

# Recreating Period Voices

## The Boy Soprano Circa 1880 -1940

### What was this voice?

Those interested in boys' singing but not totally familiar with the more detailed historical and technical nuances pertaining to it are sometimes confused as to whether the term "soprano" or "treble" should be used to describe the highest voice part when taken by a young male. In England today, the term "treble" is generally preferred and has come to refer to a type of voice that became the norm during a period roughly coinciding with social recovery after the Second World War. Within the parameters of inevitable differences from one choir to another, this voice type is the one that exists today (2017). A somewhat different voice existed and reached perfection during the decades prior to the War. Originating in the mists of the nineteenth century and sometimes referred to as "traditional English cathedral tone", this voice arguably attained its apogee in the work of such choirs as London's Temple Church under the direction of George Thalben Ball (1896-1987).

Most people will have heard of the most famous of Thalben-Ball's singers, Ernest Lough, who made the world famous recording of Mendelsohn's *Hear My Prayer* in 1927 – the first "classical" recording to sell over a million copies. Though Lough was the most well-known, many other boys made 78 rpm recordings. These boys were almost invariably marketed as "sopranos" and the boy soprano genre enjoyed particular popularity during the 1930s and 40s. There is no doubt now that this has become an "historic" or "period" voice. It is quite unlike the sound of the boy "treble" of 2017. On the one hand it was "lighter", "flutier" and in some ways more like an adult female soprano than today's "treble". Any such "less masculine" quality however should not be confused with weakness. Heard live in the flesh, the boy soprano voice was almost certainly more powerful, assured and possessed of greater presence than today's smaller "treble" voice.

Unless one counts the unique 1902 and 1904 castrato recordings by Alessandro Moreschi, the pre-war boy soprano voice is the only period boy's voice significantly different from its present-day counterpart that we can actually hear. The old 78rpm wax recordings, of course, lack the fidelity of modern recordings but a unique project by Stephen Beet to remaster and reissue as many of them as could be found and recovered has given us an invaluable resource<sup>1</sup>. Beet has also written extensively about these voices and his writings include carefully researched prescriptions of how they were created. Two technical features particularly stand out to define how these voices were produced.

1. *The age and physical maturity of the boys.* Strictly speaking, the singers were not boys at all, but adolescents nearing full physical maturity. Ages such as sixteen or seventeen were commonly given as the time of voice "break". This is a complex issue I have dealt with in depth in several of

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<sup>1</sup> The Better Land series on Amphion. [www.amphion-recordings.com/soprano.html](http://www.amphion-recordings.com/soprano.html)

my publications, but it is entirely wrong to imagine that the onset of puberty marks the end of a high singing voice. It is perfectly possible for an adolescent to maintain a soprano singing range throughout puberty, well into the time of full sexual maturity. Recordings exist of the baritone speaking voices of these young men, as well as photographs that show them equal in height to the adult men of the choir and having the angular faces of the sexually mature teenager. A consequence of this is that the old boy sopranos were bigger, stronger and possessed of somewhat greater experience and musical maturity than most boy trebles of today.

2. *The technique of "head tone"*. Another complex issue dealt with in several of my publications, the type of "head tone" singing perfected by exponents such as Thalben-Ball was largely responsible for the longevity of the voices as well as the particular timbre of the boy soprano. The term "head tone" confuses many. It is not the same as what we today understand as "head voice" (i.e. the lighter, upper end of the modal register). Neither was it the same as falsetto, though it had certain features in common with that kind of production. It is best understood as a largely forgotten technique of downward extension of the upper part of the voice so that the "break" into full thyroarytenoid ("chest") production is not crossed. The old "head tone" differed from falsetto through achieving full closure of the vocal folds and a higher closed quotient (the period of the glottal cycle during which the folds are in full contact). An adolescent voice that is purely falsetto will be weak, breathy, insecure and expressionless as the folds make contact only very briefly, perhaps not closing along their full length.

### **Can and should this voice be resurrected?**

Let us deal first with the question of "can". The first thing that is required is adolescents who are (a) already well-experienced in singing and (b) physically larger and more advanced in development than "trebles". It is here that we immediately run into an interesting conundrum with all sorts of implications. Although the trend is often exaggerated, the timing of puberty does seem to have advanced somewhat since the 1930s. Boys are commonly achieving a level of physical development now at age 13 that might not have been reached until nearer 15 in the 1930s. A consequence is that amongst today's boy "trebles" are found some adolescents who come close to the physical size and development of the old boy sopranos. Broadly three possible fates await such individuals:

- They may be dismissed as "trebles" from a choir that sets particular standards concerning how far into voice change boys are allowed to remain;
- They may continue singing in a falsetto voice that is painful to both singer and listener yet apparently not a matter of much concern to the choir director;
- They may develop a singing technique that has at least some features in common with the old boy sopranos.

The last of these fates is the one of particular interest. It seems that for reasons nobody seems to understand, on certain rare occasions a boy discovers for himself how to produce the old soprano tone. One such case came to light several years ago. The boy concerned was a month short of his fourteenth birthday and, though previously of average height and weight, reported to be undergoing a rapid growth spurt ahead of most of his school peers. His voice had clearly fully changed. He had a surprisingly rich and well-developed proto-bass voice extending comfortably as low as E2. Intriguingly, he was concerned *not* to use this voice in singing as it made him stand out as different from his peers who generally still had higher voices.

He was comprehensively assessed and measured. Part of the assessment included a recording of Handel's *Where'er you walk* that had particularly caught the attention of the conductor for whom he had recently auditioned. It possessed none of the tell-tale qualities of a falsetto voice, sounding much more like one of the old boy-soprano recordings. The recording was sent to Stephen Beet who stated that the sound was indeed that of the old "head tone". The boy's soprano voice was not subsequently developed. He was counselled to accept a place in the changed voices section of the choir, which he did with entirely positive results. We are left with the question, what would have happened if the boy had been asked to continue for longer as a soprano in order to contribute to a project on the recreation of "period voices"?

We thus arrive at the second part of the question, *should* they? This is very much an ethical issue. There is little appetite in present-day choral work for "traditional English cathedral tone". For one thing, though well suited to the floating legato lines of Edwardian homophony, this style of singing fell out of favour largely at the same time as sixteenth century polyphony began to be revived and composers such as Benjamin Britten began to explore children's voices in ways that were novel at the time but largely mainstream today. So, we must ask who would want to recreate "traditional English cathedral tone" and to what end? The ends of such a project assume considerable importance with regard to youth welfare and what it is reasonable to ask of boys, given the kinds of peer condemnation they might face. There is also the question of whether voices might be harmed through well-intentioned attempts to produce the old head-tone that might default to a falsetto. Such an outcome could be potentially destructive of future technique and even physically harmful through drying out the delicate epithelium of the vocal folds.

Very few, if any, teachers exist today who fully understand how to produce safely the old head tone. Nevertheless, the methods have been comprehensively described by Beet in a forthcoming book that I have been granted the privilege of previewing. Were suitable boys to be selected, and Beet's instructions to be carefully followed, it is quite probable that the largely forgotten voice of the boy soprano could be resurrected. Setting aside whether it should be done, the fact that almost certainly it *can* be done at least points to the viability of a quest to recreate period voices.

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