

University of Northern Colorado

## Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC

---

Undergraduate Honors Theses

Student Research

---

5-8-2021

### The Voice of Androgyny: A Gender Analysis of the Countertenor Within Opera

Samuel Sherman  
sher2647@bears.unco.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/honors>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Sherman, Samuel, "The Voice of Androgyny: A Gender Analysis of the Countertenor Within Opera" (2021). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. 47.  
<https://digscholarship.unco.edu/honors/47>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact [Jane.Monson@unco.edu](mailto:Jane.Monson@unco.edu).

University of Northern Colorado

Greeley, Colorado

The Voice of Androgyny: A Gender Analysis of the  
Countertenor Within Opera

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment for Graduation with Honors Distinction and  
the Degree of Bachelor of Music

Samuel W. Sherman

School of Music

May 2021

**Signature Page**

The Voice of Androgyny: A Gender Analysis of the  
Countertenor Within Opera

PREPARED BY: \_\_\_\_\_  
Samuel Sherman

APPROVED BY  
THESIS ADVISOR: \_\_\_\_\_  
Brian Luedloff

HONORS  
DEPT LIAISON: \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Michael Oravitz

HONORS DIRECTOR: \_\_\_\_\_  
Loree Crow

*RECEIVED BY THE UNIVERSTIY THESIS/CAPSONTE*

*PROJECT COMMITTEE ON:*

May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## **Abstract**

Opera, as an art form and historical vocal practice, continues to be a field where self-expression and the representation of the human experience can be portrayed. However, in contrast to the current societal expansion of diversity and inclusion movements, vocal range classifications within vocal music and its use in opera are arguably exclusive in nature. In an attempt to expand the inclusivity of the vocal arts, this study examines the vocal properties of the countertenor and their inherent socially ambiguous androgyny within opera, in addition to their its predecessors. These themes and their intersections were explored through the lens of social perception in current and historical practices in relation to voiced gender. The study concludes that a redefined countertenor vocal classification should be pursued and applied as the first step toward improvement of gender identity inclusion within the vocal arts.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	3
Voice Classification .....	8
Voiced gender .....	10
Castrati .....	12
Countertenor .....	16
Proposal for the Future.....	19
Sources .....	23

## Preface

While the countertenor invites exploration within the expanding diverse current cultural society, the initial impetus for this research came from a life-changing personal experience. This personal experience not only opened my eyes to the diminishing progress of the vocal arts in terms of inclusion-based terminology, but also to shared experiences of others who have led to these similar conclusions.

As a young undergraduate cis-male vocal performance student, through trial and exploration, I was introduced to the countertenor voice classification. The Countertenor classification had been cursorily introduced to me in music history courses, but was a musical phenomenon that did not receive much exposure within the context of my applied lessons in voice. Thus, the transition from a tenor voice class to the countertenor voice class came with challenges as well as unprecedented questions. The solo voice repertoire that was provided to me mandated further exploration of repertoire due to the repositioning of my vocal range. Compositions that were originally intended for female sopranos or female altos were introduced into my study. Within the practice of solo vocal performance, these repertoire adjustments came with minor precautionary thoughts, such as: “if this piece were written for a woman, who do I present as in performance?”, “is it appropriate stylistically for me, a cis-male, to perform these pieces?”, and “how will the audience react when they realize I'm singing from a woman's point of view?”. All of these questions were valid but posed no threat to my ability to adapt and perform them in a confident manner in relation to my identity and stage presence.

I had the fortunate opportunity to study abroad for a summer during which time I was able to partake in the performance of various operas throughout Europe. For this performance opportunity, I decided that I would only perform as a countertenor to preserve the vocal strength and improvements I had made within my previous applied studies. This decision brought about the most intriguing of experiences for me, given a highly complex personal interplay between my vocal classification, my stage identity, and my self-identification, as I engaged in these operatic performances.

