

# The controversy concerning the timbre of the countertenor

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THE CONTROVERSY CONCERNING  
THE TIMBRE OF THE COUNTERTENOR

Since Alfred Deller started a renaissance of the male alto as a solo voice, the "countertenor" has become an important figure in twentieth-century concert life concerned with "early music". The modern male alto has not been totally accepted, however, by the average lover of *bel canto*; he is tolerated intermittently as a singer of castrato/contralto parts, from Monteverdi's 'Ottone' to Gluck's 'Orfeo'.

Most feelings of discontent for the "countertenor" among modern opera audiences are easy to understand and fully justified. Castrati/contralti such as Senesino and Guadagni were famous for their sonorous chest voices that were combined with a ringing *falsetto or head voice* (in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries both terms were used to indicate the same register, i.e., the highest register of the human voice). Their *middle* had, according to F. Haböck, a "tenoral" sound<sup>1</sup>.

For modern "countertenors" the falsetto in its isolated form is their exclusive register. Even for the lowest notes, i.e., under *d'*, the *primo passaggio* of the tenor voice, they use only a fragment of their voice, the falsetto. In that part of their range they sound weak, thin, effeminate, even sometimes inaudible. But these were the particular notes in which both castrati and, as we will see, true seventeenth- and eighteenth-century countertenors had a masculine sound.

Thus, for the modern audience, "countertenor" necessarily means "falsettist" because for 99% of the times this is indeed the case. Again, the historical truth was different: the Baroque male alto, used as a dramatic or lyric singer, not as a church or choir singer, was never a falsettist, that is, one who uses falsetto register to the exclusion of others. His falsetto may have been his *strongest* register (as with the high countertenor) — but never his only one. Currently, all seventeenth- and eighteenth-century male alto parts written either for castrati or for natural countertenors are sung by falsettists when not sung by women, even when the lowest notes are strained and the part has to be transposed. The public thinks it has to be like that and is so misled. I have heard "'Tis Nature's Voice" from Purcell's *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day* (1692) by falsettists in a transposition of a third or fourth!

Today only French countertenor, i.e., *haute-contre*, parts are not sung by falsettists but by tenors who often force their voices in the high notes, for such parts are too low for falsettists and too high for modern tenors. Neal Zaslaw and Mary Cyr write about the special problems of the *haute-contre*<sup>2</sup>. Zaslaw concludes that the *haute-contre* traditionally "used falsetto only in rare exceptions". Cyr states that "it remains to be determined what unusual circumstances might have prompted the use of falsetto, when and by whom". But was the *haute-contre* so different from the low Purcellian countertenor? We shall conclude that both voices

<sup>1</sup> Franz Haböck, *Die Kastraten und ihre Gesangkunst*, Stuttgart/Berlin/Leipzig, 1927, 210.

<sup>2</sup> Neal Zaslaw, "The Enigma of the *Haute-Contre*", *MT* 115 (1974), 939 ss.; Mary Cyr, "On Performing Eighteenth-Century *Haute-Contre* Roles", *MT* 118 (1977), 291–295.

had very much in common, that in fact the (operatic) male alto was never a falsettist as defined above, but rather a *voce mezzana*.

*The Countertenor: A Voce Mezzana*

Lodovico Zacconi in his *Prattica di Musica* (Venice, 1592)<sup>3</sup> makes a distinction between *Chest voices* (tenors and basses), *Head voices* (falsettists) and *Voci mezzane*. He defines the *voci mezzane* (from the German translation of F. Chrysander) as: "Sie sind teils Brust-, teils Kopfstimme. Sie haben ihren Namen wegen der von ihnen zu vernehmenden Wirkung, als ob sie halb von der einen, halb von der anderen Art sind. Und man sagt, daß, wenn sie mehr von der Brust- als von der Kopfstimme haben, sie immer schöner sind."

Zacconi's text proves that the ability to unite the chest voice and falsetto and thus to sing both chest and falsetto in the same range so that both registers *overlap* almost entirely, was considered an advantage: as Giovanni Battista Mancini wrote two centuries later, the ability to sing everything in (the) chest voice ("di potere eseguire tutto colla sola voce di petto") was considered an exceptional gift ("singolarissimo dono della Natura")<sup>4</sup>.

The countertenor (England) — *haute-contre* (France), *altus* or *altist* (Germany), *contralto*, or *alto naturale* (Italy) — essentially theoretical names for the alto voice, regardless of sex, has always been a *voce mezzana*. The *haute-contre* as well as the (English) countertenor sang in both registers "without the listener's noticing any change of voice"<sup>5</sup>. Since the unification of registers was a basic principle of *bel canto* for every voice type, why would the male alto have been excluded? The male alto first learned how to separate the registers, as one was generally weaker, and then to combine the two. The more the two registers overlapped, the more the voice was perfectly built.

An overlap or "ponticello" of one octave or more was considered the ideal for any male or female alto or castrato. Of the voice of Giuditta Pasta, Stendhal wrote:

"C'est avec une étonnante habilité que Madame Pasta unit la voix de tête à la voix de poitrine; elle a l'art suprême de tirer une fort grande quantité d'effets agréables et piquants de l'union de ces deux voix. Pour aviver le coloris d'une phrase de mélodie ou pour en changer la nuance en un clin d'œil, elle emploie le falsetto jusque dans les cordes du milieu de son diapason, ou bien alterne les notes de falsetto avec celles de poitrine. Elle fait usage de cet artifice avec la même facilité de *fusion*, dans les tons du milieu comme dans les tons les plus aigus de sa voix de poitrine. La voix de tête de Madame Pasta a un caractère presque opposé à sa voix de poitrine; elle est brillante, rapide, pure, facile et d'une admirable légèreté. En descendant, la

<sup>3</sup> Lodovico Zacconi, *Prattica di musica*, Venice, 1592; Facs. ed., Bologna 1967, part 2, vol. 1 (*Bibliotheca Musica Bononiensis* 2/1); trans. into German by Friedrich Chrysander, "L. Zacconi als Lehrer des Kunstgesangs", *Vierteljahresschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 9 (1893), 291.

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Battista Mancini, *Riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato*, Vienna, 1774, Milan 1777; Facs. ed., Bologna 1970 (*Bibliotheca Musica Bononiensis* 2/41), part 3, vol. 4; trans. into English, *Practical Reflections on Figured Singing*, ed. Edward Forman, Champaign, Ill., 1967 (*Masterworks on Singing* 7).

