2016

The contemporary countertenor in context: vocal production, gender/sexuality, and reception

Fugate, Bradley

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/17736

Boston University
THE CONTEMPORARY COUNTERTENOR IN CONTEXT: VOCAL PRODUCTION, GENDER/SEXUALITY, AND RECEPTION

by

BRADLEY K. FUGATE

B.M., Furman University, 1995
M.M., University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, 1997
D.M.A., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2006

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

2016
Approved by

First Reader

Miki Kaneda, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Music

Second Reader

Brita Heimarck, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Music
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend gratitude to everyone who supported me in the process of writing and compiling the research for this dissertation. Many people contributed to the result: friends listened to me, professors guided me, and informants spoke with me. Thank you to everyone involved.
THE CONTEMPORARY COUNTERENOR IN CONTEXT: VOCAL PRODUCTION, GENDER/SEXUALITY, AND RECEPTION

BRADLEY K. FUGATE

Boston University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2016

Major Professor: Miki Kaneda, Assistant Professor of Music

ABSTRACT

This dissertation highlights the importance of vocal registration/production in the ongoing discussion of how the material qualities of the singing voice transmit socially constructed meaning. Using the modern-day countertenor as an example, I show how falsetto singing can act as a marker for gender/sexuality. The first chapter of the project explains the anatomy and physiology of the singing voice, particularly as it applies to the falsetto register and the contemporary countertenor. Then, a brief look at how singing and gender fit within the burgeoning field of voice studies ensues. Chapter 2 inspects theories of vocal gender, identity, and sexuality in regards to vocal embodiment and applies them to the voice, singing, and the contemporary countertenor. Chapter 3 looks at the reception theories of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in order to pinpoint ways in which social norms can be inscribed on the voice, especially that of the countertenor Klaus Nomi. The last three chapters apply the theories purported in the first half of the dissertation to the contemporary countertenor in three countries—the United States, England, and Japan. Examining the use and appreciation of the countertenor in these
different societies provides examples of how the falsetto register, singing, and norms of gender/sexuality are connected in the different social contexts. The epilogue projects how this type of academic inquiry can extend to other types of singing and societies.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: FALSETTO VOCAL PRODUCTION AND THE TRANSMISSION OF SOCIAL MEANING...........................................................1

Why Falsetto Matters........................................................................................................2
Falsetto, Vocal Production, and Reception.......................................................................7

CHAPTER ONE: FALSETTO VOCAL PRODUCTION AND THE THEORETICAL STUDY OF VOICE............................................................15

Writing About the Material Qualities of the Singing Voice..............................................16
Vocal Production: A Brief Vocal Anatomy and Physiology Lesson..................................21
Falsetto Vocal Production...............................................................................................24
The Countertenor Falsetto Voice.....................................................................................27
Objectifying the Countertenor’s Vocal Production.........................................................25
Vocal In Betweenness.....................................................................................................35
The Vocal Body...............................................................................................................39
Materiality and Vocal Sensation.....................................................................................42
Affect, Intimacy, and Singing..........................................................................................48
Gender and Voice Studies.............................................................................................51

CHAPTER TWO: VOCAL GENDER, VOCAL IDENTITY, AND THE CONTEMPORARY COUNTERTENOR...................................................54

Bodies and Voices..........................................................................................................54
Vocal Gender....................................................................................................................59
Gender and Singing........................................................................................................62
A Very Short History of the Countertenor in England .................................................. 133
Alfred Deller .................................................................................................................. 141
Vocal Production and the Timbre of the British Choral Countertenor ....................... 143
Choral Countertenors and Jauss’ Horizon of Expectations ....................................... 145
Psychology and the Choral Countertenor .................................................................. 147
The History of Gender Equality, Britain, and the Countertenor ............................... 150

CHAPTER FIVE: U.S. COUNTER TENORS, VOCAL PRODUCTION, AND
IDENTITY ........................................................................................................... 160
U.S. Countertenors ...................................................................................................... 161
U.S. Countertenors and Gender/Sexuality ................................................................. 167
Countertenor, Difference, and Discourse ................................................................. 169
Vocal Embodiment and Sexuality ............................................................................... 172
Confessions of a Bi-Vocalist .................................................................................... 173
Transitive Properties of the Singing Voice .................................................................. 180

CHAPTER SIX: CROSS-CULTURAL COUNTER TENORS–JAPANESE
SOCIAL NORMS AND COUNTER TENOR RECEPTION ............................... 187
Uragoe and the Japanese Psyche ............................................................................... 188
Vocal Gender in Japan ............................................................................................... 194
Vocal Androgyny in Japan ....................................................................................... 196
The Contemporary Countertenor in Japan ............................................................... 199
Yoshikazu Mera ....................................................................................................... 202
LIST OF GRAPHS

Graph #1: [i] vowel – male singer (spoken) 29
Graph #2: [i] vowel – male singer – falsetto (spoken) 31
Graph #3: [i] vowel – male singer – modal/non=falsetto (sung) 32
Graph #4: [i] vowel – male singer – falsetto (sung) 32
Graph #5: Giulietta Simionatto, mezzo-soprano 33
Graph #6: Jochen Kowalski 34
Graph #7: David Daniels 34
INTRODUCTION: FALSETTO VOCAL PRODUCTION AND THE TRANSMISSION OF SOCIAL MEANING

The emerging field of voice studies aims to integrate academic paradigms of thought as well as applied disciplines of research and performance that relate to the spoken or sung voice as a material entity. The corporeal nature and function of the material voice—meaning the qualities intrinsic to it—such as size, physiology, timbre, pitch, mode of production, etc., possess multidimensional, theoretical capacities as well as varied sociocultural modalities or means of expression. Moreover, the material voice has the capability to act as a medium for social constructs such as language, emotion, race, sex, gender, and sexuality.

Until recently, authors have approached the voice in 2 ways: theoretically (as in the work of Don Ihde, Mladen Dolar, Andrea Cavarero, et al.) and pedagogically (Garcia, Dundberg, Miller, Doscher, et al.). However, researchers are now placing more emphasis on integrated and multidisciplinary investigations of voice studies, capitalizing on both fields of knowledge in order to further our understanding of the vocal experience. The current and relevant authors in this emergent field of study will be explored in more depth throughout the project; but, suffice it to say, the work of James Potter, Annette Schlechter, Nina Sun Eidshim, et al., examines historical, political, racial, and performative aspects of the material voice, which are reforming the discussion of voice in significant ways.

This project looks at the material voice—particularly the singing voice—through the lens of vocal production and/or registration: scrutinizing ways in which the actual
production of sound—such as falsetto register, breathy tone, belting, etc.—can act as a site for semantic transference of cultural meaning. Put another way: How does vocal production aide in signifying or transferring socially constructed meaning outside that of regularly associated vocal expressions, such as language and emotion?

In truth, the answer to this question is as limitless as the parameters of meaning itself. To focus this discussion into a teleological argument, I have chosen the contemporary countertenor as a representative example. The countertenor’s vocal register and vocal production—that is, the use of falsetto with contemporary bel canto vocal production—create a truly unique sound, which has not existed heretofore in music history. This project explores many ways in which the contemporary countertenor vocal production, in various contexts, has the capacity to carry semantic meanings of gender and sexuality. The eventual goal of the project is to open the discussion to include other types of vocal production and how one might theoretically include them in the construction of meaning. The reader should think of these chapters as autonomous representations of how the falsettist and gender/sexuality might be related, rather than an attempt at a complete compendium on the subject. In order to initiate this discussion, however, the next section considers the importance of the falsetto register in society and highlights some of its functions.

**Why Falsetto Matters**

Falsetto vocal production allows male singers (and speakers) the ability to access pitches above the modal range—that is, one’s normal or non-falsetto range. For instance,
in a choir or barber shop quartet, a tenor might access falsetto in order to sing very high notes or to blend with the other singers. Many pop, doo-wop, and R&B groups in the 1940s through the 1960s utilized falsetto for this purpose; in fact, Frankie Valli became quite famous for his falsetto stylings. More recently, George Michael’s falsetto exclamations in Wham!’s 1983 hit “Bad Boys” invoke a shout of rebellion or a call to incitement.¹ Michael Jackson’s famous, high-pitched falsetto vocalisms—for example, in the first measures of “The Way You Make Me Feel”—create a sense of energy and have even come to be representative of the proclaimed King of Pop’s vocal style.²

Some uses of the falsetto voice carry meanings other than excitement. Many soul singers use falsetto to create a sense of intimacy, vulnerability, or sexiness, which stereotypically denotes femininity. Hard rock singers often utilize falsetto to “suggest intensity and power,” or hyper-masculinity.³ How does the use of the falsetto voice transmit these gendered associations?

The majority of male singers utilize falsetto in order to access pitches above the modal range in choirs or vocal ensembles. For the purposes of this project (excluding Chapter 4), I would like to draw the reader’s attention away from such uses and focus on the solo singer. The solo singer who uses falsetto does so with more volitional intent. Disregarding repertoire written for high male voices, singing at such high pitches in and


³Robert Walser, Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 45.
of itself must carry a modicum of significance or else the singer would opt for lower ones. Furthermore, the singer’s utilization of falsetto in repertoire assigned to falsettists or castrati in the past, which possessed a different timbre and/or tone than contemporary modal range–more often than not–is a symbolic performance and expresses meaning outside of the verbal and/or discursive realm.

Yvon Bonenfant states, “Like other forms of physical gesture, the voice is, in part, a product of both our genetic makeup and of socialization and culture.” The intentional act on the part of a singer to use a different register or vocal quality creates a scenario in which the vocal production—the way in which the vocal sound is produced in the larynx—is of prime importance. So that, in addition to the existing significance that singing and music impart, the singer’s choice of production adds another layer of meaning. Therefore, one can state that falsetto vocal production carries non-discursive, symbolic meaning and—in certain cases—can act as a gendered soundmark.

The term soundmark was coined by musicologist, composer, and environmentalist, R. Murray Schafer. In his book, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1993), the author states:

> The term *soundmark* is derived from landmark and refers to a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community. Once a soundmark

---

has been identified, it deserves to be protected, for soundmarks make the acoustic life of the community unique.\(^5\) Although Schafer refers to sounds dispossessing agency in this quote, the iconic (recorded) falsetto vocal sounds of Frankie Valli or Michael Jackson, which evoke a particular time period, musical genre, or other cultural artifact/event, surely represent an associative link to a different time or place, highlighting the “acoustic life” (sounds from a particular time period) of the “community” (society) that the voice represents. Taken a step further, certain soundmarks can emblematize norms and values of a particular society, making them *social markers*.\(^6\) Moreover, as Margaret Sarkissian states, “Changes in musical behaviour often reflect more widespread changes in society as a whole.”\(^7\)

Accordingly, one must reorient Schafer’s soundmark to include agentful entities, such as singers who utilize falsetto (or other vocal productions) purposefully in order to convey or transfer non-discursive meaning. As aforementioned, this project investigates this correlation by using the example of the countertenor. In contemporary Classical music circles, a singer who mostly utilizes falsetto to sing has come to be referred to as a


\(^6\) For example, the sound of a banjo can be a social marker for the South (U.S.) because certain associations can also be attached to the sound, such as poverty, lower standards of education, et al.

countertenor. The term “countertenor” has not always implied a falsetto vocal production. In fact, much debate has ensued in regards to whether the historical “countertenor” was a falsettist or high tenor. In many cases—outside the auspices of the church—for which documented evidence suggests that falsetto was used, this voice production is in some way linked with gender and/or sexuality. The fact that the falsetto voice can be connected with a cultural construct such as gender or sexuality suggests that—in some instances but not all—this type of vocal production can act as a gendered soundmark or social marker.

Countertenors have come to be well-respected in the professional, Western art music world; most educated musicians, Anglican and/or Episcopal choir members, and avid classical concert attendees are familiar with the voice type. Yet, countertenors

---

8 Other names for this voice type are used, such as male soprano, male alto, or even soprano and alto without the “male” distinction. For the purposes of this project, the term “countertenor” will serve as a catch-all for these vocalists despite individual singers’ identifications. For information on the countertenor in Western music history, see Peter Giles, The Counter-tenor (London: Frederick Muller Ltd. 1982), and The History and Technique of the Counter-tenor: A Study of the Male High Voice Family (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1994). For information on the contemporary state of the countertenor in Europe and the U.S., see Alessandro Mormile, Controtenori: La rinascita dei ‘nuovi angeli’ nella prassi esecutiva dell’opera barocca (Varese: Zecchini Editore, 2010); C. Herr, A Jacobshagen, and K. Wessel, eds., Der countertenor: Die männliche Falsettstimme von Mittelealter zur Gegenwart (Mainz: Schott, 2012).


10 For further study, please refer to Bradley K. Fugate, More Than Men in Drag: Gender, Sexuality, and the Falsettist in Music Comedy of Western Civilization, D.M.A. dissertation (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2006).
cannot exist in a bubble—only heard by or listened to by educated and informed individuals. Invariably, the countertenor must contend with societies outside the ones in which countertenors normally exist. In these cases, when a listener hears a countertenor, both the gendered voice and the gendered body—to which the voice is attached—become paramount. Therefore, only within the parameters of socially constructed gender are listeners able to interpret non-normative voices—such as the countertenor.

**Falsetto, Vocal Production, and Reception**

The goal of this study is to explore falsetto vocal production and the voice-listener relationship in order to explain how the collective acts of vocal registration/production, singing, and listener reception transmit societal norms of gender and sexuality. The contemporary countertenor has been chosen as a representative example for this study for several reasons. First, having sung countertenor myself for many years, the project is very personal. Second, the sample size of the trained countertenor is relatively low, which makes for more valid and accessible research. Third, the countertenor has a unique and localized position in Western art music, making the parameters that define the voice type more clearly discernible than other voice types, particularly in non-Western societies such as Japan. Lastly, the countertenor provides an example of a voice that crosses the boundaries of masculine and feminine both in the way the voice is heard by the listener and the potentially traditional or transgressive ways in which the voice can be
utilized by the singer, thereby, providing a clear example of a discrete voice type that is affected by equally discrete social norms.

For example, in a recent book entitled *How to be Gay*, David Halperin—a professor of English and gender studies at University of Michigan—explores the social construction of gay male sexual desire, identity, and subjectivity in the United States. In a section entitled “American Falsettos,” he dedicates a whole chapter to a discussion of countertenors in the U.S. Halperin questions why the majority of U.S. countertenors are gay and uses David Daniels as an archetype. David Daniels is an openly gay male with a strong, *bel canto*, falsetto voice. He not only sings treble repertoire written for male singers (such as those in Baroque opera) but also Romantic and Modern art songs originally intended for women. Halperin states:

After all, no one—no gay man, anyway—who has heard David Daniels sing, or who has listened to his recording of Romantic art songs written for the soprano voice, could fail to discern *some* connection between his appropriation of the female vocal repertory and the queer form of emotional life that often seems to accompany homosexuality. What is the nature of that connection?

In the end, Halperin implies that the countertenor is representative of one among many queer institutions that represent a genre of homosexual social norms (such as the opera diva, Judy Garland, musical theater, and disco). Halperin’s spotlight on the countertenor raises three important questions:

- What is queer about singing countertenor?
- Why are so many gay men in the U.S. attracted to singing countertenor?

---

• Why is it acceptable for countertenors to sing female repertory and not other male singers?

Falsetto vocal production has—since the Ancient Greek period—been placed in a tenuous relationship between masculine and feminine (i.e., queer). So, in order to answer the first question, the connections between the countertenor voice and gender/sexuality must be explored in order to show how gender is inscribed on the voice and/or a voice type as well as the importance that vocal production plays in falsetto singing. If it can be proven that the social construct of gender is transmitted via falsetto vocal production then—due to the close, ideological relationship between gender and sexuality—the second question concerning the attraction of gay males to singing countertenor could potentially be answered. Regarding the third question, one of the most important acts that contribute to the voice/listener relationship is listener reception, which links together the singing voice, the listener, and the society in which the singing occurs. Pinpointing the ways in which the voice, the listener, and society are interdependent could provide answers to why David Daniel’s performances of female repertory appear to be acceptable to listeners. In light of these demands, the first half of this research project explores falsetto vocal production and the theoretical realms of gender/sexuality, voice, and listener reception. The second half of the dissertation applies these theories by discussing the countertenor in three separate societies—U.S., England, and Japan.

First, any reader of this project must understand what the falsetto voice is and how the voice creates sound in general. Also, the unique qualities of countertenor vocal
production must be addressed. To this end, Chapter 1 examines the countertenor singer from a pedagogical view. Going forward, this information is used to make connections for the reader into the theoretical realm of vocal studies. In order to create continuity and support postmodern modes of discourse, I add personal experiences as a singer, teacher, and academic.

Chapter 2 of this project takes a very specific look at vocal production and its association to the performative aspects of vocal gender and vocal identity. Deborah Wong’s idea of the somaticization of the gendered body is applied to the voice in three ways: the somatic realization of sex (male/female), the somatic realization of gender (masculine/feminine), and the somatic realization of sexuality. This type of theoretical analysis will shed light on how socially gendered norms are inscribed on the voice.

Chapter 3 of this project focuses on listener reception. A discussion of “Reception Theory,” a literary theory popularized in the 1960s, influences the majority of this chapter. Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser’s theory of reception provides a useful, theoretical framework for the text-reader relationship. This framework can be directly applied to singing via an analogous relationship of voice-listener as evidenced in the life and career of Klaus Nomi.

As I mentioned, this project is very personal for me. I have performed as a countertenor in three countries: U.S., England, and Japan. In each country, I have

---

experienced that the reception toward the countertenor is different. In the U.S., particularly among uneducated listeners, many people remarked that I sounded “like a woman.” Many people were curious as to how I produced the sound. I noticed in England that people, by and large, acknowledged the countertenor and recognized the voice type. So, when I sang solo repertoire, there was little surprise or discussion concerning the vocal production. In Japan, however, most people had never heard of a countertenor; yet, when I performed, there was little surprise or discussion concerning the vocal production. I find this phenomenon intriguing. Common wisdom would suggest that countertenor awareness should affect listener reception in direct proportion—positively or negatively. Also, Japanese listeners did not think I sounded like a woman. In fact, many of them could not verbalize a sufficient analogy for what they heard. However, the fact that gender is constructed differently in Japan supports the fact that the gender norms and vocal histories of discrete societies impact the listener reception of the countertenor.

The second half of the project looks specifically at these three countries (England, U.S., and Japan) and how different societal norms affect listener reception of the voice. An exploration of these particular societies will serve several purposes. First, an analysis of the histories and current social contexts of the countertenor in these three countries will show the role that history plays in affect listener reception—a concept known as “horizon of expectations” as explored in Chapter 3. Each country has a unique historical relationship with the countertenor and a side-by-side description of them will put this
importance into relief. Second, the contrasts between the use and reception of the countertenor in England and the U.S. will demonstrate how vocal gender and identity differs between two countries that seemingly share relatively similar attitudes toward gender and sexuality. In the case of the U.S., particularly, the subject of identity and the embodiment of gender/sexuality appears to be much more important than that of England. Lastly, the more fluid and alternately-constructed view of gender in Japan presents a very clear contrast to the Western countries.

Chapter 4 examines the conditions that have surrounded the growth and popularity of the countertenor in modern England and the unique way in which vocal production and gender intermingle with the Anglican choral countertenor and solo contemporary countertenor. The countertenor in England is a staple of the Anglican choir (that is, the Church of England). However, many of these countertenors are not trained in the bel canto tradition. With the growing popularity of Baroque opera, Britain has seen many countertenors train to sing these operatic roles. Interviews of some British countertenors and U.S. countertenors who perform in Britain as well as data concerning the overall concepts of gender/sexuality in Britain help to show the unique balance of tradition and equality that exists.

Chapter 5 answers the aforementioned questions initiated by Halperin. An examination of the state of the countertenor in the U.S. will provide the groundwork needed to show how falsetto voice production and the countertenor convey certain social norms of gender and sexuality. Also, this chapter will discuss the social norms unique to
the U.S.—such as identity formation and embodiment of gender—that brought Halperin to his conclusion. A final section offers a theory of transitivity to show how gendered language affects the reception of the contemporary countertenor.

Chapter 6 explores the (almost nonexistent) world of the countertenor in Japan. An examination of the ways in which Japanese conceptualize gender and sexuality differently than Westerners is essential to understanding how they hear the voice type. Also, the variety of falsetto sounds already existing in Japanese traditional music contrast with the bel canto singing technique of the countertenor in ways that Westerners cannot readily comprehend. Additionally, the chapter will discuss non-gendered social norms and values that influence how Japanese hear the countertenor voice.

Lastly, a short epilogue will touch on the ultimate goal of this project. First, this project will contribute to the burgeoning field of voice studies, which can be found in many academic disciplines but this study primarily concerns applications to historical
musicology and ethnomusicology. Second, the far-reaching goal of this avenue of research is to identify similar types of vocal production, existing in separate musical cultures, and examine the ways in which social norms are inscribed on the material voice and/or the singer.

CHAPTER ONE: FALSETTO VOCAL PRODUCTION AND THE
THEORETICAL STUDY OF VOICE

The falsetto voice is utilized in many ways—both speaking and singing. The recognition of falsetto versus non-falsetto voice production proves elusive for many people. Granted, a complete knowledge of how to produce vocal tone is not necessary to speak or sing; and, as a result, many misconceptions about vocal production/registers exist because of these gaps in knowledge. The male falsetto voice, particularly, is surrounded by a wealth of misidentifications, misunderstandings, and misappropriations.

Out of all the voice classifications in Western art music, the countertenor voice type has most often suffered these indignities. To the uninformed listener, the countertenor can potentially sound like a female voice. To confound matters, the word “countertenor” itself associates the singer with a tenor; yet, countertenors normally sing in the alto or soprano range. Furthermore, if a countertenor is referred to as an “alto” or “soprano” then an added dimension of verbal confusion persists. Therefore, the voice science behind the falsetto vocal production and the terminology surrounding the countertenor must be analyzed in order to clarify the misappropriations that have occurred over centuries of singing. Additionally, because vocal terminology is inherently gendered and singing is a performative act in league with the social constructs of gender and sexuality, an examination of the links between gender/sexuality and the falsetto register will help to clarify how the associations have developed. Therefore, the falsetto vocal register itself must be investigated as a potential social marker for gender and/or sexuality.
First, a basic understanding of the anatomy and physiology of the countertenor voice will provide the reader with the tools to conceptually differentiate the falsetto voice from other modes of vocal production. Next, an objective method to identify the countertenor voice will utilize electronic sonic imaging to show the acoustical differences that exist between falsetto and non-falsetto vocal production. Making distinctions between the early sound of the male falsettist and that of the contemporary countertenor is very important due to the fact that the countertenor, who utilizes *bel canto* singing techniques as opposed to pop/folk singing styles, possesses a very unique sound in the history of Western singing. In the second half of this chapter, I will synthesize some of the current scholarship on voice studies in order to provide the necessary theoretical background. Simultaneously, I situate the reader more clearly in the body of the singer so that the non-singer, especially, can better conceptualize what it feels like to be a singer.

**Writing About the Material Qualities of the Singing Voice**

Sensorial experiences often transcend categorical description. For example, the word “red” is a color but how do you describe red further? Wittgenstein famously analogized this quandary by calling attention to the fact that describing the color red is virtually impossible without pointing to a red object or identifying a pre-existing object that is red. Indeed, how do you explain red to someone who has never seen color? In like manner: What if you had to explain the sound of a voice to someone who had never heard one? As the latter half of this chapter shows, the material qualities of the voice—
just the sound of the voice itself—can be quite powerful and touch on matters ontological, phenomenological, existential, metaphysical, political, social, kinesthetic, et al. In the process of writing about this topic, I have struggled with the somewhat illusive and disjunctive aspects of describing the material qualities of the singing voice, which are phenomena that oftentimes must be heard to be understood. In an effort to clarify, it is of utmost importance that the material qualities of the voice are defined at the onset of this project so that confusion is decreased to a minimum. I will utilize the terms that are most used in the fields of voice and speech science. Other disciplines, such as linguistics and psychology, have slightly different definitions. I use the scientific terminology in order to remain consistent across boundaries of musical genre and/or non-Western understandings of these concepts.

The pitch of the voice refers to the relative highness or lowness of sound. Most speakers utilize pitched speech, which can be measured by means of frequency (the amplitude of the sound wave) using Hertz; however, certain vocalizations such as whispering defy specific frequencies yet can still be relatively high or low perceptually. Modern-day singers in the Western art music tradition typically utilize discrete pitches that can be catalogued or classified on a pitch scale. Most of the canonized scales use the Helmholtz letter notation (a-f) and can be written in some form of notation. However, certain notes of scales—blues notes for instance—are very difficult to notate due to their capacity to lie outside the parameters of Western notation. Moreover, non-Western
scales and notations exist but a discussion of these matters lie outside the scope of the topic at hand.

*Inflection* is the raising or lowering of pitch in order to denote non-verbal meaning.¹ For example, pitch contours (inflections) are used in English to express interrogative statements (typically sliding up) and directives (typically sliding down or monotone). Other aspects of language that are often connected to inflection or intonation are pitch range, volume/dynamics, rhythm, tempo, and cadence. These aspects of vocalization are also very important in singing.

The *timbre* of the voice is the set of unique, acoustical properties that help a listener to differentiate between voices. These individual vocal characteristics are a byproduct of many physical attributes, including but not limited to: height, weight, bone structure, resonance/cavity space, the size of the larynx and its musculature, et al. As we will see later in the chapter, timbral qualities can be shared among certain ethnic or social groups; some of these properties are due to genetics and some are due to social conditioning.

A final aspect of the material singing voice, is often conflated with timbre, is *vocal production*. Outside the realms of vocal pedagogy and voice science, vocal production is not often acknowledged for a couple of reasons. First, many people who write about singing are not as knowledgeable as they probably should be about how the

¹Two different terminologies for these elements exist, one typically used in voice studies and one typically used in linguistics. Time does not allow for a differentiation between the two; also, taking part in this debate would derail the trajectory of this chapter.
singing voice operates. Even professional singers and, unfortunately, voice teachers and choir directors are woefully ignorant of the inner-workings of the vocal apparatus.

Second, the average reader/listener is also unaware of the intricacies involved in and around the larynx during vocal production. Due to this fact, many individuals simply do not have the field of knowledge at their disposal to recognize that the voice is operating in different modalities at various times. Yet, this project will show that these differentiations in vocal production are important in determining the exchange of social meaning. Going forward, I would like to consider vocal production as 1) \textit{ways in which the larynx produces sound given normative conditions} and 2) \textit{ways in which the larynx is voluntarily manipulated above and beyond normative conditions}.²

One important attribute of the healthy vocal mechanism (the larynx and its adjacent muscle groups) is—what is commonly referred to as—\textit{vocal registration} or \textit{vocal registers}. The term vocal register refers to a set of similar vocal sounds that are produced using a particular set of muscles in the same way within the vocal mechanism. As will be further explained in the next section of this chapter, as pitches rise and fall, the muscles of the larynx must work in different ways to regulate air pressure; so, the muscles in and around the larynx work together in various ways to keep the vocal cords from stretching to their longest length. As a result, different registers of the voice possess different qualities of sound and utilize different resonance spaces in the body. Points of registration shift (\textit{passaggi})—from chest to head voice for example—vary from voice to

²These normative conditions will be explained in the next section.
voice based on the size of the larynx and its musculature. However, males and females
tend to have similar registers in the general sense. All voices, if the vocal cords are
completely relaxed, will be able to produce a guttural, gravelly sound known as vocal fry.
When the muscles of the vocal mechanism engage, both sexes tend to possess a lower
and a higher register. Many different terminologies exist for these registers, but for this
discussion differentiations are not required, except to say that these registers are called
‘modal’ registers. When modal register is exhausted, typically men access falsetto (some
women do as well) and women typically access a whistle register (some men do as well).³

The larynx houses several muscle groups and connects to more adjacent muscle
groups than almost any other bone in the body, making it highly susceptible to
manipulation. Air flow, tongue placement, jaw tension, posture, position of the pharynx
and soft palate, and many other variables can affect the position of the larynx and/or
change the quality of the vocal sound. Non-pitched vocal productions such as whispering
or growling are also vocal acts of volition that manipulate the muscles of the larynx.
Vocal registers, too, can be manipulated voluntarily. For example, a female can take her
lower register higher or her higher register lower—likewise for men. Men also have a
rather wide range of pitches which are accessible in either modal or falsetto register.

³ For a full explanation of vocal registers see Barbara M. Doscher, The Functional Unity of the
Vocal Production: A Brief Vocal Anatomy and Physiology Lesson

Vocal production involves a complex interrelationship between the muscles connected to the diaphragm and lungs (abdominal and intercostal), the muscles inside and outside the larynx (voice box), the muscles connected to the larynx, the muscles of the vocal tract (throat and pharynx), and various resonance spaces within the body. This section will succinctly describe the process of non-falsetto vocal production, offering a background for the discussion of falsetto voice production that follows.

For the most part, three main groups of muscles are used for respiration: the diaphragm, intercostal muscles, and abdominal muscles.\(^4\) The diaphragm extends along the bottom of the lungs and the intercostal muscles line the exterior and interior side of the rib cage. During inhalation, the external intercostal muscles—which run diagonally downward from the backbone—and diaphragm contract. This process both expands the rib cage and opens the lungs, drawing air into the body. When the diaphragm and external intercostal muscles relax, the air expels. Humans do not have complete voluntary control of these muscles—for good reason. The diaphragm and external intercostal muscles involuntarily control respiration while asleep and during moment when the brain is not actively concentrating on breathing. However, humans can control these muscles by either inhibiting the contraction/relaxation process or using other sets of muscles adjacent to them to control inspiration and expiration.

\(^4\) Doscher, 8-19.
Other muscles in the body help to control respiration—either voluntarily or in cases when the body requires more air (physical exertion, sighing, speaking, singing, etc.). The abdominal muscles, which are connected to the diaphragm can help to expand the lungs further as well as control the expiration process. Additionally, the internal intercostal muscles can help to control exhalation. Other muscles associated with breathing—such as the pectoral muscles, upper chest, and upper back muscles—can be used to control respiration but are more important in regards to proper posture and alignment of the body.  

When air enters or leaves the body, muscles in and around the larynx can contract to produce pitch. The larynx is a group of cartilages and muscles just above the trachea. In order to understand how the muscles are interconnected, one must know the anatomy of the larynx itself. The short and cylindrically-shaped cricoid cartilage sits just above the trachea. The thyroid cartilage is also cylindrical in shape; however, the posterior top and bottom of the cartilage has 2 appendages (upper horns and lower horns) on each side. The lower horns aide in attachment to the cricoid cartilage and the upper horns loosely attach to the hyoid bone. The anterior upper section of the thyroid cartilage is shaped like the spout of a pitcher. This upper, anterior section is often larger in males and protrudes (adam's apple). The arytenoid cartilages are two pyramid-shaped, highly elastic

---

5 Ibid., 16.
6 Ibid., 30-55.
cartilages inside the thyroid cartilage that sit atop the posterior side of the cricoid cartilage.

Muscles inside (intrinsic) or attached to (extrinsic) the larynx help to control the pitch. The intrinsic muscles of the larynx lie completely within the apparatus itself or have at least one point of articulation outside it. The extrinsic muscles help to raise and lower the larynx as well as hold it in place.

The main muscles used during phonation are the *vocalis* muscles, or vocal cords. The technical name for these muscles are the thyro-arytenoid muscles because they initiate anteriorly at the thyroid cartilage and insert at the arytenoid cartilages. These two sets of muscles perpendicularly flank the interior sides of the thyroid cartilage. When contracted, the vocal cords synchronously adduct due to the contraction of the crico-arytenoid muscles and rotation of the arytenoid cartilages. The vibration of air through the approximated vocal cords creates a pitch. However, when these muscles are tightly contracted no air can escape, thereby stopping the sound. The cords anteriorly begin with densely membranous edges, which develop into cartilaginous ones. These edges protect the muscles and also create a reedy quality of sound. The crico-thyroid muscle originates on the external, anterior side of the cricoid cartilage and inserts into the front portion of the thyroid cartilage. When this muscle contracts, the action pulls the thyro-arytenoid muscles forward and down, thereby lengthening them and creating various pitches.

The extrinsic muscles attach mostly to the exterior portions of the laryngeal complex and help to move the larynx higher or lower as well as stabilize the structure.
Typically, a deactivation of these muscles is desired for well-balanced, Western vocal technique; moreover, these muscles attach to the internal muscles of the larynx as well as the pharynx (throat muscles) and tongue, which can help to manipulate the foundational phonation and pitch of the larynx in a myriad of ways.

**Falsetto Vocal Production**

Certain differences separate non-falsetto (or modal) singing from falsetto production. As mentioned above, the contraction of the thyro-arytenoid and arytenoid muscles helps the vocal cords to adduct (or close). However, in falsetto the thyro-arytenoid muscle relaxes while the arytenoid muscles continue to contract, closing the aperture but only allowing the ligamentous edges of the vocal cords to vibrate. Simultaneously, the crico-thyroid muscles stretch to their greatest extent exerting pressure on these membranous/cartilaginous edges. When air attempts to escape, these edges are blown apart to create a pitch as opposed to acting in tandem with balanced glottal pressure on the vocal cords. Pitch variation is achieved by added longitudinal tension on the cords’ edges. A “hooty” or breathy sound may occur if the vocal cords are not entirely being closed by the arytenoid muscles, which may help to explain how the falsetto voice acquired its association with “false” (untrue, not real, deceptive).

