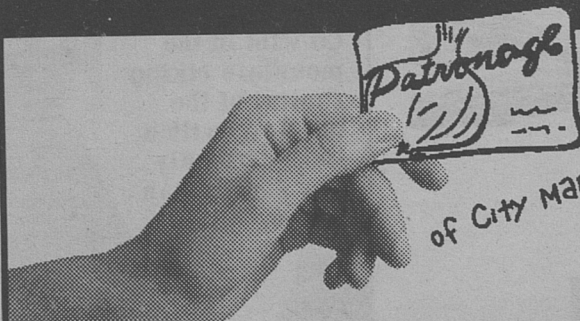


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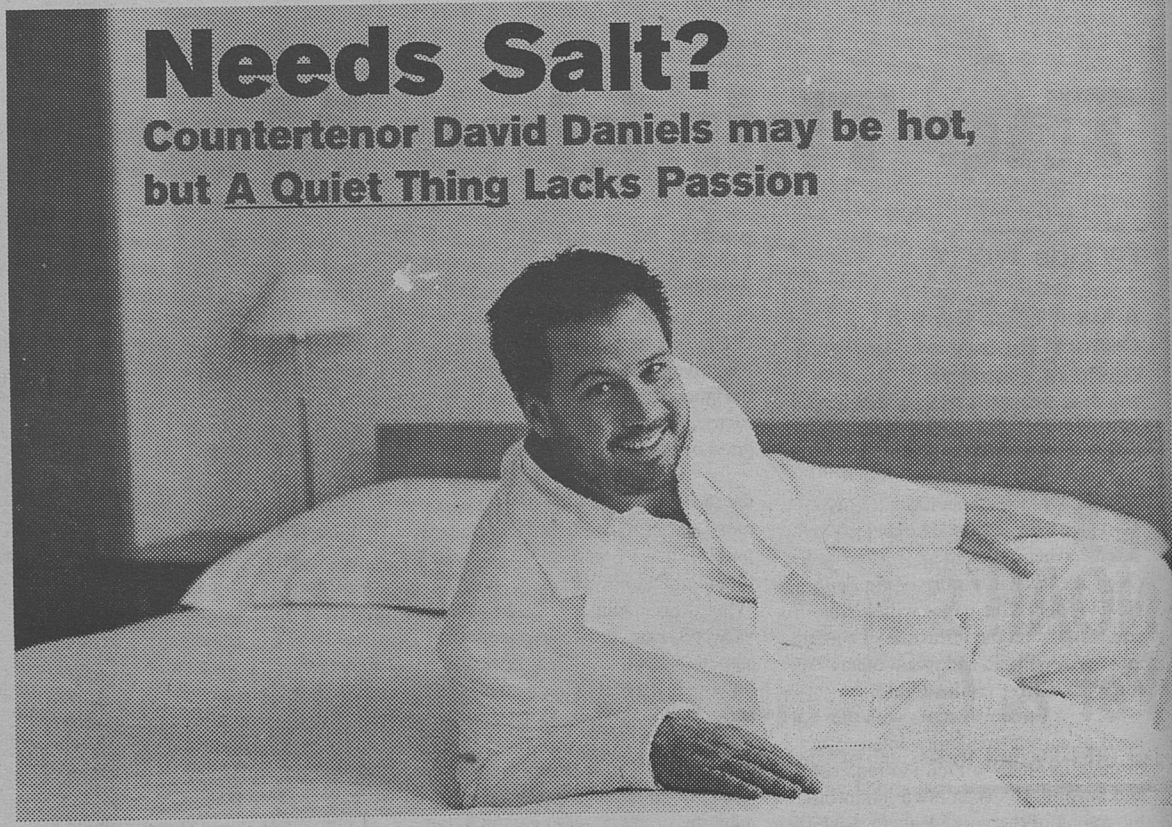
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## Needs Salt?

Countertenor David Daniels may be hot, but **A Quiet Thing** Lacks Passion

BY FRANCESCA SUSANNA

**David Daniels**  
*A Quiet Thing*  
Virgin Classics CD

**D**avid Daniels seems to be just about the hottest thing going in the world of classical singing these days. Besides being a true countertenor – which is sometimes known as a falsetto – he is unique because he is openly gay and has been with his current boyfriend since college. He is handsome in a burly, yet boyish way and looks like a milk-fed David Duchovny, which has not hurt his rise to stardom, such as it is. He has packed Carnegie Hall, gets all the best opera roles written for his type of voice, and has released several well-received cds.

Countertenors are something of a novelty in the classical music world. It's not that they haven't existed before now, but they have not been much recognized. Recently they have begun to take the place of the mezzo-sopranos, who had taken the place of the castrati.

The castrati were a shameful but fascinating musical phenomenon that flourished during the Baroque era (roughly 1600-1750). At the time, women were forbidden from the stage and church choirs, but the soprano voice was nonetheless much prized. Prepubescent boys were sometimes picked out of boys' choirs or sold into musical service by desperately poor parents, then neutered so that their voices remained high. They took the female parts in opera, but there were also male parts, such as the title roles of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* and *Rinaldo*, written specifically for the

high castrato voice.

Daniels' latest cd, *A Quiet Thing*, is an eclectic collection of songs accompanied by a single guitar. The songs run the gamut from Renaissance Spain to Stephen Foster with some English ballads thrown in. It includes two songs that, until Daniels' renditions, never failed to move me to the brink of tears: Schubert's "Ave Maria" and a Virginia folk song, "Oh, Shenandoah."

When Luciano Pavarotti takes his first breath to begin "Ave Maria," I am drawn immediately to a dark stable where a frightened girl of fourteen is about to give birth, out of wedlock, to a messiah. Although I don't understand a word of the lyrics beyond the title, "Ave Maria" does this to me, no matter who sings it – with the exception of David Daniels. He is well trained, his voice is true, and his technique is excellent, but the song doesn't seem to affect him. He comes across as more concerned with his pretty voice than with the music.

"Oh, Shenandoah" is another song that never fails to transport me, to make me fall achingly in love with a time and a place and a few people who are no longer there and whom I barely remember. It is a song that opens up the cupboard doors of my memory to reveal only a glimpse of all that and just for a moment. It breaks my heart every time I hear it. And Daniels' singing of "Oh,

Shenandoah" breaks my heart too, but for a different reason: its lack of passion or depth or connection.

Perhaps his voice has yet to reach its full maturity, or perhaps he is still too young and raw to give a song like "Ave Maria" what it needs. His voice is pinched when it should soar. It holds the listener back by the elbow, stuck in a dirty kitchen, when she should be transported completely, far beyond the mundane to the glorious. Nor does he sound like he "just happens to be singing" as a friend of mine – the assistant musical director of a theater – told a couple of the singers, and which is the way the singer of a folk song should sound. Perhaps he's just not into the songs, but his voice seems empty. His renditions need something the way a fabulous dish made of the best ingredients by a great chef sometimes just needs salt.

If what Daniels' copious press says is true – that his voice is magical, capable of amazing feats of embellishment, that it is 'ferocious,' 'supple,' 'muscular' – then the songs on this cd are perhaps not the best vehicle for such a voice. The collection as a whole is flat, it is monotonous, the songs all sound the same. The trills and rises are lackluster and disappointing. He sounds bored, and all the training and all the technique and all the talent in the world can't make up for that. ▼

*Francesca Susanna lives, writes, and listens to music in Burlington.*