Pro Rege

Volume 24 | Number 2 Article 12

December 1995

My Life as a Boy Soprano

David Schelhaas
Dordt College

My Life as a Boy Soprano

by David Schelhaas

When I was a ninth grader I sang a soprano solo at a chapel assembly in my high school. I walked out on the stage of the old quonset gymnasium with the twelve or fourteen rows of chairs spread out before me filled with mostly bored or amused students, seniors in the back and freshmen in the front, and after the brief piano introduction, I gave a nearly flawless rendition of PANIS ANGELICUS--in English, of course. I could see Howie Hartog and Ervy Walhof, hotshot juniors, snickering and pantomiming, Howie holding one hand beneath an imagined bosom and the other way out in an extravagantly dramatic gesture as if he were a coloratura soprano from the Metropolitan Opera. A few seats down sat my sister, her face nearly as red as her auburn hair, not able to decide whether to look at me or at her feet. I zipped through the song and sat down without giving the whole business much thought.

As I think now about the social stigma such an action should produce, I am momentarily amazed. Was I so stupid that I didn't realize the implications of a fifteen year old boy singing a soprano solo? Any kind of solo would have been bad enough--but a SOPRANO solo! How could my parents have permitted it? My music instructor? How in the world was I persuaded?

Two reasons can be given why this travesty of social/psychological development was allowed to occur. First, I had been singing soprano solos since I was six years old, so no one was particularly surprised to hear me sing one more. The other reason was that I had absolutely no doubts about my own masculinity. Sure, I was only 5 foot 6 and my voice hadn't changed, but I was also the only ninth grader starting on the JV basketball team. Living in a community where basketball was nearly a religious sacrament, I must have known instinctively that I could withstand a measly soprano solo.

My choir instructor, Francis Bulthuis, had arranged for me to sing, and yet when I sang soprano he seemed surprised. "So," he said, "You sang soprano, huh?" As if I could decide to sing tenor or bass. I had been trying all summer in preparation for high school to get my voice to change, but nothing--gargling, talking in an artificially low voice, growling down along the bass line as we sang hymns in church, surreptitiously smoking cigarettes in the basement of my dad' store--nothing changed my vocal range one bit. Yet here was my choir director, the man who had placed me in the soprano section of the junior choir, apparently surprised that I sang soprano.

Since no boys would ever choose to be boy sopranos, one might ask where they come from. And I suppose that most of the time the answer is that slightly pushy females, mothers or teachers, create boy sopranos or, at least, identify them. I'm sure that each year thousands of little boys with voices that would qualify them for the Vienna Boys Choir are simply not identified as singers by a teacher or mother and miss out entirely on the chance to be a boy soprano, becoming instead shortstops or crossing guards or paperboys.

I became a boy soprano because my bell-like soprano voice was recognized by my mother. She was not a pushy stage mother nor was she a frustrated musician. But she WAS a music lover. She had been inspired to love music and literature and art by an exceptional grade school teacher and then jerked out of school at the beginning of the ninth grade to work on the farm. She wanted to make sure her kids got what she missed. I think she hoped that someday she would hear me sing in one of the

Metropolitan Opera performances that she so faithfully listened to on the radio each Saturday afternoon. She didn't realize that most boy sopranos grow up to be mediocre baritones.

I didn't mind being the boy soprano of my generation. (A small town could accommodate only one at a time--or possibly two, the aging star--fourteen or fifteen years old--and the heir apparent.) I got my start as a first grader singing at the Christmas program. Actually Meinie Wensink and I sang alternate verses of "Away in the Manger" dressed as Mary and Joseph.

We must have wowed the audience because I became the boy soprano of Edgerton, Minnesota. Even though I took a few jibes from kids, the praise I got from adults more than compensated. From then on, I sang several solos a year, at school programs, church programs, and wedding receptions. Boy sopranos did not do funerals for obvious reasons, I suppose. It was only much later, as a mediocre baritone, that I got an "on-call" job with a funeral home singing solos--thirty bucks per funeral--at the funerals of people I had never known or seen.

But that was much later. As a boy soprano I soon had an established repertoire: At Christmas it was "Star of the East" and "O Holy Night"; for regular church services "Beautiful Savior" and a version of Psalm 23; for secular occasions, wedding receptions and anniversaries I sang "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" and a really corny thing called "Teacher, Kin I Go Home" (Our old seamstress, Old Miss Ritches,/ Sewed my pants with rotten stitches/ And today I ripped my britches/ Teacher, I gotta go home.)

I don't really know how my mother let me sing that. She was a bit of a musical snob. Consequently, I also sang, at weddings, such 19th century classics as "I Attempt from Love's Sickness to Fly" and "Love Has Eyes." Was there anything anomalous about an eleven-year-old boy singing "I Attempt from Love's Sickness to Fly"? Apparently not. After all, my audience was an all Dutch community that got misty-eyed when I sang "Irish Eyes."

