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PRACTISING AND TEACHING HISTORICALLY INFORMED SINGING – WHO CARES?

by RICHARD WISTREICH

One of my favourite British politicians, the grand old socialist Tony Benn, tells a story which never fails to amuse the left-wing faithful at demonstrations. Apparently, Mahatma Ghandi visited Britain some time in the 1930s in order to negotiate with the government about Indian independence, and he cut a striking figure with his bare head and flowing robes among the drably uniformed bowler hats and dark suits of the British bureaucrats. A reporter from one of the newspapers asked him „Mr Ghandi, what do you think of western civilisation?“ Ghandi thought for a moment and replied „Well, I think it would be very good idea“. In my own version of this charming parable, specially modified for this symposium, the characters are played by different actors. Today, my crowd of the smartly-dressed consists not of colonial administrators, but of the deeply satisfied directors, owners and heirs of the early music phenomenon, presiding over their stacks and stacks of CDs, which are the concrete signs of the irreversible effect they have had on the way that the classical music canon has been re-negotiated, massively expanded and re-released. In the crowd are also other more humble functionaries, such as the Kantors in their local town churches where clean, slim line „baroque bands“ now accompany the choir for the annual *Johannespassion* or *Messiah*. And there are also the large numbers of knowledgeable concert-goers (and CD buyers) who are no longer surprised at the sight of a *chitarrone* or an *oboe da caccia* on the stage and know to smile condescendingly at performances of the *Weihnachstoratorium* which still employ those nasty little „piccolo trumpets“ with valves, not to mention other „musically incorrect“ sounds. My confident newspaper reporter sees me in the crowd and knows me for a singer and a singing teacher, so he asks „Well, Mr Wistreich, what do you think of the Historically Informed Singing Revolution?“ After a short pause, during which I look back over twenty five years or so at my own adventures in the heroic struggle and my progress from bright-eyed young iconoclast to greying member of the academy teaching staff, I, too, reply without (much) irony: „Well, I think it might be a very good idea“.

If, behind its glibness, this sounds like a somewhat surprising comment and surely a polemically motivated caricature, coming as it does from someone who has not only been apparently singing „early music“ throughout the period under discussion, but who has also been actively teaching singing to budding early music professionals for more than a decade, then I can only say that your surprise is nothing to my own, experienced on so many occasions and in so many different situations in the recent past, as performer, listener and teacher within our early music world. And it is for this reason that I believe that this forum, in this place, provides a timely opportunity for us, singers and singing teachers, to think about the nature of what we do in the realm of historically

informed professional music practice; to recognise and face up to some of the myths and stories that have informed what we do. We might think about the ways in which we justify our belief that „early music“ singing may be a field of practice discrete from other kinds of singing and explore our sometimes fraught relationship with so-called „mainstream classical vocal practice“. We could take this opportunity to assess the small and still precarious space we seem to have found for ourselves inside the conservatoire and examine how our practices as teachers and students relate to the „general education“ of singers. Finally, I would like to offer a small selection of my own questions about historically informed vocal practice which, for many reasons connected with the way that our discipline has emerged in the recent past, have been either bypassed or neglected, but which might nevertheless be worth addressing both in our wider practice as performers and also specifically, in our pedagogy, as we work towards that „revolution“ which so far we have largely denied ourselves.

In order to begin to understand our present situation, we need to reconstruct the story of how we got here. Let us first examine the period of, say, the past thirty years, and look at the process by which historically informed *instrumentalists* reached the point where they have now been relieved of much of the earnest anxiety that characterised the beginnings of the current early music revival and see if it offers parallel models for a „singers' story.“ Viewed very broadly we can discern successive phases of:

- 1) initial curiosity and pioneering experimentation by individuals who were working, by and large, away from the commercial mainstream, and who were motivated by a dissatisfaction with, or even rejection of, the ways of making music which they found available to them there;
- 2) a more focused research and development phase, during which musicians of the younger generation, through teaching and imitation, were attracted in and, in turn, responded to the exciting feeling of being at the cutting edge. Their readiness to take the major step of committing themselves full time to historically informed practice enabled the founding of the first successful professional period instrument ensembles;
- 3) rapid building of technical skills „on the job“, often collectively, in orchestras and other ensembles;
- 4) ever increasing levels of sophistication and precision, under the guidance of some dynamic and truly determined directors and conductors, as a result of which, these musicians arrived at their present near irreversible stability and dominance – even hegemony – over large swathes of the classical canon.

