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A Comparison of the Alto Voice in Early and Modern Opera

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A COMPARISON OF THE ALTO VOICE IN EARLY AND MODERN OPERA

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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

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ENTITLED A COMPARISON OF THE ALTO VOICE IN EARLY AND MODERN OPERA.

IS APPROVED BY ME AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

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A COMPARISON OF THE ALTO VOICE IN EARLY AND MODERN OPERA.

The alto voice is, in culture and use, as an important solo instrument, comparatively modern. It must be well understood that the alto voice, due to its harmonic relation to the soprano, has always been the secondary voice. The early opera writers, such as Monteverde, Cavalli, Lully, and Scarlatti, although they wrote for this voice when it was sung only by the male artificial contralti or counter-tenor, have done much toward putting it where it is today. The alto voice as we recognize it, was in its origin classified as the counter-tenor or artificial contralti, and sung by men exclusively until the middle of the eighteenth century (1762).

One of the very earliest works in which any kind of a solo voice is used, is in a madrigal by Caccini, in about the year 1600. It was written for the mezzo-soprano voice, but its range could easily be sung by any of our contraltos today and probably was, at that time, by the artificial contralti. Monteverde, in his opera "Adrianna" (1608) employs this lower register of voice. The wife of the hero sings the aria which is written for the mezzo-soprano, and here again the range could also be sung by a contralto today. It is a lament "Lasciatiem morire" "Let Death Resolve my Sorrow", with despair as the mood. Thus we see the early beginning of the tendency for the low voice to sing of sorrow, despair and anguish, which is noticeable throughout the whole history of opera, both early and modern. Francesco Cavalli, born in 1600, just at the very beginning of opera in Italy, was the author of thirty-nine operas, the most famous of which is "Giasone" performed in 1649.

From this opera there lives today an aria "Delizie Contente" - "Oh Exquisite Pleasures," classified for the mezzo voice. It too,
might easily be sung by a contralto, the range extending no higher than e♭. When opera extended to France, Jean Baptiste Lully, recognized by many as the first composer of legitimate French opera, saw fit to use the alto voice independently and to classify it as such. He composed many operas but "Amadis de Gaule" 1684, contains one of the finest melodic products of his genius, the air beginning "Bois épais redouble ton ombre" - "Gloomy Woods in Darkness Receive Me". The range extends higher than those arias mentioned for the mezzo-soprano range. There is slight ornamentation in the form of two trills. It is evident by the text, that Lully wrote it to be sung by a man, as he says "My love, she is lost forever". We shall find as opera develops, and singing becomes more and more popular, that the music becomes more difficult, and more elaborate, to show off the singer's ability. In Handel's opera "Rinaldo" 1711, there occurs a mezzo-soprano aria, "Lascia chio pianga" - "Leave me to Languish", which is one of the most widely known, in one form or another, and without question the best loved of any arias from his operas. His operas today have been voted antiquated, and have been laid upon the shelf, but in his own time they were the prop upon which his reputation rested. It is interesting to note that Rinaldo is probably the only opera of this period which has for the heroine any other than the strictly soprano voice. "Leave me to Languish" is sung by the heroine of the opera when she finds herself in the power of her wicked rival. Handel wrote the entire opera of "Rinaldo" in Italian and accepted all the artificial formula, permitting male sopranos to sing the women's parts as well as all of the men's, except the basso. This aria "Leave me to Languish" is an aria "di portamento", that is, one which depends chiefly for its effect upon the substitution of long swelling notes for the
lighter forms of ornament, and therefore demands no slight amount of sustaining power on the part of the singer. Two other alto arias from Handel's opera which have maintained themselves in popular approval in spite of the changes which have taken place, are "Pena Tiranna" - "Torment Unending" from "Amadigi" 1715, and "Verdi Prati" - "Verdant Meadows" from "Alcena" 1735, which were both written strictly for the alto voice. "Torment Unending", is in the minor and is more difficult in regard to intervals than the previous arias. "Verdant Meadows" is simple in structure but very impressive. It can be sung with or without some slight ornamentation. Beginning with Alessandro Scarlatti, vocal music becomes more difficult. The first opera of Scarlatti's that gives recognition to the alto voice as a solo instrument is "Ligrane" 1715, with the aria "All acquisto di Gloria" - "To Achieve all the Glamor of Glory." It has a goodly number of runs and from the text it is evident that at even this late date, 1715, men were still singing the alto parts. It speaks of "loud trumpets of war invite me to go, to achieve all the glamor of glory." Today most certainly, this type of song would not be interpreted by a woman contralto. Leonardo Leo, equally famous for his operas and oratorios, wrote an aria for the alto voice in his opera "La Clemenza di Lito", beginning "Se Mai Senti" - "When around Thy Dear Face". It is comparatively simple in structure, and here again in 1735, the text gives evidence that it was written to be sung by the artificial contralti.

