

An Increasingly Fragile Musical Miracle

Straightforward words from Dr Peter Giles

It's how the composer Alan Ridout (1934-1996) described our traditional all-male cathedral choirs, though at the time he didn't need the 'increasingly'. How right he was. How right he's being proved. Lifelong champion of our unique cathedral choir tradition, Ridout was writing much concerned by 1970s political choir-school manoeuvrings at Canterbury; but the present writer knew Alan and his views well. His phrase expressed exactly the unique, ineffable quality of the all-male choral sound: the glorious but temporary stay of the boy's voice, and the wonderful, otherworldly quality of the countertenor voice. His words are ever more cogent now.

During the following discussion, please bear in mind:

- (i) Historically and correctly, though much ignored today, 'alto voice' denotes a male singer exclusively ¹.
- (ii) 'Alto' and 'countertenor' are therefore used interchangeably – a topic over-complex for detailing here ¹.
- (iii) 'Traditional cathedral choir' is *ipso facto* all-male.
- (iv) 'Cathedral' and 'Contralto' are employed *generically*.

Previously undreamt-of challenges to the delicate ecology of the all-male choir have arisen in the last decades. James Bowman's article, 'Male Alto versus Female Alto' ², re-published 2012 in *Once a Chorister*, concerned the admission of women as altos during the last year or two. Before discussing this, it is essential that brief mention should be made of what has or has not happened since Salisbury Cathedral established its girls' choir in 1991.

Whatever else has come about, girls' choirs in cathedrals should surely be contributing something unique and fresh: the start of a new sacred choral art form – a contrasted tradition and repertoire of their very own. But is this occurring? A new art form such as this can develop only if kept genuinely and totally separate from that of the men and boys. Employing the girls as an alternative top line to sing with the men hardly constitutes a new sacred choral art form. We rejoice, of course, that these gifted girls already represent half the solution to another increasingly worrying problem: the future supply of

real singers as soloists and in all choirs – except all-male. There is a tragic lack of classical singing in most state schools. Until the national educational system comes to its pop-deadened senses – and so many people await that day! – independent schools, from which most cathedral choristers are still drawn, fly as the main pathfinders for the future of quality adult singing.

So girls' cathedral choirs are playing their part for the future of good singing. But unfortunately, however well-intentioned and totally separate from the men and boys' choir they were intended to be when set up, some are playing a part in ending the historic traditional choir in the cathedrals concerned ³. And now, increasingly, another component of that ending is being fitted on the alto line in a number of cathedrals.

The introduction of contraltos into surviving all-male choirs. There are four semi-linked arguments:

(a) Claimed difficulty in (or impossibility of) recruiting altos.

(b) The alto part needs help or rescue.

(c) Women should be admitted to specialist, all-male cathedral choirs. It is a question of equal rights.

(d) Contraltos offer the all-male tradition better vocal technique than most countertenors.

We discuss recruitment later. In recent years, despite generally high cathedral choral standards, the word 'rescue' has resurfaced. It began with the insistence that boys needed in-choir assistance from girls. (We've seen what that kind of assistance helped do to most parish choirs.) Now it's being applied to the alto part in cathedrals, only partially related to rather over-easily accepted claims of a shortage of countertenors. 'Help-needed' is a familiar way of achieving partisan change.

Meanwhile, James Bowman proclaims 'London is positively awash with excellent male altos' ². Clearly there's no availability problem in the metropolis, so why is St Paul's Cathedral starting to use contraltos instead of altos? Obviously, the answer lies in (c) and (d). Consequently, the number of contraltos in prestigious St Paul's will surely increase; thus numbers of

contraltos in other former all-male choirs will also expand – an irreversible step has already begun.

Contentions (c) and (d) emanate from particularly partisan quarters. Contention (c) is of course totally political, not musical – an integrant of a wide, determined sociological crusade. Obvious in (d) is the argument that contraltos should be appointed to traditional cathedral choirs, not in addition to but *instead of* altos; that, in effect, contraltos offer the all-male tradition enhanced range and superior handling of register changes than can some counter-tenors.