Along the way we have seen diversions and distortions, many of them the result of extra-musical conditions. For example, there have been the agendas of the recording industry and the career ambitions of the small but proportionately very influential group of directors, who all along have been the major drivers of the historically informed performance movement. One particular „diversion“ was the tendency (and, I believe, for many a conscious choice) of directors and

their agents and managers to align themselves with the aggressive, winner-takes-all form of the conducting profession. They are deeply embedded in, and in debt to, a prevailing conservative culture of musical production and this has defined and produced the current early music performance structures and their employment systems, which mimic existing dominant models.

It has, by and large, been a rather different story for singers, although the end position is comparable. The reasons for this are complex, and they are to a certain extent symptomatic of a number of still unresolved tensions within the early music scene, that go to the heart of its image and its ideology. Those who want or need a „historically informed vocal performance“ to go with their period instrumentalists face two basic choices. On one hand, they can start with the assumption that their employable singers will be produced by the „received tradition“, whether by their conservatory education or by their exposure in other ways to dominant and approved models of that „classical“ vocal sound. These singers might then be diverted, either under their own steam or by direction, to go through the same process as the pioneer instrumentalists: rejection of the prevailing status quo, examination of „the sources“, questioning why established ways of singing western art music may not in fact answer the demands of the repertoire, followed by experimentation, practice and the possible emergence of „other“ kinds of singing. One would not have to go right back to the beginning to find out what different sounds the human voice could make and which thus might have made at some other time: we are surrounded on all sides by easily accessible examples of every possible kind of world, popular and avant-garde musics, which demonstrate the almost limitless variety of ways that a singing voice can be produced. What might happen (and has, to a very limited extent, sometimes already happened) is the emergence of singers with ideals of vocal sound, production and style more or less differentiated according to historically-defined fields of repertoire, parallel with those of instrumental players, necessarily prone to many of the same gradually evolving subtleties and concomitant compromises, but nevertheless more or less „historically“ constructed, independent of pre-existing constructs of „appropriate“ art singing. On our more confident days, we might see our work here in the specialist wing of the academy as following such a path.

On the other hand, one could say that singing presents a fundamentally different case to that of instrumental playing, because the human voice box itself is an unchanged and unchanging organ. This position was unequivocally stated a few years ago by René Jacobs in an interview with the newspaper *Le Monde*; the article was entitled „Il n’y a pas de voix baroque.“ He said, „unlike instruments, which become outmoded and develop, the voice does not evolve. The only thing of which we can be sure is that voices today are identical to those of the past“. ¹ There is a problematic logic in this; let us

¹ Interview with Jacques Doucelin in *Le Monde*, November 1993 at the time of the production of Jean-Baptiste Lully, *Roland* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: „Contrairement aux instruments qui vieillissent et se modifient, la voix, elle, n’évolue pas. La seule chose don’t on soit sûr, c’est que les voix d’aujourd’hui, sont indentiques à celles d’autrefois“.

take the violin as an example. The seventeenth-century violin differs from its modern cousin in a number of clear physical ways: a different bow, neck-length and angle, internal set-up, bridge and strings. It is taken as given that there should thus be a whole set of „different“ technical and aesthetic parameters which separate some putative „baroque violin“ playing from an equally putative „modern“ style of playing (leaving aside the many problems of definition raised by such generalisations). This apparently justifies the decisions of many violinists to specialise on the „baroque“ violin as a career choice, the existence of separate structures of professional work and the provision of specialist educational programmes for them. If there are no „baroque“ voices (and, by implication, no „medieval“, „renaissance“, or for that matter, „romantic“ or even „modern“ voices), then Jacobs’s logic would suggest that although one may make more or less historically informed gestures towards stylistic and articulatory differences between repertoires as far as this is possible (such as ornamentation or, perhaps, language), at the level of vocal sound production itself – perhaps because the repertoire is apparently essentially „familiar“ – you can stick confidently and faithfully to the „certainties“ of some apparently agreed notion of the western classical received tradition, something that is immediately recognisable as „proper singing“. Seen in the context of all the other premises of the historically informed performance movement, the second choice looks like a seriously irrational side-stepping of a whole range of issues, including not only questions of „evidence“ and the possible fruits of experimentation, but also fundamental ideological implications of the construction of our notions of what might constitute this „proper singing“. It is, however, the position that has by and large been accepted, adopted, and promoted both in the profession, and – particularly significantly for us – in the conservatory, right up to the present time.

