

‘Looking for Sopranos that can sing High and not Wobble’: the improbably high pitch imagined by David Wulstan

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It would not be an understatement to describe the late David Wulstan (1937 – 2017) as a “towering influence upon the early music movement”. His legacy lives on in many of today’s most well-known professional early music ensembles including the Sixteen, the Tallis Scholars and several others who fell under the spell of the Clerkes of Oxenford. The Clerkes were of course known for the sustained, stratospherically high singing of their young female sopranos and the consequent practice of transposing the music up by a minor third.



Andrew Parrott’s view is this:

: . . .the treble, revived occasionally during the early decades of the 17th century, called for ‘a high cleere sweete voice’, but the ‘very high treble’ seems to be a 20th-century invention, evidently born of the high-pitch hypothesis and of a modern appetite for ‘extra and desirable brilliance’.ⁱ

My own view is that it is indeed a twentieth century invention and the use of high sopranos and upward transposition does not sit at all easily with the ambition to hear the music the way its composers heard it. Of course, there are those who argue that such an ambition is unachievable and that there is nothing at all wrong with modern day artists adding their own interpretation and embellishment to the music of the past. I am not here to have that argument. I am here simply to ask the question that Wulstan never asked. *How high should [can] boys sing?*

Modern high pitch choirs certainly have their following and do have seem to have created a certain appetite for extra brilliance. The one thing they do not have is boys amongst their membership. As far as choral music of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is concerned, G5 is “high”. It is a tone higher than the average range of A3-F5 given by Cooksey, so already represents the difference between the highly trained boy with unchanged voice who can truly claim to be a “treble” and more average boys who are better classified as means, particularly once C5 becomes the top of their range on becoming midvoice I at the onset of puberty.

How did this belief in boys who could sing, for long periods, at the high pitch of the Clerkes of Oxenford come about? Paradoxically, it was the alto part, not the soprano part that was responsible for the high pitch. This might set alarm bells ringing when we remind ourselves that one of Fellowes’s justifications for high pitch transposition was to make parts singable by the male altos of his day. Wulstan was himself was a countertenor at a time when that voice was in its ascendancy after Afred Deller and John Whitworth. He was to use the phrase “the broken glass sound” to describe what he was looking for in countertenors, a sound that was loud through “the number of frequency ranges in the formants”.ⁱⁱ He was also clear that, though it was critical for all parts to balance, “the altos led”. The whole ensemble,

therefore, was influenced by this broken glass sound of enhanced upper partials. Sally Dunkley has confirmed that the whole choir had to be tutored to sing in the same way, loudly but not forcefully, with nasal resonance and with little or no vibrato.

The Clerkes of Oxenford had begun as a male voice student choir, - one in other words comprised of the young, essentially untrained voices who would in all probability dismay singing teachers such as Janice Chapman who wrote, without disclosing the particular Oxbridge choir to which she referred:

“The choral director was basically an organist with choral skills but not personal vocal proficiency or training . . . The college provided a singing lesson each week (1 hour) for choral scholars when individual vocal problems were meant to be addressed. The recommended voice teachers were often from a similar academic and musical background”.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was when Wulstan decided he needed upper voices to exploit his developing interest in the music of Sheppard than he posted an advertisement for “sopranos that can sing high and not wobble”.^{iv} He was presumably at the time immersed in a sound world traceable from Bernard Rose’s time as a Salisbury chorister. It would not have been easy or practical for Wulstan as a student to recruit and sustain boys even if he had wanted to, any more than it was for me as a student in Canterbury however much I admired what Allan Wicks was doing. There would therefore have been an entirely practical reason to advertise for sopranos who could sing without wobble.

In addition to his pioneering work with the Clerkes, Wulstan was himself of course a formidable scholar.^v He wrote in a paper co-authored with the physiologist G.M. Ardran that “The treble was a very high boy's voice (reaching *bb*") whereas the mean was the normal boy's voice".^{vi} His main source for this was Charles Butler’s ‘The Principles of Music’ of 1636 in which he appeared to place a lot of faith. That the mean was (and still is) the normal boy’s voice is not in dispute. The evidence that the mean range of C to D5 is the most secure, sustainable and controllable part of most boys’ voices today is there for all to see and amply expounded in my own writing. As Praetorius remarked, it requires additional coaching to get boys up to G5 or perhaps A5.^{vii} Such coaching is successfully undertaken on a daily basis in today’s cathedrals. There are, of course, occasionally some boys who can reach *bb*” (B5). The out-of-range high soprano C now enshrined in Allegri’s *Miserere* by Rockstro’s mistaken 1880 transposition can be managed by the occasional boy who can somehow reach even higher than Wulstan required.

These, however, are exceptions and more to the point, as Peter Phillips has remarked, such young voices “lack the stamina” needed for the kind of touring and concert performance regime required of singers in such choirs as the Tallis Scholars.^{viii} The irony is that Wulstan believed he was being objective when he stated that:

In church music of the early seventeenth century, found in ‘cathedral’ type part books, no problem exists, for two reasons: first, the part books are what we might call eponymous, and secondly the music is at church, i.e. organ pitch, which is a known factor.

This was written in 1967, long before the Early English Organ project turned such received wisdom upside down. We have to be very careful when we claim that we “know” something, particularly when the evidence is as fragmentary as is common in early music sources. It is, in retrospect, extraordinary that Wulstan and other similarly minded individuals never thought to base their observations on the many living boys potentially available for study and it is largely upon that omission that I rest my own case. Though influential choirs such as The Sixteen seem to persist with high pitch, alternatives at pitches realistic for boys are increasingly available. There are, for example, two recent recordings of Mundi’s *In Medio Chori* Magnificat. One is by York Minster Choir and is sung at the pitch adopted by the Timothy Symons edition (*Cantus Firmus*). The other, by the Sixteen is sung a tone higher. That the

pitch chosen by Christophers is uncomfortable, even for today's highly trained boy choristers, ought to alert us to a possible error. Meanwhile, as Simon Ravens has noted "in our own time, experiments with boys singing Tudor polyphony at high pitch have been very rare, and even more rarely successful."^{ix} Surely, if few or even no boys can sing sustainably with a "sweet shrill voice" in the G5 – C6 range (g'' – c''') the entire enterprise from Clerkes to Sixteen is based upon a demonstrable falsehood.

If you have found this essay instructive and have been able to stomach its contents, perhaps you are ready for my essay on the Fourth Evening Service by Thomas Weelkes. Do look out for it!

Boat of Garten, September 2025.

ⁱ Parrott, A. (2015) *Composers' Intentions? Lost traditions of musical performance*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press. P49

ⁱⁱ BBC Radio Three, *The Early Music show* with Catherine Bott and Sally Dunkley. [Bing Videos](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Chapman, J. (1996) The Journey of a Boy treble to Oxbridge Choral Scholar to Adult Professional Soloist, *Pan European Voice Conference*, September 1995, Royal Academy of Music, London.

^{iv} Early Music Show op cit.

^v Wulstan, D. (1979) Vocal colour in English sixteenth-century polyphony. *Journal of the Plainsong & Medieval Music Society*, 2: 19

^{vi} Wulstan, D and Ardran, G. (1967) The alto or countertenor voice, *Music & Letters*, 48 (1): 17 – 22.

^{vii} Praetorius, M. (1614) *Syntagma musicum II, 17-18 and 20*.

^{viii} Phillips, P. (2005) Treble or Soprano, Performing Tallis, *Early Music*, 33 (3): 495 – 502.

^{ix} Ravens, S. (2014) *The Supernatural Voice: history of high male singing*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press. P82.