The reader should be advised of two additional matters. One, females also can use falsetto voice, although considerable debate exists regarding its usefulness in

---

performance or pedagogy. Two, a listener can easily mistake the sound of the male falsetto voice with that of a voce finta, or feigned voice, which is characterized by a raised laryngeal position and excess breathy tone. This type of production, according to Richard Miller, is used for “emotive coloration”. The range of voce finta typically does not exceed that of a 4th or 5th interval above a male, non-falsetto range and, due to its excessively breathy quality can be identified quite easily. Commonly, this style of singing is used in certain instances by German lieder singers as well as pop, slow rock, and R&B/soul artists. In order to blend the modal register, voce finta, and falsetto, many singers will add breath to the basic tone quality in order to achieve continuity between them. With the breathy quality added to each register, identification of vocal production can be quite difficult to the average listener.

The Countertenor Falsetto Voice

The vocal quality and production of the countertenor voice differs in several ways from that of other falsettists. The contemporary countertenor (post-1960) typically utilizes bel canto singing, which creates a more resonant, less breathy, and stronger tone quality. Bel canto consists of several techniques designed to ensure a low laryngeal

---


9 Miller, 119.
position and attain even air pressure and control.\textsuperscript{10} In order to achieve this quality of sound, a singer must support the larynx with a breathing technique called \textit{appoggio}, which uses the abdominal muscles to support and control the air that passes through the vocal cords during phonation.\textsuperscript{11} With a balance of air flow and reduction of tension in the neck and tongue, a resultant vibrato will occur.\textsuperscript{12} Vowel modification (\textit{aggiustamento}) for higher pitches is used to stabilize the larynx as well as a raised soft palate and use of nasal, oral, and chest resonance to create a well-rounded, full sound.\textsuperscript{13}

This type of technique can be most often heard in opera, oratorio, and art song of the Western art music tradition. Obviously, other varieties of falsetto production are used in other types of music; however, the most important aspect to the \textit{bel canto} falsetto vocal production in the male is the fact that the technique has the capacity at times to approximate the quality and timbre of the female voice.

This quality of the countertenor voice begins to implicate the listener in the gendered reception of the vocal production, that is, whether the listener interprets the voice as masculine, feminine, or Other. These topics will be discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3. In order to understand fully the ramifications of the countertenor and reception, one must explore the topic of the countertenor and the ways in which the social

\textsuperscript{10} Miller, 150-1.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 23-9.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 180-94.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 48-68, 150-5.
constructs of gender and sexuality define his vocal, physical, social, and even acoustical parameters.

**Objectifying the Countertenor’s Vocal Production**

Nowadays, since many voice instructors use *bel canto* singing techniques to teach the countertenor voice, listeners sometimes find it difficult to distinguish between the sound of a female singer and a countertenor. At least in the opera world, gone are the days of wimpy, breathy falsetto vocal production. The *trained* ear can—albeit subjectively—identify the sex of the singer; yet, a more quantifiable method of identification can be performed via the employment of a spectrograph. Because sounds resonate in various ways and at different frequencies, a spectrograph can show more clearly the ways in which these frequencies are energized. The next few pages will explain some key differences in the timbre of falsetto and modal/non-falsetto voices by way of this analysis. Please refer to the spectrograph below for a visual reference.

The spectrograph was first developed during World War II in order to help the Allied Forces decode messages from enemy broadcasts. This particular spectrograph program displays two identical graphs one above the other. Time is designated horizontally on the x-axis of the graph. Here, an [i] (International Phonetic Alphabet for “ee”) vowel is spoken over 3/10 of a second. The y-axis vertically represents the

---

14 Please note that in this research project when I use phrase “*bel canto*” that I am referring to the vocal production chiefly associated with contemporary Western classical art music and opera, not the phrasing/style associated with the phrase. These attributes consist of techniques such as *appoggio* breathing, raised soft palate, relaxed tongue and jaw, et al.
frequency, which is measured in Hz (Hertz). To explain, a sound wave is a sine wave that continually repeats until the sound ends or changes. The waves cycle at different speeds, influencing the resultant pitch and timbre of the sound. If a sound wave cycles once per second then it can be said to have a frequency of 1Hz—a very low, inaudible pitch. Because items resonate in more than one place when the sound is emitted, multiple sound waves can be carried simultaneously. For example, when one hears the sound of a voice, the vocal cords are vibrating to create the fundamental/core sound but many variables exist after the fact. In other words, the fundamental frequencies produced by the vibration of the vocal cords proceed through the vocal tract—the channel that spans from the larynx, through the pharynx, past the tongue out of the mouth as well as through the soft palate area, and through the nasal passages—at which point certain frequencies are maximized and/or minimized according to the position and condition of the vocal tract’s extremely malleable components—the tongue, throat, nasal passages, etc. Also, the distance from the larynx to the hyoid bone can affect frequencies of sound as well as one’s physiognomy, the size of the chest cavity, and even the shape and size of the larynx itself. In the spectrograph below, one will note the many frequencies that are energized based on the complex nature of the composite vocal sound. One can discern from the spectrograph that the vowel does not change due to the fact that the highlighted areas of energy remain constant.
At the levels from 275-400Hz and just above 2000Hz one can distinguish brighter concentrations of energy, known as formants. According to Barbara Doscher, “A formant of the vocal resonating system may be broadly defined as a specific concentration of energy within the vocal sound wave.”¹⁵ For example, if the tongue is–more or less–forward in the mouth and slightly arched, the composite vocal sound will resonate in a way that is distinguishable as [i]. The bright lines in the spectrograph above denote the formants for the vowel [i]. Each vowel has its own, unique formants, which can be amplified by manipulation of the vocal apparatus and vocal tract. A voice teacher who ascribes to Western Classical bel canto pedagogy will attempt to align these formants to achieve optimal resonance to magnify the “singing formant,” the bright line in the

¹⁵ Doscher, p. 133.
spectrograph between 3000-4000Hz. This frequency is independent of the fundamental frequency and allows singers to project, even over a full symphonic orchestra.\textsuperscript{16} The singer in Graph #1 clearly demonstrates a strong singer’s formant. Fortunately, that singer is me. Moreover, the energy can be seen to extend across the full spectrum of frequencies, which is why one sees the brightness of the energy connecting the strong formants.

The falsetto voice does not use the entire breadth of the vocal cord to produce sound but only the ligamentous edges of the vocal cords. Therefore, the amplitude or intensity of the frequencies are condensed. The spectrograph below shows that the individual frequencies—while still energized—are more concentrated and not present across the breadth of the spectrum. This phenomenon is represented on the graph by more discrete frequency lines, giving the graph a more striated look as opposed to the thick and dense quality of the male modal/non-falsetto production in Graph #1.

\textsuperscript{16} Doscher, p. 140.
This same phenomenon occurs during singing. Below, the reader can compare the same male singer singing [i] in modal/non-falsetto (Graph #3) and falsetto (Graph #4) respectively. Again note the discrete, concentrated quality of the falsetto frequencies in the range of the singing formant (3000Hz) as opposed to the wash of amplitude in the
singing formant of the modal/non-falsetto voice.

Graph #3: [i] vowel - male singer - modal/non-falsetto (sung)

Graph #4: [i] vowel - male singer - falsetto (sung)
Even in professional recordings one can observe the spectrographs and note the differences. Below, the reader will find three spectrographs of three different singers. Each graph shows mm. 47-48 of the aria “Che farò senza Euridice” from Gluck’s *Orfée ed Euridice* (1762). Graph #5 represents the voice of mezzo-soprano Giulietta Simionato (1959). Graphs #6 and #7 represent two counter-tenors: Jochen Kowalski (1989) and David Daniels (2008). The observer will note the condensed frequencies in the counter-tenors versus the fuller frequencies of the mezzo-soprano. Three words are sung in these two measures: “é dal ciel.” The “é” vowel in Italian is a very bright [e] (reminiscent of the Canadian “eh?”). [e] lies close to [i] on the frequency spectrum, so the reader will notice that the formants are in similar places.

Graph #5: Giulietta Simionato, mezzo-soprano

(é-------------------------------------------- da--------l ciē-----l)
Graph #6: Jochen Kowalski
(é---------------------------------------- da----l cie-----------------------l)

Graph #7: David Daniels
(é--------------------------- da----------l cie--------------------------------l)

Particularly in Graph #7, one can see at least five distinct formants (1st formant:
500Hz, 2nd formant: 1800Hz, and 3rd, 4th, and 5th above). In the Simionato graph (#5), the frequencies are not so compact, making it harder to discern the various formants. In essence, the fully functioning vocal cord (of the mezzo-soprano) creates a greater number of frequencies in addition to bolstering the fixed vowel formants. The falsetto voice’s concentration of amplitude/frequency distinguishes the bel canto falsetto sound from other singers. Furthermore, a person can develop the ability to hear this difference by use of one’s experience and prior knowledge in order to differentiate which type of “voice” is singing. Now that the reader has a basic knowledge of vocal production and the differentiation between modal and falsetto productions specifically, I would like to turn attention to ways in which the voice can be conceptualized outside of voice science, integrating both material and theoretical concepts of voice.

Vocal In-betweenness

In order to situate the falsetto conceptually into a framework, it is essential to understand how the voice can be theorized conceptually and the work that has already been done on the subject. In this process, I do not want to lose sight of or—more to the point—a sense of the connection between voice, body, singing, and the construction of meaning. The “in-betweenness” of voice is precisely that quality which makes it a medium for non-discursive semantic constructs such as gender or sexuality. To introduce
the topic, I would like to start with a wonderful quote that—in my estimation—helps to bridge the gap between voice science and voice studies. Ben Macpherson states:

> Whilst voice is often inextricably linked to performative or illocutionary acts, the idea of studying voice offers us the opportunity to extend our thinking beyond practical or pedagogic concerns and into the realm of the theoretical and philosophical...[M]ulti-sensory, embodied and intensely present; the process, performance and experience of voice deserves and demands to be studied in-depth.

The material voice—or the vocal sound itself—began to be investigated as a medium to convey non-discursive significance with the work of Sigmund Freud, who believed that the material voice stands as the gateway to the unconscious, in fact, Socrates entreated his readers to “Speak! That I may see you.” Because the material qualities of the voice can transmit semantic information more readily than the written word, voices carry emotions that confront us and challenge us.17 Freud placed an emphasis on using the materiality of the voice as a means to more clearly understand the unconscious, particularly during the process of psychoanalysis. Jacques Lacan expanded on Freud’s view of the voice—that is, to express unconscious desire—showing ways in which the voice mediates unconscious desire for an object. In truth, Lacan was more interested in silence or the absence of rationality in speech than normative discourse. According to Lacan, the voice fills the void of what cannot be said—that is, non-discursive thought—and mediates human desire.18


Derrida extends this concept to incorporate the materiality of the voice with the production of meaning.\textsuperscript{19}

In his book, \textit{A Voice and Nothing More}, Mladen Dolar uses Lacan’s notion of desire to create theoretical space for vocal semantics, above and beyond psychoanalysis.\textsuperscript{20} He states that the voice represents a “place where what cannot be said can nevertheless be conveyed.”\textsuperscript{21} He also describes the voice as having a certain state of in-betweenness.

Dolar...argues and demonstrates that the phenomenon of Voice is in fact far more uncanny and slippery, and already inclusive of difference, than Derrida gives it credit for. The voice always stands \textit{in between}: in between body and language, in between biology and culture, in between inside and outside, in between subject and Other, in between mere sound or noise and meaningful articulation. In each of these instances, the voice is both what links these opposed categories together, what is common to both of them, without belonging to either.\textsuperscript{22}

I extend this line of thought to include other contradistinctions and/or dialectics that require a mediation of voice. For example, Denis Vasse claims that the voice is situated between the organism and organization, that is, the biological body and the social body.\textsuperscript{23} He further describes this relationship as a distinction between the “real and the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Mladen Dolar, \textit{A Voice and Nothing More} (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Dolar, p. 31.
\end{itemize}
imaginary,” that is, the symbolism of both the body and of the language. At this point, the study of the material voice begins to offer fruitful theoretical ground. What qualities of the voice transmit non-verbal, semantic material? How does this transmission occur? What are the myriad of ramifications?

To begin, one must isolate the signifiable qualities of the material voice. Dolar emphasizes three: accent, intonation, and timbre. These components of vocality are very important when transferring social meaning. For example, a person can accent a word in sentence in order to inscribe emotional or social meaning onto the statement. For example, “I really need a drink” is different from, “I really need a drink.” The latter is more urgent and adds emotional content to the statement. Intonation is defined as adding a raised or lowered pitch to the sentence in order to transmit supplementary meaning. If the former sentence were uttered with a decidedly lowered pitch at the end, it could be assumed that the speaker is either tired or sad. The timbre of the voice (and, for Dolar, vocal production is included in this category) can also relay semantic information. For example, if the speaker of the former sentence growls the statement, one might assume that s/he is frustrated or angry. So, the material qualities of the voice can carry these conscious and subconscious desires. I would like the reader to keep this notion in mind when listening to the falsetto voice in particular. Many listeners and even singers do not question the significance of the falsetto voice but in most cases there must be a reason.

---

24 “Cette idée représentative inconsciente de cicatrice <<ombilicale>> fonctionne comme la butée origininaire qui sépare et contre-distance le réel et l’immaginaire, et délimite le lien virtuel d’où naît l’activité symbolisante du sujet, relié dès lors à son origine, dans la méditation du language articulé par la parole au désir de l’Autre, par la voix.” Ibid., p. 74.
why a singer would choose to use this particular register. As mentioned in the introduction, expression of gender and sexuality can be a reason. This aspect will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

**The Vocal Body**

In her doctoral dissertation, “Voice as a Technology of Selfhood: Towards an Analysis of Racialized Timbre and Vocal Performance,” Nina Eidsheim shows how timbre carries social implications, particularly in regards to race.\(^{25}\) Eidsheim suggests that:

> Vocal timbre is commonly thought of as a given material with which words are formed or pitches are sung. It is assumed . . . that the composite sound of a person’s voice—the timbre—reveals something essential about the person’s body, something that could not but be revealed through the timbre of the voice. In other words, vocal timbre is thought of as something indelible like a fingerprint.\(^{26}\)

Yet, unlike a fingerprint, timbre is performed by the body and is “shaped by unconscious and conscious training that are cultural artifacts of attitudes towards gender, class, race and sexuality.”\(^{27}\)

Most of Eidsheim’s dissertation is focused on the racialization of timbre—particularly that of African-Americans. However, she creates a theoretical framework that demonstrates the connection between the material voice and social constructs.


\(^{26}\) Eidsheim, p. 1.

\(^{27}\) Eidsheim, p. 2.
Eidsheim calls this framework the vocal body. The vocal body, according to Eidsheim, is a composite construct of 1) the anatomical mechanisms and resonance spaces of the vocalist, 2) the voice as shaped by lived experience as well as vocal training, and 3) the listener’s reception. This more gestalt view of voice is reminiscent of Steven Connor’s perception that, “The voice does not merely possess phonetic measure and pattern; it works to confer a dynamic shape on my whole body.”

Paul Baker states, “As we listen to the voice, our bodies may reflect the physiology of the singer, and we are able to feel how the singer creates the sound; how they feel,” not merely the emotional content of the vocal utterance but vibratory, somatic feeling as well as empathetic sensation.

Voice science confirms that the anatomical and physiological resonance spaces in a person’s body affect the timbre of the voice; and, common wisdom would assume that persons of a similar race or genetic makeup would possess similar vocal timbres. Yet, Eidsheim makes a very poignant theoretical move by incorporating the experience of the singer into the equation. By including 1) the ways in which singers learn to sing and 2) the sounds that influence their timbres, Eidsheim hones in on the social components of timbre.

Eidsheim identifies listener reception as a component of the vocal body but chooses not to fully explore the voice/listener connection. In Chapter 3, I hope to supplement Eidsheim’s research by demonstrating the specific relationships between

---


29 Baker, xxiv.
singing and aesthetic reception, in the hopes of filling this theoretical gap. Additionally, she neglects to broach the subject of differentiating timbre from vocal production. What necessitates this process of differentiation is the fact that timbre can be a by-product of vocal production. Any vocal timbre can be altered based on the vocal production chosen by the singer/speaker. In her dissertation, for simplicity’s sake, Eidsheim allows the reader to assume that the representative singers whom she has chosen for her study are consistently using the same vocal production when—in fact—a variety of vocal productions are always used by singers in order to convey emotional (or even social) meaning. Furthermore, singers use different productions when they are forced to access a different register of the voice—such as chest voice, head voice, or falsetto. The brilliance of Eidsheim’s framework is that she identifies a “performativity of timbre.” With this fell stroke, she amalgamates body, voice, and performance; furthermore, because timbre is a by-product of vocal production, she creates theoretical space for the performativity of various vocal productions/registrations such as the falsetto.

Here, I would like to pause and differentiate the terms vocal production and registration. Vocal registration is how the muscles of the larynx and the air flow act together to produce vocal sound, which in turn creates various timbres. For those readers who need a brief explanation of vocal registers:

- Females have a lower/chest registration and a higher/head register
- A significant register shift occurs when untrained voices attempt to negotiate the two registers.
• Males tend to blend chest and head registers into one but have a significant register shift when accessing falsetto.

In the broadest sense, the choice to shift into one register or another (since medial pitches can be accessed in more than one register) is an act of voluntary vocal production. So, I have chosen to use the all-encompassing term “vocal production” in some cases and “register/registration” in others. In fact, I would rather leave the concept open in the hopes that other researchers can utilize “vocal production” in a broader sense rather than being limited by terms such as register and/or registration.

**Materiality and Vocal Sensation**

In her recent article entitled “Sensing Voice: Materiality and the Lived Body in Singing and Listening Philosophy,” Nina Sun Eidsheim researches a performance artist named Snapper who performs her songs underwater. The singer has chosen this artistic decision in light of environmental disasters, happening as a result of global warming, such as the Hurricane Katrina disaster. She also wants to capitalize on the symbolism of water to express emotion such as “a flood of emotion” or “a storm of rage.” In the process of singing underwater herself, Eidsheim comes to grips with the material properties of the world that act on the voice. For example, vocal sound emanates and resonates differently in water than in air. Also, the deeper one descends in water the

---


31 Ibid., p. 107.
harder it becomes to phonate properly due to the added pressure on the larynx. Eidsheim
states:

By highlighting the material aspects of sound and their reception, Snapper
reminds us that what we hear depends as much on our materiality,
physicality, cultural and social histories, as it does on so-called objective
measurements (decibel level, sound-wave count, or score), which are
themselves mere images. Indeed, the experience of [vocal] sound is a
triangulation of events wherein physical impulses (sonic vibrations), our
bodies’ encultured capacity to receive these vibrations, and how we have
been taught to understand them are at constant play and subject to
negotiation.\footnote{Ibid., p. 116.}

In this way, the voice, body, culture, and listener are incorporated into a \textit{habitus} of
enculturated sound. More concerning this topic will be addressed in Chapter 3 but for
our purposes at this juncture, I would like to focus on the ramifications of Eidsheim’s
theoretical playground here in regards to gender and/or sexuality. The fact that vocal
sound is produced by the “encultured” body assumes that societal norms, cultural capital,
or even ways of being are constantly being inscribed on the voice even before a person
begins to self-identify. So, vocal gender is imprinted on the larynx and in the expectation
of the listener in much the same way as Eidsheim’s racial timbre (aforementioned). As
identities form and societal norms change, the voice becomes gendered in different ways.
For example, a section of Chapter 2 will briefly outline the changes in acceptance and use
of the countertenor voice in Western society due to pendular swings in gender and
sexuality norms. Other voices, such as the castrato, also flourished and vanished due to
social norm and listener expectation regarding gender.
Päivi Järviö, in her article “The Singularity of Experience in the Voice Studio,” invokes the phenomenology and ontology of singing as a site for the deconstruction of devocalization. She provides experiential anecdotes of singing and also states:

The human voice is something that does not represent anything that is in the world: it represents the force of life dwelling in the body of an individual. One sound, one swiftly passing moment in the singing, can touch the listener in a special way that she may find impossible to verbalize.33

In this short quote, Järviö broaches the disciplines of ontology, epistemology, and even affect, inviting them to the field of voice studies. Furthermore, the author suggests that other ethnographical styles—such as autoethnography—would be beneficial to the process of de-logos-izing the material singing voice.34

In an effort to support her cause, I would like to offer a personal autoethnography, which will introduce another way to approach the study of the material voice. I have taught singing for over 15 years. One of the most exciting tidbits of information that I have gleaned from experience in the voice studio is that students (and singers in general) spend too much time listening to themselves and not enough time paying attention to how it feels to sing. I am constantly asking my students, “What did that feel like?” and then I say, “Remember how it feels to sing correctly and try to duplicate the sensation—not the sound.” The realm of feeling, sensation, and affect can offer insight into the study of the


material voice. Here, I offer an auto-ethnographical account of what it feels like for me
to sing, both in my baritone (modal) voice and my countertenor (falsetto) voice.

Breathing

I inhale, making an [u] vowel with my lips, like sucking through a straw. I
feel the cool air rush over my tongue and against the inner mouth cavity. I
feel my lower abdominals relax and expand down and out; simultaneously,
I sense that the oblique muscles and others in the lower back are
expanding to make room for more air in the lungs. After taking in a
goodly portion of air, I suspend the muscles to create a sense of support. I
am ready to sing.

Singing

I sing A2 (a low A for baritone range). I feel a strong vibration in the
sternum. Other areas are also resonating such as: the front of the mouth
just behind the upper front teeth, the tip of the tongue, the bridge of the
nose, the cheekbones, and the forehead. At the same time, I feel as if I am
expanding the abdominal muscles as I sing/exhale in order to control the
air flow. I feel a sense of oscillation in the throat as my vibrato begins to
sound. I stop singing and breathe again, proceeding to A3 (A below middle
C). I feel less of a connection to the sternum and more in the bridge of the
nose and cheekbones, although all the previous spaces are still resonating.
I stop singing and breathe differently in order to sing A4 (A above middle
C), can be accessed three different ways in my voice. The first way is to
stay in modal voice but with a bel canto technique; so, I raise my soft
palate to the sky, breathing through both my nose and my mouth. I extend
the abdominal and lower back muscles a little more to access all the air I
will need to support the sound (within reason). I do not feel nearly as
connected to the chest area. In fact, I feel as if the sound is resonating
somewhere above me. A very strong vibration is felt in the upper nose and
a more pronounced sensation in the forehead. I stop singing and breathe
again as I did the very first time. The second way to sing A4 is in falsetto.
I possess a fairly bright and full falsetto sound. As I sing the vowel, the
sensation that immediately differs from the modal is that the vibrations
have shifted from the upper nose to just behind the nose in the raised
palatal area of the mouth. Additionally, I still feel connection to the chest.
I stop singing and breathe again. The third way to produce this pitch is to
belt the A4 in modal voice. My voice, which has a fairly decent and
healthy belt, requires me to lower the palatal muscles a little and rely much more on nasal resonance. So, I feel the vibrations very strongly in the cheekbones, the bridge of the nose, and the throat.

Every singer’s perception of the voice is different, which makes for interesting comparisons. For example, compare the above statements with the description by renowned tenor, Evan Williams:

Imagine two pieces of whip cord. Tie the ends together. Place the knot immediately under the upper lip directly beneath the center bone of the nose, run the strings straight back an inch, then up over the cheek bones thence down the large cords inside the neck...Laugh if you will, but this is actually the sensation I have repeatedly felt when producing...a good tone.35

Most certainly, a longitudinal study would need to be conducted in order to apply the elements of perceived sensation to the voice studio scientifically and pedagogically. Some work has been done. Johan Sundberg, a Swedish voice scientist, concludes that certain phonatory vibrations can be felt consistently across a large demographic, which validates the claim that sensation can be used pedagogically to help singers find certain modes of resonance and projection.36

Voice teachers consistently use metaphors of the senses in their teaching, perhaps without realizing that they are doing so. For example, one of the canonic exercises for creating sufficient palatal space in the mouth (to enhance resonance) is to imagine that one is smelling a plate of freshly baked cookies or a bouquet of flowers. Physiologically,

as a reflex, the palatal muscles (or the soft palate) raise in order to make more space for the “fragrant odor” to be absorbed by the sensory nerves. Want more oral space in the mouth? Insert an orange. To create a legato singing line? Connect the vowels with taffy. To darken a bright vowel? Sing it as if it is covered in chocolate. To energize the breath and release body tension? Simulate pitching a baseball or kicking a soccer ball. In fact, an operatic soprano friend of mine, after attending an Atlanta Hawks game, compared singing a high C with a slam dunk. This analogy not only captures the physical energy exerted in both feats, but also the rush of emotion that is connected to them.

Most teachers use sensation as a pedagogical tool but I would like to add that sensations can differ significantly based on genre, technique, and even language. The unique qualities of a language can be inscribed to such an extent that the singer (a good singer at least) must alter the sound, thereby creating varying sensations. For example, when singing in Japanese I hold my tongue farther back than I typically do when singing in English; moreover, when I teach Japanese voice students, I find that most of their tongues linger farther back in the throat than other students. Having studied Japanese for a few years, I have noted that in order to achieve an authentic accent, I must feel a more gutteral sensation. In Chapter 6, I will discuss more how this relates to gender and sexuality but the main point to be made here is that affective methodologies, in addition to those of vibratory sensation, are a valid point of departure for voice studies.
Affect, Intimacy, and Singing

Researchers are now utilizing these affective methodologies in creative and theoretical ways. The concept of intimacy—or collective emotion—in an analysis of a culture means to incorporate sentiment and feeling into cultural discourse as a way of analyzing both non-discursive and discursive meaning making that is constructed by the society (much like gender and/or sexuality).37 Due to the inherent, emotive qualities of both music and poetry these types of affectation apply directly to the voice studio and voice studies. Emotions—particularly those of distress and anxiety—play an important role in the development of vocal tensions and disorders, which are of obvious importance in the voice studio.38 The sites of emotion, which connect vocal music and its production, can be a point of intimate connection between singers themselves, collaborative performers, and listeners. This section provides the reader a point of entry to how voice studies and intimacy interrelate.


Lauren Berlant, in her introduction to *Intimacy*, urges readers to consider the idea of intimacy as a means of connection between bodies, spaces, and places in the cultural web.\(^{39}\) Indeed, the special bonds of *singer-hood* create a cultural intimacy. This connection serves as a “recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered [perhaps] a source of embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality.”\(^{40}\) One might ask, “How could singing be embarrassing?” However, when a man sings in the range of a female—such as the countertenor—this can create a sense of self-awareness (or even embarrassment at times) which is absent in singers who use modal production to produce sound.

A pertinent example of the concept of intimacy and the voice is one made by Martin Stokes in his book, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music*.\(^{41}\) In the first chapter, Stokes introduces the celebrated singer Zeki Müren to Western readers. Müren began his career in the 1950s and became very popular for his *gazino* (casino nightclub) performances in the 1970s and 1980s. Even though Müren appeared effeminate, wore flamboyant costumes and makeup, financially supported exclusively gay establishments, and frequented them—in a predominantly conservative Islamic country—he was referred to as a “model citizen” in many of his obituaries.\(^{42}\)

---


\(^{42}\) Ibid., p. 36.
Stokes explains that the sense of cultural intimacy absolved Müren from ridicule of his sexuality and outwardly feminine expression. I would like to focus, however, on the sound of Müren’s voice, in order to exact the importance of vocal production in this discussion.

Stokes provides copious examples of vocal descriptors for Müren’s voice. Some words are tactile in nature, such as “soft” or “velvet” and others are more socially oriented such as “decent” or “polite.” In truth, one of the main appeals of Müren’s voice was that it lacked the intense, more masculine quality of other male singers which are marked by “physical effort and assertiveness.” Stokes situates the “newness” of Müren’s voice alongside societal advances in institutionalized music as well as technology, such as the use of the microphone “as an expressive device.” As a trained voice instructor, when I listen to Zeki Müren, I hear the qualities of vocal sound that have been described as rather “androgynous.” The vocal production is light in character and less muscular; Müren controls the breath expertly so that extrinsic forces (muscles outside the larynx) are kept at a minimum. In fact, I also often hear a certain breathy quality at the end of phrases. These aspects of vocal production, which set him apart from other singers, helped to create the sense of cultural intimacy that protected him from social denigration.

43 Ibid., p. 58.
44 Ibid., p. 64.
46 Ibid., p. 63.
Also during the 1970s in Turkey, the female singer Aksu began to gain notoriety, not only in music but in film as well. Her voice is often characterized as intimate and feminine.\(^{47}\) When I listen to the beginning of many songs sung by Aksu, I hear a similar quality as that of Zeki Müren: even breath control to point of breathiness at times. Often, however, during the choruses of these songs I hear a strong, very emotional quality. Indeed, other descriptors of Aksu’s voice that recur in Stokes’ account are “sexy” and “emotional” and one of Stokes’ main points is to emphasize the connection between the eroticization of female bodies in Turkish culture and the performance of sexuality displayed in Aksu’s vocal stylings.\(^{48}\) Here, I would like to focus less on the cultural intimacy involved and suggest that a singer’s vocal production can change the mode of femininity from subjective to objective. In Aksu’s more intimate, breathy moments the gaze is outwardly expressive but based on Turkish social norms of female sexuality, when she sings with a bold, emotional quality in the upper ranges of her chest register, the gaze shifts onto her from a decidedly male perspective.

**Gender and Voice Studies**

To state that voice and gender are irrevocably wed seems rather gratuitous. Yet, for this study in particular, the reader must understand the ways in which these constructs are interrelated. In Jane Sugarman’s account of singing at Prespa Albanian weddings she

---

\(^{47}\) Ibid., p. 119.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., p. 144.
indicates a difference between the singing of women and the singing of men at these celebrations. For example, very few women performed men’s songs but as “long as they maintained a feminine demeanor and vocal timbre as they sang, their forays into the men’s repertoire were viewed as evidence of an unusual degree of intelligence and talent.” From this statement, one might be able to infer that exceptional intelligence and talent are viewed as masculine traits in Prespa society and the style of singing as well as the songs themselves express these social norms. Additionally, the fact that women needed to retain a certain feminine timbre speaks to the importance of the material voice when performing gender. Masculine vocal traits were also noted:

In contrast, male singers are particularly highly regarded if they sing in a “thick voice”...that is, at a medium tessitura and with greater tensing of the muscles in the throat so that a rich tone in partials is produced. Men who sing in this way are often said to sing “with strength”...implying that it requires the greater physical strength of a man to produce such a resonant tone.

Here, Sugarman clearly demonstrates that vocal production denotes a masculine quality. This masculine quality could also manifest in the singing of elderly women at these weddings. Sugarman states:

As women age they have considerably more social freedom as singers and need not be so attentive to their demeanor. It is women elders. rather than younger women, whom I have seen singing boisterously and prominently before a mixed group of men and women. They also experience greater freedom to express emotion...[O]nce women are past their reproductive


50 Ibid., p. 208.

51 Ibid., p. 200.
years they may behave—and sing—in a more evocative manner, closer to
that characteristic of men.\textsuperscript{52}

The freedom that older women embody, due to respect of one’s elders, could be a
byproduct of the drop in pitch of the voice as well as the huskiness or “thick” quality that
older voices obtain. Moreover, older men were documented as singing with less
“resonance and clarity” and one has to wonder if this result tends to make older singers to
sound less powerful.\textsuperscript{53} Sugarman also points out that the–albeit limited–gender
acceptance did not flow in both directions: men did not feel comfortable singing
women’s songs.\textsuperscript{54} This fact points toward the act of singing as possessing components of
gender identity. Finally, Sugarman points out that men tend to sing at a “medium to
high” volume and women at a “low to medium” volume. This quality proves that vocal
production—in and of itself—can carry gendered meaning: a concept which will be very
important in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 203.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 200.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 208.
CHAPTER TWO: VOCAL GENDER, VOCAL IDENTITY, AND THE CONTEMPORARY COUNTERTENOR

This chapter explores the concepts of vocal gender—the qualities of speaking and singing that carry gendered meaning—and vocal identity—the qualities of singing that circumscribe and/or manifest one’s sense of self. The goal is to achieve a better understanding of how societal expectations of gender and sexuality constitute the gender of the spoken and singing voice; additionally, these constructs become inscribed on the material qualities of voices and even the bodies of singers. Gender will not only be discussed in terms of how the voice carries socially constructed meanings of masculine/feminine but also in ways that involve the voice and power—that is, vocal authority or dominance. The reader is encouraged to continually refer to this chapter throughout the remainder of the project as the information—particularly in the first half of the chapter—will pertain to each of the following chapters in an overarching way.

Bodies and Voices

The phenomenologist Don Ihde states that, “Voice retains vestigially some sense of the materiality we are.”\(^1\) The epistemological truth of the matter is that the essence of a voice—the materiality to which Ihde refers—lies in the existence of the human body, otherwise, the sound would be unrecognizable as human. If a sound can be identified as human then one must admit that the material qualities of the voice carry symbolic

\(^1\) Ihde, p. 195.
meaning that indicate humanity. At this point, one must begin to separate semiotics of
the body and those of a socially constructed nature, such as gender/sexuality, which
emanate from and are simultaneously inscribed on the body physically, visually,
ideologically, performatively, and discursively.²

At the most basic level, the fact that male voices are biologically predisposed to
be normatively lower than female voices seems at first blush to stand as indisputable:
voices at lower pitches indicate male and voices at higher pitches indicate female.
However, a glance at the current frequency ranges of the speaking voice (in Europe and
the U.S.) for both males and females reveals some fascinating results.

