

Out of the Choir Loft and Onto the Stage A Biography of the Modern Countertenor, Part 1

by Miles David Romney, countertenor

The dark melismas of a *Dies Irae* spilled up into the sculpted vaults of San Lorenzo in Damaso, and rolled over its rows of wooden pews crowded with the grieving forms of mourners gathered from all across Italy. The painted figures of Gaiuto's ceiling fresco, and the statues of Saints Francesco Saverio and Carlo Borromeo looked solemnly on, appearing now more alive than the object of this gathering: the man lying dead and awaiting burial in his family's vault at the *Cimitero del Verano*, the great city of the dead in Rome. The mass itself – conducted as it was by Lorenzo Perosi, Perpetual Director of the Sistine Chapel in Rome and a reformist – would no-doubt have been a throwback to Gregorian tradition. A postmortem jab (though surely not intended by Perosi as such) at the life and career of the dead man.

The castrati were no more. The year was 1922 and Alessandro Moreschi, the world's last remaining castrated soprano, had died.

Moreschi may have been altered soon after birth as a remedy for an inguinal hernia. Or, it could have happened shortly before puberty to preserve his talent as a boy soprano – castration wasn't banned in Italy until 1870, a comfortable two years after Moreschi would have been gelded. However it happened, Moreschi was left with a soprano voice hailed in its time (though his series of wax recordings from 1902 are underwhelming, and the subject of much debate), and honoured with nearly thirty years as First Soprano at the Sistine Chapel. His tenure was ultimately cut short by the arrival of Lorenzo Perosi, Pope Pius X, and the *Motu Proprio* edict banning castrati from singing at the Vatican.

Pope Pius X and Lorenzo Perosi urged Rome's seminaries "to great efforts in learning Gregorian chant"¹ and represented a movement – popular, pious and intellectual – to restore music within the Catholic church to the foundations of chant and the polyphony of the sixteenth-century composer Giovanni Palestrina. The movement was by no means isolated, but tracked (substantively but loosely) with interest growing throughout the western world in overturning the excess and gilt of the Romantic era, and returning to the comparative simple honesty of the Renaissance and (though not the case with Pope Pius and Perosi) the Baroque. Nineteen years before Moreschi's funereal scene, castrati had been put out and pensioned, replaced by boys and women after two centuries of dominating Europe's musical sphere as masters and celebrities.

Now – after having been revered as the greatest singers of history – they were all gone. Though their demise might be compared to the shattering of a stain-glass window, one could observe that, absent the artifice and obstacle of the coloured window, the natural golden yellow and endless blue of sun and sky might once again be observed.

Twenty-two years later, in the spring of 1944, composer Michael Tippett sat in a practice room in the choir school of the cathedral at Canterbury. Walking into the building he may have seen a warbler, returning from its southern migration to nest in the reed beds surrounding Canterbury, or admired the spring growth of an alder, ash or birch. Or, he may have observed a workman perched atop a high ladder knocking glass shards from the cathedral's many empty window casements. The war had taken its toll of Canterbury, just as it had of all England. Though the buildings on the cathedral grounds had all survived the bombings, their windows had not. With cool droughts gusting through the cathedral proper, offices were sung in the crypt (which tripled as a bomb shelter). But for this meeting, windows or no, Tippett had been summoned to a practice room aboveground.

The choir school was empty. The wartime choir of Canterbury consisted only of twenty-odd lay singers and volunteers. But Tippett was used to these circumstances – he was himself the musical director at Morley College in London (a position earlier occupied by Gustav Holst), which had lost most of its infrastructure to bombings (only the entrance hall, a few classrooms and the Gustav Holst music room remained).

Tippett had a keen interest in Renaissance music, most especially in Henry Purcell, though he wrote "I was at that time wrapped up not only in Purcell, but in the Elizabethans and all the early English school. One of my heroes was Orlando Gibbons." As he entered the room and sat, he observed that his "first thrill of that visit to Canterbury was to enter the practice room in the choir school, which I found to be almost unchanged since Gibbons himself was there in the sixteenth century"².

His second thrill was the unassuming man who stood before him singing Purcell's *Music for a While*. He was called Alfred Deller, and was a male alto in the Canterbury choir. For Tippett, "in that moment, the centuries rolled back"³.

