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Throughout history the socially constructed concepts of gender and sexual desire have played a vital role in the inter-connectedness of human cultures. Nowhere is this more evident than in the performing and visual arts, which act as a looking glass for society as a whole. Within the realm of theater alone, one finds ample representation of gender and sex norms. The genre of comedy casts incisive light on societal norms due to the unwritten license of the author and actors to comment subversively on matters that would otherwise be taboo. In musical comedy the issue of the male singing in his falsetto—a mature male singing in a female’s range—inherently problematizes gender. It magnifies the intrinsic differences between masculine and feminine while simultaneously referring to the norms of a society. This study parallels the history of the comic falsetto-singing male in Western culture with the history of gender and sexuality in order to see the relationship that exists between them. The use and appreciation of the comic falsettist, or lack thereof, has typically been a direct reflection of a culture’s attitude toward gender and sexuality. This paper provides representative examples of repertoire for the comic falsettist from different time periods and interprets them contextually within their respective cultures. Examples from a play by Aristophanes and from a Baroque *intermezzo* exemplify the predominantly patriarchal society in which women and men with same-sex desire existed in the pre-modern age. A discussion of the absence of the male falsettist in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries explores the relationship between this voice type, the beginnings of sexual identity, and a more rigid concept of gender roles.

Finally, there is a discussion of several comic *falsetto* roles, written in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, which mirror the evolution of Western culture's views toward gender and sexuality since 1900.

MORE THAN MEN IN DRAG: GENDER, SEXUALITY,  
AND THE FALSETTIST IN MUSICAL COMEDY  
OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

*To Entendre, who is nothing short of fabulous*

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Western Civilization the male falsettist has enjoyed varying degrees of prevalence and acceptance. A number of explanations have been explored to discover the reason for this fluctuation. First, the expansion of vocal ranges occurring in music during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, coupled with the exclusion of women from the professional stage and church choir, did much to promote the use of the falsetto voice to access the higher pitches composed in music of the time. Second, the advent of the *bel canto* era in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nudged the falsettist out of the limelight and replaced him with *castrati*, *contralti*, and dramatic tenors. Third, renewed interests in performance practice during the twentieth century brought the falsettist back to popularity. Yet there is another approach to this issue that has not been researched in depth: the changing views of gender and sexuality at many times and places during the history of Western civilization, specifically those of ancient Greece to the present, affected individual cultures' appreciation of the falsettist. This study considers the relationship between gender, sexuality, and the falsettist by coupling the use of the falsettist in the realm of musical comedy with the history of gender from antiquity to the present. By exploring this relationship, additional reasons for the rise and fall of the falsettist in Western civilization will become clear.

## Gender and Expectation

A male singing in a female's register instantly creates a dilemma of gender.<sup>1</sup> For example, many people who hear a falsettist sing, without a visual image of the singer, are unclear about the sex of the person. When the listener eventually discerns the sex of the singer, it creates confusion in the listener's mind because the feminine voice that is heard does not match the masculine mental image. A falsettist's vocal gender is misleading to the average listener, which is why composers throughout history have used the voice type to mimic females on stage—predominantly in musical comedy. Before examining the role of gender in the realm of the falsettist, it is essential to clarify the general precepts of gender theory and how it applies to this paper.

Before the 1960s, the sociological and historical study of gender and sexuality was almost nonexistent. Our society has only recently developed the words with which to verbalize these concepts because of the development of gender theory—a body of knowledge based on the idea that gender is culturally constructed, that is, not exclusively linked to biological sex. Applying gender theory to history is important and arduous work, not only for the writer but for the reader. Recent research in gender and sexuality has shown how central these two sociological concepts are to the fabric of society. Applying these new theories to previous cultures illuminates them. Moreover, it is worthwhile for contemporary society to struggle with these concepts and either apply or

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term "gender" will apply only to one's behavior, societal roles, or appearance—for example, masculine or feminine. The term "sex" will apply to either the act of sexual intercourse or one's biological sex, male or female. The term "sexuality" will apply to the innate sense of sexual desire for a particular sex.

challenge them; only then can these gender theories truly be put into practice. To that end, the remainder of the introduction aims to give the reader more insight into gender theory, the male falsettist, culture, and how these entities are interrelated.

Gender refers to the masculine and feminine traits of an individual. This concept can be counterintuitive because one's gender is not only based upon how one perceives oneself, but how one is perceived by someone else. A person can act, look, or sound a certain way, but unless those actions are capable of cultural interpretation, as appropriately masculine or feminine, observers may be confused. In other words, gender is most important in the eyes (and ears) of the beholder.

The paradoxical nature of gender thought can be applied to a vocal performance, in that *the most important aspect is not the singer, but the listener*. When a singer sings for an audience, the voice is essentially given over to that audience. The listeners form an expectation of it and comprehend it using the knowledge at their immediate disposal. For example, if a heldentenor sings an aria from *Tristan und Isolde* to six-year-olds, they are likely to appreciate the voice merely for its volume, because they have little experience with opera, not to mention with voices of such magnitude. If the same singer performs at Bayreuth, where the average listener is more mature and more highly educated, the audience will likely appreciate the voice for more reasons than its volume, rather, technical skill and interpretive ability. The performance of the heldentenor is understood by these listeners in various ways based on their previous conceptions of singing. Such pre-existing notions shape the individual appreciation of any vocal

performance.

In the realm of gender, the word “performance” takes on a broader meaning. One “performs” merely by interacting within a given society. Because societies are different, an action may be interpreted as masculine in one culture but feminine in another. In Western culture, for example, crossing one’s legs at the knee when sitting is considered by some as slightly feminine or an action that a woman would perform; however, in Eastern culture there is no feminine association with this action. A Chinese gentleman can cross his legs on the subway in Beijing without any public discomfort or perceived gender conflict. When the same man crosses his legs during a rodeo at a stadium in Texas someone could more likely interpret his action as feminine. This example suggests that gender must be socially constructed—a set of norms collectively created by a culture to regulate or make sense of what is masculine and/or feminine—and its interpretation depends on the social context of the action performed.

A person can attempt to accurately display his/her gender, but this effort is always subject to external interpretations. Judith Butler, author of *Bodies that Matter*, *Gender Trouble*, and *Undoing Gender*, has made great strides in developing a philosophy of the gendered body, or an entity that is interpreted based on its capacity to be masculine and/or feminine. “It is through the body,” she contends, “that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings. In a sense, to be a body is to be given over to

others even as a body is, emphatically, ‘one’s own.’”<sup>2</sup> In other words, because people cannot read minds, they can only see masculinities, femininities, or sexual preferences based on visual cues or actions. It is at that point that a person’s body ceases to be “one’s own” because it is continually being interpreted by others. The body is a signifier. It means something to the person who sees it—or hears it.

Being part of the body, the voice is “one’s own” only until it is heard by someone else. At that point it is interpreted as masculine or feminine because it is also a gendered entity subject to social and cultural norms. For example, when a bass sings the listener usually assumes that the person singing is a man because of the low pitch heard, proving that the *pitch* of one’s voice can denote gender (masculine or feminine) because it has the capacity to sound as if it belongs to a man or to a woman. With the bass, vocal gender clarity allows the listener to perceive more easily the singer’s sex. On the other hand, vocal gender ambiguity can occasionally lead to gender confusion. For example, a listener can have difficulty in distinguishing between male or female if an unidentified voice on the phone hovers around c4 [middle c] or just below.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, one can imagine why some listeners are confused by the male falsettist, a *male* singing with a *female*-sounding voice, a combination which naturally

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20.

<sup>3</sup> The pitch classification system for this paper is as follows:



problematizes the issues of gender and sex recognition. Depending on the listener's previous conceptions of singing, a recorded falsetto voice could sound feminine or it could sound masculine. In either case, when the listener sees the person singing, he/she expects the sex of the singer to be the one that is being heard in his/her mind's ear. Gender is fluid; one person could hear the falsetto as a masculine sound and another person could hear it as feminine. Because the gender expectation of the male falsettist varies from person to person, the expectations of a whole culture concerning *both* male and female can shape that culture's appreciation of the male falsettist. Reciprocally, it stands to reason that the use and appreciation of the male falsettist should reflect something about a given society's view of gender.

This study addresses the male falsettist and how the sex and gender norms of various Western cultures have interpreted its use in different ways. A male falsettist does not signify an identical meaning cross-culturally; it exists at the crossroads of culture, gender, and music in each respective society. Because the falsettist has been utilized in many different genres throughout history, it is necessary to narrow the scope of this study. By observing the male falsettist in musical comedy of Western civilization from ancient Greece to the present and the ways in which the voice type was appreciated or underappreciated, one can see a reflection of these societies' thoughts and attitudes toward gender, desire, and sexuality.

## **Defining Terminology**

It is difficult to discuss the male falsettist in its historical context because of a lack of uniformity regarding terminology of the voice type. This confusion still exists today. Male falsettists assume many aliases due, in part, to the wide-spread ignorance concerning falsetto nomenclature and its history. Because the falsetto voice has consistently been ambiguously gendered, ever-changing gender norms have caused each new society's way of classifying the falsettist to collide with previous ones.

Chapter Two offers a categorization of the various knowledge sets applicable to the study of the male falsettist. A historicization of the present terminology used to reference this vocal type will help to clarify ambiguous terms and to differentiate between those words that legitimately apply to the male falsettist and others that are misleading. A more precise and modern nomenclature is needed in order to distinguish who is singing and how the sound is produced.

Chapter Two also considers the exclusivity of various terms for the falsettist within their respective cultures. For example, the word "counter-tenor" does not mean the same thing today as it did in Europe from 1100 to 1785; during this pre-modern era, the counter-tenor was mainly a part designation. It was not used to denote vocal range, production of sound, or timbre. In the mid-twentieth century the term "counter-tenor" was extracted from its historical context with almost no philological evolution and unleashed into a society having both a keen awareness of sex difference and new attitudes toward gender that were different from those of the pre-modern era.

## **The Importance of Comedy in the Study of the Falsetto**

In pre-modern Europe, many uses for the male falsettist were evident in the church, theater, and royal court settings. This study will not address the issue of male falsettists and religion. The utilization of the male falsettist in the Christian church has been widespread but there is considerable debate over whether counter-tenors were using falsetto or modal voice in the English church, particularly the choral and oratorio genres.<sup>4</sup> It is, therefore, impossible to consider the church tradition historiographically in regard to gender until more information or theory reveals itself. However, the medium of comic musical theater, free from theological and historical complication, has used falsetto frequently in the imitation of female characters on stage, thereby leading to a better understanding of the relationship between the falsettist, comedy, and gender.

Falsettists, gender, and theater have a unique history. Gender and theater are intrinsically intertwined because, in order to represent actions between persons on stage, an actor must portray the appropriate sex on stage. If the actor is called upon to portray a character different from his/her biological sex, then the actor must assume the role of the opposite sex by using masculine or feminine traits and costume. At this point the actor is displaying gender.

Since women were not allowed on stage for a large portion of theater history, conflicts between the actor's sex and the gender portrayed were frequent, and limited to

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<sup>4</sup> "Falsetto" refers to partial vocal fold use and "modal" to full fold use. A more complete explanation is provided on pp. 15-16. G. M. Ardran and David Wulstan, "The Alto or Countertenor Voice," *Music & Letters* 48, no. 1 (1976): 17-22, and Simon Ravens, "A Sweet Shriill Voice," *Early Music* 26, no. 1, (1998): 123-134.



the male representation of feminine gender. For instance, in ancient Greece women were allowed to sing in the chorus, but only men were allowed to play the title roles.<sup>5</sup> Female masks and floor length robes helped to make men look more like women. In Medieval mystery plays and the stage theater of the Renaissance, boys were used to depict women because of their high-pitched voices. Male-dominated theater began to wane when Vittoria Archilei sang the title role of Caccini's *Euridice* in 1589 and women began to be introduced into musical theater. However, in the realm of comedy, male falsetto singers were still employed to play the female roles.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of non-comedic roles that were composed for the high male voice before the *bel canto* period, roughly 1750-1800, were meant for *castrati* or boys, neither of which used their falsetto. Additionally, the roles designated "counter-tenor" in dramatic musical theater of the Renaissance and Baroque periods are unreliable sources for purely falsetto singing in dramatic musical theater because the question remains whether the falsetto or modal voice was employed. The use of falsetto in the genre of comedy is less debatable because the roles composed for this voice type—until the twentieth century—were mainly comic, female mimetic roles. The composers of these comic works were using the ambiguity of the *falsetto* to mock the common cultural view of female inferiority. Thus, comic theater is an excellent historical setting in which to explore issues of gender and sex.

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<sup>5</sup> The period and location referred to as "ancient Greece" in this study is the region in and around Athens from 550-150 B.C.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Murata, ed., *The Baroque Era*, in *Source Readings in Music History*, vol. 4, Oliver Strunk, ed., rev. ed., Leo Treitler, gen. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 98.

Chapters Three through Five of this paper discuss the changes that took place in gender perception within Western civilization, focusing on the comic falsettist in musical theater. Chapter Three of this study shows one of the earliest supposed instances of falsetto used in the theater. In an ancient Greek play by Aristophanes entitled *Thesmophoriazusae*, the character of Agathon presents an entirely sung eloquent reading of poetry. Throughout his rendering, he pretends to be both a female chorus leader and, alternately, the female chorus. Other references to his performance in the play point to the fact that Agathon did not sound like a man but like a woman—he is referred to in a mocking, feminine way by other characters onstage. This degrading mimesis of women in the *falsetto* role of Agathon clearly points to patriarchal views of gender and sexual desire that were present in ancient Greek society. An examination of European comic musical theater through the Baroque period shows that gender and sex norms remained for the most part unchanged. Chapter Three also explores *Pimpinone*, an *intermezzo* by Telemann, in which the *baritone* title character uses his falsetto to mimic the singing of women, thereby reinforcing sex roles.

Chapter Four takes a dialectical approach to gender and the falsettist by looking at the *absence* of *falsetto* roles in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musical theater. This disappearance was a powerful statement concerning Western culture's rejection of sexual ambiguity. As biological and psychological sciences advanced, a chasm between male and female developed, to the extent that the theory of sexual identity, or an awareness of one's own individual sexual desire or nature, developed in the social identities of

nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>7</sup> As one examines the development of medical science, gender, and sexuality during this time, it becomes clear why the male falsettist was removed from the musical stage and replaced with voice types that represented the norms of that society. Chapter Four discusses ways in which *falsetto* roles were discouraged and why the use of falsettists on the stage became synonymous with homosexuality.

In the past century, the cultures of Europe and America have made great strides towards the acceptance of women and non-heteronormative sexualities. Gender and sexual equality were the main thrusts of the Women's Suffrage movements of the early and mid-twentieth century as well as the gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Society's change in perspective regarding gender and sexuality has been directly reflected in musical comedy, specifically *falsetto* roles. Chapter Five discusses some of these roles: Mary Sunshine in Kander and Ebb's *Chicago*, Galt Dermott's depiction of Margaret Mead in *Hair*, Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Benjamin Britten, and Sir Andrew Aguecheek in Joel Feigin's opera, *Twelfth Night*. Examining these roles will not only reveal how society since 1900 has become more accepting of non-traditional gender representation, but will also give the reader a glimpse of how the falsettist's use in the genre of musical comedy continues to be a reflection of changes in social norms regarding gender.

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 14.

## CHAPTER II

### THE COUNTER-TENOR CONUNDRUM: ESTABLISHING DEFINITIONS AND CLARIFYING CONCEPTS

#### **Will the Real Counter-tenor Please Stand up?**

One may find humor in the fact that the most frequently asked question of counter-tenor scholars is: “What *is* a counter-tenor?” Despite the current popularity of counter-tenors in the classical music world, the average musician (and certainly the average person who merely appreciates music) is likely to lack accurate and precise information regarding the definition and concept of the counter-tenor. To complicate matters further, the study of the counter-tenor remains a relatively closed field because information regarding the counter-tenor, in primary sources, is vague.

