

# "Composers' Intentions?: Lost Traditions of Musical Performance," by Andrew Parrott

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Lawson, Colin (2016) "'Composers' Intentions?: Lost Traditions of Musical Performance," by Andrew Parrott," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 21: No. 1, Article 5. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.201621.01.05

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**Parrott, Andrew. *Composers' Intentions?: Lost Traditions of Musical Performance*. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2015. ISBN 978-1-783-27032-3.**

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In recent times an increasing number of writers have grappled with the question of performance intentions (or expectations) of composers of the past. Few have done so from Andrew Parrott's perspective of planning and directing musical performances, many of which have been widely regarded as ground-breaking. His writing is intelligent, clear, and unencumbered by academic jargon, while reflecting a life in the concert hall and studio refreshingly free from institutional constraints. Bringing together seminal writings on the performance expectations of, amongst others, Monteverdi, Purcell, and J. S. Bach, this volume also includes the full version of a major new article calling into question the presumed historical place of the "countertenor" voice. Focusing primarily on vocal and choral matters, the timespan is broad, and the essays, multifarious.

Parrott is authoritative, provocative, and readable, with a great deal to communicate to scholars, performers and curious listeners. As Joshua Rifkin has observed, Parrott is one of those rare musicians who has never settled for easy answers but has always asked the hard questions. As a result, this stimulating book is of value way beyond the topics with which it engages. Most of his discourse revolves around vocal practices. Do we understand what a "choir" might have been? Has falsetto singing really been around since the Middle Ages, and what exactly was the French *haut-contre*? What does high-clef notation imply, not least in the case of Monteverdi's 1610 *Magnificat à 7*? Did Purcell have our understanding of what was the countertenor? If much of Bach's choral writing was designed for one voice per part, how was this supposed to work in practice?

Andrew Parrott has been at the cutting edge of Monteverdi performance since he directed a landmark 1610 *Vespers* at the 1977 BBC Promenade Concerts, in a version later issued as a recording that has since become a classic. Applying standard rules of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century notational convention (rather than those of the twentieth), Parrott's musicians performed two of the "movements" of the *Vespers* – the psalm, "Lauda Jerusalem" and the "Magnificat à 7" – one fourth lower than notated. At one stroke this simultaneously resolved the main anomaly of voices and instruments otherwise being forced into unidiomatically and uncomfortably high tessituras and exposed the fault-lines defining the emotional limits of historically informed performance for some of its adherents, when this most canonical piece was subjected to its particular logic. Clearly stung by the public judgement of his



“innovation” by a prominent fellow Monteverdian as “an aberration – dull and wrong,” Parrott presented the documentary evidence in one of the essays in this volume, which originally appeared in *Early Music*.<sup>1</sup> Despite further detailed support of his reading from leading scholars, others continued to question it, and Parrott returned a decade later to issue a robust rebuttal.

In 2003, Roger Bowers entered the fray, disputing not the fact of downward transposition of high clefs in vocal music, but the degree – arguing for an interval of a second. Parrott swiftly responded with fresh corroboration of his original thesis in an article in *Early Music*.<sup>2</sup> Yet there remains an evident attachment to the emotive and anachronistic idea, first that the 1610 *Vespers* is a unified “work,” and second that it must conclude – like *Messiah* – with a thrilling (high) climax. In one self-proclaimed “historical” performance after another, right up to the present day, the rule of downward transposition in the *Vespers* continues far more often to be avoided than observed. Parrott ventured further arguments in “High clefs and down-to-earth transposition: a brief defence of Monteverdi” in *Early Music*.<sup>3</sup> He cited Monteverdi’s contemporary Michael Praetorius, “... a man who knew more about early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian music and its workings than most of us today.”<sup>4</sup> Praetorius wrote, “Every vocal piece in high clefs, i.e. where the bass is written in C4 or C3, or F3, must be transposed, when it is put in tablature or score for players of the organ, lute and all other foundation instruments, as follows; if it has a flat, down a 4<sup>th</sup> ... but if it has no flat, down a 5<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>5</sup> Parrott observes that unanimous confirmation of these clear principles comes from copious Italian sources, emphatically answering Bowers’s question, “what did North Italian musicians of c. 1600-10 expect to be told by the clefs of the music they were performing?”<sup>6</sup>

Parrott’s questioning approach is especially stimulating across the three articles that address vocal scoring. In “A brief anatomy of choirs” he asks whether “the choir” has somehow managed to remain essentially one and the same thing through the ages to our own time. Though much transcribed, discussed and performed, music written for choirs in earlier centuries generally reaches us through a filter of more recent choral expectations, with unfamiliar features disregarded, overlooked, or misconstrued. There are recurrent difficulties in establishing the size and nature of earlier choirs. Just as the institutional strength of a choir will not reflect any extra singers brought in on a temporary or occasional basis, so too does it fail to take account of absences, rota systems, the function or importance of an event, and any divisions of labour within a church service. Parrott addresses the question of