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Framery et al., *Encyclopédie méthodique: Musique*, Paris, 1792, article on "Fausset" by Jean-Louis Castilhon; reprint edition New York, 1971.

cantatrice peut avec cette voix *smorzare il canto* (diminuer le chant) jusqu'à rendre en quelque sorte douteuse l'existence des sons."<sup>6</sup>

In "Mémoire sur la voix humaine présenté à l'Académie des sciences," (Paris 1849) which introduces Manuel García's *Traité*, we read how his students mastered the special technique:

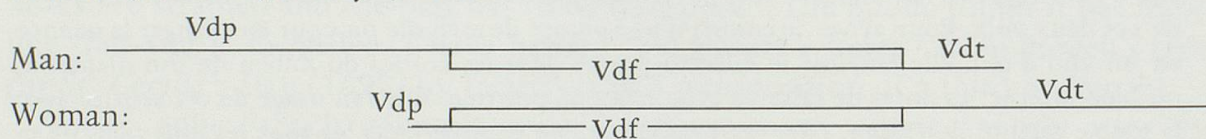
"... de manœuvrer avec assez de facilité leur organe vocal, pour séparer nettement et à volonté les uns des autres, les sons qui dérivent de la voix pleine et ceux qui dérivent de la voix de fausset. Ainsi nous avons entendu des voix d'homme et des voix de femme, après avoir suivi jusqu'à leur limite la plus élevée les sons diatoniques qui appartiennent à la voix pleine, prendre la voix de fausset pour s'élever plus haut, puis descendre diatoniquement, en conservant toujours le fausset, jusqu'à une certaine distance au-dessous de la limite à laquelle s'était arrêtée la voix pleine ... Bien plus, nous avons entendu le même chanteur produire à volonté et alternativement la même note avec la voix pleine et avec la voix de fausset en sorte que les sons produits par les deux voix se trouvaient ainsi mis en parallèle. L'étendue de la portion commune aux deux voix ou registres de poitrine et de fausset est variable suivant les sujets et suivant l'habitude qui leur a rendu plus ou moins facile l'usage facultatif de l'un et de l'autre de ces deux registres dans le médium de la voix. Le plus communément cette étendue est d'une sixte à une octave, et elle s'étend quelquefois à une dixième. Selon M. García, cette partie commune aux deux registres est placée sur les mêmes notes pour les voix d'homme et pour les voix de femme."<sup>7</sup>

García's theory on registers was still very much in the tradition of eighteenth-century castrato teachers, e.g., Tosi, Porpora and Mancini.

### *García and the Haute-Contre*

#### A. García's Theory About Registers

According to García, men and women have the same registers: the *voix pleine* or *voix de poitrine* (hereby noted "Vdp"); the *voix de fausset* ("Vdf"); and the *voix de tête* ("Vdt"). Although men have a much more developed chest voice than women, women have a greater developed head voice. The middle register of both, however, the Vdf, is very similar.



There is a 'break' between the Vdp and the Vdf because different mechanisms correspond to the two registers. But, between the Vdf and the Vdt the passagio is smooth and less problematic — both registers correspond to the same mechanism, so there is only a change of resonance. Thus at the end of his life García spoke of two registers (the Vdp and the *voix de fausset-tête* ("Vdf-t")) instead of three<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Stendhal, *Vie de Rossini*, 2 vols., Paris, 1824; Paris, 1929, vol. 2, 176; trans. into English, *Life of Rossini*, Washington, 1972.

<sup>7</sup> Manuel García, *Traité complet de l'art du chant*, 2 vols., preface to vol. 1: "Rapport sur le mémoire de M. García présenté à l'Académie des Sciences", Paris, 1857, vi.

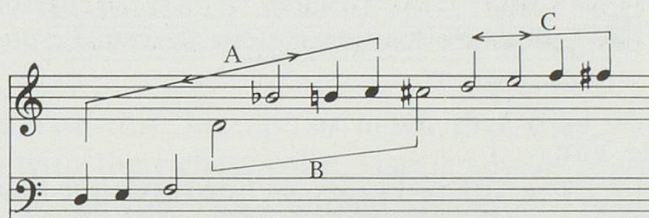
<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xii, 8 and 11.

Centuries before García, Conrad von Zabern in *De modo bene cantandi choralium cantum* (Mainz, 1474) wrote that a good singer uses his voice in three degrees (“trivarie”): “resonantly (“grossius”) and trumpet-like (“tubalius”) for low notes, moderately (“medio modo”) in the middle range, and more delicately (“subtilius”) for the high notes – even more so the higher the chant ascends ... An organ whether large, moderate or small in size has three kinds of pipes: large, medium, and small. The large pipes sound the lower notes of the chant, the medium-size ones the middle notes and the little ones the upper notes of the chant. The sound (resonant, medium, and high-pitched or delicate) of these tubes or pipes can be said to be threefold. Since, however, a man has only a single windpipe through which the voice passes, which must supply for the diversity of the many organ pipes, some large and some small, how mistaken it would be to attempt to imitate the diversity by a uniform use of the voice”<sup>9</sup> (“uniformae vocis usus”: the twentieth-century ideal of some teachers, the *Einregister*).

The *vox plena* or *valida*, *vox media* and *vox subtiliata* termed by von Zabern correspond respectively to the *vox pectoris*, the *vox gutturis* and the *vox capitis* described by Hieronymus De Moravia, the first writer on the voice to connect resonance changes with registers<sup>10</sup>. I am convinced that García’s *voix de fausset* is referring to the *vox gutturis*: *fausset*, often written in the eighteenth century as *faucet*, derived from the Latin *fauces* meaning throat, not from *falsus*.

#### B. García’s Description of the Registers and “Timbres” in the *Haute-Contre* Voice

García called the *haute-contre* or *contraltino* the highest male voice: “... une voix claire, déliée, dont l’étendue est la même que celle des voix de contralto et se compose des mêmes cordes.”<sup>11</sup> The registers of the *haute-contre* are:



The Vdp (= A) and the Vdf (= B) in this voice fit together well (“se marient fort bien”). The Vdt (= C) should hardly be used because of its effeminate tone and large contrast with the Vdp. Clearly the Vdt of an *haute-contre* is the falsetto or

<sup>9</sup> Karl-Werner Gumpel, *Die Musiktraktate Conrads von Zabern*, Mainz-Wiesbaden, 1956; trans. into English by Joseph Dyer in *Early Music*.

<sup>10</sup> Hieronymus de Moravia, *Tractatus de musica*, Regensburg-Freiburg, 1934, vol. 2 (*Freiburger Studien zur Musikwissenschaft* 2); trans. into German by Bernhard Ulrich, *Die Grundsätze der Stimmbildung während der A-cappella-Periode und zur Zeit des Aufkommens der Oper 1474–1640*, Leipzig, 1910, 93.

<sup>11</sup> M. García 1, op. cit., 22.

*fistel* of the falsettist. Since the range of the *haute-contre* is more or less that of the contralto, let us look at García's register analysis of the contralto<sup>12</sup>:



A: Vdp: male, energetic. This is the essential basis of any voice type, male or female, which is sometimes neglected by singers and teachers.

a: area of danger in the Vdp. "Il est imprudent de prétendre les obtenir malgré la nature."

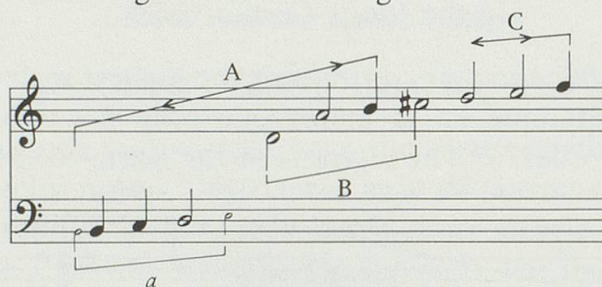
B: Vdf

b: weak portion of the Vdf, which should be replaced by the Vdp.

b': Tones of great intensity of character in the Vdp when they are not suppressed ("étouffés") by the Vdp.

C: Vdt: very tiring for the contralto: "On n'en doit aborder les sons qu'en effleurant dans les traits." This register is of course much more developed in the mezzo-soprano and soprano voices.