It was Michael Tippett's affinity with the polyphony of early English music that first impressed Canterbury Vice-dean Canon Poole. Poole wrote Tippett, asking him to write a mass for Canterbury. Tippett refused, explaining that as a *pagani* (he was a Communist), he could not in good conscience write a Christian mass. The two compromised on an anthem, the double-choired motet *Plebs Angelica* based on Helen Waddell's collection of medieval Latin lyrics. The work was first performed in the crypt at Canterbury, and later by the Fleet Street Choir, also at Canterbury.

At Morley College Tippett worked with a choir varying in size between thirteen and eighty members. The choir's free Sunday-night performances grew popular in London, consistently attracting enthusiastic audiences. Most Morley College Choir recitals included examples of works by the Elizabethans, Purcell among them. But Tippett struggled with the high voicings of the early music. Purcell himself had often performed his own music, and had been called a *countertenor*. Tippett wondered on the nature of this countertenor voice. It could not have been a naturally occurring castrato voice – Purcell sang bass in the Chapel

¹ Nicholas Clapton, *Moreschi: the last castrato* (Haus, 2004), 128.

² Michael & Mollie Hardwick, *Alfred Deller A Singularity of Voice* (New York: Frederick A. Prager, 1969), 75.

³ Hardwick, *Voice*, 75.

Royal choir. (Though lately some have contended, unconvincingly, that a *true* countertenor is “by definition ... a freak of nature”⁴ – a male singer whose chemistry causes an unusual underdevelopment of the larynx accompanied by a womanly voice. These contentions betray incomplete or inaccurate information about Henry Purcell and the voices he wrote for.) And yet, to Tippett, the idea of relying in solo performance on the unsatisfying sounds of the church choir male alto was untenable. Purcell represented something of a mystery to Tippett, and solving it became a personal obsession. In the interim, Tippett tried repeatedly to mimic what he imagined to be the effect of a Purcell countertenor voice. He used unison choir, boys and female contraltos, varyingly. They were all “artistically unsatisfying”⁵.

For two hundred years, the art of the naturally occurring male high voice had simply gone unused. There were no techniques or guidelines to coach a male singer into use of what had unfortunately been termed his *false* – a term that may in itself be responsible for the avoidance of the male high register, suggesting that it is somehow *false* or illegitimate. The incredible vocal facilities demonstrated by the most accomplished castrati further discouraged exploration of the falsetto – it became impossible to compete in stamina, range and agility with a castrated man (though baroque *false*ists did try, in England some going so far as impersonating the newly imported Italian castrati). As astonishing as it appears (especially in light of the emphasis placed on development of the falsetto by some *bel canto* teachers, most prominently Giovanni Battista Lamperti), the technique for a man’s focusing of head tone such that it produces a *core* sound appropriate to a concert hall had simply been lost. Until now.

Tippett sat astonished. Here before him, singing Purcell no less, stood the very voice that had so eluded him. He instantly made his mind up that *this* was the voice, this was Purcell’s countertenor. “I shall give you the old English classical name for your voice, which is countertenor,” he announced to Deller. He later defined the countertenor voice as “a male alto of what would be regarded now as exceptional range and facility” and wrote, “To my ear it has a peculiarly musical sound because almost no emotional irrelevances distract us from the absolutely pure musical quality of the production. It is like no other sound in music, and few other musical sounds are so intrinsically musical.”⁶

Tippett, Poole and Deller discussed how best the countertenor voice could be re-introduced to the public. Poole (remembering Tippett’s refusal to write him a mass, and apparently not being one to give up old arguments) urged Tippett to become a Christian. Tippett refused, contending that his lack of affiliation gave him a broader audience. It was finally decided that Deller would debut at one of the Morley College recitals in London. The event took place on 21 October 1944. Deller sang *Music for a While*. The hall was

full, but only accommodated two hundred. On 31 December 1944 Deller sang Purcell’s *Ode for St Cecilia’s Day* at the Friends’ House, Euston Road to an audience of over a thousand. It was a hit. Walter Bergmann wrote “Suddenly, there was a Purcell again.”⁷ Anthony Lewis, Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, wrote “He has helped to open up a great repertoire of Purcell and Handel ... The obstacle in the way of performing those works requiring a virtuoso countertenor has [had] ... an adverse effect on the whole status of the performance ... Alfred Deller, by his first-class interpretation and unassailable technique, gave ... promoters confidence to put on these works at the highest artistic level, bringing them off before a highly sophisticated and critical public.”⁸