This paucity of factual information regarding the history of the falsettist has spawned debate over whether the pre-modern counter-tenors were singing in falsetto or modal voice. For example, when most Renaissance British lexicographers and authors refer to the counter-tenor, they are usually referring to the “counter-tenor part” (a line of music) or the person singing the counter-tenor part.<sup>8</sup> Seldom do they mention vocal range or production of sound, except in secondary sources that only offer scant information on the timbre or quality of the sound. In modern usage, however, the term,

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<sup>8</sup> Graham Strahle, *An Early Music Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 41.

“counter-tenor,” has become a vocal designation (the type of voice and/or range used to sing the counter-tenor part).

When researching the term internationally, the web of words tangles further. For example, the term in French, *haute-contre*, may or may not mean the same thing as the English counter-tenor depending on what period of history one is studying and the genre to which one is referring. Furthermore, the Italian terms *contratenor*, *alto*, or *contralto* do not quite capture the exact essence of the English word “counter-tenor” because many of these Italian singers were *castrati*, medically altered singers using the full capacity of their vocal cords. The one link among all the terms is that in European dictionaries written before the nineteenth century “counter-tenor” is the *part* being sung, not the *vocal production* used to sing the part. This particular matter has been surprisingly overlooked in previous counter-tenor research.

Relatively few musicologists have endeavored to write about the counter-tenor. Lynelle Wiens wrote an excellent academic treatise on the subject of the counter-tenor in her dissertation entitled “A Practical and Historical Guide to the Understanding of the Counter Tenor Voice” (1987).<sup>9</sup> Even though her work was presented almost twenty years ago, it is still not widely known, even among professional musicians. Wiens offers an excellent history of the term “counter-tenor,” but does not solve the matter of historical versus current usages of the word. Peter Giles, a British counter-tenor and author, has

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<sup>9</sup> Lynelle Wiens, “A Practical and Historical Guide to the Understanding of the Counter Tenor Voice,” (D.M.A., diss., Indiana University, 1987).

written two studies on the history of the counter-tenor.<sup>10</sup> He has even delved into the topics of vocal physiology and technique relevant to the “male high voice family,” but a disconnection between the historical and modern perceptions of the counter-tenor remains. Many other articles and texts address the definition of “counter-tenor”: this study alone uses over thirty different sources that relate specifically to the study of the high male voice, yet there is no authoritative consensus for an exact definition. Does the term “counter-tenor” address the line of music, the singer of the line of music, a vocal type (falsettist or high tenor) or a complicated catch-all? Why is the term such a conundrum? “Counter-tenor” (and the gamut of related international terminology, e.g., *haute-contre*, etc.) is a time-specific/place-specific entity. It means different things to both past and present cultures, thereby making its study confusing. The matter of pinning down a specific definition for the term is only possible given the context. Also, a variety of knowledge sets is necessary in order to comprehend more fully the differences and similarities between the terms.

This chapter will provide information necessary for understanding the world of the counter-tenor and, given the variety of cultural contexts in which the word “counter-tenor” and its closely connected international terms are used, will look at sociological reasons why the term is so confusing today. To people in pre-modern Europe, words such as *counter-tenor*, *haute-contre*, *alto*, meant the part being sung; however, today

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<sup>10</sup> 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).

these terms are highly gendered and imply a specific vocal type. For example, when the average person sees “counter-tenor” on the program, the expectation is a male, but, when the same person sees “alto,” the expectation is typically female. This shift in understanding of the language provides insight into the relationship between vocal terminology and gender, which will be clarified by positing a return to the pre-modern conceptualization of vocal terminology to offer a resolution for the current confusion regarding nomenclature for the “high male voice family.” Finally, this research will help to define more precisely the terminology that will be used in this paper in an effort to explore the relationship between gender and the high male voice.

### **Comprehending the Counter-tenor**

An explication of certain applicable knowledge sets is necessary for an extended discussion of the counter-tenor. The Vocal Knowledge Set explains the difference between falsetto and full voice, which is often misunderstood outside the realm of vocal science. The Etymological Knowledge Set follows the history of the word “counter-tenor,” showing the relationship of the word to the part being sung. The Philological Knowledge Set helps to determine how the word has mutated during the centuries and its relationship to quasi-synonymous words in other Western cultures. An in-depth study of the interrelationships of these matters brings the reader closer to an understanding of how culture has shaped our perspective of the counter-tenor and how it pertains to the comic falsettist throughout history.

## The Vocal Knowledge Set

The first hurdle to overcome in the quest for knowledge about the counter-tenor is to discern how the singer is producing the sound. In order to understand what is happening physiologically when a counter-tenor sings (whether in full voice or falsetto), it is necessary to understand some fairly advanced vocal concepts. Because the study of the voice is also a field of scientific research, the modern, technical terminology in use helps to avoid misunderstandings of certain words in the vernacular.

In addition to the term “counter-tenor,” many other multi-faceted terms regarding counter-tenors are bandied about the studio, music hall, and air waves, and these words deserve some clarification. The two terms that create the most confusion are “falsetto” and “head voice.” A consideration of how the "vocal folds" function is necessary here.<sup>11</sup> In the simplest terms, vocal sound is produced by two ligaments that vibrate against each other due to air passing between them. The internal thyro-arytenoid muscles surround (and are essentially a part of) these ligaments. Several groups of muscles stretch and alter the internal thyro-arytenoids in order to change the pitch; for example, the crico-thyroid muscles lengthen or shorten the vocal folds to alter pitch.

"Modal voice" refers to the quality of sound produced by the use of the entire vocal fold capacity. There are mainly two types of "modal" production in the male— "chest" and "head." In “chest voice,” the full length and breadth of the vocal folds are used to produce the sound and the crico-thyroid muscles do most of the work when

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<sup>11</sup> Some pedagogues use the term "vocal cords." "Folds" is used here to designate the gamut of muscles utilized during phonation, not just one particular pair of muscles.



changing pitch.<sup>12</sup> The pitches produced via this production are low to middle range.<sup>13</sup> “Head voice” is typically used in the higher pitch range.<sup>14</sup> During this type of vocal production, when the pitch ascends into the higher range, the palatal muscles, or muscles of the soft palate, are extended upward and assist the crico-thyroids in accessing notes that are above the *passaggio* (or break) in the voice, creating a bright, resonant, and full sound.<sup>15</sup> Note that the full length and breadth of the vocal folds are still in use during “head voice.” When these muscles reach their full capacity, the voice usually breaks again and begins to access a register (or part) of the voice called falsetto.<sup>16</sup> Falsetto, simply stated, occurs when the internal thyro-arytenoid muscles, which surround the vocal ligaments, relax completely and the sound is altered due to partial use of the folds, hence the “false” sound.<sup>17</sup> When the internal thyro-artynoids disengage, only the ligamentous edges of the folds vibrate. Many different sonorities can be created in this falsetto register. Some singers have access to the full length of the vocal ligament. This creates a more robust sound. A more flute-like sound is produced when only a portion of

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Doscher, *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1994), 178, 183.

<sup>13</sup> Approximately g2-d4 in bass/baritone and d3-g4 in tenor.

<sup>14</sup> Approximately e-flat4-a5 in bass/baritone and g-sharp4-d5 in tenor.

<sup>15</sup> Doscher, 180, 184.

<sup>16</sup> Mostly this phenomenon occurs in men, but women do also have a falsetto, particularly females with low ranges.

<sup>17</sup> Victor Negus, “Falsetto,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 6, ed. by Stanley Sadie (New York: McMillan Publishers, Ltd., 1980), 375.

the vocal ligament is allowed to open during falsetto phonation.<sup>18</sup>

In modern usage, the word "counter-tenor" typically characterizes voice types that use the falsetto register, although this classification can often be confusing. Some counter-tenors, for example, do sing in falsetto. Depending on the singer, the falsetto voice can reach notes in the soprano range and sound high and flute-like, or it can have a lower, more alto range with a fuller quality to the sound. Other counter-tenors do not sing in falsetto but use the "modal voice" to produce the sound. These singers have exceptionally high, light voices, also called *tenorino*.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, some adult male singers today have voices that have never dropped. These persons may not have received enough of the correct hormone during puberty to initiate the process of vocal fold elongation, thereby allowing them to sing extremely high pitches utilizing the full range of the modal voice.

All these different voice types and their divergent vocal productions can be classified as "counter-tenor." This nomenclature, however, is not specific and misleading. Without specifying information regarding the singer in question, it is almost impossible to know exactly how the person is producing the sound. A look at the history of the word, "counter-tenor," will provide more reasons why there is such confusion with this term.

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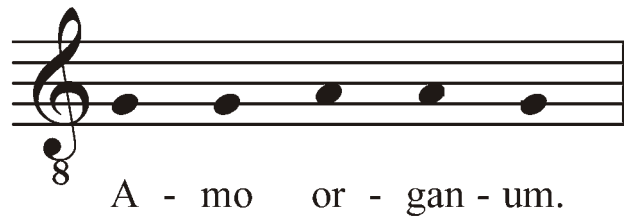
<sup>18</sup> Doscher , 186.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), 162.

## The Etymological Knowledge Set

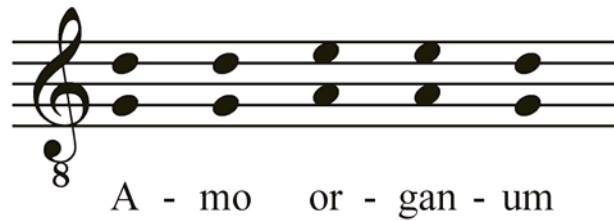
In the history of the word “counter-tenor,” the vocal *part* (or line of music) precedes any reference to the voice *type* used to sing the part. In the early musical history of the church, approximately the year 1100 A.D., men in the church began to sing chant (single lines of melody). The chant was either sung by a cantor (single person) or by the choir (consisting of many persons singing in unison). Below is an example of a chant excerpt:

Example 1:



As musical theory and tastes changed over the next two hundred years, unwritten notes were added to the chant at fixed intervals. This style was eventually codified and given the name *organum*. Here is an example of the previous chant excerpt with *organum* at the fifth:

Example 2:



The lower voice part is the original chant and the upper voice is a fifth above each note of chant.

As vocal music became more polyphonic (having more than one musical line), the original chant (musical material borrowed from the chant) was given the name *tenor*. Other parts were composed around the tenor part and these lines were called *contratenor*, which literally means “against the tenor”—that is, a part written in addition to the tenor line in order to complement it.<sup>20</sup> If the part was written at a higher pitch than the tenor, then the part was given the name *contratenor altus*. If the part was lower than the tenor the term *contratenor bassus* applied.<sup>21</sup> There were many ways to designate or classify the parts. Below is just one way that a manuscript may have named parts in the early fifteenth century:

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<sup>20</sup> Wiens, 4-7.

<sup>21</sup> In Latin, *altus* means high and *bassus* means low.

Example 3:

Superius  
A - mo or - gan - um

Contratenor  
Altus  
A - mo or - gan - um

Tenor  
8  
A - mo or - gan - um

Contratenor  
Bassus  
A - mo or - gan - um

By the end of the fifteenth century, many composers and scribes shortened the terms to *altus* and *bassus*. However, in England and Northern Europe, the *contratenor altus* developed into the word *contratenor* and the *contratenor bassus* into *bassus*:

Example 4:

Superius

Contratenor

Tenor  
8

Bassus

Johannes Tinctoris provided the first musical dictionary for the Western world in 1495. "Countertenor," he wrote, "is that voice of a part-song, mainly written opposite the tenor, which is lower than the highest voice, but higher, or on the same level, or even lower than the tenor."<sup>22</sup> The *contratenorista* was one who sang the *contratenor* part; yet, the *tenor* was defined as one who sang the tenor part and *bassus* as one who sang the bassus part.<sup>23</sup> It is not known why the counter-tenor part name was not synonymous with the title of the person singing the part, but, in 1611, Cotgrave described *counter-tenor* as "the counter-tenor part, in musicke, and he that sings, or beares it," and in 1704 *Cocker's English Dictionary* described it as "the middle part in musick."<sup>24</sup> Both Brossard (1703) and Rousseau (1768) in their respective *dictionnaires de musique* made reference only to the counter-tenor part, not the type of voice singing the part.<sup>25</sup>

The anomaly to this train of thought is evident in the entry in Butler's *Principles in Musik* (1636), which states:

The Countertenor or *Contratenor*, is so called,  
because it answereth the Tenor; though commonly in higher

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<sup>22</sup> CONTRATENOR est pars illa cantus compositi quae principaliter contra tenorem facta inferior est supremo, altior autem aut aequalis aut etiam ipso tenore inferior." Johannes Tinctoris, *Dictionary of Musical Terminology*, trans. and annotated by Carl Parrish (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 16-17.

<sup>23</sup> Tinctoris, p. 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Strahle, 41.

<sup>25</sup> "[CONTRA-TENOR. or simply *Contra*. Latin Word, which signifies HAUTE-CONTRE or the Part next to and just above the Taille.]" Sébastien de Brossard, *Dictionary of Music, Dictionnaire de Musique (Paris 1703)*, Trans. and ed. by Albion Gruber, *Musical Theorists in Translation* 12 (Henryville, PA: Institute of Mediaeval Music, Ltd., 1982), 16. "[CONTRA-TENOR. Name given in the beginning of Counterpoint to the part that since has been named *Tenor* or *Taille*.]" Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique* (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969), 121.

keyz: and therefore is fittest for a man of a sweete shril  
voice. Which Parte though it have little Melodi by it self;  
(as consisting much of monotonies) yet in Harmoni it hath  
the greatest grace: specially when it is sung with a right  
voice: which is too rare.<sup>26</sup>

This definition problematizes the issue of the counter-tenor. Butler is clearly addressing quality of sound (a sweet, shrill, and rare male voice) as well as denoting the quality of the part (a monotonous line that provides character to the harmony). To Butler, “counter-tenor” was not just a line in the music; it represented a vocal quality, type, and designation. The next section will illustrate how this manner of thinking mutated the term “counter-tenor” into a myriad of different entities.

### **The Philological Knowledge Set**

Knowing the etymology of the word “counter-tenor” is only the first step. One must also consider the evolution of this word across time in order to better understand its historical and modern contexts. Despite Medieval tunings, the aforementioned *organum* lines were well within the modal range of males (Examples 1 and 2), especially considering anthropometric evidence that the singing voice was naturally higher in pre-modern Europe.<sup>27</sup> As music became more harmonically and melodically complex, the ranges of the vocal parts expanded. Composers such as Machaut in the early fourteenth century and Ockeghem in the fifteenth century did much to push the limits of the highest

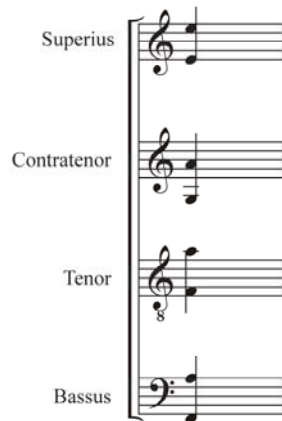
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<sup>26</sup> Strahle, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Ravens, 123-134.

and lowest voice parts. The example below shows the typical ranges for a composition by Ockeghem (1400-1474):

Example 5:



In England during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it is generally agreed that boys were singing the highest parts (usually called *treble*),<sup>28</sup> however, adult males were called upon to sing the next highest parts (*mean* and *counter-tenor*).<sup>29</sup> The mean and counter-tenor parts do not seem to be excessively high for the Renaissance male; however, at

times, men were called upon to sing the treble line, particularly after the Commonwealth

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, at Saint Chapelle cathedral in Paris, boys were singing the *superius*, or highest parts, in these vocal pieces as early as 1305. Michel Brenet, *Les musiciens de la Sainte-Chapelle du Palais*, (Paris: Librairie Alphonse Picard et Fils, 1910), 15.

