

Falsetto and the French: "Une toute autre marche"

Autor(en): **Parrott, Andrew**

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FALSETTO AND THE FRENCH:
„UNE TOUTE AUTRE MARCHE“

by ANDREW PARROTT

Few areas of musical study have engendered as much confusion as the (sometimes) interrelated topics of the „falsetto“ voice and the singing of „alto“ parts in earlier centuries. Some of this confusion is entirely understandable: at almost every turn we may encounter unknowable pitch standards, terminological riddles, or sheer dearth of evidence. Much, however, is of our own making: in particular, the endemic failure to distinguish different repertoires, different traditions, or different periods, coupled not infrequently with an apparent belief in a single „true countertenor“ of the past.

My broad aim is thus to encourage some fundamental re-thinking about the place of falsetto singing – if any – in a number of specific vocal traditions. But on the present occasion I shall limit myself to a single period and country (eighteenth-century France), one which, despite an abundance of relatively clear documentation, has nevertheless remained prone to misunderstanding. My approach has been to keep speculative interpretation to a minimum and, wherever possible, to allow the sources to speak for themselves. (All are given both in their original language and in translation.) More specifically, this study aims to take a fresh look at the nature of the *haute-contre* in this period.

With his admirably succinct article, „The enigma of the Haute-Contre“, Neal Zaslaw (1974) sought to clear up „the vexed question of whether the *haute-contre* – the designation of the voice to which the leading male roles in French opera from Lully to Rameau were usually assigned – was a natural or a falsetto voice“.¹ He concludes: „a balanced appraisal of all the historical evidence seems to suggest that the *haute-contre* in 18th-century French music was sung falsetto only by rare exception“ – in other words, that the voice was essentially the same as our high tenor. Mary Cyr (1977) concurred and presented further valuable information, adding: „it remains to be determined what unusual circumstances might have prompted the use of falsetto, when, and by whom“.²

René Jacobs (1983) sees things differently:³ The *haute-contre* was indeed a high tenor, but one that was significantly different from those we know today.⁴ All Baroque singers (he believes) cultivated „the ability to unite chest voice and falsetto“ – the French *haute-contre* (or „countertenor“) included. „If modern

¹ N. Zaslaw, „The enigma of the Haute-Contre“, *The Musical Times* 115 (1974) 939–941.

² M. Cyr, „On performing 18th-century Haute-Contre roles“, *The Musical Times* 118 (1977) 291–295.

³ R. Jacobs, „The controversy concerning the timbre of the countertenor“, in P. Reidemeister & V. Gutmann (eds.), *Alte Musik: Praxis und Reflexion*, Winterthur 1983, 288–306.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 298

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".⁵

Pursuing these various issues turns out to have interesting implications not only for singers of *haute-contre* parts but for all voice types. And it is not only our understanding of French but of Italian singing that is affected.

Categories of voice

Contemporary comparisons of French and Italian music in the eighteenth century – most of them from a French perspective – have left us with some very clear descriptions of the perceived distinctions between their vocal practices. A fundamental point to emerge from these sources is that the two countries favoured quite different vocal ranges and scorings: according to de Brosses (1739/40) the three top parts in Italian music (soprano, contralto, tenor) lay „a third or a fourth higher than ours“ (*dessus, haute-contre* and *taille*).⁶ As a consequence, alto parts – „contralto“ to the Italians, „haute-contre“ to the French – were conceived for and executed by wholly different categories of singer:

Charles de Brosses (1739/40): [Les hautes-contres italiens] ne sont pas du même genre que les nôtres; aucune espèce de voix françoise ne pourroit bien rendre leur chant. Ce sont des voix de femmes en bas-dessus plus bas qu'aucun des nôtres [...].⁷
 ([Italian contraltos] are not of the same kind as ours: no type of French voice could render their song well. They are female *bas-dessus* voices, lower than any of ours [...].)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1768): Dans la Musique Italienne, cette Partie, qu'ils appellent *Contr'alto*, & qui répond à la *Haute-contre*, est presque toujours chantée par des *Bas-dessus*, soit femmes, soit Castrati.⁸
 (In Italian music this part, which they call contralto and which corresponds to the *haute-contre*, is nearly always sung by *bas-dessus*, be they women or castratos.⁹)

Joseph de Lalande (2/1787): Les *contralti* [des Italiens] sont des voix de femmes [et de castrats] en second dessus.¹⁰
 (The [Italians'] contraltos are *second dessus* voices of women [and of castratos]).

⁵ Ibid., 289, 306.

⁶ C. de Brosses, *Lettres familières écrites d'Italie en 1739 et 1740*, ii (R. Colomb, ed.; Paris 4/1885): „Ces trois premiers genres de voix ont une tierce ou une quarte d'élévation plus que chez nous“; 317.

⁷ Ibid., 317–318.

⁸ J.-J. Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de musique*, Paris 1768/R, 248. The *Dictionnaire* is based on articles originally written for Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, Paris 1751–1765.

⁹ The „Haute-contre“ article in *New Grove/2* (London 2001) mistakenly represents Rousseau as saying that „the haute-contre is a male voice *equivalent in range* to the contralto or second soprano parts sung by women or castratos“ [my italics]. As de Brosses and others make clear, it is merely the *name* of the part which „corresponds“, not its range. See also fn. 93.

¹⁰ J. de Lalande, *Voyage en Italie*, Yverdon 2/1787, v, 447.

This distinction still held good at the end of the century, as we see from Framery's „Contralto“ entry in the *Encyclopédie méthodique: Musique* (1791):

mot italien qui répond à notre mot haute-contre; mais les deux voix ne sont pourtant pas les mêmes, & leur diapason est assez différent. Le *contralto* italien est exécuté par des castrati à qui l'âge a rendu la voix plus grave, ou par des femmes qui ont particulièrement [*sic*] cultivé les cordes basses, & qui sont proprement, ce que nous appellons des bas-dessus.[...] On peut donc conclure que les Italiens ne connoissent point dans leurs chœurs la haute-contre, & qu'ils lui ont substitué le second-dessus, en continuant de le nommer *contralto*.¹¹

(an Italian word which corresponds to our word *haute-contre*; but the two voices are nevertheless not the same, and their ranges are rather different. The Italian *contralto* is performed by castratos whose voices have become lower with age, or by women who have particularly cultivated the low [vocal] cords and who are, properly, what we call *bas-dessus*.) [...] One can therefore conclude that in their choirs the Italians are wholly unacquainted with the *haute-contre* and that they have substituted for it the *second dessus*, while continuing to call it „contralto“.)

In other words, *haute-contre* and *contralto* corresponded only in *name* (both deriving ultimately from the Latin „contra[tenor] altus“). In *range* (and general voice type) the Italian *contralto*'s closest equivalent was the *second* (or *bas-)**dessus*, while the *haute-contre* was best equated with the Italian tenor. French practice and terminology, Framery argues, were connected in a way the Italian was not:

A considérer le diapason de la clef d'*ut* sur la troisième ligne, qui sert aux deux espèces de voix, il est évident que ce sont les François qui emploient la véritable haute-contre, & que les *contralti* italiens ne sont que des seconds-dessus, car cette clef descend jusqu'au *mi* ou au *re*, & monte jusqu'au *la* & au *si*. [...] Tel est en effet l'espace que peut parcourir à son aise la voix d'homme quand elle est aiguë & claire; mais cette voix, les Italiens l'appellent *tenore*, sans la distinguer de cette autre dont le son est plus grave & plus nourri.¹²

(From the compass of the C3 [or „alto“] clef, which serves both types of voice, it is evident that it is the French who use the true *haute-contre* and that Italian *contraltos* are just *seconds dessus*, as this clef goes down to *e* or *d* and up to *a'* or *b'*. [...] This is in fact the [pitch] area which a man's voice can comfortably cover when it is a high and clear one; but the Italians call this voice „tenore“, without distinguishing it from the other type [„tenore secundo“] whose sound is deeper and fuller.)

