

CULTURE DESK

ANTHONY ROTH COSTANZO SINGS HANDEL AT NATIONAL SAWDUST



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Anthony Roth Costanzo plays the sea nymph Galatea in a production of Handel's "Aci, Galatea, e Polifemo," at National Sawdust.

Photograph by Michelle V. Agins / NYT / Redux

As one of the not very many people who saw the 1998 Merchant Ivory movie “A Soldier’s Daughter Never Cries” (which I genuinely liked), I’ve hardly been surprised at the gathering rush of Anthony Roth Costanzo’s career, which has since stretched from independent film into opera at the highest levels. In the movie, based on a lightly fictionalized novel about the family life of the writer James Jones, Costanzo plays Francis Fortescue, a certainly-seems-to-be-gay teen-ager who befriends Jones’s daughter, his classmate at a Parisian high school. As I remember the scene, Francis, eccentric and graciously effeminate—Jane Birkin plays his mother!—wins over his skeptical class by making his love of opera animate: he sings a gently touching rendition of Cherubino’s aria “Voi che sapete,” from “The Marriage of Figaro.” This is, of course, mezzo-soprano

territory, but it was intriguing to hear a teen-age countertenor sing an aria for a character who is actually supposed to be a teen-ager.

Costanzo's performance, musically and dramatically, was both sweet and strong. However, starring in the sold-out run of Handel's serenata "Aci, Galatea, e Polifemo," which he co-produced (with Cath Brittan), at the Williamsburg music club National Sawdust, he was just strong, as he had to be. He takes the role of the sea nymph Galatea (a part originally written for a contralto), who is ardently in love with the shepherd Aci; both are being menaced by the monster Polifemo (Cyclops), who holds them captive. Costanzo's voice is still very much in its prime, but since the time when he first dazzled audiences, at the Met in 2011, it has acquired a touch of grit in its lower reaches, and a bit of a wild edge on top. From reports, Costanzo seems to be expertly managing his career: he recently signed a contract with Decca Gold. Instead of something like "Anthony Roth Costanzo: Baroque Arias," his first album, thankfully, will be a collection of tracks split evenly between Handel and Philip Glass. I hope he'll continue to pursue projects that allow him to exploit his unique mix of musical and theatrical strengths.

One of the good things about "Aci" was that, vocally, Costanzo was merely first among equals. The soprano Ambur Braid, as Aci, sang with both force and florid charm; the bass-baritone Davóne Tines brought both soft, floating high notes and cavernous cellar tones to the role of Polifemo, a part that demands an astonishing two-and-a-half-octave range. Dramatically, this show was a complex beast. Christopher Alden, the distinguished veteran director, took a concert piece written in 1708, for a ducal wedding in Italy, and turned it into a riveting seventy-five-minute chamber opera that had the slow-action inevitability of an underwater ballet and the fraught psychology of a therapy session gone berserk. (He was aided by Mark Grey's smoothly disruptive sound design and by the rough-edged intensity of the period-performance ensemble Ruckus, conducted by Clay Zeller-Townson.) It's a wonder that National Sawdust, with its small

audience capacity, is making a go of it economically. But, artistically, its young and novel presence on the New York scene has been a smashing success.



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