

Falsettists, Castratos and Sopranos . . .

Different Timbres for the Same Part

By Andrea Angelini, choir director and Editor of ICB

The falsetto technique played a vital part in early polyphonic music, having appeared long before it was described in formal treatises or employed in Renaissance musical performances. As far back as the 13th century, Jerome of Moravia, [\[1\]](#) in his *Discantus position vulgaris*, mentioned three types of vocal register: 'vox pectoris' (chest register), 'vox guttoris' (throat register) and 'vox capitis' (head register). Until the 19th century, everything that was termed 'vox capitis' (later known as 'voce di testa') could be attributed to the falsetto technique. During the late Middle Ages, awareness of the different vocal registers increased due to the widening of the *tessitura* into various melodic lines. It should be borne in mind that church choirs were exclusively male, and that this brought with it a number of problems connected to the employment of the male voice outside its natural range. The use of boy sopranos for the highest parts was already being mentioned in the 9th century, when the author of *Scolica Enchiriadis* asserted that in the performance of parallel organum "...there is no doubt that the highest voices can be entrusted to children." [\[2\]](#) However, judging from the pictorial evidence, it is quite clear that in the centuries that followed the highest parts were sung almost exclusively not by children but by men, who would have sung in falsetto where necessary.

With the diffusion of polyphonic music, and naturally enough, the appreciation of the differences in timbre between the various male voices gradually increased. During the late 15th century, for example, there was a rapid growth in interest around the bass voice, observable partly in the composition of separate counterpoint lines (contratenor, bassus), but even more in the emphasis given to low voices in order to create a new sound. Vocal nomenclature focussed on the Greek prefix *bari-* (bass) and produced a varied terminology, including *baricanor*, *baripsaltes*, *bariclamans*, *barisonans* and *baritonans*. Composers such as Pierre de La Rue and Johannes Ockeghem wrote works that employed two parts below the tenors. *Missa Saxsonie* by Nicholas Champion (1526) has one bass part (A-d') and, below that, a part for *baritonans* (F-b). It is not at all surprising that Johannes Tinctoris cited Ockeghem as the best bass he had ever heard. This Mannerist fashion for bass voices did not last long, however, and in the late Renaissance the male voices were eventually divided into *Bassus*, *Tenor*, *Altus* and *Cantus* or *Discantus* (this last part was generally performed by falsettists until the end of the 16th century).

It does not appear that many singers before the second half of the 16th century became famous in their own right. Singers, although skilled interpreters of music written by others, were seen as mere reciters, and were rarely mentioned in contemporary print. The first singers whose names came to be widely known were the troubadours, from the 11th to the 13th centuries. These performers combined the skills of poet, composer and singer, earning themselves some degree of fame. 'Minnesang', [31] performed by poet-singers who also composed their own songs, had an important impact on musical development in the cultural centres of France, the Low Countries and Italy up until the beginning of the 16th century. In an anonymous 14th century work, Philippe de Vitry was

described as a “flower and gem among singers”, while Paolo da Firenze was certainly one of many contemporary composers who could also claim the title of ‘singer’. Dufay, La Rue, Josquin, Obrecht, Agricola and others who spent their professional lives at the various courts of Eastern Europe carried out the work of both composers and singers. Flemish singers became especially sought after as soon as the Italian courts, including those of Naples, Milan and Florence, began to emulate the Papal Choir from the second half of the 15th century. For the first time, foreign singers were taking part in public performances.

Around the middle of the 16th century a number of musical treatises, among them *Fontegara* (Ganassi del Fontego, 1535), *Trattado de Glosas* (Diego Ortiz, 1553) and *Compendium Musices* (Adriano Petit Coclico, 1552) demonstrate a new emphasis on the art of the singer, which is increasingly connected with the art of ornamentation or embellishment.[\[4\]](#) This was due, above all, to the arrival of the same technique among instrumentalists; indeed, most of these treatises were directed towards flutists, viola da gamba players and other instrumentalists. It is therefore fairly clear that the new technique was not aimed at those with an exclusive interest in, or who prioritised the importance of, sacred music. Although the technique of ornamentation could be applied to motets and other sacred compositions, singers began to experiment with the new stylistic possibilities through the performance of secular music, principally madrigals.