- Adult female overall speaking range = 200-400Hz
- Adult female average speaking range = 200-230Hz
- Adult male overall speaking range = 100-300Hz
- Adult male average speaking range = 100-130Hz³

The average frequency range of a female speaking voice (200-230Hz) is well within the
overall vocal range of a male (100-300Hz). Alternatively, some female voices easily dip

² Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (1949), trans. by H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape,
1956); Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and
Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 1999); Foucault, 1978; David Halperin, How to Do the History
of Homosexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Susan Ortner, “Is Female to Male as
Nature is to Culture?” in Woman, Culture, and Society, ed. by M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, (Stanford,

³ Graddol and Swann, pp. 20-1.
into the male pitch range due to age and/or estrogen levels. So, why do males speak lower than females on average? The Australian feminist scholar, Dale Spender, offers a sociological explanation:

It has been found that males tend to have lower pitched voices than females. But it has also been found that this difference cannot be explained by anatomy. If males do not speak in high pitched voices, it is not usually because they are unable to do so. The reason is more likely to be because there are penalties. Males with high pitched voices are often the subject of ridicule. And what is considered the right pitch for males varies from country to country.

In a recent interview, the author and comedian David Sedaris admits: “If I’m in a hotel and I call the front desk, they always say, ‘I’ll have that right up to you ma’am.'” Yet, in his own defense Sedaris asserts, “I don’t think I sound like a woman. I think I sound like a very small man.” All humor aside, Sedaris unwittingly admits the repercussions that exist for high-pitched male speaking voices.

The fixed pitch of the male speaking is, as Spender states, unstable. For example, the average speaking range for males in Japan is considerably lower than that of Western Europe. Therefore, according to Spender, the only legitimate reasons why men speak at a lower pitch range than women is due to social pressure and accessibility. Regardless of

---


Spender’s almost brusque social analysis, in Western society—at least—one must contend with the fact that the normative speaking range for men is lower than women’s. Yet, some of this gendered reception is based on timbre rather than pitch or frequency. Another intriguing study found that the average fundamental frequency of prepubescent boys actually exceeds that of girls the same age due to muscular tension and activity; yet, the perceived pitch is lower due to a significantly lower vocal tract resonance in boys. So, pitch—albeit socially determined—is a critical factor in the identification of a speaker’s biological sex, still other factors such as timbre are equally as more important.

In a study conducted by Jason Bishop and Patricia Keating, the researchers found that acoustical properties of the voice make the sex of male and female voices recognizable by the average listener despite the fundamental frequency or pitch of the vocal sound. In short, a listener can identify a voice as male or female based on whether a certain fundamental pitch sounds high or low in the speaker’s range. Keeping in mind that the average speaking range of a male is 100-130Hz, if a male attempts to speak on the fundamental pitch A220Hz (which is in the center of the average female speaking range) with non-falsetto production, the sound will be interpreted as high in his range. However, most men can reach up to A440Hz and beyond in their falsetto. So, if a male speaks in falsetto at 220Hz the listener will hear the sound as low in the speaker’s

---


register. Other studies show that both the timbre of the voice and even phonetic properties can also help to indicate the sex of the speaker.\textsuperscript{11} This information is then stored in a person’s memory and can help facilitate voice-face pairings as well as musical melodies.\textsuperscript{12}

Therefore, the pitch of the voice itself is not always the best indicator of the person’s sex. The acoustical properties of a vocal range or register can also denote the sex of a speaker. Moreover, the associations that a person’s brain makes with certain timbres creates certain expectations regarding the sex of the speaker when listening to an unidentified voice. I would like to suggest that these same types of identifications extend to the singing voice as well, which results in social “penalties” (to use Spender’s term) when the sex of the singer is misidentified. Yet, the sex of an individual is not the only semantic information carried by the material voice; the previous chapter demonstrates ways in which gender and sexuality, in particular, can be inscribed on the material voice in the same manner as with bodies, via performativity. The next section explores these gendered performative acts of the material voice and applies them to the singing voice.

\begin{flushright}

\end{flushright}
Vocal Gender

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states that “Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender.” 13 The “signifiable existence” of a body, or the meaning that is transferred when a body is apprehended, then must be determined by the expression of acts, which are *performed* by the body. Bodies do not exist in a vacuum but, instead, within the social context in which bodies exist. So, the performance of a gendered body (that is, the gender that the performance signifies) can only be interpreted through the lens of a society’s gender norms. 14 Likewise, the performance of one’s race can be signified by the body via performative acts. The *aural* component of race or gender—one’s voice—cannot be excluded from the overall discussion of performativity and the body.

In her article, “Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, and Gender Performativity,” Annette Schlichter criticizes Judith Butler for her overemphasis on the visual components of the body’s performative acts as “texts” (again, something seen), forsaking vocality almost altogether. 15 Schlichter adds, “Butler cannot hear the material voice because of her ambivalence towards the matter of bodies.” 16 The critical word here is “ambivalence” meaning that, at a certain point, Butler had to choose between the two;

---


16 Schlichter, p. 39.
however, Schlichter redeems the voice as a “material as well as a performative phenomenon” in league with the body to the extent that the material qualities of the voice make it a “carrier of self or identity.”\(^\text{17}\) Therefore, the human voice (that is, the anatomical phenotypes and chromosomal genotypes that constitute it) can have a *vocal* gender in the same manner that a human body can be gendered, so that the meaning ascribed to a masculine-sounding voice differs from one that is feminine-sounding.

This discussion can be furthered by a consideration of Nina Sun Eidsheim’s use of Deborah Wong’s theory of “somatic realization.” In Wong’s essay, “The Asian American Body In Performance,” she theorizes ways in which the socially constructed properties of race–namely Asian American–are coded on the body as well as the body politic.\(^\text{18}\) Wong accuses Western society of denying an autonomous space for the Asian American body due to the fact that “the [U.S.] American color line is Black and White;” therefore, “Asian Americans have traditionally been more easily absorbed into Whiteness.” Wong even compares an Asian American to a “banana (yellow on the outside but White on the inside).”\(^\text{19}\) Race is–at its most basic and unenlightened–a system of categorization to which humans are cognitively predisposed, so it stands to reason that race would become a socially constructed byproduct of somatic distinction. Yet, within the parameters of a stereotypical, racial paradigm–White and Black–ethnicities outside this limited

\(^\text{17}\) Schlichter, pp. 33, 36.


parameter experience a lack of ontology. Wong further indicates that an autonomous Asian American musical style seems improbable due to the fact that the Asian American body is subsumed by Whiteness.

When Asian Americans attempt to break into the U.S. popular music scene they are unceremoniously rebuffed. 20 Take for instance the case of Harlemm Lee, née Gerry Woo, a Detroit-native who won the NBC talent show “Fame” in 2007. Lee was promised a recording contract and an off-Broadway debut as prize offerings. These opportunities never materialized and even though Lee’s voice bests many current R&B singers, subsequent producers have refused to sign him. The implication here is that the U.S. market simply does not have a space for Asian (American) musicians. The current pop music trends focus on Caucasian or African American artists and/or styles. 21 Even K-pop performers such as Rain and idol groups–who are finding ever-growing popularity in anime music subcultures–have met with resistance and exclusion from mainstream U.S. airwaves. Many of these groups record songs in English but I would like to suggest that, in addition to the Asian body, the material vocal properties of the Asian voice suggests a sense of Asian-ness that has yet to be acknowledged and identified as U.S. American. These vocal manifestations of racial politics could explain also why Middle Eastern American music lies further outside the acceptable parameters of U.S. pop culture.


21 I disagree slightly with Wong here that the U.S. is seen only in Black and White. Latino bodies, sounds, and artists have much more accessibility and popularity in the U.S. pop music market; however, reasons for this phenomenon lie outside the parameters of this particular discussion.
In Eidsheim’s dissertation, she appropriates Wong’s theory of “somatic realization” for voice studies: “We believe that a voice we hear confirms a difference based on voice, but what we actually hear is a somatic realization of race.”\textsuperscript{22} My personal interpretation of Eidsheim is that, although the natural inclination is to perceive voices as unique and discrete, certain overarching, socio-vocal elements conjoin to create a vocal performance of race. Eidsheim uses Elizabeth Taylor-Greenfield (c. 1820-1876) and Sissiretta Jones (1869-1933) as representative examples of African American opera singers in the U.S. whose careers suffered due to the general public’s association between their singing and minstrel shows.\textsuperscript{23} According to Eidsheim, the timbre of the African American voice—its somatic realization—figured as prominently in this association as the singer herself. Using this same theoretical lens, a timbral connection between the singing voice and the somatic realization of gender/sexuality follows quite logically.

**Gender and Singing**

The voice can only be gendered \textit{vis-à-vis} the ways in which a society constitutes gender. For example, in Western society masculine-sounding voices suggest dominance and even a person’s potential leadership abilities.\textsuperscript{24} This predisposition is not without

\textsuperscript{22} Eidsheim, 65.

\textsuperscript{23} Eidsheim, 70-6.

biological foundation. For example, a linguist from University of California at Berkeley, John J. Ohala, found some vocal similarities across the animal kingdom:

The sounds made by a confident aggressor or dominant individual are low-pitched and often harsh, whereas those of a submissive or subordinate individual are high-pitched and tone like. The dog’s threatening growl and submissive whine are familiar examples of this pattern...[T]he pitch of the voice can also indirectly convey an impression of the size of the vocalizer since there is a correlation (an inverse one) between the rate of vibration of the vocal cords (or the syringeal membranes) and overall body mass... Moreover, the more massive and thick the vibrating mass, the more likely it is that secondary modes of vibration will be set up in it and in that way will give rise to irregular vibrator patterns and thus harsh voice quality...the individual that intends to prevail in the contest...will try to convey his [or her] largeness (even if it is a bluff) by producing the lowest-pitched and harshest vocalization...[T]he individual who wants to capitulate will attempt to appear small and non-threatening and will therefore emit as high-pitched and tone-like a cry as possible.\(^{25}\)

Although the data would suggest that larger–predominately male–members of a species might dominate physically and socially over the female, Graddol and Swann caution that:

Such sociobiological accounts often make unwarranted assumptions about the similarities between humans and other animals and may be guilty of trying to justify and legitimate some of the more sexist and oppressive aspects of human behaviour as ‘natural’, and instinctive.\(^{26}\)

For example, Ohala would suggest that loud voices are more aggressive and masculine; however, singers such as Jesse Norman–whose sheer, vocal volume demands acknowledgement–or Ewa Podles–whose depth of vocal range and quality approximates the richness of a sultry baritone timbre–challenge the notion of male vocal dominance.


\(^{26}\) Graddol and Swann, p. 31.
Under these conditions, one must consider that power relations begin to be renegotiated: male need no longer refer to masculine and female need not intimate feminine. Rather, the vocal performance spectrum may be reconfigured to evoke a sense of gender/power fluidity.

Furthermore, the capacity of *bel canto* vocal production to increase the volume or vocal dynamic of the singing voice creates a curious and fascinating gender dynamic in and of itself. One cannot deny that the Western, classically-trained voice exudes dominance in some ways over the untrained voice and, in many Western and non-Western countries across the globe, holds a place of prestige or a standard of excellence in regards to singing that other types of singing do not. The only vocal production that could possibly challenge this assertion would be the vocal belt. In both modes of production, the loudness and dynamism of the voice exert a sense of vocal dominance and—in Foucaultian terms—power over other modes of vocal production.

In order to demonstrate this theory, I offer two examples. First, consider the case of Choi Sung Bong, who was born in Seoul, Korea in 1990. At age 3, he was abandoned in an orphanage and lived on the street for nearly 10 years selling gum and energy drinks to make money. At age 14, he heard a classical singer at a local nightclub and vowed to pursue a musical career. He worked hard to educate himself and even hid in the night school to escape street gangs. After passing his elementary and middle school exams, his music teacher—who gave him lessons gratis—helped him to enter an arts

---

high school. He wanted to attend university for music but could not afford it. Instead, he began working for a construction company and suffered from severe depression. In 2011, Choi received a bid to sing on the popular TV show *Korea’s Got Talent*. In the introductory interview, Choi is meek, understated, and extremely humble. He tells the panel of judges about his troubled past and admits to having little training and not much talent. However, when Choi begins to sing his version of Sarah Brightman’s hit “Nella Fantasia,” a strong, *bel canto* baritone voice emerges. The judges and audience are stunned and begin to cry. Everyone is astonished that such a glorious voice can come from such a seemingly submissive and unassuming person. The video of the performance has gone viral, exceeding 150,000,000 views. Choi has been signed by a music producer and performs regularly. He donates a significant portion of his proceeds to charity.

Choi’s case provides an excellent example of the power dynamics inherent within the timbre and vocal production of the singing voice. Choi’s speaking voice would never suggest that he is a confident, assured person; yet, when he sings, the quality of sound he produces assures the listener that he, indeed, has deep-seeded strength and has endured much in his life. The meek—or what some would call feminine qualities—evident in Choi’s demeanor and speaking voice belie the masculine quality of the singing voice. After hearing him tell his amazing story and listening to him sing, one might have a hard time considering him weak and submissive.
A very important aspect to this anecdote is the *bel canto* mode of production used by Choi. *Bel canto* singing provides the warm timbre and emotional quality to Choi’s singing voice—in this case—creating a strong, masculine impression despite the otherwise humble aspects to his background and appearance. An acknowledgement of the difference between basic vocal timbre and vocal production is a vital concern here. The timbre produced by the physical attributes of the body—resonance spaces, bone structure, body mass, vocal cord/laryngeal anatomy—indicate attributes to the body that are pre-existing. When a person speaks or sings, the manipulation of muscle groups that affect vocal sound in and around the larynx, throat, nasal and oral cavities occurs in a variety of ways, producing added timbre. Also, the tongue and lips play a major role in the quality of speech. The mode of vocal production, quality of speech, and language that a person uses can reflect aspects of sociality. A person can alter these forms of expression and these decisions are typically based on social context. This process is referred to as style-switching or style-shifting, which aides a speaker in negotiating communication in a social context.²⁸ A simplified, hypothetical example of this concept might be the difference between an employee calling his/her boss “sir” in the office but “dude” on the basketball court or a parent responding to a child’s behavior politely and sweetly in public but more harshly at home. The example of Choi Sung Bong provides an excellent of example of how style-shifting can apply to singing. Choi used *bel canto* vocal technique, in effect, to alter his social status and negotiate acceptance and praise in the

---

²⁸ Style-shifting is a term used in the field of sociolinguistics, coined by Penelope Eckert and John Rickford in *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001).
context of an amateur singing competition. I would argue that the more dominant timbre of Choi’s singing style juxtaposed with his humble social status created an scenario in which this drastic style-shift elicited an unexpected, emotional response from the audience.

Another excellent example of the capacity that vocal production has to affect vocal gender is in the contrast between versions of Dolly Parton’s hit country song, “I Will Always Love You.”29 The original version of this song was composed in 1973 as a farewell song to Parton’s long-time music partner Porter Wagoner. The song features a limited accompaniment and some mood enhancing back-up singers. Dolly’s vocal performance is obviously heartfelt but rather reserved. At the highest notes, she flips into a breathy head voice and even recites part of the 2nd verse as opposed to singing it. All in all, Parton’s performance is very intimate and quietly emotional.

Linda Ronstadt’s version of the song in 1975 adds a fuller accompaniment and more back-up singers.30 Also, during the chorus, Ronstadt only occasionally hints at head voice, preferring to belt the sustained notes each time. Only once does she access the head voice fully toward the end on the word “you.” Ronstadt’s head voice is fuller and stronger than the production Parton chooses to use, causing the note to sound extremely emotional. One could characterize this rendition as more self-assured, stronger. But, more importantly, for this conversation is the timbre of Ronstadt’s voice versus Parton’s.


Ronstadt is a rocker with a naturally resonant vocal instrument. Her voice is strong and clear. Parton’s voice is strong and clear at times too. But, a clear fullness of tone is present in Ronstadt’s voice that Parton has never possessed. In essence, Ronstadt offers a more powerful (masculine?) vocal performance.

Whitney Houston’s iconic rendition of this song in 1992 starts with a nod to Dolly Parton’s more intimate, original version. Houston sings the first verse a cappella and then croons the chorus. Later, she develops more of the Linda Ronstadt sound, opening up to the fuller more belty quality of the voice. Houston’s version is more soulful and improvisatory; and, at the reprise, she opens the flood gates and shares her full voice with the listener–both in belt and high register. The truly emotional quality of Houston’s rendition often takes people by surprise, causing them to cry or–at the very least–to pay rapt attention to her performance.

In a way, over the years, Parton’s song was taken from being more introverted to more extroverted–less a reserved promise of steadfastness between friends and more of an outspoken declaration of utter devotion. The belt quality of Ronstadt and Houston’s voices help to create a more charged emotional atmosphere. In stereotypical Western paradigms of political gender (that is, strong = masculine/weak = feminine) the mode of vocal production for Parton’s performance could be interpreted as a more intimate, feminine style and Ronstadt and Houston’s performances as more masculine based on the material qualities of the singing voice.

Singing and Identity

Due to the close ties between the voice and language, one cannot dismiss the importance of discourse and discursive thought in the construction of vocal identities. Benjamin Lee Whorf (1896-1941) is credited with the hypothesis that “language sets the limits of thought and constructs a speaker’s perception of both physical and social reality.” Many feminist writers over the past 50 years have used exponents of this theory to show how language affects division of labor and perpetuates discrimination. The ways in which Western discourse—at least—discusses the voice is extremely gendered in several different ways.

First, the vocal designations that commonly categorize voices—soprano, alto, tenor, bass—quite often imply a person’s biological sex. The phrase “He’s a soprano” would probably perplex a large percentage of average music listeners in the U.S. Unless the speaker indicates or context dictates that the soprano is a boy whose voice has not lowered, then the assumption most probably will link soprano with female. In fact, the Italian words “soprano” and “alto” imply biological males—note the masculine ending “o”. In the late 1500s to 1750, when females were beginning to be allowed to sing on stage and in church, these terms were appropriated for female singers. The terms have become so ubiquitously associated with females now that adult male treble singers are met with a questioning ear.

32 Graddol and Swann, p. 147.
For example, Michael Maniaci is a legitimate soprano. His vocal apparatus never fully matured, so that his vocal range naturally lies in the range of a soprano without the use of falsetto. I met Michael in graduate school and have followed his career through Julliard, winning the national Metropolitan Opera competition, and establishing his international career. More often than not, websites and concert programs refer to him as a male soprano, or even worse a sopranIST. Why can he not just be a soprano? Answer: Because of the social constructed norms of vocal identity that are inscribed on the singing voice in addition to the terminology used to describe them. But how must it make Michael feel to never fit into a category? Where does he belong? How does vocal identity (or the lack thereof) contribute to a sense of self and belonging?

As a voice teacher, I deal with this issue every semester—most often with Freshmen. No offense to choral conductors but many students arrive in my studio who have been placed in sections for their high school choruses which were not appropriate for their true voice type. Some singers have legitimate emotional distress, on par with an identity crises, when I prove to them that their voices are actually more suited to a different range. Additionally, I have had students whose voices mature and they need to switch fachs or begin to sing different repertoire. In these cases, the singer’s entire vocal identity is called into question. In this way, one can see the oftentimes intense connection between the voice, embodiment, and identity.
On the opposite end of the gendered spectrum. Women with low voices—particularly elderly ones—often sing tenor in non-professional choirs. The Southern gospel song, “Daddy Sang Bass” refers to this phenomenon:

I remember when I was a lad
Times were hard and things were bad
But there's a silver linin' behind every cloud
Just poor people that's all we were
Tryin' to make a livin' out of black land earth
But we'd get together in a family circle singin' loud

Daddy sang bass, Mama sang tenor
Me and little brother would join right in there
Singin' seems to help a troubled soul
One of these days and it won't be long
I'll rejoin them in a song
I'm gonna join the family circle at the throne

The implication here is that the two boys were too young to sing the tenor—due to their unchanged voices—or bass lines so “Mama” had to assume the responsibility. In this instance, “Mama” is most probably using her chest voice—or the lowest vocal register for females—which oftentimes allows a singer with a low voice type a certain amount of power due to the relaxation of the larynx and the access to more resonance of the chest cavity. The capacity of low female voices such as Nina Simone, Bea Arthur, or Chavela Vargas to be mistaken as male problematizes the canonized vocal categories.

Ultimately, the discourses that surround the singing voice can effectively construct—consciously or unconsciously—a person’s vocal subjectivity and vocal identity. Identifying as a particular voice type creates a unique situation for countertenors, who

often are called upon to sing parts labelled alto or to sing arias for mezzo-soprano (or even soprano). A trend has existed for the past 10 years in which some falsetto, Western classical singers market themselves as “male soprano” or “male alto”. To many listeners, in my experience, this type of nomenclature is rather confusing; however, the term “countertenor” does not offer a valid solution to the issue either. Most uneducated listeners scan a recital program, see the word “countertenor” and expect a tenor-type voice. The result is unexpected in these instances. Even the most direct term–falsettist–is fraught with the notion that the sound is unnatural or false. Given the current state of the Western art music world, the word “countertenor” reigns supreme and is not likely to be dethroned.

Lastly, in regards to the material voice contributing to a sense of subjectivity, studies have shown that the speaking voice can indicate to a listener one’s sexual orientation–many authors refer to this phenomenon as sexual identity. For example, pitch range, lisp, excessive nasal quality, and the pronunciation of certain consonants in a male voice has been shown to be associated with homosexuality in the U.S. Researchers have determined that these linguistic properties to gay men’s speech allow them to aurally identify with a certain social group. Since the socio-vocal ramifications of speaking and singing are related, one can only imagine that certain singing sounds must

---

allow oneself to identify with a certain social group. For example, a bright, nasal quality is often used in musical theater singing. Furthermore, the genre of musical theater has for over a hundred years been associated with gay subculture in the U.S.\(^{35}\)

As an example, I recently saw a brilliant video, which a friend posted on Facebook, that exemplifies the multiplicity of gendered acts. The video is published by BuzzFeed and is entitled, “What You Really Mean When You Say, ‘Girl’.”\(^{36}\) At first, the video might seem rather silly but the kernel of sociolinguistic truth that serves as its comic conceit should not be overlooked.

The script to this short video consists of one repeated word, “Girl,” which has been appropriated by many gay males in the U.S. as a way to address one another. On the outset, the fact that gay men use female gendered words or phrases—for example, when meeting another gay male, one might say “Hey, girl!” or “Girl! How you doing?” The feminine pronoun is also invoked when referring to another gay male, “Jeff was so upset that she ate a whole carton of Ben and Jerry’s!” This pronoun reversal often verbally reinforces and/or accompanies other feminine behavior, linguistically circumscribing the parameters of certain members of the gay community who choose to identify as more effeminate. The video shows 28 different scenarios in which the single word “Girl” is used to convey vastly different meanings, which are printed at the bottom


of the screen. For example, the first scene shows a male entering a store with a huge smile on his face, raising his arms in the air. As he says the word “Girl!” a female approaches and they hug. At the bottom of the screen the words “Hello!” appear. A fascinating aspect to the way in which the actor inflects this word is that he begins by mirroring the way one might inflect a very cheery (albeit very gay) “Hello” (“Hel-” starts mid-range then “loooooo” immediately jumps to a high pitch and slides down).

Hello----------------------------------

But, on the high pitch, the actor flips into falsetto, sustaining the high pitch and fluctuating the pitch almost as if he were singing with vibrato.

Gi--(falsetto)----------------------rl!

Another scene shows the actor in a more intimate setting, his head cocked to one side, and with a sympathetic look on his face, he says in light, semi-falsetto tone, “Girl” and puts his hand to his heart–indicating that he has been emotionally moved by something. The text at the bottom of the screen reads, “Thank you!” Another scene shows the actor leaning over a high-top table toward a female with food in his hand and a very excited expression on his face. After he says, “Girl!” with a low-pitched, secretive, raspy vocal
production, he looks in both directions as the text reads “I’m about to tell you stuff I’m not supposed to tell you!” As clever and fun-loving as the video may be, it also expertly demonstrates how physical gestures, social context, and vocal pitch, inflection, timbre, and register/production convey non-discursive meaning.

Two items of particular importance should be noted. First, 12 out of 28 repetitions of “Girl” utilize falsetto in some way. Second, the variety of meanings that are expressed based on the vocal production alone (falsetto, rasp, vibrato, growling) demonstrate the voice’s capacity to provide a multiplicity of semantic information. At this point, I would like to turn the reader’s attention to the hypothetical notion of only listening to the video clip. Could the actor’s voice unintentionally be misinterpreted due to its pitch, inflection, timbre, or production? This issue brings the concept of multistability to the foreground. Multistability particularly applies to the voice, especially when the pitch, timbre, and expression of a person’s voice approximates that of the opposite sex. Another classic example of this phenomenon is the voice of the legendary singer Nina Simone. In a recent presentation on gender and the voice, I played the beginning of Simone’s 1965 recording of “Feeling Good.” I asked the students if the voice was a male or female. 100 percent of the class identified the voice as male, based on qualities of vocal production and timbre.
Vocal Gender/Identity, Sexuality, and Falsetto

The falsetto voice in everyday usage can manifest in many ways: high-pitched laughter, a sneeze, a hoot or holler (for example, as a means to acquire someone’s attention or to be heard over other noises), et al. In these instances, the use of falsetto vocal production in and of itself does not transfer much meaning. However, when men intentionally use falsetto in order to mimic the sound of the female voice, the act is fraught with cultural significance. Popular examples of this phenomenon would be Dustin Hoffman as Dorothy in the movie *Tootsie* (1982) or Robin Williams as *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993); in these movies, both characters dress in drag as a disguise. However, because their female personae are intended to be as believable as possible, the actors use the falsetto voice in order to approximate the quality or timbre of the female voice when in drag.

The voice undeniably plays a major role in sex determination (male or female). Stereotypically, a higher speaking voice denotes a female and a lower speaking voice denotes a male. So, why then would male actors or others who mimic women’s voices resort to falsetto to approximate the female voice when the pitch range is within the scope of non-falsetto production? In truth, not all actors do; instead, some actors use their modal (non-falsetto) voices without even attempting to raise the pitch to a normative female range, such as Tyler Perry’s character, Madea.

Tyler Perry (né Emmitt Perry, Jr.) is a director, producer, and writer who has achieved notoriety for his movies, which by and large comment on the contemporary
African American experience. Perry’s first film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), centers on the character of Mabel “Madea” Simmons—a strong-willed, capable, 62-year-old African American female—who is portrayed by Perry in drag. The success of the film has prompted a cinematic series of 9 Madea movies and an equal number of stage plays. Drag can be a useful site for awareness of how a society perceives and constructs gender; and, one need not question in contemporary academia why the performative aspects and stereotypes of gender construction aide Perry in comically suspending disbelief as the character Madea. Yet, Tyler Perry does not use falsetto voice to portray the female character. Why is the listener not distracted by Tyler’s low-pitched voice? How is this would-be vocal anomaly culturally acceptable? To answer this question one must draw from the fields of socio-linguistics and acoustics.

In 1975, Robin Lakoff, a sociolinguist at University of California, Berkeley, began to compile a list of female linguistic traits. These characteristics include a wide use of pitch range, varied intonation, increased vocal contour, hedging (“sort of”/“kind of”), expressive adjectives, apologetic speech, use of tonal inflection to denote italicized speech (That movie was “so” good), et al. One should note that these vocalisms are not dependent on any stereotypical frequency range associated with females but exist outside


these parameters. Therefore, the possibility exists for a male to speak in a low register and still “sound” like a female based on the characteristics of the speech.\textsuperscript{39} Furthermore, Tyler’s decision to maintain a non-falsetto production, in a certain respect, adds a masculine quality to the strong-willed character of Madea. So, the production of vocal sound here stands a marker for a socially-constructed concept of gender (in this case, masculinity).

So, why then do Hoffman and Williams use falsetto? I refer the reader to the aforementioned study conducted by Jason Bishop and Patricia Keating, which found that acoustical properties of the voice make the sex of male and female voices recognizable by the average listener despite the fundamental frequency or pitch of the vocal sound.\textsuperscript{40} In short, a listener can identify a voice as male or female based on whether a certain fundamental pitch sounds high or low in the speaker’s range. Knowing these acoustical properties of the falsetto help to explain why an actor, such as Dustin Hoffman or Robin Williams, might utilize the falsetto in order to vocally differentiate between the sexes as well as using the visual component of drag. In both \textit{Tootsie} and \textit{Mrs. Doubtfire}, Hoffman and Williams play men who are leading double lives—one as a male and one as a female. The audience knowingly witnesses both personae; so, the use of falsetto as a means to

\textsuperscript{39}Incidentally, many of these characteristics are approximated in normatively “gay” speech patterns; although the current consensus is that “gay” speech patterns are not female but a sociolinguistic variation of female and male.

vocally differentiate between the two characters (in addition to using drag as a visual component) increases the legitimacy of the actor’s performance.

Furthermore, because falsetto production feels differently in the body when used, it could be that men gravitate toward the use of the falsetto in these instances as a way to psychologically and kinesthetically project their voice into a space of difference or Other: a purposeful, non-normative vocal production. In this way, the falsetto voice preserves or safeguards their masculinity and becomes a social marker for the Other and/or the feminine.

**The Countertenor and Vocal Gender/Identity**

The countertenor provides a unique twist to this discussion by adding an element of aural ambiguity, which is less present in other voice types due to the decentering of gender and—in some societies and circles—sexuality that springs from the connection that the voice has with the body. The countertenor voice most definitely approximates the pitch of a female voice (as opposed to a male). So, upon hearing the voice type only, the listener might “hear” a feminine sound and associate the body with a female. However, the contemporary countertenor, who trains in the *bel canto* singing tradition, often confuses listeners due to the technique used to sing.

According to James Stark, author of *Bel canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, the *bel canto* tradition of solo singing began in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The schools of singing that developed in Italy particularly, starting with Giulio Caccini
(1551-1618) and continuing through Pierfrancesco Tosi (1653-1732) and Giovanni Battista Mancini (1714-1800), focused mainly on solo singing and vocal technique. The tradition developed into a pedagogical practice as well as a field of scientific research in the 19th century as Manuel Garcia II (1805-1906) began to publish his treatises on singing.\footnote{James Stark, \textit{Bel canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. xi-56.}

\textit{Bel canto} technique most often implies that vibrato is used consistently throughout the sound but according to Stark:

The chief distinguishing characteristic in classical singing is, of course, the quality of the voice [including but not limited to \textit{chiaroscuro}], with its special powers of expression. Even the casual or non-expert listener can tell in an instant if a voice sounds ‘classically trained’ by the tone alone.\footnote{Stark, p. 163.}

The falsettist began to be overshadowed by other more natural sounding voices or voices that were more “true to nature,” such as the tenor, the female, and the castrato. Due to \textit{bel canto} technique, tenors were able to extend their range into that of the countertenor. The castrato began to be favored because of his “naturally” high vocal range [as opposed to a ‘false’ one] as was the female. Moreover, the falsettist began to be associated with homosexuality, which diminished its social status greatly.\footnote{Fox, 2003; Fugate, 2006.}

When countertenors began to return to the opera scene in the 1960s, many of them (such as Alfred Deller) were chorally trained in the tradition of the Anglican church. However, over the next 30 years, more and more countertenors began to be
classically trained, which means that the *bel canto* technique is utilized. The voices of falsettists are now able to capitalize on breath and resonance in a way that had theretofore been inaccessible. Contemporary countertenor voices, such as David Daniels, are characterized by words such as “virility,” “power,” “full-bodied,” “emphatic,” “command,” “charisma,”, et al.44 These words—at least in Western society—possess a masculine quality. Yet, these words also are often used to describe classically trained singers at large. It could be that over the centuries, the sound of the *bel canto* voice has become associated with masculinity. This perspective, then, presents a different spin on vocal gender that does not rely on the pitch or timbre of the voice.

Of equal importance, I would argue is the qualities of *bel canto* singing that can also denote femininity. The material qualities of French countertenor Phillippe Jaroussky’s sound do not match Daniels’ intensity. So, even though both singers are utilizing *bel canto* technique the resonance and timbre of the singing voices carry differently gendered meanings. I would like to spend a moment suggesting reasons for this disparity. As a singing instructor, when I listen to Jaroussky’s voice with my pedagogical or “teacher’s ears,” I hear a certain quality that denotes a constricting of the thyro-hyoid membrane and a slight raising of the laryngeal apparatus as a whole. In my experience as a teacher, this type of singing, which can be found particularly in MT

---

singers, amplifies nasal and head resonances. In contrast, Daniels utilizes more chest resonance due to a more relaxed larynx. My thought here is that both Daniels and Jaroussky are capitalizing on vocally gendered qualities of the material singing voice in order to sound more masculine (Daniels) and/or feminine (Jarousky).

**Conclusion**

Ihde states that listening is an experience of an experience; the reflexive act of listening involves both the experience of the sound (what is happening outside of the body) and the processing of the experience (what happens internally). As this chapter has demonstrated, the processing of the material singing voice in regards to gender, identity, and sexuality is contingent upon the norms of the society in which the singing occurs. In the case of the countertenor—who sings in the range of a female and in a falsetto voice that might sound atypical to some listeners—listeners that ascribe to Butler’s concept of multiplicity would have welcoming ears into which countertenor voices could sing. However, not every sector of society thinks in the same manner as Western academia. Some societies still cling to conservative binary views of gender and sexuality. These groups most assuredly hear the gender of the countertenor voice in a different manner. So, the reception of the material singing voice—whether it be countertenor or another voice type—depends largely on the context of the listener and his/her societal expectation and experience.