As I arrived in Europe, I was unaware of the potential confusion my vocal placement would create for our music directors and conductors. But this soon changed, as we were asked to separate into traditional vocal placements of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. The countertenor was clearly excluded from the repertoire to be rehearsed, given that the compositions were from given musical eras that post-dated the historical use of countertenors. This categorization compounded already existing stresses on my individual performance experience. In measures of preparation, my distinction of vocal placement was deemed to be within the soprano section, among my female soprano peers. Upon approaching my fellow performers, I was presented with an unfamiliar sensation. Thus far within my countertenor study, when I had approached a section dominated by female voices, I was well welcomed. However, when rehearsing for this production with professional performers I was welcomed with hesitation. It appeared that a few of my fellow performers were shocked and confused by the vocal properties of the countertenor and why a countertenor would then be used within this production setting. Such exclusion and pushback was not something I had ever experienced up to this point, nor had I even contemplated its possibility. The limitations of my vocal range

and its implications were a subject that I believed to be minimally disruptive to my pursuit of personal performance goals.

After numerous rehearsals for the upcoming opera performances and after continuous explanations to my peers regarding my vocal placement, my fellow performers became more familiar with my countertenor status, and my integration within the female-dominated vocal sections became more commonplace as my peers and I became more familiar with each other. However, the next personal and professional hurdle soon approached. During staging rehearsals, issues of blocking and choreography related to my visual presence posed difficult decisions for me and for the production crew, as did the quality and timbre of my voice when singing individual vocal lines. As an individual who shared the vocal range of my female chorus members, it would be musically appropriate for me to be staged with them. However, as I present as a cis-male, I should be placed with my male chorus members from a staging perspective. Therefore, when I was approached by the producer and asked if I was going to "stand with the girls," I hesitantly agreed.

Unknowingly, I then would begin my journey exploring the application of the countertenor within the modern performance of opera through my own personal experience. After the production crew decided to cast me as a female-presenting performer within these productions, I had to partake in a foreign realm of self-exploration which led to the questioning of my own identity off stage. This was brought upon by the fact that the presentation of these operas implied that I would have to adjust my physical presentation to meet the necessary performance standards. These decisions included the application of make-up to soften and feminize my appearance, wigs in conjunction with the hair styles of my fellow performers, as well as the application of



appropriate standard women's performance attire. Up to this point in my career I had no experience within any of these realms of illusion, making the experience rather exciting yet daunting. The performance transformation I had partaken in not only prompted my peers to ask me questions, but also led me to self-reflect and observe and question my own participation as a countertenor within these situations. For example, my student and professional peers would pose uninformed questions regarding my thoughts on transgendered individuals and my thoughts on transitioning myself. Thus, these experiences further provided me with conflicting realizations about myself as an individual and myself as a performer. Leading me to questions such as: “how does the countertenor have a successful career within a historic musical era and performance practice that was not designed for their participation?”, “will I always need to partake in the illusion of cross dressing to have a successful career as a countertenor?”, and “do all countertenors who hope to perform opera face these questions?”.

Intriguingly, the experiences of these performances in the context of the study abroad program, where I had accumulated a large number of performances as a cross-dressing countertenor had led to questions formed early on within my experience that remained unanswered, as well as newly-formed questions about the countertenor. All which evolved into a consideration of the countertenors purpose. As a countertenor experiencing these interactions alone, there were points of confusion and internal discourse regarding my identity and my “opposing” presentation. Personally, I was able find them intriguing as forms of self-expression given my understanding of my personal identification, while also coming to terms with the extreme difficulty of attempting to realize one’s self in a situation that asks for a transformation of one’s very being.

Ultimately, the ability to feel present as one's self on stage seemed, in retrospect, to be a privilege after being asked to become something you do not identify as.

