

Bel Canto and the Boy Soprano

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Abstract

The history of the boy and adult male soprano (as opposed to high countertenor) has been little researched. This paper examines recently discovered documents and sound recordings which confirm that the vocal techniques employed by teachers and choir trainers since the mid-20th century differ fundamentally from those used in the past. The consequences of a change from the teaching of what was understood as “head-tone”, “small voice” and “mixed voice” to the use of the “chest” or “fundamental register” during mutation has resulted in advice that boys stop singing soprano/treble at the first sign of puberty, but boys expertly trained in earlier methods in most cases sang the whole soprano range without strain well into late adolescence. In some cases, this continued into adulthood. The assumption that their head tone is nothing more than falsetto with no variation in dynamics is challenged by contemporary accounts, recordings, and documents. Recently rediscovered sound recordings evidence a sound comparable to a good female voice trained in similar methods. Recordings heretofore classified as falsetto, countertenor or alto may need to be reappraised. There are implications for a profound practical effect on the training of present-day choirs; and, most importantly, the sound they produce.

Introduction

One of the most common beliefs today is that boys' soprano voices lasted longer in the past. It is sometimes reported that voices are now 'breaking' as early as twelve years old, thus making them useless for cathedral choir work. Many of these reports are anecdotal and make no allowance for changes in vocal training. That the speaking voice changes before the singing voice is lost is usually accepted by teachers, but there are conflicting views about the training of boy sopranos/trebles, some teachers correlating the stages of adolescent mutation with the pitch of the singing voice, thus affecting the boy's subsequent training with early loss of the high register.

This may be because of ignorance on the part of choir directors of the mutating boy, or a rigid application of certain schools of thought which advocate stopping boys singing treble/soprano as soon as the speaking voice begins to fall. As to the ages at which boys' voices broke in the distant past, reliable historical data are necessarily scarce but a passage from *The Problemes of Aristotle* (published in London, 1597) states that 'boyes [are] apt to change their voice about fourteene yeeres of age'. Evidence from Notre Dame in Paris before 1550 shows that choristers advanced to lay clerks at 14 to 16 years whilst Roger Bowers wrote (JRMA 1987): 'It is entirely clear that in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries the trained singing-boy's voice broke not at 18 [as some claim] but at about 14 of 15.' A review of the medical literature on pubertal timing by Ashley (2013)

cited several large-scale authoritative reports which agreed that there is no conclusive evidence of a secular trend to earlier puberty in boys on this scale.

James Bates, founder and director (1894-1919) of the London College for Choristers, wrote in *Voice Culture for Children* (Novello 1907):

It is remarkable, too, that as the time of break approaches, a boy's voice becomes much more resonant and beautiful. This is so both with boys who have been trained to use their voices correctly and with those who have not. The trained boy's voice undoubtedly gets richer and fuller, but the improvement in the untrained voice is due to the fact that the boy loses the power of using the forced 'chest voice,' and is thus compelled to employ the easy, resonant 'head voice,' with its accompanying beautiful quality of tone (Bates, 1907).

An understanding common today is that "head tone" simply means the treble singing-voice of any pre-pubescent boy and "chest -tone", the voice of an adolescent singing in a 'changed' voice. Journalists commonly report that "a boy's voice breaks when he hits puberty". This can then be confused with the moment of a boy's leaving his choir, but this is a highly subjective event and variable according to the training method, the beliefs of the choirmaster, and what he is told by any singing teacher attached to the choir.

Use of the term "break" for the mutation of a boy's voice is justified by its use in history. Writers such as Stubbs (1898, p.36), Curwen (1913, p.2), and notably the writer of *Should Breaking Voices Be Rested?* (*The Music Teacher*, London, April 1930) used it, as did many contemporary academic contributors. So, to dismiss "break" altogether and to replace it with such terms as 'the transition ' seems a little hasty. In an historical context, 'break' and 'change have sometimes been interchangeable and an early reference from Aristotle (see above) does, indeed use the term 'change'.

Francis E. Howard's *The Child-Voice in Singing* (1898) speaks about the voice being broken into two parts. And William J. Finn, in *The Art of the Choral Conductor* (1939), describes the 'break' as the moment when trained choristers continuing on the soprano line start to "crack and crackle ". A century ago voice manuals tended to say the same thing about boys' voices at puberty, advising rest after the instability. As will be shown, the American choirmaster George Bragg was one of the few to advocate working through this period to produce an even better soprano voice.