After an initial phase, in which directors simply worked with the established singers from within the received tradition who were readily to hand (for example, in Harnoncourt’s Monteverdi opera cycle),² a critical feature of the new movement, which at first manifested itself most strongly in Britain, saw directors looking outside this obvious and convenient constituency. This feature was the pursuit of „otherness“, *difference*: one of the principal underlying premises of what the „movement“ was all about. It was certainly intellectually defensible as a way of challenging orthodoxy. In the early 1970s, clearing a fresh and separate space in the forest and announcing something „new“ was an important part of the process of establishing a significant presence in a fiercely self-protective environment. What it meant in practice for singing, though, was a classic compromise. Directors turned away from the established singers of the classical received tradition and looked to another group, which,

² One exceptional and potentially revolutionary figure who appeared in this phase was the singer Cathy Berberian, whose sense of the potentially unlimited possible differentiations of vocalities might have led the movement off down new paths; she did not have the opportunity to become such a figure.

for many of them, was right under their noses: the men of the collegiate choral tradition. For women singers, they looked to those who shared as closely as possible the same approach to music making – as often as not, one that came out of academic rather than performance institutions.³ Here, *prêt à porter*, as it were, was a clean, lightweight, disciplined, flexible, understated and emotionally relatively neutral singing style purveyed by intellectually quick and engaged young people, apparently unencumbered with the perceived „excesses“ of conventional classical singing.⁴ The phenomenon was particularly British, but found, as we know, imitators and admirers throughout Europe and America. In its sound image, it may have answered the immediate demand for „otherness“, but although that sound may have been quantitatively lighter (originally, perhaps, because it was simply „younger“?) and more homogenous (and anonymous?) than the mainstream, it was still intimately linked to the same highly developed received tradition of western classical vocal production that it purported to displace. A fundamental, root and branch re-thinking of singing in terms of historically informed experimentation and an opening of the ears to quite other vocal sounds in the musical environment: this it was not.

The driving urgency of the situation in which the movement found itself simply did not allow for such a process, even if it had been wanted. The priority was to get all of that mass of un-colonised repertoire on to record – vast prairies of wonderful sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century music, as well as forays into the preceding and succeeding centuries – and the collegiate trained singers were well adapted to such a task inasmuch as they had stamina, enthusiasm and sight-reading ability. However, as time would show, most of these singers were not at all interested in renouncing or even reconsidering the givens of the received tradition; indeed, many of them yearned to graduate from the historically informed performance ghetto and get into the mainstream, the „real thing“. Some sought to distance themselves from any damaging association with a vocal sound that, thanks to the successes of a few prominent practitioners, was recognised first as a potential rival to the mainstream and thus a threat, and so began, then, to be mocked as „not really singing“. It was a process akin to the debunking of early attempts by the period instrumentalists to invade occupied territory such as late eighteenth century repertoire, by writing off their playing as congenitally out of tune.

Many of the most ambitious conductors, with one or two significant exceptions, also recognised the limitations of the „collegiate singers“ and were fast coming to the same conclusions about vocal sound as some influential critics. In the event, the dilemma was settled for them once and for all by their most important patron, the recording industry. The new golden goose, compact

³ Of the six singing members of the *Consort of Musicke* in the early 1980s, only one was a graduate of a conservatoire, a statistic fairly typical of most early music vocal ensembles in Britain at the time.

