

THE HISTORIC ENGLISH ALTO, c.1450-1550

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Simon Ravens' article in *EMR* 164 (February 2015), pp. 6-8, pursues further his contention that the adult male alto was unknown in 15th- and 16th-century England, and that the medius/meane part in the elaborate church polyphony of the century following c.1450 can have been sung only by boy altos. Nevertheless, it does not raise any issue of substance that I have not already addressed in earlier writing, wherein all the source references necessary here will be found – e. g., 'Chains of (rehabilitated) gold', *EMR* 159 (April, 2014), pp. 10-17.

1. Rather than in any of the documentary sources of the time (and certainly not in any idiosyncrasies incorporated into their punctuation), primarily it is in close inspection of the music itself that there may be located the means to identify the vocal scoring appropriate to pre-Reformation church polyphony, and the sonic palette so resulting. Little could be clearer than perception of the process whereby the five-voice ensemble for which (or for evident variations upon which) church polyphony was being composed by c.1480 can be seen to have evolved from the preceding three-voice ensemble over the previous thirty years. Reduced to essentials, it was achieved through the addition of one new timbre above and one new timbre below, so converting a prevailing clef-configuration of C2-C2-C4 into that of G2-C2-C4-C4-F4. The contemporaneous inauguration of the training of boys to sing composed polyphony shows that the G2 voice may be identified as that of the boy treble (and identifies also, by extension, the F4 voice as that of the adult bass). Since up to about the mid-point of the 15th century boys had not been taught to sing composed polyphony in any timbre, it follows that prior to, throughout and beyond the transitions of c.1450-80 the C2 voice can only have been that of the adult alto. Hereby, the five-voice vocal scoring is identified as that of boy trebles and adult altos, equal tenors I and II, and basses.

2. This is the conclusion presented by the music itself, and it appears indisputable; it arises from pursuit of the sole available avenue of research that is legitimate for the purpose, being the systematic and laborious analysis and detailed assessment of the many hundreds of pieces of music germane to this issue, in respect both of the ranges of their individual component voices and of the differentials of pitch between the constituent vocal timbres. This finding is confirmed by the choice of four to be the number of expert singers newly added to the choir of Chichester Cathedral by bishop Robert Sherborn in 1526. With each voice supporting one division of the adult choir, that number may be understood to have been determined by (and thus to endorse) the manner in which the vocal scoring engaged for this period's standard five-part polyphony for full choir required not just three adult vocal timbres but actually four: bass, two tenors, and adult alto.

3. It is in the light of this finding that the further evidence supplied by documentary sources ancillary to the music may best be interpreted and understood. As regards the content of the training of the choristers, in the case of household chapel choirs stipulation might be made indirectly within household ordinance. At contemporary churches provision was made in some cases by statute, in others by the contractual employment terms of their appointed master. These were legal documents setting out general duties and obligations, and in these (as was normal for all such documentation) no attempt was made punctiliously to specify detail of the manner in which the work of teaching the polyphonic repertory to the boys was to be undertaken. Commonly there sufficed a phrase such as 'in the best the best manner he knows'; entirely properly, all else was left to the appointee's professional competence and judgement.

4. Contemporary documentation gives rise to no grounds for concluding that, as well as the treble part, the alto part lying a fifth below was also routinely being taught to the boys. Necessarily the master taught

the treble part lying at the top of the five-part deployment of voices conventional for full choir. Further, since the voices of adult men had always been available to sing the C2 part, it may be understood that normally the master instructed the boys in no part other than the treble, so that this may be identified as the prevalent default position that needed no detailed stipulation. In those few instances in which, unusually, resort was made to some detailed specification, it may be understood that this arose because in this instance the employer was seeking some deviation from the norm.

5. I know of no contemporary set of collegiate statutes that directs any departure from the default position. In respect of the employment contracts of choristers' masters, I have tracked down and studied over sixty dating from between c.1450 and c.1550. In the case of those institutions responsible for the making of the vast majority of these, there was evinced no perception of need to depart from the standard default position. One alone from this period specified something different; the contract of John Hogges for the priory of Llanthony Secunda (1533) directed him to teach to the boys both treble and mean parts. Meanwhile, regulations of c.1505 and c.1518 for the chapel of the household of Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, disclose that its boys were then divided into treble and mean (alternatively, treble and second treble); and processes of inference may supply a few more possible examples. In the case of Llanthony Secunda it is fair to understand that the circumstance generating the particular specification of this requirement was its tender of an acknowledged exception to the rule then prevailing, which would have been understood to apply otherwise; and the revelatory rarity of these specified instances establishes them as exceptional, so confirming as conventional the practice of teaching to the choristers not these two parts but just a single part, necessarily the treble.