A present-day scientific definition might be that period when the boy passes from the third to fourth stage of puberty and the speaking voice drops rapidly. But this need not, indeed should not, be the end of his soprano singing career. As will be demonstrated, the upper and contralto registers may strengthen and expand considerably from this point onwards.

The bel canto era: a review of the evidence

Historical Context – Comparing Like with Like

The ways in which boys have been trained to sing over the centuries is shrouded in mystery, all the more so the further back one tries to research. Evetts and Worthington pointed out that sixteenth century England probably led the world in vocal music and

singing. 'This was the true *bel canto* (described simply as beautiful singing), the result of perfect technique, for which the Old Italian School was noted. In the 16th century, learning of singing was by imitation, the tradition being handed on from one singer to another.' (Evetts and Worthington, 1928).

They go on to recommend that 'the treble voice of a boy can and should be produced throughout its compass of at least two octaves by the thin mechanism. In this way evenness of tone is ensured and strain prevented. The use of the thick mechanism gives raucous tone on the lower notes, followed above the point of change by "hooty" so-called "head" notes, and clear diction is difficult' (p. 126). It is worth noting at this point that Worthington was a distinguished throat surgeon and had studied in detail the findings of Garcia, which have been influential in defining registers. His comments are most interesting and worth quoting in full: (Preface p. vii - ix)

Since Garcia's invention of the laryngeal scope mirror, attempts have been made to place the art of voice production upon a more scientific basis. The result so far has been a failure, for the observations made upon the larynx by reflected light tell only part of the story and, alone, do not account for the difficulties of singers. Yet in order to explain those difficulties, a theory of multiple registers has been evolved for the existence of which there is little or no evidence to be obtained with the laryngeal scope. This theory has in one form or another obtained wide credence, so that a false conception of the mechanics of singing has grown up and influenced academic teaching, greatly to its detriment. [...] For the tradition of true *bel canto* has been lost, and it will never be regained [as long as these] theories are permitted to influence the teaching of singing.

Although the methods and findings of Garcia have been superseded or developed, his writings appear to mark the beginning of voice science. The terminology used by Evetts and Worthington in referring to the "thin mechanism" is not new and is consistent with earlier writings.

Vocal Development in Commonwealth Times

Going back further than the sixteenth century and to mediaeval times is difficult but new research by Ridgeway who has extensively studied the records of the choir of St. George's Chapel, Windsor has uncovered interesting facts. His assessment of the possible singing methods promoted during earlier periods came about as an attempt to explain the sudden increased duration of a boy's time in the choir post 1660 – some boys remaining until they were past seventeen years old.

In correspondence with the author, Ridgeway wrote:

This suggests musical balance could be achieved with a less taxing singing method than that necessary in pre-Commonwealth times. Older boys singing with the "Head-Voice" technique would have been capable of producing a considerable volume of sound. The pre-Commonwealth comment 'roaring boys' [mentioned by Ridgeway but at present un-sourced] by one of Cromwell's sympathisers, though perhaps prejudiced, may have been close to the truth in some establishments. The fact that eight boys at St. George's in the seventeenth century were able to hold the balance is evidence of some change in voice production around that time. One wonders if there was Portuguese influence at the time of the Restoration, from Charles II's Queen, Catherine of Braganza, and her entourage. (Neville Ridgeway, Letters to the Author, 1998).

(It is worth mentioning at this point that the early balance of the Temple Church Choir was four boys, raised to eight in 1862 (Lewer p.488) and 12 under Walford Davis and so maintained until the retirement of George Thalben-Ball in 1981.)

In earlier times, as Ridgeway describes, the performance of music had begun with the chanting of plainsong and it was common to divide boys' voices into two groups: the normal voice being the "meane", and a higher voice "the treble".

Most of the music was scored for "meanes", music for the "treble" voice being rare and often containing top B flats. However towards 1660 the music written for "high trebles" seems to have declined, perhaps indicting that during Commonwealth times boys were not being trained in the techniques necessary for a successful performance of such music.

Ridgeway says that the coarser "roaring" sound made by boys in early times was the accepted technique and was most likely necessary for balance during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially for the polyphonic genre of music. "Such a singing technique would limit the duration of the usefulness of a boy's voice, a conclusion supported by the records here at Windsor after 1660." (letter to the Author 2000)

We have no way of knowing if the complex musical forms of the later fifteenth century universally produced the "roaring sound" from boys of which we have just heard or whether these were isolated examples. The theory certainly does not seem to be in accord with the claim that the Italian *bel canto* techniques were well established in England by this time, but Ridgeway's conclusions do not exclude the possibility of a tradition of pre-Reformation *bel canto*, and the fact that some music was written for "high trebles" would suggest that enough suitably trained boys were available in pre-Commonwealth times to sing it.

