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The Sound of Whiteness: Early Music Vocal Performance Practice in Britain

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I was brought up to think that it is racist to see race. This liberal race blindness serves whiteness well because it helps to keep whiteness invisible, and it makes it hard to acknowledge imbalances of power or privilege due to this thing called 'race'. Indeed, it suggests there are only two ways to deal with power differences: ignore them or support them. (Unfortunately, ignoring them effectively means supporting them.) But it is possible to see race without seeking to support or further the structural, material, cultural and other inequities produced by an axis of racial difference, and in order to dismantle white privilege, you have to see that it's there — you have to be 'race cognizant' (to use Ruth Frankenberg's term).[1] Unlike racism, which is often underpinned by an essentialist concept of race, progressive antiracist thinking understands race as discursively produced and historically contingent. (See, for example, work by Richard Dyer, Ruth Frankenberg, Vron Ware and Les Back.)[2] In other words, whiteness is not a constant. Not all those who are considered white or who consciously identify as white have identical experiences of their whiteness—there are marked differences within the category (class, gender, and other intersecting axes of difference). And indeed who falls within the category changes too—the boundaries of whiteness are flexible.[3]

This, then, is the thinking which prompted me to begin to ask whether early music performance in Britain is implicated in reproducing racial privilege. Is performing early music also performing whiteness?

In one sense, early music performance must be about whiteness for it is ostensibly unmarked racially. Just think about the scholarship and journalism around it in comparison to other musics: hip hop is often considered in relation to race because the race of most of the practitioners is "visible"; the artists do not conform (or are not presented as conforming) to an unspoken, invisible white middle-class norm. The fact that no-one has really talked about race in relation to early music, then, might suggest that it is invisible and most likely racially normative: white. That's not to say that all practitioners are white—that's not the case, but within Britan (and Ireland), non-white practitioners are in a minority. I follow George Lewis in that my description of this "system . . . of musicality refers to social and cultural location and is theorized here as historically emergent rather than ethnically essential."[4]

One of the historically emergent ideas in this system of musicality is purity and the related notions of clarity and cleanliness. (Slide 3) This image, also on page two of the handout, is the cover of a compilation CD released by Decca in 1998: *The Pure Voice of Emma Kirkby*. Purity is clearly a selling point; reviews that mention the artist's vocal purity are quoted in advertising materials, such as the undated quote from the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (quote 1 on the handout):

> For two decades, Emma Kirkby's clear agile voice has epitomized the pure sound in the singing of early music. She remains one of the treasures of the music world.[5]

Quote 2 on the handout, from an obituary of Tessa Bonner, uses similar concepts—clean, true, natural

This discourse of clarity, purity is not just applied to women singers; a New York Times review of the choir of King's College, Cambridge appeared on Sept. 18, 1995 with the title "In the Pure Voices of Boys: A Chorus's Self Renewal".[6] Many women singers of early music will have experienced the dubious pleasure of being congratulated by an audience member for sounding "just like a boy"—intended as high praise, for obviously there is no greater aspiration for a mature, adult woman vocalist than to sound like a nine-year-old boy.

But in some respects, there's something to the comparison. As Kirsten Yri has explained, much early music singing by adult women involves extensive use of the head voice—a way of singing that produces resonance primarily in the head rather than in the chest and body.[7] The technique is sometimes referred to as *voce bianca* or *voix blanche* (literally, white voice), a term that I assumed had fallen out of fashion since after years of learning this style of singing, or a variant thereof, I only encountered the phrase a year ago but as you can see from quote 3 on the handout it was still in use in 2005 (modified by 'so-called'), while the fourth quote is about

Emma Kirkby, from Gramophone magazine in 1975 — look at those buzz words: white tone, choir boy, purity. [8]

So where does this purity idea come from? Yri has suggested its "associations with boy choirs" evokes "youth, innocence and, importantly, the presexual or premature."[9] This head voice is often coupled in early music with what I have heard described as 'straight tone' singing, in which vibrato is kept to a minimum, employed as an ornament. Don Grieg has suggested that the sound of this vocal production technique—which is not 'natural' or unlearned; it is as much the product of training as an operatic voice—is perceived as "disembodied" and "angelic."[10]

Both Yri and Grieg suggest the sound evokes sexual purity. But the concept of purity is embedded in racial as well as gendered discourse: the elephant in the room, it seems, is whiteness. Whether or not it is coincidence that the vocal technique that produces a sound often received and marketed as pure is called white voice, sexuality and race are intimately connected. In Ann Laura Stoler's words:

