



## THE ART MUSIC LOUNGE

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### Aksel Rykkvin an Excellent Boy Treble

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**AKSEL! / BACH:** *Jauchzet Gott in Allen Landen* (opening aria only). *Mein gläubiges Herz*. *St. John Passion: Ich folge dir gleichfalls. Bist du bei mir. Magnificat: Quia respexit. Zerreiſet: Angenehmer Zephyrus*. **HANDEL:** *Joshua: Happy, o thrice happy we. Alcina: Chi m'insegna il caro padre?; Barbara! lo ben lo so. Rinaldo: Lascia ch'io pianga. Eternal source of light divine. Messiah: How beautiful are the feet; Thou art gone up on high. Samson: Let the bright Seraphim. Joshua: O had I Jubal's lyre. MOZART: Le Nozze di Figaro: Voi che sapete; Non so più, cosa son, cosa faccio. Exsultate Jubilate: Alleluia* / Aksel Rykkvin, treble; Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment; Nigel Short, conductor / Signum SIGCD435

The history of recording is not really as full of boy trebles, altos etc. as one might think, although they have proliferated much more in the digital era than previously. The granddaddy of them all was young William Pickels of Trinity Church in Pittsburgh, PA, who made a batch of stunning recordings in 1915 for Victor Records. The only problem was that this was an era when the kind of music a boy treble *should* have been singing—Bach, Handel, perhaps a little Mozart, as on this CD—was not at all popular, thus young Pickels

was relegated to what was considered standard soprano fare: Musetta's waltz from *La Bohème*, *Just A-Wearyin' for You*, *Mattinata*, and Luigi Arditi's *Se saran rose* (*Love in Springtime*), also called "the Melba waltz" because it was a showstopper of the great Australian soprano. This was undoubtedly young Pickels' greatest achievement on record (you can hear it [here](http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/700001600/B-16603-Love%20in%20springtime) (<http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/700001600/B-16603-Love in springtime>)), and for whatever reason his voice did not survive puberty. Many years later, in the early 1950s, he narrated on a recording of *Peter and the Wolf*.



William Pickels

Since the 1980s, however, we have had two very fine boy trebles or sopranos, Bejun Mehta and Max Emanuel Cenčić, both of whom became countertenors when they grew up. Mehta had the richer voice and an almost adult feeling for line and interpretation, but as a boy his pitch was occasionally suspect. Cenčić's voice, though not as lush in quality, had an unusual bronze timbre and he was an exceptional interpreter: I still have, and treasure, his phenomenal recording of the Mahler Fourth Symphony conducted by Anton Nanut (Stradivarius). As an adult countertenor, Cenčić's voice is the more spectacular since he has somehow managed to maintain that same bronze color he had as a boy while extending his range downward. I would place him, along with Philippe Jaourssky and Robin Blaze, as the best countertenor currently singing.

What future may hold in store for 12-year-old Aksel Rykkvin has yet to be determined, but it is probably certain that this disc, like Bejun Mehta's, will be his one and only as a treble. Unlike Mehta, who chose a few Baroque arias but (surprisingly) filled his disc with art songs, Rykkvin sticks closely to that type of repertoire I mentioned in the first paragraph, singing music composed for boy soprano (the Bach Cantata No. 51 and Handel's arias from *Alcina*), Cherubino's arias from *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and several other Bach and Handel pieces that are at least technically and emotionally accessible to him. He

does not have the sensuous tone of young Mehta or the bronze quality of Cencič; in fact, just by looking at his photo on the album cover and listening to his voice, I judged him to be no older than 9 or 10, and was thus surprised to learn that he is already 12.

Despite, or perhaps because, of his still-youthful sound, Rykkvin's voice has the kind of penetrating tone that one associates with most boy trebles, allied to a superb technique and flawless sense of pitch that many such singers do not enjoy. His trill is not quite perfect but at least it's there, and the rest of his technical arsenal (turns, grace notes or *gruppetti*, etc.) is perfectly in place. His wonderful legato and sense of style makes it all sound perfectly natural and not forced, always a trap for such singers. Pickels also escaped this, but in listening to some of Cencič's early performances (i.e., Johann Strauss' *Voices of Spring*) one heard some of the technique being so "locked in" that it tended to sound mechanical. Rykkvin almost sounds like the classical equivalent of a natural-born yodeler, joyfully singing his way through music that would daunt a soprano twice his age.

I was a bit disappointed that he didn't record the full Bach Cantata No. 51, but the opening aria is superbly executed and a good starter for this album. The liner notes don't indicate who wrote the variations that he sings in "Lascia ch'io pianga," and towards the end I felt that they were a bit too much of a good thing, but by golly he manages them cleanly. Just about the only drawback I heard on this record was his English diction, which is not terribly close to the way it should sound.

I wish I could be as enthusiastic about the accompaniment by the Age of Enlightenment Orchestra, but to my ears they have deteriorated in both sound quality and musical style from the years when Gustav Leonhardt was conducting them. The reason, of course, is the more stringent adherence to this modern-day style that is supposed to emulate historical performance practice but does not. As a result, the strings are much drier and even a bit whiny in tone compared to the Leonhardt recordings and the brass thinner; only the winds still emerge somewhat sweetly. Even by comparison with, say, John Eliot Gardiner's recording of the Bach Cantata from the early 1980s with soprano Emma Kirkby—whose voice Rykkvin's resembles somewhat—the pallid tone and choppy style of the orchestra almost resembles a parody of correct musical style. Sorry, but that's how I feel and I have the recordings to prove it.


Nonetheless, this certainly isn't Rykkvin's fault; he chose a well-established orchestra that all the critics besides me simply adore. Even more interestingly, he funded his own record through Kickstarter! His goal was 250,000 Norwegian krona (\$30,400) but he actually raised kr264,967 (\$32,220). Good for you, Aksel! Now do us all a favor when you hit puberty, stop singing for a few years, and re-emerge as a tenor or baritone. I'm rooting for you!



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## One thought on “Aksel Rykkvin an Excellent Boy Treble”

### 1. ROBIN HELLIWELL says:

Yes, the voice does sound young for twelve and he is still physically quite small for his age. I wonder if, like Aled Jones, he may retain his treble voice for another couple of years – in which case we may hear more from him yet. I for one hope so

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