6. The unconventional circumstance under which there applied this particular departure from the norm may readily be identified. With few exceptions, ecclesiastical choirs consisted of bodies of singers in which the number of adult voices outnumbered that of the boys by a factor of two or three. Those very few choirs in which the team of boys was taught to supply the mean as well as the treble part turn out all to have belonged to one particular minority: that in which, unusually, the boys almost equalled or actually outnumbered the men, so making desirable the appointment of only three parts to the men, and two to the boys. That, however, was the exception; and indeed – bearing especially in mind the virtuoso difficulty of the music to be taught – the suggestion that in any of the vast majority of choirs that were conventionally constituted (e.g. Chichester Cathedral, where after 1526 there were twenty men and eight boys) a small number of boys routinely learnt and executed two independent upper parts while a much larger body of men sang only three, as argued by Mr Ravens, appears to possess no credible traction whatsoever.

7. The diverse vagaries and inconsistencies of punctuation that may be observed within any early 16th-century document have to be recognised as offering too slight a premise upon which to endeavour either to establish or to dismantle any historical discussion. At this period there prevailed settled rules neither for the deployment of marks of punctuation, nor even for the design of the various symbols. In consideration of such pre-modern imprecision, the common practice in editing for modern publication is to regularise the punctuation, necessarily with close regard to the category and resultant style of the document concerned, and in accordance with clarification of the meaning which the editor believes to be consistent with its manner and content as a whole.

8. The style of the Chichester Cathedral document of 1526 was conventional for its period. Its compiler was no practising musician presenting a definitive treatise upon composition, nor was his objective the tender to 21st-century musicologists of meticulous technical detail upon the manner of vocal scoring to be adopted for the performance of the current style of elaborate church polyphony. Rather, he was a lawyer creating a legal deed of duties and obligations, for observance and practice by its inaugural and subsequent users. His purpose was to encapsulate for immediate use the instructions given to him as Bishop Sherborn's

intentions; as best he could, he chose his words appropriately, and it was thus by choice of words that his meaning was conveyed, and not by any feature so nebulous and capricious as the deployment of punctuation (at this period no more capable of containing and conveying subtlety or precision of meaning than choice of spelling). The compiler's non-perception of need to incorporate any such words as 'omnium praedictarum' into the phrase 'a communi vocum succentu' suffices to show that his purpose was to make the phrase 'possint naturaliter et libere ascendere ad quindecim vel sexdecim notas' refer solely to the three singers currently adverted to and characterised as possessing voices meeting the description 'suaves et canore', and not also to the bass singer already fully considered and characterised as 'naturalis et audibilis vocis'; and this consideration applied irrespective of the presence or absence of any mark of punctuation between 'canore' and 'ita'. From its wording there thus emerges the clear meaning of this document; and clear it so remains irrespective of any application of a mark of punctuation, whether applied to his draft by the originating lawyer or inserted at will by subsequent copyists.

9. The authoritative opinion upon this whole subject is that of the late Frank Harrison, uniquely a master of both the music and the documents. He observed that 'though the actual pitch was partly a matter of convenience, it is clear that the range of polyphony until the second half of the fifteenth century corresponded to that of the tenor and countertenor voices of today'. His report of the Chichester Cathedral document of 1526 was perhaps over-succinct, but certainly yielded no indication that he had perceived within Bishop Sherborn's provisions anything that actually contradicted or undermined his earlier finding (*Music in Medieval Britain*, 2nd edn (London, 1963), pp. 311, 181); and his conclusive and definitive understanding of the vocal scoring appropriate to the music of the Eton Choirbook period, entirely consistent with these considerations, is revealed by two gramophone recordings made in the late 1960s. *Richard Davy: Passion according to St Matthew* and *Eton Choirbook: Record 2* (Argo: ZRG 557-8) were produced in 1968 under Harrison's immediate guidance and personal supervision. His chosen scoring was for boy trebles and adult altos, tenors and basses; and there appear to be no valid grounds for any departure from that definitive practice.

Clifford Bartlett's postscript:

I happened to notice that the two standard clef patterns changed from C2-C2-C4 to G2-C2-C4-C4-F4. It is possible that the equal voices of C2 had the same tessitura as the later equal C4 – perhaps a matter of the single pairs of voices being identical. Perhaps singers preferred to keep pitches in C clef until the wider range made the pitch levels more precise and other clefs were used. I've done no research on the matter, but it might be worth considering. Incidentally, Andrew Parrott's article in the February *Early Music* reached me after I had the idea, and I won't have time to read it properly till after *EMR* is in the post.