



# Handel and Philip Glass, but Make It Fashion



George Condo's portrait of the countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, on the cover of Mr.

**By Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim**

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For a countertenor, music history is a broken line. At one end is the treasury of parts written for castrato singers during the Baroque era; at the other, an explosion of contemporary music. In between is the 19th century: the mainstay of opera, and a countertenor void.

Mr. Costanzo, 36, has just released "ARC," a recording that bridges the Great Countertenor Gap, finding common ground between the music of Handel and Philip Glass. An early-music ensemble, Les Violons du Roy, accompanies Mr. Costanzo's gleaming, often emotionally raw soprano on tracks alternating between the two composers.

“I’m glad I’m a countertenor, even though I can’t sing ‘Tosca’ at all the best opera houses and make my money with that,” he said in a recent interview at his Manhattan apartment. “I’ve had to carve out my own path. And in the end that’s what I find most exciting.”

It’s in the live production he’s created to accompany the album — at the Barnes Foundation, as part of [Opera Philadelphia’s O18 festival](#) this weekend and next, and [at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in November](#) — that Mr. Costanzo can really show off his entrepreneurial chops.

The show, “Glass Handel,” features choreography by Justin Peck. The painter George Condo, who created the cover art for the disc, will produce a

live artwork from behind a backlit scrim. Videos directed by nine artists, including Mark Romanek (better known for his collaborations with Michael Jackson and Taylor Swift), James Ivory, Pix Talarico and Maurizio Cattelan, will play. A small army of “people movers” transport audience members, who remain seated, from one area of the space to another. And everyone, from the dancers to the movers, will wear costumes designed by Raf Simons, of Calvin Klein. Even Mr. Costanzo’s water bottle will be clad in couture.

Though the project was produced in collaboration with Opera Philadelphia, National Sawdust, and the art-fashion media company Visionaire and Cath Brittan, it was Mr. Costanzo who raised the bulk of the budget and inspired artists to contribute their work for free. (The value of those contributions brings the true cost of the show to several times the official \$500,000 budget.)

It’s not the first time Mr. Costanzo has had to hustle to mount a production. In his senior year at Princeton University, he wrote a show about a fictional castrato, unlocking \$35,000 from college funds. Even after a win at the prestigious Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions in 2009, he understood he needed to generate opportunities for himself.

“The Met is great,” he said, “but it’s not going to be my bread and butter. And then what do you do? Do you go around singing Bach in churches and do all the Baroque operas you can in Europe? Or do you create something new?”

This summer he became the first Westerner to perform in a Kabuki show at

a storied theater in Tokyo, in a take on the classic “Tales of Genji” he created in Kyoto in 2014. After each performance, Mr. Costanzo would work through the night on “Glass Handel.”

“I would stay up until 4 or 5 a.m., talking to people in New York on the phone, and then rest so I could sing the next day,” he said. He estimates he spent eight hours a day on fund-raising for eight months.



A still from Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari’s music video for Handel’s “Vivi tiranno.”  
Maurizio Cattelan and Pierpaolo Ferrari

Back in the United States, he befriended Mr. Condo, an amateur lute player who bonded with Mr. Costanzo over readings of Dowland. Mr. Condo

introduced Mr. Simons to the project.

“I’m like, ‘Raf, I can’t raise that much money; I don’t have it in my budget,’” Mr. Costanzo said, recalling his reaction when Mr. Simons agreed to dress the performers. “I already have to raise half a million dollars for this show, and I’m a single person.”

Mr. Simons agreed to donate hundreds of garments and pairs of shoes. He declined to comment on the value of his contribution, and Mr. Costanzo said it was hard to put a dollar figure on the value his high-profile collaborators — and their respective millions of followers on social media — bring to a niche music endeavor.

The videos, too, materialized free of charge, in large part through the intercession of Visionaire. Mr. Cattelan, an enfant terrible of the art world best known for [his 18-karat-gold toilet](#) called “America,” contributed a hallucinogenic collage set to Handel. Mr. Romanek sent in a mesmerizing single-take film of a street dancer gliding to Glass under a freeway overpass in Los Angeles.

“The reason they did it,” Mr. Costanzo said, “is that even though they are at the top of their game, creative freedom means a lot.”

That freedom, ultimately, is what drives him, too.

“I’m 36, and I have a really nice career doing what I do,” he said. “But do I want to be a singer for hire? How do you move the needle? When do you try to make this a turning point? Not only for me, but if I’m really

passionate about getting new audiences for classical music — where are they?”

Glass Handel

Saturday, Sunday and Sept. 30 at the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia; [operaphila.org](http://operaphila.org). And Nov. 26-27 at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Manhattan; [nationalsawdust.org](http://nationalsawdust.org).

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