It is also of value to compare the *haute-contre* to the tenor. We see that the difference between the two ranges is not that big<sup>13</sup>:



a: weak sounds in the Vdp

B: "Vdf unie à la Vdp." The Vdf in tenors is "une ressource heureuse et naturelle. L'emploi de cette ressource doit être déterminé par l'aptitude de l'organe à fondre ensemble le métal des deux registres. Sinon, quelque bien dissimulée que soit la transition d'un registre à l'autre, la disparité des sons choque l'oreille et anéantit l'unité de l'effet. On croirait entendre deux individus différents chanter alternativement dans la même phrase."<sup>14</sup>

C: Vdt, to be used very rarely (e.g., for a comic effect) because of its feminine character.

In both the Vdp and the *voix de fausset-tête* there is a *timbre sombre* and a *timbre clair*. This is true for all voices, but especially evident in the tenor and

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 22.

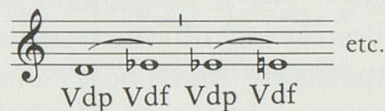
<sup>14</sup> Loc. cit.

*haute-contre*. The *timbre clair* makes their Vdp penetrating and clear, but too much of it makes the register shrill, sharp and screeching. The *timbre sombre*, created by narrowing the vowel with a low larynx, makes their Vdp sweet, round and full and is especially appropriate for the highest note of the Vdp of tenors and *haute-contres*. In this timbre, also called the *voix mixte* those notes get an admirable bite and masculine vigor that they can never get in the *timbre clair*. In the *voix de fausset-tête* the difference between the two timbres is less, except in the highest notes. But in the Vdp, from *d'* and higher, tenors and *haute-contres* should keep the right balance between both timbres:

“On ne doit pas travailler le timbre sombre tant que l’on ne s’est pas rendu maître du timbre clair, le plus difficile à obtenir dans cette partie de l’étendue, et le seul qui donne de l’éclat au sons. Si l’on n’égliçait cette recommandation, on s’exposerait à voiler et à étouffer sa voix.”<sup>15</sup>

### C. García On the Uniting of the Registers in the *Haute-Contre*

How should tenors and *haute-contres* unite the Vdp and Vdf, covering the ‘break’? García’s first exercise is a *portamento* from a first note sung in Vdp to a next note, half a tone higher, sung in Vdf on *d' e<sup>b'</sup> e' f' f<sup>#'</sup>*. He asks his students to pass from one register to another without interruption and without breathing in the passage e. g.,



His commentary is:

“Cette succession s’opérera d’une même respiration. Elle sera d’abord peu multipliée et exécutée lentement en accusant fortement le passage. Puis on augmentera la vitesse et le nombre des successions ... Il ne faut pas craindre de bien accuser *l’espèce de hoquet* qui sert de passage d’un registre à l’autre. L’exercice continu peut seul l’adoucir d’abord, et le faire disparaître ensuite.”<sup>16</sup>

Modern falsettists hate this ‘hiccup’ so much that they often never attempt to join their falsetto with their chest voice. García advises beginning students not to sing higher than *f'* in the Vdp. This *f'* should of course be sung in the *timbre sombre* because it will blend much better with the Vdf. On the other hand, the lowest notes sung in the Vdf should be sung as forcefully as possible rather than weakening the highest notes sung in the Vdp.

García continues:

“Il faut bien se garder d’amoindrir l’éclat et la force des sons de poitrine de même qu’il faut donner au fausset toute l’énergie dont il est susceptible. On est tenté de penser qu’il serait mieux de réduire la puissance du plus fort aux proportions du plus faible. C’est une erreur. L’expérience prouve que l’emploi d’un tel procédé aurait pour résultat d’appauvrir la voix. L’élève ne cèdera pas au penchant qui le porte à aspirer les sons de fausset au moment où il quitte le registre de poitrine.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 28.

### Haute-Contre and Countertenor

The *haute-contre*, as described by García in the nineteenth century, was a male alto (García wrote in the tenor as well as alto clefs for him!). He developed his chest voice and falsetto (in García's interpretation of that word, i. e., throat voice) in equal proportions and learned how to combine the two, as did his counterparts in the eighteenth century. I firmly believe that the *haute-contre* and countertenor are to be regarded as basically one and the same voice, although today they are considered by some to be each other's opposites. Gluck's first "Orphée" Joseph Legros, an *haute-contre*, was called a countertenor by Burney. Many modern scholars who have likewise translated the two terms interchangeably have been attacked by those critics who are themselves misled by the numerous falsettists who "falsely" label themselves countertenors; if, according to this current misnomer, a falsettist is a countertenor, then an *haute-contre* must be a quasi-tenor<sup>17</sup>. But there is enough historical evidence to indicate that both the *haute-contre* and countertenor were close to the old tenor voice that was, per García's description, very different from the modern "tenore robusto".

In his article, "The Historical Significance of the Countertenor" W. J. Houghs discusses the interaction of the *haute-contre* and countertenor in the seventeenth century<sup>18</sup>. He mentions both English countertenors singing in France e. g., Nicholas Mauregan, and French *haute-contres* singing in England e. g., Purcell's singers Damascene and Bowcher (Boucher)<sup>19</sup>. But the tessitura of the countertenor parts in Purcell and Blow's music speaks for itself; how can a falsettist successfully sing an air such as "'Tis Nature's Voice" (*Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, 1692), which so clearly is written to display the color contrasts between the registers:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major, 3/4 time. The first staff is labeled 'chest' and 'falsetto'. The melody starts on a low note (G4) and moves up to a higher note (G5) where it enters the falsetto register. The lyrics are: "'Tis Nature's Voice thro' all the mov - - - - -". The second staff is labeled 'chest' and continues the melody from the first staff, with lyrics: "ing wood,". The melody returns to the chest register.

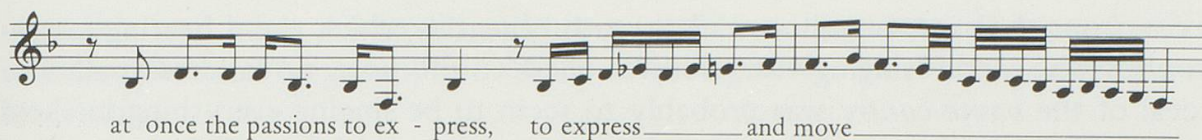
How can a falsetto alto, in a range in which *every* male singer, tenor as well as baritone, should be able to use his natural voice without problem, "express the passions and move" on the many low *a*'s, *g*'s and *f*'s in:

<sup>17</sup> See translation of *haute-contre* in Cuthbert Girdlestone, *Jean-Philippe Rameau; His Life and Work*, New York, 1970, and James R. Anthony, *French Baroque Music – from Beaujoyeulx to Rameau*, New York, 1978.

<sup>18</sup> *PRMA* 69 (1937), 1–24.

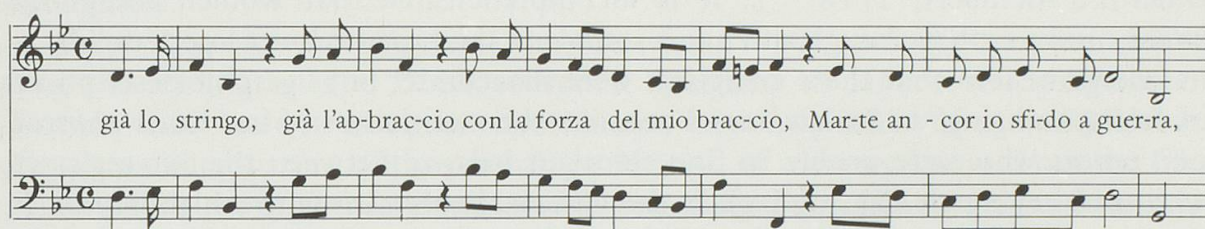
<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.