The Italian „tenore“, declares Lalande (2/1787), „c'est la haute-contre française“.¹³ To illustrate the point as clearly as possible, he invokes two of the century's most celebrated *hautes-contre*, Pierre de Jélyotte and his younger contemporary

¹¹ N. E. Framery & P. L. Ginguené (eds.), *Encyclopédie méthodique: Musique*, Paris 1791/R, i, „Contralto“, 315–316.

¹² *Ibid.*, 315.

¹³ Lalande, *op. cit.*, 446. He introduces his subsequent comments (see below) in more or less identical fashion: „J'ai dit que le tenore des Italiens étoit la haute-contre des François“; 447.

Joseph Legros, whose combined careers spanned several decades (from 1738 to 1783) and included the creation of an impressive number of leading operatic roles in Paris, from Rameau to Gluck. In Italian terms,

Geliot & Legros auroient été appelés *tenori*, & non pas *contralti*, quoiqu'on ait coutume de traduire ce mot par haute-contre.¹⁴

(Jélyotte and Legros would have been called „tenors“ and not „contraltos“, even though one may be accustomed to translate this word as *haute-contre*.)

This is plain enough and readily suggests that we too would recognise those eminent *hautes-contre* as tenors. But are we also to assume that Italian and French singers used these „tenor“ voices in more or less the same fashion as each other?

Ranges

Lalande continues his comparison of *haute-contre* and *tenore* with some very specific information on ranges. But when we look at it, we shall need to remind ourselves that such ranges – whether expressed in note names or in musical notation – are of only limited use unless we understand the pitch standards that inform them.

Fortunately, it is possible to be reasonably certain both of the pitch standard adopted by Lully in performances of his own *tragédies en musique* during the 1670s and 80s and of subsequent practice at the Paris Opéra, where his works long remained core repertory. Lully's standard, it seems, lay roughly a tone beneath today's $a'=440$ and was still in use at the Opéra as late as 1770.¹⁵ By 1766, though, Dom Bédos de Celles could write that „*ton de l'Opéra* [...] is not a fixed pitch; it is raised and lowered by a quarter of a tone, or even more, depending on the compass of the voices.“¹⁶ The ranges of Italian singers given by Lalande are less straightforward, as his information was presumably collected in Italy in the 1760s;¹⁷ but it seems reasonable to suppose that such a sophisticated writer (musical amateur though he was) would base his remarks on a single pitch standard, one that his French readers would most readily understand.

As a solo voice the French *haute-contre* first rose to prominence with the dozen or more heroic parts written for it by Lully.¹⁸ Roles such as those of Perseus, Phaeton, Atys, Roland and Amadis typically range from *g* up to *a'* (plus the occasional *b'*) and have a consistently fairly low tessitura.¹⁹ (The voice of

¹⁴ Ibid., 447.

¹⁵ B. Haynes, *A history of performing pitch*, 100–102, 116, 275–77, 308–310.

¹⁶ F. Bédos de Celles, *L'art du facteur d'orgues*, Paris 1770/R, ii: „le *ton de l'Opéra* [...] n'est pas un ton fixe; on le hausse ou le baisse d'un quart de ton, ou même plus, selon la portée des voix“; 432.

¹⁷ Haynes, *op. cit.*, 269–273.

¹⁸ *New Grove/2*, „Haute-contre“, 154.

¹⁹ Cyr, *op. cit.*, 292.

Antoine Boutelou, „the celebrated *haute-contre* of Louis XIV's chapel“, was said to have been full but „not high“, extending to *bb'* „only in passing“.²⁰ By the 1730s Rameau had adopted a higher tessitura and very slightly wider compass when writing for Denis-François Tribou (*Hippolytus, Castor*); the Act IV air in *Hippolyte et Aricie*, for example, extends from *f* up to *bb'*.²¹ A generation or so further on, both Corrette (1758) and Rousseau (1768) set the *haute-contre*'s upper limit still higher at *c'''* (with *g* and *f* respectively as the lowest notes).²² As we have already seen, Framery (1791) links the range of the voice to the natural span of the C3 clef (*e* up to *a'*) with an extra tone at each end (low *d* and high *b'*).²³

And now Lalande (2/1787): „our *haute-contre* [...] ascends in full voice to *bb'*.“ Exceptionally, Legros went to *c''* and Jélyotte a further tone to *d''*, though „in all countries these vocal qualities are very rare“. Others were successful as *hautes-contre* despite distinctly restricted upper limits: „Lainez goes up to a forced *a'*, Rousseau [a young singer in Paris from 1780] to a somewhat forced *ab'''*, Dufrenoy up to a forced *g''*“.²⁴ But as many important roles had been created for the exceptionally high voices of Jélyotte and Legros in particular, „all who succeeded Legros are obliged to shout in order to reach the pitch of the *haute-contre*, except for Rousseau, but he has a smaller tone.“²⁵ Gluck's *Orphée* (1774) proved particularly problematic in this respect. In revising *Orfeo ed Euridice* for Paris, the composer had contrived to give Legros some top *c''*'s (in the Act III duet) and even a fleeting *d''* (at „L'excès de mes malheurs“ in Act II). Others later attempted the part as written, but pitch at the Opéra had risen²⁶ and by the time Louis Nourrit took on the role in 1809 many downward transpositions were deemed necessary.²⁷

²⁰ J.-B. de La Borde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*, iii, Paris 1780/R: „célèbre haute-contre de la chapelle de Louis XIV [...] Sa voix n'était pas haute, & il n'allait au sib qu'en passant; mais le son en était si plein [...]“; 498.

²¹ Cyr, op. cit., 293.

²² M. Corrette, *Le parfait maître à chanter*, Paris 1758, 20; Rousseau (1768), op. cit., Planche F, Fig. 6. The manner of notating the ranges is explained thus: „Les Notes blanches montrent les Sons pleins où la Voix commenceroit à se forcer, & qu'elle ne doit former qu'en passant“; 368. („The white notes indicate the full sounds which each part can reach both at top and bottom, and the quavers that follow indicate the sounds where the voice begins to force and which it should not employ except in passing“.).

²³ Framery & Ginguené (eds.), op. cit., 315.

²⁴ Lalande, op. cit.: „[...] notre haute-contre [...] monte en pleine voix jusqu'au sib [...] A Paris, Geliot avoit la même étendue qu'Amorevoli [jusqu'à *re*], & Legros avoit celle des deux premiers [Babbi & Caribaldi, jusqu'à *ut*]; ces qualités de voix, dans tous les pays, sont très-rares: Lainez va jusqu'au *la* forcé, Rousseau jusqu'au *lab* un peu forcé, Dufrenoy jusqu'au *sol* forcé“; 447. See also fn. 93.

