

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE TREBLE VOICE IN CHORAL ENSEMBLES (England - Part I)

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Introduction

The convention of female treble performance in liturgical and non-liturgical choral ensembles is a relatively recent development in the history of Western art music. Composers, even the eccentric greats such as Beethoven, are creatures of their own societies upon whom the forces of "tradition, present purpose and opportunity" act to determine how each one "disposes his musical materials" (Young 106).

Most scholarship makes only parenthetical reference to changes--some transitory, some permanent, some even bizarre--in the gender composition of choral ensembles. This paper attempts to codify these changes--among boys, falsettists and *castrati*, and women--into a concise chronology of the usage of the treble voice within the context of choral music history.

Because England's crown-mandated conversion to Protestantism allowed its traditional liturgical practices to continue, this study will follow the sacred and secular practices which were to bear an influence on the choral music of England. As will be shown, this journey does not reach an end until the twentieth century.

Chapter 1

The Era of the Professional Boy Treble

The Aesthetics of the Immature Treble Voice

The exclusion of women from liturgical choral ensembles may have created an appreciation for the aesthetic of the immature male voice. The opinion that there was, in the female voice, "something at variance with the austerity of ideal which should prevail in the music of worship" existed nearly universally in the Western world and beyond and precluded female participation (Dickinson 30). Thus, in temple worship in Israel, in the Catholic, Eastern, and German Protestant churches and in the Anglican Church cathedral service, women were silenced (Dickinson 30).

Father Finn disputes that boys took the place of female trebles, asserting that, not only do they pre-date the women in this function, "their selection is approved by sound reason of aesthetic propriety" (1: 118). Finn continues that the latter constitutes the reason that generations of choir masters have suffered the "small, wriggling, noisy and generally undisciplined male sopranos . . ." (1: 147).

It is Finn's opinion that the female sound belongs in non-liturgical choruses (1: 148) whose art more properly suits, by virtue of the emotionalism brought to it by the "dramatic soprano," the music of the Romantic period and not that of the a cappella masters of previous times (1: 119). Finn greatly admires the female mezzo-soprano quality but not the liturgical choir directors who have disguised women as boys to obtain that quality in service music (1: 147).

Canon law and aesthetic considerations were not the only factors at work in the on-going decision to use the boy-treble voice. Remembering that, through the polyphonic period, all famous composers composed almost exclusively for the voice, it is not difficult to understand the great tradition of former choir boys who became church musicians and composers, perpetuating the male-only domain (Vale 3). These composers include des Prés, di Lasso, Palestrina, Purcell, Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, and Brahms (Vale 3). Even with the advent of instrumental composition, many composers still were accustomed to the sound of the boy treble in choral singing.

Judaic Practices

The tradition of female exclusion from liturgical worship dates from Christianity's antecedent, Judaism (Dickinson 30). The female voice, free to participate in singing at home and in the processions and

celebrations outside the temple, was not heard within its walls (Dickinson 29). This contravention had the force of the Halakah (Schleifer 23-24), the legal rulings of the Gemara, the section of the Talmud which provides the commentary to the Mishna--the "text of the Oral Law"--of the Talmud (Bridgwater 1939). Its rulings addressed the question quite explicitly: "'Men singing and women answering is promiscuity; women singing and men answering like fire set to chaff' (Sotah 48a)" (Schleifer 24) and "'A woman's voice is indecency' (Ber. 24a)" (Schleifer 23). Consequently, the gender-segregated seating in the temples and, later in the synagogues, provided no opportunity for antiphonal singing (Schleifer 24).

During the existence of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, boys were added to the ranks of the adult Levites who had exclusively populated the Temple choir (Schleifer 20). The Levites, one of the twelve tribes of Judaism, was the only one which possessed no land; the other tribes were required to provide for its existence through alms and, later, work: "With the unification of worship at Jerusalem the Levites became temple servants with hereditary assignments" (Bridgwater 1125). Therefore, the exigency of providing for these sons of Levi became a liturgical matter for the Temple which decreed that only a male Levite could become an ecclesiastical singer (Finn 1: 119). As Schleifer notes, according to Ezra 2:41, "one hundred and twenty-eight singers . . . are said to have returned from Babylonian exile" with the call to rebuild the Temple in Judah (19).

After the destruction of the Second Temple in C.E. 70, synagogue worship differed from that in the Temple (Schleifer 22). Under the control of each local rabbi, both instrumental music and singing in the synagogues were circumscribed by the "rules of Sabbath observance; the mourning over the destruction of the Temple; and the struggle against what the rabbis took to be promiscuity" (Schleifer 22). This "struggle" seems not to have curtailed singing--male and female--in such paraliturgical customs as the Sabbath meal (Schleifer 36). Indeed, the history of the hymn with its accentual rhythm probably dates from the extra-liturgical tradition of this period (Phillips 31). Speculation exists that, because of the impossibility of duplication of the Temple rituals in the much-smaller synagogues, psalmody became a part of the latter's services after the Temple's destruction (Fassler and Jeffery 84). During the following Diaspora, folk songs based on gentile melodies and Arab-influenced Jewish poetry in the Judeo-Spanish dialect, and perhaps the older hymns, were in the oral custody of Jewish women at the time of the Jewish expulsion from Spain (Schleifer 36).