In the weeks following my return to the states, I was approached by a previous educator of mine to speak with individuals in her institution's choir that were in the process of transitioning. Personnel at this institution thought I could lend a point of view as a person whose perceived voice identity did not coincide with their personal identification, and that I could provide meaningful advice on how to manage these experiences. In the wake of having spoken on this topic, I realized there were facets of this topic that I was unfamiliar with. Namely, I did not have direct empathy as a non-cisgender performer with voice classification that *does* identify with the coinciding gender assignment. While I had performed as a cross dressing countertenor, I still had an understanding that the countertenor definition followed my personal identification and I only had to partake in the visual adjustments to follow performance standards. Therefore, I fell within a category of representation in musical terms, even if it was not well understood within the general public audience. This presented the realization that there were individuals who experienced congruence between their gender identification and their vocal classification definitions, and that a term for these individuals was unknown within my discipline, both academically and professionally. With the understanding of my own application of the countertenor definition in use, I believe that an expansion and adjustment of its definition to coincide with the current diverse society of modern singers would prove useful in the evolution and continued performance of opera within the vocal arts.

## Voice Classification

Each individual that partakes in the art of singing comes across the application and definition of a personal voice classification assignment, which is the process of circumscribing the capabilities of an individual's vocal properties and assigning them a classification that contains these general defining attributes (Cotton: 154). These voice classifications are then further used to determine their placement within repertoire decisions and vocal fach<sup>1</sup> (O'Conner). Upon early inspection of a singer's vocal properties, there are four main basic voice classifications that they can be identified as soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Each voice classification coincides with a given pitch range, which in basic terms brings the soprano and alto voices to higher pitch ranges than the tenor or bass.

Historically these terms were adopted within the Medieval and Renaissance eras of western music (400-1600) (Fugate 2). Furthermore, all of these classifications were given to men and boys due to patriarchal reasons and the current societal culture (Fugate 2). Implying that originally the musical voice classifications were not connected to the gender of the performer but with the compositions' defined vocal line (Sherr 453). For example, if a boy soprano were to be placed within a voice classification of the Medieval and Renaissance era, they would simply be described as a soprano. During

---

<sup>1</sup> "The German *Fach* (pl. *Fächer*) system is a method of classifying singers, primarily opera singers, by the range, weight, and colour of their voices. It's used primarily in the German-speaking opera houses of Europe. If a singer signed a contract with a company to sing a certain *Fach* in the company, that singer would be responsible for singing all roles for the company that were designated for that *Fach*. For that reason, *Fach* is more specific than voice part and can be a better way of classifying voices." (Scott-Stoddart).

these times of musical practice, men that obtained a vocal range within the soprano and alto voice class were identified as falsettists (DeMarco 175). However, as the society and culture changed there were visible shifts in the way professional vocal performances were held and casted. With the inclusion of women and the castrati, vocal terminology began to coincide with the identity of the voice itself and not the previously determined musical line (Fugate 2). By the 18<sup>th</sup> century this form of vocal classification, based upon to sex/gender, became a common practice.

During the 1600-1900's, there was the general "medicalization" of the human body, thus connecting musical practices with enlightenment trends (Fugate 2). A clear sense of knowledge in relation to anatomy and physiology was founded within the general public, which then created a society defined binary of sexual identity (Fugate 2). By creating this science driven ideology surrounding the sexes, more defined relationship between sexual identity, gender, and its relation to voice classification came into being. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the use of the main four voice classifications and their relation to the male and female sex binary became solidified in to musical practice. These categorizations were, in turn, applied to solo voice performers. This fach system, which originated in Germany, was adapted to help singers and educators determine appropriate repertoire according to the voice classifications (Cotton, 164). Within the fach system, individual singers can be further distinguished by their range, weight and [color] of their voices (Scott-Stoddart). The usage of voice classification and the application of the fach system have become extremely synonymous in nature within the current study of solo voice performance (Cotton 164).

The prevalent use of the fach system, by default, essentially mandates an individual's voice classification into one of the two constructed voice binaries based on

apparent visual cisgender-ism. For example, if a male presenting individual were to approach the study of voice there would be an initial assumption that they would reside within the tenor or bass voice classifications.