Tippett had discovered Alfred Deller in obscurity, and had successfully introduced him *into musical society*, as it were. Tippett and Deller orchestrated the final movement that brought Purcell, Handel, Dowland and so many others out of the archives and back into the public ear. But their way had been passionately prepared by a popular rejection of Romanticism, a stepping away from the Victorian age, a feeling that modernity was best served by reaching far back into history for the seeds of what could become new – or newly rediscovered – art. Englishmen in particular (though not uniquely) had a marked interest in eschewing the imported music of Romanticism and re-discovering truly *English* works. The Purcell Society, the Royal College of Music, and the BBC with their Third Programme all contributed.

And it wasn’t just about embracing England’s heritage. A new expectation of music was emerging, riding the popularity of music by composers such as Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Benjamin Britten.

Without relevance in this new music, the countertenor voice would be relegated to a historical curiosity, finding a place beside other museum-piece instruments like the hurdy gurdy or the nyckelharpa.

Tippett helped, but he was slow in producing new work, and was sometimes distracted by his political affiliations with the Communist Party, the Trotskyist Bolshevik-Leninist Group and the Peace Pledge Union. (He even served a prison sentence for refusing to fight in World War II.) Others contributed as well, though sparingly. Alfred Deller premiered most of the few new works that emerged in those early years before 1960.

Of the 619 catalogued works for countertenor⁹ written in the twentieth century, only a handful were written before 1970, most of those after 1960. These dates, it happens, are significant.

Benjamin Britten sat at his wooden desk with a wood and graphite pencil in his hand, hunched over a score : it may have been *Curlew River*; the first of three church parables he was writing in the style of Japanese *No drama*. With a few clear slashes of his pencil, he marked the manuscript, perhaps

⁴ Laura E. DeMarco, "The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor", *Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2002): doi:10.1093/musqt/gdg006, 174.

⁵ Hardwick, *Voice*, 73.

⁶ Hardwick, *Voice*, 73.

⁷ Hardwick, *Voice*, 93.

⁸ Hardwick, *Voice*, 95.

⁹ Steven Rickards. *Twentieth-Century Countertenor Repertoire: A guide* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2008)

adding a tremolando in brackets to achieve a gradual crescendo – a notation characteristic of his work. Then he reached up with his left hand and brushed away a droplet of water from his largish nose, a gesture he would have repeated a dozen times over the course of an hour. Finally, his subconscious managed to interrupt the intensity of his musical thought, and Britten looked up. It was pouring rain outside, and his window was open. He was soaking wet.¹⁰

“I fear I must postpone this piece, still near to my heart, for a year,” Britten wrote to William Plomer, his collaborator on *Curlew River*. “We are going to rebuild the Jubilee Hall, make it a proper little Opera House ... I am going to do *Midsummer Night’s Dream* ... (it is an old idea of mine ... Peter & I have already done much work, cutting up poor old Shakespeare).”¹¹

Of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Britten wrote “I haven’t tried to give the opera an Elizabethan flavour. It is no more Elizabethan than Shakespeare’s play was Athenian.”¹² Though Britten’s inspirations are discernible in his music (he admired Gustav Mahler, for example), his music reflected a fusion of the *new* and the *traditional* that would come to be regarded (though not yet fully by 1960) as exemplary of post-war English music. He wrote with a studied economy, insisting that every note have a purpose (in keeping with twentieth-century rebellion against the Romantic). Britten was deeply concerned that his music be relevant in the *local* context. “I must say one hoped, after the war, that audiences would revolt at seeing operas performed with bad acting, bad scenery and in a foreign language,” he wrote. “We are taking *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to Holland immediately ... it will get many different interpretations in many different places and all with translations ... Ultimately, it is to me the local things that matter most.”¹³ Beyond that, he understood that he was telling stories, which are based on *characters*, interpreted by *actors*. “Frankly, I’m not very interested in beautiful voices as such. I’m interested in the person behind the voice.”¹⁴ In achieving the dramatic and aural effects he desired, he used a veritable cornucopia of innovative instrumentations. He also worked with children, and was attracted to a rougher quality of boy’s voice, and to speaking voices.

