

To make again sweete musicke with the fearest voyces of England

Martin Ashley

Period Voices

The “fearest voyces of all cathedral churches in England” included those of the ten boy choristers of St Paul’s Cathedral, London in 1575. A visitor from France had never heard the like of their “sweete musicke”. It is tempting to assume that he and his gentleman friend who did “get to the quier” would have heard something similar to what we expect today when we think of the ‘English choral tradition’. It is unlikely that they did. The boys of 1575 almost certainly made a sound different from today’s expectations, as did the men in the rows behind them. We take it for granted now that a scholarly performance of *Messiah* will be accompanied by period instruments. Is it not about time that the choral community gave similar consideration to period voices – for the baroque era certainly, but perhaps even more importantly for the sixteenth century?

A traditional objection to period voices has been that human beings cannot be reconstructed to scholarly specifications in the way instruments can. Research into historical anthropometry (the study of past body types) suggests that this is a needlessly defeatist view. We might better proceed on the assumption that the ‘instruments’ exist and the problem has more to do with learning

how to employ them in performance.

Pitch and Disposition

The most profound, single change we need to make concerns performing pitch. It is no longer exceptional to hear expert recordings of performances at historically informed pitch by choirs specialising in early music. My aim in this article is to encourage a greater sense of adventure amongst a wider range of choirs, perhaps closer to the choirs that actually performed than some of today’s highly polished early music groups. To perform at historic pitch will require shifting singers around, but as I shall show, this need not be a permanent shift. It requires nothing more than curiosity, open-mindedness and the willingness to experiment. It may also be necessary to review time honoured training methods, particularly where children’s voices are concerned, but is this such a bad thing?

There are now available to the performing community three Tudor-style organs reconstructed by Goetze and Gwynn under the auspices of John Harper’s *Early English Organ Project* (the Wingfield and Wetheringsett organs of 2002) and *Experience of Worship Project* (the St Teilo’s organ of 2010). These instruments, constructed with 5’ and 10’ pipe

length scales in place of the more familiar 8’ and 16’, present many exciting performance challenges, none more so than when organ and voices must sound together. Those wishing to understand in more depth the meaning of terms such as ‘quire pitch’ will find Andrew Johnstone’s extensive work on the subject particularly instructive and illuminating.¹

Performing with Tudor organs confirms the mistake of transposing sixteenth century music upwards by as much as a minor third (i.e. to the erroneous pitch of editions likely still to be in most choir libraries). Early attempts at historic choral pitch were greeted with much scepticism. The sound was said to be ‘muddy’ and ‘lifeless’. It was sometimes contrasted unfavourably with what was perceived as the ‘thrilling’ sound achieved by sopranos specialising in giving life to David Wulstan’s theory of a lost high treble voice. More importantly, singers reported difficulties in fitting the parts to their voice ranges. This, surely, confirmed that the music had to be transposed upwards?

The mistake had been to assume that what had *not* changed was the conception of soprano, alto, tenor and bass, whilst what *had* changed was the anthropometry of the singers. As I have suggested, we need to take a somewhat inverted view. Singers’

bodies have changed less than is often imagined. The timing of puberty in boys was not as much later as is popularly believed², neither were adult heights as short as popular folklore would maintain. Average adult heights in the sixteenth century were greater than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries³. We need to keep our singers but dispense with SATB. Starting at the top, we need to put aside modern-day notions of soprano. Perhaps more importantly still, we need to dispense with the modern notion of a boy (or young girl) treble. Most boys in the sixteenth century sang a part known as mean or medius (sometimes spelt 'meane' or 'meany'). The range of this part, in today's notation at 440Hz pitch standard, was approximately from middle C to the D an octave above. Although a boy's unchanged voice can, in theory, descend on average to the A below middle C (A3), in practice the singing of modern English boys, whilst increasingly powerful towards the high G5 lacks any serious presence or projection from middle E downwards.

To have been effective throughout the polyphony sixteenth century boys must have had relatively more presence and character in the lower range of their voices. There are various ways of reproducing this profile in living boys today, each of which has a different impact upon the timbre created and the type of boy chosen. Anybody who has witnessed live performances by German choirs where boys with unchanged voices sing alto will appreciate the potential here. This is a topic beyond the scope of the present article, but the interested reader is referred to texts such as Kenneth Phillips⁴.