### **Voiced gender**

While historically an ability to distinguish one's vocal classification by determining their individual sex identity was taken for granted, one's gender identification, voiced gender, and voice classification must all be collectively taken into consideration, making for an increasingly difficult and complex relationship between self-identity and voice classification. Historically, there was no necessary distinction between the definition of a male and a bass because culturally they were synonymous. Given the expansion of cultural diversity and inclusion the 21<sup>st</sup> century, individuals within the arts must recognize the intersectionality of gender, sex, voice gender, and its relation to determining voice classifications.

Noted as a historically defined category, rather than natural fact, gender is a social condition formed through performative acts of expression (Butler 520). Through the historical social construction of an objective biological categorization of individuals, such as that which occurred during the Enlightenment era where the medicalization of human thought was common, there came to be the dichotomous stereotype of male and female (Butler 2). Furthermore, the distinguished social binary is based upon the understanding that the realm of human existence can only be understood through the dichotomy of the female and male body (Whittaker 407). This

dichotomy construct is reinforced from the moment of birth, which encompasses linguistic acts, learning processes, and patterns of societal function (Butler 8). However, this building of an individual through the prescribed social construct can be described as gender performativity, which is what we produce and perform rather than something pre-existing which we express (Matošec 13). While these findings may encompass the interactions of visual representations and societally deemed actions through performative practices, the voice contains its own complex relationship with gender and an individual's identification.

As previously stated, gender can be defined as acts that do not come with the initial existence of an individual, but rather through performative action (Butler 527). One's identity can be perceived through distinctions in relation to physical appearance and social context as well as sound shaped identities (Lagos 803), further creating the identification of voiced gender. The voice is a physical phenomenon that ages and matures with the individual's biological body as well as a produced act of performativity. Biologically, the voice is the contraction of muscles which produce audible sound through phonation (Malde 141). The process of phonation is altered by the length, size, and density of any physical vocal processes. These processes and various adaptations lead to the differences between the determined vocal classifications with regard to sex. These phonations then can be interpreted through acoustic features (i.e. the determining factors of voice classes) that cue perceptions of an individual's identity (Levon 541). These perceptions are led through culturally defined attributes of audible sound, but upon perception the sound of one's vocalization is removed from the body and perceived as an external force (Schlichter 33). This external force of vocalization is then generally molded and configured to social and cultural standards of

the given era. For example, through the distinction of the gender binary and its relation to one's body and gender identity, the vocalization of an individual can be deemed as male or female due to acoustic properties alone. Thus, the connection of high-pitched vocalization being in conjunction with the female soprano and alto voice classification and the low-pitched vocalization with male tenor and bass classifications is derived through cultural performative standards. In sum, construction of the female voice is the representation of an authentic female self, in dated terms (Schlichter 37).

While the connotative historical backing of vocal classification in relation to voiced gender or an individual's gender identity may have been deemed appropriate and useful at the given time, the musical arts must understand and change with the societal and cultural standards of the current era. This may lead to the removal of gender from voice classification in hopes that individuals who do not identify as the perceived gender of their vocal classification may remain included and acknowledged within their practice.

### **Castrati**

The ability to defy and rework the connotative judgments of voice classification and their reputations of gender stereotypes within the general public and music circles is not a 21<sup>st</sup>-century issue or phenomenon. The manipulation of gender within theatrical musical works such as opera have been demonstrated, in a grand way, by the now extinct castrati.

The castrati were a music phenomenon that appeared in Italy in the latter half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, expanding to the "Golden Age of the Castrati" in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>

century (Georgiou 2). During this time, it was deemed that women were unable to partake in church choirs as they were “[to] remain silent in the churches” (Smith 129). However, to meet musical balance within the high-pitched registers, which could not be found with the use of pre-pubescent boys and male falsettists, the castrati were introduced as a solution which in some way was preferable to the participation of women and/or girls (Smith 130). The demeaning nature in describing the castrati comes through the historical practice which created these individuals. A castrato consists of a young boy who had been castrated to preserve their pre-pubescent voice. Once an individual has been castrated, the coinciding low levels of testosterone result in the prevention of a “masculine” voice (Georgiou 2). The practice of castration, in hope to create a castrato, was a conscious decision by the parents of the youthful boys. By castrating their sons, they would gamble their virility on the success of their son as an opera singer and as a church chorus singer in hopes of reaching financial security (Rosselli 179). This phenomenon continued, almost exclusively through Italy, during the early years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As previously noted, this time era was the golden age for the castrati as they were employed and admired in various positions as court singers, opera performers, and church chorus members throughout all of Italy (Rosselli 47).