England had low and high countertenors. The low countertenors were certainly in more demand, at least in the seventeenth century. One of them was John Pate, for whom "'Tis Nature's Voice" was probably written<sup>20</sup>. A high countertenor sang the duet, "Hark! Each Tree" (written in the mezzo-soprano clef) also from the same Ode. In Händel's time, high countertenors sometimes sang arias written for castrati (e.g., Walter Powell in parts written for Senesino). Händel used them occasionally as contralti, e.g., Russell as "David" in *Saul*; Daniel Sullivan as "Athanas" in *Semele* and in the title role in *Joseph*; Brent as "Hamor" in *Jephtha*.

The low countertenors must have had a more developed chest voice, the high countertenors a more developed falsetto; but *both* used the two registers and exploited the color contrast between them. Otherwise, a countertenor such as Powell would never have been accepted as a stand-in for a castrato such as Senesino whose chest voice was so impressive and for whom Händel wrote bass-arias "all'ot-tava" as in *Orlando*:



It was not the falsettist, but the high countertenor who combined a ringing falsetto with a masculine-sounding chest voice who was the acceptable substitute for the castrato.

The *haute-contre* had the same range as the low English countertenor. His chest voice was perhaps even more developed than the low countertenor; his Vdf was, as García wrote referring to the *haute-contre* and tenor, "une ressource heureuse et naturelle". It had to be so well cultivated that it seemed natural<sup>21</sup>. In other words, the Vdf had to sound like the true middle voice, the *vox gutturis*, the voice of the throat (*fauces*), not a feigned voice, *voce finta*, *vox ficta* or *falsa*. Commentaries

<sup>20</sup> According to the *Gentlemen's Journal*, Nov. 1692, this aria was "sung with incredible graces by Mr. Purcell himself." "This doesn't necessarily mean that Purcell (who was a bass) sang them (the ornaments); it can as well mean that those "graces" were written by Mr. Purcell.

<sup>21</sup> Bénigne de Bacilly, *Remarques curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter*, Paris, 1668, <sup>3</sup>1679; reprinted in *Monuments of Music and Music Literature* 73, New York, 1967, trans. into English by A.B. Caswell, *Bacilly: A Commentary Upon the Art of Proper Singing*, Brooklyn 1959 (*Music Theory in Translation* 7). See also Gudrun Ryhming, "L'art du chant français au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle selon Bénigne de Bacilly", *Revue musicale de la Suisse Romande* 35 (1982), 10-25.

exist from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which claim hearing *haute-contrés* who were "singing everything in chest voice" using no falsetto at all. The ideal of the *haute-contre* was probably to seem to be singing everything in chest voice, more so than was the reality. As can be determined from García's register analysis the Vdp and Vdf of an *haute-contre* overlap each other almost entirely.

Thus, as Berlioz, recalls, a good *haute-contre* was able to sing a "full" b<sup>4</sup>: this meant he was able to produce that note in the Vdp *en timbre sombre* or *voix mixte* as well as in the Vdf<sup>22</sup>. Not many *haute-contrés* succeeded in this. In their articles on the *haute-contre* quoted above, Zaslav and Cyr cite criticisms that were often fostered on the eighteenth-century *haute-contrés* who pushed their chest voice too high. Very probably those singers had to do so because they were unable to "find" the appropriate *timbre sombre* in the Vdp, a technique that was not systematically taught as yet in the eighteenth century. Zaslav quotes the complaints of Rousseau ("Whatever a *haute-contre* may do, there is always some harshness and the voice is rarely in tune") and Nicolas Etienne Framery ("... who in order to reach the highest notes are obliged to force their natural means by contracting their throat; in this manner they lose in charm what they gain in range, for these constricted sounds lack sweetness and purity", 1792)<sup>23</sup>. Cyr refers to the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot-d'Alembert, 1778: "... it is incomprehensible that women accept the *haute-contre* with his rough and harsh sounds as the favorite lover in opera."<sup>24</sup>

I don't believe that these criticisms were inaccurate, but "graphic descriptions of falsetto singing" as Zaslav does. I consider them criticisms of bad *haute-contrés*, i. e., tenors who were unable to find the right balance between the two registers, who were trying to sing too high in the Vdp *en timbre clair* with a high larynx. In doing so they suffocated their Vdf that gives the 'sweetness and purity' to high notes. A good *haute-contre* was able to unite the two registers so that there was a 'ponticello' of at least a sixth, preferably of an octave or more, so that the listener couldn't hear any change of voice. The *haute-contre* didn't use falsetto occasionally at the top of his range, but at the top of his range *whenever* he wanted to use this color in service of the particular expressive need of the music at the moment.

The high *haute-contre* that sang in Lully's comédie-ballets (written in the mezzo-soprano clef), e.g., the *premier musicien* in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* sung by Mr. Langez and certain high *haute-contre* parts (frequently until c'') by Charpentier, e.g., the character of David in *David et Jonathas*, required more falsetto than the "heroic" low *haute-contre* who sang the roles of Perseus, Phaeton, Atys, Roland and Amadis. Laborde's description of Antoine' Boutelou's voice, ("his sound is so full, so beautiful and so touching that one cannot hear him with-

<sup>22</sup> Hector Berlioz, *Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration moderne*, Paris, 1844, 237; trans. into English as *A Treatise on Modern Instrumentation and Orchestration*, s. l., 1976.

<sup>23</sup> N. Zaslav, op. cit., 940.

<sup>24</sup> Denis Diderot et Jean d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie*, article on the "Basse-taille", Paris, 1751, 31778.

out one's soul being affected") and his range ("he only goes to  $b^b$  in passing")<sup>25</sup> sounds quite like the description of the *voix de poitrine en timbre sombre* given by García.

Pierre de Jélyotte, who sang so many of Rameau's leading *haute-contre* parts must have been the ideal *haute-contre*. That he had total command of his Vdp and Vdf is proven by the fact that Rameau wrote heroic (*Pygmalion*, *Zoroastre*) as well as comic travesty roles (*Platée*) for him. The anonymous poet who wrote the "Vers à M. Jélyotte jouant dans les *Indes Galantes*" likens the force of his Vdp to a volcano, whereas his Vdf was as refreshing to the audience as a gentle breeze:

"La voix de ce divin chanteur  
Est tantôt un zéphir, qui vole dans la plaine,  
Et tantôt un volcan, qui part, enlève, entraîne  
Et dispute de force avec l'art de l'auteur."<sup>26</sup>

The criticism made by Mendé-Monpas (*Dictionnaire*, 1787), as cited by Cyr, that Jélyotte had no other fault other than being too affected (*pomponé*) and too elegant in his singing and that he "made art shine too brilliantly" can be explained as the comment of a man who regarded Jélyotte's art of exploiting the color-contrasts of Vdp and Vdf to the utmost as a mannerism, ergo, too much art and too little naturalness.