<sup>29</sup> Giles, *The History and Technique of the Counter-tenor*, 55.



period (1640-1660).<sup>30</sup>

Debate over which vocal production was being used for the counter-tenor parts focuses on the difference between falsetto or modal voice.<sup>31</sup> Lionel Sawkins asserts that falsettists sang the treble lines.<sup>32</sup> Falsettists in the Vatican choir, sang the highest treble lines and also the second highest lines. This practice of using boys and male falsettists for the treble parts in the European choral tradition extended throughout the Renaissance period and into the Baroque era.<sup>33</sup>

Most of the early sources that mention treble, counter-tenor, or falsetto only discuss the part that is sung; mention of the vocal quality, or timbre, is rarely given. Some writers commented on the “artificial” nature of the sound<sup>34</sup>—an important observation because it indicates a direct link between this “false” sound and the falsetto.

For instance, many falsettists' voices have a shrillness, which is characteristic of counter-

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<sup>30</sup> During the Commonwealth no music was allowed in the churches of England. As a consequence, there were no trained boys to sing in the choir directly following this time. Giles, 55.

<sup>31</sup> Giles, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Lionel Sawkins, “For and Against the Order of Nature: Who Sang the Soprano?” *Early Music* 15, no. 3 (1987): 318.

<sup>33</sup> This practice still exists in the Anglican and Episcopal Christian church traditions.

<sup>34</sup> Aelred of Rivaulx (c. 1109-1166) depicts the falsetto sound as a man singing “treble.” He continues by saying that, “sometimes the masculine vigor being laid aside it is sharpened with the shrilnesse of a woman’s voyce: now and then it is writhed and retorted into a certaine artificial circumvolution.” Aelred of Rivaulx, *Speculum Charitatis* (1123), as quoted in Giles, 13.

tenors who do not use *bel canto* technique.<sup>35</sup>

Even though the treble parts were being sung by boys and falsettists, the use of falsetto may or may not have been the primary way to produce the sounds used to sing the counter-tenor part. There are few records stating that falsettists were used as opposed to modal, male counter-tenors or altos. Hough (1937) mentions in “The Historical Significance of the Counter-tenor” the separation between falsettist and alto: “Late in 1716, there were six singing boys, two falsettists, one altist, two tenorists, and two bassists....”<sup>36</sup> But this example is a very special case. Few distinctions were made between the two terms by pre-modern writers and composers because less was known about the anatomy and physiology of the voice at the time. A doctor cannot study how the voice works without a living subject and, since no instruments were available to visually record the working vocal apparatus, the naked eye was inadequate to observe the difference.<sup>37</sup> This lack of knowledge could explain why the term “counter-tenor” began to be used in association with the voice type (falsetto or high modal tenor), since no effort was made to separate the two. Furthermore, by the end of the Renaissance period, the

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<sup>35</sup> The *bel canto* school of teaching originated in the late seventeenth century (the *bel canto* style of singing in the eighteenth century evolved from this pedagogy) and flourished during the eighteenth century. It focused on utilizing proper support in breathing, an open or relaxed throat, lower larynx, and modification of vowels in higher registers. It would be anachronistic to think that singers in the twelfth century used this technique. Owen Jander, “Bel canto,” In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 2, ed. by Stanley Sadie (New York: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 1980), 420. See also: Berton Coffin, *Coffin’s Overtones of bel canto: Phonetic Basis of Artistic Singing* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press), 1980.

<sup>36</sup> Giles, *Historical Significance*, 88. The quote is from “The Historical Significance of the Counter-Tenor” *The Journal of the Royal Music Association* 64 (1937): 1-24.

<sup>37</sup> It is documented that Renaissance theory considered the male and female bodies to be very similar. Currently, technological advances allow us to see the differences more clearly, see footnote 36.

principle melodic material of vocal music began to be placed predominantly in the soprano line as opposed to the tenor line, where it had been situated previously. This shift, in theory, nullifies the original conception of the term “counter-tenor” (“against the tenor”), thereby creating space for the perception that “counter-tenor” refers to the person singing the part more than the part being sung. Over the next few centuries the vocal part labeled *counter-tenor*, *haute-contre*, *alto*, or *contralto* became synonymous with the section and persons singing that part, thereby focusing more on the voice type and less on the name of the part being sung.

Regardless of the production of sound (falsetto or modal voice), “counter-tenor” eventually became a catch-all term for those that sang in falsetto, those high tenors who could sing the treble parts in the modal voice (perhaps occasionally switching over to falsetto), and those that sang any high male voice part (*counter-tenor*, *mean*, *alto*, *treble*, etc.). This non-specific classification system continued into the twentieth century. For instance, Alfred Deller (a famous falsettist in the mid-twentieth century) presented himself as a counter-tenor at the same time as Russell Oberlin, a high tenor who was singing the same pitch range but with a different (modal) vocal production. Yet, even among falsettists one finds diverse timbres. Alfred Deller’s sound is very different from that of contemporary counter-tenors such as David Daniels or Brian Osawa (both trained via the *bel canto* method). The modern falsetto sound is much more full-bodied and resembles less and less the sonority of falsettists in pre-modern Europe.

Thus, a breakdown in counter-tenor classification is evident. A deficit of

scientific knowledge concerning the vocal production of falsetto throughout history and in the present has created a disconnection. The original definition of “counter-tenor” (as a part designation) differs significantly from the present catch-all term embodying vocal part, singer, and vocal designation. The next section adds gender to the mélange of reasons for a lack of precise clarification for the definition of “counter-tenor.”

### **Gender and the Counter-tenor**

In the pre-modern era men were the only people singing professionally. There was little question of sex recognition; regardless of the voice part, it was assumed that the singer was male. The terminology was gendered in a one-sided, patriarchal fashion.<sup>38</sup> Currently, however, because both males and females sing, gender plays a more confusing role in the process of discerning a singer’s sex. The terms used for female singers today (*soprano* and *alto*) have evolved. The gender of these words (or word endings) has stayed the same, but the sex association of the words is now female.

In today’s society a singer is considered to be not merely a voice but also a person, a sexed body (male or female); but a singer’s voice cannot have a sex. Its pitch and timbre can only refer to a gender (masculine or feminine). Current vocal terminology in Western culture “embodies” both sex and gender. A clear example of this is the bass voice part. “Bass” is gendered (masculine) because the average listener

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<sup>38</sup> The Romance languages are highly gendered. Endings of words govern masculine or feminine. The words used for high voice parts, e.g., *cantus*, *soprano*, *alto*, have masculine endings. This makes rational sense considering that men and boys sang these parts at the time the terminology was first used.

assumes that the person singing the bass part is male, thereby making it a masculine sound. In saying that a particular person is a *bass*, that individual is classified and visualized as having a particular sex (male) based on the masculine gender of the voice part.

Using the same verbal calculus for the term *counter-tenor* creates problems. By calling a voice *counter-tenor*, it can be gendered in many different ways, depending upon the listener. A listener might associate the voice with a feminine sound thereby creating a female gendering. If the listener has a highly developed ear and knows that the voice is falsetto or a very high, light tenor sound, the timbre heard might be masculine and the visualized body might be male. Due to the ambiguity of the vocal gender, the sex of the named *counter-tenor* is therefore in question as well. In order to avoid this gender confusion, a system must be adopted to clarify who is singing and how.

In contemporary society, the music that a certain singer performs is intrinsically linked to the voice type that he/she sings. For example, a soprano aria is typically sung by a female soprano or mezzo-soprano, categories distinguished by the quality of the voice. In fact, anyone can attempt to sing a soprano aria—male or female. Knowing that the *soprano* part was originally sung by boys, male falsettists, and *castrati* explains the masculine gender of the word, "soprano," that is, the masculine word ending. As females began to replace of high male singers in Europe during the late eighteenth century, no attempt was made to differentiate between soprano-man and soprano-woman. The ending of such parts written for soprano-woman could easily have become *soprana*, but

this was not in keeping with the customs of previous centuries when part designation determined the title of the singer. Several explanations could be advanced to account for the lack of an evolution for these terms.

One hypothesis hinges on the fact that pre-modern European thought did not account for many physical differences between the female body and the male body. In fact, the traditional view held that the sexual parts of men and women were alike, but reversed.<sup>39</sup> Both male and female voices were thought of as being similar in size (i.e., the larynx is the same size from birth to death and from male to female) and composition, yet different in sound. Aristotle asserted that the difference existed due to the heat of a man's body, which made the sound lower and more virile. Why then was a boy's voice high like a woman's? Aristotle explained that the passageway behind the boy's throat is not as large as a mature male's.<sup>40</sup> This theory indicates that the, mostly false, pre-modern conceptions of the voice were connected with the belief that few differences existed between male and female bodies. Knowing this historical, scientific knowledge, if the female voice only differed from the male in a minute way according to ancient Greek, Medieval, and Renaissance medicine, this contention could explain why no attempt was made to change the name of the soprano to something else more gender-specific when women began to sing the soprano parts at the end of the sixteenth century. This same thought process applied to the alto and the counter-tenor.

However, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the body of scientific

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<sup>39</sup> Helkiah Crooke, as quoted in William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Bruce R. Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 195-201.

<sup>40</sup> As quoted in *Twelfth Night*, 161-163.

medical knowledge grew enormously. Although the perceived chasm between male and female became larger, nothing was done to change the terminology of vocal designation. *Soprano* and *alto* gradually became synonymous with feminine and female.

“Counter-tenor” was left in limbo. With the increased awareness of female singing and the excitement that it created in eighteenth-century Europe, it is no wonder that the counter-tenor fell out of fashion. The counter-tenor’s place in the theater and the church (apart from the English choral tradition, which retained the use of the counter-tenor falsettist during this period) quickly diminished across Europe. As gender became more akin to sex, masculine being equated with male and feminine with female, aberrations from this formula became suspect. This trend in gender thought resulted in the popularity of *bel canto* tenors and *heldentenors* during this period—male singers who possessed fully modal, strong, masculine-sounding voices, as opposed to the feminine sound of the falsetto and the *castrato*, which became obsolete by the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup> *Counter-tenor*, the voice type, was ignored for almost 150 years, until the twentieth-century renewal of interest in the performance practice of early music. By that time, vocal designation far outweighed the part designation.

The disconnection between part and vocal designations is the cause of the muddled counter-tenor taxonomy. “Counter-tenor” is a reversed anachronism, a non-gendered concept (in pre-modern usage) released into a hyper-gendered and sexually aware culture without any philological evolution. It creates a gender-identity problem for

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<sup>41</sup> Giles, *Historical Significance*, 93; Fox, 31-32. This concept will be addressed further in Ch. 4.

false alto counter-tenors, who, because of contemporary society's more dialectical views of gender, sound feminine and look masculine as opposed to the pre-modern counter-tenor who sounded masculine and looked masculine. Therefore, the counter-tenor who sings in falsetto, whether singing a part designated "counter-tenor" or merely identifying with the voice type, must be differentiated from the one who sings in modal voice.

In this paper, the term *false alto* will be used to designate a person who sings in falsetto regardless of the part being sung. The adoption of this terminology reduces confusion as to the production of tone and lessens any association with the modern, feminine connotations of *alto* or *soprano*. Moreover, the same vocal modifiers used to specify differences in sound quality between other voice types can likewise apply to the false alto. For example, a coloratura or lyric *false alto* might sing a high, light role (such as one performed by *castrati*), whereas a *mezzo false alto* or dramatic *false alto* might sing Bach arias.<sup>42</sup>

In keeping with pre-modern history, the term *counter-tenor* will only apply to the part designation, the person who is singing the counter-tenor part, or the person documented as having sung the counter-tenor part. This distinction alleviates at least part of the gender confusion under which the term suffers. Only in this way can any type of standardization be achieved. To differentiate between the use of the falsetto and other vocal productions, males with a high, super-light, modal vocal production will be called *tenorino*. High male soloists—whose voices have never dropped—singing roles in

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<sup>42</sup> Stylistic performing distinctions can also spring from this system; e.g., the term Baroque *false alto* could apply to the singer who renders Baroque music with the appropriate style.



operas, masques, and oratorios with no part designation should be called *male soprano* or *male alto* because the definitions for “soprano” and “alto” have mutated over the centuries to designate persons with this specific range and quality of sound using modal voice.

It is evident that the voice categories into which the *falsetto* falls are highly gendered, especially in modern society. *Falsetto* is male, but the term may or may not equate to masculine depending on the culture. Because gender is socially constructed, it means different things in different societies. Composers, musicians, and cultures have used the *falsetto* to play with gender, particularly in comic literature. The remaining chapters examine various instances in history where gender and the *falsetto* intersect in the context of musical comedy.

## CHAPTER III

### ONE THRILLING COMBINATION: FEMALE MIMESIS AND THE *FALSETTO* IN EUROPEAN MUSICAL COMEDY BEFORE 1750

#### **Music and the Mirror**

Throughout history civilizations have used the arts to record and comment on their respective cultures. The art of music has been no exception. The thoughts and feelings of a society are mirrored not only sonically, but also textually, in poetry or lyrics of a musical setting. A third dimension is added to this reflection when one considers musical drama. Not only can the audience hear the music, they can also see a visual representation of the performance. Like the art of music, theater reflects cultural norms as well. One of the main images being reflected in the genre of musical comedy in Europe during the pre-modern era was patriarchy.

Early European theater, in particular, was notable for the exclusion of women. Females were prohibited from performing leading roles on stage, or being on stage at all, because of the stronghold of patriarchy in pre-modern European cultures.<sup>43</sup> Without females on the stage, men were required to perform the roles of female characters, creating special performance problems. The elements of costume and voice were the

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<sup>43</sup> For more information on this patriarchal structure see, Paul Halsall, "Early Western Civilization under the Sign of Gender: Europe and the Mediterranean," in *A Companion to Gender History*, ed. by Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 290-291, and Wiens, 8-9.

most common forms of gender differentiation, but each culture dealt with gender perception in its own way.

For instance, in ancient Greek theater all leading roles—male and female—were portrayed by men.<sup>44</sup> When playing a woman on stage, the male actor put on a female costume—a long robe as opposed to the masculine short robe—and usually wore a mask. In Greek comedy men were often depicted as fat with elongated phalluses.<sup>45</sup> Lawrence Senelick states that "the clear signifiers of costume and mask probably relieved the actor of having to perform gender at all, vocally or physically."<sup>46</sup> Immediately thereafter, he points to a reference in Aristophanes' play, *Thesmophoriazusae*, or *The Women's Assembly*, in which the playwright refers to cross-dressing, effeminacy, and the probable use of falsetto. The first section of this chapter will use this Aristophanic reference to elucidate the possible connection between Greek gender norms and the use of falsetto on the comic stage in early Western civilization. The portrayal of women by men on stage was a cultural looking glass, reflecting that ancient Greek culture viewed women and effeminate men as sub-standard. The use of falsetto took this depiction a step further by mimetically identifying more fully with the female and epicene.

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<sup>44</sup> There are instances of women singing in the chorus. Claude Calame, *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997).

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 49.

<sup>46</sup> Senelick, 49.

The remaining sections of this chapter trace musical comedy after the ancient Greek period. Between the third and tenth centuries A.D., musical drama was either rarely written or not extant.<sup>47</sup> This lack of theatrical drama could be due to the focus on liturgical music, such as chant, and the ceremonious nature of the mass. Liturgical drama began to emerge in the tenth century, but comedy was not part of these productions until the rise of the English and French mystery plays during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>48</sup> There are no explicit references to falsetto singing within these plays, but the use of the mature male in drag reflects the continuation of female subjugation.

During the Medieval era it became common in the church for boys rather than men to play the roles of women in mystery plays.<sup>49</sup> It was expected that female characters consistently sound like women instead of just appearing to be women. Changes in gender thought during the Middle Ages led to a psychological change in the Medieval mind. The philosophical growth of equality between husband and wife in the institution of marriage and the rise of the Christian church, particularly in its observance of Pauline precepts, changed the predominant cognitive perspective on women, but continued to validate patriarchy, with its sociological ramifications.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Donald Grout and Claude Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 25.

<sup>48</sup> Vern L. Bullough, "Cross Dressing and Gender Role Change in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. by Vern L Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 235.

<sup>49</sup> Bullough, 235.

<sup>50</sup> A detailed description of Paul's role will occur later in the paper. Robert Nye, "Sexuality," in *A Companion to Gender History*, ed. by Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 354.

