

Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen to make Apollo's Fire debut in two of J.S. Bach's Easter works

by Daniel Hathaway



Countertenors lead interesting and varied professional lives that are reflected in the wide range of roles they sing.

Take the example of Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen, who will make his Apollo's Fire debut this weekend in a pair of Johann Sebastian Bach's

rarely performed Easter works.

Cohen, who graduated from Princeton in 2015, will come to Cleveland immediately after returning to his alma mater to sing the role of the Angel in Edward Elgar's mystical Roman Catholic oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius*.

And with Apollo's Fire, the countertenor, who grew up in a Jewish household, sang in synagogue, and studied cantorial music, will sing the allegorical role of Fear (Furcht) in Bach's Cantata 66, then take on the persona of Mary Magdalene in the composer's *Easter Oratorio* — two Pietist Lutheran works.

“My two alter egos,” Cohen quipped in a recent telephone interview.

I reached him in a café in San Francisco to chat about his activities in the decade since he graduated from an institution he entered with the intention of majoring in its School of Public and International Affairs, but ended up studying history and vocal performance. (Cohen talked about his undergraduate days, including the career-changing experience when he heard his first opera, in an [interview](#) earlier this month for the Princeton Music Department.)

Daniel Hathaway: I've come to believe that every countertenor has an interesting origin story, and I want to ask you about yours.

Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen: Mine is perhaps a bit different than most folks. I never had an ah-ha moment when I said, 'I'm going to be a countertenor.' But I began singing in synagogues and in the wonderful Brooklyn Youth Choir, and also did a lot of backup with artists like James Taylor, which was very exciting to me, an 11-year-old kid who grew up in a pop and rock household.

When my voice dropped. I just didn't want to leave that choir because I was having such a great time. I went in and did a re-audition, and they felt like I could still sing decently enough in that treble range to stay in the choir, and that's really how I became a countertenor. I didn't know what that term was, and I had no intention of pursuing a musical career, so it was kind of a happy accident.

DH: Most countertenors have an idol that they try to emulate or were influenced by. Do you have one?

ANC: There were two — Andreas Scholl and David Daniels. Andreas had this gorgeous, pure, angelic beauty to his voice that I knew really well from two albums I listened to over and over. I also admired David Daniels' album and the power of his voice. In my mind, they charted in the modern age of the countertenor. They were both at the top of their game in the early 2000s, and they piqued a lot of people's interest in the voice type and in the music because of how beautifully they were singing and how much energy they were bringing to the art.

DH: Moving on to Apollo's Fire, you have a very interesting pair of assignments singing Fear and Mary Magdalene. And for someone with a Jewish background, performing in an Easter cantata must be kind of interesting as well.

ANC: I also sing a lot of Christmas music, so I'm sort of used to it. And, frankly, Bach's works are just a joy to sing. There's just so much character in Bach's writing. Recently I've been performing with Nic McGegan — we've done a couple of concerts and worked together on recordings, and he's very supportive. I think a lot of folks in our industry forget just how lucky we are to be artists servicing this music. It's not about us, right? I think that's something that Nic understands so naturally, and that's why I love working with him.

DH: I think this is going to be one of the more interesting Apollo's Fire programs of the season. These pieces aren't done very often.

ANC: There's so much drama in music that can be explored and brought out. Every single Bach cantata has so much depth to it. They don't have to be performed like straight church music.

Beginning on Thursday, April 25 at 7:30 pm at Federated Church in Chagrin Falls, Apollo's Fire — under the direction of Jeannette Sorrell — reaches back 300 years to celebrate Easter with the closest Johann Sebastian Bach came to penning opera: the Easter Oratorio and an Easter Cantata with soloists Andréa Walker, soprano, Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen, countertenor, Haitham Haidar, tenor, and Edward Vogel, baritone, taking on dramatic roles. Festive baroque trumpets add to the celebration. Performances continue on Friday (7:30 at St. Raphael, Bay Village), Saturday (8 pm at St. Paul's, Akron), and Sunday (5 pm at Church of the Gesu, University Hts.) Tickets available [online](#).

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 25, 2024

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)