²⁵ Ibid.: „tous ce qui ont succédé à Legros, sont obligés de crier pour arriver au ton de la haute-contre, excepté Rousseau; mais il a le timbre plus petit“; 447.

²⁶ Haynes, op. cit., 308–10, 329–332.

²⁷ P. Howard, *C. W. von Gluck, Orfeo*, Cambridge 1983, 75.

Registers

Neal Zaslaw (1974) argues that the eighteenth-century *haute-contre* used falsetto „only by rare exception“.²⁸ For his part, René Jacobs (1983) claims that the *haute-contre*, like all „Baroque male alto“ voices, „has always been a *voce mezzana*“ (a rather murky term borrowed from Zacconi, 1596)²⁹ and that all such voices „united their chest voice with their falsetto in the way described by García“.³⁰ (Manuel García published his theory of registers in the 1840s; it is, Jacobs tells us, „still very much in the tradition of eighteenth-century castrato teachers, e.g., Tosi, Porpora and Mancini“.)³¹ But just how relevant are these Italianate theories to an earlier *French* vocal tradition, one rooted in Lully's time and long regarded as quite distinct from Italian practice?³²

In a chapter on declamation, Jean-Léonar le Gallois de Grimarest (*Traité du récitatif*, 1707) sets out an interesting principle:

Un Acteur doit éviter avec soin d'avoir deux tons de voix différens: c'est à dire, de prononcer dans un ton naturel en de certains endroits, & de tomber dans le fausset, quand il est obligé de s'élever. Ce desagrement est tres-choquant pour l'Auditeur.³³

(An actor must carefully avoid having two different tones of voice, viz. pronouncing in a natural tone at certain points and falling into falsetto when he is obliged to raise [his voice]. This unpleasantness is very shocking to the listener.)

This has been translated as „A singer must take care to avoid using two different voices: that is, [...] falsetto when he is obliged to *sing* higher“ (my italics).³⁴ While the term „acteur“ undoubtedly embraces „l'Acteur qui chante“, and while this actor-singer was explicitly required to observe the rules of good declamation,³⁵ Grimarest's comments – despite the reference to falsetto – are probably best understood in relation to the speaking actor. (Only the subsequent and final chapter of the *Traité* is specifically concerned with recitative „dans le Chant“.)³⁶ It could in any case be argued that the very mention of the „defect“ of register switching implies that it happened rather frequently, or perhaps that Grimarest's view was purely „theoretical“ or idiosyncratic.

²⁸ Zaslaw, op.cit., 941.

²⁹ Jacobs, op. cit., 289.

³⁰ Ibid., 306.

³¹ Ibid., 290. García was born in 1805 and first studied singing in Naples with his eminent (Spanish) father.

³² Zaslaw (op. cit.) warns against undue reliance on „the testimony of a generation of musicians [Castil-Blaze, Choron, Fétis] who may have lived too late to know the true *haute-contre* tradition except by hearsay“; 941.

³³ J.-L. le G. de Grimarest, *Traité du récitatif*, Paris 1707, Ch. VII, „De la Déclamation“, 133.

³⁴ J. R. Anthony, letter to *The Musical Times* 116 (1975) 237.

³⁵ Grimarest, op. cit.: „l'Acteur qui chante doit absolument suivre toutes les regles de la Déclamation“; 222.

³⁶ Cf. D. Tunley, „Grimarest's *Traité du récitatif*: Glimpses of performance practice in Lully's operas“, *Early Music* 15 (1987) 361–364.

Nevertheless, it may well be that French vocal music observed a comparable underlying principle.

Powerful evidence of French preference for a single register comes from no lesser authority than Johann Joachim Quantz (1752), a well-placed and astute observer of practical musical matters French and Italian:

Die Stimme besteht aus zweyerley Arten, aus der Bruststimme, und aus dem Falset, oder Fistel. [...] Die Italiäner, und einige andere Nationen vereinigen dieses Falset mit der Bruststimme, und bedienen sich dessen, bey dem Singen, mit großem Vortheile; Bey den Franzosen aber ist es nicht üblich [...].³⁷

(The voice is of two types, chest voice and falsetto or fistula. [...] The Italians and several other nations unite this falsetto with the chest voice, and make use of it to great advantage when singing: with the French, however, it is not customary [...].)

With this we come, I believe, to the heart of the matter. From the documentary evidence presented in this brief study it emerges – quite plainly, it seems to me – that the use or non-use of falsetto (in the sense of head voice, as most of us would call it) was seen as a central factor in the polarisation of Italian and French vocal traditions. Its cultivation, throughout the eighteenth century (and beyond), was seen as a defining characteristic of Italian singing, one which distinguished it sharply from French practice.³⁸ Even Rousseau, a vociferous critic of French music, was not comfortable with its use. Referring in his *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768) to a table of ranges for each principal voice part (*dessus, haute-contre, taille* and *basse*), he writes:

Les Voix Italiennes excèdent presque toujours cette étendue dans le haut, sur-tout les Dessus; mais la Voix devient alors une espèce de *Faucet*, & avec quelqu'art que ce défaut se déguise, c'en est certainement un.³⁹

(Italian voices nearly always exceed this range at the top, especially the *dessus*; but then the voice becomes a sort of falsetto, and however artfully this defect may be disguised, it certainly is one.)

This „sort of falsetto“ not only made for a very different colour in the upper reaches of a voice (a colour the Italians liked and the French generally did not) but extended the potential range upwards by a significant amount. As Quantz puts it, judicious use of falsetto enabled one, „without doing oneself violence, to produce several more notes at the top than is possible with chest voice“.⁴⁰

³⁷ J. J. Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversière zu spielen*, Berlin 1752/R, 47.

³⁸ I am unaware of this distinction being emphasised in the secondary literature, though I cannot claim to have searched extensively. It is, however, absent from general surveys such as those in *New Grove's handbook on performance practice: Music after 1600*, ed. H. M. Brown & S. Sadie (1989).

³⁹ Rousseau (1768), op. cit., „Partie“, 368.

⁴⁰ Quantz, op. cit.: „... ohne sich Gewalt anzuthun, in der Höhe einige Töne mehr, als mit der Bruststimme möglich ist, herausbringen“; 47.