In *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, he brought his full repertoire into play. As the mischievous faery Puck, he cast a boy who speaks his part, never singing a note. As the faery queen Titania he used a coloratura soprano – unusual for music of this period. And for the ethereal Oberon, he cast Alfred Deller singing countertenor. This would be Deller’s premier on the dramatic stage.

The opera was a success, and Deller’s performance was critically acclaimed. That was in 1960. In 1964, Britten was awarded the first Aspen award in the United States,

honouring “the individual anywhere in the world judged to have made the greatest contribution to the advancement of the humanities”¹⁵. In 1971 Britten wrote his *Canticle IV* for countertenor, premiered by James Bowman, a countertenor newly arrived on England’s musical scene when he performed *Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1967. In 1973 Britten completed his opera *Death in Venice*, with a countertenor principal role also premiered by James Bowman.

Donald Mitchell writes that “[Britten of the 1950s] was, too, a very different composer from the one who died in 1976. What struck me most forcibly was how the intervening three decades have modified the perspective.”¹⁶

Before 1960, almost no new work was being written for countertenor. In 1960 Britten premiered *Midsummer Night’s Dream* which received increasing notice and approbation throughout the 1960s. Other works for countertenor were written almost in direct proportion to the public exposure and academic interest generated by *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In 1971 and 1973 Britten completed his two additional – and final – works for countertenor. Britten was by now recognised as an icon of not only post-war English music, but of twentieth-century music at large. The floodgates were opened. Nearly 600 new works for countertenor followed.

The re-popularisation of the countertenor voice became a reality, a world-wide phenomenon. The combined circumstances of anti-Romanticism, the end of the castrati, renewed interest in Renaissance and Baroque music, the efforts of organisations like the Purcell Society and the BBC all created an atmosphere favourable to the fortuitous convergence of an extraordinary voice – Alfred Deller – with two composers capable of applying it to the rediscovery of the past, and the development of the future. The trinity of Alfred Deller, Michael Tippett and Benjamin Britten became the Madonna who suffered through the throes and the ecstasy of (re)birthing an “absolutely pure musical quality”¹⁷ and the sublime music it produces.

The countertenor voice had been taken beyond its obscurity in the choir loft, and taken onto the stage.

¹⁰ Christopher Palmer, *The Britten Companion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 46.

¹¹ Britten to Plomer, 12 August 1959, quoted in Seymour, *Expression*, 224-225.

¹² Christopher Palmer, *The Britten Companion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 179.

¹³ Palmer, *Companion*, 180.

¹⁴ Palmer, *Companion*, 65.

¹⁵ William H.L. Godsalve, *Britten’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Making An Opera From Shakespeare’s Comedy* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), 19.

¹⁶ Palmer, *Companion*, 21-22.

¹⁷ Hardwick, *Voice*, 73.

Beyond Adolescence

A Biography of the Modern Countertenor, Part 2

Sunday, 29 September, 1946. Just over a year has passed since German surrender ended World War II. Soldiers have returned home to Britain – nearly 300,000 of them in wooden boxes. The lucky ones – those still ambulatory – struggle to re-discover their lives, and their places in family and society. The rebuilding of Britain’s vandalized infrastructure is under way, but homes, schools and churches still show the deep scars inflicted by German bombers¹⁸. The world has changed. With 60 million dead, and the looming reality of thermonuclear weaponry, it is impossible to simply return to the pre-war status quo (so much so that 1945 has been called Year Zero)¹⁹.

6:00pm. The sun falls slowly toward the western horizon ; it will set in just under an hour. In homes across Britain, families gather for an evening of radio. For many, the family “wireless” is likely Britain’s own Ferranti 145E : an elegant art deco box of mahogany Bakelite plastic with four distinctive dials, an intricate tuner display, and a single speaker covered in what looks like brass basket weave²⁰. In many homes, it occupies a place of prominence – almost reverence – in a living room or parlor. Fathers would be performing a masculine ritual : they fiddle with the box, minutely adjusting the dials, and possibly the wireless’s own placement and rotation, for maximum reception. Some look for the BBC Home Service, others find the BBC Light Programme. Still others tune to “203.5 metres” for the inaugural broadcast of the BBC Third Programme. It has just begun. They listen.