Johann Hasse, one of the most popular opera writers of the eighteenth century, wrote an alto aria, "Padre Perdona" - "Father have Mercy" in his "Demofoonte" 1748. This aria is more difficult in structure than many of the earlier ones, and requires a musician to sing it. Christoph Gluck, in his opera "Orfeo" 1762
1762 has written for the alto voice the aria "Che faro senza Euridice" - "I have lost my Euridice". The text gives proof that it too, as late as 1762, was sung by an artificial contralti. It is a lover lamenting the death of his love, and was most certainly sung by a man. Gluck also, in his opera "Paride ed Elena" 1770, has another aria for this voice, "O del mio dolce ardor" - "Oh From My Tender Love."

In Mozart's "The Magic Flute" 1791, there is no solo part given to the alto voice, but there is a trio of three genii, in which the third is a contralto, and who sings one hundred and forty nine measures, only one of which is sung without either of the other two. Thus we see that the alto voice did not play a very important part in "The Magic Flute", other than in the harmonic sense. In "The Marriage of Figaro" there is not even so small a part given to the alto voice. There are four sopranos and one mezzo-soprano. One of the sopranos parts, an old housekeeper would have been given undoubtedly to a contralto, if written by any of the modern opera composers. In his "Don Giovanni," there is neither an alto nor mezzo-soprano part.

Etienne Méhul, in his "Ariodant", 1799, has written "O Des Amants Le Plus Fidèle" - O Lover Mine, Most Faithful Hearted," for this voice. The text indicates that it was written for a woman's voice, but the range is greatly beyond the usual alto one. It is about one hundred and ninety-eight measures in length, and the music being highly ornamented, is very difficult. It is safe to assume that from this time on, women began to appear in their rightful places. Giacomo Meyerbeer, in his "Les Huguenots", 1836, wrote the aria "Nobles Seigneurs" originally for the soprano voice, but trans-
posed it later for Mme. Alboni, a famous contralto of the early nineteenth century, when he made his Italian version of his opera for London. At the same time he composed, and interpolated the rondo "Non vous N'auez jamais", to oblige this great singer. This aria is indeed a difficult one, and only an artist could sing it with any pretention of interpretation. It's many runs and trills, and tremendous range of two octaves and a half, gives proof that the contralto singers were not to be outdone in the popular gymnastics of singing at that time. The contralto to-day is not expected to show off her skill by long passages of runs and trills. It is rather a voice that expresses deep feeling, beauty and with great power of expression.

There is also an alto aria from Meyerbeer's "Le Prophète", 1849, still living. It is "Ah mon fils" - "Ah My Son", sung by a mother. This tendency to have a contralto for the character of a mother, whenever one is needed, becomes quite noticeable in the modern opera period, as we shall see later. It was upon the wings of Rossini's "Ditanto Palpati" - "For all the Pains I Bear", the alto aria from "Tancredi", that his fame was carried to all parts of Europe. Pagannini wrote variations on it for the violin, and Wagner was influenced by it in the opening measures of the chorus of tailors in the last scene of "Die Meistersinger". Rossini also in his "Cenerentola", 1817, wrote a most extraordinarily difficult aria for alto voice, filled with runs, called "non Più Mesta Accanto al Fuoco" - "No more Lonely, Hopeless Waiting." Probably none of our contraltos today would even attempt it in public. It was most evidently written with the intention of giving some singer an opportunity to display her technique. There is no beauty of melody such as is characteristic of the modern contralto arias, or those that are loved
and sung today. Very much like the other two arias is his third "Ah Quel Giorno" - "Live This Day in Memory Shining" from "Semeiramis" 1823. It is filled with opportunities for display of the voice. It may be interesting to note that this aria is one of the very few of both early and modern opera that is not a lament, or a song of despair, sorrow or anguish. It is, however, intensely dramatic and full of passion.

Gioseppppe Raffaello Mercadante, a name perhaps not very familiar to most Americans, wrote for the alto voice in his opera "Donna Caritea", the aria, "Ah! S'Estinto amor mi vuoi" -"Ah, Since Vainly I Implore Thee". He seems to have imitated Rossini, in that it contains numerous runs, not adding particularly to the beauty of the melody, but of course demanding much of the technique of the singer.

