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Who sings the *cantus*? Children as performers of secular music in the early modern period

Sometime around 1488, the poet Angelo Poliziano wrote from Rome (in Latin) to the philosopher Pico della Mirandola about a banquet he had attended given by the nobleman, Paolo Orsini, during which the guests were entertained by the host's 11 year-old son, Fabio:

No sooner were we seated at the table than [Fabio] was ordered to sing, together with some other experts, certain songs which are put into writing with those little signs of music and immediately he filled our ears, or rather our hearts, with a voice so sweet, that as for myself (I do not know about the others), I was almost transported out of my sense and was touched beyond doubt by the unspoken feeling of an altogether divine pleasure.¹

This famous letter continues with an even more ecstatic account of Fabio's solo rendition of a self-composed monody on a heroic theme that followed his performance in the ensemble songs, in which Poliziano praised the boy's perfect oratorical style of delivery, likening him to the great Roman actor, Roscius.² Setting aside for a moment Poliziano's rather self-conscious citation

- 1 As cited in Nino Pirrotta and Elena Povoledo, *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi*, trans. Karen Eales (Cambridge, 1982), p. 36. (»Vt ergo discubimus, canere quaedam iussus notata Musicis accentiunculis carmina simul cum peritis alijs statim suavissima quadam uoce sic in aures nostras illapsus, imò verò in præcordia est, ut me quidem (cæteros nescio) penè extra me rapuerit, certè sensu tacito diuinæ prorsus cuiusdam uoluptatis affecerit.« *Angeli Politiani operum: Epistolarium libros XII. ac Miscellaneorum Centuriam I. complectens*, Paris: Sébastien Gryphius, 1550, p. 351).
- 2 Ibid.: »He then performed an heroic song which he had himself recently composed in praise of our own Piero dei Medici ... His voice was not entirely that of someone reading, nor entirely that of someone singing: both could be heard, and yet neither separated one from the other: it was, in any case, even or modulated, and now restrained, now calm and now vehement, now slowing down and now quickening its pace, but always it was precise, always clear and always pleasant; and his gestures were not indifferent or sluggish, but not posturing or affected either. You might have thought that an adolescent Roscius was acting on the stage.« (»Pronuntiauit heroicum deinde carmen, quod ipsemet nuper in Petri Medicis ... Vox ipsa nec quasi legentis, nec quasi canentis, sed in qua tamen utrunq[ue] sentire, neutrum discerneres: uariè tamen prout locus posceret, aut æqualis, aut inflexa, nunc distincta, nunc perpetua, nunc sublata, nunc deducta, nu[n]c remissa, nunc contenta nunc lenta, nunc incitata, semper emendata, semper clara, semper dulcis, gestus non oti-

of generic elements of rhetoric in support of his praise for the boy's performance, the habituated historical performance-practitioner in me will immediately note that this appears to have been a performance of secular polyphony; that the »other experts« were probably also singers (although this is not definite); and that this child was presumably singing the superius part in chansons in his unbroken voice in the soprano range. *Ergo*, this literary description yields up a set of useful information that might well be extrapolated to future performances of late fifteenth-century secular song from Rome, and quite possibly a far wider geographical area – particularly welcome in a period of history that is so rich in vocal repertoire and yet so extraordinarily short of eye-witness accounts of vocal performance: all in all, a pretty promising way to begin an essay that asks the question »Who sings the cantus part in secular music?«

The cultural historian of music in me, meanwhile, is drawn to the singularity of the occasion: the physical and social space the performance occupied – private, yet semi-formal; an audience of family and guests, seated at table but not yet eating, their conversation interrupted or delayed by complex music; an ensemble consisting of a young family member collaborating with »experts«; Poliziano's selectiveness of detail – focussed on sound, musical texture and personal emotion, but no hint of the word content or meaning of the songs (something reversed in his subsequent account of the monody); and finally (for now), returning to the main focus of the writer's attention: this boy, Fabio. His ability: outstanding, as we expect from a son of the aristocratic and humanist elite; his specific skills: apparently musically literate and creative, able to hold his own with expert musicians, indeed, to outshine them; a child with the confidence and bearing of a young adult, yet, as Poliziano notes a little later, »not posturing or affected either«. But even if I restrict myself to considering this source solely in terms of my chosen job-in-hand – investigating soprano singing, and, specifically, the role of children in the performance of sixteenth-century polyphonic secular music – and going behind the writer's highly rhetorical style (we might well accuse Poliziano himself of posturing and affectation!), it is clear that this account cannot be treated simply as a descriptive portrait of »a singer«, »a boy-soprano«, even »the cantus«, any more than we would remotely do justice to, say, the *Lamento d'Arianna* by describing it as »a piece for mezzo soprano« or to

osus, non somniculosus, sed nec uultuosus tamen, ac molestus: Rosciolum prorsus aliquem diceres in scena uersari.« *Ibid.*, pp. 151–52).

Virginia Ramponi, who first performed it in 1608, by considering her merely as »a female theatre singer«.