They don’t hear news, popular music or light entertainment, as they might on Home Service or Light Programme. Instead, the broadcast includes content curated for cultural education : literary readings, plays, interviews, operas and folk music, all presented in long-form without the regularly scheduled interruptions of other broadcasts²¹.

The program transitions to a musical segment. The piece comes from Henry Purcell’s *Come All Ye Sons of Art*. The voice is like nothing they’ve ever heard before. Though in the pitch range of a woman, the sound has a distinctly masculine timbre. The singer is Alfred Deller. He is the first countertenor of the twentieth century, possibly the first to

perform publicly in nearly two hundred years. In the words of composer Michael Tippett, “To my ear it has a peculiarly musical sound because almost no emotional irrelevances distract us from the absolutely pure musical quality of the production. It is like no other sound in music, and few other musical sounds are so intrinsically musical.”²²

In its very first broadcast, the BBC’s Third Programme introduced British listeners to a sound only very recently rediscovered and presented in live performance : the solo male alto, called a *countertenor* by Henry Purcell²³. The seed was planted in fertile ground. The post-war cultural and artistic environment sought to transcend nationalism²⁴, continue to distance itself from the Romantic, and open musical possibilities to an ever-expanding range of styles and sounds²⁵. Composers such as Michael Tippett responded to a new expectation of music by pushing further back in history. Others, like Benjamin Britten, sought to leverage historical themes, timbres and instrumentations in shaping new and diversified musical styles. The triumvirate of Michael Tippett, Benjamin Britten and Alfred Deller can be credited with resurrecting the countertenor voice²⁶. But in isolation, their efforts could not have succeeded in proliferating popular interest in countertenor singing. Together, the Third Programme, The Purcell Society, and the Royal College of Music, along with an extraordinary progression of countertenor singers following Alfred Deller, were responsible for the dissemination and cultural embrace of the twentieth-century countertenor.

The British Broadcasting Corporation’s Third Programme was established in response to the public’s growing interest in the arts, and as part of a restructuring of BBC networks following World War II²⁷. The intent of the BBC’s new three-network strategy was ambitious : “the BBC is giving listeners everything they wanted ... just look through the programme pages of this issue and see for yourselves”. The Third Programme, specifically, “intends to set a high standard in its choice of broadcasts of music, drama and speech, and to achieve the highest available level of performance. When the condition of communications in Europe permits, we shall give listeners the chance of hearing what is best abroad, and so assist in the restoring of international standards of performance. And well, above all, experiment.”²⁸ This tradition had been started, in a limited way, through periodic broadcasts on the BBC’s

¹⁸ MacMillan, Margaret, "Rebuilding the world after the second world war," *The Guardian*, September 10, 2009.

¹⁹ MacMillan, "Rebuilding the world".

²⁰ "145E Radio Ferranti," Radio Museum, accessed April 1, 2012, http://www.radiomuseum.org/r/ferranti_145e_145_e.html.

²¹ "Historical Note," University of Delaware Special Collections Department, accessed April 1, 2012, <http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/findaids/bbc.htm>.

²² Michael & Mollie Hardwick, *Alfred Deller A Singularity of Voice* (New York: Frederick A. Prager, 1969), 75.

²³ Hardwick, *Voice*, 75.

²⁴ Morgan, Robert. *Twentieth-century Music : A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 33.

²⁵ Morgan, *Twentieth-century Music*, 17.

²⁶ Romney, Miles David, "Out of the Choir Loft and Onto the Stage: A Biography of the Modern Countertenor, Part 1," 2010.

²⁷ "Historical Note." University of Delaware Special Collections Department.

²⁸ "For the Alert and Receptive Listener," BBC, accessed April 1, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/classical/thirdprogramme/alert.shtml>.

wartime network. Now, through the Third Programme, the British public would have access to 48-hours per week of high-culture programming. For many – even most – Britons, this would be the first time such works were available to them in any form. The Third Programme broadcast live musical and operatic performances unattainable through any other means²⁹. In fact, these live broadcasts were the rule. “The BBC’s gramophone library will be drawn upon for those who are interested in comparing the interpretations of the same work played by different artists.”³⁰ In today’s world – where only a small minority of our media consumption comprises live performances – this niche-minded relegation of a recording library is astonishing.

