

ARTS

A higher calling

Star countertenor Michael Chance debuts in Hong Kong next week, writes **Victoria Finlay**

Ten years ago there were probably only four or five countertenors working on the international opera and concert circuit although the number has since gone up and there are at least 25 male singers who perform with that highest of natural male voices. British countertenor Michael Chance, 55, however, is still a rarity not least because he has been on the circuit for more than quarter of a century.

"People who think they've never heard a countertenor are often surprised to find they have. Quite probably a lot. They only have to have listened to the Beach Boys or the Bee Gees. And Michael Jackson broke naturally into a high voice without even thinking about it," says the British singer who will be making his debut here next week at City Hall with the City Chamber Orchestra of Hong Kong.

Using a high voice is something that everyone can do, but obviously some people can do slightly better than others

Michael Chance (right and below)



Chance first realised he was a natural countertenor in his early 20s. "I was a choral scholar at Cambridge [University] and sang tenor. The countertenor voice takes quite a long time to develop in a man and it doesn't emerge properly until later."

He explains that the whole point of being a countertenor is that you sing in a part of the voice called falsetto, meaning slightly false. You're in the upper regions, the singer adds, though there are some who just claim they are tenors and they don't have a break (the note range between the normal and the higher, falsetto voice); but most countertenors have a break.

"Using a high voice is something

that everyone can do," Chance says, "but obviously some people can do slightly better than others."

At first it was not clear that his ability to sing high notes "slightly better than others" could lead to a full-time career. His first job was in London at the stock exchange, though he would often sing in a group with five friends from Cambridge. "In those days a countertenor was a rarity: it was hard to think it would be a career."

But things were changing quickly. It was 1985, and the music market was about to explode. Not only had interest in early music—in which the countertenor has an important role—been gaining momentum since the 60s, but with the introduction of CD and digital technology, everything had to be re-recorded. Chance says he was lucky in that he did huge numbers of recordings. "Early music demands a much clearer, more vibrant sound than vinyl gives," he says. "And when composers such as Handel, Bach, Monteverdi and Purcell were recorded digitally, it all sounded so fresh that it created audiences all around the world."

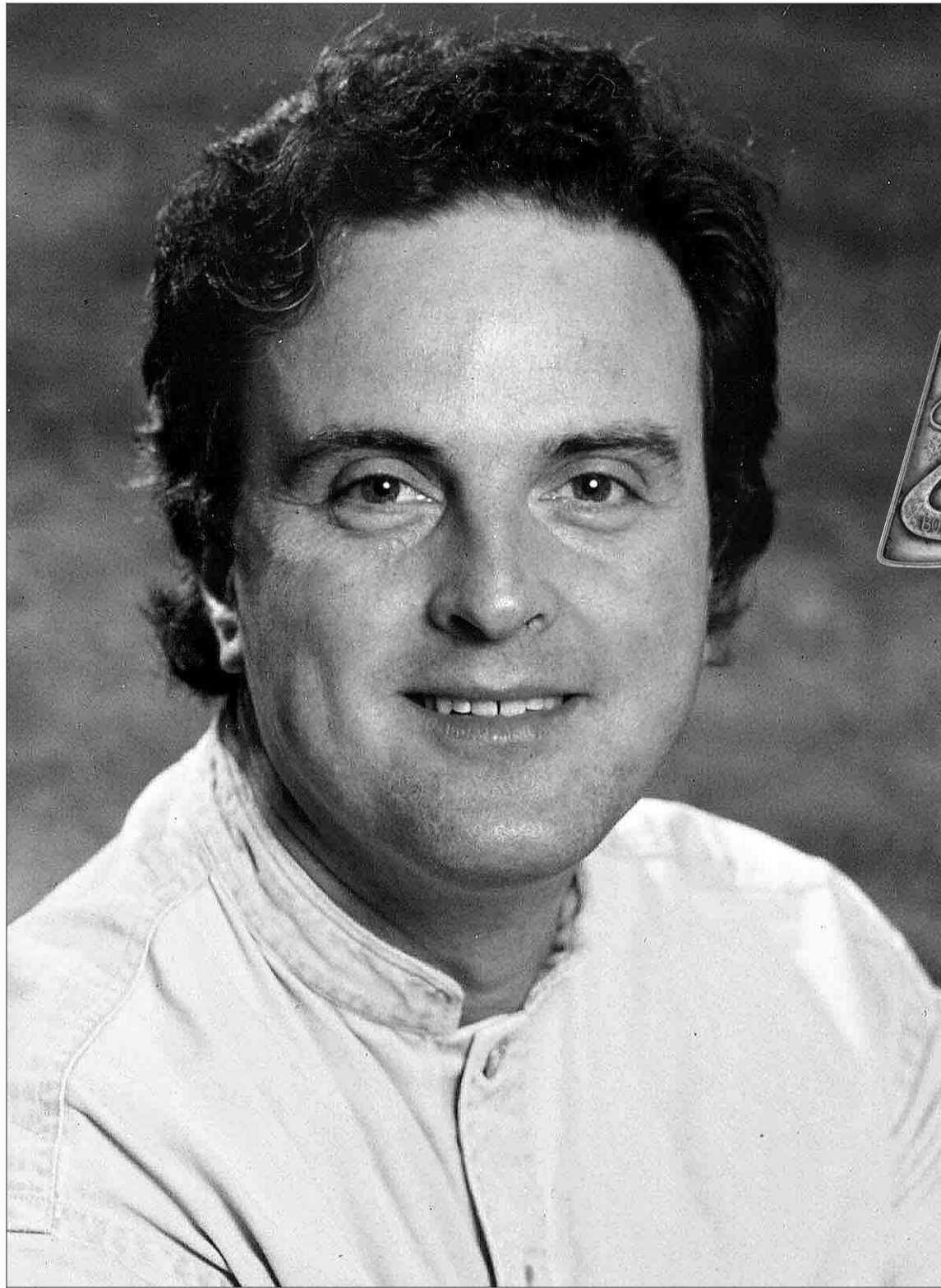
In baroque opera the countertenor often had either the "matinee idol lead", or the part of a god or demi-god. "In contemporary opera it can be these or something slightly more sinister."

