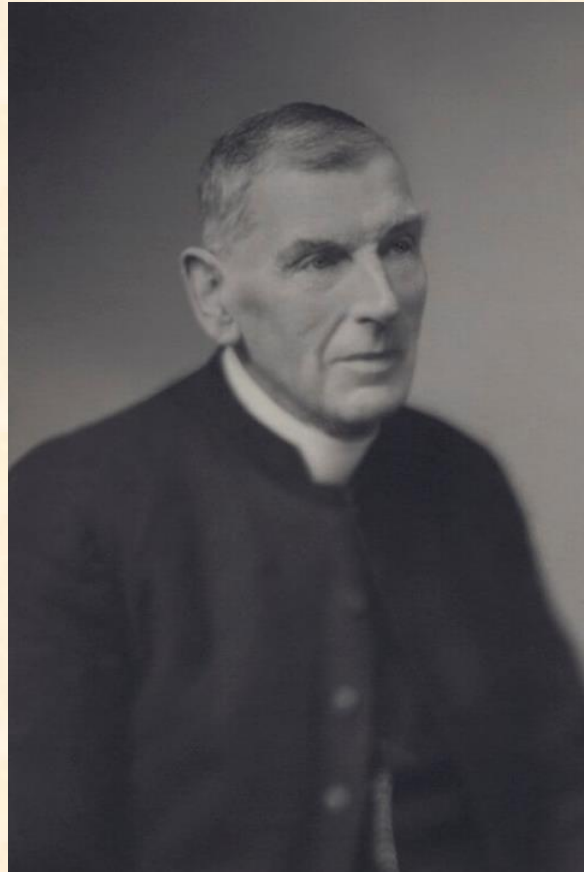


The Reverend Edmund Hoarce Fellowes of Windsor: Heroic Musicologist or Progenitor of the Perceptual Stereotype?

Martin Ashley PhD

Edmund Fellowes was a minor canon of St. George's Chapel Windsor from 1900 until 1951, a remarkable tenure that saw him serve no less than five different sovereigns. His name will be familiar to generations of choir singers if for no reason other than that the familiar words "edited by Edmund Fellowes" are printed on the copies put before them. In addition to his clerical duties, which he carried out with the utmost dedication, Fellowes was one of the most eminent musicologists of his day. Quite where we would be without his lifelong labours rediscovering and making available the music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it would be hard to say. In diligence and dedication he probably has no equal. In recent years, however, his legacy has come under the microscope on account of its association with upward transposition. Andrew Johnstone has this to say. "Fellowes adopted minor-3rd-higher transposition as a rule of thumb in his performing editions of the 1920s and 30s . . . use of editions such as these, pitched purely according to editorial whim, remains widespread".



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Johnstone's charge of "editorial whim" is a little disconcerting.ⁱ Richard Turbet makes a similar one, cautioning that whilst "his [Fellowes'] writings are always worth consideration [they] need to be read with an eye to the state of knowledge and the opinions prevalent at the time". Elsewhere he takes Fellowes to task for inventing the term "Great Service" to fit his theory of a pre-existing genre for which Byrd, Tallis, Parsons and Sheppard composed. The concept was unknown, Renaissance composers did not use the term and "some musicologists [have] realised that Fellowes was misguided".ⁱⁱ Simon Ravens levels similar charges,ⁱⁱⁱ not only at Fellowes, but at Ouseley and Wulstan, the apparently unholy trinity that bears the brunt of responsibility for the fact that "transpositions of the Fellowes type are by now so familiar and firmly established that they have acquired a time-honoured authenticity of their own that will be difficult, and perhaps even undesirable, to shake off".^{iv} Ouseley is now known to have been in significant error regarding organ pipe lengths and pitches,^v whilst for all his undoubted scholarship, Wulstan's views on the topic of pitch never amounted to more than "assertion".^{vi} My own view, after listening repeatedly to Parsons' *Ave Maria* (a favourite motet of mine) at historic pitch and

in the more common upwardly transposed version, is that it is more than a little desirable to shake off this spurious “time-honoured authenticity”.

Not least amongst reasons for the persistence of upward transposition is the simple fact that most music libraries are well stocked with Fellowes or Fellowes inspired editions and to replace them all will be a considerable and some would argue unjustifiable expense. The reasons go deeper however and, as I am going to suggest, are firmly rooted in the *perceptual stereotype*. Perceptual stereotype, or the “sound in our heads” was a term used by Graham Welch and David Howard in their influential paper on gendered voice in the cathedral choir.^{vii} In order to explain the frequency with which girls in cathedral choirs were misidentified as boys, they reached the position that “a psychological process of categorical perception permits the listener to determine the degree of match between their personal male voice archetype and the heard example”^{viii}. Jacob Sagrans, in his 2016 doctoral thesis on early music and the choir of King’s College Cambridge seems to imply that the sound of the boys of that choir and others like it (mainly Oxbridge) constituted a perceptual stereotype for a critical mass of those behind the early professional vocal ensembles specialising in early music. He wrote that

This was likely because King’s and other English church choirs were performing and recording early music with the English sound before these professional vocal ensembles emerged en masse around 1980, and also because many professional ensemble singers and choral directors in England trained as trebles, choral scholars, and organ scholars in church choirs that exhibit the English sound.