The one complication that needs to be allowed at this juncture is that a higher boy voice did exist in the sixteenth century. This was known as treble but is not to be confused with today's tendency to call boys on the soprano line trebles. Treble parts are found alongside mean parts in music written before 1549 but there is no evidence that they ever ascended to the stratospheric heights proposed by Wulstan. They largely died out with the publication of the 1549 prayer book, Protestant sensibilities approving only of the less florid mean

voice. Interestingly, treble singing as high as today's G5 may have persisted towards the end of the century in contexts such as the theatrical performances of the chorister/actor boys of St. Paul's and the Chapel Royal.⁵

If Latin music composed prior to 1549 is to be sung there is a complication with the mean parts which, prior to 1549 when a treble part also existed, tended to be lower than the post-1549 part of mean for all boys. They could descend right to the very bottom of possible phonation for an unchanged boy voice (e.g. Ab below middle C). Fierce scholarly arguments have raged as to whether these mean parts were sung by boys or men, but the winning side currently appears to be that of Andrew Parrott, whose extensive and painstaking research shows that these low means were invariably boys.⁶ Assuming Parrott is right, the question then arises of what kind of boys. Would they, could they, have been unchanged voices, or were they voices that were beginning to change in a manner similar to what we understand today as 'cambiata'? Here we are confronted with complex difficulties concerning the historic timing of puberty and documentary evidence of the ages of sixteenth century choristers. This is a fascinating topic for the student of boy voices, but we must move on.

The voice parts below the mean were the contratenors (often two). If we are to avoid confusing today's soprano (called treble) with the sixteenth century treble we must be even more careful not to confuse the contratenor with today's counter-tenor. If sung at historic pitch, the contratenor parts prove awkward and sometimes ineffective for the falsetto production of the counter-tenor. Previously, this was taken as evidence that the music must have been sung at higher pitches. Early music scholars today, however, are united in the belief that the falsetto voice was rarely if ever used. This is a major departure from popular notions of the 'English choral tradition'. Ears need to adjust to the absence of the distinctive falsetto timbre. Parrott is recommended on this topic, also Simon Ravens' book *The Supernatural Voice*.⁷

The contratenor part needs to be

sung by the lighter, higher tenors that are available in the choir. Sixteenth century contratenor parts never go as high as the Pavarotti C and should be within the reach of any higher-voiced male singer who is adventurous enough to develop his range as far as Ab4. What, then, are the counter-tenors to do, assuming the choir has some? Possibilities range from sitting out or having a free day (not as outrageous as it sounds – there are plenty of orchestral players for whom this is normal practice) to joining the basses or tenors. It needs to be stressed that if the choir is not a specialist early music group, this is not a permanent arrangement! Much will depend upon whether the individual singer is a trained counter-tenor or simply a bass singing in falsetto. As with the boy question, the differences here are beyond the scope of the present article. Peter Giles' book may help⁸, and Jenevora Williams' book is strongly recommended when dealing with any adolescent singers aspiring to be counter-tenors.⁹

More needs to be said about tenors and baritones. We tend today to prize the tenor voice highly. Really good tenors can be hard to come by, particularly for the smaller, amateur choir. This was not the case in the sixteenth century. The tenor voice then was the ordinary, relatively undistinguished man's voice.¹⁰ The very word tenor, of course, comes from the 'tenore' who held the cantus firmus, a plain, easier melody with longer notes around which more skilful singers sang more florid parts. Without wishing to insult those who have cultivated a fine baritone voice, there are many (perhaps a majority) of male choral singers we can place on the sixteenth century tenor lines instead of their usual allocation to the bass line as baritones. Problem solved provided the conductor is diplomatic!

And so, to the bass line. This does require true basses rather than baritones. Just as the lighter tenors might tackle the higher range up to Ab4, so the profundo basses can really exploit the richness of their lower range. Both opportunities need to be seen as highly positive ones that perhaps counter a worrying tendency in modern choral singers



William Byrd



Orlando Gibbons



Thomas Tallis



to gravitate to undemanding ranges that do not fully exploit the voice – a sort of universal ‘baritone’ for men and ‘mezzo’ for women. If this is a controversial topic, it is one worth airing.