Early Christian Practices

33 . . . As in all the churches of the saints, 34the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as even the law says. 35If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor 14:33-35)

This edict of St. Paul (d. ca. A.D. 67) governed all aspects of ecclesiastical worship of the Catholic church everywhere for seventeen centuries, in some locations much later (Heriot 9). While not as specific as the rabbis' proscriptions, it had the same effect of virtually forbidding female participation in ecclesiastical services and, as will be seen later, with the help of popes and theologians, extending the stricture into their followers' daily lives.

Prior to the conversion of Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century, Christian worship necessarily, for the safety of its participants, took place in its followers' homes (Fassler and Jeffery 87). Thus, as much as Temple and synagogue worship may have contributed to early Christian liturgical practice, for two hundred years many Christians developed their own liturgy in their homes (Fassler and Jeffery 85). Ritual meals similar to the last supper of Jesus and the twelve disciples are described in writings about pagan religions by Plato and Plutarch, and early Christian banquets were held to commemorate this meal (Fassler and Jeffery 85). The early Christian recreations of this solemn banquet would have duplicated the episode of Jesus and the disciples singing a hymn (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26).

When the Edict of Milan made Christianity the religion of the Holy Roman Empire in A.D. 313, Phillips conjectures that congregational singing was limited to responsorial singing like that in the Jewish synagogues (30). However, Fassler and Jeffery state that three types of music moved from Christian homes

to public places of worship: that based on the one hundred and fifty Psalms of the Bible, that based on the canticles or odes from other books of the Bible, and nonscriptural hymns (85-86).

The Catholics of the Western realm did not ignore the Eastern realm's innovations in congregational singing; at the end of the third century, Bardesanes composed psalms and hymns for this purpose for the church in Persia (Henderson 8). There is every reason to believe that the performance practice of the Western home gatherings mimicked that of the Eastern church, being divided into men versus women and children, each singing one verse, then together (Henderson 8). This practice was "introduced into Rome under Pope Damasius [r. 366-384] . . ." (Henderson 8).

That pomp quickly followed the Christian's new right to worship openly is demonstrated by the Church's adoption of a tradition of secular civil ceremony in the third century: upon his approach to the basilica, a place of worship designed for huge crowds, a bishop owned the right to be met by a choir (Henderson 87). Already, it seems that the liturgy of the cathedral, the seat of a bishop's authority, had provided for a distinction between the choir and the congregation. The early choir of the Catholic church was exclusively a male domain (Finn 1: 118-19), the purpose of its existence to provide "chant aimed to be as impersonal as possible. . . its moods devotional and contemplative; its musical character intentionally vague and colorless" (Henderson 87).

The adventure of forbidden Christianity was suddenly replaced by the complacency of an established religion increasingly controlled by the ecclesiastics after A.D. 313. Almost immediately, lay individuals of both sexes retreated, following a custom of the East (Phillips 31)--some to wilderness locations, some to urban enclaves--to experience a "more rigorous and heroic spirituality" via monastic life (Fassler and Jeffery 88). As the urban male hermits ventured back into the community of the cathedrals, they brought elements of their monastic ritual to the ritual extant in the cathedrals. Some lay monks became clericals, qualified by rite, in order to participate in the services in the cathedrals (Fassler and Jeffery 89).

Phillips states that "during the fourth century another method of singing spread, like the monastic ideal, from the East where boys were first used as singers; this was called *Cantus [a]ntiphonarius*" (31). Antiphonal singing first meant "singing by boys and men together in octaves . . ." (Phillips 31). Circa A.D. 314, Pope Sylvester established the first school for such chant instruction in Rome (Henderson 17).

Simultaneously, the exclusionary monks and a new-found musical quality as practiced by the trained singers combined to conspire against congregational singing. The monastics prevailed in their view that the performance of the liturgy should be a function of clericals "on behalf of the whole church" (Henderson 17). Thus, in A.D. 367, the Council of Laodicea forbade congregational singing, leaving the "musical liturgy in the hands of the canons, or singing men" (Henderson 21). Not long after this, complaints about overly-decorated music--again attributed to the Eastern church (Henderson 36)--and the vanity of the solo chanters are first heard (Henderson 21).

During the German barbarian attacks on the city, Roman schools began a deterioration that was completed with the revolt in A.D. 476 of German mercenaries in Roman service (Henderson 31). The religion remained intact, however, the mercenaries operating only with the collusion of the Eastern church (Bridgwater 1430). Singing schools did not reappear until reinstated by Pope Gregory one hundred years later. Meanwhile, literary and educative functions fell to the clerics who began to write down the liturgy then in existence (Hoffman 90).

Between A.D. 300 and 600, the periodic excesses of soloists and choirs in the melodic ornamentation of the performance of plainsong chant were remedied by restrictive rulings by bishops and popes (Phillips 34). The "Gregorian revision" in the late sixth century was not only a codification of the chant as practiced in the Church but also made the music of the soloists and choir "truly subordinate to the worship" (Phillips 32). The *schola cantorum*, whose course was a ten-year aural study, was originally conceived as the source of musical instruction in this version of plainsong performance for Gregory's papal chapel and "to advise him, possibly, on the musical revision . . ." (Phillips 33). Gregory had had prior experience in training boys; at a monastery, he had been a deacon, a choral singer probably in charge of the younger singers (Henderson 32).