(Over-indulgence in this register, perhaps when embellishing, is presumably what Jommelli meant [1769] by „the usual defect of modern tenors of wanting to contralto-ise [*contraltigliare*] too much.“)⁴¹ In comparing the French *haute-contre* voice with its closest Italian equivalent Lalande is admirably clear on this crucial distinction in technique:

Le *tenore* va de *ut* à *sol* en pleine voix, & jusqu'à *re* en *falsetto* ou fausset: notre haute-contre, ordinairement après le *sol*, monte en pleine voix jusqu'au *sib*; au lieu que le *tenore*, après le *sol*, entre dans le fausset; mais cela n'est pas sans exception: Babbi montoit jusqu'à *ut* en pleine voix, de même que Caribaldi, jusqu'à l'âge de quarante-huit ans. Amorevoli, qui étoit un peu plus ancien, alloit jusqu'à *re*.⁴²

(The [Italian] *tenore* goes from *C* to *g'* in full voice and up to *d''* in falsetto or *fausset*; after *g'* our *haute-contre* ordinarily ascends in full voice to *bb'*, whereas after *g'* the *tenore* enters into falsetto – but that is not without exception: Babbi ascended to *c''* in full voice, like Caribaldi, until the age of 48. Amorevoli, who was a little older, went up to *d''*.⁴³)

In a response (1754) to Rousseau's *Lettre sur la musique françoise* an anonymous writer reported an „experiment“ aimed at identifying the cause of French „antipathy“ towards Italian singing and made with the help of „people I knew could not bear“ it.⁴⁴ This antipathy he duly ascribed, in part, to „the custom of using falsetto and of making an artificial voice [which] must make a much more disagreeable impression on the ear than would have been made by a natural sound.“⁴⁵ This association of falsetto with Italian singing (and, perhaps, a consequent Gallic distrust of it) is still found alive and well towards the end of the century in Meude-Monpas's definition (1787) of „*Fausset*“:

Genre de voix qui n'est pas naturel: car, au lieu de chanter du gosier, on a, pour ainsi dire, l'air de chanter du toupet. Cette méthode de chanter le fausset nous vient encore d'Italie.⁴⁶

(Voice type which is not natural: for, instead of singing from the throat, one gives the impression, so to speak, of singing from the top of one's head. This method of singing falsetto comes to us once again from Italy.)

⁴¹ Cyr, op. cit., 294.

⁴² Lalande, op. cit., 447. Jacobs appears to regard this comparison as demonstrating that *both* types of voice combined chest and falsetto, with the Italian tenor doing so „in perhaps a less perfect manner“; op. cit., 298.

⁴³ Mancini mentions (but does not discuss) „some rare examples of somebody receiving from Nature the most singular gift of being able to execute everything with just chest voice“ („qualche raro esempio, che qualcheduno riceve dalle natura il singolarissimo dono di poter eseguir tutto colla sola voce di petto“; G. Mancini, *Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato*, (Vienna 1774), 43.

⁴⁴ *Suite des lettres sur la musique françoise, Lettre IV*: „[...] des personnes que je sçavois ne pouvoir souffrir le Chant Italien“; 33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: „[...] j'ai trouvé que la coutume de se servir du fausset & de se faire une voix factice devoit faire sur l'oreille une impression d'autant plus désagréable, qu'elle venoit d'être affectée par un son naturel“; 34.

⁴⁶ J. J. O. de Meude-Monpas, *Dictionnaire de musique*, Paris 1787, „*Fausset*“, 60.

And indeed this is an aspect of technique which is consistently addressed in Italian sources from at least Tosi (1723) to Mancini (1774) and well beyond.⁴⁷ (The origins of this Italian tradition are, of course, another story altogether, and we may briefly note Giulio Caccini's well-known advice at the start of the previous century that the solo singer should choose „a pitch at which he can sing in a full and natural voice in order to avoid feigned notes“.)⁴⁸ In stark contrast, Jean-Antoine Bérard, author of *L'art du chant* (1755)⁴⁹ and a former solo *haute-contre* at the Paris Opéra, makes no mention whatsoever of the falsetto register.

Unlike our French writers, Quantz (1752) had no qualms about endorsing the Italian approach, when setting out „what is required of a good singer“:⁵⁰

Es wird weiter erfordert, daß ein Sänger das Falset mit der Bruststimme so zu vereinigen wisse, damit man nicht merken könne, wo die letzte aufhöret, und das erstere anfängt [...].⁵¹

(It is further required that a singer know how to unite the falsetto with the chest voice so as for it to be imperceptible where the latter leaves off and the former commences [...].)

By the 1750s this Italianate manner of vocal production was evidently already in vogue at Germany's cosmopolitan courts, though not in „most towns“:

Wie die Singart der Deutschen in den alten Zeiten beschaffen gewesen sey, kann man, noch bis auf diese Stunde, in den meisten Städten, an den Chor- oder Schul-Sängern abnehmen. [...] Die Vereinigung der Bruststimme mit dem Falset ist ihnen eben so unbekannt, als den Franzosen.⁵²

(From choir- or school-singers one can still even now gather an impression, in most towns, of the nature of the Germans' singing style in times past. [...] Uniting chest voice with falsetto is as unknown to them as [it is] to the French.)

Perceptions

If asked to differentiate between quintessential Italian and French voices of the eighteenth century, many of us today would perhaps be tempted to characterise the former as the more robust, not least on high notes, the latter as generally lighter and somewhat thin, especially at the top. Contemporary descriptions, however, frequently run counter to these preconceptions:

⁴⁷ Mancini, op. cit., Articolo IV, „Della voce di petto, e di testa, o sia falsetto“, 43–46.

⁴⁸ G. Caccini, *Le nuove musiche*, Florence 1602/R, preface, 7: „un tuono, nel quale possa cantare in voce piena, e naturale per isfuggire le voci finte“. By taking „le voci finte“ to mean „falsettists“ (rather than the more probable „falsetto notes“ – Playford's „feigned Tunes of Notes“) and by overlooking the force of the verb „isfuggire“, Jacobs is able to argue thus: „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* [sic], or falsettists“ (op.cit., 303).

⁴⁹ J.-A. Bérard, *L'art du chant*, Paris 1755/R.

⁵⁰ Quantz, op. cit.: „Von einem guten Sänger wird erfordert [sic]: [...]“; 281.

⁵¹ Ibid., 281–282.

⁵² Ibid., 326.

Rousseau (1753): Le chant François exige tout l'effort des poumons, toute l'étendue de la voix; plus fort, nous disent nos Maîtres, enflez les sons, ouvrez la bouche, donnez toute votre voix. Plus doux, disent les Maîtres Italiens, ne forcez point, chantez sans gêne, rendez vos sons doux, flexibles & coulans, réservez les éclats pour ces momens rares & passagers où il faut surprendre & déchirer.⁵³

(French singing demands full lung power, the full range of the voice; louder, our singing masters tell us, swell the sounds, open the mouth, use the whole of your voice. Softer, say the Italian masters, don't force, sing freely, make your notes soft, flexible and flowing, save the outbursts for those rare and fleeting moments when you must astonish and overwhelm.)

A. P. (1754): Nous entrâmes d'abord dans une grande dispute; je lui dis qu'elles [deux Demoiselles qu'on avoit fait venir d'Italie] avoient fort grossi leur voix dans le bas, & qu'elles l'avoient fort adoucie dans le haut, il [Mr. le Marquis de Varenne] me répondit si je voulois que les Italiens fissent comme les François, qui crient au loup, lorsqu'il s'agit de donner un ton en haut; je lui repliquai que je n'aprouvois pas qu'on forçât la voix, mais qu'on en fit paroître la beauté par un éclat naturel, & qu'il y avoit plus de plaisir à entendre une grande voix qu'une petite: Je lui ajoutai encore que l'on faisoit mention de *Mademoiselle Le More, de Mr. Muraire, de Mr. Gelliotto, de Mrs. Benoit & Maligne*, & autres qui se sont rendus charmans par la beauté & le grand volume de leur voix, & qu'on n'avoit jamais fait mention d'une petite [...].

