

## Alone, together: The production of female soprano voice in Oxbridge chapel choirs

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**Disciplinary background A.** This paper analyzes the vocal experiences of female sopranos singing in chapel choirs in Oxford and Cambridge Universities (Oxbridge). I discuss vocal tension and the wide discrepancy between technique learned in voice lessons and technique implemented in choir within the fields of vocal pedagogy and empirical performance. These ‘solo’ and ‘choral’ voices are discussed within the context of the laryngeal development of 18-21 year old women within the Oxbridge chapel choir tradition (Caldretti 2017; Goodwin 1980; Olson 2010; Sweet and Parker 2019).

**Disciplinary background B.** The second disciplinary area relates these pedagogical and health concerns to their philosophical counterparts in voice studies. Boy trebles have sung the top line in the Oxbridge chapel choir tradition throughout its history only to be disrupted in the 1970s by the addition of women to the top line in some choirs (Day 2018, 229). I analyze this phenomenon within the context of philosophical arguments surrounding female voice (Cavarero 2005; Dunn and Jones 1994; Lochhead 2009), and current voice studies theories about performed timbre (Eidsheim 2019) through the lens of the Derridean term, hauntology (Harper 2009).

### Abstract

I theorize that the voice of the female soprano in these choirs is directly influenced by the presence of the ideal and institutionalized boy treble voice, perpetuated by conductors, voice teachers and the sopranos themselves. These three participants together produce a voice which creates both physical and symbolic tension for the sopranos through a hauntological effect.

Through an online questionnaire distributed to sopranos, conductors and voice teachers of Oxbridge chapel choirs, I analyzed their responses as three participatory stakeholders in the dynamic production of voice in chapel choirs. I focused on participant observation and the interaction of technical concerns communicated between participants. The responses describing sound preference clearly outlined a distinction between a solo/female (solid, full, expressive, and colorful) and choral/male (weightless, pure, aloof and clear) vocal stereotypes as reflected in historical associations of feminine emotionality and masculine reason (Lochhead 2009). I suggest that both the recent incorporation of female sopranos into this static tradition and the gendered associations with voice perpetuated by all stakeholders produce a third voice outside of the gendered dichotomy as the women work to fit their voices into the sound ideal – the female disembodied voice.

I argue that the female soprano’s voice in Oxbridge chapel choirs is haunted by the boy treble voice. The echo of this voice they perform as influenced by multiple participants is haunted by the female’s “natural” voice, creating a “hauntological,” or obfuscating effect. The embodied ideal itself restrains the female voice into one norm of freedom, resonance and fullness, influenced by and influencing listeners in a circular relationship (Eidsheim 2019). Even though the female disembodied voice is haunted by its “natural” self, its presence as a “restrained” voice frees the female identity of its restraining vocal standard. Rather than simply arguing that the embodied female voice adds something new to the chapel choir tradition, I acknowledge the diversity of female voices. I argue that female sopranos influence and are influenced by a multitude of voices, an interaction of internal, external, dis/embodied, and hauntological voices, creating tension of the past, present and future in Oxbridge chapel choirs.

**Interdisciplinary implications.** While vocal health and pedagogy have previously fallen outside of the musicological sphere, the interdisciplinarity of voice studies has increasingly incorporated these fields (Eidsheim 2015). This method, using vocal technique and the psychological experience of vocal production through the perspectives of three participatory stakeholders, brought sedimented gender inequalities to light. Therefore, it is important to continue this type of interdisciplinary work, connecting health and wellbeing to theoretical arguments and historical accounts, to create a more holistic understanding of vocal experience.

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