

# Bravo, Farinelli!

## The legendary castrato lives again

A baroque star is reborn thanks to this Swedish nightingale, says **Neil Fisher**

### classical

**Ann Hallenberg**

**Farinelli**

Aparte

★★★★☆

More than 20 years ago the 18th-century superstar singer Carlo Broschi, better known as Farinelli, made it to the big screen in a splashy French biopic. The soundtrack was produced by the conductor Christophe Rousset (then little-known) and his ensemble, Les Talens Lyriques. To make his Farinelli sing, Rousset had the actor playing the title role dubbed by two singers, the countertenor Derek Lee Ragin and the soprano Ewa Malas-Godlewska, whose voices were spliced to try to summon the unearthly sound of those dodos of the opera world, the castratos.

Now, for Les Talens Lyriques's 25th anniversary, the group is celebrating with the belated release of *Farinelli*, a

Ann Hallenberg channels the spirit of Farinelli in Bergen in 2011



recital given in Bergen 2011 starring just one singer, the Swedish mezzo Ann Hallenberg. Does she sound like Farinelli? Your guess is probably as good as mine. But Hallenberg does deliver some of the most demanding arias in the Baroque repertoire with tremendous elan.

The castrato was adored for his breath control, florid passagework and virtuosic range. In numbers written for him by Nicola Porpora, Leonardo Leo, Geminiano Giacomelli and Riccardo Broschi (Farinelli's brother) the mezzo shows off all these assets as well as a deliciously fruity, rounded tone. I can't imagine I'll hear a more flagrantly seductive performance in 2017 than Hallenberg's ripe *Si pietoso il tuo labbro* from Porpora's *Semiramide riconosciuta*, complete with delicious trills and audacious vocal leaps.

If there is a drawback it's that the recital is like a buffet of puddings without any mains or appetisers. Subtlety was not Farinelli's forte; or, perhaps because he was considered such a show pony, the composers who wrote for him put acrobatic thrills above dramatic sincerity. Indeed, it is one of the great missed opportunities that when Farinelli was wooed to London for a season of opera he was in the pay of the anti-Handel faction, so the great composer never wrote for him. Hallenberg remedies this on the live recording by throwing in two numbers from Handel's *Alcina* and *Rinaldo*, which are sorely needed. Les Talens Lyriques offers robust if rather undifferentiated support.

The countertenor Iestyn Davies also had a crack at playing Farinelli, in Claire van Kampen's drama *Farinelli and the King*, although he didn't actually sing much music that the castrato performed, partly because his voice lies lower. Davies, currently starring in the Royal Opera's production of *Written on Skin*, has a sinuous, silky-sweet sound, allied to the technical precision honed by his training as an falsettist in the English cathedral choir tradition.

In his new *Bach* album (Hyperion, ★★★★★) he explores three intense cantatas, devotional works that, staggeringly, would originally have been sung by a boy alto rather than the countertenors or mezzo-sopranos who handle them now. The main pleasure in this album is the partnership between the eloquent