And yet these examples in many ways encapsulate the kinds of historiographical problems that underlie and, I would argue, can undermine the validity of systematic approaches to the study of the singing practices of Renaissance vocal music, especially those whose principal aim is the ›recovery‹ of vocal practices in order somehow to revive early modern music in the contemporary world. The preoccupation of the ›historical performance movement‹ with such recovery has inevitably meant that the kinds of questions which they ask of sources are naturally liable very much to shape the kinds of answers those sources are asked to yield up, opening up broader problems of historical method not always recognised as such by musicologists working in the same area, but perhaps to different ends. When we look for answers to even such apparently innocuous questions as »Did women perform fifteenth-century motets?« or »Did Monteverdi write the Sixth Book of Madrigals intending the soprano parts to be sung by castratos?« – questions that performance practice scholars have been investigating and debating for a while now – we can easily imagine that all we need to find is that one elusive description in a letter or picture that will provide the evidence we need.³ Images of actual singers, especially when they are ›caught in the act‹ of making music are, naturally, highly privileged sources, seeming to promise exclusive ›first-hand‹ knowledge. But whether they are famous virtuosi or elite amateurs, rank-and-file professionals, or the countless and usually nameless figures who, in letters, reports and pictures, briefly break into song and out again (and often once only), individual singers can easily be forced to become expert witnesses, called to testify in enquiries intended either to establish sweepingly broad generalisations about entire genres of music, or, in cultural historical studies, to carry the burden of ›speaking on behalf of‹ sometimes huge social groups, such as »nuns«, »courtiers«, or even an entire gender. But there is an inherent danger that in making generalisations from individual cases we can create distortions that then become established as ›truths‹.

3 See for example, Howard Mayer Brown, »Women Singers and Women's Songs in Fifteenth-Century Italy«, *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition 1150–1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana, 1986), pp. 62–89; Richard Wistreich, »Monteverdi in Performance«, *The Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi*, ed. John Whenham and Richard Wistreich (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 261–279, 296–298.

Thus, in a recent companion article to this one, in which I focussed on adult soprano singing in the sixteenth century,⁴ I noted how the relatively rich literary record of professional vocal performance that is now foregrounded in most discussions of ensemble vocal performance in the sixteenth century – and especially the copious knowledge we have of the famous *concerti delle donne* – has been appropriated to underpin what is now a well-entrenched truism about the compositional history of the Italian madrigal. This teleological model states, in brief and in the words of Anthony Newcomb, that in the course of the sixteenth century, madrigal scorings changed, from »the low, male-dominated (probably often all-male) ensemble of the Rore generation, to the bright, female-dominated one of the last quarter of the century«. ⁵ This highly questionable association of the vocal colour and pitch level of the soprano voice with the gender of its singers is based on an anachronistic assumption that it is possible to identify and differentiate specifically »female soprano music« from other *cantus* or *superius* parts, on the grounds of a higher pitch range. In fact, perhaps the most interesting fact about the soprano voice and its music in sixteenth-century secular music, is the inter-exchangeability of the soprano parts, however named, among all those who were both capable of singing in the same vocal range – adult women, adult men, both castratos and falsettists and, of course, children, both girls and boys. But the implications of Newcomb's statement gives rise to the further proposal that, in the words of another influential scholar, »the later sixteenth-century Italian madrigal is«, therefore, »possibly the first musical genre in modern history to which the female voice is crucial«. ⁶

But careful consideration of the evidence about the participation of adult male sopranos (both falsettists and castratos) as well as women in the performance of madrigals and other part songs throughout the course of the century, shows that mixed gender ensembles where women sing together with men, are no more prevalent than those by all male groups, whether in what we today distinguish as amateur, or in professional performances. In fact, evidence for any professional mixed gender vocal ensembles for non-

4 Richard Wistreich, »Sopranos, Castratos and the Performance of Late-Renaissance Secular Music«, *Der Countertenor. Die männliche Falsettstimme vom Mittelalter zur Gegenwart*, ed. Corinna Herr, Arnold Jacobshagen and Kai Wessel (Mainz, 2012), pp. 71–85.

5 Anthony Newcomb, »Secular Polyphony in the 16th Century«, *Performance Practice: Music before 1600*, ed. Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie (London, 1989), pp. 222–239: p. 234.

6 Laura W. Macy, »Women's History and Early Music«, *Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music*, ed. Tess Knighton and David Fallows (New York, 1992), pp. 93–98: p. 94.

liturgical music anywhere in the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries is, despite what is often assumed, extremely rare. Moreover, when males are depicted taking on singing the *cantus* part, it seems to happen without further comment, suggesting that it was quite normal for adult men to sing soprano in their falsetto voices, or at least not a major issue.⁷

To illustrate the point, I present three short examples from fictional literature. In 1543 Antonfrancesco Doni's famous *Dialogo della musica* gathers together an all-male group of musical friends, members of the *Academia degli Ortolani* in Piacenza, to sing through a selection of madrigals and motets.⁸ When it comes to distributing the parts for a four-part madrigal by Claudio Veggio, the organizer, Bargo (Bartolomeo Gottifredi, alternating secretary of the *Ortolani*), retains the tenor book for himself, and hands around the others to his colleagues with no apparent need for discussion about which one will go to whom: »Grullone pigliate il vostro basso. Michele l'alto, et l'Hoste il canto (Grullone, take your bass, Michele the alto and Hoste, the canto)«. It is probable that Grullone has the lowest voice (»your« bass) and also clear that Hoste will presumably sing the *canto* in his falsetto voice; there is no suggestion that he is a boy with an unbroken voice, which anyway would be highly anomalous in this adult company; nor as an amateur singer would he have been a castrato.⁹ There is neither discussion of Hoste's vocal production either in this piece nor in any of the other madrigals and motets that the company sings later in the evening, which similarly require a singer to cover the top voice. The designation »canto«, as in most sixteenth-century written music, is used here in its role as a »musical-theoretical« label for the highest-sounding part in the polyphony and this is, presumably, how it appears written or printed on the part-book; this designation neither specifies a particular absolute pitch register (which remains fully negotiable between the four singers to choose to suit their own capabilities) nor a par-

7 See R. Wistreich, *Sopranos, Castratos* (cf. fn. 4), for further elucidation of this point.

8 Antonfrancesco Doni, *Dialogo della musica* (Venice: Girolamo Scotto, 1544; repr. Cremona, 1967). See James Haar, »Notes on the *Dialogo della musica* of Antonfrancesco Doni«, *Music and Letters* 47 (1966), pp. 198–224; see also R. Wistreich, *Sopranos, Castratos* (cf. fn. 4), p. 76.