By the end of the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, women had a bit more prominence in societal hegemony, yet they were still denied a place on the theatrical stage. Boys were typically used to portray females in drama; however, in pure comedy, the *falsetto* was commonly used to imitate women, perpetuating the pattern of male dominance that saturated Europe at the time.

However, around the turn of the seventeenth century, the Age of Enlightenment initiated changes in the medical and intellectual view of the sexes.<sup>51</sup> Thus, women began to depict their own sex in musical theater.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it may seem paradoxical that the vocally androgynous *castrato* was a permanent fixture in *opera seria* during the Baroque era. One must consider that even though the *castrato* was biologically male, he was also biologically intended to sing in the female range. This technicality increased the strength and virility of his voice, as well as granting it temporary immunity to accusations of femininity.<sup>53</sup> Because of the popularity of the *castrato*, the *falsetto* began to be used less and less, but the presence of the falsettist was still felt in female mimetic comedy. The final section of this chapter illustrates why the *falsetto* was retained, first by looking at the common uses for the *falsetto* in comedy at the time and then by analyzing the Telemann aria, "So quel, che si dice," from the intermezzo, *Pimpinone*, which requires the baritone to switch from modal to falsetto production when referring to men and

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<sup>51</sup> Foucault, 3-13.

<sup>52</sup> There are several references to women singing opera in source readings from the Baroque period. See *The Baroque Era*, ed. by Margaret Murata, in *Source Readings in Music History*, vol. 4, Oliver Strunk, ed., rev. ed., Leo Treitler, gen. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 41, 98, 153.

<sup>53</sup> The ultimate feminization of the *castrato* will be explored further in Ch. 4.

women respectively. In context, this aria is merely situation comedy; however, in the broader scheme of pre-modern European gender thought, the ramifications are greater because the use of falsetto in comedy ridiculed women. Musical comedy was a mirror that revealed the social subjugation of women inherent within female mimesis. At the heart of this degradation was the *falsetto*, whose capacity to visually and vocally (mis)represent the female sex, created an inextricable link between gender and the use of this voice type. The remainder of this chapter delves more thoroughly into this topic in the context of several time periods beginning with ancient Greece.

### **Agathon's Chorus Line**

As far as historians know, falsetto was not commonly used in ancient Greece. In fact, the subject of falsetto singing in ancient times has not been adequately explored due to the paucity of extant manuscripts relating to musical theory and performance practice of the time. Despite the lack of direct references to the sound of the ancient Greek singing voice, treatises by writers such as Plato and Aristotle do offer insights into the philosophical ideas behind music in Greek society. Additionally, ancient Greek theater is an excellent source for information regarding music, because music was incorporated into almost every performance.

Greek theater consisted of two main genres, tragedy and comedy, the derivations of which are both tied to music—singing in particular. The Greek theatrical term "tragedy" comes from the word *tragos*, meaning "goat," and the word *ōidē*, meaning

"song"; the ancient Greeks associated the sound of a goat with the "cracking" sound of boys' voices during adolescence, even though we do not make that connection today. According to John Winkler, "tragedy," is centered on the *tragizein* or the time during which boys go through puberty.<sup>54</sup> Tragedy, as a genre, was created to entertain and instruct boys at the festival of Dionysus, during which the ephebes, "boys on the threshold of manhood," were celebrated.<sup>55</sup> Tragedy was introduced into the festival in 534 B.C. and was used to instruct the boys on the history of Greece and also entertain them with stories of mythology.

Comedy was initiated into the Dionysian festival as a competitive genre in 486 B.C.<sup>56</sup> The word "comedy" comes from the Greek terms, *komos*, meaning "revels" or "a drinking party," and *aidos*, meaning "singer." During the festivals festive drinking parties, or *kōmizein*, were occasions "of wine, song, and dance, when men could figuratively let down their hair and for a brief space become feminine." In fact, the word *kōmizein* meant "to play the other."<sup>57</sup> This type of behavior typically went against the norms of Attic Greece except at the parties and in the comedies of the Dionysian festivals.

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<sup>54</sup> John J. Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song: *Tragōida* and *Polis*," *Representations* 11 (Summer 1985): 47.

<sup>55</sup> Winkler, 30.

<sup>56</sup> Winkler, 41.

<sup>57</sup> Senelick, 44.

Athenian Greek society excluded women from publicity, kept them indoors, and isolated them from men. Women were not allowed to vote, to hold legal citizenship, or to lack a male guardian. One of the most important events in a woman's life—marriage—was arranged and normally imposed around the age of fifteen to a male who was approximately thirty.<sup>58</sup> Although men were uncontested in their superior civic role, *kōmazein* provided an escape from the typical norms of Greek male behavior. Both the *komos* and the comic portions of the Dionysian festival were occasions when civic order could be suspended. Comedy was the only genre in which men were allowed to become "the other" and play the opposite sex without a mask. Women were hidden, or masked, both in society and on stage, unless a man was having fun at their expense. "It is not a woman who speaks or acts in ancient Greek drama," according to Froma Zeitlin, "but a man who speaks and acts for her."<sup>59</sup> This social norm is evidenced in comedy when mimesis and parody are used to demean the feminine.

As mentioned before, music was used in most theatrical productions. Michelle Edwards remarks that "music can articulate status, [sic] it is closely connected with both class and gender systems."<sup>60</sup> Instrumentally, the connection between music, gender, and class is complex, but vocally it is not. The pitch of one's voice can immediately clarify—

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<sup>58</sup> Halsall, 290-291.

<sup>59</sup> Froma Zeitlin, "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," in *Nothing to do with Dionysius? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, ed. by John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 65.

<sup>60</sup> Michelle Edwards, "Women in Music to ca. 1450," in *Women & Music: A History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. by Karin Pendle (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 50.



or confuse—one's gender and, by association, one's sex, which implies one's status in any pre-modern society. Therefore, it stands to reason that vocalization would be a prominent method used by Greek actors to portray women on stage.

Unfortunately, we lack adequate information regarding Greek vocal music. Claude Calame states that in tragedy and comedy, "choruses were made up of a fixed number of participants, men and women . . . twenty-four for the comic."<sup>61</sup> He also states that, in choral music as a whole, female choruses predominated, especially in myths, temples, and rites.<sup>62</sup> Boys were also used in the theatrical choruses, particularly for the Dionysian celebrations.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, the higher register, relatively speaking, was something fairly common for the average Greek audience to hear.

In fact, this register is documented in a manuscript by the Anonymous Bellermani.<sup>64</sup> This source states that the low male register, or *Hypatoeides*, extends from c3 to b-flat3; the middle male register, or *Mesoeides*, from g3 to f4; and the high male register, or *Netoeides*, from d4-c5.<sup>65</sup> The *Hyperboloeides* register was specified for anything higher. Martin Litchfield, author of *Ancient Greek Music*, presumes that this

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<sup>61</sup> Calame, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Calame, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song," 30.

<sup>64</sup> The Anonymous Bellermani was a notational author (or perhaps 3 authors) of a collection of material on ancient Greek music transmitted in a number of Byzantine manuscripts and first published by F. Bellermann in 1841.

<sup>65</sup> c4 = middle c

fourth region designates the register for females' and boys' voices.<sup>66</sup> Assuming, then, that the female register was recognized by the ancients, it logically follows that men would attempt to imitate it, especially in comedy. Costume and mask were usually sufficient for portraying women to a degree; however, the voice could have assisted in the depiction of women on stage. The character of Agathon in Aristophanes' play *Thesmophoriazusae* provides license for this utilization of the falsetto to occur.

*Thesmophoriazusae*, or *The Women's Assembly*, was composed in 411 B.C. for the festival of Dionysus and won a bid for first prize in the competition as "Best Comedy."<sup>67</sup> *Thesmophoriazusae* displays much gender confusion in the form of cross dressing, gender-blending, and situation comedy: many of the scenes could never have occurred in ancient Greek reality. It is within this Dionysian context that one might look for the possible use of the falsetto voice to mimic females on stage.

The play opens with the character Euripides, based on the actual Greek playwright, lamenting the fact that a conference of women is meeting in order to discuss alleged misogyny that he has written into his plays. Mnesilochus—referred to as Uncle, In-law, and Relative in various texts—has accompanied him on a journey to entreat Agathon, the famous tragic poet and pathic,<sup>68</sup> to attend the women's conference and defend Euripides. It would not be difficult for Agathon to pass as a female at the

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<sup>66</sup> Martin L. Litchfield, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), 275.

<sup>67</sup> Laurie O'Higgins, *Women and Humor in Classical Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 159.

<sup>68</sup> A male who assumes the receiving role in anal intercourse.

conference because, when he is wheeled onto the stage, he is dressed in women's robes, holding a mirror, as well as wearing a hair net, a girdle, and women's shoes. Not only is he visually feminine, but he is also vocally fit for the role. Twice in the scene, Agathon's voice is characterized as "sweet," a word used in Ancient Greece to denote a full, rich, and high voice.<sup>69</sup> In line 192, Euripides claims that Agathon is already endowed with female-sounding equipment by describing his voice as a *gynecophonos* (*gyneco*→female + *phonos*→voice) or "womanly voice."<sup>70</sup> The line implies that the pitch of his modal voice is high, or close to that of a woman. It places Agathon's voice at least in the *Netoeides* range of the Anonymous Bellermani.

After being antagonized by Mnesilochus for being feminine, Agathon sings a hymn in which he assumes two roles: himself and the chorus. When Agathon is singing as himself, Aristophanes writes *os hypokritis* or "as actor"; the other part is labeled *os choros* or "as chorus." If Agathon's speaking voice was already high enough to pass as female (according to Euripides, line 192), it is possible that the actor was using the falsetto to render the voice of the chorus. There are several reasons why the character of Agathon may have utilized the falsetto for this differentiation. First, if the female register, *Hyperboloeides*, was recognized, then the mimetic usage of it would have been a comic boon to the farcical portrayal of Agathon.<sup>71</sup> Second, if the chorus being imitated

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<sup>69</sup> Litchfield, 43.

<sup>70</sup> Aristophanes, *The Thesmophoriazusae of Aristophanes Acted in Athen in the Year B.C. 410: with a Free Translation into English Verse, Introduction, and Commentary*, trans. by Benjamin Bickley Rogers (London: George Bell & Sons, 1904), 24.

were female, it would make sense to use the register that corresponded to female. Another argument for the use of falsetto in the characterization of Agathon is the statement immediately following Agathon's song. Mnesilochus, confused by the sound and appearance of Agathon, states:

"Do you pretend to be a man? Where is the sign of your manhood, pray? Where is the cloak, the footgear that belong to that sex? Are you a woman? Then where are your breasts? Answer me. But you keep silent. Oh! just as you choose; your songs display your character quite sufficiently."<sup>72</sup>

Benjamin B. Rogers translates the last line, "Myself must guess your gender from your song."<sup>73</sup> As seen in this quote, Mnesilochus can scarcely discern Agathon's identity based on looks alone (even though he knows Agathon to be male); however, Agathon's songs apparently display his gender adequately. In the context of the highly sophisticated comic sarcasm used throughout the play, this statement is a tongue-in-cheek stab at Agathon, both on the level of female mimesis and on the level of Agathon's pathetic past. Aristophanes' stage directions do not refer to the use of falsetto during this scene, but Mnesilochus' witty jab would not be consistent if Agathon is singing only in chest voice.

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<sup>71</sup> Agathon was a legitimate poet and composer of the fifth century B.C.; furthermore, Aristophanes was quite fond of parodying his colleagues and competitors within the context of his comedies. Euripides is a classic example of this type of treatment.

<sup>72</sup> Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, in *Aristophanes, The Eleven Comedies: literally and completely translated from the Greek tongue into English with translator's foreword, an introduction to each comedy and elucidatory notes*, vol. 2 (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928), 285

<sup>73</sup> Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, in *The Complete Plays of Aristophanes*, trans. by Benjamin B. Rogers, ed. by Moses Hadas (New York: Bantam Books, 1962), 335.

A final indication of the use of falsetto singing in *Thesmophoriazusae* is a statement by Euripides to Mnesilochus later in the scene. After Agathon refuses to help Euripides, Mnesilochus offers to dress up like a woman and defend Euripides at the conference of women. In line 266 of Benjamin Rogers' translation, Euripides says, "There then, the man's a regular woman now, at least to look at; and if you've to speak, put on a feminine, mincing voice."<sup>74</sup> Another translation of the same text reads, "You look for all the world like a woman. But when you talk, take good care to give your voice a woman's tone."<sup>75</sup> The Greeks knew what the female register sounded like, so it is plausible that actors may have imitated it with the falsetto. In the context of Dionysian festivity, a Greek male would certainly have had no social qualms with assuming the role of female in a vocal capacity, because it was one of the only times during the year that he was allowed to veer from his clearly delineated role of masculinity.

This validation of male dominance is why Agathon's chorus line is so important. In ancient Greek society it was permissible for a free-born, adult-male citizen to penetrate either the body of a female, male slave, teenage boy, or pathic. Mnesilochus virulently demeans Agathon by referring to him as a male prostitute and pathic, while simultaneously ridiculing his feminine singing, thus validating Mnesilochus' place at the top of the Athenian social stratum.

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<sup>74</sup> *The Complete Plays of Aristophanes*, 339.

<sup>75</sup> *The Eleven Comedies*, 294.

This scene in Aristophanes' play has great social ramifications. It comments on the degrading social status of ancient Greek women and effeminate men. Moreover, it reinforces the fact that a man who sings like a woman off stage would not be a candidate for honor in the Greek patriarchal system; thus, the use of the falsetto, in conjunction with musical comedy and female mimesis, accurately reflects ancient Greek attitudes toward gender. The next section continues this discussion of Western civilization's patriarchal attitude toward gender in the pre-modern era by considering how Christianity and the writings of Paul affected Western society's view of women.

### **One Singular Sensation**

When writing to the constituents of Galatia in the first century A.D., the apostle Paul stated that "there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."<sup>76</sup> Jesus's teachings created quite a sensation, initiating precepts that leveled the social playing field for men and women, at least in theory. For example, in Paul's letter to the people of Corinth he wrote that "neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman."<sup>77</sup> Even though Paul wrote a multitude of contradictory statements on the matter, it is clear that a new sense of gender awareness began to take shape.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Gal. 3:28. (NASV)

<sup>77</sup> 1 Cor. 11:11.

<sup>78</sup> 1 Cor. 11:3-9, 14:34-35, Eph. 5:22-24

Paul's writings also influenced the woman's role in religious and secular domains. According to 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, women were not to speak in church. In conjunction with the misogynistic leanings of Augustine, verses like this led to a strict patriarchal aristocracy in the church, which helped to establish the all-male choral tradition in medieval Europe and the use of falsetto singing in the church.<sup>79</sup> According to Lynelle Wiens, women were excluded from church leadership positions for many reasons. First, the fact that women were associated with pagan rituals suggested a link with paganism that the early Christian church wanted desperately to sever. Second, according to Wiens, women's voices were increasingly becoming associated with carnality and eroticism in the early Medieval era. A woman's voice could tempt a man to sin.<sup>80</sup> A boy's voice, on the other hand, denoted innocence and purity, and was acceptable in church rites by virtue of being male. It could be one reason why boys began to be an integral part of the church choir around 1300.<sup>81</sup>

The absence of women in church leadership also affected the institution of the theater, both private—that is, courtly—and public. Whether taking their cue from the church or ancient Greek and Roman theater, males dominated the stage. Perhaps due to the serious nature of medieval Christianity, staged musical comedy as a professional genre was out of fashion; yet, adult men and boys were used in the English and French morality plays of the Middle Ages. Boys typically assumed the roles of female

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<sup>79</sup> Wiens, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Wiens, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Brenet, 15.

characters, except in isolated comic episodes when men assumed the roles of older women, such as Noah's cantankerous wife.<sup>82</sup>

Paradoxical as it may seem, as time progressed, the system by which Christian marriage and politics attempted to enforce gender roles created an atmosphere that was highly conducive to men singing in a treble range. According to Julie Hardwick, female rulers during the Renaissance created a wealth of possibilities for women in the collective consciences of European culture.<sup>83</sup> This awareness also could have contributed to the rise in the use of the *falsetto* at churches and the royal court. The sound of a female voice coming from a male body did not compromise a man's masculinity, as in antiquity. The strict policies of female exclusion from church and theater created more space for the inclusion of the *falsetto* in music making.