---

The next chapter discusses the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser and its relationship to singing and the countertenor. This literary theory from the 1960s has to my knowledge never been applied to music; however, due to the aesthetic nature of the theory, I believe that an application of this analytical framework to the discussion of gender/sexuality and the countertenor will be very productive in that it will show more clearly how each observer and listener is related to her/his larger social context, which acts on the gendered and sexualized body.
CHAPTER THREE: RECEPTION THEORY AND THE COUNTERTENOR—MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE TEXT-READER AND VOICE-LISTENER RELATIONSHIP

The purpose of this chapter is to connect Hans Robert Jauss’ reception theory—a literary theory regarding the reader/text relationship—with the listener/singing relationship and the contemporary countertenor. Particular emphasis will be placed on the body of the singer as well as the vocal production that the singer uses during performance. Another important element to consider in this discussion is the experience and subjective lens of the listener, particularly as it pertains to gender and sexuality. In an effort to apply this theory of vocal reception to the topic of the countertenor, the life and work of pop sensation and countertenor, Klaus Nomi will exemplify the ways in which reception theory applies to the countertenor and society.

Before embarking on an aesthetic reception theory of singing, it is necessary to define what an aesthetic viewpoint in regards to singing entails and pinpoint the various ways in which the singing voice can be analyzed. The next section justifies why such differentiations must be made when discussing the reception of the singing voice. Specific definitions are provided for each “attitude” or perspective that one can take when approaching such an analysis in an effort to better understand precisely what constitutes an “aesthetic” attitude of the singing voice.
“Attitudes” of the Singing Voice

Franz Brentano’s theory of intentionality states that one cannot simply have a thought, but must have a thought of _________.1 This theory can be applied to sound and listening. In a lived world, sounds cannot exist apart from an object; they are sounds of something. Moreover, Don Ihde states in Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound—based largely on Husserl and Heidegger, who were both influenced by Brentano’s ideas and teaching—that “listening is listening to _________.2 Yet, not everyone will fill the blank with the same answer. A discussion of the voice-listener relationship must begin with this essential acknowledgement. Another way to verbalize this concept is listener reception, or the theoretical lens through which listeners analyze sound.

Before this discussion proceeds, however, a differentiation must be made between various analyses of singing, that is, different “attitudes” toward the reception of singing:

1. Phenomenologically, singing can be analyzed by defining the experiential qualities that occur when listening to singing or when singing oneself; for example, the affective qualities of singing or the experience of hearing singing and recognizing how one creates or hears the sound.

2. Scientifically, singing can be analyzed to discover its physical, acoustical, and physiological components. A scientific approach to singing investigates the genesis of the sound, its constitution, and its production.


2 Ihde, p. 23.
3. Psychologically, singing can be analyzed based on perception–particularly how a person perceives her/his own performance and ability–as well as how motivation, imagery, emotion, personality, and intelligence affect the act of singing.

4. Pedagogically, singing is analyzed in regards to the techniques used for the instruction of singing.

5. Socioculturally, singing can be analyzed based on the relationship between a society’s norms and values and the act of singing. A sociocultural approach considers the socially constructed aspects to singing: sociological, intercultural/anthropological, spiritual/religious/theological, political, economic, performative, linguistic, etc.

6. Historically, singing can be analyzed by comparing the historical styles, methods, attitudes toward, and occurrences of singing.

7. Theoretically, singing can be assessed based on the network of ideas that support, define, or explain the concept of singing.

8. Aesthetically, singing can be analyzed based on how the singer or listener appreciates the experience in regards to beauty or enjoyment. An aesthetic attitude can also be extended to a voice’s ugliness, the ineffable qualities of singing, as well as the comic/dramatic aspects of the performance. Additionally, musical and literary devices that shape the singing experience artistically–such as timbre, mode of production, metaphor, personification, etc.–fall into the category of aesthetics.

---

Throughout the first two chapters of this research project, the singing voice has been analyzed in many of these ways. This chapter will turn the focus toward the listener’s perspective, demonstrating the ways in which singing is analyzed by the listener, particularly in regards to aesthetics. Identifying a theoretical framework that helps to explain the aesthetics of reception in the voice/listener relationship is the next step in understanding the connection between gender/sexuality and the material singing voice—most specifically the voice of the countertenor.

Reception Theory and the Singing Voice

Reception theory is a literary theory developed chiefly by the 20th-century, German literature scholar, Hans Robert Jauss. This critical perspective focuses on the text-reader relationship—de-emphasizing the role of the author—and is a response to the paradigmatic shift in literary studies that occurred in Europe during the 1960s, which was:

...a turn from the historical and causal explanations [of the development of literary works] to a concentration on the work itself. The precise description of linguistic technique, literary devices, composition, and structure provided scholars of this paradigm with an array of interpretive tools for analysis. At the same time this approach legitimized a preoccupation with literature as such by raising the literary work to the status of a self-sufficient object for research.\(^4\)

This same type of paradigmatic shift proves to be evident in the field of voice studies at present. The outpouring of research on the subject of voice, singing, and the singer as a

“self-sufficient object for research” has taken place chiefly within the past decade. At the same time, authors have employed a diverse number of critical theories in order to approach singing and the voice, such as semiotics, materiality, phenomenology, sound studies, affect, et al. As a means of both corroborating and supplementing research on the singing voice, this chapter will inspect Jauss’ reception theory in order to analogously apply his literary theories of the text-reader relationship to the voice-listener relationship, investigating parallels that may be drawn from such extrapolations.

As a point of orientation, this chapter will consider some of the main components of reception theory, as outlined in Robert C. Holub’s *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*. This background knowledge will facilitate the reader’s foundational understanding of the analogue, lest overly complicated concepts be flung at the reader without adequate preparation. The following sections introduce the literary theories that both preceded and nourished Jauss’s reception theory. I will also connect these text-reader associations to voice-listener relationships by directly applying these theories to the reception of a very unique countertenor, Klaus Nomi.

Klaus Nomi, née Klaus Sperber, was born in Bavaria, Germany in 1944. Klaus spent time in West Berlin working at the Deutsche Oper and singing at gay discotheques before moving to New York City in the late 1970s. There, he immersed himself in the New Wave arts scene, which was up-and-coming at the time. Klaus studied singing with

---

5 Please refer to footnote 13 in the introduction of this dissertation for a representative survey of the research.

6 Holub, pp. 13-52.
opera coach Ira Siff, who comments in the documentary *The Nomi Song* that Klaus had a lovely operatic singing voice—both falsetto and non-falsetto—but that making a name for oneself as a countertenor at the time was rather inconceivable. New Wave and opera may seem to be strange bedfellows, however, in 1978 Klaus performed at a New Wave Vaudeville show in the East Village sponsored by artist David McDermott as a plastic-covered alien singing “Mon coeur s’ouvre à ta voix” from Saint-Saëns’ *Samson et Dalila* in full, *bel canto* falsetto.

**Defamiliarization**

The New Wave movement in which Nomi involved himself can be seen as a direct descendent of the postmodern movement at large. Russian Formalists of the early 20th century contributed much to this overall philosophy. Russian Formalism refers to a body of literary criticism created by a group of Russian and Soviet scholars from 1910-1930. One of these writers, Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984), stated that “the function of art...is to dehabitualize our perception, to make the object come alive again.” In literature, the process of *defamiliarization* takes the reader out of the realm of reality. Literary devices such as personification and metaphor create alternate symbols, signs, and significance for ordinary objects. For example, the adage, “Eyes are the windows to

---


8 “Klaus Nomi’s 1978 Debut at New Wave Vaudeville, Irving Plaza (NYC),” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4sMKzT1uME](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4sMKzT1uME) (Accessed 10/25/15).

9 Ibid, 17.
the soul,” defamiliarizes windows as “panes of glass” and re-familiarizes them as eyes that possess hidden or deeply personal feeling.

This process of defamiliarization, then, removes an object from its initial perceptive field and constitutes an aesthetic one.\(^{10}\) Examination of the ways in which an author defamiliarizes the object places emphasis on perception and reception (text-reader relationships) as opposed to creation and production (author-text relationships).\(^{11}\) In Jauss’ words:

> The distinction between poetic and practical language led to the concept of “artistic perception,” which completely severed the link between literature and lived praxis. Art now becomes the means of disrupting the automatization of everyday perception through “estrangement” or “defamiliarization” (ostraneniye). It follows that the reception of art also can no longer exist in the naive enjoyment of the beautiful, but rather demands the differentiation of form, and the recognition of the operation [device].\(^{12}\)

In these artistic endeavors, the processes of invention or imagination culminate in the defamiliarization of the object of mimesis. For example, Van Gogh’s sunflowers do not exactly resemble sunflowers but are infused with his unique, artistic expressivity and vivacity by the color contrasts and brush strokes used. Rodin’s famous bust of Gustav Mahler (housed in the Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.) does not reflect an accurate 3-D likeness of the composer. Instead, he uses unconventional materials and severe angles to


\(^{11}\) Holub, p. 18.

capture Mahler’s intensity of emotion, both in his personality and in his music. These artistic devices (contrast, brush stroke, material, etc.) serve to defamiliarize the observer with realistic objects (flowers, composers) and re-familiarize the objects as aesthetic ones, imbued with the artist’s creativity.

When applying this technique to a vocal work (as opposed to a literary work), one must pinpoint clearly how the sound is being defamiliarized, which demands a consideration of the differentiation between speech and song. In fact, the act of singing itself is a form of defamiliarization. Elevating sound to the level of an aesthetic, intentional act is a clear example of Jauss’ “differentiation of form” and has existed since the beginning of human history.

Defamiliarization is also a device used in song and singing. As with speech, alteration of pitch, the lengthening or sustaining of vowels, and the timbre/inflection of a singing voice can place text in a different context. An excellent example of this type of defamiliarization can be found in the song “Uguisu” [The Nightingale].

The text of “Uguisu” is a short poem by the Japanese novelist and poet, Haruo Satō (1892-1964).

君を見ぬ日のうぐひす
Kimi wo minu hi no uguisu,
On the day I do not see you the nightingale,

海近き宿のうぐひす
Umi chikaki yado no uguisu
Near the house on the sea the nightingale
波の音にまじりなくよ うぐひす
Nami no oto ni majiri naku yo
Singing between the sound of the waves the nightingale.

ひねもす聴くよ うぐひす
Hinemosu kiku yo uguisu
I listen all day long the nightingale,

うぐひす うぐひす うぐひす
uguisu uguisu uguisu
The nightingale. The nightingale. The nightingale.\textsuperscript{13}

Satō uses the repeated word, “uguisu,” in a very unique way here. Not only does the word refer to the nightingale itself but onomatopoetically refers the reader to the nightingale’s call. By placing the word at the end of each line, he sets in motion the repeating call of the nightingale. In this way, Satō defamiliarizes the text by taking the word out of context and replacing its association with a sound rather than the image of a bird.

The unaccompanied song to this poem, set by the Japanese composer Fumio Hayasaka (1914-1955), also demonstrates examples of \textit{musical} defamiliarization.\textsuperscript{14} First, the composer utilizes a modified version of the 17th-century \textit{hirajōshi} scale as a focal point for the melody. In the following example, one can compare the \textit{hirajōshi} scale to one of the phrases of the song (albeit transposed down a half-step and modified).

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Translation by Chris Bladsell, transliteration by Mika Kimura.
\item \textsuperscript{14} I need to find the publisher’s information for this score. And, I need to create my own versions of the score examples.
\end{itemize}
This sonic aspect creates a strong tie to traditional Japanese music. However, the modified scale and chromatic interpolation of the B-flat in the melody suggests a more contemporary compositional technique. The following example from the song demonstrates more modern compositional technique. Concomitantly, these mimetic representations of the nightingale remind one of the suriage (scoops) and kobushi (trills) of the Noh and nagauta/kabuki theater music traditions.

Additionally, certain aspects of the melody act as onomatopoetic calls of the nightingale.
In these ways, Hayasaka brilliantly utilizes elements of song–melody, scale, inflection, ornamentation, etc.–in order to add shades of meaning to the text, which were not originally present, defamiliarizing and disassociating the listener from general expectations.

The Japanese countertenor Yoshikazu Mera has a wonderful recording of this song on the album *Nightingale: Japanese Art Songs*. Mera’s vocal timbre proves to be a very important aspect to this recording. Mera possesses a light but round vocal sonority. I like to compare his sound to the alto flute. Because of this unique timbre in conjunction with falsetto vocal production, the listener can almost hear the nightingale calling. Mera’s vocal production—in this case— aides in defamiliarizing the text further. In general, one should note that vocal production can serve to defamiliarize the listener at large. For example, the vibrato, formants, and resonant frequencies that are achieved with *bel canto* production (discussed in Chapter 1)—which sound quite natural in conjunction with Western art music—can defamiliarize other vocal genres such as pop or rock.

---

Many people jokingly use *bel canto* vocal production to mimic opera singers. But, in certain cases, this type of production can both serve as a comic device and alter the aesthetic of a musical genre. Ana Gasteyer’s characterization of Bobbi Mohan Culp on the NBC sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* is a quintessential example of how vocal production can be used to defamiliarize a context. In the sketch “Mandatory Drug Awareness Assembly,” Gasteyer, a trained opera singer, and Will Ferrell pretend to be two high school music teachers performing a medley of pop and R&B songs related to drug use. Gasteyer uses *bel canto* production to heighten the comedy, essentially replacing the expected pop style with a more operatic one. Gasteyer also impressively uses her advanced vocal technique to mimic musical instruments, such as a high-pitched saxophone and a fiddle. The juxtaposition of *bel canto* singing with well-known pop and R&B lyrics in this scenario defies the listener’s aural expectation and defamiliarizes the context to a comic extreme. Most importantly, though, this example demonstrates how vocal production acts as a marker for vocal genres. These markers circumscribe the limits of acceptability as to vocal production within a specified genre. Yet, as in the case with Gasteyer, certain uses of vocal production challenge these limits.

Likewise, Klaus Nomi also pushed the limits of vocal production and genre by expanding his performance art into a persona called Klaus Nomi—an androgynous robot from another planet who came to sing to the earthlings—and assembled a band of musicians and artists to produce a show. Through a series of events, Nomi landed an

appearance as a back-up singer for David Bowie. Through a mutual connection, he contacted one of Bowie’s U.S. designers, who created his signature outfit: a very stylized, triangular-shaped tuxedo top with exaggerated shoulders and a cinched waist. Klaus used starkly contrasting black and white makeup to de-emphasize the gendered aspects of his face. In videos, Nomi often moves with robotic gestures, further distancing his character from humanoids.

Nomi’s first album, *Klaus Nomi*, features an odd array of original New Wave, synthesized pop songs, covers, and opera arias.17 In almost every track, Klaus sings in his *bel canto* bari-tenor voice and then switches to falsetto halfway through the song. The contrast of pop music and opera seems almost laughable. Yet, Nomi garnered quite a following in the early 1980s in the U.S., Europe, and even Japan. Moreover, if he had not prematurely died of AIDS in 1983, who knows how far he could have taken this conceit.

Klaus Nomi utilized the concept of defamiliarization in several capacities. First, Nomi’s predilection for and utilization of the contemporary countertenor vocal production within the context of pop music defamiliarizes the listener from stereotypes of gendered voices. To further the defamiliarization Nomi added the space alien persona, calling into question whether his voice was even a human voice or not. Dehumanizing the voice, then, lent credence or justification for utilizing a voice production that is atypical of pop or rock music.

---

Indeterminacy

Roman Ingarden (1893-1970) was a Polish philosopher who studied with Edmund Husserl—the father of phenomenology. Ingarden wrote two important works on literary aesthetics: *The Literary Work of Art* (1931) and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1937). Like the Russian Formalists, Ingarden believed that the “work itself should be the focal point of investigation.” Ingarden studied the reading process and involvement of cognition in literary works. He considered the literary work to be an “intentional and heteronomous” object, meaning that the literary work refers to something (intentional) and cannot stand alone but must exist within a context (heteronomous). Another way to conceptualize this idea is to say that the objects are representational in that they refer to or represent determined objects. According to Ingarden, the components of literature (words, sentences, etc.) are not able to indicate “unequivocally, universally (i.e., in every respect) determined” objects; instead, these objects are represented in an *indeterminate* manner.

To explain, Ingarden uses the example of the sentence, “The boy bounced the ball.” This sentence possesses “gaps” in the reader’s knowledge. What does the boy look like? Does he have blond hair or brown hair? What color are his eyes? What kind of ball is it? Large or small? Is the boy lightly bouncing the ball or heavily? Where is

---


19 Holub, p. 23.

the boy? What time of day is it? Is he inside or outside? Etc. Oftentimes, the reader does not question these indeterminacies but relies on the ability of the cognitive apparatus to eliminate the necessity of these specifics in order to arrive at an ideological understanding of the sentence’s meaning. In essence, Ingarden reinforces Plato’s theory of forms while demonstrating that these cognitive constructions (forms) lead to gaps in knowledge that must be either eliminated or completed by the reader, a process that Ingarden referred to as concretization.21 These concretizations vary from individual to individual based on the reader’s previous knowledge and, in regards to the same reader, are subject to change due to a reader’s propensity to evaluate, analyze, and interpret the literary work over time.

After publishing The Literary Work of Art, he set forth to provide ontological claims relevant to some of the other arts, such as music, visual art, architecture, and film. Originally, these writings were to constitute an appendix to the published version of The Literary Work of Art but remained unpublished until 1961 and were not translated to English until 1989.22 The section entitled “The Musical Work” focuses largely on the ontology of the written composition or musical score. In “Roman Ingarden’s Theory of Intentional Musical Work,” Jan Stęszewski examines Ingarden’s theories, stating:

Such a work [i.e., a musical work] originates in specific, creative, psychosomatic acts by the composer. These may culminate in the work’s


being notated in a musical score, as has been the practice for centuries...Because of the imperfection of musical notation, the score is an incomplete, schematic prescription for performance...in the work itself as notated, we have gaps or areas of indeterminate-ness which can be removed only in performance.\footnote{Jan Stęszewski, “Roman Ingarden’s Theory of Intentional Musical Work,” \textit{Muzikologija,} v. 2004/4 (2004): 155-65.}

In this way, Ingarden draws comparisons with a written literary work. Very few people possess the ability to read a musical score in the same manner as a book; be that as it may, the indeterminacies created or inherent within the musical score must be filtered through the performance, performers, or interpreters.

The concept of performance has already been discussed in both Chapters 1 and 2. When applied to Ingarden’s theory of indeterminacy, vocal performance can either substantiate or blur the lines of demarcation between normative constructions of gender. When a listener hears a recorded countertenor voice (for example), depending on his/her previous knowledge and analytic ability, the indeterminacy of the body gives rise to many interpretations but, quite often, the listener strives to determine the singer’s sex (male/ female). Two interpretations typically emerge:

1. The listener recognizes the mode of production of the voice and associates it with male.
2. The listener misinterprets the mode of production and, based on the pitch or timbre of the voice, associates it with female.

After the listener determines the sex of the singer—whether correctly or incorrectly—then gender comes into play. As discussed in Chapter 2, depending on the listener’s personal
concept of gender, s/he may hear the voice as masculine, feminine, or other. The resultant assignation depends on the context.

For example, David Daniels’ performance as Sesto in *Giulio Cesare* (Handel) at the Metropolitan Opera in 1997 was described as quite masculine.\(^{24}\) Yet, if a listener were comparing Daniels’ performance to Phillipe Jaroussky, who is praised for his “sensitivity” and “fragility of soul,” then Jaroussky’s sound might be considered more feminine.\(^{25}\) In the same vein, Daniel’s voice might be deemed more feminine when compared with the falsetto stylings of the hard rock band Judas Priest’s former front man, Rob Halford.

Nomi’s strategic use of the indeterminacy of gender was ultimately one of the keys to the success of this artistic conceit. In Ken McLeod’s article “Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music,” he characterizes Nomi’s voice as an “otherworldly opera falsetto.”\(^{26}\) Opera is not otherworldly, yet, in the soundscape of pop music the *bel canto* vocal production seems out of place. Vowels and consonants are not produced in a natural way and the resonance of the voice is ultimately manufactured. For most listeners, this type of vocal production disallows the necessary aural negation that must take place; that is, this type of singing is not socially-acceptable to pair with pop music. When one adds the strong countertenor, falsetto production that Nomi possesses


to the equation, the “otherworldly” experience is enhanced, perhaps reminding the listener of an out-of-body experience. Chapter 2 of this project discusses issues of the body and the falsetto, in particular. Furthermore, because falsetto production feels differently in the body when used, it could be that men gravitate toward the use of the falsetto in these instances as a way to psychologically and kinesthetically project their voice into a space of difference or Other: a purposeful, non-normative vocal production.

Klaus Nomi most often utilizes falsetto at the climax of a song. He ingeniously magnifies this moment by projecting his voice into a space of Otherness. Moreover, Nomi’s attempts to minimize gender issues or neutrally androgynize his appearance and gesture eliminates the grip that the body holds on social expectations of gender and biological sex. The fact that Nomi can also access a wide range of pitch increases the illusion of Otherness—particularly in a location and time such as NYC in the late 1970s/early 1980s when countertenors were not commonly known and issues of genderqueer and non-binary gender identities were just beginning to gain theoretical and sociopolitical acknowledgement. Furthermore, the Otherness of Nomi’s persona problematizes the transitive properties of the singing voice to tautological proportions. When non-binary gendered ideologies are considered, the need for “trans” disappears and socially constructed labels of gender become destabilized, even for the singing voice.

---

27 For a discussion of the transitive properties of the singing voice, please see Chapter 5, pp. 185-91.
Art as Semiotic Fact

Jan Mukařovský (1891-1975) was a Czech literary theorist who was greatly influenced by the Structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure as well as the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky. Mukařovský conceives of art as a “dynamic signifying system.” He defines the artwork as a structure that does not stand as an autonomous, independent entity but one that is shaped and affected by history so that any changes in the structure—for example, the discovery of a lost work by a certain composer or author—will affect the perception of the artwork as a whole. Mukařovský “designates the artwork itself as a complex sign, a ‘semiotic fact’ that mediates between the artist and the addressee (audience, listener, reader, etc.),” eliminating the legitimacy of claims that art is merely a reflection of social reality.

According to Mukařovský, the semiotic nature of the artwork functions in two ways. First, the work acts as a communicative sign, in the same manner as Saussure’s concept of parole. For those who are not familiar with this theory, parole is the arbitrarily assigned collection of syllables, letters, or words that symbolize or represent a thing. An example would be the letters “c-a-t.” The represented entity, or langue, is the socially accepted ideological structure to which parole refers, such as “the animal called cat.” An important aspect to understand here is that “c-a-t” in English, “g-a-t-o” in Italian, and 猫 in Japanese, refer to the same ideological structure, thus proving the

---

28 Holub, p. 31.
29 Ibid.
arbitrariness of the sign. Additionally, “c-a-t” can refer to a variety of different ideological structures: a house cat, a lion, a cheetah, or even a person (“He’s a really cool cat”). A work of art can act in the same manner. For example, if a coloratura soprano is trying to explain her fach (vocal category) to an opera enthusiast, she might say, “I’m more of a Lakmé and less of an Aïda!” meaning that she sings coloratura soprano roles such as the title role in *Lakmé* by Délibes rather than dramatic soprano roles such as the title role of *Aïda* by Verdi. Here, “L-a-k-m-é” stands for the opera itself, the role of Lakmé in the opera, as well as roles in the same range as Lakmé.

Second, the work of art stands as an autonomous structure in three different ways. 1) Art is not simply a thought but an artifact, a product of society with physical attributes. This concept is analogous to the concept of *signifier* (signifier)—a sign’s physical form—such as a sound, word, picture, etc. Using the example from the paragraph above, the signifier would be the score to *Lakmé*, the title of the score, or a CD of *Lakmé*. 2) The artwork is also the *signifié* (signified) or the meaning indicated by the signifier. Mukařovský further explains that art is an “aesthetic object” placed in the collective consciousness of a society. 30 For instance, *Lakmé* is the concept of the opera *Lakmé*, the role of Lakmé, etc. 3) The work of art also stands as the referential aspect to the sign, meaning that all indexical contexts point toward the artwork. For example, the score of *Lakmé*, the role of Lakmé, and the vocal range of the title role refer to the opera *Lakmé*.

---

30 Ibid, p. 32.
and not something else—the artwork acts a constant around which all these other dependent and contextual meanings orbit.

Mukařovský places great emphasis on the importance of social norms in the process of aesthetic reception: the artwork may be autonomous but the perceiver is subject to social influence. In this way, Mukařovský de-emphasizes the psychologizing effects of the creative process of the creator as well as the state of mind of the perceiver. For example, a person can listen to *Lakmé* and have no clue as to Délibes’ intentions or the socio-historical forces acting on him, yet, the aesthetic devices used by Délibes are constant and the listener interprets those devices based on which ones are comprehensible to him/her as well as the influence of present social norms or historically-informed social norms. So, although the opera was not conceived as such, a modern-day listener might interpret *Lakmé* as an offensive, orientalist—even colonialist—work of art that perpetuates outdated, divisive, and exploitative musical and social stereotypes. The opera, though, stays constant.

In the mid-2000s, the countertenor David Daniels began to record repertoire that lies outside of the countertenor repertoire, which is chiefly from the Baroque period of Western art music. His recording of Romantic French *mélodies* including Berlioz’s song cycle *Les nuits d’été*—most often sung by females—made a bold statement concerning the viability and versatility of the countertenor in the professional music world. However, the semiotic fact of the song cycle—in Mukařovskýian terms—retains the authenticity of

---

the art. Yet, the social fact that 21st-century gender politics allows for slightly queered performances of art song puts the onus of reception on the listener as well as the social norms that are prevalent.

A lesser-known recording by Daniels was released a year earlier entitled *A Quiet Thing: Songs for Voice and Guitar* with guitarist Craig Ogden. The album is an eclectic amalgamation of Baroque English art song, American Songbook pieces, and—the title track—a Broadway ballad. “A Quiet Thing” is from the musical *Flora, The Red Menace* by the famous Broadway writing team, Kander and Ebb. The song reflects Flora’s elation at having received a job that pays well during the Great Depression as well as meeting a handsome, eligible bachelor. She discovers that “when it all comes true/just the way you planned” even though one might expect to hear bells, choirs, and fireworks that “happiness steps in on tip-toe” and the celebration is “a quiet thing.” The show starred a yet-to-be-legendary performer in the title role, Liza Minnelli. Minnelli’s brassy timbre and ability to belt are iconic aspects of her contribution to the history of musical theater. But, “A Quiet Thing” is not easy to sing. The pitch range of the piece is rather wide for a Broadway tune and even though Liza has to access her breathy head register at times, she manages to touch the listener with her sensitive artistry.

I have taught this piece several times in voice lessons and, being a fan of musical theater, I admire Minnelli’s recording of the song. When I heard Daniel’s rendition,

---


though, my first reaction was one of puzzlement. I could not reconcile Daniel’s beautiful and strong bel canto singing with the other versions of the song that had been in my mind’s ear for so long; in particular, the sound of Minnelli was clashing with Daniels in my brain. Daniels’ rendition of this song will continue to appeal to many listeners and the semiotic fact of “A Quiet Thing” remains untarnished; but, most importantly—for this discussion—another semiotic fact remains constant: Liza Minnelli’s and David Daniels’ lovely voices. The vocal construct created by the material qualities of the singing voice (chiefly timbre and vocal production here) in both the case of Daniels and Minnelli create autonomous, individual aesthetics. This theoretical move creates space to consider the material singing voice as artwork in and of itself.

Revisiting Mukařovský, not only does the material singing voice stand autonomously as artwork but it also acts as a semiotic fact both in regards to the timbre of the voice as well as the production. In the case of David Daniels, the distinctive character or timbre of his voice makes both his singing and his existence identifiable. For example, suppose an opera enthusiast states, “Last night, I went to hear David Daniels.” By using the words “David Daniels,” the implication is that the enthusiast went to hear Daniels sing and expected to hear his distinctive timbre and quality of performance as opposed to hearing Daniels speak. Moreover, in this case, the person also expects to hear Daniels sing in his falsetto/countertenor mode of vocal production. If David Daniels were to sing a concert in his non-falsetto voice the timbre would, indeed, be different; however, it would be a fallacy to say that the timbre was not Daniels’. This exemplar demonstrates
most effectively the importance of vocal register and production in the analysis of the singing voice. Without this consideration, the signifier “David Daniel’s timbre” must be qualified as falsetto or non-falsetto. The same rule applies to Liza Minnelli, whose vocal belt production stands as the identifiable, qualifying element of her timbre.

In the case of Klaus Nomi, his use dual register (non-falsetto and falsetto) creates a unique vocal entity vis à vis Mukařovský’s “art as social fact.” Also, Nomi’s use of bel canto vocal production in both registers—within the context of pop music—and, additionally, the iconic black and white alien tuxedo outfit and characteristic make-up offer the listener even more aesthetic qualities that s/he can attribute to the social fact or construct of “Nomi.” The development and perpetuation of this artistic persona concretized the sound and image of Nomi within pop music culture, making him easily recognizable, which is most likely why he received international acclaim and a devoted cult following.

**Horizon**

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a German philosopher whose most important work *Truth and Method* tackled the complicated issue of scientific method and hermeneutics. Gadamer’s concern was that the scientific method had been touted as pure truth when, in fact, interpreters of scientific method had not been able to extricate themselves from the belief that a pure objectivity was possible. In truth, hermeneutical

---

prejudice will always be present and that one’s “prejudices and preconceptions are a fundamental part of any hermeneutic situation” and that interpretation must take history into account.\textsuperscript{35} So, the interpreter’s field of experience (history) limits one’s possible vision—or pure objectivity. In order to represent this phenomenon, Gadamer borrowed the concept of the ‘horizon’ from Edmund Husserl:

Horizon thus describes our situatedness in the world, but it should not be thought of in terms of a fixed or closed standpoint; rather, it is “something into which we move and which moves with us.”\textsuperscript{36} It may also be defined with reference to the prejudices that we bring with us at any given time, since these represent a “horizon” over which we cannot see.\textsuperscript{37}

Particularly in regards to art, one’s history or experience constitutes the horizon or limits of one’s purview surrounding an aesthetic reception of the artwork.

For example, my personal experience with musical theater and with Liza Minnelli affected my horizon in regards to David Daniels’ recording of “A Quiet Thing.” Had I never heard “A Quiet Thing”—that is, had it not been on my horizon of understanding—then, perhaps, I would not have had a conflicted reaction to it. The concept of horizon not only relates to one’s prejudices—note that Gadamer considers prejudices to be positive rather than negative—but also the field of experience that a person has gained due to living in the world and among one’s society.

For example, last August a friend and I were driving to Cape Cod to perform a taiko Japanese drumming show. En route, while listening to the radio, the song,

\textsuperscript{35} Holub, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{36} Gadamer, p. 271.
\textsuperscript{37} Holub, p. 42.
“Because of You” by the R&B artist Ne-Yo began to play on the radio. I mentioned that I have always been very impressed at the ease with which singers such as Ne-Yo alternate between falsetto and non-falsetto singing. My friend’s response: “Wait...that’s falsetto?” She cogitated for a second. “Hold on, what’s falsetto?” My friend is not a singer nor was she raised in a musical family. I indicated the difference between the modes of production and she began to listen differently. As we continued to drive and chat, she would point to the radio and abruptly ask, “Is that falsetto?” After some trial and error, she became quite good at identifying the sounds correctly. This anecdote demonstrates the importance of one’s horizon of understanding in the aesthetics of reception. I asked my friend to explain what she heard before her “falsetto enlightenment” and she claimed that she heard a difference in timbre, not production. In her words, “[The difference in timbre] is just how that person’s voice sounds...” She did not realize that a person has voluntary control over the mode of production in such a way because this fact or experience was not on her horizon of understanding.39

At this juncture, I would like to point out a critical component of vocal voluntarism. A speaker or singer can utilize her/his voice in many different ways; this fact almost goes without saying. Yet, the voluntary act of certain vocalisms is tantamount to an act of—what Nietzsche would call—subjective “will” or drive.40 In regards to this


39 Brad Fugate, Conversation with Jenny Tsai (August 2014).

discussion, the vocalist willfully expresses subjective inclination via certain modes of vocal production. Additionally, Nietzsche claims:

...in all willing there is, first, a plurality of sensations, namely, the sensation of the state “away from which,” the sensation of the state, “towards which,” the sensations of this “from” and “towards” themselves, and then also an accompanying muscular sensation, which, even without our putting into motion “arms and legs,” begins its action by force of habit as soon as we “will” anything.41

For this discussion, Nietzsche helps to contextualize the purposefulness behind using a certain vocal mode of production. The action must carry a sense of subjective meaning, purpose, and intention—towards which. But, as Nietzsche indicates, this act is not entirely an act of free will:

That which is termed “freedom of the will” is essentially the affect of superiority in relation to him who must obey: “I am free, ‘he’ must obey”—this consciousness is inherent in every will: and equally so the straining of the attention, the straight look that fixes itself exclusively on one aim, the unconditional evaluation that “this and nothing else is necessary now,” the inward certainty that obedience will be rendered—and whatever else belongs to the position of the commander. A man who wills commands something within himself that renders obedience, or that he believes renders obedience.42

Despite Nietzsche’s overly dramatic tone, the kernel of truth here is that each act of will exists within a Nietzschean/Foucaultian power dynamic. Acts of will are expressed within the context of otherwise constraining social norms.