Support for this might be evidenced from the complexity of some early sixteenth century compositions: the music of Thomas Ashewell (b.ca.1478) being so difficult (and quickly falling out of use) that it may have caused problems for singers no longer able to cope with an older tradition. He had been a chorister at St George's Chapel, Windsor and became Master of the Choristers at Lincoln Cathedral, so was not composing abstractly, but knew the full capabilities of choristers of his time.

Liturgical choirs were, of course, proscribed during Commonwealth times but there is evidence to suggest that some individual boy singers were trained for private work (at Westminster School for example); however the choral continuity would have been broken, so it is not altogether surprising that some change or development in vocal production may have taken place around the time of the Restoration in 1660; and the upheavals of the Reformation begun in the previous century certainly heralded a new age, complete with its own composers writing for the texts of The Book of Common Prayer. The maxim was that 'a plain and distinct note [be written] for every syllable' (Lincoln Cathedral Injunction 1548); and this indeed was the age of the great music of Byrd, Gibbons, Tomkins and Weelkes.

Ridgeway concludes (op.cit):

By now the old division of boys into those singing the "mean" and those fewer who sang a higher "treble" had given place to the treble range we know today. The subdued nature of post-reformation Church Music (as opposed to the more florid Catholic style), coupled with the fact that

it would have taken time to train boys taken into the choirs in 1660 to the required standard possibly brought with it a transition to teaching what became known as English Cathedral Tone – a pure head-tone production suited to the lofty cathedral architecture and dignified Anglican repertory.

The Choral Revival

The rôle of the Temple Church in the Victorian Choral Revival has been well documented, not least by Bernarr Rainbow (Rainbow B. *The Choral Revival in the Anglican Church 1839-1872*. London, Boydell Press 1970) and in greater detail by David Lewer in *A Spiritual Song* (London 1961, Templars' Union) Rainbow traces this revival in England back to the Tractarians, in particular to Sir Frederick Gore Ousley and his choir school at Tenbury, but also, in part, credits the influence of Dr. Zachariah Buck, Organist of Norwich Cathedral (1828 to 1877) and that of Dr. E. John Hopkins of The Temple Church (1843 – 1898), the latter being credited with creating “The Mystical Temple Tone,” (q.v. George Dixon, Jack Salisbury and Ernest Lough in separate 1960's radio interviews). They also credited the respective geniuses of Sir George Thalben-Ball (Organist and Master of the Choristers 1919 – 1982) and H. Walford Davis (Organist 1898 – 1923, overlapping with Ball four years). However, a study of Lewer (chorister 1931 and archivist of the choir thereafter until 2005) and the writings of Frederick Kitton (*Zechariah Buck Mus. D. Cantor. A Centenary Memoir* by Frederic G. Kitten, private publication, 1899) a chorister of Dr. Buck, would suggest a more complex story.

The Influence of Dr. Buck

The methods described above are consistent with a close examination of those of Buck, who was admitted as a choirboy at Norwich Cathedral in 1807 and whose tenure as the Cathedral organist lasted from 1819-77. He invited many continental singers to Norwich during his long tenure and was renowned as a trainer of boys.

Rainbow comments that “the taste for solo-singing developed by English audiences generally during the eighteenth century conditioned public response to cathedral music long afterwards”. He also makes an interesting observation that Buck's boys were famed for the beauty of their singing voices [and] were trained primarily as future solo boys.” (Rainbow op. cit. p. 245). An outstanding feature was the “assiduous development of the *shake*.” An attribute which earned the competent boy a prize of half-a-crown. Compare this with Lewer's quote of former Temple Chorister Alfred Capel Dixon. (q.v).

Curwen mentions Buck's training in *The Boy's Voice* (J. Curwen, London 1894, p. 85) and adds a note from the church organist Frederick Cambridge (1841-1914) confirming that [in the 1850's] “Dr. Buck used to make his boys sing with closed mouth to ‘hm’, immediately followed by the same note to ‘ah’, in order to get the highest notes. There were no ‘solo’ boys at Norwich, because all were expected to be able to take a solo.” (pp. 67ff, 92.)

A fascinating insight into the methods of Buck is contained in *Musicians An Mummies* (Cassell 1925 p.p. 8-9) by Herman Klein, an eminent Music Journalist Critic and Singing Teacher. (Transcribed by Jack Wakefield 2000).