The success of the castrati was, in many parts, due to their vocal properties. Vocally, the castrati were deemed as an unparalleled vocal force with notable vocal strength, range and the accompanying angelic high-pitched timbre (Roselli 143). They also were defined as a brighter tone with a more powerful and wider vocal range than its other high voice male counterparts (i.e. falsettists) (Matošec 40). Furthermore, the success of the castrati can be linked to the era’s general public disdain for the



prepubescent choir boys, whose voices would soon alter, and the falsettists with their seemingly weak and reedy toned vocal properties (Rosselli 147). This later translated into their success within the performance of opera, as the popular taste for castrato voice was reflected in the singers chosen for this practice (Rosselli 147). For example, the first opera with complete surviving music is Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* (performed in 1600), which contained three castrati (Matošec 42). The popularity of the castrati continued as new works such as Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* were adapted to the rising dominant vocal force. To further explain, *L'Orfeo* had been originally composed for the casting of a tenor for the lead part. However, through the gradual application and popularity of the castrati, the composition was adapted to cast a castrato as the main protagonist (Rosselli 147). Likewise, due to their inherent vocal range, the castrati were commonly cast as female leads in opera as well. For example, within *Euridice*, the three castrati are cast as an allegorical figure, a supporting male, and a goddess. (Rosselli 147 & Matošec 42). Therefore, it can be said that the castrati accomplished a theatrical sense of androgyny due to their large reach in casting potential. To further explain, the castrati can be observed as an individual who is in constant cross-casting (Smith 134). For example, when a castrato is cast as a male role, they present male connotative actions, desires, and physical attributes, but contradictorily present vocally through the deemed female pitch range (i.e. soprano/alto).

While the castrati were admired for their vocal abilities and stage presence within the practice of opera, societal and cultural standards changed throughout their existence and the castrati were met with increasing resistance, ultimately leading to their demise. The causes of their demise can be linked to the social perception of the castrati as victims, quasi-human individuals, and their relation with gender stereotypes.

Eventually, the practice of castration was outlawed as inhuman by the Vatican in 1903 (Eberstadt 40). However, before the illegalization of creating a castrato, many were then seen as victims of an unwanted medical treatment (Matošec 39). Furthermore, castrati populations were met with claims of being an incomplete man or a man with a distinct lack, in reference to their castration (Smith 131). In the wake of this, anti-castrato discourse was maintained in importance through the general and music populations as a patriarchal society was present, therefore they were seen as a large step down in terms of masculinity and their representation of sometimes unwanted femininity (Smith 131). In conjunction, castrati were met with demeaning descriptions such as “poor wretched creature[s]”, “demi-virs (half-men)”, “subhuman”, and “ghoulish or nightmarish” (Davies 271 & Smith 132).

While the castrati now are an extinct musical phenomenon, group, and practice, for the purpose of this study it is crucially important to simply recognize their existence. By doing so, one can understand that the limitations of a society and culture which acknowledges and fiercely practices the ever-evolving gender binary while allowing for a group of individuals who quite literally disassociate themselves from the defining factors of their culture to not only exist but thrive. Through the implication and acknowledgment of their prosperous careers, it can be deduced that the public was able to not only dissociate the character from the performer, in terms of a female character and a castrati performer, but the voice from the character, for instance a male character with a distinct soprano vocal range. The castrati therefore stand as one of the most influential and prosperous examples of a musical individual who, even if not by choice, was partially removed from the limitations of a gender binary and its relation to theatrical casting within opera and other musical practices.

## Countertenor

The current countertenor voice classification holds a particularly intriguing relationship with the current social and cultural standards upheld within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Due to these ever-changing cultural standards, the countertenor can be observed as an extremely ambiguous individual due to their vocal properties and inherent androgyny. These concepts can be further understood through the development of their historical application and their relation to their distant predecessors.

