sotto voce

Countertenoring

Richard Miller

Written questions that teachers and performers have submitted for discussion at sessions devoted to systematic voice technique are wide ranging, often penetrating the very heart of voice pedagogy; sotto voce continues to consider some of them.

Question:

Should we voice teachers consider countertenoring as a legitimate performance instrument? How does the technical training of a countertenor differ from that of other male singers?

Comment:

As is well known, in Renaissance polyphony the term contratenor, or countertenor, denoted a voice part lying just above the tenor line (contratenor altus) sung by a male with a generally small and unusually high-pitched voice. In the latter part of the fifteenth century, this kind of singer was known in France as an haute-contre. At least by the seventeenth century, the French haute-contre was neither a castrato nor a falsettist, as the operatic roles given to him by Lully, Rameau, and their contemporaries attest. In England, as early as the sixteenth century, the contratenor began to be called countertenor. Later on, the same kind of tenor instrument was dubbed a tenorino, a term still applied internationally to a very light tenor voice with a facile top.

In England during the early seventeenth century, the term countertenor came to identify a male alto falsettist (not a castrato). By the nineteenth century, it was almost entirely the male falsettist who had become known as a countertenor. Falsestists (that is, countertenors) had long been part of the Church of England choral tradition, often reinforcing the soprano and alto boy treble voices in chapel and cathedral choirs, as they still do today. They were never notable as solo performers.

It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Alfred Deller “invented” the modern English countertenor by turning what had been basically an ensemble art into a solo art in the 1940s. The role of Oberon in Britten’s opera was written with Deller in mind, but it was an American countertenor, Russell Oberlin, who had joined Noah Greenberg’s newly formed New York Pro Musica group in 1951, who sang the Royal Opera’s first production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream in 1961. Through the beauty and fullness of his timbre and his exceptional musicianship, Oberlin brought the countertenor voice to further prominence in this country, singing the literature of former centuries as well as such modern roles as the Britten Oberon. His timbre was much fuller than what had long been associated with the British falsetto tradition. Even today, the American countertenor sound does not resemble that of the current British countertenor.

Many musicians looked to countertenoring as an integral part of a new movement, a revitalization of a style of solo singing with roots in the Early Music and Baroque literatures. It was nourished by the growing interest in performance authenticity (HIP, Historically Informed Performance). This gave rise to two frequent misconceptions concerning the countertenor: first, that he is the modern-day equivalent of the castrato; second, that he is the possessor of a rare laryngeal construction unlike that found among other males.

There is a limited laryngeal relationship between the castrato of the Baroque Era and today’s countertenor. Castration inhibits bone growth, so that boys who were subjected to castration grew to be tall men with oversized chests and small larynges. They had prepubertal larynges located in large male bodies. If contemporary reports can be trusted, the castrato had phenomenal breath management skills, a large and often penetrating voice (capable of competing in contests with trumpets). Unless puberty has been arrested, the countertenor does not have the laryngeal construction of the castrato. Although his presence is often a welcome addition to the
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performance world, the countertenor is not recovering the sounds of the Baroque operatic male solo voice.

Today’s solo countertenor is largely a product of the last five or six decades. It is ingenuous to consider the countertenor’s exceptional velocity ability, his subtle dynamic control, and his often three-octave performable range—none of which are normally matched by other male voices—as uniquely remarkable. Falsetto does not require the same degree of breath energy it takes to produce the more complete laryngeal closure associated with male classical singing. Vocal-fold elongation, and the diminution of vocal-fold mass in ascending pitch are identically produced in falsetto and in the complete male voice, but vocal-fold approximation (that is, vocal-fold occlusion) and closure are not. (This discussion does not rule out the pedagogic advantages of falsetto as a technical device in all male voices.) Yet, increased breath reinforcement of the falsetto can bring about a quite full sound.

The kind of timbre mostly associated with much countertenoring is readily available to many trained male voices. Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, a number of baritones and some tenors can be taught to sing as countertenors. In some male voices the sounds of falsetto are more beautiful than the sounds of voce completa (complete voice). Almost any male can easily produce quickly running passages and pianissimo dynamic levels in the lighter falsetto production that would be much more difficult for him to accomplish in voce piena in testa (full head voice). But he must learn how to incorporate them into a viable performance whole.

A number of excellent male singers have chosen to perfect skills that can be acquired in falsetto register, and they have wisely made the decision to perform as countertenors. The impressive part of a fine countertenor technique is proficiency in maintaining sustained lines and long phrases, because the countertenor must learn to compensate for a normally less-firm glottal closure than occurs when he uses his other voice. That does not mean that he must try to locally control his breath or his vocal folds, but he must be especially careful to preserve what is generally termed “support.” In an effort to do this, some countertenors reinforce the falsetto sound at levels of energization seldom made use of by baritone and tenor singers, a practice that may eventually raise health concerns. This means that in singing the operatic repertoire, the modern countertenor may be singing more vigorously than do his male colleagues. He no longer sounds like the countertenor of the British cathedral/chapel tradition.