The most outstanding development in the history of singing in the second half of the 16th century was surely the discovery and use of the female voice (especially sopranos) as both an important participant in the performance of existing music and as a revolutionary factor in the composition of new pieces. From the Middle Ages onwards, there is substantial evidence that female singers took part in the performance of secular music, but their participation was viewed as an optional extra

rather than an essential part of the music. There were certainly a very large number of female singers and players at the European courts, although it is very difficult to find any written trace of their work: as courtesans they did not receive a salary, and as such do not appear in contemporary financial records. In any case, at the start of the 16th century, several women of noble birth became deeply interested in the practice of music. Isabella d'Este, Marchesa of Mantua (1474-1539) was an excellent example. An attentive patron of the arts in general and of music in particular, she was also a lute player, singer and collector of musical instruments. During her lifetime, all profane music utilised a tessitura suited to the male voice, and the falsetto part never rose above d". In contrast, the madrigals of the following years reflected the discovery of the soprano. The composer Nicola Vicentino, from Ferrara, who lived through the middle years of the 16th century, distinguished between pieces composed *a voce mutata* (without female voices) and *a voce piena* (male and female voices) and wrote madrigals in which the soprano was to sing notes above g".

This development, which occurred in various northern Italian courts as well as in Rome, reached its peak in Ferrara during the reign of Alfonso d'Este. He brought together an ensemble of virtuoso female musicians in the *Concerto delle Dame* (women's consort), [5] including Lucrezia Bendidio, Tarquinia Molza and Laura Pavarara (the last of whom had an impressive number of madrigals dedicated to her). This new sound of high voices, most of them female, was used by Claudio Monteverdi in the composition of his First Madrigal Book (1587), in which the bass section stays silent for at least the first eight bars, during which the sopranos and other higher pitched voices render the texture of the piece. The new style brought with it a strong element of *virtuosismo* to all singers, from bass to soprano. The art of improvised embellishment often proved to be extreme or misjudged and, as a result, was subject to strong criticism. Giovanni de' Bardi, in his

discourse on ancient music and on the correct singing method addressed to Giulio Caccini (c. 1578), complains of singers who ruined madrigals with their "...disordered passages" to such an extent that even the composer would be unable to recognise his own work. A similar complaint was made by Pietro Cerone in his *El Melopeo y Maestro* (1613). This was why a few composers began to write in the improvisational elements themselves, for instance Giaches de Wert's Eight, Ninth and Tenth Book of Madrigals, composed between 1586 and 1591.

The passion for vocal embellishment found its natural outlet in monody. Its most brilliant representative was Giulio Caccini (c. 1554-1618) who described an elaborate style of vocal embellishment, as distinct from normal instrumental music, in *Le Nuove Musiche*. He then went on to provide a painstakingly detailed description of the art in *Nuove Musiche e Nuova Maniera di Scriverle* (New Music and New Ways of Writing It) in 1614. The style involved not only elaborate embellishments in the strict sense of the word, but also the use of dynamic inflexions, declamation and posture. In any case, the most important factor for the future of vocal music was that the monodic style paid great attention to the free declamation of the piece, without any kind of constraints placed on the rhythm, as though it were a sort of musical narration – 'almost conversing in harmony'. This mannerism, the first step towards the 'recitative style', was an indispensable part of the language of cantatas, oratorios and operas for two centuries. The recitative style is without a doubt the most celebrated example of how musical practice can radically alter both the formal structure of, and the whole approach towards, vocal composition.