9 The absence of children is probably confirmed when early on in the evening, as the friends are deciding how to pass their time together, Grullone responds to a suggestion that they should dance, by proposing something that can be done while seated, such as telling stories, gaming or singing. Michele objects to telling stories: »Il novellare non mi pare al propositio, per esser cosa più tosto da femine, ò fanciulli« (»telling stories seems to me to be something better suited to women or children«.) A. Doni, *Dialogo della musica*, *ibid.*, p. 3^v.

ticular type of vocal production. However, the possibility of singing the music low enough for Hoste to perform his part entirely in his chest voice is almost certainly ruled out by the fact that it would take Grullone too low for any voice.¹⁰

My second example is set in the context of a fictionalised Academy. Lodovico Agostini, poet and courtier to Guidobaldo II, Duke of Urbino, wrote his *Giornate Soriane* sometime around 1561.¹¹ The novel describes ten days during which six courtiers travel around the hills of Pesaro in the Duchy of Urbino, staying in country *palazzi* and discussing a wide range of topics as they go, ranging from religion to beauty – a sort of peripatetic version of a popular form of literature about the upper classes pioneered in *Il Cortegiano*. The main characters are members of an imaginary Academy with names like »il Stupido«, »il Contrario« or »il Vano«, representing, in fact, different facets of Agostini's own personality.¹² Each day they stop to eat sumptuous meals, followed by relaxation – playing chess, cards, and billiards, after which they move on to music-making.¹³ Sometimes one of the courtiers takes a lute or lira and sings one or more of Agostini's own love poems (presumably improvising to an aria formula), or they take up a variety of different stringed and wind instruments that the servants carry with them and play dance music together, probably »busking« rather than reading from written music (which would render their activity inappropriately artisanal). Their collaborations in singing polyphonic music, however, are more highbrow. On the first day, they sing madrigals by the duke's *maestro di capella*, Paolo Animuccia and on another, motets by Adrian Willaert.¹⁴ Another time they call the servants to

10 The music is reproduced A. Doni, *Dialogo della musica* (cf. fn. 8), pp. 1–11; the lowest note of the bassus and the highest of the cantus are *A*, and *d'*, respectively.

11 Lodovico Agostini, *Le giornate Soriane*. Testi e documenti di letteratura e di lingua, 23, ed. Laura Salvetti Firpo (Rome, 2004).

12 See Franco Piperno, *L'immagine del duca: musica e spettacolo alla corte di Guidobaldo II duca d'Urbino*. *Historiae musices cultores*, 89 (Florence, 2001), pp. 135–7.

13 »Finito che fu il desinare, e già levate le tavole, chi a scacchi, chi a tarocchie chi a biardi, ci trettenevmo tutti per grand'ispazio di tempo; poscia, levatosi 'l Sventato, propose (così com'era l'ordine dato) che far si dovesse un puoco di musica. La qual cosa, confirmando sua eccellenza, fu subito.« (»Supper being finished and the table cleared, they all relaxed for a long time, some playing chess, others cards and some at billiards. Presently, il Svenato (it being his turn) proposed that they should make a little music. This was agreed to by His Excellency and immediately begun.« L. Agostini, *Le giornate*, cf. fn. 11, pp. 13–14).

14 Although when their voices become tired from singing Willaert, they turn to fly-fishing: »si cantarono alcuni motetti di Adriano, e quando cui parve tempo da riposar le voci, demmo mano all loro reti da pesce che tratte si chiamano« (»they sang some motets by Adriano

bring music books, from which they sang »con molto piacer di tutti, molti e diversi madrigali di diversi autori« (»to the great pleasure of all, many and various madrigals by different composers«).¹⁵ They are all men, yet they clearly have no difficulty coping with all the parts, including, presumably, the *cantus*: but, unlike the allocation of instruments for their jam session, there is never any mention of who sings what.

The final example comes from Claudius Hollyband's *The French Schoolemaister* of 1573, a popular parallel phrase book for learning French, reprinted many times over more than 50 years.¹⁶ The second half of the book consists of a loosely-constructed story about a day in the life of a middle-class family in London, for students to practise basic and useful French phrases. In the evening they sit down to dinner and once the cheese is on the table and the company has had plenty to drink, the host calls his servant to go to his closet and bring the music books containing »fair songs at four parts«. »Who shall sing with me?«, asks Roland, the guest. »You shall have company enough«, replies his host, calling members of his household (either his sons or servants): »David shall make the bass, John the tenor and James the treble«. ¹⁷ This time, the treble is surely sung by a younger boy with an unbroken voice. The word »treble«, although also used in music theory as an alternate to *discantus* or to denote the highest-sounding part in general (including, for example, in consorts of instruments such as viols), had strong associations with boy singers in English usage. There is a hiatus as the group try to start the song and the host is impatient with the child, but James shows he is reading his part carefully: »Begin, James! For what do you tarry?«, »I have but a rest«, is the child's speedy reply (incidentally confirming his musical literacy).