The Third Programme continued in this format for 11 years. The Programme would then go on to face accusations of elitism and eclecticism, along with budgetary challenges. This was, in part, due to its educational aims, and the diversity of its programming. It would endure restructuring and broadcast-time reductions, but at every step, was hotly championed by a dedicated group of defenders including T.S. Eliot, Albert Camus and Sir Laurence Olivier.³¹ It would continue to broadcast performances by Alfred Deller, and those countertenors that followed him, and advocate both for the early music for which countertenors are now largely known, as well as for new music for countertenor from composers such as Benjamin Britten³². The Third Programme survives today as BBC Radio 3. But those early years of the Programme were “a venture in cultural excellence the likes of which have not been seen since.”³³

Wednesday, 16 October, 1940. Dawn. Michael Tippett, music director at Morley College, stands beneath the proscenium arch of the college’s main hall. The mild blue of London’s morning sky hangs over him, to either side of the arch. Tippett walks forward, probably kicking rubble out of his path, or climbing gingerly over a fallen rafter. The arch, and a pair of mangled walls that cling to corners on either side of it, is all that remains of the building – the Germans had bombed it the night before.³⁴ Tippett moves on, then stops. He stoops down, and rummages through blasted debris at his feet. His

fingers close over a thin binding, and he stands to see what he’s found. Clearing dust reverently from its cover, he sees the publisher’s mark : a Purcell Society Edition³⁵.

The path for the rise and survival of the Third Programme had been laid, in significant part, by The Purcell Society, and the Royal College of Music. The Purcell Society was formed in Britain in 1876. Its chief mandate was to discover and publish all available works of Henry Purcell³⁶. (Before The Purcell Society, came the Purcell Club, formed in 1836 – 141 years after Purcell’s death.) By 1965, it had succeeded. Purcell had a pervasive influence on British music, affecting generations of later composers including Ralph Vaughan Williams, William Hurlstone, Gustav Holst, Michael Tippett, and Benjamin Britten³⁷. Under Gustav Holst’s direction at Morley College, London saw the first performance since 1695 of Purcell’s opera, *Fairy Queen*.³⁸ The Royal College of Music performed *Dido and Aeneas* on the anniversary of Purcell’s death, in 1895. Britten and Tippett are said to have admired Purcell’s English-language settings, and their “carry and freedom of [the] vocal line.”³⁹ Britten arranged a whole volume of Purcell songs. And, of course, Purcell’s *Music for a While* was the first piece publicly performed by a countertenor in the twentieth century (on 21 October, 1944)⁴⁰, with Purcell’s *Come All Ye Sons of Art* being the first broadcasted (on 29 September, 1946). The works of Purcell were selected – over and over again – as the optimal vector for the timbre of the countertenor voice, the most likely to inspire public interest in the instrument. The publications of the Purcell Society (32 volumes, when completed in 1965) made this possible. Without the Purcell Society, this repertoire may well have lain in obscurity, available neither to inspire the imaginations of Tippett and Britten, nor to showcase the novel range and technique of Alfred Deller.

Contemporary with the activities of The Purcell Society was a growing desire on the part of royalty, cultural movers and civil servants to improve the state of music education, and establish a truly English musical tradition⁴¹. Sir Henry Cole, after successfully bringing off Britain’s *Great Exhibition* (popularly known as the *Crystal Palace Exhibition*

²⁹ "For the Alert and Receptive Listener," BBC.

³⁰ "For the Alert and Receptive Listener," BBC.

³¹ "Historical Note," University of Delaware Special Collections Department.

³² Stevens, Denis, "Performance Practice Issues on the BBC Third Programme," (Performance Practice Review, 1989), 4.

³³ Stevens, "Performance Practice", 73.

³⁴ Stuart, Charles. "Morley College Music." *The Musical Times* 92, no. 1303 (1951): 395.

³⁵ Bowen, M. *Michael Tippett*, The Contemporary Series, (Robson Books, 1997), 69.

³⁶ "About the Purcell Society," Purcell Society, accessed April 1, 2012, <http://www.henrypurcell.org.uk/about.html>.

³⁷ Hodges, B, and The University of North Carolina at Greensboro School of Music. *W. W. Cobbett's Phantasy: A Legacy of Chamber Music in the British Musical Renaissance*. (The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2008), 39.

³⁸ Hodges, *Phantasy*, 38.

³⁹ Hodges, *Phantasy*, 38.

⁴⁰ Hardwick, *Voice*, 95.