Phillips states that the *schola cantorum's* population was recruited from amongst orphan boys of a local institution, some of whom later became pope (33). Originating from the authority of the papacy, the school's functions and methods were duplicated wherever the Church held influence, many of its graduates being sent out to reform chant and its performance in Europe, an act accomplished by A.D. 1000 (Phillips 33). It is interesting to note that, although it is certain that boys did participate fully in the music of early Catholic liturgical services, The *Historical Anthology of Music (HAM)* chooses to represent Gregorian chant (and much later liturgical music) in the bass or the treble/octave-basso clef (Davison and Apel 11-13); boy sopranos easily could have sung the chant in the latter clef without the octave-below designation.

The influence of the *schola cantorum* and its subsidiaries remained important for centuries: from composer to composer, the line of composer-singers schooled by the Roman church can be traced from Pope Gregory's original school to the beginnings of modern opera and beyond (Henderson 69). The missionary Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory with forty monks to England in A.D. 597, converted King Ethelbert, and all of Britain had followed suit by 750 (Phillips 23). Some of the monks accompanying Augustine brought the oral tradition of the music of the *schola cantorum* with them (Phillips 23). By 670, the musical traditions were well enough established that Henderson notes the fame of one "James, first master of chant in the churches of Northumberland, England . . ." (46).

With the development of Guido d'Arezzo's staff notation in about A.D. 1000 and his resultant tonic sol-fa system, the training time of the liturgical singing schools was probably reduced to two or three years (Phillips 35-36). It might also be speculated that, with much less time invested in the child singer, he became somewhat more expendable as his voice progressed to its usual range.

The development of the staff and solfege system also freed the singers and composers from strictly parallel harmonization (Phillips 55). Once again, at least in one pope's view, they went too far, making sacred liturgical music resemble the secular music of the time; this resulted in alternating papal orders to cease and reinstitute ornamentation of service music in the fourteenth century (Henderson 42). Parenthetically, it may be noted that Grout maintains that the 1100s saw the first objections to displays of musical virtuosity (127); Phillips dates these objections from the 600s (32) and Henderson from A.D. 400 (21). The exclusive utilization of boys as trebles in the Church lasted until about 1100 (Phillips 34).

Chapter 2

The Development of the Amateur Singer

The Amateur Solo Singer

The period between A.D. 1000 and 1100 was a time of vast sociological changes for Europe: (1) the "final schism" between the Western and Eastern churches took place, (2) the First Crusade was launched, (3) universities were first established, and (4) the continent began a general recovery from the Plague (Grout 75). The era also marks the beginning of formalized music education for non-ecclesiastics.

Prior to the eleventh century, vocal instruction was reserved for those participating in liturgical services (Henderson 65). At that time, noblemen first had the opportunity to be educated in the abbeys (Grout 49). Thus were created the *troubadours* of southern France in the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries and the *trouvères* of northern France in the twelfth and thirteenth. Although Henderson speculates that they were the first secular singers with vocal training (71), Grout tells of the *Goliards* who appeared at approximately the same time and the *jongleurs*, first noted in the tenth century (64-65). While neither group was thought respectable, the former were "students or footloose clerics" traveling between schools while the latter were professional musicians who eventually organized themselves into guilds offering professional instruction (Grout 64-65).

Henderson asserts that the *troubadours* were the first noblemen "composing under the influence of church music, but to secular text . . ." (52) and that their compositions and performances, as well as that of the more secularly-inspired *trouvères*, may have provided the first appreciation of laymen for art singing (66). Grout provides the example of their direct successors, the German *Meistersingers*, classifying them as being "cultured middle-class citizens" (70).

The Amateur Ensemble Singer

The development of the secular motet after 1250 may have had heretofore unexplored implications for choral ensembles. Grout states that these compositions, following the custom of the times, freely combined sacred and secular texts and were designed for secular performance in the vernacular language (101-102). He also asserts that an "upper voice" might have been added to a composition or that "sometimes a motet would lose its tenor, leaving only the two upper voices" (99). Examination of the *HAM* shows varying uses of treble and treble/octave-basso clefs in the *triplum* (highest) and *duplum* (next-to-highest) voices; the treble clef is even used in the *cantus firmus*, the "voice" sometimes thought to have been performed by a member of the viol family (Davison and Apel 32-38). If the keys and clef notations of these transcribed pieces are accurate, at least the *triplum* might have been performed by true treble voices; others of the *tripla* would have been within the range of counter-tenors. It seems unlikely that children from liturgical choirs would have had the opportunity, or clerical permission, to perform in these secular contexts; women or adult male trebles may have sung these parts. Grout states that the end of the thirteenth century saw the "exaltation of the *triplum* to the status of a solo voice against the accompanying lower parts" (115).

During the fourteenth century, the importance of secular music increased as the influence of the Church waned (Grout 127). Three hundred years after the first universities were organized, education, at some level, seems to have spread to even the female nobility, as recounted in Boccaccio's contemporaneous tale in *Decameron*:

[T]he queen bade bring instruments of music, for that all the ladies knew how to dance, and also the young men, and some of them could both play and sing excellent well. Accordingly, by her commandment, Dioneo took a lute and Fiammetta a viol and began softly to sound a dance; Emilia, by the queen's commandment, leading the round, the ditty following was sung by Pampinea, whilst the other ladies responded. . . . After this they sung sundry other songs and danced sundry dances and played upon divers instruments of music. (qtd. in Grout 129)

The *cantori a liuto*, monodic lute songs, were favored by "cultivated Italian society" in this period (Henderson 71).