### "I Can Do That"

As a result of these performance opportunities, the *falsetto* experienced an increase in popularity beginning in the late Medieval period. Peter Giles, in *The History and Technique of the Counter-tenor*, chronicles the utilization of the *falsetto* (and to some extent the *tenorino*) from the Medieval era to the present. Giles particularly offers many examples of the *falsetto* used on stage during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. However, when reviewing the myriad of examples provided in Giles' *History*, one notices

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<sup>82</sup> Bullough, 235.

<sup>83</sup> Julie Hardwick, "Did Gender Have a Renaissance?" in *A Companion to Gender History*, ed. by Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 354.



that in the genre of pure musical comedy, the falsetto is solely utilized in a feminine mimetic or parodic fashion. *Falsetti* were singled out to portray women in musical comedy of this era and never cast as male characters. One reason could be the nature of comedy as a genre.

Renaissance and Baroque theater was based on the precepts of ancient Greek and Roman theater. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle described comedy as "an imitation of men worse than the average, worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the ridiculous."<sup>84</sup> Also, Horace, in his treatise *De Oratore*, lists two types of comedy, "continuous irony" and "mimicry."<sup>85</sup> Thus, comedy is not intended to resemble real life, but rather to be "ridiculous" and mock stereotypes—to make people laugh at themselves or others. Furthermore, it is used in a satirical way to make a point. In theater of Renaissance and Baroque Europe when women were far from experiencing equality with men, the concept of a man singing in a female's range was rarely contested. The influence of ancient patriarchal systems was still being felt almost a millennium later: women were still denied the right to choose a husband, were not allowed to hold administrative positions in the church, and were barred from politics unless it was their birthright. Perhaps the license to sing in the female range with no condemnation was extended to male singers because men perceived themselves as superior to women—the "I can do that" mentality. If a woman could sing in the treble

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<sup>84</sup> As quoted in David Galbraith, "Theories of Comedy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. by Alexander Leggatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>85</sup> Galbraith, 8.

range, then surely a man could sing just as high with no loss of social status. In comedy, *falsetti* were relegated to female roles not because the female range was degrading, but because being a woman was degrading. Since comedy's role is to mock reality and, in pre-modern Western civilization, a man would never deign to become a woman, a male singing in the female range made overt statements about the sanctity and supremacy of masculinity.

It is important to note here the difference between pure musical comedy and other similar genres. Genres from the Renaissance and Baroque eras, such as the pastoral opera, *ballet de cour*, and masque, contained both serious and light-hearted elements. These hybrid works employed *falsetti* as male characters; whereas, in pure musical comedy, such as farce, the *falsetto* depicted a female character. For example, Purcell's opera, *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), contains some comic moments—the witches' scenes are quite entertaining, as are many of the chorus parts. However, the opera ends with the death of Aeneas and Dido's famous lament. As expected, the *falsetto* role in this work, the Spirit, a messenger sent to dupe Aeneas into doing the Sorceresses' bidding, is a masculine role. On the other hand, the English opera, *The Boarding School, or, the Sham Captain* (1783), a broad farce, presents the *falsetto* in an entirely different light. Lady Termagant—a word meaning "ill-tempered shrew"—is married to "Alderman Nincompoop, a sneaking, uxorious citizen."<sup>86</sup> The comedic mockery here resides in the

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<sup>86</sup> Charles Coffey, *The Boarding School, or, the Sham Captain*, in *Farce: Broad or Satirical (1783)*, ed. by Walter H. Rubsaman, in *A Garland Series: The Ballad Opera: A Collection of 171 Original Texts of Musical Plays Printed in Photo-facsimile in 28 Volumes*, vol. 11 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974).

fact that a woman would not typically be the dominant figure in a relationship, at least not publicly. In light of this fact, Lady Termagant is mockingly scored for a *falsetto*.

The seventeenth-century genres of the English masque and French *ballet de cour* were very similar to one another. These genres were typically performed at the royal court and utilized music, spoken dialogue, and dance to tell a fairly innocuous story.<sup>87</sup> Masques and *ballets de cour* also used *falsetti*. Both genres have some lighter moments, but the comedy is toned down and very subtle. The main purpose of these court entertainments was royal dancing and socializing, not ribald humor; these *falsetto* roles are masculine. However, a piece like *Le Mariage de la Grosse Cathos*, a farcical *masquerade* from the seventeenth century, was intended to make the audience double over from laughter. In this single-scened farce, the roles of Madame Dupont, Dame Ragonde were originally performed by *haute-contre* and, in order to confuse the issue of gender further, a baritone in drag portrays the hilarious character of Fat Kate.<sup>88</sup>

Other examples of *falsetti* in comedy add further aberrant elements to parodic, cross-dressing roles. George Mattocks (c. 1738- 1804), a famous *falsetto* in England during the mid-eighteenth century, portrayed the title role in *Achilles in Petticoats* (1773) dressed in a full-length gown, with eponymous petticoats, brandishing a sword. Another professional *falsetto*, Thomas Solway, starred in *The Dragon of Wantley*, a long-running

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<sup>87</sup> Enid Welsford, *The Court Masque: A Study Between the Relationship of Poetry and the Revels* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1927), 1-7.

<sup>88</sup> The *haute-contre* is the French equivalent of the English *counter-tenor*. There is still debate about which register was used for these voice types—modal or falsetto. Rebecca Warrick and Carol Marsh, *Musical Theater at the Court of Louis XIV: the Example of 'Le Mariage de la Grosse Cathos,'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

burlesque, in which he dressed up as Farinelli, the famous *castrato*, parodying the feminine sound and appearance that the *castrato* embodied.<sup>89</sup> Another odd production was that of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1781. All the roles in the musical were played by the opposite sex.<sup>90</sup>

A more traditional, yet poignant, example of the use of falsetto for female mimesis in comedy occurs in a role actually scored for baritone. Pimpinone is the title character of a comic intermezzo by Telemann. In this production, the person singing Pimpinone's baritone aria, "So quel che si dice," or "I know what they say," must utilize falsetto to mimic the female voice.

The plot centers on Pimpinone, an elderly man who falls in love with Vespetta, a woman much younger than he. Pimpinone must try to match the pace of an energetic, strong-willed Vespetta, who has had enough of domestic life and has decided to go out for the evening. Pimpinone knows that she is going to meet up with her other married girlfriends and discuss their husbands. The aria begins,

So quel che si dice, e quel che si fa:  
(I know what they say, and what they do ["they" = the girlfriends])

"Sustrissima, Sustrissima, come si sta?"  
("My lady, my lady, how are you?")

In order to mimic Vespetta's girlfriends, Telemann scores this section of the vocal part in the treble clef; the tessitura is essentially an octave higher than the first line of the aria,

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<sup>89</sup> Giles, *History and Technique*, 80.

<sup>90</sup> Giles, 81.

much higher than the normal baritone could sing in modal voice. It is clear that the vocal production is intended to be falsetto.

Example 6:

Pimpinone

So quel che si di - ce, so quel che si fa, "Su - sti - si-ma, Su-sti - si-ma,  
Co - me si sta? Co - me si sta?"

All female quotes are sung in falsetto and Pimpinone's lines (without quotation marks) are sung in modal voice, requiring the singer to switch back and forth between registers.

"Bene." E poi subito: "Quel mio marito  
("Great." And then immediately: "This husband of mine)

È pur stravagante, è pur indiscreto.  
(is extremely eccentric, and extremely indiscreet.)

Pretende che in casa io stia tutto il dí."  
(He demands that I stay in the house all day.)

e l'altra risponde: "Gran bestia ch'egl'è."  
(and the other responds: "What a great beast he is.)

Pretendete, comare, l'esempio da me.  
(Demand, my companion in gossip, my example,)

Voleva anch'il mio. Ma l'ho ben chiarito.  
(He [the husband] wanted also me [to do the same]. But I cleared it up.)

Di far a mio modo trovato ho il segreto:  
(I have found the secret of doing it my way:)

S'ei dice di no, io dico di sí." So quel, etc.  
(If he says no, I say yes." I know what, etc.)<sup>91</sup>

Some underlying issues of gender are apparent within the song. The use of falsetto is combined with gender-specific stereotypes. In the context of the aria, females are always nagging, complaining, and concocting a ruse to get their way. Men know this about women—"So quel che si dice"—thereby making males superior and more noble. As in the cross-dressing *falsetto* roles discussed earlier, the falsetto register is used not only to replicate the feminine sound of the female voice, but also to perpetuate patriarchal gender hierarchy. Moreover, Telemann does not even have to resort to costume or mimesis, relying entirely upon the use of the falsetto register to accentuate the difference between male and female as well as mocking the latter.

### **Every Little Step She Takes**

Throughout the history of pre-modern Europe, women took infinitesimal, yet important, steps toward gender equality. If one compares the treatment of women in fourth century B.C. with that in 1750 A.D., it is not difficult to see that women gained ground in abating gender discrimination. Regardless of this social progress, patriarchal hegemony retained its stronghold in Western society; and likely, nowhere was it better

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<sup>91</sup> The translation of the Italian text is the author's; however, the original text is from this source: Tomaso Albioni, *Pimpione: Intermezzi comici musicali*, ed. by Michael Talbot, in *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era*, ed. by Robert L. Marshall (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, Inc., 1983), xxiv.

illustrated than in the social mirror of the arts, especially theater. The genre of comedy gave playwrights and composers license to mimic society and provide commentary, if necessary. Musical comedy provided an even clearer image of this reflection of society through the use of the *falsetto*. The subjugation of women and differences between male and female in pre-modern European society were not only seen on stage (as in spoken comedy), but also heard.

Despite the esteemed position of the *falsetto* on the serious, dramatic stage, the comic falsettist was most often used for derisive means. In ancient Greek times and in the Renaissance and Baroque eras, European society used the *falsetto* on stage as a means to denigrate women and the feminine by capitalizing on stereotypical gender differences. The remaining chapters of this study continue to survey the relationship between gender, sexuality, and the *falsetto* on the musical comedy stage. The *falsetto* fell out of favor in the nineteenth century because of the increase of perceived biological and psychological differences between male and female.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CASE OF THE MISSING FALSETTIST: A LOOK INTO THE ABSENCE OF THE *FALSETTO* DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Mystery novels traditionally begin in one of two ways. The first method is to begin the story with something phenomenal, inexplicable, and out of the ordinary. The rest of the novel is dedicated to uncovering what lies behind the mystery. The second method is to provide the reader with an idyllic scene in which the world is perfect and nothing is wrong. Then, something calamitous occurs without a satisfactory explanation, exposing corruption and intrigue behind the façade. In this manner, the paradox is heightened—perfection is exposed as imperfection—and the situation is then investigated.

The second method is a suitable analogy for the disappearance of the *falsetto* in the nineteenth century. In the three centuries immediately preceding the 1800s, the *falsetto* experienced a heyday, not only in musical comedy but in professional music drama as well. The musical world welcomed the *falsetto* in a multitude of genres: opera, oratorio, choral music, *intermezzi*, masques, *airs de cour*, *ballets de cour*, and *divertissements*. The *falsetto* world was normative and untroubled. Then, something calamitous occurred—*falsetti* were banished from the theater.

Certain theories attempt to explain music society's abandonment of the *falsetto* during the nineteenth century. Peter Giles in *The History and Technique of the Counter-*



*tenor* points out that *castrati* had begun to take the *falsetto*'s place in opera even before the nineteenth century began.<sup>92</sup> Giles also states that "by 1800 there was little work left for the counter-tenor in opera."<sup>93</sup> C.F. Fox posits another theory that the falsettist was supplanted in the nineteenth century by other types of singers, notably the female contralto and the dramatic tenor.<sup>94</sup> These replacements for the *falsetto* on stage signify a change, that is, an effect; however, the *cause* of the falsettist's exile remains a mystery.

In order to solve the mystery of the missing falsettist during the nineteenth century, it is necessary to understand the radical changes in gender perception during the course of the late 1700s and 1800s. Due to ever-increasing medical knowledge and the industrialization of modern Europe and America, men and women began to see one another differently and assume different roles. At the same time, a growing sense of a more narrowly-defined sexual identity eventually developed into a psychological concept called "sexuality." These mental changes manifested themselves in negative attitudes toward non-normative sexual behavior and toward anything that could not be readily classified as male, female, masculine, or feminine. They led to problems for the *falsetto*, which sonically was situated somewhere between the worlds of masculine and feminine in nineteenth century Western society.

Another clue to this puzzle is the curious change in the role of the *falsetto* in musical comedy of this time. Previously, the *falsetto* was frequently used on the comic

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<sup>92</sup> Giles, *History*, 80.

<sup>93</sup> My supposition is that Giles implies both *falsetto* and *tenorino* here. Giles, 93.

<sup>94</sup> C.F. Fox, "The Eclipse of the Countertenor Voice: A Study in Gender and Society," (M.A. thesis, U.S. Naval Academy, 2003), 1.

stage to parody women. Due to the disappearance of opportunities on the professional stage during the late 1700s, the comic *falsetto* was forced underground, performing at burlesques, bars, and houses of ill repute. The reason for this descent was not an insurrection on the part of women—attacking the *falsetto* for its denigration of the female on the pre-modern, comic stage. Rather, it was the growing association of the *falsetto* with homosexuality. By studying the comic *falsetto* during the nineteenth century, one can understand why early modern, Western society was loath to cast this voice type on the professional stage. The *falsetto* inhabited the middle ground between male and female, introducing a sexual ambiguity which was unacceptable to nineteenth-century society. This chapter summarizes the cultural changes that occurred immediately preceding and during the nineteenth century, leading to the sexing of the *falsetto* and to its mysterious, 150-year absence from the professional music stage.

### *Il castrato misterioso*

The Renaissance saw a drastic increase in the medical knowledge available to human society. As mentioned before, previous to this time, men and women viewed themselves as relatively similar.<sup>95</sup> With the advances in knowledge of anatomy and the physiological differences between the sexes, men and women began to think of themselves not just as culturally separate, but as biologically separate. This

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<sup>95</sup> Even though there was a wide cultural chasm between the pre-modern man and woman, the common wisdom was that male and female bodies were almost identical and that the sexual organs were the same, except that men's were convex and women's were concave. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You will: Texts and Contexts*, edited by Bruce R. Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 14.

"medicalization," or intense categorization of the sexes, led to problems for entities that existed in between one extreme or the other,<sup>96</sup> as in the case of the *falsetto*. In the seventeenth century, falsettists were still used on stage, but their numbers were diminishing. European musical societies began to clamor for women and *castrati* as replacements for the *falsetto* onstage.<sup>97</sup>

The intense taxonomic nature of the developing modern mentality sought more male gender clarity on stage. For example, take the words of William Pryne in 1632,

Yea, men...are unmanned on the Stage: all the honor and vigour of their sex is emmenated with the shame, the dishonesty of an unsinued body. He who is most womanish and best resembles the female sex, gives best content.<sup>98</sup>

This remark exhibits dissatisfaction with males pretending to be females on the stage—even in England, a place where *falsetti* were very much appreciated. Enter the *castrato*, a medically altered male, whose voice could sing just as high as a woman's, but with more power than a falsettist, because the *castrato* was singing with the full range of his musculature. The quality of the voice was also different from the *falsetto*. It was not shrill, but characterized as having more "freshness, strength and sweetness" than even a

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<sup>96</sup> Foucault, 37-39.