Gaetano Donizetti, in his operas "Anna Bolena" and "Lucrezia Borgia", 1833, has also employed the alto voice. From "Anna Bolena" there still lives the aria "Deh! non voler Constrainte" - "Why Since Thy Heart in Sadness Weeps" - The structure, with the exception of about four measures of runs, is comparatively simple and Donizetti regards more closely the alto range than did Rossini; the fifth line f, treble clef being the highest note. From "Lucrezia Borgia", 1833, we have the well known aria "Il segreto Per Esser Felici" - "It is better to Laugh than be Sighing." It is distinctly more modern than any of the previous arias at that time, in that due regard is paid to the alto range, the music is singable and the melody flowing. It is one of the two arias that are not in the melancholy mood.

Before taking up the modern period of opera, it may be well to briefly summarize the important facts about the alto voice
in the early period from 1600 to 1842, the time of Wagner's first opera.

1. We may safely say that alto parts of all kinds, were sung, not by women, but by the artificial contralti, or counter-tenors, as they were called, until as late as the year 1762.

2. That there was no great difference between the ranges of the alto and mezzo-soprano voices, as shown by the mezzo aria, "Let Death Resolve My Sorrow", from Monteverde's "Arianna", whose entire range is within the octave d' to d''; while "Gloomy Woods in Darkness Receive Me" classified as an alto aria in Lully's "Amadis" extends up to f'', and no lower than the mezzo-soprano one. This is also true of "O Lover Mine Most Faithful Hearted", the alto aria from Mehul's "Ariodant", whose range extends to a'' and down to g'' while a mezzo-soprano aria from Cavalli's opera "Grasone" has for its highest note e'b''.

3. There has been from the very beginning of vocal music a striking tendency for the alto voice to deal only with the heavier moods, such as despair, sorrow and lamentation, in-as-much as there are only two out of all the arias mentioned, that express any other emotion.

4. The comparative unimportance of the alto voice, used independently, as there are only about thirteen arias for this voice that live today, that were written before 1842.

Considering Wagner as the first exponent of Modern opera, we shall see that he did not use the alto voice to any great extent. Of his eleven operas, only four contain any solo use of this voice, and those very little. The operas "Lohengrin", "Tannhauser", "Tristan and Isolde", "Die Walkure", "Die Meistersinger", and "Parsifal", have no contralto, nor even mezzo-soprano roles; these voices are
used only in the chorus work. "Rienzi" his first opera, has a small mezzo-soprano part, but no contralto. In his "Gotter Dammerung", 1874, the alto voice is used in solo for ninety-four measures. It is the character of the oldest one of three norns, or water nymphs, called Flosshilde, or the first norn. The mezzo-soprano is the second oldest and the youngest one is a high soprano. In "Siegried" there is a character Erda, a witch, that is a contralto. She appears only once in the entire opera, and that is in the first scene of the third act, and sings only ninety-one measures. She is represented as a super-natural creature, and it is very probable that Wagner, realizing the effect the deep contralto quality would have here, wrote it so. In "Das Reingold" there are still the characters of Erda and Flosshilde, which appeared in the above operas, and which appear in this one with no more importance.

In the "Flying Dutchman" there is a contralto part in the character of Mary, Nurse to the heroine, Senta. It is not an important part, as she sings only one hundred and twenty-four measures. Wagner's operas cover a period of about forty years, yet through him we see no definite progress in the use of the alto voice. He seems to have used it only when he needed it for contrast or for some special effect. Flowtow, in his "Martha", 1847, introduces the well-known character of Nancy, a contralto. Although she is maid to Lady Henrietta, the soprano, it would appear that she has almost equally as important a role. They are both on the stage throughout almost the entire opera. A comparison of the total twenty-one numbers of the opera that Lady Henrietta and Nancy each sing, will give some idea of the equal importance of the two characters. Lady Henrietta, the soprano, sings in sixteen of them, two only, being solos, and the remainder trios, quartettes and duets. This character of Nancy is
the only known instance in opera, where the contralto has such a
light-hearted, gay and roguish part.