Curiously, the Papal court at Avignon in this same period was the site of much invention of secular music, some for solo voice with instrumental contratenor and tenor parts (Grout 134-35). Even more curious is Grout's statement that "[t]he range of voices is slowly extended upward" (144) during this period, providing no explanation for his statement. Perhaps the repertoire of the period makes a silent acknowledgement to the availability of the unnatural male treble voice and the female voice. It may be conjectured that the children of the Church, who had been doubling the tenor of the plainsong chant, had not enough physical facility nor psychological independence to execute the florid melodies of an independent treble line. Consequently, these treble lines may have been written, in secular music, for falsettists, *castrati*, and women. The range would have correspondingly moved up when no longer tied to unison duplication of tenor and even bass lines.

According to Father Finn, by the end of the polyphonic era (1450), all non-ecclesiastical composers wrote treble parts designed for women's voices (1: 119). From this period forward to the present day, a standard choral arrangement of voices was the *contratenor bassus*, the *tenor*, the *contratenor altus*, and the *superius* (or *discantus*, or *cantus*) corresponding to the modern bass, tenor, alto, and soprano (Grout 168). Although the voices were generally treated as being equal, Grout states that the composition of some church choirs of the time "suggests that the soprano line was given some prominence in performance" (177). Liturgical choirs, long restricted to "unison" plainsong chant (polyphony until that point having been performed by soloists), are seen, in the directions of English and Italian manuscripts, as now performing in groups of two or three on each polyphonic part (Grout 189).

The invention of the movable-type printing press by Johann Gutenberg in 1450 was quickly followed by the first printing of plainsong chant (1473) and polyphonic music (1501) (Grout 175). Beginning in the 1400s, part singing became a pastime throughout the middle and upper strata of European society, and many choral societies were formed (Henderson 74). By 1550, Henderson finds singing to be considered an essential part of a gentleman's education (141); "interested amateurs" were even directed to instructional

books for playing and singing (Grout 175). The positive response of an esteemed Roman Catholic cardinal to his daughter's request for instrumental lessons in 1529 demonstrates not only that the concept of clerical celibacy was not universally observed in the Church during this period but also that instrumental study "was no great novelty among girls of social position . . ." (Henderson 76). Henderson further concludes that "[u]nless we are willing to believe that boys or male sopranos were to be found in every chorus and household, we must conclude that women sang in the polyphonic works of the time" (60).

Chapter 3

The Era of the Adult Virtuoso

The Unnatural Male Treble Voice

A discussion of the increased dependence upon the unnatural male voice beginning in the Middle Ages and continuing through the Classical period becomes necessary to an understanding of the historical treble voice. There were two basic types of male sopranos: those contrived by physical control, the falsettists; and those altered males, the *castrati*. Social custom fluctuated in its acceptance of the latter so that, before 1600, many an acclaimed falsettist may have been, in fact, a *castrato* (Heriot 10).

Falsettists, males capable of controlling the size of the aperture of the vocal cords so as to approximate the female soprano range, had first been noted in liturgical choirs before A.D. 1100 (Henderson 43). By the sixteenth century Spanish falsettists were said to have accomplished great feats of artistry (Henderson 135). Eighteenth-century music historian Dr. Charles Burney noted the presence of a "falset" in the trio of a "premodern" Amsterdam Ashkenazi synagogue around 1775 (qtd. in Henderson 60). In the twentieth century Father Finn, the great choral pedagogue and master of the Paulist Choristers of New York, continued a tradition of utilizing boys as sopranos but falsettists as altos (1: 148).

Constantinople had always used the *castrato* (syn. *musico, evirato*) in its liturgical music, and Rome would have been aware of this (Heriot 10). Children first may have been castrated in Rome specifically for singing in the late second century (Heriot 9), but the Vatican papal choir is not noted as employing its first *castrato* until 1562, in the guise of the Spanish "falsettist" Padre Soto (Heriot 11). Although there is no specific reference to when falsettists were first heard in Roman choirs, Heriot postulates that, for those ears used to the timbre of the boy soprano, the falsettists' quality may have been aesthetically displeasing and the arrival of the *musicisti* in Rome welcomed (10). The presence of *castrati* in the papal choir in Avignon was noted (Finn 1: 119), although French authorities much later banned all *castrati* as well as all Italian singers, equating both with excessive ornamentation and a decadent life style (Heriot 13).

The elaborate *a cappella* style which commenced in the 1450s called for a greater virtuosity and wider range than that possessed by the boy treble (Heriot 10). The *castrato's* juvenile sound, remaining pure and elastic for decades, commanded these qualities and suited the impersonality of church music (Henderson 138-39). Orlando di Lasso employed six *castrati* in his choir in Munich during the 1560s and 1570s (Heriot 11). In 1599, the first two admitted *castrati* joined the Pope's choir; in 1687, papal authorities ordered a *castrato* to sing alto (Heriot 11). Boys were still being castrated as late as the 1880s in the Vatican and other Roman churches, and the last *castrato* retired from papal choral service in 1913 (Heriot 21-22).

Castrati also made their mark in secular music. *Castrato* Loreto Vittori (b. 1588) was first a famous opera star before joining the papal choir in 1622 and later singing for Monteverdi (Henderson 140). Vittori and many of the *castrati* of the following century were highly trained musicians who devoted their careers to the study and performance of music; in this respect they generally eclipsed the women opera singers of the same era (Heriot 30). Their virtuosity shown in the marketplace of the Italian opera, and, after 1600, *castrati* openly acknowledged their condition (Heriot 11-12).