⁴¹ Hodges, Betsi. "W.W. Cobbett's Phantasy: A Legacy of Chamber Music in the British Musical Renaissance." (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2008), 10.

in reference to the ambitious glass structure in which it was housed), secured Prince Albert's patronage in designating and developing the South Kensington area as a continuation of the aims of the Exhibition : to "extend the influence of Science and Art upon productive industry."⁴² The initiative resulted in construction of, among other things, Royal Albert Hall (which opened in 1871), and the National Training School of Music, of which Arthur Sullivan was principal. The National Training school was unsuccessful, and the idea was soon expanded into the Royal College of Music, with George Grove recruited to direct it.⁴³ It operated for a time adjacent to Royal Albert Hall, and then re-opened in its current location in May of 1894.

Cole's motivation in fostering the arts, music in particular, did not grow out of high-minded elitism. His aims were rather more populist : "I think music is to be encouraged in order not that any special class, but that the country at large may derive benefit and pleasure from it ..."⁴⁴ In establishing a native musical tradition, Britain began by pushing back into its past, to Shakespeare in literature, and notably, Henry Purcell in music⁴⁵.

George Grove, director of the newly formed Royal College of Music would go on to establish the well known dictionary of music and musicians, which was intended to foster musical culture in England, especially highlighting British musical contributions throughout history⁴⁶. The most significant of these contributions were considered, generally, to have emerged from the "Golden Age" of English music, beginning with the Elizabethans, and ending with Purcell (whose death was followed by the "foreign occupation" of Handel)⁴⁷. Even J.S. Bach's entry could not match that of Purcell in the first edition of Grove's *Dictionary*.

The Royal College of Music was envisioned as placing among Europe's finest conservatoires⁴⁸. As the century turned, and Britain was wracked by not one, but two existential wars, the Royal College persisted in providing education, public concerts, music competitions and scholarships. The Royal College of Music grew out of, and then turned to forming, a new expectation of English music rooted in the past, an expectation materially guided by the efforts of The Purcell Society, and following the second World War, taken up and championed by the Third Programme. This turning backward and inward to Purcell and his contemporaries established an optimal environment for the re-emergence of the Purcell countertenor. But, without the establishment of a disciplined progression of performers to take up this mantle and evolve

beyond Alfred Deller's contributions, Britain's "musical renaissance" would have marched along without the voice of the Tudors, the Elizabethans, and of Purcell.

James Bowman stands within the Paris Opera House. Two patrons converse nearby – well-dressed ladies. Bowman overhears their conversation. "How does Mr. Bowman sing like that?" asks the first. The second answers, knowingly, "Oh, it's all done by ventriloquism."⁴⁹

Over the course of his career, Alfred Deller released over one hundred and twenty recordings. He was the first singer of his kind in the modern era, and was celebrated the world over. He was by his own admission, however, not an actor, and preferred the intimacy of lute songs to the drama of the opera stage⁵⁰. Georg Solti, director of music for the Royal Opera, considered Deller's voice to be too small for the Covent Garden stage. Thus, when Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* made its Covent Garden debut in 1961, the role of Oberon – a role written for Deller, and earlier premiered by him at Jubilee Hall – was sung by American countertenor Russell Oberlin. In 1967 at the Aldeburgh festival, British countertenor James Bowman was given the role ; this prompted Covent Garden to revive the opera, and Bowman subsequently enjoyed a long association with the production⁵¹. Bowman went on to perform at major opera houses the world over, including La Scala Milan, Amsterdam, Paris, Aix-en-Provence, Sydney, Verona, Vienna, Strasbourg, Sante Fe, Dallas and San Francisco, and to release over 180 recordings.

Russell Oberlin studied at the Juilliard School of Music and Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, and in 1952 became a founding member of the New York Pro Musica Antiqua ensemble. Oberlin was notable not only for being among the first countertenors of the twentieth century, but also for being an exception even among those of that exclusive classification : Oberlin was not a *falsettist*, but rather a man, simply, with an extraordinarily high-pitched voice (he had the temerity to insist he was the only true countertenor of his period, a claim which contradicts what is now understood about Henry Purcell and the voices he wrote for). His singing voice was relatively low, in comparison with other countertenors. He made numerous recordings and television appearances, and performed on the opera stage as well as in recital⁵².