... But my greatest joy was listening to the Cathedral Choir. It was only a stone's-throw from St Simon's [Buck's Parents' establishment where his mother, a professional dancing teacher, had a ballroom] to the Close, through the old Erpingham Gate, where, just inside on the left, the Grammar

School stood – and still stands. Such voices – such singing I have never heard surpassed – no, not at St Paul’s or Westminster Abbey, or even at the Temple! Their delicious tone, of an amazing pure quality, sounded to my ears doubly beautiful when they were threading the mazes of those grand anthems and services by Byrd and Tallis and the others, which figured almost daily in the Cathedral calendar. I envied even as I listened and enjoyed; I felt that I would have given anything to be a choirboy in the glorious old fane [shrine] erected by the Norman bishop, Herbert de Losinga. But that could never be. No need, though, for me to wait half a century to recognise the genius of those inspired Elizabethan giants, or appreciate the wonderful originality and grandeur of their music. Little as I could understand or even perceive the complexity of their technical mastery, I could at least feel its flow through the smooth, easy stream of heavenly harmonies. I could certainly value, though still little more than a child, the inestimable privilege of being brought up, as it were, upon musical fare of this exquisite sort.

One summer evening, when walking home with one of the boys after the service, my companion pointed out to me an elderly gentleman hurrying through the close with a roll of music under his arm.

‘Look, there goes Dr. Buck, our teacher. Awfully severe, I can tell you; boxes our ears hard if we don’t do what he wants. But he knows how to make us do the right thing. Did you hear him humming to himself as he passed us? They say he knows every part of every service that was ever written!’

A high reputation, indeed, was that enjoyed by Dr. Zachariah Buck who had then been organist of the Cathedral for nearly fifty years. But it was not as an organ player that he was celebrated – a worse executionist had probably never been in the past, and his deputy, our friend, Dr. Edward Bunnett (who was never to have the honour of succeeding him) [beat him] “hands down”. But as a trainer of choirboys, Dr. Buck was literally a wonder – without a rival, I should say, in any cathedral city in the Kingdom. He had mastered the secret of giving his pupils an exquisitely clear, pure, unforced tone, wholly free from throatiness or a tendency to sing sharp; and he made them phrase in the neatest, cleanest fashion, without a shade of sentimentality. To hear his solo boy sing “O for the wings of a dove” in Mendelssohn’s “Hear my Prayer” was to my youthful ears like a foretaste of Paradise.

These appear to be the same methods adopted by the French operatic soprano Emma Calvé (1858-1942), who describes in her 1922 autobiography, that she had acquired what she termed her “fourth voice” [‘small voice’?] by following the advice of Domenico Mustafa (1829-1912) during a visit to Rome in 1891. He was a Turkish castrato who had joined the Sistine Chapel Choir in 1848 and became its director in 1860. He told her to practise with her mouth tight shut for two hours a day for ten years. She claimed to have succeeded within three years, adding half an octave to the top of her range. There are examples of her exquisite soft high notes on some of her recordings. A similar effect can be heard in the recordings of Gwen Catley, Madam Mado Robin, the French-Canadian Boy Soprano Gérard Barbeau, and the French soprano Eric Gentet (qv).

There is some evidence to suggest that these techniques were an inspiration for the Temple Church after the choir was restored with boys by Dr. Hopkins in 1842 and a more direct connection through the occasional teaching of “Jenny” Lind (died 1887), known as the “Swedish Nightingale”, a pupil of Manuel Garcia, and a frequent visitor to Norwich Cathedral, who also visited the Temple Church several times to ‘run through the boys’ solos’ (Lewer op. cit. p. 172 – amplified in Lewer’s Liner notes to CD *The Glory of the Temple Church Choir* Beet/Amphion 2000). Alfred Capel Dixon, a chorister at the Temple from 1900 to 1907, is quoted by Lewer as saying: ‘One Sunday afternoon there were eight solos for different boys, all of whom were competent and showed good form.’

A characteristic of these techniques is the deep breathing and warm emotional tone with controlled vibrato relying on the use of the head register and 'small voice' in the upper octaves, showing no strain whatsoever. Lisa Lehmann, a pupil of Lind, is quoted by Anderson (*We Sang Better Vol 2* – Beuthen Press 2012 p.108).