⁴ See the first-hand recollections of this period in John Potter's contribution to this volume.

disc technology, that just begged a re-recording of the entire western canon, had arrived. Once the talk turned from madrigals and motets to Mozart and Monteverdi opera cycles, the stakes changed radically. This was the heartland of a passionately and jealously protected area of the classical musical canon, where the very sound of the singing voice was absolutely definitive. Neither the record company executives nor those conductors who could see that they, too, might be able to negotiate a route to the top, were prepared to countenance the same singers or singing styles that had been deployed in early music up until this point. Quite simply, a subtle, perhaps unconscious, negotiation took place with respect to vocal sound, and this has affected nearly everything that has since followed in the realm of professional early music singing.

For example, I remember a conversation in the early 1980s with the late Peter Wadland, chief record producer at Decca's *L'Oiseau Lyre* label, during recording sessions for an album of Monteverdi madrigals. The subject came up of their projected pioneer period instrument recording of *Don Giovanni* with Arnold Oestmann and the Drottningholm Court Theatre Orchestra. He asked me if I had any suggestions for a young bass to sing the part of Masetto. I looked at him with a rather sheepish grin, and he just laughed and said „Oh no, we won't be having any of you lot!“ Well, at least I was behaving like a typical singer – always over-estimating myself and trying to get ahead!⁵

From this point on, the singing was to conform firmly to the same characteristics demanded by the received tradition, nuanced with certain stylistic gestures. It would allow the conductors and orchestras from the historically informed system a seamless passage on into the „mainstream“ institutions and bastions of the classical music citadel. It also, meanwhile, allowed directors and singers from the other side – those who, up until now, had kept their distance from the precocious early music scene – to cross into the new territory. This process has subsequently blurred many other important distinctions, while at the same time playing a part in allowing critics and audiences alike to feel that historically informed performance has been effectively tamed and absorbed.

Those who decided to keep going in the pursuit of „otherness“ in singing still found small niches in the domain of the exotic in which to continue their various fragmentary agendas. But they were marginalised in what at that time were largely non-commercial segments of the market, such as medieval music. This is one of the few repertoires where singers of early music either from outside the received tradition, or fugitive from it, have continued to challenge orthodoxies. Here there has been openness to experimentation with vocal sounds learned from a wide range of other traditions outside western art singing. However, the commercial demand for a sound acceptable – and above all, recognisable – to the classical market tended to militate against even these initiatives, or at least to drive them into other ghettos.

⁵ In the event, the part went to a (then) relatively unknown young singer named Bryn Terfel (recording, 1989, Decca CD 425 9432); the rest, as they say, is history!

However, the New Dispensation, under which the forces of progress (historically informed music making) and tradition (the grand tradition, the *bel canto* myth) have reached an accommodation with one another produces some extraordinary results, and these have direct and potentially defining implications for the music academy. Go to a performance of a high baroque opera in one of those theatres which has apparently been conquered and occupied by the progressive coalition, and your ears and eyes will be subjected to some puzzling experiences. With some exceptions still, the stage production will probably be more or less completely modernist or (more likely at present) post-modernist in conception. In the orchestra pit, meanwhile, there will be an ensemble of period instrumentalists, apparently exercising bang-up-to-the-minute technical and stylistic skills, honed and buffed to an impressive disciplined shine: the reward of yielding to the working structures of the conventional symphony orchestra, from its training institutions to its rehearsal techniques. And these bands are no sluggards, as René Jacobs was able to boast in the same interview I cited earlier: „don't fool yourself, the sound is as loud as a symphony orchestra. You can't imagine the noise that a lute can make in a big hall! We had a surprise at the first musical rehearsal – the orchestra was much too loud, you couldn't hear the singers any more!“⁶

Who are these singers and where do they come from? By and large, they will be members of the *crème de la crème* of the mainstream received classical style, interpreting the musical text in a more or less „historical“ way – depending largely on whoever is in charge – but with no essential difference in vocal production, articulation, dynamic or other parameters of timbre than they would use tomorrow in a performance of Beethoven or Berg. And why not? After all, the audience appears to be happy, because the auditorium is certainly as full as it will be for Mozart or Strauss on another night. They have come to attend the opera, and the ideology of the world to which opera belongs prepares them to expect singing which we, as experts, can quickly define as „low-larynx position, dynamically amplified through exploitation of the singers' formant“, but which for most people simply means „proper classical singing“. It is loud enough and sufficiently penetrating to satisfy the opera fan (even falsettists have to be super-charged these days to make much headway) and, as a bonus, it also means that the singers will probably be able to „act“ adequately on stage because they know the prevailing historically undifferentiated, neo-realist operatic style. The point is, it „works“.

