

Technique or Testosterone? An empirical report on changes in the longevity of boy singers

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Martin Ashley

Abstract

This article discusses two alternative explanations for the fact that pre-war boy singers continued to sing with the high soprano voice into their late teens. The argument from technique suggests that what has changed is the way in which boys are trained. The argument from testosterone suggests that the timing of puberty has changed. The article reviews the two arguments and concludes that explanations associated with changes in technique may be the basis of a more robust account. However, it is necessary to introduce a third factor – that of boys' vocal agency. The article suggests that boys now have greater autonomy with regard to how they will use their voices than in the past. This has generally resulted in a retreat from the soprano register. The paper illustrates the discussion with case studies of two boys whose careers as soprano or "treble" ended in 2008 respectively at the ages of 14:7 and 15:3. Its concluding contention is that there is inadequate pastoral care or education about what will happen to the voice for boys who must choose between conflicting positions held by adult professionals. Boys' will power and autonomous choice may be more significant than either technique or testosterone.