Joseph Legros, who was not a dramatic tenor<sup>27</sup> but an *haute-contre* and who sang the leading roles in Gluck's *Orphée*, *Iphigénie en Aulide* and *Iphigénie en Tauride*, must have had as great control over both Vdp and Vdf as had Jélyotte. The demanding nature of the part of *Orphée* and of what we know about the first performance prove that Legros had a ringing chest voice. Gluck wanted Legros to scream the three anguished cries "Euridice!" in Act I, sc. I as if someone was sawing through his leg!: "Denken Sie in diesem Augenblicke weder an die Musik noch an den Chor, der singt, sondern schreien Sie ganz einfach so schmerzvoll, als ob man Ihnen ein Bein absäge ..." <sup>28</sup> Certainly Gluck wanted Legros to use his full chest voice on those cries ( $g^a b^b$ ); apparently not every *haute-contre* was able to do so, which is the reason why the first edition of *Orphée* offers an alternative for these notes a fourth lower ( $d^a e^b$  where for lighter voices the use of the chest voice is safer). The many  $b$ 's in the part, the  $c$ 's and the one  $d$  on "Excès de mes malheurs" in Act II that, according to the critic in the *Journal des Beaux-Arts*, "seemed to be too much out of character with the melody," were surely sung in a

<sup>25</sup> Jean de Laborde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*, Paris, 1780; reprinted in *Music and Theater in France in the 17th and 18th Centuries* 3, s.l., 1977, 498–506.

<sup>26</sup> *Anecdotes dramatiques* 1, Paris, 1775, 445, article on "Indes galantes"; cited by J. G. Prod'homme; "Pierre de Jélyotte (1713–1797)", *SdIM* 3 (1901–02), 690; reprinted in *Music and Theater in France*, see note 25 above.

<sup>27</sup> Ludwig Finscher, ed., introduction to Christoph Willibald Gluck, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Paris, 1744, Kassel etc., 1951, <sup>3</sup>1967, xxi (*Ch. W. Gluck, Sämtliche Werke* 6, part 1).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, ix: Finscher quoting Christian von Mannlich, *Rokoko und Revolution*, "Ein deutscher Maler und Hofmann", Berlin, 1913.

brilliant, silvery Vdf<sup>29</sup>. One of the most moving moments in Act III was the duet with Euridice in which Legros's Vdf must have blended perfectly, in thirds and sixths with the Vdt of the soprano. A modern dramatic tenor screaming those high notes would ruin the whole effect, whereas a falsettist would never sing the part at all.

After Legros, more and more *haute-contres* had problems with this role. Nourrit had to transpose several sections. Rousseau was one of the only *haute-contres* who didn't have to 'force' to be able to sing the part, but, according to Joseph de Lalande (*Voyage en Italie*, 1786), his voice was much smaller than Legros's<sup>30</sup>. This was most likely because the overlap between the two registers in his voice was less extended than in Legros's.

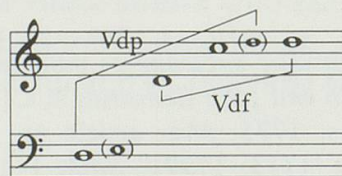
### *Haute-Contre and Tenor*

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century countertenor or *haute-contre* was a high tenor. But today this is a dangerous statement to make because our idea of a tenor is comparatively different. As we have seen in García, the tenor was able to combine the Vdp and Vdf, in perhaps a less perfect manner as a countertenor. It is therefore understandable why *haute-contres* were so often compared to Italian tenors in the eighteenth century. De Lalande (see above) compares the two voices:

"I have said that the tenor of the Italians was the *haute-contre* of the French ... The tenor goes from C to g' in full voice and to d'' in falsetto or *fausset*: our *haute-contre* ordinarily, after g' goes up in full voice to b<sup>b</sup> while the tenor after g' enters into falsetto: but that is not without exception. Babbi goes up to c'' in full voice, the same as Caribaldi until the age of 48. Amorevoli, who was a little older, went up to d''. In Paris, Geliot had the compass of Amorevoli, and Legros had that of the first two; these qualities of voice, in all countries, are very rare: Lainez goes up to a' forced, Rousseau to a b' somewhat forced, Dufrenoy up to a g' forced; all those who succeeded Legros are obliged to shout to reach the pitch of the *haute-contre* except Rousseau, but he has a much smaller sound."<sup>31</sup>

De Lalande, an amateur, described what he heard; García, a voice teacher, described what he knew. In light of García's later register analysis of the *haute-contre* and tenor, de Lalande's words can be explained as follows:

(1) Jélyotte, Legros and the tenors Caribaldi, Babbi and Amorevoli are 'perfect *haute-contres*': Vdp and Vdf overlap almost totally. This voice is rare, a "singolarissimo dono della Natura" (Mancini). Using García's method, Jélyotte and Legros's ranges could be shown as:



<sup>29</sup> Ibid., xii s.: "Une roulade sur *malheurs*, ce qui semble sortis du caractère de la mélodie."

<sup>30</sup> Joseph (Jérôme) de Lalande, *Voyage en Italie* 3, Geneva, 1786, <sup>3</sup>1790, 41–48.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 204 s.

(2) Lainez, Rousseau and Dufrenoy are 'imperfect *haute-contres*', unable to find the Vdp *en timbre sombre*; they force their Vdp *en timbre clair*; they don't sing but 'scream' their  $g'$ ,  $a^{b'}$ , and  $a'$ . This suffocates the Vdf, so the balance between the two registers is broken.

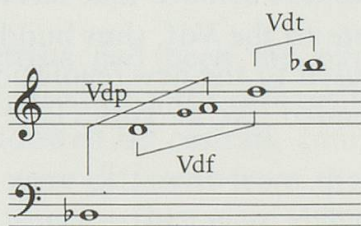
(3) The average Italian tenor excluding the exceptions above doesn't sing higher than  $g'$  (Lalande) or  $a'$  (García) in Vdp. He doesn't try to force this register higher because the ideal of a total overlap of Vdp and Vdf is French and therefore not common to Italy. In the case of the 'tenore robusto' there is hardly any falsetto. The 'tenore contraltino' on the other hand, is a master of reinforced falsetto: the overlap of both registers is much smaller than that of the *haute-contre* a criticism often made by the French and sometimes by the Italians themselves. Niccoló Jommelli (1769) wrote in a letter about the tenor Arcangelo Cortoni: "... He has the usual defect of modern tenors of wanting to sing falsetto (*contraltiggare*) too much."<sup>32</sup>

Rossini used both the dramatic 'tenore robusto' Domenico Donzelli and the 'tenore contraltino' Giovanni Davide, in *Othello*. The Vienna correspondent on the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (1823) compared the two singers:

"(Donzelli) has a beautiful, mellifluous tenor with which he attacks the high A in full chest voice, without once resorting to falsetto, while Signor Davide (who sang Roderigo) rejoices in the higher voice and, on occasion, once ascended to high F (above high C)."<sup>33</sup>

Giovanni Davide (1789–1851), the 'Rossini of Song' according to Eduard Bertin, a French critic, must have been a master in what Jommelli termed *contraltiggare*. According to the old *Grove's Dictionary of Music*, he had the "prodigious compass of three octaves comprised within four B-flats!" If this is true, is it possible that the voice of Davide was very close to the high countertenors – Powell, Russell, Sullivan and Brent – for whom Händel wrote contralto parts and who, on occasion, replaced castrati/contralti like Senesino?