Progress, Prospects and Problems

There are now plenty of specialist CDs that allow us to hear what sixteenth century music performed at historic pitch without counter-tenors sounds like. A particular favourite of mine is the well-known Parsons *Ave Maria* recorded by the Magnificat group directed by Phillip Cave. I would never dream of calling this “muddy” or “lifeless”! It has a profound, rich, prayerful sonority that would be completely destroyed by upward transposition. Most tastes, of course, are acquired. Having acquired the taste though, high pitch performances of this piece jar my ear considerably.

Some years ago, I recorded the verse part of Gibbons’ well-known *This is the Record of John* with a boy. I was interested at the time in boy altos and the boy was head chorister at a cathedral. He was, as is so commonly the case, singing ‘treble’ in a voice that had begun to change. I was well-pleased with the resultant lovely tone right down to Ab3 but unfortunately, we were working from a high-pitch edition (Palmer) in the days before I had begun seriously to study sixteenth century pitch. A landmark recording of this piece was made by the choir of Magdalen College Oxford under Bill Ives in 2004. It is sung at historic pitch with the boys as means. This is remarkable, for as Peter Phillips writes:

“...if there was only one boys’ part (the ‘treble’), then the lower part (the ‘meane’) would have been sung by altos (who may or may not have been falsettists). If one accepts this point of view, then upward transposition is not so desirable, since even falsettists have trouble singing repeated top Fs, and the top part much better fits the modern concept of a soprano. The irony in this argument is that the best modern choirs tend to employ women to sing these parts; indeed, the idea of boys singing the mean part in modern performances almost never happens,

whichever pitch is chosen.” [present author’s emphasis]¹¹

The verse part, in this recording, is of course taken by a high tenor (Rogers Covey-Crump). Would this be more like what Gibbons heard than a high-pitch counter-tenor? Almost certainly, yes, but there remain some questions. Another counter-tenor free interpretation of this piece is by Red Byrd where it is sung even lower (a major third down in E) and in very obviously ‘regional’ vernacular accents. If it does nothing else, Red Byrd’s performance demolishes any notions of false permanence concerning today’s ‘English choral tradition’.

Ives’ work with boys at historic pitch is of significance for its rarity as well as its quality. Another disc, *William Byrd, Second Service and Consort Anthems* (Harmonia Mundi B00B4K7YXG) also has the boys singing as means. Unfortunately, my ears detect counter-tenors in the chorus, but verse parts, usually sung by a counter-tenor in high-pitch performances are again sung by high tenor Rogers Covey-Crump. The boys do produce consistently good tone towards the bottom of the mean range. An important test occurs, for example, in bar 7 of Byrd’s *O Lord Make thy Servant Elizabeth* where they remain clearly audible within the polyphony when both contratenor and mean parts are on middle C (the lowest mean note). The danger here is that the boy timbre might otherwise be masked out behind cutting falsetto tone and the polyphonic continuity lost.

Also on this disc is Byrd’s Verse (Second) Service, with viol accompaniment by Fretwork. Most recently, Romsey Abbey have followed Ives’ example by recording a second disc in Convivium’s Tudor Music series (*The Tudor Choir Book, Volume II*, B078HGD1Z6) which also includes the Byrd Verse Service. The Romsey version has accompaniment by the St Teilos historic organ, thought by most scholars more likely than viols for a da chiesa performance, excellent though the playing of Fretwork is. A high tenor (Adrian Green of Convivium) is employed for verse parts. Conductor George Richford had theorised that his boy ‘treble’ line could perform effectively

as means and was willing to allow a research visit to test some key voices. Some exceedingly interesting analytical recordings were made as a result, raising challenging questions of comparison between the falsettist mean (Stefan Roberts) employed by Magdalen and the younger, unchanged mean employed by Romsey.

The bold and visionary approach of Romsey is absolutely commendable and if my present advocacy results in similar ventures elsewhere, I shall have succeeded. It is important to consider that the 'English choral tradition' has evolved considerably over the last 100 years and we can trace this evolution through the documentary evidence of recorded sound.¹² For the sixteenth century, all we can do is produce a range of hypothetical performances that say it might have sounded like this, or like this, or perhaps like this. Scholars and critics can then take up arms anew. The highly polished sound of well trained professional singers says "it might have sounded like this". What is missing here is the "or like this, or this..."

Reasons for using boys go beyond the perhaps dubious argument that only boys can produce the timbre the composers would have heard. I hope I cause no offence, but having boys actually limits the potential quality of the choir – as was once argued out by Edward Higginbottom and Peter Phillips.¹³ My worry here is that the recordings by professional early music groups are just too perfect to be the 'sweete musicke' heard by sixteenth century ears. Who knows what is being missed if we do not pursue this line of reasoning?