Les Italiens [...] ne peuvent avoir l'apas que d'une petite voix, qui ne remplit jamais l'oreille comme une grande, ils ne se piquent pas même d'en avoir, mais de forcer la nature; car je viens de voir dans un Opera Italien moderne, une ariète de dessus qui va deux octaves & demi, ce qui est presque impossible à exécuter.⁵⁴

(We then entered into a great debate; I told him that they [two young ladies who had been brought from Italy] had made their voices much bigger down low and a great deal softer up high; he [the Marquis of Varennes] asked me in reply whether I wished the Italians might do as the French, who howl like a wolf when dealing with a high note; I replied to him that what I favoured was not that the voice be forced but that its beauty be made apparent through a natural brilliance, and that there was more pleasure in hearing a large voice than a small one; I also added that mention was [regularly] made of Mlle Lemaure, Mr Muraire, Mr Jélyotte, Messrs Benoit and Maligne etc, who have made themselves charming through the beauty and large volume of their voices, and that no one ever mentioned a small one [...]. The Italians [...] can be enticed only by a small voice, which never fills the ear like

⁵³ Rousseau, *Lettre sur la musique française*, 1753, op. cit., 30.

⁵⁴ Mr. l'A*** P*****, *Dissertation sur la musique française et italienne*, Amsterdam 1754, 35–37; reproduced in *La Querelle des Bouffons*, ed. D. Launay, Geneva 1973, iii, no. 55, 1704. (Launay proposes the Abbé Pellegrin as author, but he had died in 1745; might it perhaps be another literary and musical Abbé, Prévost?) According to Dufort de Cheverny, Jélyotte was a particularly powerful singer: „Sa voix dans *Pygmalion* couvrait tellement le chœur qu'on n'a jamais entendu rien de pareil; et dans *Zoroastre*, tout Paris courait entendre, au milieu du tonnerre: „Ciel! Thémire expire dans mes bras!“; J.-P. Guicciardi (ed.), *Mémoires de Dufort de Cheverny: La Cour de Louis XV*, Paris 1990, 2012. („In *Pygmalion* his voice covered the choir in such a way that one has never heard anything comparable; and in *Zoroastre* the whole of Paris ran to hear in the midst of the thunder: „Ciel! Thémire expire dans mes bras!“) De Cheverny's recollection is not wholly accurate, as the line he quotes does not appear in *Zoroastre*.

a large one; they don't even care to have one, but [are happy] to transgress nature; for I have just seen a soprano arietta in a modern Italian opera covering two and a half octaves, which is almost impossible to execute.)

Bérard (1755): Quoique les Italiens soient plus accoutumés à chanter avec un petit volume de Voix & à sons aigus que les François, ceux-ci à l'aide de mes Observations, réussiront à former le Point d'Orgue avec autant de graces & de perfection que ceux-là.⁵⁵

(Although the Italians may be more accustomed than the French to singing with a small amount of voice and at high pitches, the latter, according to my observations, manage to produce cadenzas with just as much elegance and perfection as the former.)

Rousseau (1768): L'esprit général des Compositeurs François est toujours de forcer les Voix pour les faire crier plutôt que chanter [...]⁵⁶

(The general disposition of French composers is always to force the voices in order to make them shout rather than sing [...].)

Lalande (2/1787): La répugnance qu'ont les Italiens pour les voix fortes & dures, telles que nos basses-tailles & même nos hautes-contres, leur fait regarder comme nécessaire à leurs plaisirs l'usage des *Castrati*: il vaudrait mieux cependant pour la nature humaine que l'on soit accoutumé, comme nous, à trouver du plaisir dans les voix naturelles, mâles, éclatantes, & qui ont toute leur force [...].⁵⁷

(The repugnance which Italians have for strong, firm voices, such as our *basses-tailles* and even our *hautes-contre*, makes them regard the use of castratos as necessary for their pleasures; it would, however, be better for humankind if one were accustomed, as we are, to finding pleasure in voices that are natural, male, brilliant and that have all their strength [...].)

Although seemingly widespread, the idea that the French had stronger voices was for Rousseau (1753) a misperception which – not entirely convincingly – he endeavours to correct:

c'est un erreur de croire qu'en général les Chanteurs Italiens ayent moins de voix que les François. Il faut au contraire qu'ils ayent le timbre plus fort & plus harmonieux pour pouvoir se faire entendre sur les théâtres immenses de l'Italie, sans cesser de ménager les sons, comme le veut la Musique Italienne.⁵⁸

(it is erroneous to believe that Italian singers generally have less voice than the French. On the contrary, they need to have the strongest and most melodious tone quality in order to make themselves heard in the immense theatres of Italy, without ceasing to nurture the sounds, as Italian music requires.)

A further aspect of the evident difficulty the French had with Italian singing was that, however smooth the transition between high and low registers, the two could seem disconcertingly disparate:

⁵⁵ Bérard, op. cit., 35.

⁵⁶ Rousseau (1768), op. cit., „Voix“, 545.

⁵⁷ Lalande, op. cit., 441–442.

⁵⁸ Rousseau (1753), 30.

A. P. (1754): l'aînée de ces deux Demoiselles [qu'on avoit fait venir d'Italie] chanta un recitatif, où sa voix paroissoit plutôt une voix de basse que de dessus; je reconnus là parfaitement le chant de nos rustiques [de Provence]; elle chanta ensuite une ariété, où elle adoucit beaucoup sa voix dans ses tons les plus hauts, & rendoit désagréables ceux d'en bas, en les grossissant & creusant comme des basses-tailles [...]. Ensuite [...] la cadete chanta un recitatif où elle grossit fort sa voix dans le bas, & l'adoucit beaucoup dans le haut de l'ariété, ainsi qu'avoit fait son aînée. [...] Les Italiens ne mettent point de bornes à leurs symphonies, ni à leurs chants, ils les font aller si haut qu'il faut qu'ils adoucissent beaucoup leur voix pour atteindre à la hauteur de leurs ariétés [...].⁵⁹

(the older of these two young ladies [who had been brought from Italy] sang a recitative in which her voice turned out to be more of a bass than a *dessus*; in it I recognised perfectly the singing of our rustics [in Provence]; she then sang an arietta, in which she made her voice a great deal softer for the highest notes and rendered the low ones disagreeable by making them bigger and by digging them out like *basses-tailles* [...]. Next [...] the younger sister sang a recitative in which she made her voice much bigger in the low parts and a great deal softer in the high parts of the arietta, just as her elder had done. [...] The Italians set no limits either for their *symphonies* or for their vocal music; they make them go so high that they have to make their voices a great deal softer in order to reach the high pitches of their ariettas [...].)

But it was not only in Italian music that ranges were being expanded. In a small book on the „corruption“ of musical taste, Bollioud de Mermet (1746) deplores – amongst other things – the vogue among contemporary French composers for extending vocal as well as instrumental ranges upwards:

Comme les Voix extrêmement hautes sont rares, & rarement belles dans les derniers sons aigus, les Musiciens qui portent dans l'accord des Instrumens le ton plus haut que le naturel, & qui élèvent, en composant, les parties au-dessus de leur portée, font paroître à découvert l'extrémité la plus défectueuse des Voix ordinaires. Le gosier étant plus serré dans les tons hauts, les fibres de la glotte plus tendues, l'air frapé plus violemment, produit des sons forcés, quelquefois moins justes, & toujours contre le naturel. On ne chante plus par ce moyen, on crie: ce ne sont plus des sons pleins & moileux d'une Voix libre dans son étenduë; ce sont des clameurs, des gémissemens.⁶⁰

(Since extremely high voices are rare, and rarely beautiful in the upper reaches, if musicians tune instruments to a higher pitch than the natural one and in composing take parts above the staff [i.e. above the natural range of a given clef], they expose the most defective extreme end of ordinary voices. The throat being more contracted in high notes, the fibres of the glottis more tense, the breath more violently emitted – this produces forced sounds, sometimes less in tune and always contrary to what is natural. In this manner one no longer sings, one shouts: these are no longer the full and mellow sounds of a voice which is free within its range – this is yelling [and] wailing.)