I know of no other comparable literary descriptions of mixed gender ensemble performances of madrigals before the seventeenth century. When the famous ladies of the *concerto delle donne* chose to read madrigals from part-books, it seems that they normally did so without having to call on men to join them. One of Duke Alfonso d'Este II's courtiers recorded on 8 September 1582:

[Willaert] and when it seemed time to rest their voice, they took up their rods to fly-fish as it's called.« L. Agostini, *Le giornate*, *ibid.*, p. 157).

15 L. Agostini, *Le giornate*, *ibid.*, p. 63.

16 Claudius Hollyband, *The French Schoolemaister* (London: William How for Abraham Veale, 1573).

17 C. Hollyband, *The French Schoolemaister*, *ibid.*, p. 128. For more detailed discussion of this and other scenes of music-making in the book, see Richard Wistreich, »Music Books and Sociability«, *Il Saggiatore musicale* 18 (2011), forthcoming.

Wednesday after having dined, the Duke passed a good deal of time listening to those ladies singing from ordinary music [i.e., published repertoire]. Even in that kind of singing the ladies are beautiful to hear, because they sing the low parts an octave higher.¹⁸

However, that men and women did sing ensemble music together with men, and presumably took the *cantus* parts, is certainly better represented in the pictorial record. Well-known images include Luca van Valckenborch's *Frühlingslandschaft* (1587), an idealised vision of courtly outdoor music-making in which men and women are represented singing from part-books (while at the same time, others dance to an ensemble of shawms and trombone, confirming the scene's fictionalisation).¹⁹ Another often-reproduced image which may show a male and female courtier (that is, amateurs) sharing a part-book and making music alongside professional musicians is Hans Vredeman de Vries's *Palastarchitektur mit Muzierenden* (1596).²⁰ It is interesting, then, to compare these with others, in which the group is all male and in each there is a younger man or boy, who we can probably assume to be singing the top line. All these images have, of course, to be read with all the care that modern music-iconological studies have taught us, especially about the prevalence of tropes or models. Thus we might note the similarities between Hieronymus Höltzel's and Jost Amman's depictions of ensembles performing outdoors (figures 1 and 2).

In the earlier illustration, what we assume to be the *superius* part is being sung by the boy in the foreground and he is being instructed by the teacher with his stick, on the right; in Amman's group, each couple appears to share a part-book, while the *bassus* book lies on the table, perhaps inviting the viewer

18 Letter from Cavalier Giacomo Grana to Cardinal Luigi d'Este, 8 September 1582: »Mercoli doppo disnare, il Sig. Duca stette un gran pezzo a passare il tempo a sentir cantare quelle Dame con Libri hordinarii di musica, le quali essercitandosi in quel modo fano ancora bel sentire per che le parti grosse le cantano a l'ottava di sopra«. Elio Durante and Anna Martellotti, *Cronistoria del concerto delle dame principalissime di Margherita Gonzaga d'Este* (Florence, 1979, rev. 1989), p. 283; text translated in Anthony Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara, 1579–1597* (Princeton, 1980), vol. 1, p. 67.

19 Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv.-Nr. GG_1065. Detail showing singers in Walter Salmen, *Musikleben im 16. Jahrhundert*. Musikgeschichte in Bildern, 3.9 (Leipzig, 1961), fig. 68. On-line image at <http://tiny.cc/xrzuh> (accessed 09.08.2012).

20 Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv.-Nr. GG_2336; on-line image at <http://tiny.cc/blg4y> (accessed 09.08.2012). The male and female singers are shown at the bottom left hand corner. See also R. Wistreich, *Music Books* (cf. fn. 17), where the image is also reproduced.



Figure 1 (left): Hieronymus Hölzel, »Singende Scholaren«: ?woodcut for Eobanus Hesse, *De generibus ebriosorum* (Nürnberg, 1516)²¹

Figure 2 (right): Jost Amman, »Die Singer«: illustration for Hans Sachs, *Eygentliche Beschreibung Aller Stände auff Erden, Hoher vnd Nidriger, Geistlicher vnd Weltlicher, Aller Künsten, Handwercken vnd Händeln, [et]c. vom grösten biß zum kleinsten Auch von jrem Vrsprung, Erfindung vnd gebreuchen* (Frankfurt am Main: Georg Raben in verlegung Sigmund Feyerabents, 1568), sig. c [iv]²²

21 The attribution was originally proposed by Emil Reicke, *Lehrer und Unterrichtswesen in der deutschen Vergangenheit mit 130 Abbildungen und Beilagen nach Originalen aus dem fünfzehnten bis achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Leipzig, 1901, 2nd ed. Düsseldorf, 1924, R as *Magister und Scholaren. Illustrierte Geschichte des Unterrichtswesens*, Düsseldorf, 1971), p. 59; however, this attribution may be spurious, as the illustration does not occur in any surviving edition of Eobanus Hesse's *De generibus* ...

22 Woodcut reproduced in Andrea Lindmayr-Brandl, »The Role of Music in Sixteenth-Century German City Life: A Close Look at the Iconography of Hans Sachs's and Jost Amman's Ständebuch«, *Essays on Renaissance Music in Honour of David Fallows. Bon jour, bon mois, et bonne estrenne*, ed. Fabrice Fitch and Jacobijn Kiel (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 349–360: p. 350.

to join in the performance.²³ What might this kind of evidence offer us as a means of investigating the performance of non-religious music by children in general, as opposed to glimpses of individual children, such as young Fabio Orsini?