<sup>97</sup> Margaret Kennedy-Dygas, "Historical Perspectives on the 'Science' of Teaching Singing, Part II: Influence of the Castrato upon vocal Technique and Pedagogy (Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)," *Journal of Singing* 56, no. 3 (Jan/Feb 2000): 23-24

<sup>98</sup> William Pryne, *Histrion-Mastix: The Player's Scourge*, 1:168, quoted in Fox, 16-17.

woman's voice.<sup>99</sup> The vocal agility acquired by the *castrato* was so acute that "it was difficult for the violins of those days to keep pace" with him.<sup>100</sup> These singers were more visually appropriate onstage when playing women than were *falsetti*, particularly considering the *castrato*'s tendency to retain excess fat in the breast and hip area.<sup>101</sup>

Because of these advantages, *castrati* eclipsed *falsetti* during the eighteenth century, making up seventy percent of all male opera singers in continental Europe.<sup>102</sup> The French court was fond of the *castrato* and employed them until 1765.<sup>103</sup> Although the English still preferred the counter-tenor in liturgical choral music, Handel and other composers wrote many roles for *castrati*, but "there was seldom more than one in any single English opera production...he was the star."<sup>104</sup> However, the *falsetto* was the predominant voice type used to mimic women onstage in musical comedy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the *castrato* was rarely used in comic, musical theater. It could be that the *falsetto* was allowed this comic status because the *castrato* was "he who is most womanish, and best resembles the female sex," (earlier quote by

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<sup>99</sup> William Heinse, as quoted in Enid R. Peschel and Richard E. Peschel, "Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera," *American Scientist* 75 (Nov/Dec 1987): 580.

<sup>100</sup> Peschel and Peschel, 580.

<sup>101</sup> These cross-dressing roles are few. Most roles written for the *castrato* were strong, masculine characters. Laura DeMarco, "The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor," *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2002): 179-180.

<sup>102</sup> This statistic is quoted from the music historian, Heriot. Peschel and Peschel, 580.

<sup>103</sup> Sawkins, 319.

<sup>104</sup> Giles, *History*, 80.

Pryne), which would eliminate the more obvious gender differences presented when a *falsetto* played the role.

In essence, by creating the *castrato*, the Italians had inadvertently created a sexually viable version of the *falsetto*. As in the case of the falsettist, the biological sex of the *castrato* posed no problems when cast in male roles. In the case of female roles, the *castrato* appeared and sounded more like a female than any other male. In fact, Casanova wrote about a certain *castrato* whose breasts were "as beautiful as any woman's" and whose mien and demeanor were so voluptuous and feminine that even though he was aware of the singer's natural sex he "felt all aglow and quite madly amorous of him."<sup>105</sup> It could be that the eighteenth-century audience was in transition from a traditional fondness for the *falsetto* to the use of women on stage. The compromise was the *castrato*, who was reminiscent of the falsettist, but *biologically ordained* to sing as high as a woman. Some stigma against the *falsetto* must have caused the disappearance of the voice type on the comic musical stage as well as being banished to the ranks of mostly performing female mimetic roles. One stigma attached to both the *castrato* and the *falsetto* was an association with femininity. However, the falsettist was not medically altered to sing like a woman and, therefore, suffered a disadvantage in the mindset of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe.

The issues of gender and sexuality became increasingly important during the course of the nineteenth century, but in a subversive manner. In European and Northern

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<sup>105</sup> Peschel and Peschel, 582.

American urban areas especially, the advent of capitalism altered the nature of the nuclear family from one that produced goods to one that provided mutual love and support.<sup>106</sup> Wage-labor created an atmosphere of economic autonomy, creating space for men and women to support themselves independently, if they so desired.<sup>107</sup> Even though most women remained in the private or domestic sphere, some women began to find their own niches in the professional sector—for example, in education or the performing arts. A new system of gender relations in the middle class developed; women were seen less as objects and appreciated for other qualities.<sup>108</sup> These developments began very slowly to dismantle the hierarchy of gender and social status, subversively challenging the male's dominant role.

Changes in gender and sexuality began to transform the psychological mindset of nineteenth-century Western culture. According to John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, "sexuality came to be more deeply associated with the emotion of love and the quest for interpersonal intimacy."<sup>109</sup> Couples began to control fertility, loosening the tight constraints of the "procreative sex model" instituted earlier in the millennium.<sup>110</sup> Foucault showed that the medicalization of sex, sexual repression, and propriety of

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<sup>106</sup> John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

<sup>107</sup> D'Emilio, 7.

<sup>108</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 57.

<sup>109</sup> D'Emilio and Freedman, 56.

<sup>110</sup> Nye, 12; D'Emilio and Freedman, 56.

nineteenth-century Western culture widened the gap between the sexes, resulting in little room for gray area.<sup>111</sup> This modification of sexual outlook resulted in the theorizing of sexual psychology by scientists such as Freud and Hirschfeld. They found that, psychologically, "physical attraction [depended] on the relative differences in masculine and feminine traits."<sup>112</sup> If one were a man, he was masculine and attracted to one who is feminine, that is, a woman. By the end of the 1800s, the idea of sexuality, or the innate desire directed toward a specific sex, began to inhabit the European and American minds, resulting in a new paradigm: sexual desire and relations between a man and woman, or heterosexuality, was normal; anything else was aberrant and pathological.<sup>113</sup>

In the nineteenth century, males exhibiting personal, feminine characteristics or behaviors were less than masculine, and since middle ground was scarce, the acts were deemed definitively feminine.<sup>114</sup> The "mincing" and "shrill" *falsetto* voice surely sounded feminine to the average nineteenth-century person. Due to the close association of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that *falsetti* were abolished from professional use and associated not only with femininity but with

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<sup>111</sup> Foucault, 36-73.

<sup>112</sup> Robert A. Nye, "Sexuality," in *A Companion to Gender History*, ed. by Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2004), 14.

<sup>113</sup> Foucault, 36-44. Whereas, in previous eras same-sex relations were "a widely accepted phase for men," Hardwick, 344.

<sup>114</sup> Note the difference here between nineteenth-century gender norms and Ancient Greek ones. Greek norms were based on position in society, not necessarily one's personal behaviors or characteristics. An adult male citizen was masculine; anything else was feminine. In the Medieval and Renaissance eras, an effeminate man may or may not have sex with other men, but a man assuming the active role in same-sex activity was not assumed to be effeminate.

homosexuality as well.<sup>115</sup> As seen in the previous chapter, the roles assigned to the *false* by the end of the eighteenth century were mostly drag roles in musical comedy, offering further reason to associate the voice type with femininity. Another roadblock for the use of the *false* on the professional stage was its growing association with proscribed same-sex proclivity. The next section chronicles this association in more detail.

### Historical Clues

In the search for clues for the reason why the *false* became associated with homosexuality, it is necessary to look at the eighteenth century, in particular eighteenth-century comic theater, for precursors. According to Fox, English counter-tenors of the 1700s became increasingly associated with both the *castrato* and the English fop, thus impugning the respectability of this voice type and situating it in the direct line of fire for attack on the grounds of aberrant sexuality.<sup>116</sup>

The adult *castrato* possessed a sublime voice, but a grotesque physique. In addition to extended limbs, faux breasts, and a superbly high voice, these castrated males were left with a prepubertal penis and an inability to engage in normal, heterosexual relations.<sup>117</sup> If normative sexual relations were not possible, common logic would deduce

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<sup>115</sup> For more information see Fox, 12-17.

<sup>116</sup> Fox, 12.

<sup>117</sup> According to scientists, the myths concerning the *castrato's* intense libido are fictitious and biologically not feasible. Peschel and Peschel, 583.



that deviant relations abounded in the life of a *castrato*. For this reason, several *castrati* in the seventeenth century were documented as being exclusively same-sex oriented—including the one mentioned earlier in connection with Casanova. A stigma concerning male-male relations developed based on the fact that these singers could not perform in a masculine sexual capacity.<sup>118</sup>

Another reason for the decline of the *castrato* in the late eighteenth century was its inherent relationship to Italy. In France and England particularly, Italians had been associated with male/male sexual activity for at least a century.<sup>119</sup> This stereotype contributed to the same association in the 1800s, the time period during which much of this stereotype was documented. For example, Count von Platen, a known nineteenth-century homosexual, was very fond of Italy. He described Naples as a city where "love between men is so frequent that one never expects even the boldest demands to be refused."<sup>120</sup> Venetian gondoliers also contributed to Italy's reputation. These predominantly heterosexual men were renowned for providing special services to male passengers, especially during the non-lucrative winter months.<sup>121</sup> Because of these

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<sup>118</sup> *Castrati* were not exclusively homosexual by any means. There are many accounts of heterosexually-oriented *castrati* as well.

<sup>119</sup> Laurence Senelick, "Mollies or Men of Mode? Sodomy and the Eighteenth-Century London Stage," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, no. 1 (1990): 46.

<sup>120</sup> As quoted in Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003), 96.

<sup>121</sup> Robb, 162.

associations, being in the same ambiguous gender category as *castrati* did nothing to improve the negative accusations toward falsettists.<sup>122</sup>

Another damning influence on the perceived character of the *falsetto* was the English fop. A theatrical convention of the English theater, the fop grew out of the traditional comic figure of the rake, a seventeenth-century nymphomaniac, incessantly lavishing attention on women. The fop was an aristocratic version of this caricature. The character Sir Andrew Aguecheek in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is a classic example of a fop: extremely comic in nature, middle-aged, vying for the affections of an unattainable female, usually portrayed as less than clever—the latter being how the *bourgeoisie* viewed the real aristocracy of the time.

The fop's haughty mannerisms, which would be interpreted as feminine today, were not widely seen in that way at first, thanks to the ingrained, superior male social status at the time. However, in the eighteenth century, the fop began to be reinterpreted and was associated with femininity and homosexuality. For example, James Nokes, a character actor at the turn of the eighteenth century, who was popular for his renditions of the fop onstage, also garnered a reputation for playing comic, female characters. His nickname, Nurse Nokes, was bandied about in English theatrical society. Many satirists of the time blasted Nokes for being a sodomite, yet it did not seem to affect his popularity.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> C.R. Fox cites many examples of negative journalistic criticism aimed at *falsetti*, 14-21.

<sup>123</sup> Senelick, "Mollies," 40.

Senelick's article, "Mollies or Men of Mode," cites many actors whose effeminate shenanigans, on and off stage, helped to associate the idea of sodomite with the Restoration fop. Senelick also states that, "with the increased prominence of women on the stage and what commentators saw as the 'feminization' of society, foppery was now taken as a sign of ingrained effeminacy."<sup>124</sup> Over time, these roles became more effeminate and closely related to the idea of the "third sex," a term used in the nineteenth century to denote a person who was either a hermaphrodite, an androgyne, or one attracted to his/her own sex.<sup>125</sup>

Colley Cibber, a seventeenth-century actor, created a style of fop that included "the insipid, soft Civility, the elegant and formal Mien, the drawling delicacy of Voice!...and a pleasing counter-tenor in ballad singing."<sup>126</sup> Other actors who played fops on the theatrical stage also sang literature composed for the counter-tenor in other productions and off stage. Regardless of the production of sound, falsetto or modal voice, the counter-tenor fop became associated with effeminacy and with the mannerisms of the "mollies," or sodomites of nineteenth-century Britain.

Both the *castrato* and the fop lent a hand in associating the *falsetto* with femininity and homosexuality. Because these associations were negative, the musical

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<sup>124</sup> Senelick, "Mollies," 44.

<sup>125</sup> Senelick is quick to point out that the British public was still quite confused on the matter of the effeminate character and its relation to the real actor. For more on the "third sex" and nineteenth-century views of sexuality, see David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 15-18.

<sup>126</sup> As quoted in Senelick, "Mollies," 43, from Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*, ed. by R. S. Fone (Ann Arbor, MI: 1968), 76.

society of the nineteenth century ceased to use the voice type professionally. Toward the end of the century, however, the *falsetto* made a very brief return to the comic stage in the forms of all-male minstrel/opera companies, pantomime drag, and nascent glamour drag.<sup>127</sup>

### **The De-mystification of the Falsettist and the De-misogynization of Drag**

Although the first half of the nineteenth century was a meager era for the *falsetto*, a brief and local flourishing occurred under the auspices of the minstrel show and opera house of the American Wild West in the 1840s. With the rise of Romantic opera, the grandiose and exotic in music had become intriguing, much like the West itself. Outside of the industrialized Northeast, highly trained opera singers were scarce or expensive. Since most women were either sequestered in the confines of domestic duty or unfit for the rough and rowdy Wild West, all-male companies were sent out to perform minstrel shows and parodic opera concerts.<sup>128</sup>

Although this type of singing did not have a precedent during the mid-nineteenth century, *falsetti* met with no condemnation on the frontier. This upswing in the use of the *falsetto* took place under the sway of racism and a blind sense of heterosexuality. The

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<sup>127</sup> Pantomime drag refers to a tradition in Britain spawned by the burlesqued "dames" of pantomime holiday shows during the late nineteenth century. Roger Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 167-179. Both of these traditions flourished from c. 1890-1950. Glamour drag, mostly an American tradition, refers to female impersonation that exhibits a realistic quality, not merely a burlesqued one. Elegant costumes and accessories typically accompany this style of drag. Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 237.

<sup>128</sup> Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage 1788-1914* (Kensington, Australia: New South Wales University Press, 1990) 145-6.

"old lady in blackface" or "funny old gal" was a popular *falsetto* role in minstrel shows during the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>129</sup> By 1840, this (un)conventional character had transformed into "High yaller gal," a derivative of the racial mix term "high-yellow," which referred to a *falsetto* with make-up that had a mulatto or yellow shade. After the Civil War, *falsetti* began to be dressed in glamorous costumes and eventually engaged in parody of famous opera singers in burlesques such as *The Blonde that Never Dyes*.<sup>130</sup>

Contrary to the negative sexual connotations of the European *falsetto*, these high male singers were de-mystified, that is, men legitimately singing in the female range with the full endorsement of society. For example, Senelick quotes an auditor who heard a performance of the singer Billie Le Roy in Colorado, 1861:

As clear and as sweet as that of a prima donna his voice rang through the hall, thrilling his auditors with wonder and delight. Notes that would baffle the majority of female throats were trilled in the most bird-like manner. Every grimace and action accompanying the words of the song were executed as natural as life... Three encores were demanded, and, rather than comply with the fourth, Billy snatched the blonde wig from his head and stood revealed in his true character.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 297-298.

<sup>130</sup> Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 298.

<sup>131</sup> As quoted in Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 298.

Regardless of the actual sexual identities of these performers, their sexualities were apparently never questioned.<sup>132</sup> The culturally naïve and female-starved audience of the American West in the nineteenth century may have been unaware of the homosexual implications involved in men impersonating women. The mere spectacle of the gorgeous costumes and high voices may have satiated their appetites for entertainment sufficiently to deflect indictment of the performers as anything less than masculine. In fact, the environment of the *falsetti* in these companies was exactly that of the audience, replete with violence, gambling, alcohol, and prostitution.<sup>133</sup> After the popularity of the minstrel died out around 1880, new forms of drag took hold—pantomime and glamour drag—and the *falsetto* was again displaced.

It was the comic genius of British entertainers such as Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell in the 1890s that spawned the legacy of pantomime drag in the twentieth century. Apparently, their renditions of female impersonation in underground establishments were very compelling, as evidenced in this quote from Clement Scott, a music critic of the day:

When we see Dan Leno as a woman and hear his delightful patter it never strikes us that here is a man imitating a woman. It is a woman who stands before us...not a burlesque of the sex, but the actual thing. He catches every expression, every trick, every attitude, every inflexion of voice, and all is done without suspicion of vulgarity...Whenever he is on the stage, be it theatre or

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<sup>132</sup> Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 298.

<sup>133</sup> Waterhouse, 145-6.

music hall, he literally holds the audience tight in his power. They cannot get away from him. He is the monarch of all he surveys.<sup>134</sup>

In America, the tradition of glamour drag was drawing similarly enthusiastic audiences to underground bars and clubs. There was no ruse to trick people into believing that the impersonators were actually women, since most of the comic monologue between songs in these drag acts was spoken in a low, modal voice, not falsetto. The apparent gender and sexual paradox was blatantly obvious. Yet, for several reasons the *falsetto* was still out of favor in the mainstream music world.