The most popular hero in opera history is often a countertenor, Chance says. Orpheus is the subject of operas throughout musical history—from baroque composers such as Jacopo Peri (whose creation from 1600, *Euridice*, has been called the first genuine opera), classical composers such as Willem Gluck, comic like Jacques Offenbach or contemporary like Philip Glass.

The story is simple. Orpheus is a musician whose beloved Euridice is bitten by a snake and dies. He gets the chance to bring her back from the underworld but only if he does not look at her as they leave. And yet she demands that he look.

"Each version has something different: Orpheus as a healer; Orpheus as a redemptive character; as pre-emptive of Christ who comes back from the dead; as a romantic artist who makes up songs about his situation. She refuses to accept him unless he accepts her, which is a modern way of looking at relationships," says Chance.

The first countertenor part in a modern opera, Oberon, king of the fairies in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, was written by Benjamin Britten. Chance has sung that part many times, most memorably in Australia in 1993 in a production, set in



colonial India, staged by film director Baz Luhrmann.

"It was during that time he had the idea of putting Shakespeare on film and we had quite a lot of talks about it, and that grew into his brilliant film *Romeo + Juliet* [Luhrmann] never stops working. We were rehearsing on bits of the set and we even went to the warehouse where the scenery was being stored so that he could rehearse one bit."

In his performance in Hong Kong Chance will be concentrating on early music. The programme includes Handel's *Ombra mai fu* from his opera *Serse*, where the title character, Xerxes of Persia, sings a little aria to a plane tree. "He is giving thanks for the shade and the richness of the foliage, which is a great way to open an opera," says the countertenor.

Then there are two arias from another Handel opera, *Rinaldo*, which is about a mercenary hired to defeat Muslims and convert them to Christianity ("not a politically correct plot"). It was hugely popular at its premiere in 1711 at London's Haymarket. Not only did it star a celebrity castrato in the eponymous role, but "the divas were brilliantly designed clothes and dozens of brightly coloured birds were released into the audience at every performance."

The plot hinges around an evil enchantress, Armida. She kidnaps Rinaldo's beloved Almirena, to whom he is promised in marriage, and when he is alone, he sings the aria *Cara sposa* ("my dear wife"). Towards the end he sings *Venti turbini* which means "turbulent winds" and is a spell to conjure up the elements to try to get support in his battle.

"She's like the Wicked Witch of the West: a worthy opponent, and

when the two of them are in battle it makes quite a sound."

Vivaldi's *Nisi Dominus* was written for one of the mezzosoprano voices of girls in the Venetian orphanage where he taught in the early 18th century. "One section called *Cum dederit*, which is a slow Siciliana movement, was once cited by a BBC Music programme list as one of the pieces of Music to Make Love to," Chance says.