So the historical male high voice is now inadequate for its historical role and bespoke repertoire? Peter Phillips, whose wife now sings on the alto line at St Paul's, considers that contraltos – 'those who will come after, now that the breach has been made' – should be appointed to (up to that point) all-male cathedral choirs because they are technically better singers than altos ⁴. Are they? Properly trained countertenors have extensive ranges too, including those essential lower notes. All voice-types need to negotiate register changes. In fact, contraltos often demonstrate register changes more obviously than many through-range countertenors. But there are other equally important factors to consider. So in no particular order:

Countertenors have sustained their custom-composed alto line perfectly well, over-all, throughout the centuries, adjusting in style appropriately. Many have brought distinction to this specialist, all-male tradition, and outside it, as soloists. Others have provided the choral alto line beautifully but more discreetly. Today, most male high voices are trained better than ever. Cathedrals must set out to attract them. It must always be remembered, and never allowed to be waved airily away, that the cathedral repertoire has been written specifically with male voices in mind, and that even the undeveloped, minimally trained falsetto sound is usually attractive. Certainly, it can blend superbly, and colour a choir uniquely.

The alto voice wears out earlier? Not necessarily. Good technique is the key for all voices. For example, the author heard the distinguished countertenor John Whitworth sound as finely ringing as ever in his early eighties, and legendary alto the late Freddy Hodgson singing beautifully into his early nineties. Most cathedral and other professional choirs now re-audition all

singers at a specific age because both male and female singers can end up with, as Frank Baker once wrote wittily, 'a voice like a starving fly in a bottle' ⁶. We think too of those granite basses, scraping baritones, bleating tenors, fruit bowl altos, hootoid or concrete contraltos, acid mezzos and scrawny sopranos.... They've not all been old.

In today's financial straits, vacancies for all three male voice parts should still be attracting suitable men singers. But applicants are scarcer (probably related to the fact that for several decades, fewer and still fewer boys have been singing, nationwide). Cathedral stipends and salaries are too low? Certainly, many foundations, now with at least one extra choir to fund, seem unable to keep pace with the cost of living. Much of the free or subsidised accommodation traditionally offered to lay-clerks appears no longer available, though a few enlightened foundations still offer this. Cathedrals that take their all-male choirs genuinely seriously could perhaps find ways of offering attractive packages to suitable applicants, with a built-in extra incentive for countertenors. There is room here for merely a few suggestions. Detailed discussion belongs elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, more men sing bass or tenor than alto; though if they wished, or were encouraged, most of them could develop the wonderful, natural, high potential that exists in most male voices. Cathedrals could establish permanent alto training programmes, perhaps in conjunction with a neighbouring foundation – or other traditional ecclesiastical choir if one can be found – even if the choirs have no current alto vacancies. (In any case, the availability of deputies is essential.) But there has to be a genuine will for these and other essential initiatives to be implemented and the alto future safeguarded. Some foundations demonstrate a clear absence of any such will – sadly, just the opposite.

Alto vacancies can bring a quick-fix temptation to employ contraltos. An entirely alto-less choir cannot perform the repertoire. But when there's a shortage of tenors, what then? How can contraltos (or inevitably, those 'lady tenors/baritones' that will come after!) possibly represent the solution for our unique all-male tradition? They can't, of course, without instantly ending that tradition. But wouldn't contraltos merely be helping out temporarily? There is a well-known precedent. At Chichester Cathedral during the Second World

War, two devoted ladies filled in the alto part self-effacingly. They left voluntarily after the war, when it was again possible to appoint countertenors. Imagine such altruistic cognisance even being allowed today, whatever the wishes of the women concerned, never mind historical authenticity!

Nevertheless, Bowman suggests that if a male (*sic*) alto cannot be found for a vacancy in an all-male cathedral choir, a female singer would be perfectly acceptable – mainly because in some university chapel choirs young male and female singers sing alto together and he considers the result successful. But this brand of successful – based on a careful training compromise, the word ‘young’; and where applicable, microphone placing – also fails to acknowledge the longer term effect on the tradition and on the individual voices concerned. Almost all mature countertenors and contraltos have an inherently different timbre: valuable because different. On the same note, the female low-ish voice tends to sound an octave below the male high voice, the harmonics of which light up the choral sound and are of course a vital factor in men’s-voice repertoire.