If this tenor really sang as high as  $b^b$ , he was using García's third register, the Vdt. A register analysis might be as follows: (notice the small overlap):



This register, basically the falsetto of falsettists, is not recommended for men by García because of its big contrast to the Vdp. But Davide must have been an exception. Stendhal wrote that although Davide is called a tenor, he is brilliant in his falsetto:

<sup>32</sup> M. Cyr, op. cit., n. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Pleasants, *The Great Singers*, New York, 1970, 160.

“On entend par *tenore* la voix forte de poitrine dans les tons élevés; Davide brille dans la Vdt, le falsetto.”<sup>34</sup>

Of all tenors he is, for Stendhal, the only one who approached the “sensations délicieuses” of the soprano-castrato, Velluti. A technique like that of this ‘tenore contraltino’ could never lead to dramatic singing, though. Stendhal writes, there was something “infiniment petit” in his style; the average listeners preferred a more dramatic singer such as Nourrit, because they couldn’t comprehend the mannered style of Davide: “C’est tout simple: les trois quarts des *fioritures* que fait Davide lui sont invisible.”<sup>35</sup>

It seems very strange that Adolphe Nourrit, the “more dramatic singer,” (one of his many roles was Raoul in *Les Huguenots* of Meyerbeer) was still considered an *haute-contre* by his rival Gilbert-Louis Duprez, the first of the new dramatic tenors who were the male singing heroes of the nineteenth century<sup>36</sup>. Duprez’s high *c*, the absolute top of his voice, was sung very loudly, but not flexibly. It was sung from the chest in a uniform *voix sombrée* that was an exaggeration of the *voix de poitrine en timbre sombre* (García). (García’s best students had full control over the use of both *timbre clair* and *timbre sombre* in the Vdp and Vdf.) It must have sounded quite different from Nourrit’s high *c* that was, according to Henry Pleasants, “... brilliant, though not full-voiced, and resourcefully employed in diminuendo, *voix-mixte*, Vdt, and falsetto,”<sup>37</sup> — the high *c* of a true dramatic *haute-contre* such as Jélyotte and Legros. Nourrit tried to change his technique at the end of his life in Italy, and even was able to adopt the new *voix sombrée*: However, he expressed his dissatisfaction with this result more than once: “... I have only one color at my disposal ... I hope that with time I may be able to regain those fine nuances which are my true talent, and that variety of inflection which I had to renounce in order to conform to the exigencies of Italian singing.”

A combination of great dramatic expression and an endless “variety of inflection” treasured by the lovers of *bel canto* such as Stendhal, but considered by many others as mannered and unnatural, must have been typical of the last great *haute-contrés* and early nineteenth-century high tenors, who didn’t know the uni-colored *voix sombrée*, but used the *timbre sombre* that served, in the highest notes of the Vdp, as a transition, *voix mixte* to the Vdf, thus building a multicolored voice<sup>39</sup>.

To the modern audiences, used to the new revolutionary *voix sombrée*, the voice of the ‘old’ *haute-contre* sounded like a “voix claire et flutée” unable to express

<sup>34</sup> Stendhal 1, op. cit., 148 (footnote).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2, 29, 32, 118 ss.

<sup>36</sup> H. Pleasants, op. cit., 167: “His voice had the quality of what used to be called a counter-tenor (*haute-contre*), and he could sing very high in a mixed register.”, quoted from *Souvenir d’un chanteur* (1880) and trans. by Pleasants.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 164.

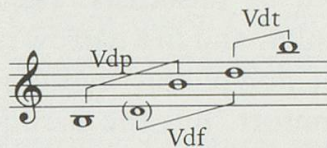
<sup>38</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>39</sup> The critic Henry F. Chorley wrote in 1831 about Giovanni Battista Rubini, the tenor of Donizetti and Bellini: “He had adopted a style of extreme contrast betwixt soft and loud, which many ears were unable for a long time to relish.” (Quoted in H. Pleasants, op. cit., 132.).

satisfactorily the heroic passions of grand opera<sup>40</sup>. The *Grand Dictionnaire Larousse* of 1866–1876 states: “The present generation no more knows what an *haute-contre* is than what a castrato is and the loss of the one is certainly not more regrettable than that of the other.”<sup>41</sup> The last *haute-contres* were called tenors more and more. With the voice, the term also disappeared.

*Attitudes Toward Falsettists in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*

As we saw, the high countertenor, not the falsettist, was a possible male substitute for the voice of the alto-castrato in the Baroque. Why the high countertenor? (1) He had the same range as the alto-castrato, but that is also true of the falsettist. (2) Both the high countertenor and the alto-castrato had a well-developed chest voice, although many alto- and soprano-castrati sang higher in the chest voice than high countertenors. (Note: if a high countertenor wants to keep his ‘ringing’ falsetto he should hardly sing higher than *f'* in the chest voice.) Haböck mentions an aria written by Vinci for Farinelli in a range that was meant to show off the power of his chest voice (*c* to *b''*, the combined tessitura of tenor, alto and soprano!). He also gives a description of the voice of Alessandro Moreschi the only recorded and last castrato, whom he heard many times in the Capella Sistina<sup>42</sup>. From this we may deduce the following register analysis:



Haböck was particularly impressed by the ringing *tenoral* sounds between *g'* and *b'* and by the smoothness of the *passaggio* to the head voice on *d''*. In England, alto-castrati were sometimes called countertenors; Burney, for instance, described the voice of Carestini as the “fullest, finest and *deepest countertenor*” he ever heard<sup>43</sup>. The falsettist, however, had no chest voice and would never have been accepted in the Baroque as a substitute.

The heyday of the falsettists had been the sixteenth century but with the beginning of the Baroque in music, with the new recitative style and dawn of opera, their popularity was foreshadowed by castrati, countertenors and *haute-contres*. Sixteenth-century falsettists were different from their twentieth-century (mainly British) counterparts in one aspect – they were able to use their natural voice also as a singing voice, though not connected with the falsetto. This means that most sixteenth-century falsettists also sang tenor, baritone or bass. In his letter on

<sup>40</sup> Castil-Blaze, *De l'opéra en France* (1820); F.-J. Fétis, *Revue musicale* 1 (1827); mentioned in a “Letter to the Editor” by F. Killingsley, *MT* 115 (1974), 217.

<sup>41</sup> M. Cyr, op. cit., 294.

<sup>42</sup> F. Haböck, op. cit., 102, 209s.