Ne-Yo’s “Because of You” begins with an intimate, sexy conversation between a male and female, which is not heard on many radio stations. The text alternates:

---

41 Ibid., p. 25.

42 Ibid., pp. 25-6.
Female: You’re obsessed.
Male: You’re like a drug.
Female: I’m addicted to you.
Male: I’m obsessed.
Female: No me.
Male: I’m strung out.
Female and Male: It’s because of you.

The music starts and Ne-Yo begins to vocally improvise. After the first phrase he flips into a breathy falsetto, mimicking the vocal tone of the previous conversation. The power dynamics here are quite fascinating. The intention of this falsetto vocal production is towards this feeling of intimacy, being close to the microphone, singing softly into someone’s ear. Neither the lyrical nor the musical contexts of the song constrain this act of vocal volition in any way. In fact, the use of falsetto in this case sets the mood of the song overall. Furthermore, a closer look at the text here indicates that the male’s desire (for the female) requires a certain amount of submission—both in the context of the female allowing the male to enter into an intimate state with her as well as the metaphorical allusion to submission to one’s addiction. A willful act does not necessarily require dominance—as Nietzsche’s tone might suggest. In truth, a rather non-stereotypical dynamic has resulted in the willful act of submission. Speaking of stereotypes, the fact that the male is submitting to the female in this instance justifies Ne-Yo’s excursion into falsetto, relinquishing his masculinity in a sense and allowing himself to be vulnerable.

Returning to the conversation with my friend, if falsetto is not on one’s horizon of understanding, the subtlety of gendered power dynamics evident in a song such as “Because of You”—however briefly—is lost. If a person does not recognize the change of
timbre or mode of production in Ne-Yo’s voice and merely believes that his voice “just sounds like that...” then a critical component of aesthetics has been breached: the listener does not comprehend the full intention. In like manner, if a person does not understand the meaning of a word in a sentence then s/he will not entirely understand the author’s meaning.

**Horizon of Expectations**

Literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss bases his “aesthetics of reception” on the groundwork that has been laid by the precursors aforementioned in this chapter. His particular interest focuses on reconciling history with contemporary literature by “placing the perceiving subject at the center of his concerns.” In doing so, Jauss is able to combine history and aesthetics in a way that is both productive and communicative.

Influenced by the work of French literary theorist Gaëtan Picon, Jauss begins his first book on reception theory by stating the importance of the history of aesthetics.

The relationship of literature and reader has aesthetic as well as historical implications. The aesthetic implication lies in the fact that the first reception of a work by the reader includes a test of its aesthetic value in comparison with works already read. The obvious historical implication of this is that the understanding of the first reader will be sustained and enriched in a chain of receptions from generation to generation in this way.

---

43 Holub, p. 58.

the historical significance of a work will be decided and its aesthetic value made evident.\footnote{Hans Robert Jauss, \textit{Towards an Aesthetic of Reception (1967)}, trans. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).}

Here, Jauss wants to demonstrate the importance of reception in regards to canonization of certain works of literature and reception being passed down from generation to generation. In contrast to Jauss, I would suggest that the “sustained and enriched” chain of reception can work in both positive and negative ways. This dissertation has already made reference to the importance of canon, reception, and vocal categorization. The canonized voice types of soprano, mezzo soprano, tenor, and bass-baritone in 19th- and 20th-century Western opera sustained and enriched these voice types but excluded countertenors for hundreds of years until a significant pendular swing in the early 1990s. Until that time, only singing voices that fell within this parameter of expectation were considered legitimate.

Jauss calls this phenomenon the “horizon of expectations” or \textit{Erwartungshorizont}.\footnote{Hans Robert Jauss, “Der Leser als Instanz einer neuen Geschichte der Literatur,” in \textit{Poetica: An International Journal of Linguistic-Literary Studies} 7/3 (1975): 325-44.} Of course, Jauss adopts Gadamer’s conception of the horizon for his theory but Jauss’ horizon “would appear to refer to an intersubjective system or structure of expectations, a ‘system of references’ or a mindset that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text.”\footnote{Holub, p. 59.} Listeners, too, operate within a set of referential elements when they hear, categorize, relate to, or identify with a vocal sound.
One example that comes to mind in regards to this concept is Katherine Bergeron’s discussion of the “Castrato as History.”\textsuperscript{48} In her article, Bergeron describes her reaction to hearing the recordings of the last castrato, Alessandro Moreschi, as “distinctly squeamish.”\textsuperscript{49} She describes the voice as “possess[ing] an odd, penetrating sweetness, the sharp taste of an unknown fruit.”\textsuperscript{50} Moreschi’s voice is not in her horizon of understanding, but rather “unknown.” She expands this thought and takes it to the next level by stating:

Voices, like flavours, are notoriously difficult to describe, but reacting to Moreschi goes beyond this sort of difficulty. For a singing voice also produces a kind of empathetic reaction in a listener, who will hear in a a particular vocal quality the resonance of a body that is, in one way or another, familiar...a sense of identifying with, and losing oneself in, a sound and body that is \textit{not} our own. Yet, neither of these conditions accurately locates the feeling produced by Moreschi’s singing...I simply cannot fathom the boy that produces those sounds. The voice, in its utter strangeness, cuts off the possibility of my forming any real or imagined connection with the singing body.\textsuperscript{51}

A very important element to Bergeron’s admittedly “hair-raising” experience is the connection that she makes with the voice and body, or disjuncture between voice and body as the case may be. This issue has already been covered in previous chapters of this project; however, I would like to direct the reader’s attention to the fact that Bergeron does not admit a knowledge of the castrato’s body. Yet, the sources she uses for her


\textsuperscript{49} Bergeron, p. 174.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, p. 175.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
research refer to Agnus Herriot’s book *The Castrati in Opera* offers some explanation about the anatomy of the castrato and, in particular, Daniel Heartz’s article “Farinelli Revisited” even offers some illustrations and copies of paintings. Most notable, though, is the 1804 treatise on the effects of castration on the human body by Benedetto Mojon. So, Bergeron actually knows quite a lot about the body of castrato, which means that the disjunct she experiences must manifest in a way other than a mere lack of knowledge.

The voice/listener relationship is extremely important in relating Jauss’ horizon of expectation theory to singing. The actual sound of the castrato has been missing from generations of listeners for centuries. In addition to the perceived, affective disjuncture that Bergeron experiences when listening to Moreschi, she also has no means of referencing this sound discursively.

In the case of Klaus Nomi, Jauss’ horizon of expectations plays a very important role in listener reception, particularly in the U.S., which only recently began to acknowledge and appreciate the countertenor voice type at large in Western Classical music circles. Due to the fact that listeners had very little historical knowledge or field of reference for the countertenor voice, Nomi could easily plant the notion of alien Otherness into the collective listener consciousness. The author Poizot would characterize this concept as “the singing of the Other.” Poizot equates the singing of the

---


Other with the high and/or virtuosic singing of the diva soprano. Nomi obviously had a sense of this idea when creating his persona.

Another fascinating result of the listener’s horizon of expectations regarding the countertenor, especially in the U.S., is the association that many uneducated listeners make between the sound of the countertenor and the castrato. Due to movies such as Farinelli (1995) and books such as Anne Rice’s Cry to Heaven and Richard Harvell’s The Bells, the castrato seems to hold a certain mystique for popular U.S. culture. Not having heard recordings of living castrati (such as Moreschi) or countertenors, listeners only point of access for understanding is via the popular cult mythology of the castrato even though the sound of the voice types are quite different. In many cases, listeners conflate the sound of countertenors with castrati due to ignorance. One of the purposes of this project is to acknowledge this fact and hope to dispel the association.

**Poeisis, Aesthesis, and Catharsis**

Looking back at Bergeron’s article, she discusses a specific moment in the movie Farinelli in which a curious filmic cut is made. To quote Bergeron:

The film’s most virtuosic bit of editing...presents a moment whose utter strangeness begins to capture the true flavour of the castrato phenomenon. It is, appropriately, a scene of music...about halfway through the film. We begin with an unprepared and unplaceable shot of Farinelli, in full stage makeup, fiendishly executing the beginning of...a bravura aria. The aria’s breathless opening phrases yield quickly to...a long melisma on an open

---

syllable (“ah”) heavy with trills and arpeggios. But almost as soon as it begins the melody is sliced off—mid-arpeggio—replaced suddenly by another piece, in a distant key, on an entirely different instrument. The camera has cut to Handel, seated in an empty theater playing...the beginning of his F-major organ concerto.  

Bergeron states that the “splice ultimately produces...a bit of deformed music, a wonderfully artificial fusion of sounds that gives pleasure precisely because it is so unrealistic.” Reading this quote, I cannot help but associate Bergeron’s experience with that of Klaus Nomi’s “artificial fusion” of genres and “unrealistic” persona. In order to more fully understand how an aesthetic experience can provide pleasure via unpleasant media, one must consider the various components of the aesthetic experience individually.

In the first section of Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, Jauss helps to explain why this type of moment produces aesthetic pleasure for Bergeron—or any listener—by identifying and re-examining key components inherent in the process of reception: the Ancient Greek concepts of poiesis, aesthesis, and catharsis. According to Jauss, each idea possesses its own function:

- **poiesis** = the productive side of the aesthetic experience
- **aesthesis** = the receptive side of the aesthetic experience
- **catharsis** = the communicative side of the aesthetic experience

---

56 Bergeron, p. 178.
57 Ibid., p. 179.
Poiesis represents the “pleasure that stems from the application of one’s own creative abilities.” Jauss explores the evolution of this process from Ancient to Modern times and claims that due to the abstractedness of modern art forms, the receiver plays a greater role in its creation. In the case of Bergeron’s experience mentioned above, the pleasure she experiences when watching and listening to the awkward cut in Farinelli occurs because its “unrealistic,” illogical, or unnatural quality—which is only possible via the aide of modern technology—demands that she make sense of it in the moment. In such instances, the observer/listener creates the line that connects the metaphorical dots, ultimately, taking part in the creative process. Undoubtedly, listeners to Klaus Nomi must engage in a similar process.

I have witnessed the pleasure that results from a listener hearing a countertenor for the first time. I exceeding enjoy moments when a person hears a countertenor voice on a recording then later discovers the countertenor’s sex. In this moment of cognitive construction, the listener reconciles the voice and the body–taking an active and generative part in the artistic process.

The process of aesthesis entails the reception–more appropriately perception–of the art work, that is, its medium or presentation. For example, the ways in which a reader responds differently to written books as opposed to audio books would fall into this category. This aspect of reception is very important in regards to the singing voice of a countertenor in contrast to a non-falsetto voice. If the body of the singer is readily

59 Holub, p. 75.
available for the listener to view then there is less of a chance that any misappropriation of sex will occur. However, if the countertenor’s voice is on a recording and the listener has no experience with the voice type then the way in which the listener genders the voice will influence the resultant sex assignation. Knowing that the countertenor is male will most likely affect how the voice is gendered. However, it is important to note the political aspect of gender at work here. Assigning a gender to a voice necessitates a context or a comparison in order to reach a conclusion because, in actuality, when a person listens for gender s/he compares the voice with ones that have been previously heard, that is, one’s vocal horizon of understanding. Also, as aforementioned, the context can influence the way in which a voice is gendered—as in the aforementioned example of the use falsetto in hard rock music.

Another important distinction to make is the role that vocal production plays in aesthesis, particularly in regards to the countertenor. Hard rock singers produce falsetto sounds that are powerful, strained, tense, and piercing, which is often interpreted as masculine in the stereotypical Western mindset. Soul/R&B singers use a more intimate falsetto and, in comparison, could seem less masculine/more feminine. So, the production of sound affects the perception of the listener. As aforementioned, the capacity of bel canto technique to create loud or resonant sounds could influence the perception of the listener to the extent that a high-pitched falsetto voice can sound very masculine. In Nomi’s case, he depends quite heavily on costume and make-up to blur the
lines of gender and sexuality by using bivocality (the use of both registers) to represent both ends of the spectrum.

*Catharsis* is the communicative aspect of aesthetic reception between art and recipient, that is, the ways in which the recipient identifies with and reacts to the art. Jauss advises:

This does not mean that aesthetic identification and passive adoption of an idealized pattern of behavior are one and the same. It occurs in a back-and-forth movement between the aesthetically freed observer and his irreal object in which the subject in its aesthetic enjoyment can run through the entire scale of attitudes such as astonishment, admiration, shock, compassion, sympathy, sympathetic laughter or tears, alienation, reflection. He can fit the offer of a model into his personal world, succumb to the fascination of mere curiosity, or fall into unfree imitation.  

Jauss goes to great lengths demonstrating this point by using the example of how a reader identifies with a hero in a story. The reader may identify with the suffering of a hero or sympathize with her plight, etc.

Because the voice/listener relationship, more often than not, involves the exchange of non-verbal semantic information, one should avoid a literal appropriation of this idea to singing. A systematic exegesis of the modalities of identification evident in the voice/listener *catharsis* would, indeed, prove productive; however, such an endeavor lies outside the scope of this project. Ontologically speaking, though, voices imply bodies and the modality of kinesthetics–body awareness–girds the foundation of such a relationship.

---

60 Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, p. 94.
An example of this phenomenon would be the perceived problem that Bergeron has with Alessandro Moreschi’s voice: she cannot identify with the body from which it originates. For Bergeron, at least, this disjunct produces some rather unpleasant reactions; but, for others, the reaction could be fascination or pleasure. At the end of Bergeron’s article, she mentions the fact that, in order to approximate the sound of the castrato for *Farinelli*, the sound editors fused the voices of two singers: The U.S. countertenor Derek Lee Ragin and the Polish soprano Ewa Malas-Godlewska.61 Bergeron claims that the result is disappointing for her because—while she was expecting a voice as unsettling as Moreschi’s—the blended voice sounds “normal,” “completely ordinary,” like “a fake voice that ‘passes’ for real singing.”62 In fact, she notes her surprise that the Ragin/Godlewska track sounds so authentic. In fact, it appears on the CD *La musique au temps des castrats*, which includes solo performances by countertenors such as James Bowman and Gérard Lesne.63 Here, Bergeron is ironically underwhelmed due to the fact that she identified so well with the sound of the blended voice. If listeners understand Nomi to be a countertenor, I wager a similar reaction as Bergeron’s could occur. Nomi’s insistence on fusing the countertenor voice with New Wave pop music could result in a rather negative aesthetic catharsis because they cannot reconcile the voice or the genre aurally.

61 Bergeron, p. 183
Blanks, Negation, and the Production of Meaning

In the movie *The Fifth Element* (1995) on the planet Fhloston at a luxurious hotel, an audience awaits a special vocal performance. However, the singer is not your average soprano; she is the Diva Plavalaguna, an intergalactically renown opera star. Diva looks somewhat anthropoid, her gait is quite feminine as is the inflection of her speaking voice. However, the timbre of Diva’s voice is very unique and only vaguely human—ethereal and diaphanous might be better descriptions. In fact, Diva sings inhumanly: spanning intervals in such quick succession that no human could possibly match her.

Diva’s voice is technologically produced, of course, by the movie’s sound technicians. Albanian lyric soprano, Inva Mula, recorded the original track of the aria “Il dolce suono” from *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The technicians took the track of Mula’s voice, manipulated the timbre, and also digitally sampled it on a keyboard in order to make the voice sound as if it were able to sing such expansive intervals.

The electronically manipulated voice of *Farinelli* is intended to sound human because the castrato was an historical character; so, one can logically understand why the sound editors chose to produce a human-sounding voice. However, in Diva’s case, she is a fictitious and (very) blue alien, eliminating the need for her vocal sound to adhere to conventionally human timbres.

I wonder how Bergeron (and others) might react to a technologically unnatural-sounding singing voice. When the Diva’s voice is heard without the image of her alien form how do listeners make sense of the vocal sounds and timbres that are not in their
horizon? First, the phenomenological fact that a voice is present creates theoretical space for such a voice to exist and listeners begin to fill in the gaps using cues and context. In considering the gaps of indeterminacy created when a singing voice is heard, certain facets of the body are alluded to via pitch, timbre, and vocal production.

I would like to extend this idea further. Suppose a person is listening to “Liebestod” from Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde on the radio. If this listener does not have a background in music or opera, the high pitch and range of the voice will most assuredly be associated with female. But what is the size of the singer? What color is her hair? What is the color of her skin? Is she angry? Sad? Etc. At this point, the timbre, vocal production, and other contextual cues begin to fill in the gaps. The sheer magnitude of a Wagnerian soprano sound can suggest a larger frame; likewise, certain elements of vocal production can belie the emotional state of the singer. These contextual cues or “schematized aspects” of the voice help the listener to fill in the gaps.64 Ingarden calls this process concretization, which helps the receiver to create a sense of determinacy.

Wolfgang Iser indicates a further ramification of this process in his treatise The Act of Reading. In the act of reception, “the multiplicity of aspects gives rise to the need for determinacy, but the greater the determinacy, the greater will be the number of unfulfilled qualities.”65 For example, in order to continue the enjoyment of listening to

64 Ingarden, p. 251.

the aforementioned soprano, the listener must accept or resign oneself to certain unfulfilled qualities regarding the gaps of knowledge about the voice, body of the singer, character development, and/or emotional state. Otherwise, the brain must process too many variables simultaneously. A work of art will provide certain determinants based on the perceiver’s abilities—or (mis)abilities—and horizon. In the case of the Wagnerian soprano’s voice, the listener might know enough about the singing voice to interpret the strained vibrato as belonging to someone who is old. This concretization will lead to other assumptions, such as the color of her hair (gray) and the condition of her skin (wrinkles). These associations and constructs may begin to contradict other known determinants such as the fact that Isolde is young. Iser would call this phenomenon a blank: “the suspended connectability in the text.” However, “when the schemata have been linked together, the blanks ‘disappear’.” So, if the singer of “Liebestod” were obviously a young singer and interpreted as such by the listener then the aforementioned blank could potentially not exist.

In the final chapter of his book, Iser pinpoints a very important type of blank called a negation. According to Holub:

In the reading process readers will often become aware of the norms of the social system in which they live. Most literature—especially the kind valorized in Iser’s theory—has the function of calling into question these norms. Through filling in blanks on the syntagmatic level [making sense] the reader acquires a perspective from which previously accepted norms

---

66 Holub, p. 93.

67 Iser, p. 183.
appear obsolete and a ‘dynamic blank on the paradigmatic axis [understanding context] of the reading process’ is produced.”

In effect, the juxtaposition of the social norms prevalent in the text are accepted, even if these norms do not align themselves with the reader’s own social norms. The ability of the reader to negate in this way helps the reader to separate art from reality. Also, negation is an aesthetic space in which meaning can be produced. For example, the intense and consuming love story of Tristan and Isolde is only possible due to the fact that the reader has willingly acquiesced in regard to several negations (only a few of which are listed below).

A person (Isolde) could be so overwrought as to attempt murder. Social norm: Murder is ethically wrong.

Love potions exist. Social norm: Love potions have not been proven by science to be effective.

Someone (Isolde) can be so overwrought as to commit suicide. Social norm: Suicide is ethically wrong.

According to Iser, these negations and blanks structure and navigate the text, creating a space for the reader to come to a conclusion such as:

1. If you attempt to take someone’s life, you will die yourself.

   or

2. The universe must balance itself; great love begets great suffering.

---

68 Holub, p. 95.
Nothing in the actual text of the opera *Tristan und Isolde* explicitly states such sentiments but through the intricate workings of the text these meanings are constituted and—hopefully—understood by the reader.

When applying the concept of negation to the singing voice, one must consider the horizon of understanding and expectation of the listener most deciduously; but, first, the listener must perform some operations of negation. For example, in order to appreciate the Diva’s voice, the listener must acknowledge that aliens—if they exist—do not have a knowledge or appreciation of Western opera. Moreover, if a person is not aware of the fact that a) the human voice is not capable of singing with the timbre and virtuosity of the Diva or that b) the technology exists to create such a timbre or virtuosity then the listener will not experience the necessary negation to separate the alien voice from a human voice—or one that could potentially be produced by a human.

Negation can also play an important role in the voice/listener relationship if the listener applies a negation that is incorrect or misinformed. This type of misapplication helps to explain the case of Bergeron and Moreschi a little more clearly. Bergeron took negation one step too far by calling into question her own ability to identify with the body that produced the sound on the recording. The psychosocial processes of identity must be maintained when listening to Moreschi’s voice: his body was human. Additionally, Bergeron does not acknowledge the hypothetical consideration that Moreschi might not be the most accomplished singer. To my ears, as a voice teacher, I hear some technical issues of vocal production that could have been improved as well as, perhaps to
Bergeron’s point, some exceptionally resonant qualities in unexpected areas of the range. However, if I am quite honest, I am listening to the voice as a soprano—not a castrato. If I suspend my expectations, negating the (socially) normative resonances of the voice then I find myself actually coming to a better appreciation of the potential of this voice type and the incredible “star quality” available to its most proficient singers.

**Negation and the Countertenor**

In the context of this dissertation as a whole, negation plays a rather important role in the aesthetic reception of the countertenor. In like manner as Iser’s text/reader negation, the listener must contend with certain social expectations when perceiving/receiving the countertenor singing voice. Depending on one’s range of understanding, a listener might need to negate the social expectation that men cannot (or are not supposed to) sing in the range of a female or, most importantly like a female—as aforementioned the *bel canto* technique contributes to this timbral mishearing. In truth, the true way in which to hear a countertenor is as a countertenor.

The powerful voices of countertenors such David Daniels, Andreas Scholl, and Jochen Kowalski have done much to change the general reception of the falsetto voice in recent decades. Regardless, the negation must be made in instances where uninformed listeners might make misguided associations of gender. In contemporary Western society, especially, this negation must take place when the countertenor is called upon to sing literature originally intended for a female voice. For example, David Daniels has
recorded music originally intended for the female voice and many countertenors today do not shy away from singing art song—especially—written for soprano or mezzo soprano voice. In truth, if a countertenor only sang music originally written for the countertenor then his repertoire would be severely limited. Only educated listeners, however, would tend to question this appropriation. Additionally, as the number of professional countertenors increases, directors are finding more inventive ways of casting them. The role of Cherubino in Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* was originally performed and conceived as a pants role for a female. However, Cherubino is a young boy so hiring a male to sing the part does not seem out of the realm of acceptability—unless, one is an avid opera attendee. Either way, listeners must relinquish their expectations or the reception of the voice will be negative.

**Vocal Production, Bel Canto, and Negation**

The close—almost essential—association of certain types of vocal production with certain types of vocal genres also deserves mention in the discussion of negation, singing, and the countertenor. For example, in contemporary, Western popular music one does not expect to hear *bel canto* singing in a top 40 pop song because the thought of juxtaposing the genres would be too jarring for the listener. If one applies the theory of negation to this phenomenon of listening, the reason for this negative reception results from the inability of the listener to negate popular singing styles from popular music—quite simple.
In fact, this type of listener expectation can be exploited and raised to comic proportions.\footnote{I refer here to the example of Ana Gasteyer singing hip-hop tunes in bel canto style (p. 96).}

However, certain juxtapositions of pop and bel canto singing have occurred over time. One particularly fascinating and relatively recent anomaly was recorded by an unlikely duo, Freddie Mercury—famous lead singer of the popular 1980s band, Queen—and Monserrat Caballé, a famous opera soprano. On October 17, 1986, after the city of Barcelona, Spain, won the bid to host the 1992 Olympics, Mercury was approached to create a theme song for the event. Freddie Mercury always had a particular affinity for Western opera and Caballé—who is originally from Barcelona—was one of his favorite singers. The two singers met in Barcelona where they discussed working on an album together. The result was the 1988 release Barcelona.\footnote{Freddie Mercury and Montserrat Caballé, Barcelona, Polydor (October 1988).}

The album consists of 8 songs. The title track, “Barcelona,” was used as the theme song for the 1992 Olympic Games. The song opens with the characteristic sound of a ballad by Queen. Mercury’s voice is over-dubbed in several octaves singing the word “Barcelona” with only synthesizer as an accompaniment. Yet, after the 4th repetition, the listener is immediately transported to what sounds like a piano concerto with synthesized orchestra, playing (what will become) the main melodic theme of the piece. After a 4-bar crescendo, Mercury’s voice abruptly halts the forward motion of the dominant 7th cadence by interrupting the concerto with one word, “DIVA!” sung on the
same 7th chord, overdubbed in 3 octaves and sustained for a full 8 counts. This outburst is followed by a distant echo of Mercury’s voice and a low tympani roll. Ingeniously, Mercury and producer Mike Moran have created a scenario in which the average listener’s expectation threshold has been shattered due to so many different styles being juxtaposed in so little time—leaving the audience to question Mercury’s next move.

The song continues with a synthesized string bass section playing a countermelody to previous melodic material and then one hears Caballé’s voice in the distance singing a high B-flat. After a short synthesized orchestral interlude, the verse of the song begins with Mercury and Caballé alternating phrases (in Spanish). The lyrics of the song describe the first meeting between Mercury and Caballé but also could refer to a romantic love-at-first-sight encounter.

During the song, the listener is barraged by so many normatively challenging/conflicting sonorities that s/he has been transported to an entirely separate sonic world. In Barcelona’s world, orchestras play with rock bands and rock stars sing with divas. Because the song itself is such a mish-mash of genre, almost anything seems possible. However, certain aspects of the song seem out of place. During the chorus, Mercury displays his prodigious rock belting style, exhibiting incredible power and vocal strength. In response, Caballé vocalizes up and down the scale, capitalizing on her equally prodigious bel canto technique. This stereotypically “opera singer” move on Caballé’s part sounds almost comical. Regardless of whether the listener can appreciate the incredible talents of both singers in their respective genres, the juxtaposition of them
takes special acts of negation to fully comprehend. Yet, when this phenomenon occurs, the result is a simultaneous appreciation of the incredible talent exhibited by these singers.

For some, these negated voice/listener relationships took hold. The song ranked #2 in the UK and Netherlands. The album as a whole actually fared much better, achieving silver status in the UK and even platinum status in Switzerland. Interestingly, the album was most popular in Europe and was never quite able to breach the Atlantic. For U.S. listeners, perhaps, the juxtaposition was too great because, since the middle of the 20th century, opera has taken a back seat to popular music in the U.S. resulting in undereducated listeners. Additionally, as unwarranted and disappointing as the case may be, U.S. listeners will have a more difficult time separating Caballé’s voice and image from the stereotypical opera singer, rendering her voice at odds with Mercury as opposed to complementary. But what if there were a way to reach the U.S. audience in such a manner?

**Klaus Nomi: A Case Study in Reception and the Countertenor**

Klaus Nomi found a way to deflect social norms in regards to vocal production; that is, he fused the *bel canto* and falsetto sounds with pop music, which has been aesthetically pleasing to a subculture of society. Yet, one must not forget that the caveat to this phenomenon is the social expectation that aliens must have non-normative voices. Indeed, at least in the U.S., the countertenor voice was considered non-normative at the
time Nomi was most popular. In a brilliant way, Nomi capitalized on the fact that countertenors were relatively unknown and that the sound and vocal production would be outside of most listener’s horizon of expectations. Additionally, he anticipated the natural process of negation that a listener would make when encountering a singing alien.

As the voice type of the countertenor has become more mainstream in the opera world, the social expectations of a new generation have come into play particularly in regards to gender. In an effort to provide concrete examples of how gender and reception theory affect the contemporary countertenor voice, the next chapters situate the countertenor in the context of specific societies. The goal will be to show how the unique social norms of each society regarding gender and sexuality influence the reception of the countertenor voice.
The first step to directly applying the theories and ideas proposed in this research project is to analyze the countertenor in its original habitat—that is, the country in which the countertenor originated—Great Britain. Interestingly, the special relationship that both the Catholic and Anglican church traditions have with the countertenor voice type will invite discussion of the importance of history and Jauss’ horizon of expectations on the aesthetic reception of the countertenor. This chapter begins with a brief history of the countertenor in Great Britain then focuses on the progenitor of the contemporary solo countertenor voice type, Alfred Deller. Next, an analysis of the choral countertenor timbre and its unique relationship to history will show how the choral countertenor defies negative and/or stereotypical associations with gender and sexuality. Additionally, I will show how gender equality, which originated in England during the 18th century, played a role in safeguarding the contemporary countertenor from negative reception.

A Very Short History of the Countertenor in England

Christopher Page (b. 1952), a British expert on Medieval music, states that “it is a birthright of every English person to enter a cathedral in winter and hear the sound of voices, rendered seraphic by the spacious acoustic, singing to almost nobody.” A fundamental truth lies at the core of this witticism: The British choral tradition—meaning

the all-male choir tradition passed down from Catholic traditions and adopted by the Anglican church—has played a major role in both the preservation and contemporary appreciation of liturgical choral music at large. According to Page, England boasts an incredibly high number of professional and semi-professional choirs who sing in its cathedrals daily as well as ensembles dedicated to Medieval and Renaissance music. This tradition has not only safeguarded its own choral repertoire but bears the distinction of conserving other choral traditions such as Renaissance Italian polyphony and that of the Franco-Flemish/Netherlandish/Burgundian school.

Another tradition that this heritage has managed to maintain and encourage is the use of the countertenor singer. The derivation of the term countertenor will be helpful here due to the fact that contemporary vocal designations derive from early Medieval polyphony. Furthermore, the appropriation of these terms by female singers in the 17th century potentially problematizes listener reception of the contemporary countertenor.

Medieval polyphony is an extension of monophonic plainchant. The bulk of this plainchant comes from the Roman Catholic church tradition—not only in Italy but throughout Europe, chiefly Spain, France, and England. Around 850-900, composers began to add notes to the monophonic chants in a discant, or note-for-note, style, which has become known as polyphony. Over the next 200 years, a more melismatic, or free-flowing style of polyphony developed called organum. In this style, the main melodic line—or basis for the composition—is a plainchant. Oftentimes, this part is entitled the tenor—from the Italian verb tenere (to hold)—because the notes of the chant line were
oftentimes lengthened (or held) so that other vocal parts could be freely composed around it.

The term “countertenor” derives from the term “contratenor”: a line that was written “against” the tenor line in Late Medieval polyphonic music (1200-1400 CE). Two types of contratenor existed during the Late Medieval period: contratenor altus (written against and above the tenor line) and contratenor bassus (written against and below the tenor line). Eventually, these parts began to also represent pitch ranges that were above and below the tenor line. In Italy, “contratenor altus” was shortened to “alto.” In Britain, the term shortened to countertenor (although the terms alto and mean have also been used concomitantly). Even though vocal lines began to extend higher and higher throughout the late Medieval and Renaissance periods in Western Europe, women were not yet allowed to sing at church or on the professional stage until the end of the 16th century; therefore, boys and male falsettists were required to sing these higher lines.

Originally, then, the vocal lines “soprano” and “alto” designated male singers and even today in certain church choral traditions these terms are still employed for boys and male falsettists who sing these vocal lines. However, at the end of the 16th century a sea

---

2 Peter Giles has written a fully fledged derivation of the term countertenor in his 1994 text (pp. 9-27).


4 Note that these terms’ Italianate endings are masculine (ending in “o”) as opposed to feminine (ending in “a”).
change occurred in regards to these terms. When women began to sing in church and on
the professional stage, female singers appropriated the titles “soprano” and “alto” as well.

I would like to pause for a moment to reflect once more on the ideological thread
connecting this dissertation: The idea that societal norms constitute and construct the
gender of the singing voice. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s book, *The Epistemology of
the Closet*, she sheds light on the importance that discourse plays in perpetuating social
constructs (such as gender and sexuality). Using her theoretical framework, the fact that
“soprano/alto” can indicate male and/or female depending on the historical or musical
context demonstrates the “radically overlapping aegises of a universalizing discourse of
acts [singing soprano/alto]...and at the same time of a minoritizing discourse of kinds of
persons [male or female].

Here, Sedgewick refers to discourse in a Foucaultian sense: “treating discourse
[not] as groups of signs...but as practices that systematically stand for the objects of
which they speak.” Her statement, in the context of the book, applies to discourse
regarding sexual orientation; however, I would like to employ its use for the present
discussion of vocal gender. In addition to the definition and explanation of this term
provided at the beginning of Chapter 2, I would like to add that vocal gender is the
gender ascribed to a particular singing voice, which is discursively constructed and

---

5 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California

perpetuated by a particular society. Beginning in the late 16th century, the vocal gender of “soprano” and “alto” began to reverse sexes in Western art music discourse at large. By the end of the 17th century in England, the male “soprano” or “alto” on the professional stage was virtually non-existent. In certain cases, falsettists portrayed examples of female, comic mimesis on stage but were otherwise solely relegated to Anglican and Catholic choral traditions. In this way, “countertenor” (both the term, the singing voice, and singer) garnered negative connotations outside the parameters of the church tradition.