"It's one of those lush, delicious baroque masterpieces that people listen to endlessly and think Oh god this is so beautiful. It's like the slow music in the *Four Seasons*... You can say this for him: Vivaldi was a great tune writer."

Michael Chance with the City Chamber Orchestra, Jan 25, 8pm, City Hall Concert Hall, HK\$120, HK\$200, HK\$300 Urbtc. Inquiries: 2864 2156

selected and trained by the man himself to perform his work.

Cunningham was famous for rejecting the conventions of both modern dance and classical ballet while drawing on elements of each to create his own unique brand of dance. He eschewed not only narrative but fundamental concepts such as structure or musicality—the music for his work (often by minimalist composer John Cage) was separate from the choreography, the two co-existing in the same space and time without being related to each other.

In other words, Cunningham's work is a classic example of that 20th-century invention, purely abstract art. Like all such art, it divides audiences between those who are profoundly moved by it and those who find it tedious. Either way, his importance in the development of dance as it is today makes this final tour a major event.

The programme presented in Hong Kong consisted of a full-length piece entitled *Nearly 90°* (below), a revised version of what was to be the choreographer's final work, *Nearly 90*, created shortly before his death.

Although not a major work in Cunningham's oeuvre, *Nearly 90°* demonstrates the unique character of his choreography and is an astounding achievement from a nonagenarian.

The movement is extremely inventive and startlingly different from anything else. Particularly impressive are the extended balances, often off-kilter and supporting another dancer. Another highlight is brief passages of light, swift footwork with great rhythmic complexity.

Much of the piece consists of duets which present an asexual, almost mystical bonding. The flexibility, control and strength of the dancers is remarkable.

Natasha Rogai

crescendos that were well sustained but barely realised Elgar's idiosyncrasies.

The least lyrical of Vaughan Williams' symphonies, it's no surprise that the caustic No 4 doesn't often get dusted down, but it takes a lot of beating as a 30-minute cathartic assault. The performance certainly disturbed the comfort zone at the tumultuous start and close of the work, but the deceptive calms and jolly maypole tunes also need to prod the angst beneath the surface.

Sam Olliver



REVIEWS

Ran Jia, the Piano Poetess
Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra
HK Cultural Centre Concert Hall
Reviewed: Jan 14

In promoting the mainland pianist, Ran Jia deserved a better platform. Mozart's Concerto Rondo in D, K382 is a set of variations on a snappy tune that sticks in its groove like an unattended music box. The piece requires special input to make its dubious charms work and such magic wasn't at Ran's behest: she was playing it for the first time in public, as was also the case with Haydn's Keyboard Concerto in D, Hob. XVIII:11.

Being quoted in the programme as believing that this enduringly popular work from 1780 was written "still in baroque style" may have accounted for her limited empathy with the impish nature of the first movement, the need to change mood and tone significantly in the next, and the advisability of not taking the finale so fast its irrepressible fun gets lost in a stampede of notes.

Conductor David Atherton set the whole ball rolling with an elegant tempo and a becalmed sense of dynamic variation that clearly weren't for docking onto Haydn's helter-skelter wit either.

A pair of British works topped and tailed the programme. Atherton took Elgar's *Cockaigne* at a laid-back pace, producing long lines and even longer

We've lift-off: space memorabilia on sale

AUCTIONS

John Grace

For a boy in the late 1960s, the Apollo missions were a time of wonder. After years spent looking towards the ground, for the first time my head turned upwards to infinity.

As Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin completed the first moon walk, I went outside to see if I could catch a glimpse of the lunar module on the moon. I still like to think I did.

It was so glamorous. Here were genuine heroes for a drab, disaffected time, nerveless men hurtling through space at thousands of kilometres an hour in shiny tubes of science-fiction technology in pursuit of new worlds. The papers couldn't get enough of them and neither could I. Starting with Apollo 8—the first to leave the earth's orbit—I kept scrapbooks of every mission until manned lunar exploration ended with Apollo 17.

These days it seems impossible. The technology merely everyday bits of hardware and plastic ingeniously bolted together on a wing and a prayer, the cutting-edge computers something a modern-day digital watch manufacturer would turn his nose up at.

Yet it still holds its romance. We may have gone on to do all sorts of clever science in space since then, but the visceral thrill of space exploration died for me the moment Nasa pulled the plug on the Apollo programme in 1972. I still can't get enough of those early years. Even though I think I've read almost every book on the early years of Nasa and Soviet space programmes, I can never resist a new one.

