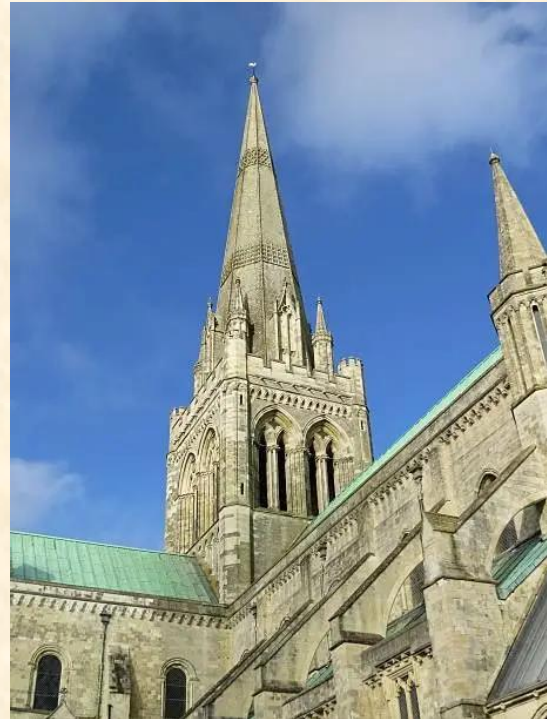


# The Curious Case of Thomas Weelkes's Fourth Evening Service

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*Singers are in their great variety of tones to keep an equal sound (except in a point), that one voice drown not another.* Charles Butler, *The Principles of Musik* 1636.

Thomas Weelkes's Fourth Evening Service is more popularly known as "Weelkes for Trebles". Yet if I had two particularly good boy meane voices and I wanted to choose a verse service to employ them to their best effect, I would be very hard pushed to find anything better. The service is called "for trebles", not on account of the verse parts as one might expect, but on account of the first treble full part. Take that away and we would be left with a service "for meanes". I suspect this viewpoint might be considered eccentric, certainly minority, but it is worth considering. The implications certainly are. The first problem is that what is known today as "Weelkes for Trebles" has been assembled by various different editors from incomplete part books, none of which actually contains the high treble part. The service was first reconstructed by Fellowes in 1931. We have seen



how Fellowes has been criticised for making up the entire genre of "great service" but in his massive scoring of this service for two antiphonal SSATB choirs and two groups of SSATB solo voices he must surely have excelled in this particular trait of his. I doubt that anybody would consider a performance of this particular Fellowes edition today. The credit for producing the first credible edition must go to Peter Le Huray who clearly devoted considerable effort to the matter. Le Huray's edition, however, is pitched in E, which does take boys singing the first treble full part above the treble range. Albeit this is by only one tone though it is in the consistently high tessitura (well above that of a normal treble) that the risk of singer discomfort and even vocal damage exists for boys. Le Huray acknowledged that this might be a difficulty and a reason to discount there ever having been a treble verse part. He wrote that "the strain of such a high part could more safely be borne by a group of boys rather than by a solo boy, especially if there were cornetts to support the group".<sup>i</sup>

Previously, LeHuray had remarked on the rarity of the treble voice and that if the "normal interval of transposition is applied, top Bbs frequently occur . . . few cathedral choristers, surely, can have had the range to sing music of this kind".<sup>ii</sup> There is no Bb5 in his edition of the Fourth Service, though the high A5 occurs four times in the Magnificat and six in the Nunc Dimittis. If the treble voice was as rare as Charles Butler (Le Huray's source) recorded, it is surely at least notable that Weelkes might have had some boys at Chichester who he perhaps took unusually great pains to coach, not tiring of the effort of getting them up to a g" (G5).<sup>iii</sup> That he did, and they could perform the unusual for the time feat

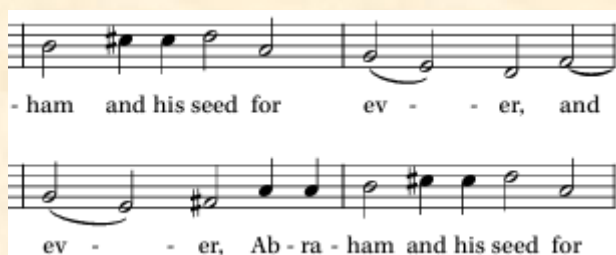
of singing treble, is dependent upon the fact that written organ parts at the time usually consisted of only the treble and bass, the organist filling in other notes as he was capable and thought fit. The high treble does exist in organ parts found both in the Durham Cathedral and Tenbury collections and it is from these that editors have constructed what they suppose to be the missing first treble part. Le Huray justified doing this on the grounds that the second treble part (which lies within the meane range) is independent of the top line of the organ part and the harmonic texture bare and incomplete without it. Unlike the two verse parts which are equal in range, the full parts differ significantly.