Alto shortage, or attempts to substitute for altos, is nothing new. In 1914 (when countertenors seldom sang outside *ecclesia* as soloists) J. Varley Roberts wrote ⁷, primarily for parish-church choirmasters:

Boy-altos must necessarily use almost entirely the ‘chest’ register, which is thick and rough, and this quality of voice is *most objectionable* in an *inner* part – indeed as objectionable as contraltos (i.e. when females sing the alto part). Boys should only be resorted to when it is absolutely impossible to obtain men-altos. Many Bass singers [an oddly narrowed view common in 1914 – PG] might sing Alto; and if they would confine themselves to *exclusively practising the falsetto voice*, men-altos would be sufficiently numerous to supply the demand. The old church composers always wrote for men-altos. Few things are more intolerable than to hear a boy-alto or lady-contralto sing the highest part – say a trio for Alto, Tenor and Bass voices, in an anthem by such Church writers as Greene, Croft, Boyce, &c. Of course, if it be impossible to obtain men-altos, then, as a last resource, adopt boy-altos or Contraltos. For the singing of *Solos* [i.e. in 1914, meaning secular works, Handel onwards – PG], no doubt, a Contralto is better

than an Alto voice, but to obtain the quality of tone most desirable in Church choirs, men-altos are essential. For some years it was the experience of the writer of this treatise to have a mixed choir of women and men, several of whom were professional singers. After a certain evensong when Boyce's anthem 'O where shall wisdom be found' had been sung, an eminent musician who happened to be in the church, subsequently remarked of the singular and disastrous effect of a 'thick' chest voice singing the *highest* part in the 'verse' portion of the anthem: it was, he said, 'as if a "Bass-singer's" quality of tone was singing the top part.' He spoke the truth: nothing can replace the beautiful thin flute-like quality of the pure Alto, it brightens up the entire quality of the tone of the choir.

The skilled countertenor can utilise characteristic, trumpet-like sonority; vital, penetrating, plangent; or an edgy or keen flute-like quality. Compromising alto and contralto tone, like mixing boys' and girls' voices, sadly loses their characteristic timbres.

The cathedral choir and repertoire requires men and boys to be soloists and small ensemble as well as choral singers. To the distant listener, a remote microphone or indeed a closer but determinedly obtuse ear, a single contralto might not seem to alter overmuch the over-all sound of an otherwise all-male choir. But we have also to consider 'verses' – sections of an anthem or canticle involving fewer voices, boys, men or both, usually one singer to each line. These range from solos to four or more voice-parts, especially the historical ATB trio, the male *Terzet* that is such an integral part of English cathedral music. Contraltos in verse singing would demonstrate one of the biggest changes in the no longer all-male cathedral choir.

Therefore, though to a claimed shortage of countertenors contraltos may appear to be an easy answer, it can never be the right one for an inherently male traditional choral art form. If, despite all watertight arguments against, contraltos are still considered to be the solution to an alto shortage, they will also become much of the problem. However gifted, women in the back row will only worsen matters for the future. Yet at Peterborough, Andrew Reid is actively encouraging the process, affirming that: '...female altos provide role models for girls's. Make no mistake, especially to today's boys, cathedral

contraltos send out a strong message that the alto part is women's work: that men singing alto are a bit odd. Experience and common sense suggest that, resultantly, fewer boys will become tomorrow's countertenors. Already, the myriad negative pressures felt by most lads now result in a powerful disincentive for them to be in choirs at all – that singing is something for girls. Chorister boys are not unaware of these things! Nation-wide, the boy singer is now rare. Outside all-male choirs – not only choirs in cathedrals and churches – hardly a boy is singing, and now the cathedral countertenor is becoming – indeed being put – at risk. The tradition itself is being dissolved or dismantled slowly. All this will result in the loss of boys and men to God's church and to the future of good singing outside it.