⁵⁹ Mr. l'A*** P*****, op. cit., 34–36 (Launay, 1702–4).

⁶⁰ B. de Mermet, *De la corruption du goust dans la musique françoise*, Lyon 1746, 25–26.

Although at the end of the century the *haute-contre* could still be defined as „a voice which is bright and which goes up high with ease“,⁶¹ persistent criticisms begin to be voiced in the middle of the century – by the French themselves – of problems associated with the upper part of the voice, and especially that of the *haute-contre*. We have already encountered Lalande's observation that Legros's successors were „obliged to shout to reach the pitch of the *haute-contre*“; others are equally outspoken:

Rousseau (1768): En effet, la *Haute-contre* en Voix d'homme n'est point naturelle; il faut la forcer pour la porter à ce Diapason: quoi qu'on fasse, elle a toujours de l'aigreur, & rarement de la justesse.⁶²

(Indeed, the *haute-contre* in a man's voice is not natural; one has to force in order to carry it to this register: whatever one may do, it always has a sharp-edged quality and rarely good intonation.)

Meude-Monpas (1787) – in a clear echo of Rousseau: La *haute-contre* est une voix factice, elle n'est pas dans la nature: [...] la *haute-contre* a toujours de l'aigreur, et rarement de la justesse.⁶³

(The *haute-contre* is an artificial voice, it is not in nature: [...] the *haute-contre* always has a sharp-edged quality and rarely good intonation.)

Framery (1791): Plusieurs [*hautes-contre*], pour parvenir aux sons les plus aigus, sont obligés de forcer leurs moyens naturels en se resserrant le gozier; mais ils perdent ainsi en agrément ce qu'ils gagnent en étendue, car ces sons étranglés manquent de douceur & de pureté.⁶⁴

(Several [*hautes-contre*], in order to reach the top notes, are obliged to force their natural means by contracting the throat; but they thereby lose in charm what they gain in range, for these strangulated sounds lack gentleness and purity.)

(These words of Framery's readily bring to mind Rossini's famous reaction to Duprez's chest-voice *c''s* in *Guillaume Tell* in 1837, which he is said to have likened to „the squawk of a capon with its throat cut“.)

As time went on singers evidently experienced increasing difficulty with the higher *haute-contre* parts. It is therefore striking that not one of the above sources mentions recourse to falsetto. Or, at least, not explicitly so; in concluding that the *haute-contre* may occasionally have employed falsetto – if „only by rare exception“ – Zaslav had in mind Rousseau's use of the words „not natural“ and „forcer“ in describing these difficult top notes (1768, see above), terms he found „strikingly similar to those which J. G. Walther

⁶¹ Framery & Ginguené (eds.), op. cit., „Contralto“: „[...] une voix claire & s'élevant facilement dans le haut“; 315.

⁶² Rousseau (1768), op. cit., „Haute-contre, Altus ou Contra“, 248.

⁶³ Meude-Monpas, op. cit., 76.

⁶⁴ Framery & Ginguené (eds.), op. cit., „Contralto“, 315.

had used in defining the falsetto voice".⁶⁵ While the observation is perfectly accurate, the usages are, I believe, reasonably distinct. After all, Rousseau himself also refers to *composers* „forcing“ voices and to an Italian emphasis on „unforced“ singing (see above, pp. 139 and 138); and elsewhere we may read of an *orchestra* „forcing the sounds“ (i.e. „making a crescendo“). The French, I suggest, considered it „unnatural“ for a voice to go above „natural“ limits by whatever means, whether by „forcing“ (straining, pushing, shouting) – as some of their own singers clearly did on occasion – or in the mellifluous fashion favoured by the Italians.

In fact, it was the very avoidance of falsetto in French singing that gave rise to these problems:

Quantz (1752): Bey den Franzosen [...] ist es nicht üblich: weswegen sich dieser ihr Singen, in den hohen Tönen, öfters in ein unangenehmes Schreyen verwandelt [...].⁶⁶
 (With the French [...] it is not customary: because of which their singing in the high register often turns into disagreeable shouting [...].)

Not until near the end of the century do we find unmistakable signs that the French tradition had begun to bow to the inevitable. In a brief note at the end of Framery's article on „Fausset“ (1791), his colleague Jean-Louis Castilhon adds:

Remarquez qu'à force d'exercice on peut parvenir à chanter quatre, & même cinq tons du *fausset*, sans que l'auditeur s'aperçoive du changement de voix, avantage qui n'est pas à mépriser.⁶⁷
 (Note that by dint of practice one can succeed in singing four or even five falsetto notes without the listener's perceiving any change of voice, an advantage which is not to be scorned.)

Yet, from the perspective of an Italian singing teacher based in Paris, there was still some way to go. Florido Tomeoni (1799) writes:

La voix de *haute-contre* n'a point d'étendue dans les sons bas; mais en revanche elle monte jusqu'au quatrième *si* du clavier: ses partisans prétendent que les sons les plus élevés se forment toujours de la poitrine; mais ils se forment réellement dans le gosier, et sont toujours plus ou moins nasillards. En Italie ces sortes de voix sont exclues des théâtres et bannies des concerts: elles ne sont admises que dans les cathédrales, où les ont reléguées le bon goût et les principes naturels de

⁶⁵ Zaslav, op. cit., 939. J. G. Walther, *Musicalisches Lexicon*, Leipzig 1732/R, „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“; 239. („Of adult male singers, when instead of their normal bass or tenor voices they sing alto or soprano by constraining and forcing the throat. It is also called an unnatural voice for that reason“.)

⁶⁶ Quantz, op. cit., 47.

⁶⁷ Framery & Ginguéné (eds.), op. cit., „Fausset“, 550.

la musique. Mais en France, où l'on suit encore une toute autre marche, ce sont au contraire les voix chéries. On les admet sur les Théâtres, on les recherche dans les concerts; elles y occupent enfin le premier rang, que l'on accorderait avec plus de justice à la voix de ténor.⁶⁸

(The *haute-contre* voice does not extend at all into the low register; but in compensation it reaches up to the fourth *B* on the keyboard [i.e. *b'*]: its partisans claim that the top register is always produced in the chest; but in reality it is produced in the throat and is always more or less nasal. In Italy voices of this sort are excluded from the theatres and banished from concerts: they are admitted only into the cathedrals, to which they have been relegated by good taste and the natural principles of music. But in France, where another path altogether is followed, they are on the contrary cherished voices. They are admitted on to the stage, they are sought out in concerts; indeed, they occupy the first rank there, which more justly would be accorded the tenor voice.)

