**MOZART AND THE CASTRATO**

Paul-Etienne Texel, male soprano.

Boston Premiere Ensemble, conducted by F. John Adams.

Event in The Tech Performing Arts Series.

By JONATHAN RICHMOND

**WHATSOEVER FAIR MALE AEGIR**

Paul-Etienne Texel can do, he cannot sing. His American debut in Jordan Hall last Saturday night, announced with much media hoopla, was a disappointment, other than to those voyeurs who could find titillation in the pauly costumes and bizarre stage presence of this vocal Liberace.

At Mozart's time, castrati could make big money, and ambitious mothers would take the knife to their sons at a tender age. Texel did not have such a nucleus, but he does have Dutch, French, Native American, Indian and Chinese blood in his veins, a woman's larynx and vocal chords and no Adam's apple.

But, while the most celebrated castrati did do very well for themselves, many others failed: it does not follow that everyone endowed with a particular vocal range is destined for the operatic stage.

The evening was at least partly rescued from the kid gloves - worn for a further Mozart aria - complete with blue fans attached to the gloves - worn for a further Mozart aria, were anything to compare with the multi-colored monstrosity with which he began the concert's second half. An ungrammatically numbered - from Handel's Rin- aldo - scene across particularly roughhewn vocal colors clashed, smudged, unable to deliver the vocal acrobatics to which he pretends. Texel's impec- cably framed vocal colors clashed, stilted, and left a bad aftertaste. As for the exist- ing pieces by the brothers Broschi; if the soaring passages left the listener numb, the high notes were about as startling as a den- nist's drill accidentally wandering off its unsanitized path.

Mozart's Exsultate jubilate, with which the program ended, was strikingly bland. The concert's highlight was, in fact, a post-instrumental piece, the Aladino from the Serenade in E-flat, K. 375, nim- bly played by a wind section with a strong sense of ensemble. Autumnal in tone, but playful in spirit, the performance provided a much-needed glimpse of Mozart heaven.

Mozart's Symphony No. 29 was successfully done, not elegantly structured, but full-blooded and rich in texture. The concert's closing piece confirmed Texel as a charlatan, came in as his encore, Porgi amor from Mozart's The Marriage of Fi- garo. Porgi is the Countess' entrance num- ber, a lament on the lost love of her hus- band, Almaviva. It is a deceptively difficult piece, demanding careful phrasing and subtle coloration.

Adams' orchestra began beautifully, charted harmonies and forms evoking a gentle solemnity. Then Texel entered - looking quite grotesque in a flowing scar- let gown - and proceeded to walk through the piece, clipping runs he could not manage, singing as many notes as he could, without regard for the form of the aria or for its complex emotional fabric. From one shapeless phrase to the next, one could only conclude that while Mozart and his Countesses were serenading in the or- chestra, there was nothing but a void on stage.

The person sitting next to me, a teacher of voice at New England Conservatory, looked on in disbelief. "It's a travesty," she said. "There are 25 sopranos in Boston who could do better than him, but they don't get the chance." She's right. Next time Boston Premiere Ensemble wants to exhibit something new, they should show- case the concert arias of Mozart's excep- tional young singers, rather than import- ing a performer who exhibits superficial sensationalism on the outside, but has absolutely no substance beneath the surface.

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