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## David Daniels, Barbican, London ★★★★★

By Edward Seckerson

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Public perception of the countertenor has moved on from the days when the celebrated English pioneer Alfred Deller, singing one day at a very posh girls' school, was introduced by the headmistress with the words: "I want you all to know, girls, that there is nothing whatever wrong with Mr Deller."

Well, there is nothing whatever wrong with David Daniels. Few would dispute that this is probably the most beautiful countertenor voice in the world. It's just such a complete voice, warm, rounded, effortlessly produced - a richly feminine sound shot through with masculine attitude. Whatever he sings sounds seductive - even his scorn is enticing.

So the prospect of an evening of Italian antiquities - Monteverdi, Frescobaldi and little-known Scarlatti - looked more than a little promising on paper. In practice, though, it proved otherwise, Daniels spreading himself rather thinly over an official programme that displayed a conspicuous lack of variety, hardly ever rising from the horizontal to challenge and engage us. The lively period ensemble - Le Point du Jour, a highly accomplished female quintet led from the harpsichord or organ by Jory Vinikour - offered sweetmeats of Castello, Marini or Scarlatti, but, with respect, it was not them we had come to hear, and with Daniels spending more time off-stage than on, we left for the interval feeling like we'd had the introductory canapés but that the prospect of a meal was nowhere in sight.

Among those canapés was Ottone's monologue from Act I of Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* - alternating between contempt and regret, emotions so well practised by Daniels in his catalogue of jilted lovers that he barely broke sweat - and a secular motet by Alessandro Scarlatti, "Infirmata, vulnerata", whose gently keening monotones did little to alleviate the feeling that Daniels might even be sight-reading.

No, the concert really began at the end with an achingly beautiful arioso "Dormi, ma sappi almen" at the heart of Alessandro Scarlatti's cantata "Perche tacete, regolati concetti?" Ravishing tone, perfect poise - this was why we had come. The encores provided further endorsement. Caccini's little aria antique "Amerilli mia bella" was a caress and Handel's Orlando found perfection in the healing power of sleep. Maybe we wouldn't ask for a refund after all.

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