She had long since retired but would illustrate with her own still phenomenal voice [...]. I particularly remember [the] power of her "Head-Voice" even to the lowest notes when she desired to do so. " Lehmann goes on to say that "Head-Voice" requires less breath than any other [and] it is more carrying. Importantly, she concluded: "I contend that in the light of experience that this capacity to use the Head tones everywhere brings health to the voice and preserves it." (Author's emphasis). Anderson quotes the author of this paper (op.cit. p.13): "The reason why these boy sopranos sang so well, Beet boiled down to two words – head tone. He is right. When comparing the early recordings to the sounds of our era, there is no more obvious difference [...] If a letter writer offered his opinions that it could be due to differences in diet or the age of puberty, Beet would come back with 'No, it's *bel canto*, head tone. He is right.

Twentieth Century Cathedral Head Tone:

The more operatic *bel canto* style would have no more place in a post-Reformation English setting, (except perhaps at the Chapel Royal) but it would have required little modification of technique to produce the "cathedral tone" recalled in now fading memory in places like St. George's, Windsor under Sir Walter Parratt or at the Chapel Royal in the 1930s under Sir Stanley Roper: that rather veiled, never louder than mezzo-forte sound which, as Frederick Hodgson claimed, (*Choirs & Cloisters*, Thames 1995) was the envy of the world.

It was a beautiful tone and apparently a safe technique, considerably extending the usefulness of a boy's singing voice. In other places and in different hands the same head tone would be amplified by greater resonance to give the more dramatic "full-toned" singing Hodgson described at Lichfield in the 1930s, or at the Savoy Chapel in the days when the boys were supplied by the London Choir School on Denmark Hill - a full, rich head tone 'capable of filling a huge building'. A fine example of this is the early "live" broadcast by Derek Barsham, then aged 16, singing *The Star of God* at the Royal Albert Hall in 1946, and his ability to fill St. Paul's Cathedral with ease.

This was also the production of John Bonner, Ernest Lough and countless other solo boys trained in the English tradition, many of whose voices are captured on *The Better Land* CD albums in six volumes (Beet/Amphion 1999 - 2006). It was this technique, a tradition stretching back centuries, which ended with a new generation of post-war choirmasters and teachers.

Hodgson traces the demise of head tone to George Malcolm at Westminster Cathedral, although it is likely to have had its roots in earlier teaching. Hodgson, a celebrated teacher and much-broadcast solo alto before Deller, describes Malcolm's caricatures of a pretty fluting sound... an insult to boyhood, as "a serious challenge to that unique quality of English choirboy tone which stood the test of centuries and became the envy of the world. It was seen at its very finest in the voices as such boys as Ernest Lough [and] the tone epitomized at the Temple Church". (Hodgson op.cit. p.41). In support of this, the tenor Robert Tear, interviewed in the 1990's for a BBC documentary about Lough's recordings, described his voice as "pure *bel canto* stretching back in a long line to the Italian masters".

Was the boy soprano head tone a falsetto or countertenor voice?

John Bonner and Derek Barsham sang and recorded until they were eighteen and seventeen respectively. Barsham's voice was compared to that of Isabel Baillie (for whom he once deputized) and hers as a boy soprano. Both boys' voices were described as true soprano, but recently have been classified as "falsetto". Ashley (2010) reported playing the voice of the sixteen-year-old boy soprano to a conference of singing teachers. He stated that "The views expressed, without exception, were that Barthel's recording were indeed very fine, but made extensive use of a falsetto production" (Ashley, 2010: 22).

So, did the traditional English choirboy sing falsetto? Until now it has been difficult to define the term. There is, however, strong historical evidence to help us establish a distinction between head tone and falsetto. Howard (2004) points out that 18th century terminology is confusing.

There are random comments here and there that confirm the lingering belief in folk law that English boys did indeed sing falsetto. As an Oxford Don recently asked: "How else would you explain the difference in the sound of the choirs of King's College Cambridge and Westminster Cathedral?"

But she goes on to say in a letter to the author that not only were the terms then interchangeable, but that head-tone itself had a broad definition.

A search of 18th-century singing tutors confirms this: the clearest demonstration being in the writings of the castrato, vocal tutor and composer, Tosi (1654-1732). On page five of his *Observations on the Florid Song* (1723), tr. Galliard (1743), ed. Pilkington (1987) he says: "The voice [...] whether it be *di petto* or *di testa*, should always come forth neat and clear [...]."

Galliard adds a note of his own: '*Voce di testa* comes more from the throat than from the breast and is capable of more volubility'. He goes on to distinguish between *voce di testa* and falsetto - 'falsetto is a feigned voice which is entirely formed in the throat [...]' However, a note by the modern editor Pilkington on the same page says: 'It seems clear that falsetto means the same as *di testa* [...].' But Howard is of the opinion that Pilkington is plainly wrong, since Galliard interpreted head voice as 'more from the throat' not 'entirely formed in the throat.'