> Discourses of sexuality do more than define the distinctions of the bourgeois self; in identifying marginal members of the body politic, they have mapped the moral parameters of European nations. Deeply sedimented discourses on sexual morality could redraw the "interior frontiers" of national communities, frontiers that were secured through—and sometimes in collision with—the boundaries of race.[11]

This is exactly what was going on in Britain around the time the early music revival was taking off. That white middle class women were seen to be preservers and purveyors of racial and moral purity was as true of the mid-20th century as it was of the late 18th to 19th centuries. Hazel Carby notes that "government, military, national and local practices … produced racialized subjects as external to ideologies of what constituted acceptable conventions of British/English subjecthood and citizenship" through the policing of sexual encounters (or potential sexual encounters) between white women and black men in Britain during World War Two.[12] Black male civilian and military personnel were a feature of Second World War Britain from about 1941 and in fact the history of immigration goes back much earlier. In the eighteenth century, for example, there were some 14,000 black people living in Britain.[13] As Carby notes, black servicemen and white women were managed in various ways. White women in the armed forces were not allowed to talk to a black serviceman without another white person present, while police often arrested white women civilians found in the company of black servicemen.[14] African American GIs (who began to arrive in 1942) who applied for permission to marry British women were refused and transferred, thus couples were forcibly separated.[15]

Wayward white women who had been consorting with the wrong men are often described as lower class; the implication is that 'good' middle class girls are 'pure'. For example, in 1942, the Duke of Buccleuch complained to Harold MacMillan about

rumours of British Hondurans stationed in Scotland having inappropriate relationships with "unsophisticated country girls"; he particularly called attention to the 'problem' of mixed race offspring. (The country aspect suggests to me that women stand in for the land, the territory.) In reply, MacMillan reassured the Duke that "there was no evidence British Hondurans had abused the hospitality offered by local residents, although several woman 'of an undesirable type' from Edinburgh had gained access to one of the camps," prompting action by local police.[16] The unit was repatriated in 1943 allegedly because it was no longer required.

Despite official efforts, brown babies were born. In 1948, one state orphanage in Somerset had 20 brown toddlers that had been given up for adoption after their single, white British mothers were ostracized by their local communities. The British government preserved national purity by rejecting the "transgressive bodies" of these babies, advertising them for adoption by African American families.[17]

After the end of the Second World War, the Colonial Office hoped that migrant workers would be repatriated and that existing, settled immigrant communities could be persuaded to leave too.[18] Carby points out that "black Britons were citizens who were located within discourses of outsiderness, colonialism, subject peoples, empire and migration, but never within discourses of belonging."[19]

But why am I talking about Britain's immigration history in the 1940s and 1950s

when the examples on the slides come from the 1970s on? For a start, this is part of the political backdrop to the early music revival. I am beginning to think the process of forming the sound world of British early music is analogous in some ways to the racial and colonial discourses of outsiderness and belonging, although it is rarely articulated in that way. Just as the "transgressive bodies" of brown babies were rejected by Britain, so the sound of early music gradually rejected "foreign" sounds and embraced a sound perceived as quintessentially British, perhaps even English. Just exactly when that starts to happen is hard to pin down. The discourse of purity in early music existed in the 1950s, but in relation to editing and to the music apart from the performance. In quote 6, Josquin's music is pure, the edition is clean, and the sublime is explicitly opposed to barbarity (which to my mind at least carries overtones of otherness). At some point, perhaps during the 1970s, purity becomes a quality of the voice, the performer, rather than a quality exclusive to the music. The most explicit reference to early music being constructed in opposition to an external Other that I have found so far in fact concerns rhythm. In a 1974 article in *Early Music*, Jeremy Montagu argues that Western Europe's early music must have been rhythmically simple. At one point, he explicitly defines it against the rhythmic complexity of Arabic, Eastern European, Indian and African music where percussionists play with their hands rather than with the large, clumsy sticks that appear in European iconography. (Montagu describes Western Europe as "one of the most backward and primitive areas" "as far as rhythm is concerned.")[20] Montagu played with pioneer ensemble Musica Reservata, directed by Michael Morrow. The main vocalist with the group, Jantina Noorman, was a folk singer who

experimented with different vocal styles, sometimes using folk-singing techniques and sometimes imitating instruments. As John Potter notes,

> The 'Reservata holler', as Howard Mayer Brown . . . called it, failed to sustain its initial impact. Noorman's folk-influenced and often strident singing was too much of a departure from the comforting warmth of the choral scholar sound. It was not until David Munrow formed his Early Music Consort of London in 1967 that early music singing was perceived by the public as attractive to listen to.[21]