First, by the end of the nineteenth century, there was no appropriate physical setting for the *falsetto* on the professional stage. Auditoriums were becoming increasingly larger and singers' voices were being trained to fill these gargantuan music halls with sound. Falsettists would have been hard pressed to compete with the voices being used onstage at the time.<sup>135</sup> Second, the falsetto had no foothold in the realm of female mimesis because it had been replaced by the novelty of glamour drag. Drag was exciting, fantastical, and illusory. The rise of this new, tantalizing genre was a subversive commentary on the "de-misogynization" of female mimesis because it altered the focus of feminine parody—from women to homosexuals.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a mental shift in understanding sexual identity was taking place, simultaneously, with a surge in the urbanization of

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<sup>134</sup> As quoted in Roger Baker, 173.

<sup>135</sup> Fox, 8.

people who engaged in same-sex relations.<sup>136</sup> Homosexuals became more visible and more ridiculed. Doctors, psychologists, and much of society as a whole considered the homosexual, or "third sex," to be pathological.<sup>137</sup> The English "mollies," or men who dressed as women in public and at private "molly-houses," "emerged from the mercantile class and lower; their same-sex practices were never explicitly referred to onstage, but they were regularly characterized as asexual [effeminates]."<sup>138</sup> These effeminate homosexuals were the types of men being mocked at the drag shows, not women. Drag is the celebration and liberation of male effeminacy, not the ridicule of feminine gender or female sex. The use of falsetto or a high female-sounding *tenorino* was employed when the performers were singing, and those actors with lower modal voices only used this register when speaking, making the sex difference distinguishable, even obvious. The musical comedy stage was no longer making fun of women; they were commenting on men—effeminate or homosexual ones.<sup>139</sup>

Although the falsettists' presence was felt in unconventional ways during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the absence of the *falsetto* from the professional, Classical music stage lasted until the middle of the twentieth century. The next chapter explores how from 1900-1920 a serious change in Western society's perception of gender

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<sup>136</sup> Robb, 156-173.

<sup>137</sup> In his book, *Strangers*, Graham Robb compiles a two-page list of documented causes for homosexuality from nineteenth-century sources. Robb, 5-6.

<sup>138</sup> Senelick, *Changing Room*, 232.

<sup>139</sup> It is worthwhile to note here that most of these drag performers were homosexual. So, in essence, homosexuals were focusing the comedy on themselves, quite different from the denigration of women in female mimesis of the pre-modern era.



occurred, thanks to the Women's Suffrage movement. This historical culture shift created a new gender paradigm in which the *falsetto* could prosper again. No longer were falsettists inherently associated with femininity and homosexuality; instead, changing gender norms of the twentieth century created new opportunities for falsettists and resurrected old ones.

## CHAPTER V

### SONGS FOR A NEW WORLD: GENDER AND THE *FALSETTO* FROM 1900 TO THE PRESENT

The twentieth century ushered in a new world of technological advancement unparalleled in Western history. Accelerating industrialization and economic expansion also brought about changes in Western culture, notably in the area of equality between the sexes. Over the course of the century a political and psychological balance began to develop in matters of civil rights, not only for women, but also for people of different races and sexual orientations. These egalitarian movements helped shape the attitudes of Western societies toward gender and sexuality. The emancipation of the female and the male homosexual from the patriarchal and heterosexually-dominated cultures of previous eras began to change the utilization of the falsettist in this time of great political and psychological mobility. This chapter chronicles the development of this evolution. A discussion of the women's rights movements and the development of sex research in the early twentieth century shows how the outlook of Western civilization changed toward gender and opened the door for the *falsetto* to return to the musical stage during the late 1940s and early 1950s. At this same time, a resurgence of popularity for early music—music written before 1750—brought the *falsetto* back to the professional stage. A look at some non-traditional casting decisions by Benjamin Britten illustrates how society was more willing to hear the falsettist on stage in comedy during this time period.

The use of falsetto in popular music of the Sixties and Seventies, coupled with the gay rights and disco movement, released the comic *falsetto* into a world that no longer associated it with the degradation of any particular sex or sexuality.

New perceptions of gender and sexuality, arising in the Sixties and Seventies, created space for the *falsetto* to be used in new ways, especially in the realm of music theater. Observing falsetto roles of the Sixties and Seventies from this genre demonstrates that the *falsetto* was slowly returning to mainstream popularity on the musical comedy stage. By the end of the twentieth century, the comic *falsetto* was freed from its association with female mimesis and allowed to portray characters other than feminine ones. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Western society could appreciate the falsetto for its inherent musical value. Musical comedy illustrates this advancement particularly well.

### **I'm Not Afraid**

The roots of civil equality and, ultimately, the efflorescence of the *falsetto* in the twentieth century began to be cultivated before 1900. The Suffrage and Solidarity movements of the early twentieth century were actually initiated by the efforts of women in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1871, Pauline Wright Davis penned a journal entitled *A History of the National Women's Rights Movement*, which described the nascent development of women's liberation in America from 1850-1870. Many other nineteenth-century women such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Stanton, Charlotte Stopes, and

Helen Blackburn incited women from all socioeconomic levels to stand up for their civil rights.<sup>140</sup> These epochal efforts had a tremendous impact on equality in Western society and loosened attitudes toward gender and sex.<sup>141</sup>

This attitude of fierce, psychological independence led to the creation of positions for women in the burgeoning working class created by the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. The working class began to disassemble the idea of the parochial family unit—large families designed to support one another—because an individual could now support himself/herself without the aid of familial ties.<sup>142</sup> These sociological developments enabled increased independence for women and people of non-normative sexualities. In addition, the use of women in the work place was magnified during the First World War because of the vast number of men being sent overseas. Women were not afraid to labor in the same capacities as men and this fact buttressed their claim to voting privileges. In theory at least, this long-awaited right of suffrage, achieved in 1920, gave them equal political rights with men.

Other concepts of independence began to suffuse European and American societies during the first two decades of the twentieth century. In America especially, the nineteenth-century strictures of sexual behavior were unbuckled and attitudes toward entertainment in the Twenties and Thirties focused more on sexual pleasure and

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<sup>140</sup> Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 180.

<sup>141</sup> Susan K. Kent, "Gender Rules: Law and Politics," in *A Companion to Gender History*, ed. by Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 107.

<sup>142</sup> This concept of domestic independence also led to the development of the homosexual identity. D'Emilio, "Capitalism," 105.

promiscuity than in the past century.<sup>143</sup> The relaxation of discourse about sex in the first half of the twentieth century was a boon to the gay liberation movement as well. Homosexuals began the subtle evolution toward gay (male) and lesbian (female) identities.<sup>144</sup> The appreciation of the comic drag queen in the late 1920s and early 1930s helped to steer post-modern urban society toward the acceptance of male homosexuality in particular. Many female impersonators such as Francis Renault became so popular that they were able to mount their shows on Broadway.<sup>145</sup>

As in the past, these changes in societal norms affected the use of the *falsetto*. Vaudeville and burlesque performers, typically relegated to homosexual and transgendered men, began to utilize the falsetto, as in past centuries, to mimic women onstage; however, the focus was on glamour, not degradation. For example, the main emphasis of the Jewel Box Revue in Miami (1939) was to present entertainment "geared toward straight audiences, aiming to win acceptance [for homosexuality] through comedy."<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 194-95.

<sup>144</sup> D'Emilio, "Capitalism," 9.

<sup>145</sup> Senelick, *Changing Room*, 378.

<sup>146</sup> Senelick, *Changing Room*, 380.

## Songs from the Old World

The *falsetto* also found a new home on the professional music stage when, at the end of the 1940s, early music—music written before 1750—became popular. Many researchers had already delved into the topic of early music performance practice during the previous decades and much attention had been given to the study of the *falsetto*.<sup>147</sup> Falsettists such as Alfred Deller began to appear on recitals, in concert halls, and onstage across Europe and America.

One could argue that the reappearance of the *falsetto* was, in part, directly related to the less stringent gender and sex norms of Western society; however, too many variables exist to permit a conclusive proof of correlation. For instance, the aegis of "historical performance" may have given sanctuary from the attacks that had plagued the *falsetto* in previous centuries. Also, most of the repertoire that involved the *falsetto* on the mid-twentieth century professional music stage centered on *historical performances*. These performances indirectly exhibited *historical attitudes* toward gender and sexual desire, not current ones; so, it would be a fallacy to connect these historical *mises en scène* with the contemporary views of gender and sexuality. In order to understand the effects of gender and sexuality on the *falsetto* in the twentieth century, it is imperative to look at the twentieth-century compositions that were composed specifically for this voice

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<sup>147</sup> For example, Edward G. Stubbs, *The Adult Male or Counter-tenor Voice* (New York: H.W. Gray Co. 1908); Peter Warlock, *The English Ayre* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926); Enid Welsford, *The Court Masque: A Study of the Relationship Between Poetry and the Revels* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1927); W.H. McCabe, "Music and Dance on the Seventeenth Century College Stage," *The Musical Quarterly* 24 (July 1938): 313-22.

type. Yet, one is hard-pressed to find any original compositions written for the *falsetto* within the first half of the century that do not stem from vaudeville or burlesque. This dearth of original material was a direct hangover from the disappearance of the *falsetto* in the nineteenth century and the public's resulting ignorance of the *falsetto* as a legitimate voice type.

A catalogue of modern music written for counter-tenor compiled by Steven Rickards traces original twentieth-century compositions written for this voice type only as far back as 1950.<sup>148</sup> Rickard's catalogue shows that the amount of repertoire for the *falsetto* grew substantially, decade by decade, after the 1950s. This sudden increase could be due to an awareness of the revived voice type. Intriguingly, almost no original *comic* works were written for the *falsetto* until the late Sixties. One could propose that twentieth-century composers' novel treatments of the comic *falsetto* were due, in part, to the change in societal attitudes toward gender and sexuality. In order to understand society's psychosexual transformation, it is necessary to consider the many advances in sexology during the early to mid-twentieth century.

### **Just One Step**

In the 1930s, medical science discovered that both men and women had the same sex hormones. This discovery led to a variety of studies on human sexual behavior. The

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<sup>148</sup> The catalogue does not state specifically that all the roles are conceived for the falsetto voice; however, seeing as Rickards is a falsettist, it stands to reason that most of the repertoire has the *falsetto* in mind. Steven Rickards, "A Listing of Repertoire for the Countertenor Voice Composed from 1950-1994, with Emphasis on Compositions Found in the United States, Canada, and England," (D.M.A. diss., Florida State University, 2001).

enlightening studies of Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues at Indiana University in the Forties and Fifties shed new light on the sexual habits of the human race.<sup>149</sup> Among other things, Kinsey's revolutionary research showed that heterosexuals were engaging in non-traditional sex practices and that homosexuality was much more prevalent in society than previously admitted.<sup>150</sup> This research also suggested that sexual desire was something fluid—one could vacillate between the extremes of hetero- or homosexual desire within a lifetime. During the same time period, Margaret Mead's study, *Male and Female*, validated many of the Kinsey findings from an anthropological slant.<sup>151</sup> Masters and Johnson's controversial exposé, *Human Sexual Response*, studied the physiological response to sex, further verifying Kinsey's research.<sup>152</sup> These publications offered insights into the diversity of human beings. Judges began to use the research in deciding court cases, further legitimizing the veracity of these findings. As a result, many people were less afraid to verbalize their thoughts and feelings regarding sex.<sup>153</sup>

After the Second World War, women gained more places of authority in the workplace than ever before in history, especially in the United States. These gains were

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<sup>149</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders Co., 1948); Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders Co., 1953).

<sup>150</sup> Kinsey, *Male*, 459.

<sup>151</sup> Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1949).

<sup>152</sup> William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1966).

<sup>153</sup> Wardell B. Pomeroy, *Dr. Kinsey and the Institute for Sex Research* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 464-65.



great advances toward gender equality; however, sexual equality took longer to develop. Groups such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s created an opportunity for the gay and lesbian community to become organized and politically active.<sup>154</sup> Such political groups helped to make the public more aware of the issue of gay rights, yet it was not until the late 1970s that attitudes toward homo- and heterosexual equality began to be balanced.

This paper focuses on the genre of musical comedy in various periods of history and the strong clues it provides to the relationship between the *falsetto*, gender, and sexuality. One would expect that more tolerant views of Western society in regard to gender and sexuality would free the comic *falsetto* from its association with female mimesis and homosexuality. Indeed, the *falsetto* played a special role in the socio-sexual milieu of the mid-twentieth century. A close look at some of the originally composed comic roles for the *falsetto* on the classical music stage and Broadway during the mid-twentieth century show that there was a step in the direction of the falsettist's liberation, but that society was not quite ready to relinquish the tradition of patriarchy entirely.

Benjamin Britten wrote several roles for *falsetto*. The only role that is set in a comic production is that of Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960).<sup>155</sup> It would make Oberon the first comic *falsetto* role that is not based on female mimesis or a mocking sense of homosexuality; however, Oberon is not comic—rather, he is one of the

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<sup>154</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 22-29.

<sup>155</sup> Benjamin Britten, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London: Hawkes & Son, Ltd., 1960).

most serious characters in the opera. Britten possibly uses this same casting philosophy for the comic character of Flute, who plays the female mimetic role of Thisby during the course of the opera, yet is not cast as a *falsetto* but as a tenor.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set as a play within a play—or in Britten's production, an opera within an opera. The characters of Flute, Quince, Bottom, Snout, Starveling, and Snug perform their own adaptation of *Pyramus and Thisby*, a Greek legend. In the process of planning the play, Quince assigns the role of Thisby, the female lead, to Flute, who responds, "Nay, faith. Let me not play a woman. I have a beard coming."<sup>156</sup> If Flute is chosen to portray a woman in the play—an obvious choice—why did Britten not set Flute as the *falsetto* role? In Britten's production, the female mimetic role was not required to be a *falsetto*. Once again, the composer defied expectation by casting a tenor in the female mimetic role. The fact that Britten uses a *falsetto* elsewhere in the production highlights the fact that he *could* have cast the roles traditionally, yet chose differently on purpose. By juxtaposing the serious *falsetto* role of Oberon with the comic, female mimetic, tenor role of Flute, Britten defies societal expectation, possibly suggesting a reflection of culture's changing views of gender and sexuality: comic female mimetic characters are no longer solely relegated to falsettists and, in like manner, *falsetti* are no longer solely relegated to play the comic, female mimetic role.

Britten made similar non-traditional casting choices in two other works, *Noye's Fludde* and *Paul Bunyun*. The work, *Noye's Fludde* (1957), is based on one of the

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<sup>156</sup> Britten, 53-54.

Chester mystery plays from the Medieval era. The role of Noye's wife in the musical production was traditionally a comic role played by a male.<sup>157</sup> Britten had a special fondness for historical literature and was a strong proponent of early music.<sup>158</sup> It is likely that he knew of the orthodox casting for Noye's wife (a male in drag) and chose to write the part so that either male or female could play it. In Britten's version, the part is scored for Alto; however, it is scored in a range that is highly conducive for *falsetto*—a3 to d4.<sup>159</sup> It could be that Britten had the casting of a male, "medieval" Mrs. Noye in mind when choosing the range. If he had intended only a mezzo-soprano to sing the role, he might have extended the range to g4 or a5, uncomfortable for most falsettists, but glorious in the voices of most mezzo-sopranos. On the contrary, the relatively low range leaves the casting of the role to the director. Even though the first person to play the role of Mrs. Noye was female (Gladys Parr), the range and tessitura suggest that a *falsetto* could also play the role.

*Paul Bunyun* (1940/ rev. 1974), a light-hearted opera, was composed by Britten in collaboration with W. H. Auden. Its "Quartet of the Defeated" is comprised of an alto, two tenors, and a bass. The alto range of the part is remarkably close to the *falsetto* range; plus, a quartet of exclusively men or women seems to be a more traditional combination—not one female and three males—especially when they sing

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<sup>157</sup> Bullough, 235.

<sup>158</sup> One should consider, for instance, his settings of Ovid, *Noye's Fludde*, *Ceremony of Carols* (a Medieval text), John Donne, William Blake, Shakespeare, and Michaelangelo, as well as his re-workings of songs and themes by Purcell.