The increasing shortage of men singers will further weaken secular mixed-voice choirs, professional and amateur. These valuable choirs, the laudatory norm outside *ecclesia*, offer the full width of the human voice, but their men are already disappearing fast. *Remember, today's boys are the other half of that answer for the future of serious singing.* They become basses, tenors – and countertenors. Losing the secular mixed choir would be a musical and cultural tragedy. But losing the all-male choral tradition would be far worse. Identifying an endangered species is always deeply dismaying. The label 'extinct' is absolute desolation. Once gone, unlike the mixed choir, the permitted return of the men and boys' choral tradition is frankly highly improbable. Its inherent, vocal restrictions are actually its glory, its wonderful uniqueness. The artist who employs a restricted palette of colours can achieve a special magic unobtainable in full colour. The all-male choir possesses this kind of magic, as in its contrasted way does an all-female choir.

Usually, a tradition of any sort is maintained yet allowed to evolve by retaining the bedrock, the absolute, while the appropriate best of the new is incorporated. But in this case, the survival of an art form itself depends totally on the survival of its inherent all-male instrument. Keeping the integrity of an art form is not normally a matter of gender, although this case is different. That which is intrinsic and that which is calculatedly mutational must be kept strictly separate. However beautifully toned her voice, or even almost countertenor-like she can sometimes sound – very rarely, such a contralto

does surface – a female singer in a once all-male choir can never represent evolution or exciting development, as has been claimed. She creates an artistic hybrid that *ipso facto* nullifies a unique, male art form. She is in the wrong *milieu*. Furthermore, an additional tragedy is involved. Women and girls slowly transmuting our ever fewer remaining all-male choirs into or towards mixed-voice hardly represent a development of the uniquely female genius that surely all of us want to see. It constitutes political engineering. Where has been the start of that new all-female sacred choral art form, underpinned by those gifted contraltos? Anywhere? True richness of the human condition demands diverseness, not reduction to identicalness.

Meanwhile, a traditional cathedral choir is either an example of our historic, unique, all-male choral genius, or it is not. There are no half measures. If we want it to survive, brave ways have to be found to accomplish this.

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1 See this writer's 'Countertenor' and 'Falsetto' articles in the *Grove Millennium* and on-line editions, and his *The History and Technique of the Counter-Tenor* (Scolar Press/Ashgate, 1994).

2 *Cathedral Music* (FCM May, 2011).

3 'In denial' nicely describes some on-going results of these developments. In his generally optimistic final editorial in the May 2011 edition of *Cathedral Music*, Andrew Palmer wrote: '...let's remember that no traditional choir has actually disappeared. Although they may have changed in character none has vanished'. This could offer some reassurance if only it were true. The last count of both Anglican and RC all-male cathedral choirs revealed only six surviving in all Ireland, four in Wales and none at all in Scotland. In England (2012) there are already more than eleven cathedrals in which the genuine traditional choir has ceased to be. Others are increasingly vulnerable. Some foundations now see their originally 'separate' choirs as one conglomerate from which they put together various sections as wished. Amongst other places, women are now singing alto in the former all-male choirs of Peterborough and Lincoln; and, of all foundations, St Paul's. (There are already disquieting rumours about at least one other major foundation, too.) In these cathedrals, by a stroke or strokes, the traditional choir no longer exists. The choir hasn't vanished. Palmer's 'changed in character' is mostly a euphemism for new, mixed-voice persona. Meanwhile, no doubt encouraged by all this, Newcastle Cathedral is advertising for an alto (male or female) lay-clerk for its traditional all-male choir, and for alto (male or female) choral scholars.

4 Peter Phillips, 'Rare Voices' (*The Spectator*, November 2010).

5 Andrew Reid, 'Sweet Singing in the Quire' (*Cathedral Music*, FCM, May 2011).

6 Frank Baker, *Miss Hargreaves* (Penguin, 1939).

7 J. Varley Roberts: *A Treatise on a Practical Method of Training Choristers* (OUP, 1914).

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