In spite of his own misgivings, LeHuray's edition almost certainly demands too much of boys. If they can sing it, it may well be at the cost of strained voices and unpleasantly shrill tone. A successful recording a semitone lower was made by Portsmouth Cathedral under Adrian Lucas in around 1994 ascending just above the normal treble range to  $A\flat 5$ . If voices were at all strained during the recording (doubtless requiring several takes), it would have been through the tessitura rather than the occasional  $A\flat 5$ . It is necessary, however, to lower the pitch only a further semitone to bring the entire service within the range of a normal treble part. Not only that, if the verse parts go no higher than the D5 that is the highest note of a meane, the full treble part correspondingly drops out of the Wulstan stratosphere and falls into place. A recording at such pitch was made by Winchester Cathedral choir under David Hill in 1992. The pitch corresponds to the Byram-Wigfield edition of 2021, which is said to be "at original pitch". This gives the following part ranges:

|                      |          |
|----------------------|----------|
| Verse:               | D4 – D5  |
| Treble:              | A4 – G5  |
| Meane ("treble II"): | C#4 – D5 |
| Contratenor:         | A3 – G4  |

The contratenor is also high, well above the tenor and in a range that could be sung by a boy whose voice had recently begun to change. Other than that and the fact that what is arguably a meane part is called "treble II", there is nothing controversial here. However, a review by Mateer (1993) in *Early Music* opined that "the Evening Service for trebles, too, is splendidly sung, though its performance at written pitch means that the boys occasionally sound uncomfortably low in their register.<sup>iv</sup> Assuming that the reviewer is referring to the verse parts, that the boys chosen were from the cathedral's normal pool of trebles and may even have had unchanged voices, we might well expect issues with the lower register. Do we not have trebles attempting to sing a part which though labelled as treble lies within the more comfortable range of a meane voice and is therefore perhaps too low and certainly not ideal for a treble?

To distinguish the subjective opinion of a reviewer (and indeed this author) from replicable objective facts is difficult but one thing we might look for is the masking that might be expected to occur when one voice goes below the lower E of a treble, and the other ascends into the most secure part of the treble range. This occurs several times notably at bar 98



If the boy on the first part is a treble, we would expect his D4 to be weak, as indeed it is. He is masked out by the boy on the second part. Indeed, at the very outset we cannot hear the D4 of the first treble against the A and D5 of the second treble, unless perhaps our ears tell us we are hearing it because

we know it is there. What cannot be known at this stage is whether two boys with voices that had recently begun to change and who were definitely meanees would have done any better. It is also, of course, impossible to measure the two voices objectively as they are not available without the organ. Some experimental work is required here.

The organ accompaniment is a further complication. The Winchester recording is kind to the boys in that it uses the soft gedackt stop of a modern organ. A 2007 recording by Durham Cathedral uses the Wetheringsett organ, then on its second residency in the cathedral. Whatever convoluted transpositions might have been needed by the player, the resultant pitch is almost the same as the Winchester recording bar the odd cent. Use of this organ was nevertheless an entirely different proposition. Only open metal pipes of relatively strident tone were available, requiring the singers to “sing out boldly when the organ was playing, in order to achieve a good balance”.<sup>v</sup> The natural limits to how “boldly” boys with treble voices might sing when low in their range I have dealt with in a more technical paper that employs phonetogram analysis. In short, however, we are looking at a deficit of between 6 to 10dB or more. The risk then becomes not only that of one part masking the other, but of both parts being masked by the organ or at least being dominated by it. To give the credit that is undoubtedly their due, the Durham boys give very good performances but nevertheless masking does happen, particularly at bar 33 of the Nunc Dimittis where the D4 of the second part is entirely inaudible, the D5 of the first part likely being in the region of 10dB stronger (twice the volume) than the D4 of the second part.



Perhaps a thinner texture could have been used by the organist but at the risk of the trebles no longer doubling the highest sounding organ part as is believed was generally done. The challenge of organ stridency and balance, however, also affects the men's voices as in the imitative sections of the Magnificat from bar 26 onwards where first treble sings with first bass and second treble with second bass. On these occasions the boys and men balance each other well, but both are dominated by the organ. Perhaps this is how it was and we should not be looking for a hypothesized kind of perfection than never existed. One thing, however, is beyond dispute. The full first trebles have absolutely no problem being heard and are the most prominent voice in the full sections, the organ being pushed right into the background and the other vocal parts taking something of a pasting too, even at original pitch. Is this how it was or did Weelkes have only a small number of boys available for the full treble part which he used on occasions to impress? If meane was the normal voice, this is plausible. Perhaps only a small semi-chorus of boys should be allocated to this part in modern performances?

So, excellent and significant as the Durham recording is, I find it hard to accept that the last word on Weelke's Fourth Evening Service has been written. The Fourth Service was in the regular Rochester repertoire under Robert Ashfield during the 1970s and I would enjoy listening to various boys' attempts at the verse as I sat in the congregation as a young student. If my memory serves me correctly, Ashfield omitted the high treble part. Presumably the overall pitch of the edition then used was high (Le Huray?), rendering the high tessitura impractical in his judgment, but I may be wrong about this. If the first treble part had been omitted, the texture of the voices would have been incomplete in places -

the very reason Le Huray supposed it must have existed. My reaction back then when I was directing a choir of students and lay clerks called the Canterbury Renaissance Consort was to remedy Rochester's "failings" as soon as possible with a performance at Wulstan pitch, so I must have been impressed by a (long lost) recording I had heard which differed markedly from what I was used to in Rochester. My reaction now is to file that episode under past misdemeanours and look for two boys aged about fourteen with voices changing but not yet falsetto and see what happens.

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<sup>i</sup> Le Huray, P. (undated) *Thomas Weelkes: Evening Service 'For Trebles'*. Stainer & Bell CS327, Editor's notes p3.

<sup>ii</sup> Le Huray, P. (1967) *Music and the Reformation in England 1549 – 1660*. London: Herbert Jenkins, p123.

<sup>iii</sup> Praetorius, M. (1620) *Syntagma musicum II*, 17-18 and 20.

<sup>iv</sup> Mateer, D. (1993) Review of Cathedral Music by Winchester Cathedral Choir, *Early Music*, 21(1), 138-141.

<sup>v</sup> Wright, K. (2010) *Tudor Church Music from Durham Cathedral*, CD booklet, OxRecs DIGITAL.