<sup>159</sup> c4 = middle c.

homophonically. Therefore, Britten must have had a specific reason for breaking the norm. He could have been allowing the director to decide on the casting, or he could have been choosing to spite orthodoxy purposely. Regardless of his reasoning, it is not far-fetched to see the intimation of *falsetto* use in these comic roles by Britten. These conscious decisions possibly point to the fact that society was on the brink of accepting the comic *falsetto* in a non-mimetic role or, at the least, not stereotyping the *falsetto*.

Another comic *falsetto* role that was created in the mid-twentieth century was the parody of Margaret Mead in the musical *Hair* (1968). The score to *Hair* shows Mead's song, "My Conviction," written in treble clef, but with the note, "sounds octave down."<sup>160</sup> This phrase means that the cross-dressing role was originally conceived as a modal baritone part in drag—inconsistent with the popular performance tradition, in which the character is sung in falsetto.<sup>161</sup> Obviously, Mead is a female mimetic role, but it differs greatly from the degrading depiction of women in previous eras.

Margaret Mead would be a candidate for this type of mimetic treatment on stage for several reasons. First, Mead was a non-traditional role model. Her cross-cultural studies of sex and society initiated research into the very nature of sexuality itself and whether sexuality is, in part, culturally constructed and not purely biological. In addition to her research, she held the position of chief ethnologist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City—a position atypical of a woman during the mid-

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<sup>160</sup> Galt MacDermot, *Hair* (New York: Music Theater International, 1968).

<sup>161</sup> Gail Seaton, Head of the Music Theater Department, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, interview by author, 12 February 2006.

twentieth century. When discussing the overarching patriarchal elements of societies worldwide, Margaret Mead observed that "denying the actual potentialities of human beings limit[s] not only both men and women, but also equally the development of the activity itself."<sup>162</sup> This comment applies not only to gender and sexual equality, but to the *falsetto* as well. Having a man sing Mead's character—in falsetto or otherwise—blurs the line between the genders, mocks the non-traditional (un)femininity of Mead, comments on the achievements of women, and criticizes society; that is, much work must still be done in the area of gender equality.

Second, the musical *Hair* is an exercise in pinpointing, questioning, and testing cultural norms. The infamous nude scene in the musical is just one example of the many efforts to challenge convention. Other controversial themes, such as extracurricular drug use, unwed pregnancy, interracial relationships, draft-dodging, astrology, sodomy, blatant racism, masturbation, anti-patriotism, and radical environmentalism, are also presented. To think that Mead is a direct insult to women, or to the author herself, would be a critical misreading of *Hair*.

The role of Mary Sunshine in Kander and Ebb's *Chicago* (1973) provides yet another example of the changing *falsetto* stereotype. Mary Sunshine is scored for a high *falsetto*, dressed in glamour drag, with an operatic flair. Since the musical is set in the 1930s, Mary is surely a re-creation of early twentieth-century glamour drag queens on Broadway such as Francis Renault. One of the overarching themes of *Chicago* is that "nothing is as it seems." Mary's song, "A Little Bit of Good," exhibits this idea well.

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<sup>162</sup> Mead, 374.

The text of the song lends itself to homosexual acceptance as did many of the songs from such mid-twentieth century drag shows such as the Jewel Box Revue.<sup>163</sup> The purpose of the song is not merely to provide comic relief, but also "something different than what it seems:" to endorse sexual equality. One can take the chorus as an example:

Yes, there's a little bit of good in everyone  
Tho' many times it doesn't show.  
It only takes the taking time with one another,  
For under ev'ry mean veneer  
Is someone warm and dear,  
Keep looking...  
For that bit of good in ev'ryone  
The ones we call bad,  
Are never all bad,  
So try to find that little bit of good.<sup>164</sup>

The reference, "many times it doesn't show," could be read as a statement about drag, in which the male underneath the clothes and make-up is not like the female exterior; in this instance, the revelation is presented as positive. Toward the end of the show, Mary Sunshine is revealed to be a man exemplifying a fluidity of gender that encapsulates the theme of the musical.

The character of Mary was a step forward for equality, but the *falsetto* in musical comedy remained imprisoned by roles of female parody. In order to be completely released from the reins of gender and sexuality, a change in society's norms needed to

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<sup>163</sup> Senelick, 380.

<sup>164</sup> John Kander and Fred Ebb, *Chicago* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corp., 1975), 32-34.

occur. *Chicago* appeared on Broadway in 1973, only four years after an angry mob rioted in the streets outside the Stonewall Inn in New York City, where normally dressed homosexual men and drag queens were continually harassed. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 motivated civil rights legislation in the Seventies and boosted mainstream society's acknowledgement of non-heteronormative sexualities. Another result of gay liberation occurred at the end of the 1970s, when the rise of disco music liberated the *falsetto* from negative associations of homosexuality and femininity.

### **The World Was Dancing**

Disco and the comic *falsetto* appear to be an unlikely pair, but they are linked together in surprising ways. First, the popularity of disco singers, such as the BeeGees, Sylvester, and Michael Jackson, generated a greater public appreciation for the falsetto voice. Second, the intrinsic association of disco with the gay liberation movement helped society to accept homosexuality more than ever, loosening the cultural and political grip of conservative views about sexuality. In an effort to show how all three of these entities became interrelated in the late Seventies, the next section of this chapter defines disco and shows the connection of this musical genre to the *falsetto* and to the gay liberation movement. These parallel movements created ample space for the complete emancipation of the falsettist from a stereotypical association with female mimesis and femininity.

Disco has several connotations. The term comes from the French word,

"discothèque," meaning a place where records ("les disques") are played. Throughout Western society, a disco is an establishment where fast-paced music is played and people dance in an independent, freestyle fashion. Also, disco is a style of music that draws on many different genres. For example, one disco song could simultaneously exhibit the use of soul, funk, pop, technological effects, Latin rhythms, and Classical instruments, such as a chamber string ensemble. This type of music flourished during the middle to late Seventies.

A symbiotic relationship existed between the rise of disco, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the emerging gay rights movement. The first clubs in America to play disco were gay-oriented establishments.<sup>165</sup> The most famous disco clubs of the era, such as New York's Studio 54 (254 West 54<sup>th</sup> St.), Limelight (47 West 20<sup>th</sup> St.), and Paradise Garage (84 King St.), were all owned and operated by gay men. Not only were these dance venues administered and predominantly attended by the homosexual community, but many of the DJs were gay as well.<sup>166</sup> According to Tim Lawrence, owner of The Loft, a 70s disco in Greenwich Village, the discos, owners, DJs, and their music created a "celebration" of a unique sexuality with freedom of expression and culture. At the same time, and more importantly, homosexuals were allowed the opportunity to replicate the unspoken, heterosexual dance/mating rituals that had been in place at dance halls for over

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<sup>165</sup> Just to name a few: Flamingo (599 Broadway), 12 West (491 West St.), Sanctuary (407 West 43<sup>rd</sup> St.), Infinity (653 Broadway), and Le Jardin (110 West 43<sup>rd</sup> St.).

<sup>166</sup> Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.



a century.<sup>167</sup> This emancipation of dancing from previously structured heterosexual dance rites served as an analogy for gay liberation and homosexuals' own acceptance of their sexualities. For example, Stephan, a 37-year-old Latino disco dancer from New York City stated, "I go back to my disco dancing. I get my gayness. I get my empowerment...and I know for a fact, it's good to be gay."<sup>168</sup>

Just as disco clubs had become a symbol of the gay community by the mid-Seventies, the disco genre was crossing over into the mainstream of American popular music.<sup>169</sup> It made inevitable a commingling of disco culture and heterosexual culture. Surprisingly, until late 1979, when heterosexual interest in disco began to wane, there was little tension between the two communities. According to Claes Widlund, "the straight party world seemed to acknowledge gays as the indispensable ingredient of disco. The most valuable commodity for a start-up club in the 70s was a gay mailing list."<sup>170</sup> Le Jardin prided itself on its diverse mix of gay men, beautiful women, and fashionable straight men. Studio 54 was legendary for its bouncer, Marc Benecke, who hand-picked everyone who entered the club. The average crowd included many celebrities, models, and always—gay men. Given that the best DJs were at the gay clubs, straight individuals realized that admittance to gay clubs was essential to the best

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<sup>167</sup> Lawrence, 47.

<sup>168</sup> Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 36.

<sup>169</sup> Kai Fikentscher, *'You Better Work': Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>170</sup> Claes Widlund, <http://www.disco-disco.com> (Accessed 2 September, 2004).

dancing. Straight men who were secure in their sexuality found a certain "hipness" to most gay discos; also, their presence was appealing to the straight ladies at these establishments.<sup>171</sup>

In addition to the growing acceptance of gay culture in the New York young, heterosexual party set, acceptance was also growing nationwide for non-traditional pop singers and singing. One group of such singers, the Village People, consisted of six men, several of whom were gay, dressed in stereotypically masculine costumes such as those of policemen, motorcycle riders, and construction workers. This disco vocal ensemble, which popularized songs such as "Y.M.C.A." and "Macho Man," created an image that was divorced from femininity. No longer was gay necessarily related to "feminine." Openly non-heterosexual singers like Sylvester and the transsexual Amanda Lear eased their way into popular culture, as did the kind of suggestively gay lyrics that formed a component of many disco songs.

In the open-minded world of disco the falsetto voice found a space in which to evolve without its former baggage. Performers such as Aaron Neville, the Bee Gees, and Michael Jackson freed the falsetto from its previous association with femininity and homosexuality.<sup>172</sup> At the same time, a wide range of listeners were introduced to falsetto through radio broadcasts of these pop artists. A unique state of homeostasis developed during the late 1970s due to the masculine, and thereby heterosexually admissible, traits

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<sup>171</sup> Alan Jones and Jussi Kantonen, *Saturday Night Fever: The Story of Disco* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2000), 31.

<sup>172</sup> To link Michael Jackson's current association with femininity and homosexuality with his initial ascent to stardom would be an injustice. Also, no attack has been made, to this author's knowledge, on his falsetto singing. He has been maligned mainly for his appearance and behavior.

of these falsetto pop singers as well as the growing trend toward masculinity in parts of the homosexual culture. This wealth of exposure to the sound of the *falsetto*, in conjunction with the popularity of early music, possibly created space in the professional music world for singers to train specifically to sing *falsetto* repertoire and for audiences to be more receptive of the falsetto sound. This liberation of the falsetto sound in the mainstream, public ear also reversed the previous dissatisfaction with falsettists on the theatrical stage. The next section shows how the emancipation of the homosexual and the falsetto sound, used in disco of the 1970s, set the stage for the resurgence of the *falsetto* in the professional music world of the 1980s and 1990s.

### **King of the World**

The Eighties and Nineties saw a drastic increase in the number of Baroque operas programmed at major opera houses.<sup>173</sup> Falsettists such as Michael Chance, David Daniels, Andreas Scholl, and many others were thrust to the forefront of Classical music media. Given the advances in acceptance of both homosexuality and the falsetto voice, it is not surprising that the publicity for the *falsetto* was overwhelmingly positive during those decades. For example, in 1997 *The New Yorker* printed an interview with David Daniels entitled "Primo Uomo," with the by-line, "The next Pavarotti may sound like a woman."<sup>174</sup> These headlines placed a *falsetto* in the same category with one of the most

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<sup>173</sup> For example, refer to the programming of New York City Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Houston Grand Opera, and Glyndebourne Opera since 1980.

<sup>174</sup> Mark Levine, "Primo Uomo," *The New Yorker* (November 10, 1997): 94-97.

famous singers of the twentieth century. Moreover, in this interview Daniels was openly interrogated about his homosexuality. His career was not damaged in the slightest by the publicity concerning his female-sounding voice or his sexuality. In truth, the fact that many falsettists singing professionally today are homosexual has not affected the popularity of the voice type.

In the context of this paper, one would expect the original compositions created for this voice type in the past decade to be free of gender or sexual bias. In accordance with this theory, comic *falsetto* roles have been written that do not involve female or homosexual mimesis. For example, the character of Morton the Frog in Edward Barnes' *The Frog that Became a Prince*, the role of Trinculo, a jester, in John Eaton's *The Tempest* and Henry Henry [sic] in Jeffrey Lependorf's *Say It With Flowers* are roles that would have been given to a tenor or baritone, if the gender of the character were used as the determining factor. The implication is not that all late twentieth-century comic roles for *falsetto* were homogeneous in their masculinity. Female mimetic characters continued to exist, but they were fewer in number than in previous centuries.

This trend has continued into the twenty-first century. For example, the character of Prince Andrew Aguecheek in Joel Feigin's *Twelfth Night* (2000) shows the comic *falsetto* in its modern usage,<sup>175</sup> but with a twist. Perhaps purposely, Feigin creates a scenario in which the role of Andrew may be played in either a masculine or feminine way, depending on the director's interpretations of Shakespeare's play and Feigin's opera. Among the many stock characters upon which the Elizabethan stage relied were

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<sup>175</sup> Joel Feigin, *Twelfth Night* (unpublished, 2000).

the masculine rake and the effeminate fop. Andrew could be either. No verbal or theatrical clues in the script or score favor one choice over the other.

In support of the rake, Shakespeare's plot makes it clear that Sir Andrew is present at the residence of Olivia in order to woo her. However, Andrew's lack of restraint gets him into trouble. As he begins to carouse and drink with his comrade Sir Toby, he lets slip clear references to the real reason that he has come—to court Olivia. The drunkards even create a ruse to direct Olivia's attention Andrew's way. Therefore, it would be quite feasible to play Andrew as a masculine, aristocratic suitor.

In support of the fop, Andrew's attempts to win Olivia never seem to trump his tendencies to party. He makes no effort to romance anything except the wine cask. While almost every other character in the play/opera ends up with a mate—Olivia with Sebastian, Orsino with Viola, and Toby with Maria, Andrew and Feste presumably remain uncoupled at the end of the production. This default pairing could be understood as suggestive by a twenty-first century observer; if the director chose to emphasize this interpretation, the effeminate side of Andrew would definitely stand a chance of being read by an audience.

### **Hear My Song**

Currently, for the first time in history, the falsettist has a chance to be both masculine and funny onstage. In addition, with flexible characters such as Sir Andrew, the *falsetto* represents an extremely versatile voice type that a composer can utilize in

novel ways. With the explosive growth in the use of the internet and electronic audio files, awareness of the *falsetto* is spreading rapidly. Because recorded music divorces the visual image of the singer from the voice, technological advances could be another boon to the longevity of this voice type. More than at any other time in history, people—especially young people—are able to hear the *falsetto* without any negative association. This liberation benefits both the listener and the singer. The scope of the falsettist's singing and acting ability can now be drastically widened instead of attached to narrow, conventional stock roles.

It cannot be a coincidence that this emancipation of the *falsetto* is happening alongside landmark events in the history of gender and sexuality. Women are now CEOs of corporations. Many households could not be financially sound without the secondary income of women in the workplace. In fact, the main breadwinners of many families are women—straight and lesbian. Many corporations provide assistance with daycare for women who are single mothers. There are female Supreme Court justices and high-ranking politicians. The civil gap between male and female is closing.

In the same way, the gap between people of varying sexualities is closing. The Supreme Court's Lawrence Decision took the American government out of the bedroom, making it legal for people to express their sexuality in any way they choose. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and throughout Canada, Spain, and several other European nations, homosexuals have the same legal rights as other married couples. Television shows and movies are depicting non-traditional lifestyles and the popularity of

these productions is overwhelming. Currently, in 2006, critically acclaimed and Oscar-nominated movies document the lives of gay cowboys and transsexuals.<sup>176</sup>

These strides in the equality of gender and sexuality have made it possible to defend difference in society against attempts to squelch it. In fact, many people today thrive on their individuality. The same principle can be observed in the appreciation of the *falsetto*. A falsettist's song can be heard without being rejected or immediately classified because the sound is different. The *falsetto* has gained the opportunity to bring its uniqueness to the music world, and its unique potential should enable it to achieve vocal equality with other voice types in the near future.

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<sup>176</sup> These movies respectively are titled *Brokeback Mountain* and *TransAmerica*.

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