And why this fuss anyway? As we all now know – and in case we had not worked it out for ourselves a long time ago, a number of high-profile musicologists such as Richard Taruskin, Peter Kivy and others have gone to great lengths to inform us – what we in the so-called historically informed performance project have been up to for the last thirty years has nothing to do with the

⁶ Op. cit.: „Détrompez vous, il sonne aussi fort qu'un orchestre symphonique. Vous n'imaginez pas le bruit que peut faire un luth dans une grande salle! Nous avons eu une surprise à la première répétition musicale: l'orchestre était beaucoup trop fort, on n'entendait plus les voix!“

historical. It has to do with the modern: „it is the sound of now, not then“.⁷ Our pursuit of historical „truth“ is and always was, an illusion. Perhaps all our effort has, in fact, been due to a need to allay a current western anxiety about identity which manifests itself in the Heritage Industry, a point recently argued by John Butt.⁸ Or perhaps it is simply that we are too timid or lazy to make new music. But, if it works and if even the directors of the historically informed music ensembles with their record contracts, festival directorships and chief conductorships are satisfied, why shouldn't we be? If singers never actually had an early music revolution, who cares?

Well, perversely perhaps, I do. I will never forget the first time I heard Bruce Dickey play the *cornetto* and listened to him talk about the process of learning how to play: the creative interplay of the study of treatises and the reconstruction of instruments and music, learning articulation that met the demands of the notation, experimenting, improvising in appropriate styles and developing a living practice based on what he found. I wish that those who say that the goal of historically informed performance practice is an illusion could have the same experience as I had. Well, I wanted to do all that, too, and over the years I have done my best to pursue such an agenda, all the while trying to accommodate myself to the competing realities of the ever more commercially-oriented world in which I worked. Then I was lucky enough to become a teacher of singing with a special responsibility for early music. Naturally, I wanted to pass on the fruits of my haphazard studies and also to infect my students with the same bug that had me in its grasp: curiosity, questioning preconceptions, experiment and, whenever possible, risk-taking. But I am a realist too, and I understand the need meanwhile to try to equip my students with the basic skills of received practice vocal technique so that a) they can meet the demands of the market and contemplate professional careers, but more importantly, b) so that they can understand not only the traditions in which they find themselves, but also, by appreciating the ideological implications of these traditions, help them to develop a critical and independent position once they begin to perform professionally. Ideally, this will allow them to withstand the sometimes oppressive methods of the commercial early music movement which, by and large, operates according to completely unreconstructed hierarchical modes of classical music production. And anyway, the „received tradition“ of vocal practice, especially when pursued along healthy and non-violent pathways, is a wonderful and important thing for singers to learn.

In the twelve or so years since I started teaching early music singing in the German conservatoire system and during the much longer period in which I have been a performer of „early music“, I have experienced (I hope) the entire gamut of suspicion, incomprehension, patronising arrogance, disparagement,

⁷ Richard Taruskin, in the *New York Times*, 29 August 1990. See also Richard Taruskin, *Text and act*, New York and Oxford 1995; Peter Kivy, *Authenticities: philosophical reflections on musical performance*, Ithaca and London 1995.

⁸ John Butt, *Playing with history*, Cambridge 2002.