If the body of evidence about the singing of soprano in secular music in the sixteenth century, whether by women, male falsettists or castratos is small and often problematic, then reliable evidence about children's participation, by comparison, can only be described as miniscule. By far the majority of written records of performance specifically by a child or children in any way, let alone in a specific piece of music, whether polyphonic or solo, are (perhaps not surprisingly) overwhelmingly about sacred music. Similarly, to find records of even the names of the boys (or in a very few cases, girls) employed as professional singers of secular music in institutions, is unusual. And yet, professional child singers were a familiar feature of some of the most ambitious musical experiments of the period: for example, in the very first public performance of a through-sung play, Ottavio Rinuccini's and Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* at the palazzo Pitti in Florence on 6 October, 1600, the role of Dafne was played by Jacopo Giusti, *fanciuletto Lucchese*. But apart from his name, we know absolutely nothing more about him.²⁴ However, 20 years ago, Timothy McGee discovered that at the second performance, the part of Tragedia (the Prologue) was sung by an adolescent girl, Ginevra Mazziere.²⁵ During the rehearsal period, she was seduced by another cast member, Giulio Caccini's bastard son, Pompilio, whom she then had to marry. The role of Venere, meanwhile was sung by a »castrato del Emilio de' Cavalieri«: thus there were three different kinds of »soprano« on stage together. A comparison of Peri's music for la Tragedia, Dafne and Venere, however, provides no clue that each was intended for a »different« kind of soprano. In fact, in contrast to sources of sacred music where there are occasional specific specifications of »puer«, as David Fallows has noted for example in some pieces by Josquin, the designation of soprano parts for one kind or another, is extremely

23 See R. Wistreich, *Music Books* (cf. fn. 17).

24 Jacopo Peri, *Le Musiche di Sig. Jacopo Peri sopra L'Euridice del Sig. Ottavio Rinuccini*, (Florence: Marescotti, 1600), »A Letori«. In an annotated copy of the libretto now at the University of Illinois, which refers to a performance subsequent to the premiere, his name is given as »Jacopino Lucchese«. See Claude V. Palisca, »The First Performance of Euridice«, *Studies in the History of Italian Music and Music Theory* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 437–446: p. 445, Table 16.1.

25 Timothy J. McGee, »Pompeo Caccini and Euridice: New Biographical Notes«, *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 26 = N.S. 14 (1990), pp. 81–99.

rare.²⁶ Indeed, the only example that has so far come to light in printed polyphonic secular music is English: Thomas Whythorne's didactic song »Prefer not great bewtie before vertue« is for four voices, notated in two C2 and two C3 clefs and marked at the top of the page »For children«.²⁷

For children. Primus Triplex.

fulnes and of solace, of toyfulness and of solace, so oft as I, so oft as I this time may
see, ij. so oft as I this time may see.

Refer not great bewtie before vertue, the much gazing thereon, the much gazing thereon many
may rue, ij. the much gazing thereon, the much gazing thereon many may rue. For to
beholde the beautie rare, of some who therewith posselt are: but them t'accompany and oft to touch, is
perillous this proof doth firmly vouch, Prefer not great beautie, *V'supra.* It'

Figure 3: Thomas Whythorne, »Prefer not great bewtie before vertue«, à4, (Primus Triplex) in *Songes, for Three, Fower, and Five Voices* (London: John Day, 1571), Primus Triplex, »For children«

That children participated in the performance of »art« music at the same level and often together with adults, throughout the Renaissance period and in all parts of Europe is not in dispute; nor that from at least the fifteenth

26 David Fallows, »The Performing Ensembles in Josquin's Sacred Music«, *Tijdschrift van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 35 (1985), pp. 32–66: p. 44.

27 Cited in Jane Flynn, »Thomas Mulliner: An Apprentice of John Heywood?«, *Young Choristers 650–1700*, ed. Susan Boynton and Eric Rice (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 173–94: p. 178.

century onwards, boys, either alone, or together with adult men singing in falsetto, performed the top line or lines of polyphonic music, in many (although not all) large household chapel, major church and cathedral choirs in Europe. Pictorial images (which may well be schematic rather than numerically accurate) suggest nevertheless ensembles in which the number of boys is relatively small and proportionate to the adult men, who presumably performed the lower voice parts.²⁸ This is borne out by the far more abundant and objective evidence collated by scholars such as Frank D'Accone, David Fallows, Roger Bowers, Noel O'Regan, Ruth Lightbourne and Christelle Cazaux about sixteenth-century choirs in major institutions in Italy, the Low Countries, England and France, in which throughout the sixteenth century there are rarely more than six boys, and sometimes as few as two.²⁹ In the otherwise apparently closely-observed image of an ensemble performing polyphony in S. Frediano, Lucca, c. 1490, it looks as if the boy is singing his

28 See, for example, images reproduced in Edmund Bowles, *Musikleben im 15. Jahrhundert. Musikgeschichte in Bildern*, 3.8 (Leipzig, 1977): p. 113, from the late fourteenth-century codex, *Tacuinum sanitatis in medicina*, showing two boys and two adults singing from what may be a choir book and p. 118 (cf. the contribution by Björn Tammen in this volume, p. 73, for a reproduction of the miniature), a late-fifteenth century wood cut of six men (including a *magister*) and two boys singing from a choirbook; etc.