<sup>43</sup> H. Pleasants, op. cit., 64.

singing (1562) Giovanni Camillo Maffei described how a singer who was a bass by nature (*havendo di natura il basso*), was able to “feign” or simulate a voice called falsetto as a substitute for a soprano: “... per mancamento di soprano fingesse la voce, chiamata falsetto.” “There are singers,” he said, “who sing bass, tenor, and other parts with great ease, and decorating, diminishing, perform passage work now in the bass, now in the mezzo, now in the alto — all beautiful to hear.”<sup>44</sup>

I am convinced through my work as a teacher that the more the falsettist trains his natural voice in the sixteenth-century practice — as an alternative voice, not connected with the falsetto, the better his falsetto sounds. In other words, the training of his bass or tenor voice has a positive influence on the quality of his falsetto. While this was the practice in the sixteenth century, most current day falsettists believe that the training of their natural voice will be of no use or even harmful to them! The practice of using both natural voice and falsetto as two independent voices persisted in the seventeenth century. Hough mentions a seventeenth-century English singer, “the celebrated Mr. Pordage”, whose singing was, according to a contemporary critic who had heard him sing a Venetian recitative, “as masterly as could be and with excellent voice both treble and bass.”<sup>45</sup>

The sixteenth-century falsettists were basically church singers (many of Spanish origin) the most famous singing in the Capella Sistina. They sang the *superius* (not *altus*, a high tenor) lines of motets and decorated them with diminutions. The art of making virtuoso diminutions (such as the ones that were written down by Bovicelli) was mainly practiced by falsettists. Their singing in only one register, which necessarily meant one color, and in a narrow range, but with great flexibility, complied with the aesthetic of polyphonic music of the Renaissance; every voice added his own color to the consort. But the Baroque audiences loved the multi-color voice, *a voce colorata* rather than a *voce bianca*. The aesthetic of the Baroque was contrast: *chiaroscuro* in painting and *contraposto* in sculpture to which the contrast between different vocal colors, forte and piano (*messa di voce*) and different kinds of vibrato corresponded in singing. Falsettists didn't answer the new taste as we can read in the “Discorso di Pietro della Valle”, published in Doni's *De praestantia Musicae II*. Della Valle mentions some of the better falsettists of the end of the sixteenth century: Lodovico, who had a beautiful cantabile but only a mediocre coloratura technique; Giovanni Luca, a “gran cantore di gorge e di passaggi,” with an extremely high range (“alto alle stelle”); and Orazietto, a falsettist who also sang tenor. But at present, Della Valle writes, those singers would be considered unexpressive and old-fashioned (*De praestantia Musicae* was published in 1640, fifteen years after the death of Giovanni di Sanctis, the last falsettist of the Capella Sistina, which was now filled with castrati). In Haböck's translation, the text continues:

<sup>44</sup> Nanie Bridgman, “Giovanni Camillo Maffei et sa lettre sur le chant”, *RdM* 38 (1956), 3; reprint in English in *Readings in the History of Music in Performance*, ed. Carol McClintock, Indiana, 1979.

<sup>45</sup> W.J. Hough, *op. cit.*, 7.



“Fremd war die Kunst des piano und forte Singens; das allmähliche Anschwellen und anmutige Abnehmen des Tones, die Wiedergabe der in der Komposition niedergelegten Empfindung; die verständige Unterstützung der Worte und ihres Sinnes; die Kunst, der Stimme eine helle und heitere oder eine düstere Klangfarbe zu verleihen, sie liebevoll oder energisch werden zu lassen, je nachdem es erforderlich ist – und ähnliche andere anmutige Ausdrucksmittel, mit welchen heutzutage die Sänger glänzen.”<sup>46</sup>

Countless are the criticisms against falsettists in the age of *bel canto*.

– 1592 Lodovico Zacconi, *Prattica di Musica*:

‘Chest voices’ are compared with ‘head voices’, i.e., natural (male) voices (tenor and bass) with falsettists. ‘Chest voices’ are more pleasant to hear. ‘Head voices’ have a tendency toward impure intonation; they are very penetrating but often sound too shrill, and one cannot listen to them for a long time<sup>47</sup>.

– 1602 Giulio Caccini, *Le Nuove Musiche*:

Falsettists (the *voce finte*) have great trouble in making a good crescendo (exclamatione), that often becomes “harsh and unbearable to hear” (*acuto e impatabile all’udito*). Caccini wants his songs to be sung “with a full, natural voice (*voce piena e naturale*), not by falsettists (*per isfuggire le voce finte*). Falsettists need too much breath in singing: they “waste breath trying not to expose the tones too much, since, for the most part, they usually offend the ear. Rather one must use [the breath] to give more spirit to vocal crescendos and decrescendos ... from falsettists no nobility of good singing can arise (*dalle voce finte non può nascere nobilita di buon canto*) – that comes from a natural voice, comfortable through the whole range.”<sup>48</sup> Caccini doesn’t attack the *voce di testa o falsetto*, the register that in a good voice is always connected with the *voce piena o naturale*; he attacks the *voce finte*, or falsettists.

– 1679 Bénigne de Bacilly, *Remarques Curieuses sur l’Art de bien Chanter*:

“Les voix de fausset ont de l’aigreur et manquent souvent de justesse, a moins que d’estre si bien cultivées qu’elles semblent estre passées en nature.”<sup>49</sup> Most falsettists sound “unnatural” but there are some exceptions: Does this mean that Bacilly refers to those falsettists who sing the lowest notes in their natural voice i.e., high countertenors?

In France, *pro* or *contra* falsettists must have been an open question: “Ceux qui ont la voix naturelle, méprisent les voix de fausset, comme fausses et glapissantes; et ceux cy tiennent que la fin du chant paroist bien plus dans une voix de taille naturelle, qui pour l’ordinaire n’a pas tant d’éclat, bien qu’elle ait de justesse.” But Bacilly, who liked high voices very much, defended those falsettists (high counter-

<sup>46</sup> Angelo Solerti, “Lettere inedite sulla musica di Pietro della Valle a Giovanni Battista Doni”, *Le origini del melodramma*, Turin, 1903; reprint in *RMI* 12 (1905), 271–349; quoted by F. Haböck, op. cit., 161; facsimile of Doni’s three books, *De praestantia musicae veteris libri tres*, Florence, 1647, Bologna, 1970 (*Bibliotheca Musica Bononiensis* 2/49).

<sup>47</sup> See footnote 2 above; F. Haböck, op. cit. 83 s.

<sup>48</sup> Giulio Caccini, *Le nuove musiche*, Florence, 1601, reprinted New York, 1964 (*Monuments of Music and Music Literature in Facsimile* 1/29); also H. Wiley Hitchcock, “Introduction to *le nuove musiche*”, *RRMBE* 9 (1970), 7.

<sup>49</sup> See note 21 above; reprint edition, op. cit., 46.

tenors) whose voices sounded natural: "... si l'on y faisait bien réflexion, on remarquerait qu'ils doivent tout ce qu'ils ont de particulier dans la manière de chanter à leur voix ainsi élevée en fausset, qui fait paroistre certains ports de voix, certains intervalles, et autres charmes du chant tous autrement que dans la voix de taille!"

—1732 J. G. Walther, *Musikalisches Lexicon*:

"Falset-Stimme, Falsetto: Bey erwachsenen Sängern, wenn Sie an statt ihrer ordentlichen Bass- oder Tenor-Stimme, durch Zusammenzwingen und Dringen des Halses, den Alt oder Discant singen. Man nennet es auch deswegen eine unnatürliche Stimme."<sup>50</sup>

— 1757 J. F. Agricola, *Anleitung zur Singkunst*:

"Einige Mannspersonen haben, wenn Sie singen, nichts als lauter Falsettöne, und diese nennt man eigentlich Falsettisten. Die tiefen Töne werden dieses gemeinlich sauer und sind schwächer."<sup>51</sup>

— 1774 J. A. Hiller, *Anweisung zum Musikalisch-richtigen Gesange*:

A falsettist sings "... durch die Fistel, mit einer durchaus erzwungenen Stimme."<sup>52</sup> Pure falsettists were hardly ever accepted as dramatic soloists in the Baroque. The advantages of a good falsettist were exploited in choirs and church singing. In this light we may see the use Bach made of falsettists. The Bach documents mention falsettists as well as *altisten*. Falsettists often supported the boy sopranos and altos. The low countertenor for whom the cantata "Widerstehe doch der Sünde" was written was certainly considered an altist; a falsettist would have to transpose the part. Dramatic alto arias such as "Es ist vollbracht" from *St. John's Passion* must have been sung by *altisten* (boys and high countertenors) who used both their chest voice and falsetto. I can imagine the *B-Minor Mass* being sung by a falsettist in the mezzo-soprano part ("Laudamus te") — an almost purely instrumental, 'white' voice, and by an altist or high countertenor singing the alto part ("Agnus Dei") — a highly colored voice. As church singers, falsettists were defended in the beginning of the seventeenth century, while others, such as Caccini, attacked them as dramatic singers. For instance, in his foreword to *Cento Concerti Ecclesiastici*, Viadana advised the use of falsettists instead of boys who, for the most part "sing carelessly and with little grace." In the choir of the *Concert spirituel* of eighteenth-century France, falsettists were used to support the female sopranos. In Italy, the use of falsettists to support female sopranos and altos in choirs persisted until the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1911, for instance, Toscanini used ten falsettists in a performance of Verdi's *Requiem*.