even fear, and also the curiosity, pleasure, open-mindedness, praise, hunger for fresh ideas and the recognition that there might be something fun going on, which characterises the everyday negotiations between „received classical music practice“ and the historically informed performance approach which I practise. But what has not been changed by these negotiations is the continuing insistence that – and here I quote from a teacher of received practice when responding to a criticism that a student had sung with too much unmitigated vibrato – „no singer without a vibrato has any chance whatsoever of having a career“. Here, of course, the signifier „vibrato“, a topic of argument long ago exhausted and emptied of any interesting content in itself, is to be understood as a code-word, emblematic of the way that received practice responds to the threat of the „otherness“ of competing vocal productions. Its underlying text, that „early music singing“ means „not real singing“, disguises a still deeper morass of gnawing anxieties about what is going on in the vocal academy, which grow out of a fundamentally misconceived sense of opposites. On one side, there is the investment of so many voice teachers in the construction of a mythical ur-tradition of *bel canto*, often used to justify an uncritical and narrow elitism that, in turn, sentences potential professional singers to unnecessary pressures to conform to artificially privileged paradigms, in the pursuit of which most are doomed to fail. Not only this, it also denies or, at best, marginalises other repertoires and styles such as ensemble singing and non-classical musics, to name but two, which, ironically perhaps, are in fact major growth areas in professional music practice where conservatoires need urgently to look if they are to retain any relevance. On the other side there is, for example, my own interest in pursuing practical research in historical vocal pedagogy in order to apply the findings directly in the curriculum. I would suggest that this offers the potential for deepening and revitalising the very repertoires of the western art music tradition in which the conservatoire has invested so much of its currency. As my confidence in the relevance of historically informed voice teaching has increased over the past decade, so has my exhaustion from „falling over backwards“ in order to mollify the voices of conservatism. The echoes of this appeasement are, of course, manifest in the prevailing incongruities of the vocal component of „early music“ which I have summarised in this brief essay.

To conclude, I want briefly to ask what the curriculum of a genuinely historically informed singing education might include? And what are the burning issues that have yet to be addressed, not only in the academy, but also in the wider world of performing life? First, I reject the notion that because our larynxes are identical to those of our forbears, then the way we use them to perform repertoires of the past must therefore also have remained unchanged: to accept this is to privilege a particular received tradition and uncritically to locate it as normative. As John Potter has persuasively demonstrated, the manner in which we use our singing voices is ideologically constructed.⁹ I

⁹ John Potter, *Vocal authority: singing style and ideology*, Cambridge 1998.

challenge, too, the presumption of the superiority of received classical vocal production in the performance of pre-Romantic western art music. Second, in giving formal structure to my programme of study, I would consciously invoke a historical antecedent and base my curriculum on a phrase from Benigne de Bacilly's *Remarques curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter* (1662): „There are three things necessary to singing well: to wit, the voice, the disposition and the ear, or intelligence“.¹⁰ Here, then, are a few of the things I have been thinking about and experimenting with, for a number of years.

First, the voice. Sources from the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries consistently insist on the use of the chest or modal register, wherever possible. Caccini, for example, proposes that solo music be transposed in order to avoid register changes.¹¹ Only in Rome at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries do I know of references to a few singers who sang falsetto professionally, but then only in chamber music and not in church. This preference can be put together with the many references to the fact that, in Zarlino's words, „one sings in one way in churches and public chapels and another way in private rooms. In the former, one sings with a full voice and in private rooms one sings with a lower and gentler voice“.¹² I see this differentiation as critical not only for finding a suitable soft dynamic and vocal production for secular music, but, perhaps more importantly, for the ideas it could generate about the performance of *sacred* music. Very nearly all sixteenth century vocal music is written so that the notes for each voice fall within the compass of the stave, i.e., not more than 11 notes, although Zacconi, writing in 1588 says that the human voice normally does not have a range of more than 8 tones.¹³ I propose that in church, *all* singers sang *only* in chest or modal voice, although there are certain exceptions. For example, boys who sang the very high parts labelled Quatreble in certain mid sixteenth century elite establishments in England and also the possibility that in some choirs, some falsettists sang soprano parts. This means that parts in C3 clef (which always cause big headaches for modern performers) could have been sung either with fully strident tone by high tenors, that is, with-

¹⁰ „Il y a trois choses pour parvenir à bien chanter [...] à sçavoir, la Voix, le Disposition & l'Oreille, ou l'Intelligence“. The remainder of this essay is based on the more detailed contents of my „Reconstructing pre-romantic singing technique“, in John Potter (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to singing*, Cambridge 2000, p. 178–191.

¹¹ Giulio Caccini, *Le nuove musiche*, Florence 1602: „se elegga un tuono, nel qual possa cantare in voce piena e naturale per isfuggire le voci finte, nelle quali per fingerle, o almeno nelle forzate“. Castrato singing is a separate case, which I am not discussing here.