The period from 1575 to 1625 witnessed two important developments in the history of vocal music: the appearance of the castrati and the birth of opera. The castrato voice made its first significant appearance in church choirs; the discovery of the high female voice in secular music had

created an exciting new texture that the Counter-Reformation Church could not do without. With women forbidden from actively participating in liturgical music, only the castrati could deliver the sound that was so sought after, and so all questions of morality were put to one side. Inherited from ancient oriental and Byzantine traditions, the practice of ritual castration was carried out in order to present something quite extraordinary to the faithful: an incomparably celestial voice with alien, even supernatural, qualities. It developed in Italy from the beginning of the 16th century, finding particularly fertile ground in the Eternal City, where Saint Paul's precept imposing silence on women in church was widely observed (1 Corinthians 14:34). The castrati thrived in 16th century Rome, finding the perfect musical and cultural environment in the florid, polyphonic productions that proliferated in the period. Their unnatural voices, angelic and yet powerful, seemed purposely designed to leave congregations dumbstruck during liturgical performances, becoming a magnificent intermediary between man and God. The first castrato to enter into the famous Papal Chapel was probably Francisco Soto de Langa in 1562, followed in 1599 by the first two great *virtuosi* Pietro Paolo Folignato and Girolamo Rossini. The success of these 'golden-voiced angels' was such that Pope Clement VIII provided for the gradual substitution of all Chapel choristers with castrati. It therefore goes without saying that, even though it was never made legal, the practice of castration was tacitly accepted by the Church in order to mould the human voice in the service of the Almighty.



A caricature of the famous castrato Farinelli in a female role, by Pier Leone Ghezzi 1724

At the same time, castrati were also employed by opera composers, who made better use of their special vocal characteristics than the composers of sacred music. Nevertheless, the castrati survived in church choirs until the start of the 20th century: the castrato Alessandro Moreschi made a number of recordings before retiring in 1913 from his position as Director at the Sistine Chapel. He died in 1922.

[\[1\]](#) Jerome di Moravia, who died after 1271, was a mediaeval music theorist. A Dominican friar of unknown origin, it is thought that he worked in Paris at the Rue Saint-Jacques Convent.

[\[2\]](#) *Scolica enchiriadis* is an anonymous musical treatise from the 9th century, paired with *Musica Enchiriadis*. These

treatises were once attributed to Hucbald, but modern scholars no longer support this theory.

[3] Poetic movement with some similarities with the Italian *Stil Novo*, which originated in late 12th century Germany. *Minnesang* was modelled on the work of the Provençal troubadours and was influenced by the lyric poetry of the Cult of the Virgin Mary. German *Minnesang*, centred on Austria and Bavaria, is quite distinct both from the Aristotelianism of the *Stil Novo* and from the sensuality of the troubadours: the lady, not only unreachable but married to the feudal lord, is the object not of direct desire but of a nostalgic love, a dedication to the fusion of two souls.

[4] 'Embellishment' or 'ornamentation' refers to a succession of generally chromatic notes inserted into almost any part of a tune and nearly always chosen by the composer. The notes of the embellishment are smaller and are almost improvised, without strict rules of rhythm, according to the free interpretation of the performer. The origin of the equivalent Italian term *fioritura* probably derives from the Latin *florificatio* vocis, from which also derive the terms *contrappunto fiorito* and *stile fiorito*.

[5] According to contemporary accounts, the fame of the group derived from the skilful integration of instruments and vocals. Their talent, especially in performing madrigals, combined with the physical-gestural fascination of which the female musicians were the object, explain the popularity of the *Concerto delle Dame*. The *Concerto Secreto* performed daily in the chambers of Margherita Gonzaga, herself an excellent dancer and musician of some refinement. The Duke, proud of the ladies' performances, made a written record of their repertoire, and during the concerts that were open to outsiders he would show them to select members of the audience (nobles and intellectuals). Nevertheless, he did not allow the compositions to be printed, perhaps in order to maintain the

shroud of mystery that would soon surround the *Concerto delle Dame*. Upon the death of Alfonso II d'Este, however, the books disappeared, making it impossible to find out what the repertoire of the group really was, with the exception of Luzzasco Luzzaschi's works.

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