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Parrott, “Transposition in Monteverdi’s *Vespers* of 1610: An ‘aberration’ defended,” *Early Music* 12/4 (Nov., 1984): 490-516.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Parrott, “Monteverdi: Onwards and Downwards,” *Early Music* 32/2 (May, 2004): 303-318.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Parrott, “High clefs and down-to-earth transposition: a brief defence of Monteverdi,” *Early Music* 40/1 (Feb., 2012): 81-6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Roger Bowers, “‘The high and low keys come both to one pitch’: Reconciling Inconsistent Clef-systems in Monteverdi’s Vocal Music for Mantua,” *Early Music* 39/4 (Nov., 2011), 531.

vocal ranges, clefs and scoring, voice types, instruments, female voices, across a chronology that reaches as far as Bach and Handel.

A specialist area within this arena is traversed in Parrott's recent article "Falsetto beliefs: the 'countertenor' cross-examined," originally published in *Early Music* 43/1 (2015).<sup>7</sup> He notes different accounts of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century "countertenor" and offers lines of reasoning that contrast Roger Bowers's theories with his own. Parrott concludes that no music written before c1500 can be shown to imply or to demand falsetto singing, nor is there any convincing contemporary record of its cultivation. Subsequent first sightings are associated not with alto parts but with the upper parts usually sung by boys. He concludes that while the alto falsettist has been traditionally accepted in France (at least from the time of Perotin) and Italy (the Trecento), his sound was not remarkable enough to elicit comment; and it is unproven that falsetto singing has been the most common source of alto voices in all-male choirs throughout the history of Western music.

"Falsetto singing and the singing of an alto part (*contratenor*) have quite separate stories, although in some traditions they eventually converge. In England, long seen as the home of the falsettist countertenor, a transition towards this new voice-type began only in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Almost all of Purcell's writing for solo countertenor nevertheless seems still to have been intended for an equivalent of today's (high) tenor, as does Handel's until at least 1719."<sup>8</sup>

National differences lie at the heart of the related article in Parrott's book, "Falsetto and the French," where (in contrast to the Italians), Parrott concludes that neither falsettist nor castrato seems to have appealed much to French taste.

The volume also includes an anniversary article from *The Purcell Companion* (1995), "Performing Purcell," which brings together disparate and incomplete sources to build a picture of relevant keyboard instruments, temperaments, continuo practices, orchestral and vocal practice, voice types, vibrato, and pitch. In contrast to this panoramic vista (but also written with practicalities strictly in mind) is the series of articles from 2000-2010 addressing the specific agenda of numbers of Bach's singers, vocal ripienists and the Mass in B minor, and Bach's Chorus. Some of this material may also be found in Parrott's book *The Essential Bach Choir*.<sup>9</sup> What type of choir did Bach have in mind as he created his cantatas, Passions, and Masses? How many singers were at his disposal in Leipzig, and in what ways did he deploy them in his own music? Seeking to understand the very medium of Bach's incomparable choral output, Parrott investigates a wide range of sources: not only Bach's own writings and the scores and parts he used in performance, but also a variety of theoretical, pictorial, and archival documents, together with the musical testimony of the composer's

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Parrott, "Falsetto beliefs: the 'countertenor' cross-examined," *Early Music* 43/1 (Feb., 2015): 79-110.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Parrott, *The Essential Bach Choir* (London: Boydell, 2002).

forerunners and contemporaries. Many of the findings shed a surprising, even disturbing, light on conventions we have long taken for granted. A whole world away from, say, the typical oratorio choir of Handel's London with which we are reasonably familiar, the essential Bach choir was in fact an expert vocal quartet (or quintet), whose members were also responsible for all solos and duets. (In a mere handful of Bach's works, this solo team was selectively supported by a second rank of singers—also one per part—whose contribution was all but optional). Parrott shows that this use of a one-per-part choir was mainstream practice in the Lutheran Germany of Bach's time: Bach chose to use single voices not because a larger group was unavailable, but because they were the natural vehicle of elaborate concerted music.

Within a text of refreshingly strong opinion completely unobstructed by ego for its own sake, the "Selected Recordings" and "Further Writings" demand special attention. Parrott is a model of the thinking musician across practice and theory, an inspirational figure for scholars and performers of any specialist period of music. With the recent widespread popularity of historical performance practice among students, it has become all too easy again for practitioners to be content with secondary sources and to accept the customs and habits of their mentors. To such lazy attitudes Parrott's work represents the perfect antidote.