

## Oberlin Artist Recital Series: A conversation with Iestyn Davies

by Mike Telin



Singing has always been an important part of Iestyn Davies' life. As a boy treble, he began singing in the choir of St John's College, Cambridge. In his teens he discovered his falsetto, and became a countertenor at Wells Cathedral School, and after completing the British equivalent of high school, he entered St John's College as a choral scholar, graduating with a degree in archaeology and anthropology. And as they say, the rest is history.

On Friday, November 22 at 7:30 pm in Finney Chapel, [Iestyn Davies](#) will join the Orchestra and Choir of the Age of Enlightenment in performances of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* and Vivaldi's

*Gloria* under the direction of Jonathan Cohen. Presented as part of the Oberlin Artist Recital Series, the program also includes Albinoni's Oboe *Concerto No. 2 in d*, Op. 9. Tickets are available [online](#).

During a Skype interview, Davies said that like Vivaldi's *Gloria*, Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* has also been used in many films and advertisements. "People will recognize the opening movement. For that reason alone, I think the two pieces are a great combination."

He noted that although they are religious pieces, like Bach's B-minor Mass and his two Passions, they are more often performed in a concert situation rather than an ecclesiastical setting.

Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* was commissioned by the Confraternita dei Cavalieri di San Luigi di Palazzo and was written during the final weeks of the composer's life.

"It's a beautiful setting of the medieval Latin hymn on the suffering of the Virgin Mary at the Crucifixion," Davies said. "The penultimate movement, 'Quando corpus morietur' — when my body dies and gets delivered to paradise — is so evocative of somebody lying on their deathbed. It totally reminds me of the Mozart *Requiem*. It's the dying moments of a composer and yet it's his most celebrated work. Pergolesi was only in his late 20s when he died, so it's tragic that he never saw the success of the piece."

When asked if he prefers singing at Baroque pitch, as he will on Friday, or modern pitch, he said that switching from one to the other does not present a problem. "People often think there's this seismic shift that we have to make, when actually it's a small thing. If you're performing Handel's *Messiah* at modern pitch, some of the arias just feel a bit higher and noticeably brighter, and the high notes are sometimes in a different place in your voice. But take the aria 'He was despised,' which is essentially a low contralto aria. As a countertenor, it starts at the bottom of your range, so when I do it at modern pitch it's actually a little easier down there."

He noted that composers often wrote arias for specific singers. "In Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, you sort of know that the singer he had in mind for 'Erbarme dich', was a different singer from the one who sang 'Es ist vollbracht!' in the *St. John*. My preference is never to do the Matthew aria at modern pitch, because it sits too high for me."

When talking about Baroque vs modern pitch, stamina also enters the equation. "I've just done Handel's *Agrippina* with The Age of Enlightenment Orchestra at The Royal Opera house at Baroque pitch, and I had done it in the summer in Munich at modern pitch. It was quite nice going into Covent Garden because everything was just a little bit lower and I didn't have to work as hard."

Davies will be part of a new production of *Agrippina* at the Metropolitan Opera beginning in March of 2020. "That will also be at modern pitch, but that's fine because I have a gap in between performances. So no, I don't really have a preference, it's just one of those things, you get used to it. But the one thing you don't want to do is sing something low, and then something high the next day."

Asked what the number one misconception the public has about countertenors, he didn't miss a beat. "That we're castrati. It's really just that." He added that people hear falsetto all the time, but unlike a pop singer who might use it about 20% of the time, countertenors do the "Olympic falsetto," which is a 24/7 thing.

“I think for people who are not used to hearing that all of the time, it’s a little bit of an adjustment for them. There’s a man up there with stubble, obviously fully grown and sometimes tall — Alfred Deller was 6-foot something — so amateur listeners don’t want to offend you, but there are ellipses in the question.

A less intrusive question Davies is often asked is ‘do you go to a countertenor to learn to sing?’ “My answer is no, I’ve never had a countertenor teacher. I’ve had the odd one or two coachings with a countertenor, but once you understand how the mechanism works and know what it feels like to go into your falsetto and are in that voice, you just supply all the usual techniques, which is mainly breath support — controlling air pressure.”

Unlike other voice types, Davies said the sound of a countertenor is there from the beginning. “We don’t develop into Helden-countertenors, So those first ten years are crucial in learning to use the voice and managing it so that you can have a career that lasts 25, 30 years. People ask how long the voice lasts and we don’t really know because the people just two generations above me were learning when there were very few countertenors. There was no blueprint and people often avoided teaching countertenors. They were often self-taught.”

Another misconception is that countertenors employ a different technique from other voices. “Mechanically, there is some difference but it’s not something that you need to be scared of if you teach singing because it’s internal stuff — learning how to take what feels technical into something that feels natural — and when that happens, a teacher can grab hold of it and run with it.”

While we were on the subject of teaching singing, I asked Davies how he chose to follow a path other than the music school route. “I did get into St John’s for a music degree, but it was hugely academic and not particularly performance-based, or at least it was at that time. It was a lot of writing string quartets and fugues, something I had never done before and wasn’t interested in because I knew that I wanted to perform.”

He immediately decided to switch majors and asked to study archeology and anthropology because that is a major interest of his. “The fact is that it didn’t really matter what I did. I was having singing lessons, I was paid to sing in the choir, which we did seven days a week, we did tours and recorded. In my generation, there were a lot of singers who had gone on and were killing it in terms of opera careers, and it was a springboard into going to one of the music colleges for post graduate.”

Although he has a brilliant career as a singer, Davies remains an archeologist and anthropologist at heart. “I love mud-walking on the River Thames and finding something that hasn’t been touched for centuries. I like going to Handel’s house and seeing the

window he threatened to throw a soprano out of, or the small room where he ate his dinner. It's so easy to assume that people in the past were more naïve than us or to assume that they were so grand because they're famous now. Handel lived in a house not too dissimilar from mine. And you can work out what his walk to the opera house was. It's a bit like archeology, trying to piece it together.”

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 21, 2019.*

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