The fame of the *castrati* led them to performance excesses. In mid-eighteenth-century England, Handel found that the use of native female singers was sufficient in the non-liturgical oratorio form and wrote for and used *castrati* only on limited occasions (Dean 107). Caffarelli and Farinelli, the two greatest male *castrati* sopranos of Handel's era (Henderson 144), were not reported as having had any artistic disagreements with the even greater composer.

Rossini, half of a century later in 1814, reportedly furious at the *castrato* Velluti for further ornamenting an already florid Rossini song, vowed never again to write for or employ a *castrato* (Heriot 20-21). Although undoubtedly other composers had made that promise, and the last *castrato* was heard in London in 1844 (Heriot 20-21), it was more likely the "tumultuous elemental passion" introduced into Italian opera after the Handelian era which caused the demise of the adult male trebles (Henderson 151). Drama requires a range of volume which neither the delicate size of a child's vocal mechanism in a child's or an adult's body nor the controlled mechanism of a falsettist can produce; the increased size of the Romantic orchestra also demanded a greater treble vocal volume which only women could provide.

The Professional Adult Treble

The later Middle Ages was a time of "international" musicians populating numerous European court and liturgical chapels and additionally providing secular works for the former (Grout 159-60). The Burgundian courts were among the sites of the continuation of the tradition of composers receiving education in liturgical choirs; Guillaume Dufay (b. ca. 1400-d. 1474) was a choir boy at Cambrai before becoming a priest and directing the papal choirs at Rome, Florence, and Bologna (Grout 161). But, perhaps the growth of this secular sponsorship, the patronage of the arts, was most responsible for the changes which took place in the arts and signalled the beginning of the Renaissance period. Certainly, because of this patronage, the concept of the "great composer" made its first tentative appearance" and musicians gained a somewhat greater respectability (Grout 175).

Individual musical artistry became recognized as the Renaissance progressed into the seventeenth century (Grout 130). Peri and Caccini, notable composers of the period, were first known as singers (Grout 130). Females performing in the compositions of these masters, including Caccini's daughter, gained fame as soloists. (Early in the century, a short-lived experiment allowed women--nuns--to sing in Roman Catholic services; one, Verovia, even gained some celebrity [Henderson 133-34]). Church officials, aping the secular patronage system, often owned singers, usually sopranos, adult males or females (Henderson 132). Then, as now, these soloists--the first "stars"--were admired and emulated.

According to Guido Gasperini in *Encyclopédie de la Musique*, the Italian *frottole* and *strambotti* of the fifteenth century were meant "for dilettante singers who did not possess the brilliant qualities of professional artists" (qtd. in Henderson 79). While "art" composers mostly neglected the solo song, the nobility and the public continued their appreciation for the form in popular music, emphasizing the growing importance of the soprano voice (Henderson 80). By the end of the sixteenth century, solo song, the "ancient popular style of Italy" (Henderson 81) and the direct link between the venerable lute songs and the coming madrigal dramas (Henderson 73) which then led directly to early Italian opera, had dominated the music of the Florentine composers.

The year A.D. 1600 begins the period about which Grout reluctantly allows the use of the term "Baroque" (294). While much has been written about the period, and about the beginnings of Italian opera, substantial confusion remains about the latter topic. Sources consulted state the following:

1. Women were slow to gain a foothold in Italian opera (Heriot 24).
2. Female sopranos played lead parts in a Roman opera in 1634 (Henderson 172).
3. Women were not allowed to perform in the theatres of Rome until 1798 (Heriot 25).
4. The first treble opera singers in 1575 were boys (Henderson 137).
5. As of 1600, women opera singers were in their "full blaze of glory" (Henderson 71).

The confusion over women's participation may have resulted from the effects of varying degrees of papal control of the stage, from the different performance practices of *da camera* opera, and from the varying views on the respectability of female performance on stage held by different Italian cities. It is generally agreed, however, that the Peri/Caccini *Euridice* (1600) can be considered the immediate precursor to the true Italian opera of Monteverdi (Henderson 69-70; Grout 307-309).

Henderson states that opera became a public amusement, rather than one reserved for the educated elite, with the opening of the Teatro San Cassiano in Venice in 1637 (137); Heriot notes that women were first

seen on the stage in Venice in that same year (28). Concurrently, the popularity of adult male sopranos and altos is noted (Henderson 171). Numerous opera houses were opened throughout Italy between 1640 and 1700, making the art form readily available to the general public (Henderson 162).

Early opera choruses were composed of the soloists hired for the named characters; these choruses performed madrigal-style, that is, one person singing each of the six, eight, or more parts (Henderson 162). Because of, or in spite of, the constant danger of ecclesiastical censure, the cast lists of some seventeenth-century operas were unusual by modern standards. In some cases, male parts were written for female sopranos to sing (Dean 107)--"breeches parts" (Heriot 22). A 1684 Scarlatti opera in Naples cast four *castrati*, three natural males, and four women, three of them singing male roles (Heriot 33).