¹² Gioseffo Zarlino, *Le institutioni harmoniche*, Venice 1558; edn. of 1558–1559, III p 253: „ad altro modo si canta nelle Chiese & nelle Capella publiche; & ad altro modo nelle private Camere; imperoche ivi si canta à piena voce; con discrezione però [...] & nelle Camere si canta con voce più sommessa & soave, senza fare alcun strepito“.

¹³ Lodovico Zacconi, *Prattica di musica ... prima parte*, Venice 1592, f. 51r: „perche le voci humane naturalmente non ascendono più di otto gradi; overo otto diverse voci che vogliamo dire, ascendente sopra l'altra“.

out recourse to falsetto at all,¹⁴ or more likely, by boys, in full chest voice, that extends from high a¹ to low E.¹⁵ The sources also suggest that very low bass voices were prized and that they were to be found in the best establishments.¹⁶ Indeed, because bass singers naturally have a longer range in chest voice than baritones and tenors, this is often reflected in the greater vocal ranges demanded of them.¹⁷ If we stick to modal voice at all times, then the problem of high clefs, or *chiavette*, caused by the incompatibility between the function of notation as the proper representation of the compositional modes or, in other cases, the need to avoid leger lines, and our wish that it should convey transparent performance information, can be resolved once and for all: the same singers always performed from their own respective part books, and notation in *chiavette* was sung at some convenient lower pitch to allow the appropriate modal voice range for all the singers. This is a concrete example of a possible solution – based on vocal technical parameters – to a historical conundrum, which we could test with our own voices.

I also think that in the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, concepts of registers and the names of voices (tenor, basso, contrabasso, etc.) refer to these „modal voice singularities“. As soon as vocal music began to range beyond the span of a single clef, it called on certain singers who could perform in more than one of the registers. These vocal registers remained clearly differentiated in sound quality, and a critical test of a singer's skill became the negotiation of the register change (there is a series of very useful letters by Monteverdi that illustrate this point).¹⁸ The focus on the management of the transition between two, strongly differentiated registers is, of course, a corner stone of the educational programmes of most influential singing teaching methods right through the eighteenth century, particularly those of Tosi and Mancini.

¹⁴ The distinction between „falsetto“ and „head voice“ is a complex one, and here is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion. Suffice to say that some singing pedagogues understand „falsetto“, as it is used in eighteenth and early nineteenth century treatises, to mean not the „woman-like“ voice of male altos, but the light, high voice of the tenor, which is still technically produced in the modal or chest register. See Richard Miller, *The structure of singing: system and art in vocal technique*, New York 1986, p. 119–123.

¹⁵ Nearly all women singers whom I have taught are also capable of singing convincingly in this same range.

¹⁶ See for example Michael Praetorius, *Syntagmatis musici tomus secundus: De organographia* Wolfenbüttel, 1618, p. 17 and Richard Wistreich, „Giulio Cesare Brancaccio and solo bass singing in sixteenth-century Italy“, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of London, 2002, p. 221.

¹⁷ My remarks concern the overwhelming majority of „high Renaissance“ church music. The vocal ranges in music of the fifteenth century and early sixteenth centuries are sometimes remarkably large, especially in English music, and raise intriguing questions about vocal production: see Roger Bowers, „To chorus from quartet: the performing resources for English church polyphony, c. 1390–1559“, in *English Choral Practice, 1400–1650*, ed. John Morehen, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 1–47. Similarly some mass movements from around 1500 require exceptionally long ranges from bass singers; see, for example, Edward Wickham, „Finding closure: performance issues in the Agnus Dei of Ockeghem's *Missa L'homme armé*“, *Early Music*, 30 (2002) 593–607.

¹⁸ See Richard Wistreich, „La voce è grata assai [...] Monteverdi on singing“, *Early Music* 22 (1994) 7–20.