Guiseppe Verdi, one of the greatest names in the develop-
ment of modern opera, has in his "Il Trovatore", 1853, given a most
important part to a mezzo-soprano, but contraltos always sing the
role today. It is the character of the gypsy, Azucena. Although
Senora, the soprano, has the florid music to sing, and is the center
of the stage, she is not truly the heroine. It is the gypsy that
is the character most in relief, and capable of thrilling any audi-
ence. Famous contraltos of Verdi's time, it is said, were unfor-
getable in this role, especially Mme. Garcia. The gypsy has a beau-
tiful aria, and has the greater part of the second act with Manrico.
The opera ends with a scene between her and the count. The range
is for the greater part, between b, second added space below treble
clef, and high g, first space above treble clef, but next to the
last note in the opera, she sings b₄. In Verd's opera, "Un Ballo in
Maschera", one of lesser importance, he has employed the contralto
voice in the role of a black sorceress who tells fortune, and deals
in love charms. She sings the aria that still lives today, "Re
Delle Abisso" - "King of the Shade", which is a typical contralto
song. It is written in the minor, and the mood is one of terror, as
it speaks of "newly made graves," of "Moans that chill like ice,
which sigh of the owl's loud screeching voice, resounding from caves!
In his "Rigoletto", there is one contralto part, that of Maddalena,
one of the villain's sister, and three mezzo-soprano parts, one a
nurse to Gilda, the heroine, one a page, and one the Countess Ce-
prano. But the contralto role, although itself quite a minor part,
has more singing to do than any of the mezzo-sopranos. She sings one
hundred and seventy-three measures, including her part in the famous
Rigoletto Quartette. In two of his most important operas, "Aida" and "La Traviata", Verdi has not used the alto voice except in the chorus. There are in "La Traviata", two minor mezzo-soprano parts, and in "Aida", Ammeria, the wicked queen, is a mezzo-soprano.

Gounod's famous Faust, 1859, there is no character in the original cast designated as contralto, but there are two mezzo-soprano parts, one of which is sung the majority of times today by contraltos. It is the part of a youth secretly in love with Margarita. The range is on the whole, quite high, but a good contralto who gets as far as grand opera, is able to handle g'', a'' and b'' without any difficulty. The other mezzo-soprano takes the part of old Dame Martha, a neighbor, and not an important role at all. Gounod's Romeo and Juliet, 1867, also has no contralto part, but a very minor mezzo-soprano one. But in his "Mirella", there is a role definitely given to the contralto voice, beside two mezzo-soprano roles. The contralto, Tavena, is a reputed sorceress, who sings only about two hundred and sixteen measures.

In Bizet's "Carmen", first performed in 1875, the leading role of Carmen herself, was for the first time, as far as I have been able to determine, given to a mezzo-soprano. Contraltos have also been known to sing the part in past years, but today it is seldom that a mezzo sings it. It is a successful soprano role today. The range is for the greater part between great b natural and e''. There are numerous occasions, however, when the f's and the g's on the treble clef may be sung an octave higher, thus making it more suitable to a soprano. In trios and choruses in which Carmen sings, she has always the second part. One may consider this sufficient evidence that Bizet did not intend the role for a high soprano voice.

Goring Thomas', most famous opera "Mignon", 1866 uses the
mezzo-soprano voice in the role of the heroine Mignon. The most famous aria from it "Kenns't Du Das Land" is sung quite frequently by contraltos, and is a great favorite. In his "Nadeshda", 1885, Thomas has given the character of a mother to the contralto voice, which sings the wonderful aria, "Oh! My Heart is Weary". It has the range of two octaves from great g# to a♭.

"My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice", the famous aria from Saint-Saëns opera "Samson and Dalila", and sung today by so many contraltos is in the opera, written for the mezzo voice.

Massenet in his opera "Herodiade" 1881, has a mezzo-soprano for the leading role, Salome, but has no contralto part. In his "Le A'd"1885, he has used neither contralto no mezzo-soprano.

"Cavalleria Rusticana," 1890, by Mascagni, has both a contralto and mezzo-soprano role. Lucia, the contralto, is the old mother of Turiddu, the leading male character. She sings only sixty measures, none of which are in solo, and the range adheres closely to the alto range, being, if anything, a little less than the average from b to d♭. The mezzo-soprano sings ninety measures with about thirty measures in solo.

"Pagliacci", "La Bohème" and "Madame Butterfly", are all distinctly modern operas, and all well known and successful, have neither alto nor mezzo-soprano roles.

"The Girl of the Golden West", 1910, by Puccini, has no contralto part, and but a very minor mezzo one. It is the role of an Indian squaw, servant to the heroine. She sings only about forty measures in the entire opera, with many of the forty being only the Indian's exclamation, "Ugh!"

In summing up the use of the alto voice by the modern
opera composers, a few general facts might be well emphasized:

1. There have been no definite strides upward in the use of this voice, no leading up to universal use or importance. Due to its deep, rich quality, it will probably be used in the coming years just as it has been in the past, that is, for some particular effect. It is purely a voice to express emotion, and one that is more capable of moving people than a soprano.

2. The music for this voice has been singable in this modern period, in comparison with the difficult and showy passages of the earlier one.

3. It has been used but little in comparison with the soprano, or even mezzo-soprano voice. It is perhaps appreciated and loved more, because it is not so common.

The slight use of a contralto role in opera is probably accounted for by the fact that there are so few contralto voices in comparison with the number of soprano ones.