We read in Chapter VII (*The Proper Way to Draw out the Voice, to Modulate and to Place it*) of *Practical Reflections on Figured Singing* by Giambattista Mancini (1714-1800), singing master at the Imperial Court of Vienna from 1757 (see Edward Foreman's 1967 comparison & translation of the 1774 & 1777 editions) that the author is dealing with 'a student of tender years' (p. 35), and talks about extending the range of the voice. Howard points out that by Mancini's time, teachers aimed to unite the vocal registers and urged exercises on long notes 'which ought to encircle the low notes, pass to the middle of the voice, and finally mingle with and unite the high voice.'

By "high voice", does Mancini mean "Head-Tone or "Falsetto"? Howard says that one simply can't tell. Mancini then goes on to talk about teaching a thirteen-year-old boy to develop 'the second portion of the voice [which] belongs to the register of the head. After taking this boy in hand he 'advanced him little by little in his studies to the point that he found his voice now florid, robust, and rich in range, able to ascend with ease to the high D-la-sol-re, and in consequence worthy to perform in any noble theatre.'

Mancini's instructions are very detailed and interesting: Chapter VIII is on blending the registers. Like other Italian singing masters he used the term *chiaroscuro* for a bright-dark tone where every sung note was supposed to have a bright edge, as well as a dark or

round rich resonant quality, but his comments on head & chest voice tend to be ambiguous. It is here that we wish we could have just one recording of his different “voices”! A useful study of singing methods through the centuries, discussing Mancini, Lamperti, Garcia, et. al. is James Stark’s *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (University of Toronto 1999).

The author has also corresponded with countertenor authority Peter Giles who has made useful comments supporting the time-honoured view that the traditional English system of training boy sopranos in the use of the head voice was indeed that derived from the Italian masters and passed down through the ages.

That the “Head-Tone” of English choirboys is indeed a remnant of earlier techniques is not unlikely, and to describe and deride it now as falsetto seems plainly unjustified. The reasons that vocal teachers do not recognise this voice as legitimate, may be based upon ignorance of past technique (Giles, 2002).

How the head tone of a boy could be confused with falsetto is hard to understand by those familiar with the sound and the traditional methods. Head tone produces a light, and dynamic voice full of colour – now powerful, and now soft and emotional with controlled vibrato like the best female sopranos or the boy sopranos of the past. What might, however, be regarded as falsetto would be the “false” production of an adolescent who, having used only the extended chest register finds it is no longer possible at the onset of puberty to maintain this “natural” production and compensates by producing that wholly unnatural, “feigned” voice. This is arguably the direct result of thoroughly bad training. In other words, like the countertenor, there is little ‘light and shade’, variation in power or emotion in either voice technique, as opposed to the pure soprano voice of a boy.

Discussion

Vocal Difficulties and Workload

Today much has been written of vocal difficulties affecting cathedral choristers due to the strain put on their voices by constant singing. In earlier days nothing was heard of these vocal difficulties, even though choirs generally comprised fewer boys and that these same boys were worked harder and sang two or more services per day. John S. Curwen, who was an exponent of “Head Tone” as generally taught, mentions that in some churches the morning service lasted for 2 hours (*The Boy’s Voice*, 1913 edition, p. 8). Later in the same book (p. 70) he gives the timetable of daily duty for the twelve choristers at Norwich Cathedral under Buck (organist & choirmaster 1819-77):

9.00 - 9.45am - scale practice
10.00 - 11.00am - morning
service
11.00am - 12.30 or 1.00pm -
music practice
2.00 - 3.45pm - music practice
4.00 - 5.00pm - evening service
5.00 - 6.30 or 7.00pm - school
lessons.

Former chorister Alfred Gaul wrote that

During the thirteen years I remained at the Cathedral I did not have a month's holiday, all told. For, it must be remembered, we chorister boys were engaged seven days a week, and thus we had no interval for recreation. (Kitton's memoir of Buck op. cit. p.62)

This amounts from six to six- and-a-half hours work each day, apart from schooling, or well over two thousand hours choral work per annum. The limited schooling has to be seen in the context of the time: the Factory Act of 1833 under which working children between ages nine and fourteen had to have two hours free for education, and the "universal" education of children, introduced piecemeal under the Act of 1870, did not become compulsory until 1880 - after Buck's time - and was only for those aged between five and ten years of age, somewhat younger than most choristers then and now.