It goes without saying that the taboo on female voices that existed in the sixteenth century is not acceptable today. At the same time, we cannot object to the sound of counter-tenors and then say nothing about the place of female voices. Doubtless there are many fine performances yet to come with both counter-tenors and female voices that of course have their place. Nevertheless, the quest for historically informed performance compels many questions, of which the following are perhaps the most pressing:

- What do boys sound like when

singing as means and what kinds of boys should be used?

- What would a mean part, sung by a counter-tenor in modern performances sound like if sung by a boy with unchanged or changing voice?
- What singing techniques and choral timbres might be explored by females in the light of answers to the first question?

Conclusion

So, we have at least two answers to the question "what do boys sound like when singing as means?" They could have sounded like Magdalen, or like Romsey. The recordings and measurements I was able to make of the Romsey boys have, perhaps inevitably raised more questions than answers, particularly about audibility within the polyphony. There are no simple answers to the conundrum of whether or not means were in any way changing or even falsetto voices, but the popular belief in much later puberty during historic times is once again significantly challenged and confronted by evidence.

There is only one way to go – onwards and upwards (or perhaps downwards if modern day 'trebles' are to rediscover the mean voice!) We need to add to the possible "it might

have sounded like this" examples. The more of these we have, the more we can develop informed debate about historical choral performance. Whilst the recordings we have by today's specialist early music groups are important and valuable, I cannot believe that their refined and polished voices necessarily reflect exactly what our French visitor who did "get to the quier" of St Paul's Cathedral in 1575 heard. At the same time, I cannot believe that composers of the quality of Tallis, Byrd, Gibbons or any of their celebrated contemporaries could have conceived their wonderful polyphony with the sound in their heads of voices described by eighteenth century writers as "wretched and screaming".¹⁴ One yardstick of quality needs to be what can be done with the 'fearest' of children's voices. With this in mind, Andrew Johnstone and I have conceived the 'Quire Pitch Evensong Project' and will make available previously unpublished scholarly editions to any conductor fired by curiosity and willingness to try something different.

You can find more details here: <https://www.martin-ashley.com/fearest-voices-of-england/the-quire-pitch-evensong-project/>

¹ Johnstone, A. (2003) As It Was in the Beginning: Organ and Choir Pitch in Early Anglican Church Music, *Early Music*, 31(4), 506-525.

² Ashley, M. and Mecke, A-C (2013) Boyes are apt to change their voices at about fourteen years of age: an historical background to the debate about longevity in boy treble singers. *Reviews of Research in Human Learning and Music*. 1, 1 – 19.

³ Steckel, R. (2008) Heights and Human Welfare: recent developments and new directions. NBER Working Paper Series 14536. Cambridge MA: National Bureau of Economic Research

⁴ Phillips, K. (2013) *Teaching Kids to Sing*. Boston MA: Schirmer. pp91-94.

⁵ Hentschell, R. (2016) Our Children Made Entertainers: Choristers, Actors, and Students in St Paul's Cathedral Precinct. *Early Theatre*, 19 (2), 179–196.

⁶ Parrot, A. (2015b) *Composers' Intentions? lost traditions of musical performance*. Woodbridge: Boydell.

⁷ Ravens, S. (2014) *The Supernatural Voice: a history of high male singing*. Woodbridge: Boydell.

⁸ Giles, P. (2005) *A Basic Countertenor Method for teacher and student*. London: Kahn and Averill.

⁹ Williams, J. (2012) *Teaching Singing to Children and Young Adults*. Abingdon: Crompton.

¹⁰ LeHuray, P. *Music and the Reformation in England 1549-1660*. London: Herbert Jenkins. p120

¹¹ Phillips, P. (2005) Treble or soprano? Performing Tallis, *Early Music*, 33(3), p498.

¹² The Archive of Recorded Church Music is an invaluable resource: <http://www.recordedchurchmusic.org/>

¹³ Details of a Musical Times spat between Edward Higginbottom and Peter Phillips are recorded on p73 of Ashley, M. (2009) *How High Should Boys Sing?* Aldershot: Ashgate.

¹⁴ Jerold, B. (2006) Choral Singing before the Era of Recording, *Musical Times*, 147 (1895), 77-84.