I have a couple of clips to illustrate the contrast.
Slide 4: Jantina Noorman sounding rather nasal – just play 30s and then change to slide 5 (blank).
Slide 6: Early Music Consort of London – play 30s and move to slide 7 (blank).
(In all fairness to Brown, he described the English cathedral choir sound not as warm and comforting, but as a "hoot".[22])

In contrast to Morrow's ensemble, Munrow's principal singers were all male and all Oxbridge or cathedral choir trained (James Bowman, Martyn Hill, Paul Elliott and Geoffrey Shaw). The beneficiaries of this training just happened to be white (and predominately middle class and male) because that is the series that had accrued the educational, social and material privileges that enabled people to gain the skills considered necessary for practitioners of early music in Britain. For *a capella*

singers, these skills include excellent sight-singing and experience at ensemble singing, and a "learned instinct" for the repertoire the group sings. This latter can be achieved on the job, that is through working regularly with an ensemble (especially one that has low turnover of personnel).[23] The predominant white make up of these groups, then, is an outcome of exclusionary policies at different levels (e.g. schooling, opportunities for certain types of vocal training) and of the long history of discriminatory policies now in theory against the law (e.g. labour market discrimination) that have material impact for generations.[24]

To a large extent this same Oxbridge/cathedral series carried through the 1980s and 1990s with the Hilliards, Taverner Choir, Tallis Scholars, Gabrieli Consort, the Sixteen and Gothic Voices. Women singers did not necessarily have quite the same training—girls were excluded from cathedral choirs, and adult women often still are—yet many were still Oxbridge graduates (perhaps most famously Emma Kirkby). According to John Potter, ensembles that did not make this prized sound (e.g. the Dufay Collective) were marginalised.

(Slide 8: Play 30s clip of Emma Kirkby. Emma Kirkby came on the scene in the early 1970s. She worked with Jessica Cash to develop a vocal technique suitable for early music, which she put to use professionally working with The Taverner Choir and the Consort of Musicke. And the sound she developed was remarkably like the "warm, comforting" sound of the world of the choral scholar. Emma's sound became and has remained one of the defining early music soprano sounds.)

The typical sound of the early music vocal ensemble, whether one voice per part or several, is achieved through careful attention to balance and blend. Blend is not a simple thing to achieve. And it's an aesthetic and practice that is not necessarily desirable in other choral traditions. (For example, US Sacred Harp shape note singing values audibly individual voices; in Britain, the psalm-singing of the free church on the Isle of Lewis, off the west coast of Scotland, is not unison as a classically-trained musician would recognize it.) It's perhaps surprising that the tradition of early music and of classical ensemble singing more generally values the blend given the constant political rhetoric of individual freedom: in a sense, blending is opposed to liberal humanism. In this tradition, different people come together and blend their voices so that it really feels like we're singing with one voice. And to be completely honest, speaking as a practitioner, it feels wonderful when it works. But the origin of this practice lies in Victorian voice culture. It can be seen or experienced as an exercise in assimilation, especially when the aim of the blend is to achieve a particular type of sound that already exists (a cathedral choir type sound). This involves singing in modified Received Pronunciation rather than regional accents, matching the vowel sounds (which can be very difficult), and placing the consonants carefully. It's about minimizing difference, and when it's achieved it is a loss of the self (many into one), assimilating to a unified ideal that is in fact the sound of elite whiteness. (Quote on handout) I find worrying parallels to Deleuze and Guattari's assertion that "racism propagates waves of sameness until all those who resist identification have been wiped out."

Many performers in the early days of the post-war early music revival were also involved in folk music and 'world' musics. (This was also true of Dolmetsch in the early 20th century.) This seems to have been less of a reception problem for instrumentalists than it was for Jantina Noorman. It's possible that this engagement between early music, folk music and world musics never really stopped in live performances, but the practice seems to be experiencing a renaissance. (Slide: image of The Clerks and guests on their Sanctus project.)[25] Rather than decentering whiteness it might serve to highlight it without doing anything to dismantle the power structures (relating to gender, class, race, religion and nation) embedded in the sound. Musicians might be in danger of constructing "a safe and innocent notion of white identity without a critical reckoning with the forces that continue to make people white", to quote Vron Ware and Les Back.[26] Early music practice may not yet be ready to take a seat as an equal partner at an antiracist table until it has addressed the processes of exclusion inherent in developing the early music vocal sound—processes which may be a kind of cultural violence related to processes of white supremacy.

