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"We bring magic to the stage."

Press Text: Terrace Talk

The Fascination of Countertenors



Left to right: Yuriy Mynenko, Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen, Justin Kangmin Kim, Federico Fiorio, Dennis Orellana, Cameron Shahbazi

(SF, 18 July 2025) The casts of several opera productions this summer, including George Frideric Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* and Peter Eötvös' *Three Sisters*, feature countertenors. One of them, Federico Fiorio, who plays the role of Sesto, talked about his approach to the role and the ongoing rehearsals for *Giulio Cesare*: "I have encountered this work repeatedly in my career. The role is highly complex, not just in vocal terms, but also regarding its physically strenuous aspects. That's where I benefit from my experience with my hobby, the discipline of parkour." He described his collaboration with the director Dmitri Tcherniakov as very satisfying, praising his ability to lend the characters plenty of nuance. He added that the conductor Emmanuelle Haïm also has very precise ideas of what is to happen on stage.

Yuriy Mynenko (Tolomeo) also emphasized the positive rehearsal process. It is his fourth time working with Dmitri Tcherniakov, of whom he said: "He knows exactly what is important to

him, and what he wants to get from the artists.” He also praised the conductor Emmanuelle Haïm: “She is a great musician who supports us singers extremely well.”

The singers are equally pleased with the rehearsals for *Three Sisters*, directed by Evgeny Titov. Dennis Orellana (Irina) said: “Our team is fantastic, I am delighted to be here.” To him, whose repertoire has consisted mainly of baroque opera and Mozart, his first time working on a modern opera and the Russian language involve special challenges. “But I can learn a lot about my own voice, and it’s all great fun,” he said.

Kangmin Justin Kim (Natasha) discussed his method: “As a singing actor, I approach every role first from the perspective of the text. In this way, you see how the composer transforms the libretto into music, and that gives you a feeling for the character you are embodying.” He has worked with Evgeny Titov before, emphasizing: „We have a very similar understanding of the rehearsal process, and one can focus on the emotions of an opera with him very well. In combination with Eötvös’ music, we bring magic to the stage as a team.”



Left to right: Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen, Yuriy Mynenko, Federico Fiorio, Kangmin Justin Kim, Dennis Orellana, Cameron Shahbazi

Asked about his take on interpreting the role of Masha, Cameron Shahbazi said: “In the beginning, there is always studying the characters. First of all, I read the piece several times, trying to find my way into the person I am portraying. Exploring the composer’s oeuvre in advance of the production is always very important to me.” The Russian language, entirely unfamiliar to him, was also a challenge in the beginning. He described the overall work as follows: „The structure of the piece is first deconstructed and then put together again. The music creates a suspended atmosphere.”

Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen has explored the vocal range of the countertenor not only under musical, but also under scientific aspects. In this context, he remarked about Eötvös’ *Three Sisters*: “The extraordinary thing about this opera is actually that all the female figures are sung by countertenors in the original casting. This aspect brings an additional complexity to the portrayal of the characters, opening a new dimension of deeper experience to the viewer.” He described his impression that countertenor voices are perceived by the audience as particularly fascinating. In general, he considers the goal of opera to invite the audience to

escape their daily lives, opening up a pathway into another world. That is exactly what Titov's work as a director is achieving, in his opinion.

Each of the singers found his path to their common *fach* in different ways. Federico Fiorio noted his unchanged disposition toward the soprano voice while still in a children's chorus, right after the mutation of his voice. After that, special training enabled him to reach even higher ranges. Dennis Orellana too emphasized the importance of daily practice for the continuous development and differentiation of the voice. The chemistry between teacher and student plays another important role, Kangmin Justin Kim added, pointing out that there are different useful approaches for each singer: "One singer might respond well to a scientific and theoretic approach, while another can be helped by specific images and metaphors." He himself learned from his teacher to always try to comprehend the intention of the text first. This background, he explained, helps him delve into a sonic world with multiple layers.

Within the countertenor field, there are different vocal phenomena, Yuriy Mynenko emphasized – something that must be taken into account during one's education as well. For himself, the original plan of training as a baritone did not work out. In finding one's own vocal range, one aspect is essential, he said: "The decisive element is believing in yourself and your own potential – that's the only way it can work."

Cameron Shahbazi described his own, intuitive approach to his vocal type: "I too was trained as a baritone at first. At the age of about 18, however, I kept automatically switching into another range, and it took me a while to recognize the significance of this fact." With a view to the current production, he finds working with two orchestras in Salzburg particularly interesting: "That evokes an additional, special imagination. It allows us to delve even more deeply into the characters' vulnerability."

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