29 See, for example: Frank d'Accone, »The Singers of San Giovanni in Florence during the 15th Century«, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 14 (1961), pp. 307–51: p. 328, where (in 1478) the choir of S. Giovanni consisted of »five adult singers and four soprano choristers«; D. Fallows, *The Performing Ensembles* (cf. fn. 27), especially pp. 43–6, Fallows argues that the top lines of Franco-Flemish polyphony might be sung by falsettists or boys; Roger Bowers, »Vocal Scoring, Choral Balance and Performing Pitch of Latin Church Music in England, c. 1500–58«, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 112 (1986–1987), pp. 38–76, details the dispositions of a number of cathedral choirs in England in the first half of the sixteenth century, noting (p. 54) that »In the majority of major choirs, the number of men at least available to sing polyphony considerably exceeded that of the boys« and also that the Duke of Northumberland's household chapel choir around the turn of the century had about five boys who divided into trebles and means (i. e., first and second sopranos); Noel O'Regan, »Choirboys in Early Modern Rome«, *Young Choristers 650–1700*, ed. Susan Boynton and Eric Rice (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 216–40, notes the »doi nostri putti che cantano soprano in S. Lorenzo« (»two of our little boys who sing soprano in San Lorenzo«) provided by the confraternity for orphans, S. Maria della Visitazione degli Orfani; Ruth Lightbourne, »Annibale Stabile and Performance Practice at two Roman institutions«, *Early Music* 32 (2004), pp. 271–85 notes (p. 282) that at S. Giovanni in Laterano and S. Maria Maggiore in Rome in the early 1590s, »the number of boys varied, with S. Giovanni averaging two and S. Maria four«; Christelle Cazaux, *La musique à la cour de François Ier. Mémoires et documents de l'École des Chartes*, 65 (Paris, 2002), an exhaustive study of the musical records of the household of François 1, gives detailed insight into the balance of boys to men in the various vocal ensembles (see below).

part alone (although it is also possible either that one of the adults is doubling him in the soprano register or that the group is singing monody).³⁰ The many im-ages depicting angel choirs need to be treated with extreme scepticism, but in Michiel Coxcie's well-known portrait of S. Cecilia, the *putto* holds a part-book labelled »Superius«, from which he appears ready to sing alone.³¹

What little documentary evidence there is for the professional engagement of boys in secular music-making, is, not surprisingly from major courts, where not only were singers employed in quite large numbers, but, of course, the records survive. All of these sources suggest that professional boy singers learned their art in church choirs under the tutelage of *maîtrises* before moving into chamber music. In many cases, it seems likely that boys were drawn directly from the *capella* when needed for secular music, especially entertainments. For example, in 1527, when King François I was entertained by King Henry VIII at Greenwich eight boys of the Chapel Royal, almost certainly under the direction of the singer and English playwright, John Heywood, took part in a »pageant of the father of heaven (Jupiter) in which four young choristers of the Chapel Royal supported ›Riches‹ and another four supported ›Love‹ in a debate concerning whether the former were better than the latter«. ³² Heywood went on to write plays for St Paul's Boys, who together with their ›rival‹ boys' theatre troupe the Children of the Chapel (Royal) and their successor companies, such as The King's Revels, were renowned during the second half of the sixteenth century, among other things, for their singing and instrumental music.³³ The role of boy singers in the mainstream professional theatre in late Elizabethan and Jacobean London was a major feature of the all-male companies of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries, where the parts not only of children but also of women were always taken by boys.³⁴

30 Amico Aspertini, *Transportation of the Volto Saneto* (fresco) in S. Frediano, Lucca (1508–09). E. Bowles, *Musikleben* (cf. fn. 29), p. 119, shows a detail of the singers; on-line image of the whole fresco at <http://tinyurl.com/8bgl23k> (accessed 09.08.2012). The singers can be seen walking just beyond the two oxen.

31 Milan, Museo Prado, Michiel Coxcie, »S. Cecilia« (1569); on-line image at <http://tinyurl.com/9272pue> (accessed 31.08.2012).

32 J. Flynn, Thomas Mulliner (cf. fn. 28), p. 178.

33 See Linda Phyllis Austern, *Music in English Children's Drama of the Late Renaissance* (Philadelphia, 1992).

34 Edward K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford, 1923), vol. 2, pp. 1–77.

However, it is from François I's court that we have the most compelling evidence for the migration of boys from the *chapelle* into paid positions as chamber musicians, and thus professional performers of secular music. Christelle Cazaux's work on the records of court music has revealed that at the time of François's visit to Greenwich in 1527, there were already two *paiges chantres* listed among the *Chantres de la Chambre*. By the mid-1530s the chamber music ensemble included five singers and three *petits chantres*, although at the time of the king's death in 1547, there is only one *petit chantre* listed, and without a name.³⁵ The boys were often also members of the chapel, where they almost certainly learned their craft under the direction of a *maîtrise*; other chapel singers went on to join the *Chambre* after their voices broke.³⁶ The *petits chantres* travelled with the court, which was almost constantly on the move. For example, Cazaux lists a payment for boots for Jacques Colombeau, »l'un desd. petiz chantres, pour son service quant il va aux champs et par pays suyvant le roy« (»the said member of the *petit chantres* for his service when he is in the field [?] on military campaign] and on progress with the king«), who clearly enjoyed special favour: the same boy was later given a coat as part of his settlement when the king paid for him to go to University after his voice broke.³⁷ It seems then, pretty likely that the *Chantres de la Chambre* performed polyphonic chansons, and that the boys must therefore have sung the *dessus* parts. It is interesting, then, to see the engraving in Tilman Susato's *Vingt et six chansons musicales & nouvelles à cinq parties* (Antwerp, 1543) which appears to depict an ensemble with a disposition not at all dissimilar to the *Chantres de la Chambre* apparently performing before an important person (although not the king) (figure 4).