Furthermore, the exploration of science that burgeoned in the 16th through 18th centuries ushered in new ideologies and perspectives on how to view and conceptualize the human body. Advances in medical technology and methodology provided anatomists and medical scientists a better understanding of how the human body functions and a clearer picture of the internal (as well as external) biological differences between male and female. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault pinpoints the development of a (albeit repressive) discourse during the Enlightenment regarding sex and/or sexual practices, which was based on this medicalization of the human body. Additionally, European society on the whole developed means of governing not only

7 The concept of vocal gender will be discussed more thoroughly later in the chapter.


discourses about sex but also sexual practices themselves. One way of discursively policing sex was to categorize and/or label sexual entities as “natural” or “unnatural”; therefore, any sex or sexual practice that was not monogamous and procreative in nature became marginalized, deemed unnatural, and often juridically sanctioned. For example, the hermaphrodite was often criminalized during this time period based on the fact that “their anatomical disposition, their very being, confounded the law that distinguished the sexes and prescribed their union.” In like manner, many laws were enacted to restrict the sexual practices of sodomites/homosexuals, which in turn created many subcultures dedicated to alternative sexual preferences such as British fops or mollies.

I would like to propose that this marginalization of the “unnatural” extended to the male falsetto singing voice, particularly in regards to secular, professional singing in which women (and castrati) were allowed to participate. Male falsettists in the 1600s experienced considerable visibility on the early Baroque opera stage and oratorio venues in England, France, and Germany singing alongside castrati and (eventually) female

---

10 Ibid., p. 35-9.
11 Ibid., p. 104-5.
12 Ibid., p. 38.
A quote by Caccini suggests that the perceptions of falsetto singing were becoming more negative. In 1602, he states that one should “avoid going into falsetto” and that “the nobility of good singing, however, cannot come from falsetto; rather, it will arise from a natural voice comfortable on all tones.” This notion of a “natural” voice [modal], as opposed to an “unnatural” voice [falsetto], most likely points to the fact that the collective conscience of European society was beginning to associate the singing voice with the physical (that is, “natural”) body, which was a hallmark of both Enlightenment and Romantic philosophy. It stands to reason that in the “truth” seeking discourse of Enlightenment Europe anything “feigned” or “false” (i.e., the falsetto) would become subject to negative inquiry under the jurisdiction of Enlightenment discursive forces. High pitches in singing, then, should come from voices which are “naturally” meant to sing high: boys, castrati, and women. Again, using Sedgewick’s framework, this ideology would presumably relegate the falsetto voice to the sidelines of societal acceptance, in league with other, marginalized entities.

For example, the fop was a notoriously effeminate Restoration theater (1660-1710) character type. The male actors who portrayed these roles were often

---


accused of having sexual proclivities for the same sex.\textsuperscript{17} An edition of the British society paper, \textit{The Female Tatler}, in 1709 stated that “Effiminate Fops, that drink Milk and Water, wear Cherry colour’d Stockings and Stitch’d Wast-coats and in a Counter-tenor Voice, complain of Vapours and the Spleen...ought to be expell’d the Nation.”\textsuperscript{18} This quote clearly links the countertenor’s vocal gender with femininity and indicates a marginalized status. Drawing on Sedgewick once more, the countertenor outside the protection of the church choral tradition must be assigned one of two sexualities (in this case homosexuality) based on its association with the vocal timbre of the fop. Due to the “unnatural” quality of falsetto singing, the male falsettist disappeared from the Western art music stage from the beginning of the 19th century through the first half of the 20th century. In the 1950s, though, professional male falsetto singers began to return to the stage. The first person to make a splash on the art music scene was Alfred Deller (1912-79). The next section discusses the contributions Deller made to the revival of the countertenor on stage, then, the discussion turns toward the importance of feminism in England and how this movement de-minoritized the discourse surrounding the countertenor.

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
Alfred Deller

Alfred Deller provides a major link between the choral countertenor tradition and the contemporary solo countertenor. After establishing himself as an integral member of the alto section in the Canterbury Cathedral choir during 1940s, Deller was heard by a composer and early music enthusiast, Michael Tippett, singing a rendition of Purcell’s song “Music for a While.” On October 21st, 1944, Tippett featured Deller on a concert of Purcell’s music–listing the singer as a “countertenor.” Tippett said to Deller, “When you sing for me, I shall give you the old English classical name for your voice, which is countertenor,” thus, according to Deller, he became a countertenor. Tippett later clarified:

The countertenor is a male alto of what would be regarded now as exceptional range and facility. It was the voice for which Bach wrote many of the alto solos in the Church cantatas; and Purcell, who himself sang countertenor, gave to it some of his best airs and ensembles. To my ear it has a peculiarly musical sound because almost no emotional irrelevancies distract us from the absolutely pure musical quality of the production. It is like no other sound in music, and few other musical sounds are so intrinsically musical.

Two years later, on September 29th, 1946, Deller was invited to sing on the inaugural concert of the BBC Third Programme, a new broadcasting initiative to support the arts in England during the wake of the Second World War. The repertoire for the


21 Hardwick, p. 77.

22 Ibid.
concert included a variety of compositions by English composers including Purcell’s “Come, Ye Sons of Art,” which calls for 2 countertenor soloists. Soon afterward, Deller was invited to become a member of the “vicars choral” at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, a fully-professional choir of men and boys. After a tearful goodbye to Canterbury where he had spent many formative and fruitful years of service, Deller sang his first service in London on January 1st, 1947.23

Residency in London helped to establish and further Deller as a professional singer. He was invited to sing on his first professional recording and, in 1950, assembled his own early music ensemble, called “The Deller Consort.”24 Over the next 3 decades, Deller became a prominent figure in the early music community–both nationally and internationally–and continued to make many recordings both solo and with his group.

Deller’s operatic debut–and unfortunately short operatic career–occurred in 1960 as the character of Oberon, King of the Fairies, in Benjamin Britten’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. On August 18th, 1959, Benjamin Britten wrote to Deller personally to request his participation in the project—which was to celebrate the renovation of Jubilee Hall. Britten stated: “I see and hear your voice very clearly in this part [Oberon].”25 Deller responded that he had little dramatic stage experience. Apparently, Britten decided to enlist the help of his partner on the project (and in life), Peter Pears, to convince him. Pears wrote:

---

23 Hardwick, pp. 100-5.

24 *His Master’s Voice*, 1949, HLM 7234.

25 Hardwick, p. 139.
Dear Alfred:

We do indeed think you can do it, and more, that you will be triumphantly successful in it! You can trust Ben, I think to write you a lovely vocal part. Your height and presence will be absolutely right (so will your beard!).

Regrettably, Deller’s inexperience with acting led to mercilessly scathing reviews and before rehearsals began for the Covent Garden production of the opera, Deller was asked to withdraw from the project. Britten’s designation of the role as “countertenor,” though, stands as a seminal event in the contemporary history of the countertenor because the term has most assuredly become standardized in contemporary opera circles.

Vocal Production and the Timbre of the British Choral Countertenor

When speaking with singers and conductors of Anglican/Episcopal men and boys choirs—in addition to my own experience—I find some unique qualities to the choral countertenor sound that must be addressed. When compared to the more bel canto timbre and production of the operatic countertenor, the choral countertenor lacks a certain resonance that would put it in league with, for instance, a lyric mezzo-soprano voice and more in line with a boy soprano. This type of vocal production requires less vocal training in general—for most singers—and has become a timbre most associated with

---

26 Ibid.

27 Hardwick, p. 143. Note that the American countertenor Russell Oberlin was asked to take Deller’s place, which is an integral moment in the contemporary history of countertenors in opera. This issue will be addressed in the next chapter as the focus switches to countertenors in the U.S.

28 I wish to thank the following intelligent musicians for their thoughts on choral singers and sounds: Mark Dwyer, Scott Jarrett, Christopher Lowrey, Graeme McCullogh, Drew Minter, John Robinson, Andrew Sheranian, Nicholas White.
singers who transition from singing as boy sopranos to male altos. Also, this production is most useful because of its tendency toward straight tone singing, or *senza vibrato*. In choral music—due to the acoustics of cavernous, stone cathedral spaces—singers are oftentimes asked to sing straight-tone for the sake of maintaining a sense of correct pitch and eliciting an overall sound that is “in tune.”

This type of vocal production can vary according to singer. Some untrained singers will push the breath, distending the larynx, creating a rather shrill, strident, or unpleasant sound. Other untrained singers will use less breath, resulting in a rather hollow, raspy sound. Furthermore, not all falsetto voices are created equal; that is to say, some vocal mechanisms only use a partial length of the vocal cords and some use the full length, resulting in a wide variety of timbres as a result. Trained countertenors in the choir tradition, however, do have a sense of fullness and richness to their vocal tone quality.

Deller’s voice had a natural resonance that is actually quite unique in the British choir tradition, which more than likely set him apart from other singers and helped advance his professional singing career. However, his voice was not as resonant as the more *bel canto* type of countertenors who are currently in vogue on opera stages around the world. Some of these highly trained contemporary countertenors do sing in church choirs, lending their resonant voices to the overall sonority of the choir. However, the inclusion of these singers meets mixed reviews.
The conductors and organ masters of men and boys choirs who were interviewed for this project profess to enjoying the strength of *bel canto* voices but question the authenticity of the overall choral sound. The unique timbre created by the less trained countertenor provides a very traditional sonority that is lost when voices are used which sound more like mezzo-sopranos or females. This fact raises some questions of gender that I would like to explore during the remaining sections of this chapter. An examination of the historical forces at work within the choral tradition as well as within the general British society at large will help to elucidate the important role that gender plays in the aesthetic appreciation of contemporary countertenors.

**Choral Countertenors and Jauss’ Horizon of Expectations**

In a certain respect, the choral countertenor (within the context of the traditional men and boys choir tradition) will forever be couched historically within the parameters of the church choir. Jauss’ theory of the “horizon of expectations” (p. 113) provides a way to situate the countertenor within this history. Anyone who knows the tradition of the men and boys choir will undoubtedly carry with them the understanding of the canonized vocal parts within the ensemble: boys (soprano/alto), countertenor (alto), tenor, bass. Additionally, more access to the sound of countertenors exists within the soundscape of British listeners because 1) Britain is smaller in population than other countries in which one may find these types of choirs and 2) Anglican and Catholic churches often utilize these types of choirs in Britain.
Similarly, the person who acknowledges this tradition will more than likely have a specific timbre in mind when s/he hears this type of choral sound. The choral countertenor voice (in addition to that of the boys) is essential to creating a sonic sense of authenticity, otherwise, the listener will not be able to identify the choral sound and distinguish it from other types of choral ensembles. Also, many listeners who are most invested in this type of choir sound are most likely keen to perpetuate its tradition; however, certain aspects of the tradition are changing. Many church choirs that once supported this type of choir have experienced attrition in participation by both boys and countertenors over the past 50 years in particular. One reason for this decline could be the growing perception of singing in early childhood and adolescence as less masculine.\textsuperscript{29} According to church choir masters, at a certain point, churches must turn to mixed choirs (males and females) in order to fill the choir stalls, lessening the need for countertenors. Additionally, due to the fact that many countertenors emerge as a direct result of having sung treble as a boy soprano, the dearth of boy sopranos creates a proportional dearth of countertenors. In a positive light, though, participation in boys choir and the development of boys choirs does seem to be on the rise, particularly in the U.S., Australia, and France.\textsuperscript{30}


Granted, not all choral countertenors sing in church choirs. Some countertenors choose to sing in early music ensembles and, for the most part, the vocal production or technique is very similar due to the choral nature of the music. However, even in more soloistic styles of music, a straight tone production is often preferred due to historical performance considerations. For example, Alfred Deller was not known for excessive vibrato, neither are more contemporary countertenors such as Drew Minter or Andreas Scholl. This type of vocal production associates the voice more with the choral or early music tradition—both of which are more historically informed—and less with the more contemporary *bel canto* vocal production heard in many countertenors today. So, once again, an element of historicity is involved in both the choice of vocal production/technique and the aesthetic reception of the voice.

**Psychology and the Choral Countertenor**

When listeners or audience members hear or watch a men and boys choir, a peculiar psychological phenomenon occurs that can be explained via gestalt theory. The gestalt effect can be summarized by an often misquoted quote by Kurt Koffka, “The whole is often different than the sum of its parts.”

---


A gestalt is an integrated, coherent structure or form...emerg[ing] spontaneously from self-organizational processes in the brain. Gestalts result from global field forces that lead to the simplest possible organization...given the available stimulation.33

A simple example of this phenomenon would be a constellation such as the The Big Dipper as opposed to six random stars or an emoji smiley face as opposed to a colon and parenthesis. In a similar way, when a listener hears a choir, oftentimes, the individual voices are not heard but the overall unified sound of the choir results in a coherent, aural structure. This facet of gestalt hearing makes it possible for listeners to identify men and boys choir timbre from a mixed choir.

An emergent feature of any choir would be the various vocal parts (SATB, etc.), which are distinguishable but do not necessarily distract the listener from perceiving the stimulus as a whole.34 The various timbres of the different voice types within a choir are used quite often by composers to highlight a musical passage or color the harmony in certain ways. This compositional consideration leads many conductors and choir masters to prefer the men and boys choir configuration (as opposed to a mixed choir of male and female). Using all men and boys will evoke the timbres that the composer originally intended, providing yet another tie to the historicization of the contemporary choral countertenor.

33 Ibid.

34 “Emergent features or EFs are features that are possessed by wholes–groups and parts–but not by any individual part nor by any single group of parts. Thus, they emerge when parts combine into wholes.” Ibid.
As an extension of this discussion, I would like to propose ways in which the unified sound of a men and boys choir—experienced by the listener—contributes to both aurally and visually gendered gestalts. Aurally, the pitch range of the sopranos and altos has the capacity to balance the gender scale, as in a mixed choir. To explain, the high pitches (particularly that of the boy sopranos) might sound more feminine to the listener because s/he would associate them with female singers. Additionally, the lack of access to the chest register in many countertenor singers results in a less than masculine sound, especially when compared to a full-bodied mezzo-soprano or contralto voice. Yet, visually, I would like to suggest that the presence of all male singers, despite the high pitch ranges and potentially feminine timbral qualities, evokes a sense of masculinity: one that does not exist with a mixed choir. Due to the gestalt of the aural experience, the listener does not necessarily focus on the individually gendered parts but on the masculine whole. This masculine gestalt (in addition to the historical aspects previously mentioned) preserved the countertenor from disappearance due to the negative associations of gender and sexuality toward the countertenor and the voice of the countertenor during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The next section explores how gender equality has evolved during the 19th and 20th centuries in Britain and its impact on the aesthetic appreciation of the solo countertenor. The reader should bear in mind that many of these trends in gender norms influenced the U.S. as well and that a flow of ideas has existed between continental
Europe, Britain, and the U.S. regarding gender equality for some time.\textsuperscript{35} However, one significant difference is that the solo countertenor is relatively absent from history in the U.S. A discussion of U.S. countertenors will occur in the next chapter.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{The History of Gender Equality, England, and the Countertenor}

England has had a long succession of female monarchs, starting with Queen Elizabeth I (1553-1603) and, indeed, one need not be surprised that London is the birthplace of modern feminism–more specifically, Newington Green, London, which is the location of Newington Green Unitarian Church. One of NGUC’s most famous ministers, Dr. Richard Price (1723-91), was a prominent Rationalist–a group of individuals whose philosophical tenets supported equality of women’s rights. Price’s sermons at NGUC heavily influenced Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), an educator and author of \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman} (1792).\textsuperscript{37} Wollstonecraft’s work draws on the philosophical work of Locke and Rousseau and deals mainly with the right of women to education and companionate marriage. Although the work was well-received, little was accomplished legally during the next 100 years to further women’s rights.

\textsuperscript{35} The reader should also bear in mind that the phrase “gender equality” pertains more to equal rights between the sexes (male and female) as opposed to masculine and feminine.

\textsuperscript{36} The reader must keep in mind that polyphonic choral music was not prevalent in the U.S. until the late 18th century. Men sang in falsetto as countertenors or altos in choral settings through the early 1800s in the U.S. as documented in Charles Perkins, \textit{History of the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston, Massachusetts, Volume 1} (Boston: Alfred Mudge and Son, 1883-93), pp. 1-65. Perkins provides evidence that women began to replace men in the choral setting gradually during the first quarter of the 19th century.

\textsuperscript{37} Mary Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman} (London: J. Johnson, 1792).
At this same time, female singers–mezzo-sopranos and contraltos–began to replace solo countertenors on the London stage. For example, Handel began to compose less and less for male alto starting in the mid-18th century. For instance, in Handel’s first performance of *Messiah* (1742) in Dublin, 2 countertenors–William Lamb and Joseph Ward–shared the alto solos with Susannah Cibber, a stage actress and contralto.38 Yet, only 5 years later, in Handel’s oratorio *Judas Maccabeus*, first performed in 1747, the part of the Israelite man was sung by a mezzo-soprano, Caterina Galli. Theretofore, male character roles had chiefly been assigned to castrati or countertenors. As the years continued (1746-1752), Handel wrote 8 more oratorios and every male treble character role is sung by a woman save the role of Didymus in *Theodora* (1750), which was sung by alto castrato Gaetano Guadagni.

Countertenors continued to disappear from public performance. For example, the once famous countertenor, Michael Leoni (c. 1750-97), who had been described as a falsettist, performed one of his final roles as a “baritone with falsetto higher notes.”39 As discussed in my first dissertation (2006), the genre of music comedy is rife with example of falsetto use in order to mimic the female voice or femininity. Leoni’s production was a comedy (Linley’s comic opera, *The Duenna*, 1775). Other comic opera productions used falsetto such as *The Beggar’s Opera* in 1781. Peter Giles mentions George Mattocks’

---


39 T.J. Walsh, *Opera in Dublin, 1705-1797* (Dublin, 1973), Chapter 14, pp. 230-1; as quoted in Giles, p. 84.
portrayal of “Achilles in Petty-coats” in his discussion of the falsettist during the late 18th century but I argue that this vocalization is merely an attempt to approximate female pitch due to the travesty of the role not an attempt to legitimize the use of the falsetto voice on stage.\footnote{Giles, p. 94.} Otherwise, the countertenor was relegated to the church choir or to early music composed originally for countertenor during the 19th century.\footnote{Giles, pp. 93-130.}

The point of connecting the history of gender equality with the history of the countertenor so thoroughly here is to show how women gained a sense of identity during this time period apart from the domestic sphere and the family. Additionally, I would like to demonstrate how gender—as an ideological concept—metamorphosed from a social status to one that could more readily be identified by the body, gesture, hierarchy, and symbolism. The Renaissance and Age of Enlightenment engendered modern science—including anatomy and physiology of the body. As more information was gained, differences between the male and female bodies heightened the ideological separation between the sexes. So, for a man to sing in the range of a woman or in the style of a woman was only acceptable when using comedy to poke fun at these social stereotypes.

As aforementioned, countertenors, females, and castrati were used almost interchangeably during the mid to late 18th century. Then, castrato voices fell out of favor by the beginning of the 19th century and, coincidentally, a new sense of gender equality was developing. This seemingly static century is referred to as the Victorian era.
(c. 1840-1900), which affected attitudes towards gender reform in many ways. Some historians coordinate the end of the Victorian era with the years just after the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. However, other historians—such as Simon Szreter—claim that Britain took part in an extended Victorian era, lasting until the 1960s.\textsuperscript{42} At the very least, one can certainly pinpoint “Victorian values,” which have “persisted well into the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{43}

As aforementioned, women were extended (for the most part) only a domestic education—that is, one that includes household duties only—as opposed to an academic education including reading, writing, etc. Because of this lack of education, women were not able to attend university or to take jobs in the public sector. Amidst this social injustice, however, the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in Britain (c. 1820-1840) necessitated that many women leave the home and take jobs in the industrial sector. Although these menial jobs did not require a formal education and men continued to earn higher wages, the fact that women were earning a wage period eventually created an economic sense of autonomy and independence both from family and husband. This newfound economic phenomenon was not altogether considered a blessing but oftentimes a burden, particularly when a woman was expected to work at the factory all day and then assume her normal domestic duties when she returned from work.


\textsuperscript{43} Lesley Hall, \textit{Sex, Gender, and Social Change in Britain Since 1880}, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 10.
This type of injustice lead to a perceived ‘Victorian hypocrisy’ in that men were allowed more leniency in domestic matters than women. For example, even though the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 made divorce more accessible for the people of Britain:

Adultery by a woman was so horrendous that a single act permitted her husband to sue for divorce. In a man, however, the offence was sufficiently trivial that even when persistent, it was not regarded as reason for a woman to terminate her marriage, unless added to cruelty, desertion, bigamy, or incest. The traditional reason given was fear of a wife introducing a spurious child into the family, whereas the man’s promiscuity had no such deleterious effects.\(^{44}\)

Although the hypocrisy and inequality apparent in this situation smacks of human injustice to those of us in modern times, one must acknowledge the fact that this law separated the ecclesiastical claim to marriage from the legal one. The separation of church and state here is not to be belittled due to the fact that Biblical perspectives on gender are fairly unequal and favor the male. The feminist movement continued, though, and in 1882 Parliament enacted a Married Women’s Property Act that allowed married women the right to own property. Additionally, by 1910, women were allowed to divorce husbands on their own grounds and by 1918 were allowed the right to vote. Birth control and sex education became a prevalent movement in the 1920s and in the 1930s contraception was legitimized. The next few paragraphs will elucidate the connection between gender theory and gender equality during the 20th century. Then, the discussion will return to ramifications that these gender norms hold for the countertenor.

\(^{44}\) Hall, p. 11.
To begin, the pre-Industrial concept of gender can more easily be understood as a sex role assignment rather than as masculine versus feminine. In this type of society “a role is...associated with a particular position within the social division of labour.”

Furthermore:

...each status had roles which the individuals who held that status had to fulfill. This perspective is clearly sociological in the true sense of the word. Thus, people’s situations and activities are held to derive from the social structure, rather than from either nature or their particular capacities.

In this type of gender ideology, each role–either male or female–consists of habitual activities that are repeated, engrained, and embodied. Raewyn Connell equates these activities to “scripts which are learned and followed by social actors: the process of learning being socialization.” This type of socialization takes place most effectively within the parameters of a pre-existing social group. During the pre-Industrial period and–depending on the society or localized situation–leading up to the present day, women are most susceptible to these sex roles within the context of the family or home and men are most susceptible within the context of non-domestic work.

---


48 Without a doubt, women in the 21st century are increasingly feeling the pressures of the sex role model in the workplace but much more work in the realm of equality must be done in order to say that the same pressures of sex role theory weigh equally on both sexes in a general sense.
In industrial societies, however, “the feminine sex role is unstable because it involves a tension between being a full-time mother and homemaker and wishing to participate in paid work outside the home as equals of men.” 49 This instability creates ambiguity not only between male vs. female roles but also opens the door to what appears to be a masculine role as opposed to what appears to be a feminine one. In an industrial society, if the husband is injured and the female is able to work in order to maintain financial solvency then the roles are switched but the sexes are not. This example provides a clear example of how a male sex role adopted by a female could be construed as masculine as opposed to feminine. Ann Oakley suggests that “the variety of gender roles within society demonstrates that gender is culturally determined, defining gender as separate and separable from biological sex, and demonstrating that gender roles are learned rather than innate.” 50

This spectrum of gender roles gives way to the creation of identities based on one’s subjectivity as opposed to objective sex roles. In the case of the countertenor, to identify as a countertenor or male alto during this time period caused no negative affect in the public’s appreciation of the voice type. The choral countertenor situates himself in the context of the choir, as previously mentioned, and does not need to necessarily validate any masculinity due to the power structure in place: the all-male choral tradition. As aforementioned, the vocal production used for countertenors at the time was less of a

---

49 Granted, not all women want to be the equal of men in this respect, I am merely quoting the author here. Charles, p. 2-3.

bel canto technique and more of a natural technique (open vowels, good breathing habits, etc.). As mentioned in Chapter 2, bel canto technique in and of itself holds a certain amount of political power due to the fact that it represents an elevated or refined sense of vocal production. An untrained male alto and a trained female contralto or mezzo-soprano at the time would have certainly balanced each other in terms of masculinity. The locus of power in each case comes from a different but equally respected singing tradition. Were the untrained male alto to step out of his comfort zone and compete with the bel canto female, his voice may have sounded less than masculine because he did not have choral tradition to reinforce his vocal production.

As the 19th and early 20th centuries progressed, giving way to a more balanced legality between the sexes, the inherent gender bias within the capitalist labor system became more and more apparent. During the 1950s and 60s, issues of abortion and gay rights became prevalent and the birth control pill was legalized, creating an image of radical permissiveness. The popular phrase, “Swinging London,” which was coined in the mid-1960s was, in fact, a misrepresentation of the actual state of sex and marriage norms in Britain during that time. In 1969, Geoffrey Gorer published a study entitled Sex and Marriage in England Today, focusing on persons under the age of 45 years old. Gorer found that “despite...all the emphasis on the ‘permissive society,’ ‘swinging London,’ and the like in reporting, and the prevalence of erotic themes in much fiction...England still appears to be a very chaste society” and that—at the time—two-thirds

51 For more information on the technique being taught at the time, please refer to George Edward Stubbs, The Adult Male Alto or Counter-Tenor Voice (New York: The H.W. Gray Company, 1908).
of women were still virgins at the time of marriage.\footnote{Geoffrey Gorer, \textit{Sex and Marriage in England Today: A Study of the views and Experience of the Under-45s} (London: Nelson, 1971), pp. 30-7; as quoted in Hall, p. 153.} This fascinating balance between gender equality and traditional family values facilitated the emergence of the solo countertenor during the 1960s and 70s.

Because the population of England is rather small and the Anglican church so influential in society, the countertenor remained on the general public’s horizon of expectations. This aesthetic reception contained no gender displacement and did not seem to occur or to negatively affect the public’s appreciation of the voice type. Also, as aforementioned, the minoritizing effects that language can have on singers such as the countertenor were lessened in Britain due to its existence in the collective conscious of its constituency at large. The language and discourse used for the countertenor and (male) alto voice type in Britain does not cause any disconnect in the understanding due to the fact that the terms “alto,” “treble,” and “countertenor” have been used interchangeably in the Anglican choir tradition for many years. For instance, G.M. Ardan and David Wulstan state in their article, “The Alto or Countertenor Voice” that, despite certain anomalies in history, the vocal production of the alto and the countertenor are very much the same—putting to rest a rather lengthy academic dispute that had been ongoing for several years.\footnote{G.M. Ardan and David Wulstan, “The Alto or Countertenor Voice,” in \textit{Music & Letter} 48/1 (January 1967): 17-22.} So, at least in British academic and music circles, no legitimate distinction was made between the terms. Yet, Alfred Deller’s decision to step beyond the
confines of the chancel in order to pursue a professional career on the stage marked a significant “game-changing” status for countertenors.

Deller was determined to “put the counter-tenor voice on the concert platform in complete equality with all the other solo voices.” His vision inspired many other countertenors to follow such as John Witworth, Grayston Burgess, Owen Wynne, and Russell Oberlin. The next generation of singers in Britain and Europe especially were to follow in Deller’s footsteps. These singers performed mainly within the parameters of early music and with a technique that was more aligned with the choral tradition. However, as will be explored in the next chapter, U.S. singers particularly began to explore the use of bel canto technique, redistributing the balance of gender and power with the use of a more widely-accepted vocal production. This period of experimentation has produced what I refer to as the “3rd generation of contemporary countertenors,” and the formation of a distinct identity for the voice type, which is very important when examining the relationship between gender and social norms in the United States.

54 This quote of Deller’s is a quote within a quote by Lawrence Watts in conversation with Peter Giles on April 28th, 1991; as quoted in Giles, p. 137.

55 Ibid., p. 139.
CHAPTER FIVE: U.S. COUNTER TENORS, VOCAL PRODUCTION, AND IDENTITY

The contemporary countertenor in the United States has experienced great success on the opera stage as well as in early music circles. Particularly in the late 20th century, much music has been written specifically for the countertenor. David Daniels, Brian Asawa, and many others have recorded full-length albums of music written originally for female voice types. This emancipation in regards to the repertoire available to and acceptable for the countertenor—in addition to the exposure and opportunity that contemporary Classical Western music circles afford the voice type—suggests that the countertenor’s popularity is not merely a passing phase.

In fact, as this chapter will illustrate, U.S. countertenors in particular form strong associations or identities around their voice type. This chapter begins with a look at the development of a “countertenor identity” by focusing on the history of the voice type in the U.S. Then, the discussion will turn to matters of identity formation to show how countertenor identity has become aligned—to a certain degree—with gay identity in the U.S. A final section offers some theoretical perspectives on how gender, identity, vocal production, and language are interrelated.

---

U.S. Countertenors

The history of the countertenor in the United States differs greatly from that of Britain. The tradition of using male falsettists to sing the alto line in church choir existed for a short time at the beginning of the nation’s history. The Colonial immigrants—despite their anti-Anglican and anti-Catholic leanings—shared a commonality with the more established European churches in that women were mostly not allowed to sing. In Charles Perkins’ account of early music in the U.S., he states:

The boys and countertenors sang the air with the soprano, and the alto part was generally intrusted [sic] to men with falsetto voices. Great opposition was made when it was proposed to have the melody sung by women, on the grounds that men had a prescriptive right to lead, and that women were forbidden to take the first part in song or any other religious service. Solo singing by women was unheard of in churches, and did not become common practice until after it had been allowed in the concerts of the Handel & Haydn Society.²

The “air” is typically associated with the melody.³ This quote, then, confuses the terminology of “countertenor”; however, the purpose of this chapter is not to examine the myriad of misappropriations of the word “countertenor” over the years. Instead, I draw the reader’s attention to the fact that the altos were singing in falsetto production.

The first professional choir in the U.S., The Handel & Haydn Society—founded in 1815—utilized male altos for their first concert but also allowed females to perform as

---


³ Ibid., p. 6.
honorary members. This practice likely had its roots in the all male choir tradition and glee clubs in Britain. Perkins states:

> On the appointed evening [December 25, 1815] the concert took place, before an audience of nearly 1,000 persons with a chorus of 90 male and 10 female singers, whose treble was strengthened, according to the custom of the time, by a few falsetto voices.

However, the overall sound of the male altos in both church and professional choirs very soon fell out of favor. Lowell Mason, an influential composer, publisher, and once president of the Handel and Haydn Society, “complained of men singing the alto parts and tenor helping out the sopranos by doubling them at the lower octave.” In a review of a Handel & Haydn Society concert in 1817, the anonymous author states that the “countertenor was mostly given in falsetto, a voice of so little power as to be almost lost in the chorus.” By the year 1866, the records of the Society indicate a very balanced female to male ratio (actually favoring the females). Therefore, apparently due to the untrained falsetto voices in both church and public performance, the female out-shined the countertenor. Without adequate vocal instruction or a choral tradition comparable to that of the British or continental European choirs, the U.S. countertenor remained in relative obscurity for almost a century.

---

4 Ibid., p. 47.


6 Perkins, p. 52.

7 Smither, p. 397.
The only places that one would hear the term “countertenor” in use were Anglican-Episcopal churches in the U.S. around the middle of the 19th century. Edward Stubbs, in his treatise on *The Adult Male Alto or Counter-Tenor Voice*, states that the path to acceptance was not easy:

Dr. Edward Hodges, the pioneer of cathedral tradition in this country, who was organist and choirmaster of Trinity Church, New York, from 1839 to 1858, was perhaps the first of our imported organists who understood the counter-tenor voice; but he was so seriously handicapped by ignorant opposition, and by the chaotic condition of church music at the time of his appointment, he could not establish the kind of choir he had been accustomed to in England. For alto purposes he was obliged to employ both boys and women. His successor, Dr. Henry Stephen Cutler, who was organist of Trinity from 1858 to 1865, got rid of the women bequeathed to his choir by Dr. Hodges, as soon as he could, and used boys only as altos and sopranos.⁸

British countertenors did immigrate to the U.S.; however, they were under-appreciated and could only gain positions in choirs with traditional Episcopal choir leanings in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, where they were “welcomed as valuable choristers, but nevertheless regarded more or less as vocal curiosities.”⁹ By 1908, Stubbs confirms an increase in demand for male altos due to the growing trend in all-male choirs in the U.S.¹⁰ To verify this claim, The Parish of All Saints Ashmont in Dorchester, MA, a borough of Boston, holds a 125-year-old tradition of a Men and Boy’s Choir.¹¹

---

⁹ Ibid., p. 4.
¹¹ Information about the choir obtained from Andrew Sheranian, organist and choirmaster at the Parish of All Saints Ashmont (November 2015).
However, these types of choirs were anomalies and solo countertenors did not gain popularity for many years to come.

The idea of using a countertenor as a soloist in the U.S. began to take shape in the late 1940s when a “renaissance” in the study of early music began in the New York City professional music scene as well as certain academic institutions, such as Julliard. One of the first countertenors to be used as a professional countertenors in the U.S. was Russell Oberlin, who was accepted to the Julliard School to study voice training as a tenor in 1948. Oberlin’s voice is uncharacteristically high and light for a tenor. In truth, oftentimes, the trained ear finds it difficult to discern exactly at which pitches Oberlin begins to transition from modal to falsetto register; however, at its extremities, the voice’s registers are distinctly different in quality. Oberlin only performed as a professional countertenor for approximately a decade, retiring at 36 years of age to teach. However, his musicality, technical mastery of the voice, knowledge of early music, and acting ability created a valid space for the professional solo countertenor in the U.S.

Oberlin did not exclusively use falsetto like the countertenors of today, quite often he utilized his excessively high range in order to access the full pitch range of a piece. Yet, the visibility of a high male voice singing alto and countertenor parts/roles at a high level opened doors for other singers to follow in his footsteps. Oberlin, also, did not betray his bel canto training when singing early music as in the case of Alfred Deller.

