One Size Never Fitted All: old myths and new performance opportunities for the 'English Choirboy'

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Abstract

The term "English choirboy" is used by an American vocal pedagogue specializing in children's voices to describe a particular style of singing whereby boys with unchanged voices employ only their upper or so-called "head" register in order to access the entire mezzo-soprano singing range. The result is said to be a particular kind of beauty higher in the range, but a lightness of tone and lack of robustness lower in the range. The term "treble" is popularly employed to describe this voice type, which is also commonly associated with an absence of boys from alto lines, those parts usually being taken by adult male counter-tenors or falsettists. Popular discourse sometimes encourages a belief that this style and disposition of choral singing is part of an unbroken tradition dating back to the arrival of St Augustine in Canterbury in the year 597.

The truth may be somewhat different. Boys were not much involved in choral polyphony until the fifteenth century. During the nineteenth century, boys were not infrequently used on alto lines in preference to men. Most significantly, there were two boys' voices in use during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. A lower ranging voice was known as "meane" and a higher ranging voice was known as "treble". The meane was the more common and following proscription of elaborate Latin polyphony sung at high pitches, the treble fell out of use altogether for a period following the introduction of the 1549 prayer book. Modern research into boys' voices as well as scholarly investigation of renaissance choir pitches suggests that there is a case for looking again at the meane voice. Not only might more historically informed performances of fifteenth and sixteenth century music be achieved, but new ways of using boys' voices in contemporary composition might be attempted.