The countertenor term encompasses the voice classification of vocal artists who historically identify as male-presenting individuals that use the practice of falsetto voice techniques to achieve a certain pitch range (Parrott 46). This pitch range can be defined as a relatively rare voice classification which presides within standard soprano and alto voice classes or the upper range of a natural male voice (DeMarco 174). In clarification, the countertenor voice classification is synonymous with the church falsettists, who are defined as the highest voice of the male voice classifications, within the Western European musical practice, such as within the Anglican Church choir (Chenez 1 & Parrott 46). However, the countertenors use of falsetto vocal production is peculiar in its vocal techniques that differ from those of the common four-voice classifications of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass (Fugate 24). This separation of vocal phonation within the countertenor voice class can also be applied and differentiated against the castrati as well. These differences in vocal production can be associated with the use of falsetto vocal processes versus non-falsetto or modal vocal processes (Fugate 24). To further explain, the use of the modal voice consists of the entire application of the vocal processes and structures within a given singer, while the falsetto technique requires the

manipulation of the foundational phonation process (Fugate 24). The falsetto voice does not use the entire breadth of the vocal cord to produce sound but only the edges, thus manipulating the amplitude and intensity of the condensed frequencies to result in a higher pitch (30). Through the manipulation of this vocal technique, countertenors are able to produce a pitch variation that can be described as “hooty” or “breathy” in sound within the typical female range (24). These vocal qualities then correlate with the falsetto-voice association; namely, “false” distinction in relation to the “counter – tenor”, as the sound is deemed untrue, is construed as not real and deceptive (24). However, the contemporary countertenor, mainly seen after the 1960s, utilizes the *bel canto* singing technique that can be most often heard within opera, oratorio, and art song of the Western music tradition (26). The *bel canto* technique allows for the countertenor to produce a less breathy, more resonant, and stronger tone quality in phonation (25). Thus, through the application of this vocal technique, the countertenor can be placed in close relation to the vocal properties of the main four vocal classifications and modal singing attributes. Along with these vocal production adjustments, the countertenors have been able to distinguish themselves in all manners of vocal ensembles as well as soloists within musical practices such as the operatic stage (Parrott 46). With that being said, the countertenor, in historical and present applications, still falls victim to societal and cultural pressures which alter the presentation and interpretation of a historically classic voice type within the general population.

To further express the means in which the countertenor voice class can be interpreted through the common public, we must consider the attributes of these individuals in relation to gender presentation, voiced gender, and its relation to current

societal forces. Historically, the countertenor can be defined as a male individual who uses manipulative vocal techniques to achieve the vocal range of female-voice classifications such as the soprano and alto. If the implication of this definition is applied through performance, the male vocalist presents physical male attributes as well as stereotypical male-gendered performative actions in conjunction with their historically perceived personal identity. With that being said, the countertenors, similar to their castrati predecessors, also partake in the performance of female characters on theatrical stages. Therefore, in terms of societal acceptance, if applying the nature of the patriarchally devised gender binary, one may assume that the countertenor should be subject to criticisms much like their castrati predecessors. However, the countertenor will not be subject to the same levels of disdain seen within castrati discourse due to the fact that their bodies have not been physically altered. In terms of vocal perception, the countertenor may be subject to similar ridicule as the castrati, and they also must navigate the difficulty between their physical representation and the connotative perceptions of their vocal range. For example, Philippe Jaroussky is a French countertenor who has graced the modern stage with his vast exploration of Baroque cantata and opera repertoire (Warner). Jaroussky has been recognized and awarded for his vocal performance abilities and is now addressed as the most prominent French countertenor to have emerged from the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century era (Cummings). However, Jaroussky even as an admired and recognized performer within the global vocal arts, still is met with the societal bounds that accompany such a musical phenomenon. In conjunction with a review published in the New York Times Magazine, the countertenor voice type alone had been described as a “turbo charged choir boy...[with a] high girlish tone...[found somewhere] between creepy and