At the end of the seventeenth century, as Venetian opera approached a type of "vocal concerto" in form, the number of choral segments dwindled to one at the end of the work (Henderson 162). High voices predominated these vocal dramas which became solo exhibitions backed by fantastic scenery (Henderson 33). Whether these vocal displays, beloved by the populace, caused the advent of comic opera and the concomitant return of a story-line to the production is debatable. However, the comic opera had no use for the *opera seria castrati* (Heriot 16) since the lighter genre's characters generally were "rationally employed," that is, men played male parts and women played female parts (Henderson 176). There were exceptions; as late as the end of the eighteenth century, women could be found in Italian comic opera other than in Rome (where the full force of the papacy would be felt during the entire century) both illegally performing as women and masquerading as *castrati* in the same production (Heriot 17; Heriot 27).

Handel did not create any new solutions to the Italian problem of rational employment of the voices. According to Henderson, Handel followed the standard practice of utilizing a male soprano as the principal singer and three females in standard women's roles (175-76). This remained the norm for his England-composed opera until, partially to prevent the imported stars' over-elaboration of his music, he switched to less-highly-trained native singers.

Mozart's early opera in the 1770s also employed the artificial soprano voice (Henderson 173), and, in his later *opera buffa*--with more natural vocal distributions--it was noted that "[t]he public attention was not wholly centred upon the achievements of the vocal virtuosi" (Henderson 173).

With the initial incursion of the Napoleonic War into Italy in 1796, and the young singers deserting the singing schools in response to the "revolutionary ideas" of the recent French Revolution, the "conservatories fell into serious neglect, and there was a shortage of young singers of all kinds" (Heriot 35). Few of the nobility could afford to patronize the arts (Young 91), and the Italian public was soon complaining about the decline in the quality of singing (Young 91). By 1810, tenors began to return to the lead roles in Italian opera and have remained in that position (Henderson 176). Adult male sopranos, deprived of their starring roles, disappeared from Italian stages; they were largely gone from London stages by 1830 (Henderson 176).

Opera, with its now-familiar configuration of voices, was most certainly not standardized among the various European nations during the nineteenth century; it did share the more-extensive use of the chorus (Grout 600). Nothing, however, seemed to make opera a popular form in England.

Chapter 4 **The Era of the Amateur Choral Singer** English Musical Tastes

The ladies of Elizabeth's court during the 1500s possessed skill in both sight-reading and instrumental accompaniment; "an educated gentleman"--presumably including those in social classes lower than the royal court--was expected to have similar skills (Henderson 75). With the excesses of Italian opera still far in the future, admiration for Italian solo and part songs was strong among the upper classes in England (Young 51). The English madrigal became music for their domestic pleasure, and they participated in its private performances eagerly (Young 51-52).

As the rest of Europe alternately basked in and was repelled by the developments in continental opera,

England remained relatively untouched. England's version of early opera, the masque, did not endure after the Civil War of the 1640s without the participation of servants and other amateurs; gone was the "social cohesion which made such productions possible" (Mackerness 71). Additionally, the "rise of professionalism in the theatre completely altered the spirit in which they were presented" (Mackerness 71).

England's first professional theater, Blackfriars, was opened sixty years prior to Venice's first lyric theater (Mackerness 72-73). Originally leased by the choir master of the Children of the Chapel Royal (the King's chapel) as a rehearsal site, there began "a considerable tradition of dramatic production by the choristers attached to several religious establishments" (Mackerness 73). Supervised by the ecclesiastical authorities, the children; performing in masques, operas and, later, oratorios; were viewed as being more respectable than the women who performed in private theaters (Mackerness 73).

The English were exposed to Italian opera, briefly by one of its own: Purcell's Italianate *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), written as *opera seria* for a girls' school, is a singularity (Young 85). Subsequent performances of imported fare, however, were not so well received, it being "below the dignity of Britons to sit and listen to seductive airs sung by eunuchs . . ." (Mackerness 93).

Music in the English Protestant Church

The Anglican church was not a revolutionary Protestant sect: it was a state-mandated institution with the King as its titular head. While it abolished Catholic idolatry and the worship of saints, Anglicanism maintained such features as the use of chant and all-male participation in the performance of its cathedral liturgy. Thus, its contribution to the lay choral tradition was negligible.

One view holds that the English choral tradition has its roots in the Industrial Revolution (ca. 1750-1850) (Mackerness 127). While this ignores the already-flourishing, upper-class choral activity, the Industrial Revolution may have contributed to its spread among the middle classes.

The employment of illiterate children in the early factories caused social and practical problems for their employers (Mackerness 129). In response to these problems, and a movement to discontinue the employment of children under ten, some children were educated in academic subjects including music (Mackerness 130-31). Smaller employers even gave their adult employees time to perform and listen to music (Mackerness 131). The largest employers, however, were not so beneficent; employees were left to their own entertainment, that usually being listening to music (Mackerness 132).

As the Industrial Revolution became established and flourished, the true reformed churches of England did likewise. The psalmody of these sects was rapidly assimilated into the parish services of the Anglican church (Dickinson 378-79) which performance was usually limited to the choir.

Methodism was the most important sect in establishing a doctrine of universal democratic participation in congregational singing: at the time when Charles and John Wesley introduced congregational singing, the practice was almost unknown (Dickinson 39). Dickinson states that, historically, "[s]ocial hymn singing . . . flourishes only in periods of popular religious awakening . . . no matter what may be going on in professional musical circles" (376-77). Mackerness even attributes "evangelical elements" in Handelian oratorios to the Methodist Revival, as well as the formation of working-class, amateur choral and instrumental societies (124).