In Tomeoni's eyes the (Italianate) tenor was altogether superior:

La voix de *ténor* est la plus étendue, et on ne saurait pas en fixer les bornes: elle est aussi agréable dans les sons bas que dans les sons les plus hauts, où elle emploie le *fausset* [...]. En France à peine s'en sert-on dans les chœurs; elle n'y semble admise que par commisération: il est à désirer pour le bon goût que son sort change bientôt, et qu'elle ne soit pas plus long-tems proscrite et méconnue.⁶⁹

(The tenor voice is the widest in range, and one wouldn't know how to fix limits for it: it is as pleasant in the low register as in the high one, where it employs falsetto [...]. In France it is scarcely made use of in choirs; it seems to be admitted into them only out of pity: for the sake of good taste one hopes that its fate may change soon and that it may not be proscribed and misunderstood any longer.)

If I am correct, the eighteenth century's first mention of falsetto in reference to any of the principal solo voice types in France – *haute-contre* included – occurs (with Castilhon) around the time of the Revolution, some four decades on from Rameau's operatic heyday and more than a century after the death of Lully.

A very different view has been put forward by René Jacobs (1983): „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“ [my italics].⁷⁰ This may or may not hold true in the case of the early nineteenth-century *haute-contre*,⁷¹ but if Jacobs' statement is intended to apply to the voice in Rameau's day, yet alone Lully's, it must surely be regarded as entirely fanciful.

⁶⁸ F. Tomeoni, *Théorie de la musique vocale*, Paris 1799, 56–57.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁰ Jacobs, *op. cit.*, 296.

⁷¹ Cyr, *op. cit.*: „The *haute-contre* gradually fell out of use and practice, and the term came to connote an unusual extension of the tenor range“; 293. Cf Zaslav, *op. cit.*, 940–941.

Falsettists

One further issue remains: would eighteenth-century France have recognised today's countertenor – whether one of the current „army of falsettists“⁷² or one who draws liberally on chest voice as well as falsetto (as Jacobs advocates)? If so, what name did the voice carry, what music did it sing and how was it regarded?

Most of what has been said above is concerned with solo singing. Choral practice is less well documented, but the broad definition of any voice type may generally be assumed to apply in both contexts. With choral singing, however, the „defect“ of switching registers is more easily disguised, particularly in the case of an inner part and especially within a large chorus. It is also true that, following the dictates of good part-writing and chordal spacing, a choral alto line may frequently inhabit a higher tessitura than the corresponding solo writing. In such circumstances it is therefore entirely possible that a choral *haute-contre* singer might commonly have felt at liberty to shift into falsetto (head voice or otherwise) for high-lying passages. Although this is, of course, entirely conjectural, it is interesting to learn (from Lalande, 2/1787) that comparable expedients were not unknown:

nous ... avons beaucoup [de castrats] à Paris parmi les chanteuses des chœurs; on les met souvent à l'unisson des hautes-contre, mais on ne les fait jamais chanter seules.⁷³

(we have many [castratos] in Paris among the female singers of the choirs; they are often put in unison with the *hautes-contre*, but they are never made to sing solo.)

These choral castratos, then, who were classed with the „chanteuses“ as *dessus* and *bas-dessus*, may „often“ have been re-assigned to *haute-contre* parts, especially perhaps when these parts lay uncomfortably high for the *hautes-contre* themselves.

One further category of choral singer has not yet been mentioned:

Sous le regne de Louis 14, et celui de Louis 15, on leur [= aux italiens] a adjoints quelques fois des personnes qui chantoient le fausset mais tres peu. D'ailleurs, cela est un tres mauvais usage et les italiens vallent mieux parce que les voix des faussets ne sont ny si agreables ny si durables que les leurs.

(In the reigns of Louis XIV and XV, some persons who sang falsetto were sometimes added to them [the Italian castratos], but very few. Moreover, it is very bad practice, and the Italians are better value because the falsettists' voices are neither as pleasant nor as durable as theirs.)

Thus Marc-François Bêche (c. 1770), sketching the musical history of the French royal chapel, where he had long sung as an *haute-contre*.⁷⁴ (We may note in passing that he makes no mention of these court falsettists' ever hav-

⁷² Jacobs, op. cit., 305.

⁷³ Lalande, op. cit., 447.

⁷⁴ L. Sawkins, „The brothers Bêche: An anecdotal history of court music“, *Recherches sur la Musique française classique* 24 (1986) 219 [original, 106].

ing been „put in unison“ with himself and his fellow *hautes-contre*, in the way Lalande describes.) Over the near-century „from 1674 up to the present“, these occasional falsettists at the chapel had numbered „at most seven or eight“ (Bêche tells us),⁷⁵ though at the time of the 1702 *Etat de France* the *dessus* section included three of them, alongside six castratos (*italiens*).⁷⁶ (A similar mix appears also to have been adopted on occasion for mid-century stage productions at court.)⁷⁷

The chorus of the Concert spirituel in Paris perhaps represented something of a special case in the 1750s and 60s. In sharp contrast to the Opéra, where choral (and solo) *dessus* parts were entrusted „almost entirely to women“,⁷⁸ it was apparently falsettists who predominated: *premier* and *second dessus* in 1751, for example, comprised respectively four men and two women, and four men and three women. Subsequently, though, the ratios became reversed, and by 1778 the number of adult male *dessus* (now listed explicitly as *fauçets*) had dwindled to three (to eight women).⁷⁹ Whether these falsettists are likely ever to have been „put in unison with the *hautes-contre*“, as their castrato colleagues sometimes were (see above), is once again a moot point, but in the *Encyclopédie méthodique* (1791) Framery makes this intriguing remark:

Les hommes qui chantent le fausset, participent aux deux espèces de voix, & peuvent servir de liaison entre la haute-contre françoise & le *contralto* des Italiens.⁸⁰

(Men who sing falsetto partake of both types of voice [i.e. „the French *haute-contre* and the Italians' *contralto*“] and can serve as liaison between [them].)

Just how this „liaison“ was supposed to function is unfortunately not made clear, though elsewhere the same author tells us a little more:

La voix de fausset des hommes ne ressemble pas précisément à la voix d'une femme. Elle est plus ronde, plus nourrie, & s'approche davantage de celle des Castrats, qui chantent le *second dessus*. Elle a aussi fort peu d'étendue, ne pouvant s'élever très-haut, & se réunissant dans le grave à la voix de Ténor. Les faussets chantent ordinairement la partie de *contralto*.⁸¹

(The adult male falsetto voice does not resemble a woman's voice precisely. It is rounder [and] fuller and is closer to that of the castratos who sing *second dessus*. It also has an extremely limited range, being unable to go up very high and merging with the tenor voice at the low end. Falsettists ordinarily sing the *contralto* part.)

⁷⁵ Sawkins (1986), op. cit.: „[...] depuis 1674 jusqu'à ce moment [...] tout au plus le nombre de sept ou huit faucets“; 32.

⁷⁶ L. Sawkins, „For and against the order of nature: Who sang the soprano?“, *Early Music* 15 (1987) 318.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 318.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 322. Before the early 1720s there were also „a small number of male sopranos, presumably falsettists“, according to L. Rosow, „Performing a choral dialogue by Lully“, *Early Music* 15 (1987) 327.

⁷⁹ Zaslav, op. cit., 940 and Sawkins (1987), op. cit., 324 (n. 50).