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[1] Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*: *The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
[2] Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women* and (ed), *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Vron Ware and Les Back, *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
[3] A key text is Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
[4] George Lewis, 'Improvised Music since 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,' *Black Music Research Journal* 16/1 (1996), reprinted in *BMRJ* 22 (2002), 215-246: 217. Like Lewis, I think it's important to face "the reality of the ethnic or racial component of a historically emergent sociomusical group . . . squarely and honestly."
[5] *Toronto Globe and Mail*, date unknown. From http://www.rayfieldartists.com/emmakirkby.html. Accessed 21 Feb. 2010.
[6] James R. Oestreich, 'In the *Pure* Voices of Boys, A Chorus's Self-Renewal.' Sept. 18, 1997, *New York Times* (online)
[7] Kirsten Yri, 'Remaking the Past: Feminist Spirituality in Anonymous 4 and Sequentia's Vox Feminae,' *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 12, 1-21.
[8] "The soprano Emma Kirkby produces a "*white tone*" which is scarcely distinguishable from that of a *choir boy* in some items, and this makes for a commendable *purity* of intonation." *Gramophone*, Dec. 1975 1075/1, cited in *OED Online* s.v. white.
[9] Yri, 9
[10] Donald Grieg, 'Sight-Readings: Notes on "A cappella" Performance Practice,' *Early Music* 21/1 (Feb. 1995), 125-148: 140.
[11] Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* (Durham, N.C., 1995), 7.
[12] "What evolved were government, military, national and local practices that produced racialized subjects as external to ideologies of what constituted acceptable conventions of British/English subjecthood and citizenship. These practices were intended to police very specific kinds of encounters, sexual encounters between black men and white women…. Particular meanings adhered to these black male and white female bodies and to the geo-politics of their encounters, to the spatial relation they inhabited on the cultural terrain of British society." Hazel Carby, 'Becoming Modern Racialized Subjects,' *Cultural Studies*, 23/4, 624-657: 644.
[13] Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, 'Ignatius Sancho: A Renaissance Black Man in Eighteenth-Century England', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 21 (Autumn 1998), 106-107, at 106. Other notable scholars in this field include Jan Marsh and Jeffrey Green. On the composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, see, for example, Jeffrey

Green, 'Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: The Early Years,' *Black Music Research Journal* 21/2 (Autumn, 2001), 133-158.
[14] Carby, 648.
[15] Carby, 648-49.
[16] Sonya Rose, 'Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation in World War II Britain,' *The American Historical Review,* 103/4 (Oct. 1998), 1147-1176: 1156-1157.
[17] Carby, 650.
[18] Carby, 643.
[19] Carby, 651. Immigration increased in the 1950s. Members of the Commonwealth could move to Britain and apply for citizenship after two years' residence; immigrants from outside the Commonwealth were subject to different legislation.
[20] Jeremy Montagu, 'Early Percussion Techniques,' *Early Music* 2/1 (Jan. 1974), 20-24, at 20-21.
[21] Potter, *Vocal Authority*, 115. (See also Potter, 'Reconstructing Lost Voices,' in the *Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music* ed. Tess Knighton and David Fallows (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997 [paperback edition; first ed. 1992], 311-316: 311.) Jantina Noorman says of her own singing for Musica Reservata: "Michael Morrow, the leader of the group, discovered my ability to imitate several vocal styles. For his interpretation of "early" music he did not want a "trained" voice, but a voice that sounded like "ordinary" people's voices. He was particularly fascinated by the way people from the Balkans sang. He told me that the voice should sound like the instruments that accompany the singer. He played the bagpipes himself; so when I sang with him my voice had to be loud. However, when I sang with a crumhorn, for instance, that required a different way of singing. I think you can compare it to pop music, as most pop musicians are not trained musicians as well." (http://www.folkworld.de/31/e/dutch.html, accessed 23 Feb. 2010).
[22] Howard Mayer Brown, 'Choral Music in the Renaissance,' *Early Music*, 6/2 (Apr. 1978), 164-169: 166.
[23] Donald Grieg, 'Sight-Readings: Notes on '*A capella*' Performance Practice,' *Early Music* 23/1 (Feb. 1995), 129.
[24] See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998.
[25] This project aims to "create an aural analogy to the sound-world of many Middle Eastern cities, but in particular Damascus and Aleppo, where the Call to Prayer might receive an unwitting harmonisation from the pealing of Christian bells." (Programme notes to Qudduson, cited in 'The Clerks: Qudduson, "That's How the Light Gets In", available at http://gerryco23.wordpress.com/2009/07/18/the-clerjs-qudduson/. Last accessed 25 Oct. 2011.)
[26] Ware and Back, *Out of Whiteness*, 14.