

Such a night of music, courtesy D'Ambrosio

Steve Winn, Chronicle Arts & Culture Critic

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Franc D'Ambrosio is a showman first and foremost, a Broadway leading man who knows how to shape and sell a song for maximum effect. When it came time to revisit "The Phantom of the Opera" at the Empire Plush Room on Tuesday night, the man who sang the title role in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical here for five years in the 1990s gave the audience what they craved and more.



Turning away for a moment to set his face and conjure a mood, D'Ambrosio launched into a "Phantom" medley that drove inexorably to "The Music of the Night." With his hands and fingers clenched and swimming through the air, the actor reinhabited the role with aching looks, the pleading timbre of his voice and a haunting pianissimo on the last floated high note. You almost had to blink to realize that D'Ambrosio wasn't back on the Curran stage in full costume and that signature white half-mask.

In one sense, the song didn't really belong in a show devoted to music from the movies. The original stage version of "Phantom" dwarfs the negligible film adaptation that followed. But D'Ambrosio knew better than to come back to San Francisco and let his adopted-hometown fans down. It just wouldn't be a night of music from this performer without "The Music of the Night."

Not that that was all the opening-night crowd got in "Franc D'Ambrosio's Hollywood." The singer, whose affect and stage presence work like an instant heat lamp onstage, sailed through an hour and change worth of A-list numbers. He did "Singin' in the Rain" and "Moon River," "Some Enchanted Evening" and "Danny Boy," "Puttin' on the Ritz" and "Let's Face the Music and Dance" (those two from a Fred Astaire tribute medley). Stepping boldly into the past, he went down on one knee and flung out an arm to invoke Al Jolson in "Mammy." Much closer to home, he did back-to-back versions of "Speak Softly," the theme song he sang in "Godfather III."

Not all of this was perfectly judged or polished Tuesday. D'Ambrosio was premiering his new act, after three years of touring a cabaret show of Broadway music around the country. He rushed and fumbled some of his spoken patter and spaced out on the lyrics of "Be My Love" before starting over and nailing the song beautifully. His voice sounded a little raw and unsteady in the early going. You kept wanting him to take a deep breath, slow down and relax.

D'Ambrosio is one of those performers who keeps an audience rooting for him. His eyes crinkle shut when he smiles. He talks about his Italian family in the Bronx with a palpable throb of love. The 14-inch black-and-white Zenith TV that he watched as a kid takes on a Proustian glow in his recollections. That was where he and his large family gathered, on Sunday nights, to take in the movies that made him want to be an actor and singer instead of a priest.

If D'Ambrosio's show runs to patches of pat nostalgia for the "dream factory" where "Hollywood royalty" carved out "legendary careers," it also has plenty of charm and theatrical appeal. In one winning sequence, he sings "Talk to the Animals" both in perfectly elucidated English and Italian. Then he sprints through an ever-quickening Italian-language "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang." That's a tribute to his voice teacher from Lucca, who was in the front row Tuesday and stood up and took a bow.

D'Ambrosio, backed by pianist Chuck Larkin, pays homage to the classic Hollywood songs and singers without trying to mimic or reproduce them. His voice, with its nimble register shifts, dramatic coloring, unexpected emphases and sudden expansiveness, is its own dream machine. Standing off to one side of the stage, he begins "Some Enchanted Evening" as a kind of hushed interior monologue before opening the lens to full vocal CinemaScope. The little-known "On a Night Such As This" becomes a lively, engaging narrative. "Moon River" floats by in dreamy long phrases.

"Franc D'Ambrosio's Hollywood" may not be a finished product yet, but the singer himself is as fascinating to watch and hear as ever. The high notes and a grounded, grateful humility about his life in show business go hand in hand. After a sweet and judiciously restrained "Danny Boy," D'Ambrosio waited for the applause to die down. "Not bad," he said with an impish shrug, "for an Italian."



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