Fassler and Jeffery state that the "last major composer" supported by the patronage of ecclesiastics or nobility was Haydn (1732-1809) (3: 110). This decline of the patronage system "paralleled" the evolution of the commercialization of music through the sale of concert tickets and sheet music to the general public (Fassler and Jeffery 3: 110). However, it may be argued that the demand for such items would not have been established had Protestant congregational singing not already become popular. Into this English atmosphere of hunger for participation in concerted singing came its greatest, although unwitting, contributor.

Amateur Concerted Singing

The advent of Handelian oratorio, "dependent alike on an act of artistic piracy and the moral scruples of a prelate, was casual and unpremediated, its parentage discreetly veiled, and its legitimacy not above suspicion" (Dean 206). Handel's earlier oratorios were nearly identical to his operas with the exception of the absence of acting as was required by the Bishop (Mackerness 102). Pragmatically, the Catholic composer was sensitive to the strictures of Anglican ecclesiastical authorities in his adopted land and to declining revenues in the face of more-elaborate rival operatic productions (Young 104). Dean cites the "piracy" of Thomas Arne, father of Dr. Thomas A. Arne, as the final precipitant of Handel's decision to quit opera through the former's unauthorized production of Handel's *Acis and Galatea* in 1732 (205).

Scholes maintains that the oratorio should be viewed "in the extended sense in which Handel used it, i.e., not limiting it to works of a religious character" (65). The vast majority of Handel's oratorio performances took place in theaters and private venues (Young 104). During Handel's lifetime, the function of the choir in these London performances was fulfilled by boy choristers from the Chapel Royal, Westminster Abbey, and St. Paul's Cathedral (Smither 3: 211); the size of these choirs ranged from seventeen to twenty-four voices plus four to nine soloists who joined the ensemble singing (Dean 108). While the Children of the Chapel had appeared costumed and had acted on London's stages for two hundred years prior to Handel's appearance, the then-current Bishop insisted that future appearances omit acting (Dean 205). The use of these boys, and the resulting importance of the numerous choral segments in Handel's oratorios, "was a certain safeguard of propriety" (Young 105). Young continues that "[t]he English took to Handel's choralism because it decreed respectability" (105). Ironically, "[s]ome years later the Handel oratorio with its noisy concert technique swept the board of fashion till [sic] it became 'the vogue' to go to the theatre for one's religious thrills rather than to the church with its reticent little 'chamber' choir" (Phillips 176).

Artistically, Handel was able to exercise control over the performance of his own works by using the less recognition-demanding, and less well-trained, English soloists and boy choristers (Dean 107). Although women were used extensively as soloists in the oratorios, Handel did not include other women as choristers in any of his own oratorio performances. However great a role Handel may have played in the innovation of English music and music in general, he did not innovate in the performance practices of choral music.

The introduction of amateur women and lay men into oratorio choruses may be attributed to provincial performance practices. As the whole of England began forming choral societies, the rural singers aped their urban counterparts in choral, and later, oratorio performances. Early choral festivals used male cathedral singers (Smither 3: 220). Later, as oratorios became the staple form of choral entertainment, larger choruses of traveling professional and ecclesiastical singers were employed (Smither 3: 221-22). By necessity, the most northerly, less populous provinces used mixed choirs, long cultivated, to satisfy their localities' eagerness to hear and participate in oratorios (Smither 3: 222). Their prowess was so advanced that they became very popular in choral festivals outside these provinces (Smither 3: 222). In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the women choristers of Lancashire--"six to eight female sopranos"--were sought after for their skill in choral section leadership at many major festivals (Smither 3: 222).

Contemporaneous performances of Handel's oratorios were held almost exclusively in non-church venues (Smither 3: 218). In 1758, at a performance attended by a much-impressed John Wesley, Bristol cathedral hosted an evening performance of *Messiah*; in the following year, the same work was performed for the first time in a morning cathedral performance, adjunct to a service, in Hereford (Smither 3: 216-18). By 1775, the pretense of a morning service was eliminated when Winchester cathedral was the site of a *Messiah* performance (Smither 3: 218). According to Smither, "a morning performance of *Messiah* in a cathedral now seemed virtually equal in status to a religious service" (3: 216).

The suburban festivals eventually bore an influence on what would become the normal performance practice in London in the nineteenth century. There is a certain irony attached to the introduction of women into oratorio performances in London: the greatest, and arguably only, composer of English oratorio, Handel, was not connected with it.

Theatrical composer Dr. Thomas A. Arne; son of the impresario who had pirated Handel's opera, brother of the famed contralto who had appeared in that pirated performance and also premièred the alto part in

Handel's *Messiah*, and husband of the leading English soprano of the time who sang in many Handel-directed performances; first introduced women to the ranks of the oratorio choir. While there were other London venues for oratorio performance, none was as popular with the public as those at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, and the King's Theatre in the Haymarket (Mackerness 103-104). Instrumental concerts and other choral performances also took place in these locations; there was some commercial competition among them (Smither 3: 202). In 1761, during his short tenure as music director there, Arne's oratorio *Judith*, one of only two he composed, was premièred at the Drury Lane Theatre (Parkinson 113). At a 1767 performance at Covent Garden, conductor Dibdin "accompanied an air from Arne's *Judith* 'on a new Instrument call'd a Piano Forte'" (Parkinson 113). Six years later, in 1773, Dr. Arne briefly became the musical director of Covent Garden and the *Public Advertiser* congratulated this February 26 revival:

The Oratorio of *Judith*, composed by Dr Arne, which was performed at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden Yesterday Evening, was received with uncommon Applause. . . . The striking Appearance of the Band and Chorus, which were much more numerous than they have usually been, received a most pleasing Addition from the Female Singers then first introduced. (qtd. in Smither 3: 211)

While it may be conjectured that his motives may have been pecuniary, it should also be recognized that Arne, an infamous "waster and a roué," was a noted teacher of singing (Langley 44-46). Not all commentary on Arne's singers had always been so complimentary; Langley paraphrases the English satirical poet Churchill who accused Arne of "introducing Italian singers, *castrati* and all that fry, on to the English stage . . ." (8).

