

The Routledge Companion to Voice and Identity

Doing Voice My Way: renegotiating male vocal identity at adolescence

Martin Ashley

The expression “doing boy” is a phrase popular with writers who stress the performative nature of gender. For boys beginning puberty and experiencing the change of voice, the difficulty of controlling squeaks and cracks is reason enough not to “do voice”. The secure, unchanged boy voice, however, has over many decades found a ready audience amongst older music listeners. “Doing voice” for some of these boys has been a way of life that has brought them success and even fame. The change of voice for them is literally a crisis – a “turning point”. They must find a new voice, and a new audience, for their former audience will gradually desert them in favour of the next “superstar treble of the moment”. They will be making their choices as they begin to assert their own identities and break free of the influence of the parents and teachers who have guided and often formulated their pre-adolescent careers.

The voice change they experience is commonly portrayed in the literature as a biological and acoustic event, casting the young singer as a hapless victim of nature, but this is not the case. Individual will, or “vocal agency” opens up significant areas of choice, of repertoire but also of vocal range and profile. The fledgling vocalists must make these life-course choices whilst they are experiencing cognitive, emotional, and social growth every bit as dramatic and significant as the changes in their bodies. Moreover, the neuroscience of adolescence tells of risk taking, sensation seeking and heightened emotional reactivity, particularly when in the company of peers who may have quite different views on how boys should sing. This chapter looks at young male singers, previously with high public profiles as children, who have responded in quite different ways to the social and technical challenges posed by the loss of their former vocal identities. The one thing they have in common is the determination to “do voice” as they choose.

Martin Ashley trained as a middle school music teacher and worked in a variety of school settings before moving to the University of the West of England, where he was awarded an AHRC funded post-doctoral fellowship for musical learning and boys’ understanding of voice. On moving to Edge Hill University as Head of Education Research, he founded the Centre for Learner Identity Studies (CLIS) and taught specialist modules on vocal identity for the music PGCE. He received a substantial further AHRC grant to work with the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain and the University of York on strategies to engage boys in singing during the period of adolescence, subsequently publishing widely on youth masculinity and singing during early adolescence. His most recent book was *Singing in the Lower Secondary School* for OUP and since retirement from full-time work he has continued as series editor for OUP’s *Emerging Voices* choral series, and as editor-in-chief of the research journal of the Association of British Choral Directors. He has also collaborated with a consultant paediatrician on the timing of puberty and voice change, developing particular interests in bioarchaeology and historic trends in voice change and gender identity, which form the substance of his forthcoming book *Dead Composers and Living Boys*.