<sup>50</sup> Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musikalisches Lexicon*, Leipzig, 1732; Facs. ed. Kassel etc., 1953, 239 (*Documenta musicologica* 1/3).

<sup>51</sup> Johann Friedrich Agricola, *Anleitung zur Singkunst*, Berlin, 1757, trans. with additions from P. F. Tosi's *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni*, Bologna, 1723; Facs. ed., Celle, 1966, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Johann Adam Hiller, *Anweisung zum musikalisch-richtigen Gesange*, Leipzig, 1774, paragraphs 14 and 15 cited in F. Haböck, op. cit., 96; trans. into English by S. J. Beiken, *Translation and Commentary of Job. Ad. Hiller's 'Anweisung'*, Diss. Stanford University, 1980.

During the whole nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, falsettists sang in the Capella Sistina, becoming more and more important as there were less and less castrati. Haböck compared them with castrati:

“Einzelne leisten ja gewiß beachtenswert gutes, aber der Durchschnitt ist von störendster Unzulänglichkeit ... In Italien ... hörte ich viele Falsettisten, die aber in der Mehrzahl mit dem Namen jämmerlicher Fistulanten abzutun waren. Bei meinem letzten Aufenthalt in Rom zu Ostern 1914 galt der Falsettist Gabrieli als der Vorzüglichste. Seine Stimme klang kräftig, voll und ausgeglichen. Auch die beiden Altfalsettisten der Cappella Giulia an der Peterskirche, Mattoni und Orciari, waren gute Sänger. Orciari, der jüngere, besaß eine sehr schöne Stimme, bei welcher ich nur manchmal zu stark das Gefühl des Gekünstelten, Erzwungenen hatte; es war fast immer etwas unfreies, aus Anstrengung vibrierendes in seinem Ton, das wohl zum Teil auf sein Streben nach möglicher Verstärkung auch schlecht resonanzierter Töne zurückzuführen war.”<sup>53</sup>

Haböck considered the replacement of castrati by falsettists in the Capella Sistina during the nineteenth century an aesthetic decline. Like Bacilly, Haböck says that the most natural sounding falsettists used their chest voice in the lower notes (in which case they should be called high countertenors, rather than falsettists):

“Der künstlerisch ausgebildete Fistulant oder Falsettist ist nicht, wie vielfach angenommen wird, ausschliesslich auf den Gebrauch der Kopfstimme angewiesen, sondern, er kann in den tieferen Lagen sehr wohl auch eine leicht mit der Kopfstimme sich verbindende *voix mixte*, sowie ein richtiges Mittel- und Brust-register besitzen.”<sup>54</sup>

One thing is clear. Pure falsetto singing, the art of the falsettist, was considered contradictory to the principles of Baroque *bel canto*. The falsettist, tolerated as a church and choir singer, was not accepted as a dramatic, i. e., operatic singer. This voice was considered a *voce finta*, a feigned, unnatural voice. Some falsettists developed the chest register that was able to blend with their falsetto; in this case their singing no longer sounded like a *voce finta*, but, as Bacilly says, as a “natural voice”. It is inaccurate to call such a singer a falsettist; he is a high countertenor and as such, a possible substitute for the lower castrati, as was Powell for Senesino.

### *The “Countertenor” Today*

Today, we are confronted with the following situation: we have no more castrati, virtually no real countertenors, neither high or low, but an army of falsettists sometimes singing castrato parts. The loss of the castrato voice can, for humanitarian reasons, be applauded. The loss of real countertenors, however, of true *voci mezzane*, as Zacconi calls them, is a disaster. Do we have a Mr. Pate who can sing “’Tis Nature’s Voice” with a voice that is somewhere between a normal tenor and a falsetto-alto? Do we have a Legros who as “Orphée” doesn’t sound like a hot-blooded lover, but as a warm human being and a mythical hero at the same time (as Guadagni did as ‘Orfeo’ in a higher tessitura)? Do we have a Walter Powell who had the powerful chest voice as well as the ringing falsetto to replace Senesino?

<sup>53</sup> F. Haböck, op. cit., 201 s.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 94.

Is there a new Giovanni Davide with his exceptional range of three octaves, that enabled him to approach the sound of a soprano-castrato?

What we have lost is the ideal of the alto as a *hermaphrodite* voice. Both male and female altos in the *bel canto* period, from the first castrati to Pauline Viardot-García, were liked for the 'bisexual' character of their voices. Théophile Gautier expressed this in a superb way in his poem, "Contralto":

"Que tu me plais, o timbre étrange!

Son double, homme et femme à la fois,

Contralto, bizarre mélange

Hermaphrodite de la voix."

A good alto voice is never a one-register voice. Unfortunately, the *bel canto* ideal of the hermaphrodite voice is threatened with a sure death by modern one-register theories that favor the one-color voice as well as by the modern ideal of the white, straight and sexless voice in early music, which is an invention of those countries that were most active in the renaissance of authentically performed early music. These have nothing to do with historical truth.

And yet, even the falsettist refusing to use his chest voice should be able to color his voice. He still has the possible contrast between the different colors of the lower "silvery" and the higher "flute-like" falsetto, García's Vdf and Vdt (one with a strong resonance in the pharynx and the other with a resonance in the head). Unfortunately, very few falsettists use this potential. One of the few to take advantage of these colors was Alfred Deller whose style of changing colors was very expressive; he had his own "maniera di cantare" i.e., he was mannered in the good sense of the word.

Alfred Deller and many other "countertenors" after him certainly participated to an important extent in the authentic revival of early music. Thanks to them the voice of the falsettist, very appropriate in Renaissance and consort music, was reborn. However, there is much historical evidence to substantiate that the true Baroque *countertenor* has not been reborn. Certainly in the Baroque there were different kinds of countertenors. As we saw, there were 'low' and 'high' countertenors in England as well as in France. The low countertenors, especially in France, were the more dramatic singers (Jélyotte, Legros). The high countertenors were more rare and had more lyric voices; they were sometimes able to replace castrati (Powell). Both low and high countertenors united their chest voice with their falsetto in the way described by García; those two registers overlapped each other, to a bigger extent in the voice of the low countertenors and to a lesser extent in the voice of the high countertenors.

If modern falsettists would abandon their preconceptions and would use their chest voice to their individual limits, and if some high tenors would develop their falsetto range, then the rebirth of the true Baroque countertenor might occur.