This schedule would not have been uncommon in cathedrals well into the 20th century. It is clear that any vocal difficulties today are not caused by the hours worked but rather as a result of the vocal techniques now taught. It could be noted that according to Finn (*Choral Technique* 1939, p.85), fatigue sharpens the pitch, which does not seem to have been a problem in the past.

Some voice trainers and choirmasters wrote extensively on the subject of boys' voices but were not all agreed as to when boys should stop. Curwen (*The Boy's Voice*, 2nd Edition, 1894) quotes Mr. Bernard Gilbert of West Ham Parish Church as saying, the firm striking of tenor C is usually sufficient to decide the point. This seems a totally random and unnecessary measure. Boys commonly left choirs when they left school at 14 or 15. In private recorded interviews with several famous boy sopranos from the late 1920's to the 1950's (Firth, Payn, Harris, Neely and Barsham) all mentioned to the author that their voices never broke but were stopped singing by their teachers for unspecified reasons. Billy Neely maintained that he never lost his voice and denied it was falsetto, although he never sang after 1960. An exception was Raymond Kinsey, who had been untrained and sang in a chest/fundamental voice, and said his voice broke before he was thirteen.

Singing soprano through mutation

Francis Howard's general thesis (*Child's Voice in Singing*, Novello, 1898) is that if voices are trained in the use of the thin register only, the management of the boy's voice during the change are much simplified. George Bragg, (founder of the Texas Boy Choir) was one of the few choirmasters who developed a boy's soprano voice throughout the mutations of adolescence, writing in detail just before his death to the author that:

... a boy will develop his finest skills and vocal technique in these early years of adolescence and will surely know in his own mind and with the aid of his choirmaster when he must stop singing soprano.

However, during the actual change it is quite possible for a well-trained boy soprano to use and even develop his voice further. The changing voice gives a director the greatest concern. The voice range is usually limited for a short time [...], but immediately after this limitation period there is an expansion of singable notes. Headwise, it is not uncommon for the pubescent to sing from middle C upwards two octaves and from middle C downward an octave to an octave and a half. The period of usefulness of this so-called changing voice is in direct proportion to its proper or improper usage.

During this change period the choirboy must be constantly under the surveillance of his choirmaster, mainly for the purpose of seeing that he does not over-use his voice. There are some weeks when the choirboy with the changing voice will be allowed to sing only part of the time. Later, it is possible for him to sing much of the time, and still later, all of the time. It is entirely an individual matter which must be handled with the greatest amount of discretion in order that the choirboy not be made too self-conscious of his momentary flaws.

Once he is over this hurdle, there is a period of approximately one year which can, by all standards and results, be the most wonderful year of all his choir days. It is a time when he can assert his authority as never before because of his advanced experience. It is a time when he can assert himself vocally with assurance.

Relating the pitch of the speaking voice to the soprano register

That the pitch of the speaking voice is always closely tied to pubertal development is not in question; but as far as the singing voice is concerned, the same implication cannot be drawn. Of course, boys' voices "change" at different rates, so it is unfortunate that there is now a common belief, perhaps based on a mis-reading of Cooksey that one can judge a boy's optimum singing pitch by measuring the average of his speaking voice, perhaps by counting down backwards. This seems only relevant when one is defining the pitch of the baritone/tenor registers, not that of a soprano singing head tone who would not break into those registers except in developing a "mixed voice" to gain power on the lower notes.

Speech training and choral reading were an important part of the elementary schools curriculum of the 1930s and it was expected that boys would develop a musical speaking voice. The rough and gruff speaking voices of country boys were of much concern at the turn of the twentieth century. Mr. W. Critchley, a choirmaster and schoolmaster at Hurst, near Reading, is quoted by Curwen as saying:

The lower register of a country boy is, as a rule, coarse, so it is important to get him to use his higher register as soon as possible. Show him first of all that he has, as it were, two voices, and point out that he is required [...] to use that voice which is most like a girl; (*The Boys' Voice* op.cit. p.49)

That was perhaps not the best way of putting it to encourage a boy to sing!

Further Research

The falsettist; castra; contra-tenor and the soprano

The classification of the male soprano, as opposed to sopranist has been very poorly, if at all, researched, and the author is undertaking a detailed study of this voice. It seems possible that several singers of the past (of whom we have no sound recordings) may have been classified wrongly as 'altos', 'contra-tenors' or 'castrati'. Suffice it here to mention that it was not until the mid-seventeenth century, that castrati began to visit and work in Britain, and they remained a rarity.

