

Treble or Meane? More Longitudinal Tales

I am writing this piece after giving a short lecture during a song recital by ten-year-old Jerome Collins, a member of the boy vocal group *Libera* and the thirty-third boy to participate in the longitudinal studies of boy singers' growth and vocal development I have been conducting since 2005. We called the lecture Treble or Meane? and Jerome performed Orlando Gibbons's madrigal *the Silver Swan* at two different pitches, one which I called treble and one I called mean. I wanted to say a little more about this here than I had time for in the lecture, but without going into all the analytical detail of phonetograms and electroglottograms that is found in my more scientific writings.



The previous article in this occasional series explored the difference between a boy soprano, a boy treble and a “cambiata”. The treble we looked at was Max Matthew who recorded between the ages of 10:04 and 12:09 items for album we published under the title *Monday Afternoons*. That age span was exactly that of a good treble. At ten, just old enough to cope with a solo recording but at 12:09 on the very cusp of no longer being a treble. The soprano we looked at was Louis Désiré. Louis had appeared on stage with me during my inaugural professorial lecture, so sharing a platform with Jerome was not new. Louis recorded several albums, but the one of greatest interest was *Bel Canto: Mes Premiers Pas*, again recorded at different ages but this time right up to nearly fourteen – a level of maturity necessary to earn the title “soprano”. Finally we looked at Dominic “Inigo” Byrne’s *My World* which I had selected as an excellent example of the “cambiata” voice of a boy who is no longer a treble, but not yet an alto, tenor or bass either. Dominic had starred in our series of ‘Boys Keep Singing’ films and it was news to him that he was, not only a cambiata, but an excellent one at that!

Clearly at only ten, Jerome is at the very beginning of the journey taken by his predecessors in longitudinal study, and the album if it appears (we hope it will!) will come two or three years after I write this. Jerome is already well on the way to a starring role with *Libera*, but he is also on the way to a unique role in the creation of knowledge about the meane voice. What is the meane voice? A very important source document in historical musicology is Charles Butler’s *Principles of Music*, published in 1636. According to Butler (who was also famous as a bee keeper) the meane and not the treble is the normal boy’s voice. Yet surprisingly few people today have heard of the meane (or medius) voice! Indeed, I once witnessed copies of music that was scored for parts including meane being given out at cathedral choir course and the singers had to ask what on earth a meane part was and who was to sing it. Really, that won’t do at all!

My interest in the meane voice comes from two sources. First my love of “early music”, that is to say Renaissance polyphony (though “early” goes up to 1750 when Bach died and I am no less enthusiastic about that!) Second, all the work I have done on the cambiata voice, and there has been plenty of that, culminating perhaps in the commissioning of repertoire for OUP’s *Emerging Voices* series of which I am series editor. The penny began to drop as I realised that the range of the cambiata and the range of the meane were all but identical – with one important caveat. Whilst both begin around the F or G below middle C, the cambiata goes no higher than middle E, whilst the mean goes right up to treble C.

There is a very good reason for *cambiata* not going above middle E. Middle E is sometimes called the “devil’s note” for if an adolescent boy’s voice is to produce an embarrassing “crack”, it’s on or near the devil’s note it will do it. Yet the mean voice is apparently untroubled by such a possible crack! There is more work to be done through longitudinal study! Exactly what kind of voice is this and if it was the most common boy’s voice in 1636, why isn’t it now?

At this point, Libera fans may express horror! Libera boys regularly sing right up to the high treble G, a tenth above middle C and some of their oohs and aahs reach right up to the high soprano C a full two octaves above middle C. Am I suggesting Jerome should not sing any higher than an octave above middle C? No I’m not, Libera fans can rest easy. But neither am I suggesting that he sings as low as the G or even F below middle C. To do so would be futile because at ten years of age he can’t get down there. Those lucky enough to hear him sing in Inverness Cathedral or Rothiemurchus church may have noticed that he just got the A below middle C at the beginning of Bernstein’s *Somewhere*, but as his accompanist I was playing very quietly at that point! So, he’s a treble and not a meane, then? What exactly is he doing appearing in a lecture called Treble or Meane?