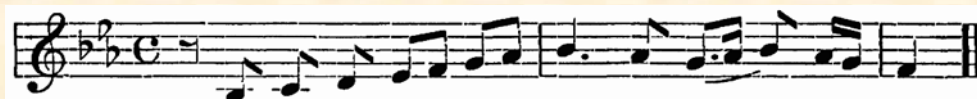
Clare Hall goes a step further and associates the “perceptual stereotype” with the dominance of the male patriarchy.

This perceptual subjectivity demonstrates what Foreman (2001) refers to as a prejudice that does not permit listening ‘with clean ears’ because the audience associates what they hear with perceptual stereotypes. In this case the audience was biased towards hearing a cathedral tone as ‘male’. This example of girls’ voices perceived as male also demonstrates how successful the musical patriarchy of the church is in promoting gender norms distinct from the secular world.

Why else were the young women Clerkes of Oxenford at first celebrated for “sounding like boys”? Boys, though they are important players, are not however here the principal point of contention. Of somewhat greater significance than the boys (for whom girls can apparently substitute as misidentified boys) is once again our old friend the falsettist countertenor. Notable and influential scholars and performers such as Philip Brett, John Butt, Roy Goodman and Charles Daniels would all have left Kings with the Kings sound of their own boyhoods “in their heads” – a sound very much characterised by the countertenors. Today’s falsettists are sustained by a strong cultural subjectivity and a high degree of cultural capital in the form of investment in training and the recorded repertoire. Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*^{ix} might also be invoked as an explanation for the reproduction of musical subjectivities when a contrary direction suggested by scholarship points in a different direction.

Countertenors of the Deller and post-Deller era were not known to Fellowes in the 1920s and 30s. According to Sir Jack Westrup “Until Deller, the [male] alto was regarded as a sort of vice [as they were associated with an unpleasant hooting sound] that one had to put up with. Many cathedral organists have groaned under the burden of their altos ... particularly as they did not become more pleasant with age”.^x Fellowes had somehow to accommodate such voices when he set out to promote Tudor repertoire and was consequently faced with an apparently intractable problem, one that had driven George Garrett at St. John’s College amongst others to prefer boy altos. According to Garrett, contributing to John Curwen’s 1891 survey, “As regards the break question, the advantage, in my experience, is wholly on the boys’ side. A well-trained boy will sing such a solo as ‘O thou that tellest,’

or such a passage as the following without letting his break be felt at all. This passage, which is from the anthem, 'Hear my crying,' by Weldon, I have heard sung by an adult alto, who broke badly between E flat and F. The effect was funny beyond description.^{xi}



Upward transposition did much to alleviate such problems and must have seemed to Fellowes not only a workable solution but perhaps one justified by the brighter sonority thus achieved by the whole choir. The “rightness” of this sound has subsequently proved to be an entrenched subjectivity which disciples of Wulstan have found difficult to shed. Other ensembles of more recent foundation have increasingly questioned this brightness, though for as long as the falsettist choral countertenor exists, work will be found for him. Performances in which high modal tenors take the part are still the exception rather than the rule despite the weight of post-Fellowes scholarship.

Whist this debate rages, very few people pause to consider the consequences for boys’ voices of upward transposition -or not as the case may be. Whether the capabilities of boys’ voices strengthen or weaken the case against upward transposition is the topic of the next short essay in this series, *Upward Transposition and Boys*.

ⁱ Johnstone, A. (2003) “‘As it was in the beginning’”: Organ and Choir Pitch in Early Anglican Church Music’, *Early Music*, 31(4): 506 – 25, p521.

ⁱⁱ Turbet, R. (1990) The Great Service: Byrd, Tomkins and Their Contemporaries, and the Meaning of 'Great', *Musical Times*, 131 (1761), p277. (2007) Byrd's Great Service, the Jewel in the Crown of Anglican Music, *A Byrd Celebration, lectures at the Church Music Association of America*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ravens, S (2014) *The Supernatural Voice: a history of high male singing*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press. pp212 and 79.

^{iv} Johnstone, A. op. cit. p522.

^v Ravens, S. op. cit. p79, Johnstone, A. op. cit. p521.

^{vi} Allred, W. (2008) *Edmund Hooper: A Study of His Style Compared to Orlando Gibbons and Prevailing Tudor Polyphony*. DMA thesis, University of North Carolina.

^{vii} Welch, G., and Howard, D. (2002) Gendered Voice in the Cathedral Choir, *Psychology of Music*, 30: 102 – 120.

^{viii} Op. cit. p118.

^{ix} Bourdieu, P. (2010) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Routledge Classics

^x Westrup, J. cited in Alfred Deller, 100 years on, and what a lot has changed. *Semibrevity blog about early music pioneers*. [Alfred Deller, 100 years on, and what a lot has changed. - Semibrevity](#) Accessed September 2025.

^{xi} Curwen, J. (1891) *The Boys Voice: A book of practical information on the training of boys’ voices for church choirs &c*. London: Curwen and Sons, p59.