sublime” (Eberstadt 38-40). Furthermore, Jaroussky adds “[that] people talk about the countertenor being a third sex, or something quasi female...” (Eberstadt 40). These reviews and the inherent androgyny of the countertenor, which can be observed within their vocal properties, voiced gendered attributes, and ability to portray men and women in musical settings, confirmed the existence of an uneducated general public. By commenting on the vocal attributes of the countertenor through the societal gender binary, individuals may perceive the effects of voiced gender within the vocal performing arts. The public’s lack of understanding that the countertenor is a historically male prescribed vocal classification results in uninformed audiences that, in turn, experience the unexpected when taking in a countertenor performance. When presented with the classic vocal range of the countertenor, the audience employs terms that recognize the disconnection between the countertenor’s physical gender presentation and its relation to their vocal range. Accordingly, the countertenor is perceived within a different light of understanding because of these qualities. This renders countertenors as an intriguing and a rare musical phenomenon in terms of gender performativity and representation, given their broad musical applications, their relation to performativity standards within gender, and their need to contend with wide misconceptions among the general public.

### **Proposal for the Future**

Audience perception of the vocal artist occurs through several lenses: the physical being upon the stage, as an abstract musical sound source, and as the character assumed by the vocal performer. In doing so, the audience and the performer jointly

form varying conclusions regarding these attributes, creating discourse in the overall perception of an individual's being. Luckily, a large majority of the individuals within the vocal arts find that their gender presentation, vocal categorization, and stage presence match their concluded personal identity. However, there must be the understanding that there are individuals whose gender representation, vocal classification, and stage presence do not align with their own identity, either fully or partially. Vocalists who experience disassociation through their musical practice may be victims to conventional norms within the vocal arts. However, through a positive reconstruction of the countertenor voice classification, as a non-binary and inclusive voice type, individuals may be able to find comfort in a musical categorization that conforms to their individual identification.

Presented as such, the countertenor vocal classification strives to define itself as a gendered individual who uses manipulative vocal techniques to achieve varying vocal ranges. With this ability, they are able to thrive in varying theatrical roles and musical performances. Along with this definition the countertenor presents inherently androgynous characteristics which aid in the dissociation from the currently applied societal and cultural derived gender binary. Still, the countertenor classification constantly encounters understandings of their abilities and attributes on stage, as well as an uneducated approach to its relationship with perceived forms of gender. Given, through the historical transitions of vocal classification connotation and definitions found within the general medicalization of human thought within the Enlightenment, there is reason to believe that the countertenor terminology can be adapted to better promote inclusion within the vocal arts.

As societal and cultural forces begin to recognize the relations between gender presentation, voiced gender, and its connection to theatrical musical performances, the countertenor can strategically function as an initial step towards the removal of gender from voice classifications.

In so doing, the recognition of androgynous figures such as pants-roles, double-voiced performers, and other various configurations of gender performance over time within the classical arts may be acknowledged (Monod 173). Of interest is the fact that the countertenor is uniquely a vocal classification, while individuals who partake in pants-roles and the practice of double-voiced performance are not vocally categorized in such terms. Therefore, the term “countertenor” cannot be employed as a term of gender-based identification.

To achieve the removal of gender stereotypes within the practice of voice classification, there must be the recognition of the societal and cultural impact of reverting the connotative properties of a historically defined voice type. Individuals who have removed themselves from the constructed gender binary or do not recognize themselves as the connotative gender identity associated with their voice type may thrive in the vocal arts due to the implication of a vocal classification that suits their individual needs of representation. An expanded definition of “countertenor,” one whose vocal identity and stage presentation shall not be defined by connotative actions of gender performativity with vocal categorization, is offered in hopes of improving inclusivity within the vocal arts. By applying this reconfigured definition, individuals who partake within the standard vocal pitch ranges of a gender identification that does not coincide with their own may be able to freely separate their vocal properties from the restrictive nature of gender/sex-based categorization. Through this application,



there is a greater possibility of exploration within the pursuit of gender non-conforming musical practices, the deconstruction of gender stereotypes within musical performances, and the inclusion of varying individuals within historically constricted classical practices. To achieve these goals of inclusion within the vocal arts, there must be small incremental adjustments, such as the redefined countertenor, to ensure the inclusion of all who hope to share and experience the wonders of vocal performance.

