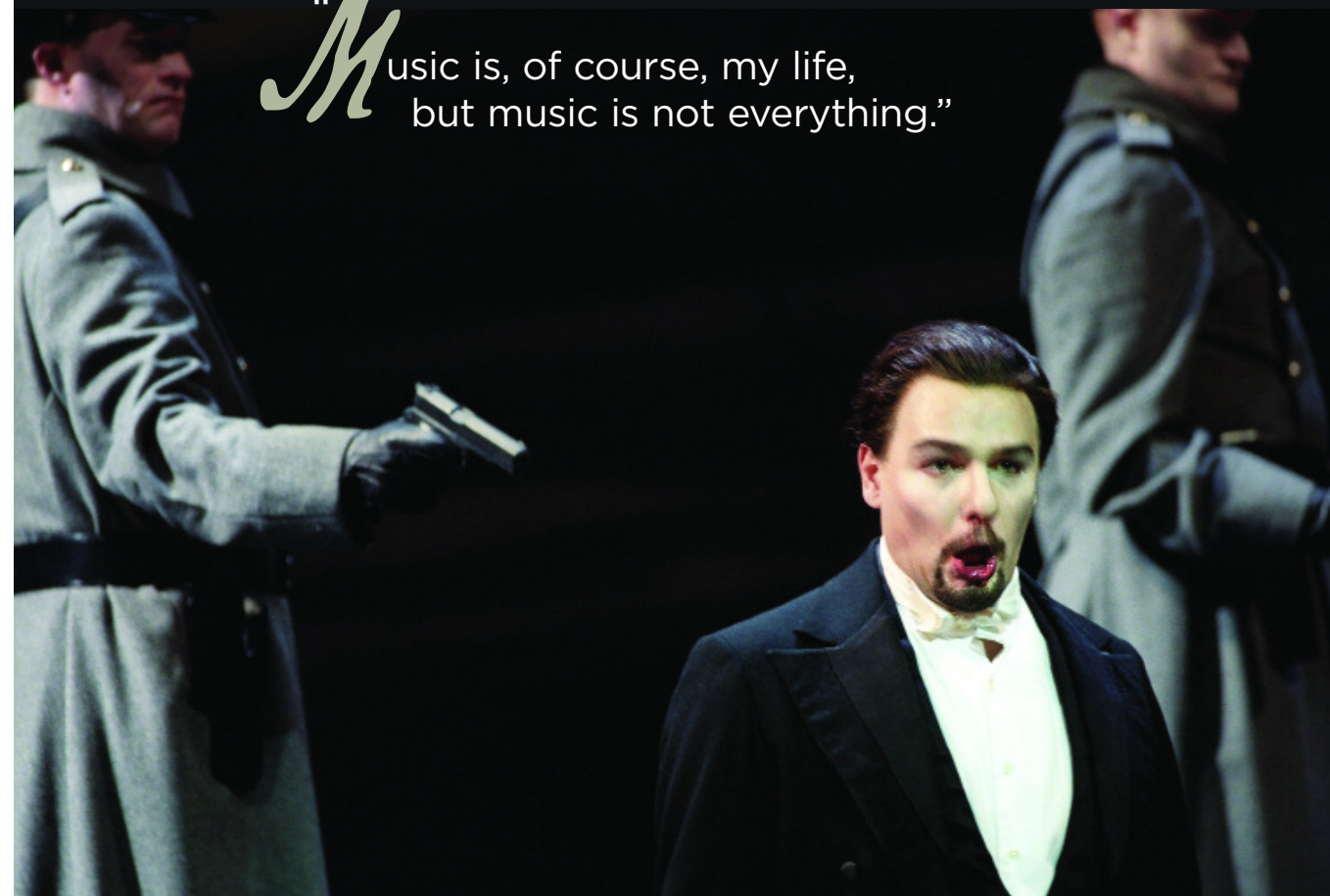
the music he performs: he immediately cites his recordings of Vivaldi's *Nisi Dominus*, the early German Baroque cantatas of Schütz, Buxtehude and their contemporaries and his numerous Bach cantata CDs as touchstones of his prodigious recording catalogue — some sixty releases in total. “I could imagine that I could only sing Bach until the end of my life, and I could not be too unhappy and would not feel unchallenged,” he says. “The fact that I am kind of religious, and I get into the religious aspect of singing while I sing, doesn't mean that it convinces the audience. I think it's more about accepting the truth that is in the music ... knowing that Mr. Bach wanted to save souls. That is the purpose of the music — to save souls through writing beautiful cantatas that comment on the gospel of that certain Sunday. Of course, I think a lot about why I sing, the purpose. What do I want people to say after a concert — ‘Great singer’ or ‘Great music’? Of course it would be better if they said, ‘Great music.’ Otherwise, I've got the focus wrong.” Scholl's good friend, composer Marco Rosano, with whom he stays when visiting his daughter in Brussels, has written a *Stabat Mater* that the singer intends to unveil in February in Sydney. Likewise Jocelyn Pook, whose music Scholl recorded for the soundtrack to the 2004 Al Pacino *Merchant of Venice*, is writing a piece based on the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas for him to perform. “It's going to be quite a heretical program,” Scholl laughs.

Scholl definitely operates with the knowledge that his remarkable level of success is rare for a countertenor. What's even more uncommon is his inability to slip into “P.R.-speak.” His singular achievements seem to have drawn him closer to the friends, family and colleagues who populate his quiet life, where he is more at home for having seen the outside world. For Scholl, it's a conscious choice.

“I am not the biggest musicologist, I have to admit. But of course I know the biography of Senesino. Also I've read the biography of Caffarelli,” says Scholl. “All those anecdotes about bitchy and difficult *castrati* are so much rooted in the psychology of those poor human beings. Despite their big success, after they retired there was tragedy. They didn't have families, so most of them tried to adopt a nephew in order to have an heir. It was a really sad life for most of them. Once the career is over, there is no audience that loves them, and they just disappear.

“Music is, of course, my life, but music is not everything. I think family should be the backbone of every musician's career. I observe with some colleagues and conductors that if you only circle around music, it means that you are only surrounded with musicians. People will tell you, ‘Hey, you are so great,’ and ‘You are wonderful,’ and after a while you start to believe it. Slowly, musicians might lose their social competence, their compatibility with the rest of the world. I am fully aware of how fortunate I am to be a musician and live from making music. But in a sense, being a musician is different from being a sports person — I don't take home any trophies. I compare it to a marathon without knowing where the finish line is. The achievement is not to be in Wigmore Hall, or Carnegie Hall, or at the Met. To make it there is difficult enough, but it's far more difficult to be invited back.” □

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Bertarido in Jean-Marie Villégier's *Rodelinda* staging at Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, 2002, above; with lutenist Crawford Young in *The Renaissance Muse* presented by Lincoln Center in its Great Performers “New Visions” series, 2005, below