These observations about church singing and voice production must surely have implications for the ways in which we might consider afresh the vocal demands of J. S. Bach's music. The extraordinary parts that Bach wrote for young male singers, most of whom were barely out of adolescence, which in terms of modern „classical“ vocal technique challenge the very limits of even the most highly-trained adult singers, presents something of a mystery that should surely be puzzling even to those directors at the very vanguard of new Bach performance. It seems to me that no amount of vocal training based on eighteenth-century principles such as those described, for example, in the scholarship of John Butt,¹⁹ however intensely pursued and even with the most talented young singers, would be likely to produce even in twenty-year-old tenors and basses the kinds of mature, received practice vocal sounds which currently characterise particularly the solo singing in contemporary historically-informed Bach performance on record and in concert. A root-and-branch reconsideration of how such music might be sung, with particular attention to the starkly differentiated (and very flexible) registers of adolescent voices, could produce startling results.

Something affecting both voice and *disposition* is the question of the lowered larynx. I am convinced that the basic singing position which distinguishes received tradition vocal production – the permanently lowered larynx, that has the effect of increasing the potential volume of the voice by allowing the engagement of the singers' formant, but at the severe cost of glottal articulation and of vowel differentiation at the upper end of the register – was a development of the late eighteenth century or even later. For all art music repertoire from before then, I believe we should be experimenting with a completely free floating larynx position, and accepting all that this implies in the way of softer sound and much faster and more accurate opening and closing of the glottis. This would enable a sufficiently high level of *disposition*, something that is reiterated in numerous sources from the early sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries as being an essential element of educated singing technique. I offer the following as samples, both from French sources: „the larynx goes up when we sing the high [...] and goes down when we sing the low“ (1636) and, from 1755, „Observation shows that the larynx rises completely for the higher tones and that it descends for the lower tones“.²⁰ Coupling this information from two knowledgeable musicians to the many references to the desirability of never forcing the voice and to the idea that outside church, the optimal dynamic for singing is no more than normal speech level, I believe we might be ready radically to reconsider the question of loudness and decibel projection, both for church and non-church singing, with particular attention to the differences between them.

¹⁹ John Butt, *Music Education and the art of performance in the German baroque*, Cambridge 1994.

²⁰ Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle*, Paris 1636, I, p. 6: „le larynx monte en haut quand nous chantons le Dessus ... le larynx descend en bas en chantant la Basse“; Jean-Antoine Bérard, *L'art du chant*, Paris 1755, pp. 19 and 21: „Les Observations apprennent que le Larinx monte tout entire dans les Sons aigus, & qu'il descend dans les Sons graves“.

This leads me into Bacilly's final category, „the ear, or the intelligence“. The repertoires with which the early music movement mainly concerns itself are actually heavily weighted towards ensemble music. This ought to be reflected far more strongly in the curriculum of the academy than is currently the case, as well as in the relative values assigned to solo and ensemble work in career structures. The severe imbalance in the prevailing syllabus, which is heavily geared towards solo singing, is another example of the way that the teaching and assessment systems of the received tradition remain the dominant models, uncritically appropriated by many specialist programmes for historically informed singing. It is a model that – as I have already hinted – creates a distortion, not to say appalling waste, for most students of singing within the present conservatoire system. The ear has to be so much more finely attuned for good ensemble singing, whether in questions of vocal timbre, intonation, or negotiation of performance rhetoric. With properly developed ensemble skills, singers have a much better chance of emancipating themselves within the conductor-led model that pervades the world of professional performance as it is currently constituted, as well as giving them the opportunities to benefit directly from open and non-hierarchical interaction with instrumentalists and other singers. Such an emancipation also encourages the development of confidence in the singer's own powers of interpretation and self-presentation: in other words, her *intelligence*.

And speaking of intelligence (or more precisely, intelligibility), if the practical problem is that singers cannot be heard in large performing spaces without being constrained to lower the larynx and force their voices, then is it not time that we harnessed the sophisticated sound projection technology that has been developed to such a high degree of technical perfection in all other areas of music-making where soft, high larynx position singing is the norm, and which can fill sometimes huge performance spaces without sacrificing clarity or intimacy? The ideal of a speech-led singing that allows every practitioner to celebrate her or his uniqueness, not only of timbre but also of „voice“ in its democratising sense of „giving voice to the individual“, might, in turn, produce a „velvet revolution“ for singers that could, as a by-product, guarantee at least another thirty years of development and innovation for institutions such as this one.