⁸⁰ Framery & Ginguéné (eds.), op. cit., „*Contralto*“, 316.

⁸¹ Ibid., „*Fausset*“, 550.

If the „voix de fausset des hommes“ is thus taken to be one that does not confine itself to the use of falsetto – thereby satisfying Jacobs' criteria for a „voce mezzana“ (see above) – we must also acknowledge that what is being described has nothing whatsoever to do with the *haute-contre*: not only does Framery liken this „fausset“ voice to the sound of „castratos who sing *second dessus*“, he assigns the voice to the „contralto part“ (as opposed to *haute-contre*) – which, as we have seen at the outset, equates in range with *second dessus*. Moreover, the eighteenth-century French falsettist seems to have had little or no place as a solo singer.

In practice, neither falsettist nor castrato seems to have appealed much to French taste. With evident relief the *Mercure de France* (April 1765) describes the voice of an eminent *taille* (Richer) as „without the sharp-edged quality of falsetto, without the sterility of voices conserved against the order of nature“. ⁸² Even a century earlier, opinions on falsetto singing had been divided, as Bénigne de Bacilly (1668) makes clear:

Ceux qui ont la Voix naturelle, méprisent les Voix de Fausset, comme fausses & glapissantes; & ceux cy tiennent que le fin du Chant paroist bien plus dans une Voix éclatante, telle que l'ont ceux qui chantent en Fausset, que dans une Voix de Taille naturelle, qui pour l'ordinaire n'a pas tant d'éclat, bien qu'elle ait plus de justesse. ⁸³

(Those who have a natural voice despise falsetto voices for being out of tune and strident; and the latter hold that the essence of a song is much more apparent with a brilliant voice, such as those of falsetto singers, than with a natural *taille* voice, which ordinarily does not have so much brilliance, even though it may have better intonation.)

Rousseau was certainly no admirer of the falsetto voice. Although he considered „Fausset“ a topic meriting inclusion in his *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768), ⁸⁴ he pointedly fails to ascribe to the voice any role in the music-making of his own time:

Dans la Musique vocale, le *Dessus* s'exécute par des voix de femmes, d'enfans, & encore par des *Castrati* [...]. ⁸⁵

(In vocal music the *dessus* is performed by women's and children's voices and also by castratos [...].)

⁸² *Mercure de France* (April 1765), ii: „[...] sans l'aigreur du fausset, sans l'aridité des voix conservées contre l'ordre de la nature“; 70.

⁸³ B. de Bacilly, *L'art de bien chanter*, Paris 1668, 35–36.

⁸⁴ Rousseau (1768), op. cit., „Fausset“: „C'est cette espèce de voix par laquelle un homme, sortant à l'aigu du Diapason de sa voix naturelle, imite celle de la femme“; „It is that species of voice by means of which a man, going out of his natural voice at the top of his compass, imitates a woman's“; 219.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, „Dessus“, 143; cf „Partie“, 368.

The Concert spirituel's falsettist sopranos had not escaped his attention, however. Expressing an unabashed preference for the female voice, Rousseau (under „Voix“) compares the different species of high voice, last amongst them the falsetto:

[...] & pour le Faucet, c'est le plus désagréable de tous les Tymbres de la Voix humaine: il suffit, pour en convenir, d'écouter à Paris les Chœurs du Concert Spirituel, & d'en comparer les Dessus avec ceux de l'Opéra.⁸⁶
 ([...] and as for falsetto, it is the most disagreeable of all the colours of the human voice: to concur with this it suffices to hear the choruses of the Concert spirituel in Paris and to compare the *dessus* with those of the Opéra.)

★

Falsettists sang *dessus*, and *hautes-contre* were not falsettists – this much is not really in dispute. But because the word we most often use for the falsettist is „countertenor“ and because this word doubles as the correct historical equivalent of „*haute-contre*“, these two quite distinct voice types have tended to become linked (and frequently confused) with each other.

René Jacobs treats the two as a single family of alto voices, albeit a heterogeneous one in which there are „high“ and „low“ types. This he is able to do by arguing that all – in England, France, Germany and Italy alike and from at least the sixteenth century – cultivated two overlapping registers, chest and falsetto, and employed them extensively.⁸⁷ This in turn sustains the notion of a „real/true countertenor“⁸⁸ (neither today's high tenor nor a mere falsettist) and brings within reach a multiplicity of repertoires – not least that of yet another voice type, the operatic castrato.

This line of thinking leads Jacobs to some generalised conclusions which flatly contradict some of the historical evidence reviewed above:

Jacobs: A good alto voice is never a one-register voice.⁸⁹

Quantz: Uniting chest voice with falsetto is [...] unknown [...] to the French.

Jacobs: What we have lost is the ideal of the alto as a *hermaphrodite* voice.⁹⁰

Lalande: [The French delight] in voices that are natural, male, brilliant and that have all their strength [...].

Ironically, a rare point of convergence occurs when Jacobs objects that *haute-contre* parts are „too high for modern tenors“:

⁸⁶ Ibid., „Voix“, 543.

⁸⁷ Jacobs, op. cit., 289.

⁸⁸ „The loss of real countertenors ... of true *voce mezzane* [*sic*], as Zacconi calls them, is a disaster“; *ibid.*, 305.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 306.

Jacobs: Today [...] *haute-contre* parts are sung by tenors who often force their voices in the high notes [...].⁹¹

Framery: Several [*hautes-contre*], in order to reach the top notes, are obliged to force their natural means [...].

An aura of mystery has long surrounded the *haute-contre*, and the documented shortcomings of some singers – beginning only in the middle of the eighteenth century, in the fading years of the Baroque – have also tended to obscure our view of French vocal ideals. But what is abundantly clear is that, while the exploitation of „falsetto“ and its unification with the chest register are correctly regarded as „a basic principle of *bel canto* for every voice type“⁹² in eighteenth-century Italy, the French manifestly followed „another path altogether“.⁹³

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⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 289.

⁹³ As this article goes to press, my attention has been drawn to a passage in the anonymous *Lettre sur le mécanisme de l'opéra italien* (Naples/Paris 1756) where the author – probably the francophile Count Giacomo Durazzo – confirms some of the points raised above: „dans ces six ou sept voix, on n'y souffre au plus qu'une Taille; & si belle qu'elle soit, c'est toujours la voix qui y brille le moins, rapport à la nature de la Musique Italienne, si l'on en excepte cependant quelques-unes de ces voix rares comme Babbi, Amorevoli, Raaff, &c. qu'une extrême agilité a rendus célèbres, & qui font communément plus d'usage du Fausset, que de la voix naturelle. On n'y entend point de Haute-contres; le climat apparemment n'en produit point. Les Italiens ont bien la Haute-contre; mais c'est ce que nous appellons *Bas-dessus*“; 30–31. (In Italian opera „no more than one of the six or seven voices is allowed to be a *taille*; and, however beautiful it may be, this is always the voice that shines the least (in keeping with the nature of Italian music) – with the exception, however, of some of those rare voices such as Babbi, Amorevoli, Raaff [who had studied with Bernacchi in Bologna] etc, [voices] which extreme agility has made famous and which commonly make more use of falsetto than of the natural voice. *Hautes-contres* are not heard there at all; apparently the climate produces none. The Italians do have the *haute-contre*, but it is what we call *bas-dessus*.“)