

Recreating Period Voices High Modal Tenors – will we find them?

The same scholarship that gives rise to our interest in the boy meane gives even more attention to the part immediately below the meane. If one believes Andrew Parrott¹, this part would be the highest adult male voice, since the part immediately above it would be sung by a “boy” (however we might interpret that word). Today we would expect a counter-tenor, a bass/baritone in falsetto or a female contralto. The actual part might variously be referred to as “alto” or “counter-tenor”, such terms not necessarily corresponding to the actual voices singing it. The thrust of scholarly writing is very much in the direction that none of the above voices would have been likely in renaissance music. The voice that would have sung the contratenor altus part would have been a “high modal tenor”.

Examples of required ranges are:

- D3 – F4 (Sanctus, Taverner Meane Mass)
- C3 – G4 (Byrd: O Lord Make Thy Servant Elizabeth)
- E3 - A4 (Tallis: Short “Dorian” Service)

The accepted full range for the modern tenor voice is C3-A4 (3 semitones lower than the fabled high C expected of the likes of Pavarotti!) so none of the above ranges in theory should be a problem. The tessitura of contratenor altus parts tends to lie towards the top of the above ranges (F3-F4, for example, in the case of the Byrd). For a proficient high tenor specialising in early music, such as Rogers Covey-Crump, there is clearly no difficulty at all. Tenors of more average accomplishment, used to a lower tessitura, may find an F3-F4 tessitura perhaps more of a challenge.

Here, there arises the question of using falsetto to access the very top of the range. According to Velde², “a man with a high natural voice. . . was rare, and prized”. A term sometimes equated with “high modal tenor” is the French *haute-contre*. This appellation is mainly an etymological convention associated with French baroque opera. Technically there may be little difference between an *haute-contre* and a contratenor altus. A modern day *haute-contre* is Valdemar Villadsen and the tenor timbre as opposed to the timbre of the falsettist can be clearly heard in the sample. Nevertheless, according to Velde, although it is claimed that the *haute-contre* sang in his “natural voice” to the top of the range, some tenors found a “professional advantage in cultivating the uppermost range of their voices . . . becoming adept in moving back and forth from falsetto to natural tone with little or no break.”

¹ Parrot, A. (2015b) *Composers' Intentions? lost traditions of musical performance*. Woodbridge:

² Velde, F. *Voice Definitions and Ranges*, on-line at www.medieval.org/emfaq/misc/voices.html

Covey-Crump's official biography³ describes him as "a 'tenor haute-contre,' a natural voice in a high range without falsetto, while still retaining the characteristic ring of a true tenor". Velde cites a paper resulting from a collaboration between David Wulstan and the radiologist G.M. Ardran, in which he attempts to play down differences between falsetto and modal voices. Although Ardran and Wulstan's paper contains some intriguing images, it is now dated. Much more sophisticated imaging than was available in 1967 confirms that there *is* a difference between high modal and falsetto phonation.

Wulstan's writing is also infused by his faith in the discredited high-pitch hypothesis. On this score it is, of course, the movement to sing renaissance music at its original pitch rather than transposed up a minor third that has shifted the goalposts in favour of the high tenor. The focus of interest has moved from phonation differences towards upper formant (and hence timbre) difference between a falsetto production extended downwards and a modal production extended upwards. If there are tenors who can reach the high tessitura with an imperceptible shift into falsetto at the top, they are a clear breed apart from singers whose normal mode of production is falsetto, but who must cross into a modal voice to reach the bottom of the part.

Arguably we are at a juncture where the need to recruit tenors willing to attempt renaissance contratenor altus parts at original pitch is pressing. A willingness, in some cases, to take singing lessons to improve the upper reaches of the voice may be part of the process. Only when we have a range of high tenor voices available for empirical analysis will we be in a strong position to answer the question of whether we will find enough high modal tenors to populate historically informed performances of renaissance polyphony. Wulstan was on safer ground when he wrote that the "music of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, supported by documentary sources (see for instance 'Early English Church Music', Vol. III, Stainer & Bell, 1964, p. viii), shows that there were as many countertenors in choirs as tenors and basses put together"⁴. "Enough high modal tenors" may therefore be a "big ask".

³ www.allmusic.com/artist/rogers-covey-crump-mn0000070628/biography

⁴ Op. cit. p17.