In 1778, the *Morning Chronicle* and *London Advertiser* congratulated the successful addition of women to a revival of Handel's opera *Acis and Galatea* (qtd. in Smither 3: 212). Performances subsequent to these began to take on the appearance of modern oratorio performances; larger and larger mixed choirs were the result of the suburban influence as well as the ever-larger, cyclical Handel commemoration concerts (Young 183).

Nineteenth-century England recognized a need to deal with the inequity of wealth and poverty; the formation of charitable societies and the performance of concerts to their benefit were a result (Mackerness 110-11). Choral societies and charity concerts became popular throughout the country (Mackerness 113). Other non-performing amateur clubs were formed, some as early as the mid-1700s, and are still in existence; still others organized subscription concerts for their patrons (Mackerness 114-15). Besides the oratorio, shorter musical forms which stressed either all-male or mixed participation were the madrigal in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the glee from about 1750 to 1830, and the part-song in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Scholes 54).

This abundant choral activity was nourished by, and in return fed, an active publishing industry both in England and Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Young 196). Scholes states that large concert halls were built for choral concerts and that "many tongues that were formerly dumb--in Britain, America, Germany and the Scandanvian countries--were unstopped and music became not merely a distant delight to, but an activity for, the many" (191). Into the English scene stepped Joseph Mainzer (1801-51), another transplanted German. Later to become publisher of London's *Musical Times* (*MT*), his instructional and performance groups often numbered two to three hundred people of both genders and all ages (Mackerness 156). An 1842 *MT* article reports that the females of one of his ensembles "seemed greatly to enjoy so novel and exciting an amusement, in which all classes were blended . . ." (qtd. in Scholes 6).

Dean postulates that the modern practice of large choirs producing huge quantities of sound in the performance of oratorios sounded the death knell for the male alto meanwhile promoting the female "heroic contralto" (115). An 1884 letter to the *MT* queried the loss of the male alto voice in prominent choral societies and the substitution of contraltos in oratorio performances (Scholes 57-58). The decline of the glee club was likewise blamed on the "unpopularity" of male altos in the *MT* in 1886 (qtd. in Scholes 55). A 1902 choral society membership roster included 116 sopranos, nineteen male altos, and seventy-seven contraltos; forty years earlier it had had no contraltos (Scholes 57). By 1924, the Norwich Festival had lost all of its altos (Scholes 58). Contemporary accounts also note among the visits of foreign choirs to England the first chorus from the United States in 1873, the Fisk University Jubilee Singers, with four male and

seven female singers (Scholes 60).

The Last All-Male Bastion

English Anglican cathedral and continental Roman Catholic liturgical choirs remained largely untouched by the gender evolution in non-liturgical choral ensembles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. English liturgical music had not only provided little inspiration, in some cases its performance had also deteriorated drastically (Matthews 273). Ordinarily, however, the cathedral and parish choirs of nineteenth-century England were credited with "high technical excellence" (Young 191).

World War I saw the disappearance of men from St. Paul's Cathedral choir as many of them fought in the war (Matthews 288); World War II caused the boys to be absent from the choir as they were evacuated to the countryside to escape the German bombing of London (Matthews 315). Nonetheless, the status quo had been restored by 1952 when the cathedral choir, comprised of eighteen men and thirty boys, crossed the United States during a tour of forty-one recitals and services (Matthews 324).

The Roman Catholic laity, which had been denied full musical participation in its services from the earliest centuries, in the twentieth century forced the papacy to legitimize for all of its constituency a practice long honored in American Catholic churches: the participation of women in liturgical choirs (Winter 151). According to Catholic educator Miriam Therese Winter, the 1963 Vatican II reforms ended an epoch in which "[f]or fifteen centuries the Catholic church told its people what to sing or not to sing as it legislated them into silence" (171).

That America should have been at the forefront of such a movement is not surprising; since it was never primarily an Anglican nor Catholic country, no pandemic exclusionary practices ever existed. The new country in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries eagerly embraced the English choral experience--especially as expressed through performances of Handel (Young 195)--without suffering its same rites of passage.

Conclusion

Modern choral conductors should be familiar with the range of performance practices encompassed by their repertoire; such information, incorporated into performances, will ensure, as far as is practicable, an accurate reflection of the composers' intentions. This is not to suggest that women should be excluded from the performance of any choral music originally written for boy or adult male trebles: the female treble voice is capable of a wide range of stylistic subtleties which may complement the performance of choral music of the various genre composed throughout the centuries.

Many theories could be advanced regarding the potential effects on Western music history had women consistently provided the treble voice in concerted singing. It might be conjectured this would have produced a music history quite different from that which did occur. However, one may be consoled--or dismayed--that "[t]here is a certain rough justice in the supposition that each country gets the music it deserves" (Young 106).

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