Next to my mother, my most earnest and ardent advocate was my sixth and seventh grade teacher, Mrs. Hoogwerf. She was a marvelous teacher and, through some alchemy that she was able to work, had managed to keep the boys in my class from teasing me about my singing. I know seventh grade boys are cruel. And I know they are concerned about their masculinity. But Mrs. Hoogwerf by some sleight of hand created an atmosphere that allowed me to go on singing with no demeaning wisecracks from my classmates.

It was also, however, Mrs. Hoogwerf who signed me up to sing at the Memorial Day assembly in the public school gym. We had two schools in our community, the Christian school and the public school. I attended the Christian school. But in the summer, the guys I played baseball and rubbergun with were from the public school. My public school friends didn't know I was a singer, and I would have liked to keep it that way. Singing had always been easy for me. I could soar to a high A or B without a grimace. Now suddenly I became recalcitrant. I whined to my mom that the song I was going to sing, "Land of Hope and Glory," a gooey patriotic song set to Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance," was too difficult. But it didn't help. At 9:30 A.M. on Memorial Day I sat nervously in the Public School gym, both cowlicks slicked down, wearing my Sunday suit with black bowtie. Then, as the auditorium began to fill, I realized I had nothing to fear. Except for Lily Schultz, who recited "In Flanders Field," I was the only kid at the program. Kids didn't go to Memorial Day programs; they were all home putting the finishing touches on the bike decorations for the ride in the Memorial Day parade.

About that same time I struck one of the great bargains of my life. Since second grade I had been laboring at piano lessons, improving about as gradually as a mountain wears down. To practice was sheer anguish yet I was required to put in a half hour a day at the piano. After five years I was stuck on "The Old Spinning Wheel" and couldn't get off it. One day out of the blue I suggested that if I could quit piano, I would take voice lessons. My mother bought the idea and though it didn't work out quite as smoothly as I hoped it might (I thought I would be able to practice in the yard or on the ballfield), it was a deal I never regretted.

Mamie Van Lingen, my teacher, was a short, squat woman with three howling kids, a house strewn with junk and a magnificent soprano voice. Each Wednesday afternoon I picked my way through baby carriages, tinker toys, carom boards and laundry piles to settle on one edge of the piano bench. Mamie sat on the rest of the bench. We opened the D. A. Clippinger *Class Method of Voice Culture* book and began. It was a half hour that flew by. She sang; I imitated. We worked on scales and breathing and enunciation. I still claim to be able to sing Robert Louis Stevenson's "I Have a Little Shadow" with perfect articulation faster than anyone in the world.

When I started high school, I stopped taking voice lessons. And the solo I sang in chapel that year was the last soprano solo I ever sang. Early the next summer I went to Bible camp where I kissed my first girl and was head over heels in love for at least two weeks. Late that same summer I had a real date. I took a girl named Genevieve to "The Song of Hiawatha," an outdoor pageant that lasted deep into the night. It was an unusually cold August night, and in an effort to survive the cold I remained locked in an almost perpetual sideways embrace with Genevieve for the three hours of the pageant. At some point between my Bible Camp kiss and Genevieve, my voice changed and I didn't even notice.

After my voice changed and I became a mediocre baritone, I continued to sing solos. I liked the praise I got, but it was more than that. I liked the feeling that singing gave me. I still do. But I don't understand it.

Music is mystery. Being a boy soprano opened me to the mystery of singing. If my mother pushed me into soloing, I'm glad, for she pushed me into mystery.

I know that scientists can say how tone is produced, but they cannot write a manual telling you how to sing on key or explaining why one person can hear a note and sing it while the next person can't even come close. Once, after I sang several solos in a cantata, an acquaintance who didn't sing expressed amazement that with each note change I was able to make my voice go to just the right pitch. "How do you do that," he asked. I couldn't answer him. I'd never been asked such a profound question about singing before. If he had asked me how singing made me feel I could have told him: melancholy, exhilarated, alive, sexy. But I couldn't have told him why. Mystery. When I sing I am king, dilly, dilly. Or nobody knows de trouble I've seen. Or I'm prostrate before my Lord and King.

I remember that as a small child and right up into junior high, I often sang myself to sleep at night. These days, as I ride in the car at night, I like to sing. Occasionally, that can be embarrassing. One hot summer night, singing along with Aretha Franklin at the top of my voice "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman" while stopped at a red light, I looked over at the guy in the lane next to me. He just shook his head and looked the other way. Most often, though, it is purely exhilarating. As the car laps up the midnight miles and my wife and kids lie snugly asleep, I sing. I become Satchmo, Nat King Cole, Elvis, Pavorotti. I soar. I dive. I am amazing.