In 1667 and 1668 Samuel Pepys recorded hearing castrati at the Catholic Queen's Chapel at St James's Palace and in a rare, much anticipated appearance at the King's Playhouse. Twenty years later, on 19 April 1687, Pepys could invite his friend, the virtuoso

John Evelyn, to a private performance, in Pepys's own lodgings, by Giovanni Francesco Grossi. However, we have no real proof that some of the men singing in England classified as "Castrati" were actually so, and one wonders if a few were, in fact, natural sopranos trained in the techniques of retaining the soprano voice.

It is interesting to note the likely sound made by castrati in several written references and the only known surviving recordings (1902) of Alessandro Moreshi (1858 – 1922). These suggest that the sound required from boys of the Sistine Chapel Choir was "Chest/Fundamental Tone". The contemporary un-sourced account says: "He sang allegros with great fire, and marked rapid divisions, from the chest, in an articular and pleasing manner." This suggests that the purpose of castrati was to preserve the "Chest/Fundamental Voice" of boys, a process which would have been rendered unnecessary had head tone been used.

There are several accounts of concerts by 'male sopranos', one of the most famous being the voice of the famous 'treble' Mr. Able, newly returned from Italy who is mentioned in the diary of John Evelyn (1620 – 1705). His voice has been classified as an 'alto' or 'contre tenor'. But where is the evidence for this?

Recent and present-day examples

The first known recordings of a male soprano appear to be those of Frank Ivallo, also called Coleman, whose voice was later reclassified as a "counter tenor". However, the voice is plainly pure soprano - a powerful yet light coloratura, capable of, fullness, dynamics and shades, with variation and range that no contra-tenor could have.

Ivallo (b 1902) performed many times during the 1920's and 30's, including St George's Hall, London – (*The Stage* 21/12/1922, and the earliest press reference traced). He was married in 1924 but it is not certain if he had children. Several have speculated that he may have had a congenital condition, but this is very doubtful, and his speaking voice was described in the press as 'a natural baritone' and there are two reports of his being examined by doctors and scientists (*Daily Mirror* -7/10/1933 and *The Gloucestershire Echo* 10/10/33) without any trace of abnormality. He made several traceable broadcasts including one with Henry Hall. (10/3/34 – *National Programme*).

Today, the voice of the Eric Gentet, aged eighteen at the time of writing, has astonished audiences as he exhibits the same qualities of voice as those of the past mentioned. A detailed study of his voice is being made, which, at this time retains the same lightness and incredible *coloratura* range, at nearly nineteen, that he has possessed for many years and developed through the various mutations of adolescence. Repeated requests for details of Eric's actual training, are simply answered:

Stephen Beet provided me with many recordings of other boys keeping their soprano voice till their 17th or later so I could believe it would happen [to me] by just keeping singing by the same way I always did since I am 6: using head voice.

In effect his voice has developed entirely on the traditions of the Italian masters, by a careful study and imitation of the best boy and some female sopranos of the past, together with the encouragement of several, including the author, who has worked with him for ten years. His performances demonstrate control of deep breathing, correct and controlled vibrato and work in several language. It is of course all based on the head tone production which is not at all understood at the present time. Eric sings much of the repertoire of the old boy sopranos and many of the popular operatic greats. He can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/@EricleRossignol>.

Conclusion

Evidence has been put forward by Dr. Patricia Howard to distinguish head tone from falsetto, the latter being a 'feigned voice', used by some male altos and boys trained in "Chest Tone" which they break into at the mutation (Patricia Howard, Letter to the Author, 2004). Neville Ridgeway has suggested a definite change in voice production during and after the Commonwealth period and the probable beginnings of traditional English cathedral head tone. The origins of head tone have been traced further back to indicate that it was a possibly used at the time of Bach and others of the period. It seems likely as Lewer stated (liner notes to *The Glory of the Temple Church Choir* 2000, op.cit) that after the retirement of George Thalben Ball in 1981 a "great change took place" at the Temple. This may account for the sudden decrease in the average age of the boys after this period, thus indicating a change in voice production (as Ridgeway suggested happened at Windsor but in reverse!).

The demise of head tone has been left to a subsequent study which will examine the various elements which survived in the approach of such choirmasters as Roy Massey at Hereford Cathedral and Stanley Vann at Peterborough. The intention of the author is to place this research before those who have the opportunity and responsibility of teaching boys to sing now and into the future and to excite further study, not least the question of girls singing in "Head Tone".

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