It’s at this point that the plot takes an intriguing twist. In the year 1549 the young King Edward VI (ironically aged, twelve at the time, the typical age of a boy chorister) gave his assent to the Act of Uniformity and the First Cranmer Prayer Book. In with an English liturgy and out with all the boys who used to sing Papist masses in high Papist voices, trebles and meanes alike! Boys were silenced and had to find other ways of existing. Perhaps you know that rather exquisite and certainly popular anthem by Thomas Tallis, *If Ye Love Me*. Tallis wrote it at a time when very few boys were singing and composers were required to abandon all their elaborate overlapping counterpoint and write just one note for every syllable. Maybe you heard *If Ye Love Me* sung

at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, -in St George’s Chapel Windsor of all places. Well, if you did, you didn’t hear what Tallis heard! You heard a modern version that has been transposed to a significantly higher key so that sopranos and altos can sing. Look at the original score and you will see there were no soprano or alto parts. In their place are a cantus and altus part for higher men’s voices, and the range of these two parts is the same. Key point here, no boys, and no falsettist countertenors either! If you want to hear what Tallis heard, my suggestion is that you ask the countertenors to take the boys on a trip to Alton Towers for the day!

How and when boys did come back is a bit obscure. We do know that when William Byrd was appointed organist of Lincoln Cathedral at the age of 23 in 1563, an assortment of nine boys was there waiting for him. So did he make them trebles or meanes? Answer, neither. He wrote boys’ parts (we are not talking Latin masses here) that ranged from middle C to the D an octave above. Just to completely confuse everyone, this part was called “meane”. Why? Possibly because people were used to calling boys meanes



because as you know by now, meane and not treble was the normal boys' voice. But here is the remarkable thing. During the lecture I asked Jerome to sing the words "You owe me five pounds" to the tune of *Happy Birthday* and (very important this) I gave him no note on the piano to start on. Why does he, and all the boys who came before him in longitudinal study, do that?



The answer is to find out where they place their tessitura. A singer's tessitura is that comfortable part of their range where they can sing for a long time without getting tired or unduly exerting themselves to reach higher and lower notes. I asked Jerome in the lecture where the pitch of his tessitura came from and he said "in my brain". Indeed! In his brain and, give or take a note or two, in the brains of several hundred other similar aged boys who have performed the "£5 test". If you do not find something remarkable in the fact that the "new" post-1549 meane range almost exactly coincides with the tessitura of a boy's unchanged voice, I don't know what is remarkable!

Meane in Byrd's 2nd Magnificat



So, is Jerome a treble or a meane? Well the answer is that if it's music written after 1549, he can be either, which takes us to the *Silver Swan*. You may know the *Silver Swan*, a lovely and moving madrigal by Orlando Gibbons. That well known composer and music theorist, Michael Praetorius (c1571 – 1621) observed that "Boys are often found who, in a work written in G2-clef, are able to sing g" [G5] and even a" cleanly and in tune. Most boys could probably be coached to do this, if one took great pains with them and did not tire of the effort." Well, Jerome's had plenty of coaching, so I had no hesitation in asking him to sing the *Silver Swan* twice. First as a meane (D above middle C to, for one note, the E an octave above) and then again as a treble (F above middle C to that magic high G).

Much to the delight of the audience, he sang both versions assuredly and quite beautifully. But which did he, the singer, prefer? On the night, he said "the meane". Five months previously, when I first introduced him to the work, he again said "the meane". And he gave a reason. "So, um, I'd say that I

probably preferred the meane, I feel it was easier to produce the dynamics using the meane version 'cos it's less high". His point about the dynamics is very interesting. He is a sensitive and musical singer, beautifully expressive for one so young, but he also has science on his side. Another of the tests he does for me is to produce a phonetogram, which is a kind of plot that shows the full extent of the possible range and where within that the voice is most expressive. And what does the phonetogram show? The controllable dynamic range is greater across the meane part of the full range than the treble! Let me bring this to a conclusion with another slightly contrary but rather pertinent observation from Michael Praetorius.



"The human voice sounds much more attractive and sweeter in its middle and lower registers than it does when it must cry out and shriek very high and above its proper limits."

You may not agree if you thrill to those high oohs and ahhs, and we won't mention what happens on Ash Wednesday!

So, why did the meane voice die out? There are all sorts of reasons, but as far as boys recording CD albums is concerned, much of the repertoire we know and love was written for the soprano voice, and the treble is of course nearer in range to soprano than the meane. Solo repertoire such as *Pie Jesu* (Faure or Lloyd Webber, take your pick) did not exist when boys were meanes. But I am looking forwards to introducing Jerome to the works of one Richard Farrant. Farrant (c1530 – 1580) was both a gentleman of the Chapel Royal and the director of the Blackfriars theatre where Elizabethan boy actor/singers did remarkable things. Perhaps that was the golden age of the meane and it's a story ripe for the telling and a repertoire ripe for the performing.

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