

Beautiful Swansongs of English Cathedral Music: adolescence and the boy “treble” voice

NATS Journal of Singing

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Abstract

According to John Cooksey, a boy soprano reaches his pinnacle of beauty, power and intensity immediately before adolescence. Pubertal onset results in loss of quality in the soprano voice. Yet some of the best performances by English boy choristers are achieved after pubertal onset. Singing teachers in English cathedrals are divided in opinion concerning potential harm to technique or damage to vocal fold tissue resulting from singing soprano during adolescence. A detailed investigation of four English choristers who remained as soprano throughout the entirety of Cooksey's stages found a history of singing in upper register only. A strong falsetto was carried to the bottom of the range with more of a “head voice” quality than the falsetto of untrained singers.

In spite of a movement in some English choirs to a more “continental” sound, many English boys still make little or no use of mixed register. The practice of having all boys sing soprano whilst adult men sing the alto part may be a significant reason for the absence of a mixed register amongst English boys. The style of singing and disposition of voices sets the English tradition apart from elsewhere in Europe. Greater use of boy altos in England would be a significant departure from long and well-established tradition. Although English practice can result in fine performances by adolescent singers, the principle of precaution should operate with regard to technique and vocal health. More research is required to explain variation in falsetto technique associated with intensity of vocal loading.