Derek Lee Ragin grew up in New Jersey, studying piano and singing in the Newark Boys Choir. After attending

⁴² F.W.H. Sheppard, "The Museums Area of South Kensington and Westminster." in *Survey of London* (London: Athlone Press, 1975), 49.

⁴³ Hodges, "Phantasy", 13.

⁴⁴ Henry Cole, *Fifty Years of Public Work* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), 24.

⁴⁵ Hodges, "Phantasy", 17.

⁴⁶ Hodges, "Phantasy", 16.

⁴⁷ Hodges, "Phantasy", 36.

⁴⁸ Hodges, "Phantasy", 12.

⁴⁹ Bowman, James, "James Bowman on striking a high note," *The Guardian*, November 26, 2009.

⁵⁰ Hardwick, Michael & Mollie, *A Singularity of Voice*, (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1980), 185.

⁵¹ Bowman, "... striking a high note".

⁵² "Russell Oberlin Biography," Barnes & Noble, accessed April 1, 2012, <http://music.barnesandnoble.com/search/artistbio.asp?CTR=828384>.

Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, Ragin went on to sing at the Metropolitan Opera, and from there, has enjoyed a vigorous career, including having sung the voice of Italiano castrato Carlo Broschi in the movie *Farinelli*. Ragin won a Gramophone Award in 1992, then went on to receive a Grammy Award in 1995 for his recording of Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* and *Missa Brevis*⁵³.

David Daniels began his career as a tenor, earning a degree from the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. His success as a tenor was underwhelming, prompting Daniels to transition to countertenor during his graduate studies at the University of Michigan. As a countertenor, he was sensational. Daniels was the first countertenor to sing at the main auditorium of Carnegie Hall. The *Chicago Tribune* has called Daniels "today's gold standard among countertenors," and *Gramophone* magazine named him among the "Top Ten Trailblazers" in classical music today⁵⁴.

Andreas Scholl was – by James Bowman's account – the first countertenor to achieve superstar status⁵⁵. At the age of seven, young Andreas was enrolled as a liturgical singer at his local cathedral in Kiedrich im Rheingau in Germany. When his voice "broke", he continued to sing soprano in the choir, as a falsettist. In 1993, Scholl stood in for countertenor René Jacobs (himself a significant countertenor and conductor, and a strong advocate of Baroque repertoire) at the Théâtre Grévin in Paris – he was a sensation. By 1998, Scholl's recordings dominated Harmonia Mundi's hit list, ranking 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 10th⁵⁶.

The re-discovery and re-popularization of the countertenor voice after nearly 200 years of silence can certainly be credited to no single influence, but is rather the result of a convergence of personalities and social trends, all acting on one another to achieve, finally, a collaborative – and to many, possibly a surprising – result. Singer Alfred Deller was the first countertenor of the twentieth century, but would likely not have emerged from obscurity in Canterbury without the advocacy of composer Michael Tippett. Without The Purcell Society, Tippett may have never fostered a love for Purcell and early English music. Without composer Benjamin Britten giving relevance to the voice in new music, the countertenor would be relegated to a historical curiosity, finding a place beside other museum-piece instruments like the hurdy-gurdy or the nyckelharpa. Without the Royal Academy of Music and its advocates, there may have been no English "musical renaissance", which certainly would have threatened a rediscovery of Purcell, and the prominence of English composers like Tippett and Britten. Without the BBC's Third Programme and its broadcasts of early music and of countertenors, opportunities for the popular embracing of countertenor singing would have been seriously limited, given the small number of countertenors available in those early days for live performance. And of course, without the establishment of a strong and growing legacy of countertenor performers, the movement could not have grown beyond its adolescence, however lovely a child it was.

But it happened, all of it. And Purcell's countertenor was reborn into modernity, carefully reared, and sent out into the world, to add its voice to the beautifully eclectic choir that is the twentieth century.

⁵³ "Derek Lee Ragin Biography," accessed April 1, 2012, <http://www.derekleeragin.net/biography.html>.

⁵⁴ "David Daniels Biography," accessed April 1, 2012, <http://www.danielssings.com/bio.html>.

⁵⁵ Bowman, "... striking a high note".

⁵⁶ "Andreas Scholl Biography," accessed April 1, 2012, <http://www.andreasschollsociety.org/biography.htm>.