---

12 Please note that a similar renaissance occurred in Britain at the same time coupled with an exchange of performance practice ideology.

This juxtaposition of a modern vocal technique used to support and strengthen the falsetto range as well as balance the transition between the vocal registers created a new brand of singer. When Oberlin began to reduce the number of professional performances he gave, he chose instead to focus on teaching at Hunter College. However, his legacy and contribution to the field of singing and early music opened the doors for later countertenors in the United States.

For example, U.S. countertenor Jeffrey Gall (b. 1950) was very much influenced by the early music movement that came out of this “early music revival” in the 1950s. While a student in Slavic studies at Princeton University in the late 1960s, he sang early opera and studied music from the Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae (CCM). Gall also enjoyed taking the train to the Metropolitan opera and listening to bel canto singing. While studying at Yale University as a graduate student, he began to take singing lessons. However, at this time, voice teachers were not educated regarding the countertenor voice (outside of using falsetto as a pedagogical technique to lighten the upper modal register). Gall’s vocal preparation as a countertenor was largely self-taught, meaning that he used bel canto pedagogical techniques to expand his range as well as to negotiate the break between falsetto and modal registers. By the mid-1970s Gall was singing professionally as an alto in groups such as the Waverly Consort and in operas. Eventually, he began to perform Baroque opera internationally and in 1988 was the first countertenor to sing a main role at the Metropolitan Opera as Ptolemy in Handel’s Giulio Cesare.

---

14 Interview, Jeffrey Gall (October 16, 2015).
Drew Minter (b. 1955) began singing at the National Cathedral boys choir in Washington D.C. as a young student.\textsuperscript{15} When his voice lowered in adolescence he began singing alto in falsetto in order to retain his financial scholarship. When he matriculated at Indiana University as a voice major, he became the first countertenor to graduate from an academic voice program in the U.S. At a certain point, Minter began to take countertenor solo gigs, which has led to an international career. Admittedly, Minter’s falsetto production is not as bel canto as other singers but, indubitably, the technical training he received has expanded his range and helped him to resonate the sound of his falsetto.

Steven Rickards (b. 1955) also studied voice at Indiana University and became the first countertenor to graduate with a Masters in Music. Later, he received a Fulbright-Hays scholarship to study in London and in the midst of a very successful professional singing career chose to return to academia, graduating with his DMA in voice performance from Florida State University in 2001. I feel it is important to note that all of the early countertenors in the U.S. received Fulbright scholarships to study—at some point in their career—and all have eventually settled into teaching singing at the university level. This fact speaks to the importance placed on the “early music revival” in the U.S. academic community in the 1960s to the 1980s.

The next generation of professional countertenors in the U.S., such as Brian Asawa, Robert Crowe, David Daniels, Bejun Mehta, et al., have enjoyed wide acceptance

\textsuperscript{15} Interview, Drew Minter (October 6, 2015).
of the voice type. In the 1990s, opera houses began to enthusiastically embrace the countertenor as a mainstay of Baroque opera, which continues to the present day. I would like to re-emphasize here that the vocal production that countertenors are now using is more akin to bel canto technique, providing a rather different sonority than singers in the 16th and 17th centuries, which is fuller in texture.

Furthermore, one must acknowledge that many of the roles that are now performed by countertenors in Baroque operas were originally performed by castrati (or even females). This understanding highlights the fact that the bel canto or contemporary countertenor is a fabrication of the 20th century or, in truth, a vocal anachronism. The next section looks at this unique voice type through the lens of contemporary U.S. culture in order to see how social norms in the U.S. have affected the use and appreciation of the countertenor.

U.S. Countertenors and Gender/Sexuality

Throughout its short history as a nation, self-expression has been a major political and personal motivator for U.S. constituents. One of the most upwardly mobile social and political subcultures in the U.S. since the 1940s is the gay subculture. In the book How to be Gay cultural theorist David Halperin examines the cultural construction of gay identity in the U.S.\textsuperscript{16} He concludes that gay culture circulates around a genre of icons, symbols, and language—such as camp, Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli, drag, feminine

\textsuperscript{16}David Halperin, How to be Gay (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
gestures, and feminine pronouns—that serve to demarcate the parameters of “what is gay” and “what is straight”. Here again, one can witness an example of U.S. subculture that must separate itself or clarify itself in order to be translatable or identifiable to others.

In this text, Halperin includes a chapter entitled “American Falsettos,” in which he states that a large percentage of men who sing countertenor in the U.S. are gay.

There are of course some countertenors who are straight. But they are relatively few and far between. Something about the particular quality of the sound one is required to produce, and about the social meanings ascribed to the kind of voice required to produce it, seems to attract gay male singers—or to bring out a male singer’s queer potential.17

For the most part, in my experience as a researcher of countertenors, I agree with Halperin in his claim that—in the U.S. at least—most countertenors identify as homosexual. But why? Halperin suggests that, due to a certain gay subjectivity, countertenors are attracted to the voice type. Halperin does not mention the fact that other genres of singing include falsetto singing, such as soul, pop, and hard rock. So, one is left to wonder how the countertenor differs from these other singers.

There does exist a certain “sensibility,” or “mystique” to men who sing in falsetto with bel canto technique. The vocal production that results from this combination creates—as aforementioned—a rather novel sonority. In light of this fact, Halperin could be right. More gay men are attracted to the voice type because it is an outlying, non-mainstream voice type. And, being a minority in regards to sexual

17 Ibid., p. 83.
identity—that is, a homosexual male in a predominantly heterosexual environment—could make it easier to identify as a minority in regards to vocal identity.

Now, not every homosexual feels the need to identify in the way Halperin describes and, in truth, the incredible advances in gay rights over the past few years have caused certain people to question whether or not “gay” is slowly becoming a nondescript entity.\(^{18}\) The increasing (post)enlightenment and equality efforts made by the gay rights movement has resulted in many homosexuals feeling as if they do not necessarily need to identify outwardly as “gay” because acceptance of homosexuality is becoming so prevalent. Furthermore, not every countertenor is homosexual. However, in the next section I would like to discuss the unique qualities of U.S. identity politics—mentioned earlier in the chapter—and the role of difference and discourse in the U.S. that helps to define the parameters of what it means to be a countertenor in the U.S.

**Countertenors, Difference, and Discourse**

In the introduction to the anthology *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* Martin Stokes discusses ways in which music helps one to experience a sense of place (geographic location) and also to ‘relocate’ oneself based on how one identifies with the music.\(^{19}\) Ever since reading this chapter, I have been thinking about how various vocal productions in singing can help to ‘relocate’ the listener.

---

\(^{18}\) Bert Archer, *The End of Gay: And the Death of Heterosexuality* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002);

Chapter 3 of this project discusses many ways in which the aesthetic reception of the listener depends on his/her horizon of expectations, and, all of that information can directly apply to this discussion. However, the idea that certain voices ‘belong’ in certain genres is very real.

As discussed in Chapter 2, voices also ‘belong’ in certain genders. Stokes states:

Gender boundaries articulate the most deeply entrenched forms of domination which provide basic metaphors for others, and thus constitute the most intensely ‘naturalised’ of all our boundary making activities...The boundaries which separate male and female and assign to each proper social practices are as ‘natural’ as the boundaries which separate one community from another...Musical performance is often the principal means by which appropriate gender behaviour is taught and socialised.\(^{20}\)

In this way, the voice becomes not only a gendered ‘place’ in regards to male/female and masculine/feminine but also designates power relationships, regulates social norms, and constructs identity.

The unique sonority and vocal technique of the contemporary countertenor creates a strong power dynamic and sets it apart from other voice types. Also, with the changes in social norms of the 1960s-1990s, the concept of gender and male/female has become more fluid in the U.S. The contemporary countertenor can sustain a sense of gendered ‘place’ in today’s society whereas the social constructs of gender in previous generations prevented such understandings or acceptance. This countertenor sonority, then, bears its own, unique identity.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 22.
Chapter 2 discusses the act of singing as an act of gendered performativity in several different ways. The pitch and timbre of the voice can symbolize the sex of the singer as well as a sense of power—that is, dominance versus subordination. The singing voice can also be a locus for social and political gender transgression. Annette Schlichter, in her article entitled “Do Voices Matter?: Vocality, Materiality, and Gender Performativity,” states that “voice, thus, marks a passage from the inside of bodies to the exterior.”²¹ This consideration has much to bear on the concept of gendered vocal identity.

The vocal embodiment of sexuality provides support for Halperin’s statement concerning the preponderance of homosexual countertenors in the U.S. if and only if one acknowledges a few facts about the culture of the contemporary countertenor in the U.S. The short history of the countertenor in the U.S. provided at the beginning of this chapter shows that the voice type has existed on the fringe of acceptance. This statement is not to diminish in any way the strides that have been made in creating a space for the contemporary countertenor, but as Halperin suggests the attraction of the homosexual to the countertenor sound lies in the identification that he hears and experiences as a person on the margins of society.

Vocal Embodiment and Sexuality

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler attempts to “denaturalize” (or de-binarize) gender and sexuality and create spaces for multiplicity and ambiguity.22 In association with Butler, Annette Schlichter indicates that the transmission of meaning from one person to another “confronts us with a material multiplicity of the body.”23 This statement behooves us to consider the myriad of acts available to humans when communicating–consciously or not–one’s gender. This quandary is representative of what Don Ihde, author of *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, calls the multistability of the voice.24

Ihde points out that language and metaphor allow us “to situate that which we experience in a certain way.”25 In fact, metaphor is very important in the aural field of phenomenology because it assists in “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”26 Certain concepts are particularly difficult to describe accurately with language. Sound is very difficult to describe and one must resort to asking, “What does that sound *like*?” Humans depend on experience and metaphor in these instances to comprehend these types of sensations and s/he can only communicate the metaphor in terms of what s/he knows or has experienced. The possibilities are limitless–multistable

---


23 Schlichte, p. 40.


25 Ihde, p. 188.

even—but more often than not a gender must be assigned to the body which hypothetically belongs to the voice. In an effort to exemplify the multistable relationship that exists between the voice, body, and identity, I offer a personal reflection.

Confessions of a Bi-vocalist

I consider myself a vocal chameleon; I sing in many different genres and styles (early music, choral music, opera, musical theater, jazz, 80s cover bands, Latin fusion, etc.). Additionally, I am ‘bi-vocal’; that is to say, I sing professionally in both baritone and alto ranges (or, more precisely, using both modal and falsetto modes of vocal production). My friend, Charlene, loves to take me to karaoke bars so that she can witness jaws drop and eyes widen in the audience when I sing the chorus from A-ha’s hit song, “Take On Me,” (which requires a 3-octave range). In all humility, though, I enjoy the diversity that vocal versatility brings to my performing experience and I never questioned my multi-vocalic abilities until I started to teach. As a beginner voice teacher, I naively thought that any student could embody these styles; my mantra was, “If you know how to sing correctly, you can sing any style you want.” Over the years, though, I’ve learned that some students, regardless of effort, lack the ability necessary to sing certain styles. In the next section, I analyze my own singing history, searching for events that have contributed to my unique skill set. In the process, I arrive at some conclusions about the relationship between vocal identity and singing.
I come from a very musical family. My father was, for much of his life, a music minister in the Southern Baptist denomination. He sings and plays guitar. During high school, he played in a rock/jazz band and almost moved to Chicago to pursue a pop music career but joined the Navy, instead. At the age of 19, he became a born-again Christian and decided to use his musical talents as an act of ministry in the church. He has served churches in many capacities: as a youth minister, music minister, associate pastor and head pastor. Over the past 40 years, regardless of his title, he has always used Southern gospel and contemporary Christian music as a way to minister to his congregations. When not at work, though, my father relaxed by playing ‘Oldies’, hits from the 50s and 60s, on his Gibson acoustic guitar.

My mother was a gifted pianist. She studied Classical music until she was 17 and then forsook her training for a career playing lavish hymn arrangements in the Southern Baptist church. Her style is a mixture of Southern Gospel and Jules Styne/50s Broadway. She consistently denied that any of her renditions of sacred music had secular origins, but, I know better. The types of chord progressions and style she used were definitely influenced by musical theater and movie music of the 1950s and 1960s, which is the time during which she learned to play.

Perhaps due to my parents’ musically eclectic backgrounds, very few restrictions were placed on my sisters and me about our musical preferences. I remember shaking my booty to disco on the radio when I was young. My grandmother had a record player and when I would visit her after school I was gyrating my hips to Elvis, harmonizing with
the Lennon Sisters, and getting down to Motown. Nonie (my grandmother) also had cable. So, I had the opportunity to ogle MTV. During middle school, my parents often found me dancing around my bedroom with a hairbrush to Wham!, Madonna, and Janet Jackson. Also, my mother taught me piano at a very early age, so, I was exposed to Classical music. In high school, I played several different instruments (no surprise there), including trombone, tuba, euphonium, bassoon, and xylophone. I participated in All-County jazz band as a pianist and sang baritone in All-State honors choir. All in all, I’d say that I had access to a wide variety of styles for a young boy growing up in the mountains of North Carolina.

Last month, when I was teaching a student at Brown University, I ran into a bit of a snag when I asked him to learn “Something About You” from the off-Broadway show, *Altar Boyz*. Stuart, my student, loves musical theater and starred in, at least, one main stage musical every year of his tenure at Brown, so, I didn’t think twice about assigning him this soulful ballad. When I asked him to ‘riff’ at one point, he looked at me and said, quite decidedly, “I can’t do that...”.

Brad: “What?? You’re young, you’ve grown up with this stuff...just riff.”

Stuart: “I’m telling you, I’ve tried many times...my voice just doesn’t do that.” I asked him about his personal music history and we discovered that, since he grew up in the middle of nowhere Minnesota, he had little exposure to improvisational music (such as rhythm ‘n’ blues, gospel, or jazz) and his ability to improvise never manifested itself as a result.
Exposure in music is very important. In “The Challenge of Bi-Musicality,” Mantle Hood analyzes the challenges that a group of ethnomusicology students at UCLA face when learning to play non-Western music. Hood blames the paradigmatic, tonal forces prevalent in Western music that make it difficult to apperceive certain nuances of pitch, rhythm, and style in foreign genres. So, in the case of Hood’s graduate students, the modalities and tonalities of Western music prevented some players from noticing certain nuances of non-Western music, for example, hearing certain microtones in Javanese gamelan performance. Foucault conceived of such forces as power/knowledge; any dominant, cultural force exerts a certain level of power over its adherents, disciplining and influencing their perspectives and actions. These spheres of influence or, in Bourdieu’s terms, doxa, create the conditions that dictate human choice/agency. In a sense, humans embody these spheres of influence and they exist unexamined until objectified or performed.

For example, because of my experience singing gospel and jazz, when ‘riffing’ I definitely do not think about what I’m about to sing before I sing it. The ‘riff’ is an extemporaneously musical thought, a pre-objectivity that, only afterwards, can be

---


objectified and considered for analysis. In Stuart’s case, his non-improvisation-influenced musical heritage denied him access to certain musics that utilize the practice of improvisation: he had never embodied it. Stuart needed exposure; he needed to embody the style. I advised him to listen to as much R&B and vocal jazz as possible before his next lesson and attempt to sing along. At his next lesson, he (sort of) ‘riffed’ in public for the first time. However, to this day, he still has not perfected the style. One of the hinderances, in my estimation, is the fact that he doesn’t “see himself” as someone who riffs, which introduces another aspect of embodiment that is important to consider when discussing style-specific singing: identity and vocal identification.

To begin this discussion, I offer another anecdote from my singing history. Everyone in my nuclear family sings (a testament to embodied music in itself). In fact, my father, at one time, dubbed us the “Fugate Family Singers.” At first, I sang lead (or the melody/soprano), then I moved to alto when I learned to sing harmony. As my voice began to change, it became evident that I would eventually be a baritone, but, the part distributions of my family’s performance repertoire at the time hinged on my ability to harmonize as an alto. I remember, for several months, having to alternate from song to song between baritone (modal) and alto (falsetto) ranges. In my Junior choir at church, too, I was asked to harmonize in alto, though my voice had completely changed. My guess is that I developed a strong, vibrant falsetto production quality by utilizing the falsetto at an early adolescent age. In high school and undergraduate college, though, I

studied exclusively as a baritone and only allowed myself to sing in falsetto on rare occasions. Additionally, I had not come out of the closet by that point and I recognized the fact that my mannerisms were rather feminine. I remember consciously making the decision to keep my strong falsetto a secret to avoid any exacerbations of femininity or glimpses of my closeted sexuality. It was not until I was singing in a conducting class at Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, while an openly gay graduate student, that my professor turned to me and said, “Brad, we need an alto...I’ve heard you laugh....you have an amazingly present falsetto...jump up there, won’t ya?” This experience drastically changed the way that I perceived myself. I realized that I had been denying myself the opportunity to sing and identify as an alto. After that day, for almost a decade, I sang professionally and collegiately as a countertenor until my voice teacher at UNC-G, who taught me during my doctoral study at University of North Carolina at Greensboro (a program for which I auditioned as a countertenor), heard me sing a musical theater piece in baritone voice. She vowed never to give me another lesson unless I studied baritone for an entire year. Since that time, I have sung professionally in both voices. It has become incumbent upon me to self-identify as a countertenor or baritone for the sake of auditioning (or else directors and hiring agents become confused) and I still struggle with how best to promote myself.

At this point, I ask that the reader consider: 1) the constructs of gender and sexuality that had been acting on me as a young person (avoiding using falsetto) as opposed to the emancipation of my falsetto voice after coming out of the closet (another
example of the aforementioned power/knowledge) and 2) the process of embodiment that takes place in the act of identification. *One can conceive embodiment as both the forces acting on the body and, alternatively, the body's expression of these forces.* For example, when singing 80s pop music, I identify with the era, the cultural forces acting on the music, or with an individual singer from the era; then, I embody/perform the style. I become one with its vocal mannerisms. This type of embodiment is an expression of the forces that have influenced my knowledge of the style and the production of it, which can further be abstracted from the body and discursively projected into society. I can say, “I’m a countertenor,” “I’m a baritone,” “I sing jazz,” “I sing opera,” thereby, verbally (in addition to physically and musically) embodying my identification.

This process of both internally and externally embodying vocal style can be explained in many ways. Working from the external to internal, one notices traces of Foucault’s power/knowledge and Bourdieu’s *doxa* working on the body and influencing practices and agency. Internally to externally, the concepts of identity, identification, and expression come into play. The embodiment of a style is something that happens to and through a person. In *Music as Social Life*, Thomas Turino describes this process as *flow*: “a state of heightened concentration, when one is so intent on the activity at hand [musicking/performing] that all other thoughts, concerns, and distractions disappear and the actor is fully in the present.”32 Style flows in and out of a person and happens “in the

---

moment,” which is why teachers demonstrate certain styles or suggest recordings of
singers rather than attempt to verbalize and explain stylistic specificity. Style is
simultaneously a performative flow of embodied knowledge, identification, and informed
act. This embodied knowledge is also manifested in vocal gender and sexuality, as
discussed in Chapter 2. The next section takes a closer look at what happens when these
vocalities are interpreted discursively.

Transitive Properties of the Singing Voice

In addition to embodied voice and sexuality, the issue of “reduced codability” for
the countertenor in the U.S. is of critical importance. Simply put, codability is the ability
of an object or entity to be acknowledged based on \textit{a priori} factors. For example,
unenlightened listeners who have difficulty acknowledging when a male uses falsetto to
sing is an example of reduced codability. Even though he/she may know the meaning of
the word “falsetto,” knowledge pertaining to how its mode of production is different from
modal or non-falsetto singing is spotty at best. Furthermore, a quick search for falsetto
on the World Wide Web or Youtube troubles this matter due to the misinformation
disseminated on such non-vetted information platforms. The word “countertenor” suffers
from even further ignorance, especially in the U.S. This lack of understanding creates
false connections for many listeners based on issues of gender, sexuality, or vocal
identity.
In order to continue this discussion, a look at the Whorf hypothesis is necessary. To review, “language sets the limits of thought and constructs a speaker’s perception of both physical and social reality.”

An extension of this theory is that lexical gaps in a society or person’s knowledge of a language result in “reduced codability”—or a reduced capacity for specificity regarding a discursive thought. Reduced codability does not mean that a thought is unthinkable but, rather, creates situations in which the thoughts are less crystallized or definable. Take for instance a new vocabulary word that has developed in U.S. society regarding men. A “metrosexual” has come to define a male who takes special care with his appearance, spends time shopping for clothes and grooming products, and tends toward more sensitivity in nature. This term has become more pervasive in U.S. vernacular since the mid-1990s due to the fact that men in U.S. society feel more freedom to break with the traditional stereotypes of masculinity that may restrict outward displays of flamboyance, emotionality, and vulnerability. Before the 1990s, the characteristics of a “metrosexual” were considered either feminine or homosexual because these terms and constructs were the concepts and/or terms that society had at its disposal to use. Yet another shift has recently occurred to swing the pendulum slightly in the opposite direction. A “lumbersexual” meticulously concerns himself with the maintenance of his beard, wears plaid shirts, and sports untamed hair. Lumbersexuality is obviously an attempt to reclaim a sense of masculinity in the wake of

33 Graddol and Swann, p. 147.

34 Ibid., p. 150.
metrosexuality but, in this instance, both heterosexuals and homosexuals are adhering to the trend; so, in a certain sense, “lumbersexual” blurs the lines of sexuality even further than “metrosexual” although one might anticipate the opposite. These new terms provide society a way to acknowledge, conceptualize, and discuss developments in society, so that the constructs are readily recognizable, understandable, or “codable.”

In order to explore these logical fallacies, I would like to consider these associations in transitive form. The transitive property in mathematics states:

\[
\text{If } a = b \text{ and } b = c \text{ then } a = c.
\]

Using this rubric, I would like to demonstrate how important reduced codeability is to the understanding of the terms “falsetto” and “countertenor” in regards to gender, sexuality, etc. For example, if a person understands that falsetto is a sound made by a male then \(a = \text{falsetto}\) and \(b = \text{male}\). At this point, however, the context of the situation enters into the equation. To begin, please consider the stereotypical thought process associated with male singing:

1. \(\text{If non-falsetto singing = male and male = masculine then non-falsetto singing = masculine.}\)

To be more precise, I ask that the reader interpret the equation in this way, “If a male singer uses a non-falsetto mode of vocal production and the gender assigned to that body is masculine then the vocal performance will be considered masculine.” As previously mentioned in this dissertation, falsetto voices can be interpreted as masculine. In certain
instances—for example, a hard rock concert—the hypermasculine use of the falsetto voice creates a masculine quality, resulting in the following equation:

2. \textit{If falsetto singing} = male \textit{and} male = masculine \textit{then} falsetto singing = masculine.

This type of exercise highlights the importance of gender in the metaphorical equation of the voice/body relationship. Yet, problems can occur quite quickly with such an exercise, such as the aforementioned association of boy sopranos (and boy actors) in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance Europe with feminine. This instance creates the following scenario:

3. \textit{If non-falsetto singing} = male \textit{and} male = feminine \textit{then} non-falsetto singing = feminine.

In this context, the focus on the body creates a scenario in which the singing is queerly gendered because one would expect a non-falsetto, female singing voice to produce a feminine vocal performance. However, if gender, body, and voice are shifted in the equation to focus on the production of sound rather than the body, another queerly gendered concept results:

4. \textit{If male} = non-falsetto singing \textit{and} non-falsetto singing = feminine \textit{then} non-falsetto singing = male.

To be more clear, “If the male uses a non-falsetto singing voice and the voice is interpreted as feminine, then the male is interpreted as feminine.” Here, the voice/gender relationship is highlighted and the body assumes secondary importance. These queer
results are crucial to understanding the fluidity of gender and voice because it highlights the importance of the listener in the process of reception and assignation of gender, explored in depth in Chapter 3. Is the listener more concerned with the gendered body of the singer or the gendered context of the vocal performance or the gendered material qualities of the singing voice?

The example of the countertenor demonstrates the validity of this theory. The only problem is that one must pinpoint, of course, what aspect of the vocal performance is being gendered in the equation. Is it the singer’s body/performance? or the mode of production/performance? For instance, as aforementioned, David Daniels is often interpreted as a masculine-looking character on stage. He also—for the most part—sings roles of male characters. If we concentrate on a gendered interpretation of the body then Daniel’s equation works out thusly:

5. If falsetto singing = male and male = masculine then falsetto singing = masculine.

This result is identical to the hard rock singers of example #2. However, if the listener interprets the falsetto quality of the singing voice to be feminine then the result is less stereotypical:

6. If male = falsetto singing and falsetto singing = feminine then male = feminine

This result places the onus of the interpretation on the listener, in that, no matter the gender identity of the performer, the gender assigned to the vocal performance determines the gender assigned to the singer. In order to substantiate this claim, consider
the example of countertenor Philippe Jaroussky. Jaroussky’s voice is often described in antithetical terms to Daniels, such as “light,” “airy,” “boyish,” “liquid,” “ethereal,” and “like a woman.” The famous mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli states: “There is a beauty in his phrasing and a delicacy, if not fragility in his soul, that touches the listener profoundly.” These qualities are typically associated with feminine, creating this equation:

7. If male = falsetto singing and falsetto singing = feminine then male = feminine.

No negative judgment needs to be made in regards to a listener’s interpretation and ultimate reception of the gendered performance and the gendered body. The take-away here is that the material qualities of the singing voice can affect the gendered performance.

Getting back to issue of codeability, if the listener knows that a countertenor is singing then that term/concept can replace “falsetto” in the equation:

8. If countertenor (e.g., David Daniels) = male and male = masculine then countertenor = masculine

Looking at #8, one can see that the falsetto mode of production can be entirely dismissed, obscured, or eclipsed by language and gender. This gap results in much confusion and misidentification of how falsetto sound is produced. Additionally, until society develops

---

new terminology, the countertenor will also suffer from associations and misrepresentations drawn from other voice types (countertenor) or status (falsetto).

The countertenor in the U.S. and internationally is becoming more of an accepted voice type in both academic and professional circles. In the process of this evolution for the voice type, these transitive properties will likely change. Also, in other societies such as England—where there is a broad knowledge of “countertenor”—and Japan—where there is very little—these transitive relationships can still be applied in order to show how language aides in the perpetuation of socially constructed ideologies. The previous discussions regarding gender, sexuality, and vocal production depend greatly on Western notions of culturally constructed identities. In order to show that these connections exist outside of Western thought one must analyze the countertenor beyond its natural habitat. The next chapter investigates the countertenor in Japan in order to show how aesthetic reception of gender, sexuality, and vocal production contains elements of difference and similarity cross culturally.
CHAPTER SIX: CROSS-CULTURAL COUNTER TENORS—JAPANESE SOCIAL NORMS AND COUNTER TENOR RECEPTION

In the process of conceiving this research project, I felt that it was important to show how a non-Western society might exemplify the transference of meaning via vocal production. In this chapter, I will show ways in which socially constructed meaning is inscribed on the human voice via vocal production and registration in Japan. Although the countertenor does not present a strong presence in Japan, the connection that the falsetto voice possesses with gender is different than that of the U.S. or England. Discussing this connection will demonstrate the uniqueness of each society in regards to vocal production and socially constructed meaning. As this chapter will show, the pre-existence of a falsetto tradition called uragoe, with its own set of socially-constructed meanings, has affected the reception of the countertenor. Additionally, other aspects of Japanese society play a role in Japanese listener reception of the countertenor voice.

Like the U.S., Japan has only recently accepted the countertenor into the ranks of canonical Western art music voice types. Many Japanese still do not recognize the voice type by its name, カウンターテナー (kauntātenā) or カウンターテノール (kauntātenōru); however, most Japanese do possess a concept of the falsetto sound, used by musicians who perform traditional Japanese music as well as female impersonators in kabuki called onnagata (女形). Additionally, a more fluid and differently structured gender system creates a more accepted public understanding of androgyny, influencing the way in which the countertenor voice is heard. The next section explores these issues
in an effort to more fully comprehend the connection between gender and the singing voice in Japan.

**Uragoe and the Japanese psyche**

Japanese, in the same manner as most U.S. Americans, do not immediately recognize the countertenor voice as such; however, falsetto singing is not an unknown entity. The musical literati specializing in Western art music—particularly music written before 1750—most certainly know the voice type and accurate information does exist both online and in Japanese music research sources.\(^1\) Also, the term ファルセット (farusetto), or falsetto, is used but more often than not, falsetto voice production is understood via a different word, 裏声 (uragoe), literally, back voice. *Uragoe* is most often associated with singers in the Noh and kabuki theater traditions. Noh theater dates back to the 14th century and the kabuki tradition from the 17th century. The music for these traditions currently use all-male ensembles of singers and instrumentalists. In Noh theater music, the vocal music, called *utai*, is monophonic in texture and chanted by a chorus as well as the actors. The pitch range of these chants is usually low and limited. However, the percussionists in the accompanying instrumental ensemble often utilize a high-pitched uragoe (falsetto) voice in order to punctuate certain pauses or rhythms during the course of the drama. The music for kabuki, called *nagauta*, has a similar monophonic texture in

---

the vocal lines; however, the music is much more melodic and the vocal range needed to sing the material is much wider. In an effort to reach high notes, many singers learn to sing with uragoe technique in order to access the pitches.

The difference between uragoe falsetto and the contemporary countertenor falsetto must be noted here. Uragoe sound is predominately focused, or placed, in the back part of the pharynx, or throat. This placement, in addition to a depression of the back of the tongue, creates a rather breathy sound. Contrary to this type of production, the contemporary countertenor uses bel canto technique, which places the sound toward the front of the head, in the facial mask—that is, cheekbones, nose, and forehead. Even though these two vocal sounds are different in resultant timbre, falsetto vocal production is used for each.

The word uragoe can be dismantled into two parts by means of the two characters or kanji used for its spelling—“ura” meaning “back” and “goe” meaning “voice.” Ura, or 裏, indicates a location in back or rear. The kanji can be pronounced as “ura” or “ri” depending on its placement within the context of the spelling. Words such as uradōri (裏通り), back street, or uraguchi (裏口), back door, suggest a physical location in back. Ura can also imply “reverse” such as in the word uragawa (裏側) meaning reverse/other side of a street or river. In like manner—using the other pronunciation of the same kanji—rimen (裏面) means “back, back surface, other side, background.” Perhaps the most important connotation for this discussion is that 裏 can mean “inner” or “hidden” such as
in the words nōri (脳裏), “brain, mind” or kyōri, (胸裏) meaning “bosom” or “inner feelings.” 裏’s symbolic and linguistic opposite is omote (表) meaning front. This kanji can mean “front side,” “outward appearance,” “exterior,” or “to express, appear, or be made public”–as in the verb arawasu (表す). Over the last 40 years, sociolinguists and cognitive anthropologists of Japanese culture have developed some theories of the Japanese mindset and/or social relations that exemplify qualities of the ura-omote dialectic.

In Jane Bachnik’s article “The Two Faces of Self and Society in Japan,” she addresses the importance of the concepts ura and omote to the Japanese sense of self. Whereas in the U.S. and other Western societies, individual sense of self depends on the process of identity formation and independence, Japanese see themselves more in relation to the society or social situations and how one fits into the social order as a whole. In this way, a Japanese person develops her/his sense of individualism. In his book, Nihonjin no kōdōyoshiki (Japanese Behavior Patterns), Araki Hiroyuki identified this phenomenon as “relational.” Other researchers have identified this same aspect of Japanese behavior, such as Lebra’s “situational relativity” and Nakane’s “situational position in a particular frame.”

---

establish the foundation for Bachnik’s theories. According to Bachnik, in regards to the omote-ura relationship, Japanese operate by use of two “faces”. The “omote” face infers the social surface or appearance of oneself. The “ura” face refers to “behind the scenes secrets” or emotionality.\(^5\) As she exemplifies in her article, “ura” can also denote intimacy in social situations or a sense of informality.\(^6\)

I would like to argue here that this connection of “ura” with emotions and intimacy extends to aspects of singing. Most Japanese would attest to the fact that singing is extremely important in Japanese culture. Singing is a required component of every child’s public school education in Japan and the nation is, after all, the birthplace of the singing phenomenon, karaoke. Christine Yano, in her book *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song*, emphasizes the importance of song in the expression of emotions, intimacy, and memory.\(^7\) Additionally, a nation-wide study deserves to be conducted on the topic of amateur adult singing groups in Japan, which are omnipresent. Many of these groups are small and rehearse in private homes, for personal not public edification.

The “ura” nature of singing is magnified in the presence of uragoe, which sounds more intimate in timbre than female impersonators in kabuki called onnagata, who use this type of vocal production to approximate the female pitch. One can associate the

---

\(^{5}\) Bachnik, p. 9.

\(^{6}\) Ibid., p. 16.

sound of the uragoe singing voice with that of the R&B soul singer who creates a sense of intimacy by crooning in a high, breathy tone. Male pop ballad singers and folk singers also utilize this technique for similar purposes. The link between this type of vocal production and intimacy goes beyond sociolinguistic or sociocultural borders.