Special skills are required of the countertenor, velocity capability being one of them. Above all, he needs to learn how to incorporate his low-range singing voice (related to his speaking range) into a descending scale when leaving the falsetto range, without a noticeable change of timbre. He can, of course, use his regular low voice to much the same purpose as does a mezzo or contralto when descending into chest. (Most males can carry falsetto production downward no lower than a few pitches below the primo passaggio, at which time there is a noticeable shift in strength and quality.) Accomplishing a seamless descending scale is a major challenge for most countertenors. It takes patience and time for both singer and teacher.

One successful device is to have the singer begin in his upper range with a five-note descending passage in falsetto, then to follow it immediately with the same passage sung an octave lower in his “other” voice, listening for matching timbres. Then both segments are sung in falsetto. Yet another vocalise of merit is beginning the uppermost note of the great scale, using a two-octave scale descent, discovering at what point bridging between the two registers occurs; then small segments of the scale that lie on either side of the bridging point are drilled. This exercise should be extended as far into upper range as possible, then brought downward through descending tonalities. Slow sustained octave leaping from upper note to lower note, and the reverse process (lower to upper) also proves useful.

The same skills (breath management, agility, vowel definition and modification, the use of consonants to adjust the vocal tract, register equalization, and the messa di voce) that apply to any “classical” singer can be applied to the training of the countertenor. However, there is no great historical tradition on which to rely (falsetto references in early treatises refer to the castrato) because the participation of the modern countertenor in operatic literature is a recent phenomenon.

In Australia, England, France, and the U.S., the voice teacher is increasingly requested to instruct countertenors; a number of American schools of music now annually admit a few male singers who wish to pursue countertenoring. It is not unusual to encounter a young man whose “other” voice, although pleas-
ant, is far less gratifying than his countertenoring one. Some singers can manage well in either voice, but using both techniques in public performance often becomes problematic. It is best to make a decision for one or the other.

The current generation of countertenors, including Drew Mintner, Derrick Lee Ragin, Bejun Mehta, Jochen Kowalski (whose Gluck Orpheo performed in East Berlin before the toppling of the wall, remains a never-to-be-forgotten performance by all who witnessed it!), and the quite sensational David Daniels, have moved the art of countertenoring into new dimensions earlier prepared by the prophetic American, Russell Oberlin.

There is a market for the countertenor, because he meets a current aesthetic demand, which appears here to stay. This is a period of time when international contests are open to countertenors, and when major opera roles are cast with countertenors. Although there are some inherent pitfalls, it is a viable and preferable way for some singers. No mystery should surround the teaching of the countertenor. Good vocal pedagogy is applicable to all voice categories.

Richard Miller has a rich performance career distinguished by diversity in opera (some 50 roles in more than 450 performances), oratorio, and recital, Europe and America. Tenor soloist with Knappertsbusch, Ackermann, Ludwig, Sebastian, Slatkin, Lane, Szell, and Boulez. Internationally known for master classes in voice technique and interpretation, in Austria, Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, 38 states of US, research in 14 European countries.

Seventeen years as Visiting Professor, Mozarteum International Summer Academy, Salzburg, Austria. Master classes at Royaumont, the Conservatoire Supérieure (both Paris and Lyon); many national French conservatories, Marseilles National Opera School, and Paris Centre Polyphonique. Decorated Chevalier/Officier l’ordre des arts et des lettres, French Ministry of Culture. Masterclasses at International Congresses and Voice Foundation symposia.

Frequent adjudicator, Munich, Paris, Metropolitan Opera Scholarships, NATS Artist Awards. Former students engaged at major opera houses: Metropolitan, City Center, San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, Dallas, Washington, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, New Orleans, Covent Garden, Glyndebourne, Welsh Opera, English National Opera, Chicago, Montreal, Santiago, Rome, Trieste, Palermo, La Scala, Bastille, Munich, Berlin, Frankfurt, Cologne, Salzburg, Vienna, Tokyo, and at numerous young artist apprenticeship programs. Former students serve on faculties of major schools of music.


Wheeler Professor of Performance, Director, Otto B. Schoepfle Vocal Arts Center, Director, Institute of Voice Performance Pedagogy, Oberlin Conservatory, B Mus., M. Mus. (University of Michigan), Artist Diploma (L’Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Rome), L.H.D. (Doctor of Humane Letters), Gustavus Adolphus.