Another boy singer who made the move from professional ecclesiastical service into secular music in a great household went on to become one of the most famous and influential singers of his age – Giulio Caccini. The full details of his recruitment to Florence from the *Capella Giulia* in Rome to come to Florence to play the role of *Psyche* in the *intermedii* to the comedy *La Cofanaria* at the wedding of Prince Francesco de' Medici to Joanna of Austria in December 1565 are told in a sequence of letters between Duke Cosimo de'

35 See the tables in Ch. Cazaux, *La musique* (cf. fn. 30), p. 315, showing »Les petits chantres de la chambre« in 1527, 1533–36, 1536–37, 1541 and 1547, and on p. 144, which shows the disposition of the »Groupe de la chambre« at the death of the king in 1547.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 147.



Figure 4: *Vingt et six chansons musicales & nouvelles a cinq parties convenables tant a la voix comme aussi propices a jouer de divers instruments* (Antwerp: Tilman Susato, 1543), frontispiece³⁸

Medici and his ambassador in Rome, Averado Serristori, which were discovered and published by Tim Carter in 1987.³⁹ Psyche was written to be performed by »a youth of 15 or 16 years« and Psyche's role culminates in the fifth *intermedio*, when he/she sings a lament in Hades after having been abandoned by Cupid. The music for the lament, »Fugge speme mia«, composed by Alessandro Striggio, was clearly both unusual and extremely demanding, as no Florentine singer was apparently considered suitable to sing it. The process of recruitment of Giulio reveals something both of the way that Roman choirboys might be obtained from the *maestri* to whom, as Noel O'Regan's recent research has shown, they were usually indentured as apprentices.⁴⁰ Duke Cosimo de' Medici's letter concerning the search for a suitable boy singer for the *intermedio* reveals much about the general biological problems of dealing with boys of a certain age and the distinct preference

38 Reproduction in Walter Salmen, *Musik der Neuzeit: Haus- und Kammermusik*. Musikgeschichte in Bildern, 4.3 (Leipzig, 1961), p. 17.

39 Tim Carter, »Giulio Caccini (1551–1618): New Facts, New Music«, *Studi musicali* 16 (1987), pp. 13–31. See also Warren Kirkendale, *The Court Musicians in Florence During the Principate of the Medici, with a Reconstruction of the Artistic Establishment* (Florence, 1993), p. 121.

40 N. O'Regan, *Choirboys* (cf. fn. 30).

for either a boy with an unbroken voice or a castrato rather than an adult falsetto, which, as far as the duke was concerned, simply would not do. Cosimo wrote to Serristori in early October:

There is need of a boy's voice as a soprano. For this it is intended to use a certain boy called Pavolino, whom our cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici had obtained from Cardinal Orsini and brought from Rome. But either because his voice has broken or because of the air, we find he cannot do it. Therefore we ask that you should have a few words there with those musicians of the Pope or with Giovanni Animuccia, *maestro di cappella* of St Peter's and see whether they might accommodate us with either a boy or a castrato from those chapels that might be judged suitable to this end ... the boy will have to represent a youth of 15 or 16 years, we would like him to have a beautiful voice and a good grace in singing with embellishments in the Neapolitan manner, and the voice should be natural not falsetto ... We tell you that he has to sing alone in company with four *violini* and four trombones.⁴¹

Among the important information about the mechanics, politics and organisation of expert singing and theatre in Italy around mid-century that this short excerpt reveals, the point which strikes me most forcefully is the sheer level of detailed expertise that Duke Cosimo manifests; even if he was perhaps acting on the dictation of Striggio when it came to specifying the requirements of the song the boy was to sing, his determination to get exactly the right solution to the problem is arresting and recalls the similar level of detailed interest on the part of Francesco Gonzaga forty years later when he was negotiating procurement of a castrato to sing in the first performance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*.⁴² Had Caccini been 'borrowed' from the Papal chapel, he would most likely have been returned as soon as the festivities were over. But for a whole range of reasons, including perhaps the exceptional impression that the boy made on all who heard him sing; Cosimo's and Striggio's ambitions for the development of the »Neapolitan« style of ornamented singing – Cosimo sent the young Caccini to study with the greatest veteran of the style, Scipione del Palle, shortly before the master's death in 1569 and the result, as one might say, is history.

The apprenticing of child singers to masters outside of the church, and thus potentially at least, preparing them for careers in the secular domain, became more typical in the course of the sixteenth-century – indeed, Giulio Caccini himself later became famous as the most sought-after teacher for both

41 T. Carter, Giulio Caccini (cf. fn. 40), pp. 14–15.

42 See Iain Fenlon, »The Mantuan *Orfeo*«, *Claudio Monteverdi: Orfeo*, ed. John Whenham, (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 1–19.