## Sources

- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, p. 519., doi:10.2307/3207893.
- Chenez, Raymond. "Vocal Registers of the Countertenor Voice: Based on Signals Recorded and Analyzed in Vocevista" p. 1-87, 2011.
- Cotton, Sanda. "Fach vs. Voice Type: A Call for Critical Discussion." *Journal of Singing*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2012, pp. 153–66. *Music Periodicals Database*, search.proquest.com/openview/d8d7a010162b30b10e084117b7460517/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=41612.
- DAVIES. "'Veluti in Speculum': The Twilight of the Castrato." *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2005, pp. 271-301.
- DeMarco, Laura E. "The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor." *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2002, pp. 174-185.
- Eberstadt, Fernanda. "Who can Resist a Man Who Sings Like a Woman?" *New York Times Magazine*, 21 Nov 2010, pp. 38-41.
- Fugate, Bradley K. "The Contemporary Countertenor in Context: Vocal Production, Gender/Sexuality, and Reception" 2016, pp. 1-234.
- Fugate, Bradley K. "Thoughts on the Cultural Construction of Vocal Classification"
- Fugate, Bradley K. "Singing on the Edge: Politics and the Marginalization of the Counter-Tenor"
- Georgiou, Stelios. "*Factors which contributed to the demise of the Castrati*" 2014, p. 1-10.
- Lagos, Danya, "Hearing Gender: Voice-Based Gender Classification Processes and Transgender Health Inequality." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 84, no. 5 2019, pp. 801-827.
- Levon, Erez. "Categories, Stereotypes, and the Linguistic Perception of Sexuality ." *Language in Society* , vol. 43, pp. 539–566., doi:10.1017/S0047404514000554.
- Malde, Melissa, et.al. *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*. 3rd ed. Plural Publishing, 2017.

- Matošec, Matjaž. "Female Voices in Male Bodies": Castrati, Onnagata, and the Performance of Gender through Ambiguous Bodies and Vocal Acts". 2008 pp. 1-104.
- Monod, David. "double-Voiced: Music, Gender, and Nature in Performance." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2015, pp. 173-193.
- O'Connor, Karyn. "How to Determine Singing Range and Vocal Fach (Voice Type)." *SingWise*, SingWise, 21 Apr. 2020, [www.singwise.com/articles/how-to-determine-singing-range-and-vocal-fach-voice-type](http://www.singwise.com/articles/how-to-determine-singing-range-and-vocal-fach-voice-type).
- Parrott, Andrew. "Falsetto Beliefs: The 'Countertenor' Cross-Examined." *Early Music*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2015, pp. 79-110.
- Rosselli, John. "The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550-1850." *Acta Musicologica*, vol. 60, no. 2, 1988, pp. 143-179. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/932789](http://www.jstor.org/stable/932789).
- Schlichter, Annette. "Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, Gender Performativity." *Body & Society*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2011, pp. 31-52.
- Scott-Stoddart, Nina. "The Fach System of Vocal Classification." *Halifax Summer Opera Festival*, [halifaxsummeroperafestival.com/?page\\_id=3270](http://halifaxsummeroperafestival.com/?page_id=3270).
- Sherr, Richard. "Performance Practice in the Papal Chapel during the 16th Century." *Renaissance Music*, 2017, pp. 181-191., doi:10.4324/9781315088891-9.
- Smith, Daniel. "Theatre Under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet, and Opera. by Julia Prest. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. Xi + 195. \$27 Pb." *Theatre Research International*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2015, pp. 128-128.
- Whittaker, Kate. "Performing Masculinity/Masculinity in Performance." *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History and New Musicology*, edited by Philip Purvis, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017