The falsetto production of contemporary countertenors, as aforementioned, resonates in a more forward place than the typical uragoe singer. However, I would like to further argue that the uragoe concept of falsetto sound influences the reception of the countertenor in Japan. While doing fieldwork in Tokyo during the summer of 2013, I interviewed several countertenors, who sang with the choir at the chapel of Rikkyō University. The university has a long-standing history with the Episcopal church and they perform music from the Anglican tradition with regularity. According to the organist/choir master of the group, Scott Shaw, several males in the choir expressed an interest in singing countertenor after a choir tour to England. When asked about their experience singing countertenor, a large percentage of the men responded that singing in the falsetto range was “omoshiroi” (interesting) and “sugoi” (amazing). One of the students expressed that since singing exists in the inner part of the person, the ability to sing with such a carefree sound heightened the emotions and feelings of not only the singers but the listeners.  

Toward the end of my fieldwork in Japan, I was asked to sing a countertenor recital on a summer music series for the town of Mishima, in Shizuoka prefecture.

---

8 This data was recorded at an interview with Scott Shaw and countertenors of the Rikkyō University chapel choir, Tokyo (July 2013).
Mishima is not a large urban area, especially by Japanese standards. The town has approximately 110,000 constituents and is situated between Mt. Fuji and the Izu peninsula. Despite its size, the town does have an active railroad station, which is a stop on the Tōkaidō line. When asked to perform the recital, I inquired as to whether the audience might be familiar with the countertenor voice and was told “probably not” but that this matter was of little consequence. With some curiosity, I set about planning a program of Western art music including both Baroque and Romantic arias/songs. The recital took place in a hall with a very small stage and movable, elevated risers for seating. I opted to perform just in front of the stage on the floor so that we would not have to move the piano to the small stage and so that I could be closer to the audience, which I assumed would be relatively small in number. To my surprise, word spread of my performance and when I entered the hall to sing only standing room remained and they had also filled the stage behind me with chairs so that people had more places to sit. I have sung in a variety of small venues with uninformed audiences and I am used to the typical reaction when I begin to sing: eyes dart, brows crinkle, some express open delight or confusion at what they hear. I’m used to these reactions. However, I was a little surprised to find that not one person in the audience expressed any sort of emotion except for a pleasant look or a polite smile. I had trouble actually discerning whether or not the audience was enjoying my performance until after the program when people were expressing their gratitude as they left the concert.
When I spoke to my Japanese friends about the experience, their response confirmed the *ura/omote* distinction. Japanese would never outwardly display extreme emotion in a public setting such as a formal concert; yet, that does not mean that internally they were not experiencing extreme emotion or feeling. In fact, many of the audience members commented on the fact that my voice in particular magnified these types of feelings. The Japanese association, then, with *ura* and falsetto creates a scenario that can heighten the realm of emotions, feeling, and intimacy. The vocal production itself stands as the medium for this transfer of social meaning.

**Vocal Gender in Japan**

Gendered stereotypes exist in every society and Japan is no exception. One cannot deny that the stereotypical idea of a Japanese businessman is most decidedly a male. At the risk of perpetuating such an ideology, from my albeit North American-influenced perspective, while in Japan doing my field work, I noticed that men tend to dominate in matters of business, government, money, etc. Yet, to me, it seems that a balance exists: women are more influential in the domestic scene making most of the decisions on that front. However, this trend is currently evolving.

In recent years a trend is taking place that has received national attention. A large percentage of men in their 20s and 30s (60-70%) are showing less interest in dating and marriage with women. A phrase to describe this stereotype is “herbivore men,” 草食系 (*sōshokukei*) or 草食男子(*sōshokudanshi*). The government has taken notice of the trend
and some commentators state that women are, indeed, becoming more dominant in Japanese society.\textsuperscript{9} The counterpart to the herbivore man is the “carnivore woman” (肉食女性, nikushokujosei), who dominates the male and succeeds in business. Even pop culture has begun to take note of this evolving shift in gender relations.\textsuperscript{10} Although these are gross stereotypes, the fact that such limiting views of gender roles exist suggests that gender—and as an extension sexuality—remains rather compartmentalized. Many Japanese with whom I spoke during this research project assured me that these views are slowly becoming less rigid but still predominate.\textsuperscript{11}

In regards to the voice, a very masculine, stereotypical vocal sound was present in early Japanese film of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in cases of actors playing yakusa or samurai characters who exude masculinity and dominance. At the same time, women’s voices at large were pitched very high. Also, men’s tones were breathy and women’s were more nasal. The pitch of these gendered voices have begun to balance out, with the male voices raising in pitch and the women’s lowering. The trend has been slow and, even in popular music (J-pop), which tends to follow cultural trends, one will still hear high, nasal female voices (such as AKB40) or breathy male voices (such as ARASHI). Yet, lower-pitched, breathy female sounds have also become popular, such as


\textsuperscript{10}Many examples of this movement abound but one poignant example is the NHK TV show “Stay At Home Dad” (ステイアットホームダッド) in which wives must return to the workplace because their husbands have been laid off.

\textsuperscript{11}Many thanks to my friends Haruna Nakagawa, Tomoko Takagi, and Yoko Kida who helped explain these issues to me who I interviewed in Japan.
the vocal stylings of legendary singer/songwriter Yumi Matsutoya or Ayumi Hamasaki, a J-pop artist, and many others.

Vocal Androgyny in Japan

Flying in the face of the pitch differences discussed in the previous section between male and female, Japanese popular culture possesses distinct forms of vocal androgyny, which are steeped in tradition and still extremely prized as Japanese Cultural Heritage. Female impersonators have existed in Nō and kabuki theater since the 14th century. The onnagata particularly, who are mostly associated with kabuki, prepare their roles for many, many years before they even consider taking the stage. Every move, every sound–called kata–must be performed with accuracy and personal conviction because, in the Japanese mindset, onnagata quite literally become women during the performance.

This notion originally sounded strange to my ear. Everyone knows that onnagata are male; however, friends have explained to me over the years that out of respect for the dedication of the performers and the history of the art form itself, Japanese suspend disbelief when onnagata are in costume. In this way, onnagata are unlike drag queens whose penchant for excess and lip-synching denote a campy version of femininity, drawing attention to the binary of gender and culture’s construction of the concept. The depiction of femininity by onnagata is incredibly respectful, thus, they are able to constitute a space of honorable androgyny in the collective Japanese conscious.
Onnagata take as much care and concern with their vocal performance as with their visual presentation. The resultant sound, to my ears, is a relatively high-pitched, piercing falsetto tone. Being that onnagata do not sing but only speak, I would rather not spend much time analyzing its place in the Japanese soundscape except to say that such a respected and respectful sound creates a sense of vocal androgyny. My hunch is that this sense of vocal androgyny influences the uragoe singing of the nagauta (kabuki music), creating a neutrally gendered space for both sonorities.

Another alternatively-gendered voice prevalent in Japanese popular culture is that of the Takarazuka actor. The Takarazuka Revue is an all-female production that began in the mid-20th century in the town of Takarazuka, Japan—in the Hyōgō prefecture, Northwest of Osaka. The organization has exponentially magnified since its inception to include as many as six troupes of actors who perform at the Grand Theater in Takarazuka and the Tokyo theater.

When I visited the Grand Theater in January 2015, I was awestruck at the opulent and majestic quality of the building. When approaching it from the train station across the Mukogawa river (武庫川), the building resembles a Renaissance castle. Inside, the rugs are plush and appear to be inspired by Louis XIV-era patterns. High ceilings and gold trimmed chandeliers add a sense of elegance. The theater itself is gargantuan and the stage immense. The experience rivals Broadway with flashy sets, flamboyant costumes, hydraulic lifts, pyrotechnics, etc. Typically, the show lasts around 2.5 to 3
hours and consists of 2 parts: a formal musical and a musical revue reminiscent of old-fashioned Broadway follies.

The “male” actors access their chest registers mostly in order to imitate the pitch and timbre of a male. Their gestures are masculine and even the language used in the script leans toward masculine style and terminology. Pitted against the stark femininity of the “female” actors and coupled with the rapt reverence of the Japanese audience, I was easily seduced into a sense of vocal and visual androgyny. This idea of sexual androgyny lies as one of the foundational arguments in Jennifer Robertson’s book on Takarazuka, entitled *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. Robertson considers androgyny in this context as a “scrambling of gender markers...in a way that both challenges the stability of a [binary] sex-gender system...and also retains the components of that dichotomy...” She discusses other examples of androgyny in her book, including kabuki as well as modern fashion designers who flirt with androgyny in their designs.

One of the factors that makes gender in Japan such a fascinating topic for Western researchers such as myself is that the acceptance of this type of established androgyny has a fixed place of aesthetic reception. As opposed to many Western societies, Japanese can experience an androgynous entity—be it a Takarazuka actor or a kabuki actor—and ideologically categorize the phenomenon as *chūseiteki* (literally, middlesexed), as

---


13 Ibid., p. 47.
opposed to merely relying on constructs of male/female or masculine/feminine.\textsuperscript{14}

Robertson argues that much of this idea of androgyne stems from philosophers who were theorizing the ontology of the \textit{onnagata}.\textsuperscript{15} Erica Stevens Abbitt claims that “the audience’s enjoyment of this slippage is central to the effectiveness of androgyny as a theatrical technique,” which could apply to lived experience outside the theater as well.\textsuperscript{16}

This imbedded sense of \textit{chūsei}, then, could help to inform how the Japanese hear or aesthetically receive vocal sounds that exist outside the binary concept of gender.

\textbf{The Contemporary Countertenor in Japan}

When I originally had the idea to apply for a grant to study countertenors in Japan, I envisioned 3 months of traveling the country and observing regional differences in reception to the voice type. However, upon doing extensive preliminary research—attempting to leave no countertenor undiscovered before my arrival—I was only able to locate 4 professional singers.\textsuperscript{17} As previously mentioned, amateur countertenors can be found singing in choral ensembles but the professional contemporary countertenors (at least in 2013, when I conducted the research) were centrally located in the Tokyo area only.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] Here, I refer to the concept as mentioned in Robertson, p. 50.
\item[15] Ibid., p. 53-4.
\item[17] I would like to thank Tadashi Miroy, Sumihito Uesugi, and Hiroya Aoki for their invaluable time and information extended during interviews.
\end{footnotes}
The first conclusion I drew was that the Japanese audience must not enjoy the countertenor for some reason and I argued heavily in my grant proposal that reasons for this result could be of a gendered nature. However, the research steered me in a surprisingly unexpected direction. Several factors have contributed to the dearth of the contemporary countertenor in Japan. First, despite the love of Western Classical music, professional singers who want to sing Western art music with a *bel canto* style find it very difficult to find adequate training in Japan. After WWII, when Western music flooded the Japanese soundscape, singers who wanted to learn *bel canto* technique had to travel to other countries in order to learn the craft. This practice still persists today. One of the unfortunate results of this practice is that singers leave the country to study and many do not return. For example, when doing my research, I was able to locate Japanese countertenors in the U.S. and Germany who had travelled there to study and never returned. All three of the countertenors who I interviewed in Japan had received the bulk of their training outside of Japan.

Another reason that seems to be contributing to the low number of countertenors in Japan is the small number of opportunities that the countertenors have to perform. Chamber music abounds in Japan but much of the repertoire focuses on Classical and Romantic music. Also, many Baroque ensembles—such as the famous Bach Collegium of Japan—often hire British or U.S. American singers to perform concerts as opposed to the local talent. As a result, these singers receive less national publicity. The geographical constraints of being a countertenor based in Japan make it very difficult to be hired by
agents who focus on Europe and North America. Additionally, the saturation of the 
Western market with countertenors creates 1) less of a demand for countertenors from 
other regions such as Japan and 2) a larger pool of countertenors who may have more 
experience, having had the opportunities to perform that are provided more readily in the 
West. The performance of Western opera also seems to be in decline in Japan and the 
Baroque opera scene that engages most of the countertenors in the West does not exist. 
Ultimately, the Japanese countertenors with whom I spoke have been forced to make 
singing their avocation for the most part.

A logical assumption might be that the inability to sing full-time would affect the 
singers’ overall level of ability; however, this is not the case. I attended a few concerts of 
countertenors while in Japan. Granted, with so few opportunities for countertenors to 
sing, even within a 3-month time period I was only able to hear 2 concerts. Both concerts 
were very well sung and performed. I could detect no difference in performance level 
compared to their Western counterparts, which is due in part to their Western training as 
well as the Japanese penchant for kaizen (改善), or a practice of continuous 
 improvement–one of my Japanese friends even suggested that a better translation would 
be “getting it right”. All in all, a lack of exposure and opportunity seems to plague the 
contemporary countertenor in Japan; although, one countertenor has received a 
considerable amount of notoriety, Yoshikazu Mera.
Yoshikazu Mera

Although I was not able to interview Mera in Japan, due to the fact that he was out of the country, his life is adequately chronicled and publicized to be of service to the present discussion. A boon to Mera’s career occurred when he was featured as the soloist for the theme song to the 1997 anime film, Princess Mononoke (もののけ姫). The film was destined for success because the director, Hayao Miyazaki, had already risen to fame with other animated films from the famous Studio Ghibli. The theme song, written by Joe Hisaishi, evokes a mystical and almost mythological Japanese imaginary and Mera’s pure countertenor sound lends an ethereal quality to the piece as a whole.

A slew of Baroque recordings emerged in 1997 and, in the year afterward, Mera released one of his most popular CD’s entitled Nightingale (うぐisu [uguisu]), consisting of many beautiful art songs not specifically written for countertenor. Japanese enjoy Mera as a public figure and he is featured quite often on celebrity talk shows. Mera’s diminutive stature—he is 4’8”–makes him quite unique in the public eye. Even though Mera is extremely flamboyant—he can be found pictured in feathery boas and brightly-colored polka-dot kimono with flowers in his hair–his effervescent personality and vocal artistry seem to be what is most important to the Japanese public. Whether or not certain Japanese see him as androgynous or simply choose to close their eyes regarding his femininely flamboyant nature, they certainly have not closed their ears. In
fact, Mera has recorded albums exclusively in Japanese. In a sense, gender issues do not seem to affect Mera’s popularity in any significant way, which calls into question the role of the listener in contemporary Japan.

**Listening and Play**

The fact that the Japanese, in general, possess an extremely strong work ethic goes without saying. To balance the pressure of work life it stands to reason that Japanese would take leisure as seriously. In her book, *Making Music in Japan’s Underground*, Jennifer Milioto Matsue focuses on the importance of “play and leisure in shaping Japanese identity and society.” Matsue follows the lives of several Japanese who work stereotypical jobs during the day but participate in the hardcore underground rock scene at night. She pinpoints a stark difference for Japanese between the “work scene” and the “play scene”. Matsue indicates that the essence of play here is more than just the manipulation of one’s instrument or the performance of hardcore music but:

...“play” here also refers to the broader act of play, play through the performance of the scene as a way to spend leisure time, with the primary purpose of enjoying oneself. This idea of “play” works particularly well in reference to underground music scenes, where there

---


20 Ibid., p. 43.
is little to no money to be made by the bands themselves. Rather, they pay for the privilege to play on stage and to play in the scene more broadly.\textsuperscript{21}

In this way, the participants in the underground music scene are taking their leisure time very seriously and by their actions demonstrate incredible dedication to their play of choice.

Japanese are known for their active listening skills. The linguist Laura Miller confirms this fact in her research on the merits of \textit{aizuchi} (utterances of active listening in Japanese communication) as well as differences between Japanese and U.S. listening skills.\textsuperscript{22} I noted while performing and also as an audience member in Japan that these active listening skills were also used during leisure time. Audience members at the Western art music performances I attended in Japan rarely looked at their programs during concerts and they did not whisper to one another. Rapt attention was given to the performance. In this way, non-performing participants in Japanese music scenes are taking an active role in leisure or play.

Matsue points out that “[m]usic scenes offer a safe space to play with new identities away from one’s traditional spheres of life.”\textsuperscript{23} I would like to suggest that in Japan (as well as other societies) vocal production plays an important role in the ability of

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{23} Matsue, p. 44.
the active listener to experience a different or transgressive gender identity. As Abbitt mentions in her article “Androgyny and Otherness,” in performances of Takarazuka Revue, “audience members...witness a woman getting away with a male performance of power and freedom.”

These audience members not only witness this transgressive act visually but also sonically as the singers modify their voices to deepen the pitch and timbre when playing *otokoyaku* or “male” roles.

Likewise, Japanese (and others worldwide) enjoy Yoshikazu Mera, not only because his gendered alterity challenges the more rigid, lived experience of gender roles in society but also because the voice invites a certain slippage into androgyny or gendered otherness. Furthermore, I suggest that the active role taken by Japanese listeners in conjunction with the act of listening as play, magnifies the experience of an alternatively gendered performance. This fact serves to intensify the inner emotion (*ura*).

Additionally, as previously mentioned, Christine Yano asserts that singing and intimacy are intricately related in Japanese society. A vocal performance, then, can create a heightened sense of intimacy in respect to the gendered Other. Therefore, the Japanese public has been able to accept Mera’s recordings of traditional Japanese music (in addition to Western music) with open arms/ears. In fact, one of Mera’s albums, which includes Japanese as well as Western music, is titled ノスタルジア：ヨイトマケの歌

---

24 Abbitt, p. 252.

25 Yano, p. 4.
[Nostalgia: Song of the Yoinomake]. The next section explores the strong sense of vocal nostalgia that influences aesthetic vocal reception in Japan.

**Vocal Nostalgia**

The “Song of the Yoinomake” or “Yoinomake no uta” is an excellent segue into a discussion concerning nostalgia and its connection to the material qualities of the singing voice. This particular song has a unique history in that it was banned in Japan for almost 2 decades. Yoinomake is a term that refers to blue-collar workers, particularly construction workers.

“Yoinomake no uta” was written and originally performed by Akihiro Miwa, a very well-known actor, performer, and director. Also, he is noted for being an openly gay transvestite and sporting brightly-colored yellow hair. “Yoinomake no uta” tells the tale of a poor boy who—while being ridiculed at school—appreciates the sacrifices of his working mother. Later in life, when he is successful, he remembers the song his mother used to sing while she was living. At its very core, the song is about the love for one’s mother; however, the issues of memory and nostalgia are also very prevalent.

When Miwa wrote the song in 1964, the word yoitomake was considered discriminatory and vulgar so the radio commission banned the song from the airwaves. It was not until 1983 that the commission rescinded the ban; yet, only recently has the general public become (re)acquainted with it. An iconic video of Miwa performing the

---

song shows the singer with a 60s female haircut and loosely-fitting, rust-colored blouse. Yet, Miwa does not sing like a woman or in falsetto but begins with a very masculine-sounding introit, evoking a very traditional Japanese chant. The sound is placed very far back in the throat, the larynx is raised so that sound is extremely constricted and raspy, and Miwa places a lot of tension on the vocal cords as well to create a vocal timbre that is reminiscent of older styles of singing. The manufactured, extrinsic vibrato also harkens back to older styles of singing, reminding one of Buddhist or Noh chanting.

The ultimate take-away, then, from Miwa’s performance will more than likely be of a masculine nature based on the fact that this type of vocal production is only heard from male singers. Yet, it also does not limit itself to singing but one can hear the strained, raspy tones in the likes of samurai and yakuza movies, at temple, as well as in comedic impressions of such talk. Despite Miwa’s appearance and reputation, there is no doubt that he is drawing on centuries’ old vocalisms in order to evoke a sense of nostalgia. This example shows the capacity of vocal production (not merely timbre) to convey gender, history, and cultural specificity: vocal meaning that can, indeed, fly in the face of the visual. Taken in this context, the countertenor does not carry a sense of nostalgia for the Japanese. If anything, the voice type transmits Western notions of aesthetics. The final section of this chapter takes a look at the more systemic problem facing the contemporary countertenor as well as most bel canto singers in Japan.

---

Vocal Production and What It Means to Be Japanese

When one looks at the music being taught privately in the Japanese home as well as at university, one cannot question the pre-eminence of Western music in Japanese musical training. This predilection for Western music began in the second half of the 19th century when Japan began to open its doors to the West. Yet, according to Ivan Hewett:

The roots seem shallowest in opera, the area of classical music where Japanese performers most obviously lag behind Western ones; only a handful of Japanese singers have made even a modest impact in the West. One of the reasons for the disparity is that the Japanese themselves have a prejudice against their own performers, which is why so many Japanese [singers] choose to live in the West.\(^{28}\)

As aforementioned, the countertenors I interviewed for this project confirm this very fact. Singers leave Japan to be trained and tend not to return because, in regards to Western art music, Japanese audiences distrust Japanese singers. However, this phenomenon does not hold true for the instrumental world. Tokyo boasts more orchestras than any other city in the world.\(^{29}\)

This “distrust” of Japanese singers of Western art music in Japan and the fate of Western art song and opera in Japan connects to an issue dealt with earlier in the chapter—the importance of vocal production in the Japanese psyche. According to Hewett:

\[\ldots\] when I attended a masterclass for young Japanese singing students given by two distinguished German singers, I was struck by how

---


\(^{29}\) Ibid.
inhibited the students were. The distinguished visitors didn’t really succeed in persuading the students to express the feelings in the words. At the bottom of these young students, who seem so completely Westernised, something stubbornly refused to let go.

I also have experienced the reluctance of my Japanese voice students to express emotions outwardly in public situations, making it rather difficult to emote the feelings and meaning of the text. Yet, Akihiro Miwa’s performance of “Yoinomake no uta” literally brought me to tears the first time I heard his performance. Enka singers particularly excel at capturing depth of emotion. Also, there are some incredible Japanese actors who are greatly admired by Japanese and Western critics alike for their talents.

The problem is not that Japanese are incapable of overcoming the ura/omote dichotomy. I contend that the act of singing, which is a gateway between ura and omote carries a sense of what it means to be Japanese, commonly known as nihonjinron.

Nihonjinron (日本人論), literally “theories of the Japanese,” has been a topic of intense discussion among philosophers, sociologists, and cultural theorists for over half a century.

According to Kazufumi Manabe and Harumi Befu:

Nihonjinron is a body of discourse which purports to demonstrate Japan’s cultural differences from other cultures and Japan’s cultural uniqueness in the world and thus tries to establish Japan’s cultural identity. It is said to be the world view of the middle class and the ideology of the Everyman.30

The amount of research on this topic is legion and a full explanation lies outside the parameters of this project. However, I mention the topic because the issues of vocal

---

production, particularly that of nostalgia, constitute a sense of vocal identity or “what it sounds like to be Japanese” which is unique to Japan.

A more detailed spectrographic study could be performed (such as in Ch. 1) however, suffice it to say, one can detect this Japanese vocal identity in most of the traditional and popular Japanese vocal genres, even J-pop, which is a more Westernized genre of Japanese music. For example, one can clearly hear the gruff, raspy, stereotypically male Japanese sound in the voices of Arashi, a teen J-pop band from the early 2000s. If you listen to female idol groups such as AKB40, you will hear the stereotypically high-pitched, shrill sound that is associated with kawaii culture, which started as a school girl trend in the 1970s and now has become a deeply-entrenched cultural norm.\footnote{Manami Okazaki and Geoff Johnson, \textit{Kawaii!: Japan’s Culture of Cute} (New York: Prestel, 2013).} Listen to recordings of Ayumi Hamasaki—perhaps one of the most famous J-pop stars in the last 20 years—and you will hear the characteristically Japanese extrinsic vibrato (à la Akihiro Miwa).\footnote{For example, pay close attention to the vibrato at the ends of phrases in this live performance of “No Way To Say” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhCvFkXUk9A (Accessed 1/23/16).}

While teaching voice students in Japan, I noticed that most Japanese tend to hold their tongues farther back in the mouth than U.S. students. Moreover, when I attempt to imitate the Japanese accent, I find that I have to put my tongue in the same place. If I want to imitate the Noh and traditional male singers I have to very intensely depress the back of my tongue in order to sound authentic. Even when speaking the Japanese language, I find that I have to place my tongue farther back in the mouth or else my
foreign accent is very thick. This type of vocal production (positioning of the tongue) pervades much of the Japanese singing that I heard in Japan—even from singers of Western art music who were trained in the West. In my estimation, if Japanese audiences are “distrustful” of Japanese singers it is because the Japanese vocal identity persists in many of these singers’ voices. It is not that Japanese perceive their own vocal identity as negative but a juxtaposition of Japanese and Western vocality creates a sense of inauthenticity, which could help to explain Japanese audiences’ preference for Western countertenors and opera/art song performers.

Conclusion

When assessing the reception of the contemporary countertenor in Japan, one has trouble separating countertenor reception from the reception of the Western bel canto voice in general. Although falsetto is used quite frequently in traditional Japanese singing by way of uragoe, the quality and timbre of the sound is quite different. In fact, at this point in the discussion, I can claim that the uragoe sound—with its characteristically back-centered tongue production—is situated within the parameters of the Japanese vocal identity that was discussed in the previous section.

The bel canto sound is most often associated with the exact opposite of the typical Japanese production of sound. As mentioned in Chapter 1, bel canto capitalizes on the forward nasal resonances of the facial mask (forehead, cheeks, and nose). The Japanese sound is focused toward the back of the mouth and even depressed into the pharyngeal
throat area. In Western vocal pedagogy, certain diagnoses exist for these types of sounds. However, I refuse to use them here because in the Western pedagogical mindset, these sounds are considered “vocal faults” and I feel that such a conception is untoward. The Japanese sound is not wrong, merely different.

Yet, this difference in vocal production represents two very dominant field of influence—one also might construe them as Foucaultian power structures. Enveloped within the Japanese vocal identity is the notion of Japanese psyche, inner emotion (ura), history, nostalgia, and identity. The bel canto production transfers associations of Westernization, modernity, and outward expression. These conflicting ideologies are ever-present in the everyday Japanese lived experience. Therefore, one should not be surprised that this cultural miscegenation is equally reflected and represented in the Japanese vocal soundscape.

The fact that Japanese countertenors are few and far between is directly proportional to the lack of support that Japanese Western art music singers receive in general. This lack of support from Japanese audiences could be a resistance of the Western ideology or vocal characteristics. Or, the Japanese audience could be listening to these singers and deeming them inauthentic to this repertoire based on the timbre of the voice. As previously mentioned, the concept of “getting it right” is very important in Japan. Perhaps, the utilization of foreign singers for foreign music agrees more readily with the Japanese aesthetic. Undoubtedly, many variables exist in regards to this issue;
however, opening the discussion of why these barriers exist for countertenors (and other Japanese singers of Western art music) can potentially open the door for more acceptance.
Singing is the most human, most companionable of the arts. It joins together in the whole realm of sound, forging a group identity where there were only individuals and making a communicative statement that far transcends what any of us could do alone. It is a paradigm of union with the creator.

This quote by Alice Walker addresses eloquently the crux of the issue at hand in this project. In this final section, I would like to investigate the wisdom in Walker’s quote, connect her ideas to the project at hand, and suggest some of the directions in which the type of research presented in this study can proceed.

Walker distinguishes singing from other forms of art as being the most human and the most companionable. In this particular case, one cannot separate these two characteristics. Other species sing—birds, dolphins, whales, mice, et al. However, Walker singles out singing as bearing unique qualities of humanity as well as its ability to create a sense of companionship. Indeed, singing connects humans via emotional content and, quite often, lyrical content, not to mention the sound itself, which envelops the group. Combining these entities helps to more easily forge “a group identity where there were only individuals.”

Much work has been done in regards to singing and its connection with society but material qualities of the voice also deserve attention because they are the building blocks of the ultimate “communicative statement” that singing makes. For example, Chapter 1 looks at various theoretical models that not only apply to the research project at hand but also to the disciple of Voice Studies at large. The model that I have proposed is
most helpful to see the particular ways in which vocal production—that is, the myriad of ways that the vocal mechanism produces sound as opposed to the timbre of the voice, which is more tied to bone structure, musculature, and genetic inheritance—transmits non-discursive meaning. The goal of this research has been to show the relationship that vocal production plays in the transmission of cultural constructs such as gender or sexuality. Using the countertenor to illustrate this theory highlights the qualities of the voice that are most involved in indicating the male/female dichotomy.

As discussed in Chapter 2, vocal production can transfer gendered constructs of culture. Pitch and timbre have strong associations with aspects of society that are associated with biological sex. However, by extension, certain types of vocal production carry elements of masculine/feminine and can also include many components of sexuality. For example, a husky vocal production in a female (at least in Western societies) can denote sensuality or even authority, meaning that certain masculine/feminine qualities are transmitted via vocal production as well.

The countertenor voice type offers a very unique perspective for this discussion because it crosses the boundaries of male/female in regards to pitch expectation and masculine/feminine in regards to singing technique (bel canto). In certain respects, the listener can confuse or conflate the issue. Due to this fact, one must take into account the listener’s reception, both aesthetically and culturally, in order to understand the bigger picture and how to differentiate components of the vocal/singing experience.
Chapter 3 provides a foundation for how to approach the singer/listener relationship. By comparing the singer/listener relationship to the text/reader relationship, one can utilize Jauss' theories of aesthetic reception in order to show how a person’s previous experience and knowledge can influence what s/he hears and interprets. In regards to the countertenor, Klaus Nomi provides a wonderful example of how U.S. American/Western culture and the element of genre act as a lens through which vocal production—particularly that of the countertenor—is perceived and understood.

The last three chapters look at the countertenor within specific social contexts, showing the relationship between vocal production and aspects of society that constitute and affect a constituent’s perspective of gender and sexuality. History plays a large role in the construction of gender and sexuality. In Britain, the countertenor has had strong ties to church music since the late Medieval period. Because of this church choral tradition, more exposure and acceptance of the voice type over time has affected contemporary countertenor reception. In the U.S., the strong connection of gender/sexuality and identity create a different association with the countertenor in that one’s subjective viewpoint as well as one’s projection of beliefs and morals onto an object influence the reception of the countertenor, in part because the history of the countertenor is practically non-existent in the U.S., and in part due to distinctly U.S. American associations. In Japan, yet another perspective of gendered vocal production exists. The Japanese have a very traditional style of falsetto production already in use—that of uragoe—which has shaped the appreciation of the countertenor as discussed in Chapter 6. However, because
the countertenor’s vocal production is different than *uragoe*, then, the voice types should not easily be compared but one should take note of their respective receptions. The fact that Japanese can conceptually categorize the countertenor voice in their own way separates how Japanese may hear the voice type from those listeners in both Britain and the U.S.

At this point, I would like to suggest an extension of my argument in this project regarding gender’s involvement in the process of reception. Masculine/feminine as a dialectic does not necessarily need to be intrinsically tied to biological sex; instead, the dialectic can apply to realms of power—along the lines of a Foucaultian dynamic. Many gendered examples of this theory can be extrapolated in this regard. For example, the style of vocal production called “belting” is considered a powerful style of singing. The fact that men and women both belt take the issue of biological sex out of the metaphorical equation and, instead, situates the focus on the act of vocal production as a means of transferring or exerting power. Some people might easily equate belting with shouting—which most definitely exemplifies dominance. However, not all belting is received as a power dynamic but rather the emotional connection or intimacy becomes predominant in the vocal experience. But this connection only exists because certain aspects of Western culture have become associated with heightened emotion and that singing is perceived to be an acceptable way to express these emotions.

Other historical qualities of the “musical theater” vocal sound carry historical elements of the genre and the society in which it originated. An exploration of these
intricacies is the next step—in my estimation—to further the knowledge of how vocal production is linked to (U.S.) culture. When this type of investigation is extended to other societies the reception and associations related to the production will vary depending on the culture. For example, other styles of music utilize vocal productions that are quite similar to belting yet the meaning transferred can be very different based on the connections that exist within the culturally constructed elements of that society towards singing.

In the simplest of terms, claiming that a connection exists between vocal production and society seems rather unnecessary at this stage in philosophical thought. However, an advanced understanding of how the voice operates is essential to conducting this type of research. Also, methodologies used for this type of research could potentially be very subjective. My advice to anyone interested in pursing this field of musicology is that they should ground themselves fully in a complete understanding of the vocal mechanism as well as practice ways in which one can diagnose how sounds are being produced aurally. Another branch of this type of methodology is to use spectrographic technology to pinpoint wavelengths that indicate precisely the sound being produced as opposed to using subjective means.

In conclusion, my ultimate goal with this research is to illuminate the ears and minds of academia to the role that vocal production plays in the transmission of cultural meaning. The takeaway is essentially a new way of listening to the singing voice and analyzing its non-discursive importance. My hope is that others will take this type of
methodology and apply new data and modes of investigation to it in order to further our understanding of the singing voice and society.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


___________. 日本のうたベスト[Best of Japanese Song] (King Records 2011).


CURRICULUM VITAE

Brad Fugate
59 Beaumont St. #2
Dorchester Center, MA 02124
(617) 777-0445
flobeau2@gmail.com

Education:


M.M. University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, Choral Conducting (1997)

B.M. Furman University, Music Education (1995)

Publications:

Three articles on Japanese music for World Music Encyclopedia:


Lectures:

“Voices Fit for Queens: Voice, Gender, and the Drag Queen” (American Musicological Society national conference, Milwaukee, WI, Nov 2014)

“No Exit: An Existential Opera” City University of New York Graduate Conference (Spring 2013)

“Voices Fit for Queens” University of Toronto Graduate Conference (Spring 2013) (invited)

“Voices Fit for Queens” Brown University Out to Lunch Lecture Series (Spring 2010)

“Voices Fit for Queens” Boston University Musicology Conference (Spring 2010)

Professional Organization Memberships:

American Musicological Society
National Association of Teachers of Singing
Society for Ethnomusicology

Research Interests:

Falsettists/Countertenors
Cultural Constructs of the Singing Voice
Philosophy and Music
Musical Theater
Gender/Sexuality and the Voice
Japanese music