Figure 5: Paul Lautensack d. J., »Organist and Musicians«, 1579 (Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen, Graphische Sammlung)

talented boys and girls referred to him by aristocrats from all over Italy. A woodcut by Paul Lautensack from 1579 (figure 5), may show a boy under instruction as he sings solo accompanied by the organ and a mute cornetto, and although it is not clear whether he is singing sacred or secular music, the setting is domestic rather than liturgical.⁴³ Notable is that he is reading from the book: musical literacy was fundamental to children's training for the profession. The English musician, William Bathe, reported rather hyperbolically in the introduction to his *A Briefe Introduction to the Skill of Song* of 1589 that he had »In a month and less, ... instructed a child about the age of eight years, to sing a good number of songs, difficult crabbed Songs, to sing at the first sight, to be so indifferent for all parts, alterations, clefs, flats, and sharps, that he could sing a part of that kind, of which he never learned any song«. ⁴⁴ And it was not just boys: an eleven-year-old girl admitted to the convent of S. Clara, Toledo in the seventeenth century »could already play the organ, compose in five parts, realize accompaniments from a figured bass, and sight-sing vocal polyphony«. ⁴⁵

If the stories of Giulio Caccini and Francois I^{er}'s *petits chantres* are examples of professional boy singers performing secular music at the most elevated level both of musical sophistication and of the social scale, it is perhaps important once again to emphasise their exceptionality. In turn, Cosimo de' Medici's almost pedantic interest in securing the services of a boy singer with outstanding vocal skill to personify Psyche in his *intermedio*, and his subsequent patronage of the boy's further development in the most sophisticated chamber vocal style might be seen as lying in a direct line from the kinds of ideals that were being enacted at Paolo Orsino's dinner party, when the proud father showed off the ›orphanic‹ talents of his son to the suitably impressed response of a humanist writer such as Poliziano. However,

43 Graphische Sammlung der Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen, reproduced in Elfried Bock, *Die Zeichnungen in der Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1929), vol. 2, fol. 152, fig. 534. Lautensack was not only an artist but also an organist at St. Sebald in Nürnberg from 1571.

44 William Bathe, *A briefe introduction to the skill of song* (London, 1589), »To the Reader«.

45 Cited in Colleen Reardon, *Holy Concord within Sacred Walls: Nuns and Music in Siena, 1575–1700* (New York, 2002), p. 264. For further information about musically-proficient girls gaining admission to Spanish convents through dowry waivers in the seventeenth century, see Colleen Baade, »›Hired‹ Nun Musicians in Early Modern Castille«, *Musical Voices of Early Modern Women*, ed. Thomasin LaMay (Ashgate, 2005), pp. 287–310, and Colleen Baade, »Two Centuries of Nun Musicians in Spain's Imperial City«, *Trans: Revista Transcultural de Música / Transcultural Music Review* 15 (2011), pp. 1–22.

far more typical were probably the innumerable professional child singers of secular music whom we now tend to meet primarily in the pictorial, rather than the documentary record. A representative collection of such images from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (listed below) suggests first-ly, that children were ubiquitous as professional soprano singers, almost always working as members of otherwise adult groups and also, even when such children are no more than ›street musicians‹, they are shown reading their songs from notation, suggesting first that musical literacy was widespread among professionals and second, that notated music (and therefore probably polyphony) was likewise typical in their repertoire and performing practice.

- Street musicians in Jakob Wimpfeling, *De fide concubinarum in sacerdotes* (Basel, c. 1501), p. 20; on-line image at <http://tinyurl.com/97n3uzn> (accessed 09.08.2012)
- Atelier of Jacob I. Jordaens (1608–1678), »The Serenade«, private Collection; on-line image at <http://tinyurl.com/8h52prt> (accessed 09.08.2012)
- Leonello Spada (1576–1622), »Concerto« (1615), Paris, Louvre; on-line image at <http://tinyurl.com/9r3fd2k> (accessed 31.08.2012)
- Aniello Falcone, »The Concert« (first half of seventeenth century), Milan, Museo Prado; on-line image at <http://tiny.cc/sqgkr> (accessed 15.02.2012)

Finally, though, I return to ›private‹ space and a series of images from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries of what we would now call middle class children engaged in music-making in domestic settings (e. g., figure 6). In all of these very diverse images, what draws our attention is not only that in each one, children are seen performing together with their elders, apparently on equal terms, but also the importance that every artist attaches to the role of notation in their music-making.⁴⁶ The resulting association between children's singing together with their mothers and fathers and the humanist celebration of literacy and expressive performance constructs a notion of domestic music-making as a manifestation of what it means to aspire to live well in social and spiritual harmony.

⁴⁶ The inclusion of music books or sheets of music in very nearly all early modern pictorial images of vocal performance (instrumentalists are far more often depicted playing apparently without notated music) may in fact be a typical artistic metaphor to show the viewer that the person is to be understood to be singing; this hypothesis would require a major study before it could be sustained any further.

- Anonymous, Sir Henry Unton Memorial Painting (c. 1596), London, National Portrait Gallery; on-line image at <http://tinyurl.com/9q77x9v> (accessed 31.08.12)
- Johann Theodor de Bry, *Emblemata secularia mira et jucunda* (Oppenheim, 1611), p. 3. Illustration entitled »Musica mortales recreat Divisoq[ue] beatos«; reproduced in Walter Salmen, *Musik der Neuzeit: Haus- und Kammermusik*. Musikgeschichte in Bildern, 4.4 (Leipzig, 1961), p. 16
- Jan Brueghel the Elder, »The Senses of Hearing, Touch and Taste« (c. 1620), Madrid, Museo Prado; on-line image at <http://tinyurl.com/95j3nxu> (accessed 31.08.12)
- Johan Rist, *Frommen und Gottseliger Christen Altäglich Haus Musik* (Lüneberg, 1654), title page; reproduced in Walter Salmen, *Musik der Neuzeit: Haus- und Kammermusik*. Musikgeschichte in Bildern, 4.4 (Leipzig, 1961), p. 17



Figure 6: Thomas Sternhold, *Tenor of the whole psalmes in foure partes* (London: John Day, 1563), p. 2