What I never, in my wildest dreams, imagined, was that I could own a part of that history. Nasa was notorious for regarding everything as government property and almost nothing escaped its clutches. But it turns out private enterprise was alive and well among a few astronauts

and now some of the material they have let slip into private hands over the years has come to light and anyone can get their hands on it—at a price.

RR Auction, based in Amherst, Massachusetts, is holding what is thought to be the largest ever sale of space memorabilia from that era. You won't find pieces of moon rock or full space suits but you will find the headset that Charlie Duke wore at ground control to communicate with Buzz Aldrin on the moon; the power cable used on the Apollo 15 lunar module; the calendar photo of *Playboy's* Miss August 1969 that was hidden on board Apollo 12 without Nasa's knowledge; the Roosevelt dime that Gus Grissom carried during the 1965 Gemini 3 mission; flight-flown signed flags from every Apollo mission; signed photographs of all the Mercury astronauts; a bolt from the capsule that flew Hal the chimp; a 56cm power instrument panel, with electronics, wiring, dials and switches intact, identical to the one used for the Apollo 1 mission that claimed the lives of Grissom, Edward White and Roger Chaffee; a freeze-dried pot roast from a mission. Probably best left unopened.

In total there are more than 500 lots, some with starting bids of US\$2,000 or more, others of just US\$100. "There is something for everyone's wallet and everything is guaranteed authentic," says auctioneer Bobby Livingston. "All the items have come straight from the astronauts themselves or from a small handful of private collectors. It's a chance to own something iconic." One such item that just missed out was a container of, ahem, waste water from Apollo 11. "The owner lives in Britain and we couldn't guarantee it would get back across the Atlantic in one piece."

My favourite? That would be telling. I don't want to encourage any bids against me. But if you have your eye on something, go to www.rrauction.com. It works like ebay; the bidding ends on January 20.

Guardian News & Media



Apollo 8 flight medal (above); bowling shoes worn in training by Apollo 17's Ron Evans (right).
Photos: RR Auctions

People

Damon, Affleck to collaborate again

Matt Damon plans to reunite with his *Good Will Hunting* writing partner Ben Affleck this year. The *Hereafter* actor is desperate to make progress on a venture he and Affleck have been discussing for ages as their family commitments have always got in the way.

"We've been talking about it for years, so hopefully we'll get to do it. But we also want to make our own film. We've been trying to work together again for 10 years now, but life has taken us in different directions," Damon said.

"Having small kids is big. Most of your energy goes there. Having small kids and living in different cities just means that you don't see each other a lot."

Damon (below) is raising four children—four-year-old Isabella, two-year-old Gia, and three-month old Stella with wife Luisiana, and her 11-year-old daughter Alexia from a previous marriage—while Affleck has daughters Violet, five, and two-year-old Seraphina with wife Jennifer Garner. *Bang Shoubiz*



First-time dad Owen Wilson thrilled

Owen Wilson has become a father. *The Little Fockers* star's girlfriend Jade Duell gave birth to a healthy baby boy who they have named Ford Linton Wilson last Friday in Hawaii.

The baby was reportedly born naturally via a water birth at their oceanfront home in Maui, with Duell's labour lasting 18 hours.

A source said: "Owen and Jade are thrilled! Owen has been doing a

celebratory hula dance all afternoon! It's a beautiful boy and everyone is incredibly happy!"

A source told at that time how first-time dad Wilson, 42, was "very excited and involved" in the pregnancy, adding: "He has been doing research and learning as much as he can. He's super into it and asks a lot of questions to make sure he knows what's going on every step of the way." *Bang Shoubiz*

Price to divorce fame-hungry Reid

Katie Price is demanding a divorce from Alex Reid.

The glamour model (right) has branded her cage-fighting spouse a "fame-hungry sponger" and reportedly banished him to a dressing room in her mansion in Surrey, England.

Price reportedly prepared a statement, but withheld it after Reid, 35, begged her for time to discuss their relationship and come to terms with the split.

A friend quoted her as saying: "It's over. There's no

way we're going to work this out. I want Alex to leave this relationship with a scrap of self-respect."

Price married Reid in Las Vegas in February 2010, but said he has become obsessed with fame, and compared him to first husband, singer Peter Andre, whom she divorced in 2009.

Price reportedly told friends: "I thought Alex was an easy-going athlete who had no interest in showbiz, fame or wanting a television career like Pete." *Bang Shoubiz*

