

Voice: Disembodiment and Desire

– Et, ô ces voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupole!
 Paul Verlaine, 'Parsifal' (1886)¹

In the early 1890s, both John Addington Symonds and Arthur Symons were fascinated by Paul Verlaine's sonnet 'Parsifal' – in particular, by its final line, which dwells upon the voices of singing children. Symonds enthused to Symons that it was 'a line [to] treasure forever' while, nevertheless, noting his reservations to Horatio Forbes Brown that 'fine as it is, [it] looks like it [. . .] must be rather of the sickly school'.² In an article on Verlaine, Symons praised the poem as a 'triumph [of] amazing virtuosity', echoing the sentiments of his friend George Moore, who in *Confessions of a Young Man* (1886) exclaimed that he 'kn[ew] of no more perfect thing than this sonnet'.³ With its quasi-chiasmic repetition of assonant vowel sounds, Verlaine's closing line captures the gentle rise heavenwards of the ethereal voices of Richard Wagner's offstage choristers, resounding above the stage at the conclusion of the opera. The hiatus with which the line opens functions as a sigh of renunciation as the listeners abandon themselves to the inexpressible force of the transcendent. In Verlaine's sonnet, these children's voices become the epitome of the 'disembodied voice' that Symons sees as so characteristic of Decadent poetics.⁴ They sing of the delicate immateriality of spiritual experience, the transient fragility of existence.

Curiously, when Symonds first recalled the line – in the letter to Horatio Forbes Brown cited above – he misremembered it, so that the children do not sing out of sight, in the dome of a cathedral ('dans la coupole'), but are rendered more immediately spatially present 'in the choir' ('dans la chœur'). Symonds's mistake is a significant one because it points to a broader tension in his own writings, and in Victorian culture

more generally, between the child's singing voice as a disembodied emblem of idealized beauty and the bodily materiality of a singing voice that becomes the object of 'sickly' desire. Verlaine's final line awakens in Symonds the memory of his own experiences as a young man, in which the voice of a chorister – singing before him 'dans la chœur' – first prompted the stirrings of his queer sexual desire.

Symonds's desires for the singing voices of prepubescent boys can best be understood if we situate them within the wider Victorian context of eroticized childhood innocence while also having regard to insights provided by psychoanalytic theories of voice. In this way, it becomes possible to articulate the significance of ideas of disembodiment – the denial of the body – that attach to such voices. Drawing attention to the manner in which the vocal 'innocence' of the chorister is produced reveals the complicity of Victorian religious institutions in indirectly contributing to the eroticization of children. More generally, the pederastic listening practices engaged in by Symonds and his contemporaries present a challenge to the frequent romanticization in queer studies of the singing voice as a space in which sexual desire may be freely and unproblematically explored.⁵

Recent work in queer studies and queer musicology has emphasized, in a variety of ways, the significance of the singing voice in articulations of the queer desiring body. The queer potential of gender-indeterminate voices that refuse to match their sexed bodies, such as that of the castrato, has been explored by a number of critics.⁶ As noted above, for example, Patricia Pulham has argued that the voice of the castrato in Vernon Lee's 'A Wicked Voice' is a 'potent symbol of [lesbian] empowerment'.⁷ From a more general perspective, Roland Barthes's paeans to the pleasures of the embodied singing voice in essays such as 'Le grain de la voix' ('The Grain of the Voice') form part of what D. A. Miller has called the 'gay male cultural project of resurrecting the flesh'.⁸ Freya Jarman-Ivens has examined those disjunctive and failing bodies whose modes of vocal production act to challenge the ideology of the 'natural' voice in a way that reveals the voice as a 'queer space' through which non-normative sexual identities may be articulated.⁹ Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat* has playfully celebrated the operatic voice – particularly the female voice – as a flamboyant emblem of liberated sexual desire.¹⁰ For Koestenbaum, the emotionally overwhelming experience of listening to the operatic voice dissolves the safe boundaries of subjectivity in a way that might liberate and empower the queer listener. The intense identification of gay male listeners with the operatic diva arises, he suggests, because the diva's

forcefully visceral voice offers a space in which desire is triumphantly and proudly theatricalized. In similar terms, Terry Castle has celebrated the erotics of a specifically lesbian style of musical spectatorship in her writing on the mezzo-soprano Brigitte Fassbaender.¹¹ Such work has often appeared to suggest that the (queer) pleasures one might discover in the singing voice are limitless. Yet in doing so, such critics have often overlooked modes of queer vocal consumption that do not contribute to such a utopian narrative of sexual liberation. Turning to the example of the chorister's voice not only challenges the prevalent idealization of the singing voice as a 'queer space', but also allows for the renewed focus on the queer desire for those voices which reject and eschew – rather than affirm – the materiality of the body.

This chapter situates the fetishization of the chorister's voice among wider Victorian discourses of childhood innocence. Drawing upon late Victorian vocal treatises, it proceeds to examine the process of vocal training through which the 'ethereal' voice of the Victorian chorister was produced. It examines a number of literary texts that focus on the chorister's voice, drawing attention to the paradoxical manner in which the chorister's voice functions simultaneously to assert and disavow their embodied presence. The discussion then proceeds to a more detailed case study, examining the significance of the chorister's voice and body in the writings of Symonds. The section that follows pays particular attention to the figure of the 'breaking voice' as an emblem of queer loss and transience. The final section offers an alternative theoretical perspective on the idea of the child's voice as a desired object of loss by examining aspects of Symonds's letters and *Memoirs* in the light of psychoanalytic theories of the voice.

In drawing attention to the problematics of such pederastic vocal consumption, my work responds to recent work in queer studies calling for closer engagement with those shameful and embarrassing aspects of queer history that many in the queer community today might prefer to forget.¹² Writing queer history has long been recognized as an important process through which modern queer identities are constructed and articulated.¹³ Indeed, Symonds's own works of queer history – 'A Problem in Greek Ethics' (1883) and 'A Problem in Modern Ethics' (1891) – are important early contributions to this project.¹⁴ Recent work in queer studies has moved beyond the impulse to restore the queer subject to history. Earlier queer historians and critics, such as George Chauncey, were motivated by a desire to reverse the process of what they saw as 'homophobic erasure' – to challenge the manner in which the queer subject is

'hidden from history'.¹⁵ Yet in constructing their accounts of queer history, such scholars often tacitly repressed those aspects of the queer past that failed to contribute to the emancipatory political project in which they were engaged. The pernicious association between homosexuality and paedophilia that persists in contemporary homophobic discourses is one understandable reason why queer historians have remained hesitant in addressing pederastic aspects of Victorian sexuality.

Such an approach serves to complicate and challenge established assumptions surrounding the consumption of Victorian musical culture more generally. Sacred music in England in the second half of the nineteenth century was often explicitly designed to promote moral self-discipline (typified, perhaps, by John Hullah's introduction of the 'fixed' sol-fa system of sight-singing in 1842).¹⁶ Scholars have generally taken as axiomatic the assertions of H. R. Haweis's influential *Music and Morals* (1871), which argues enthusiastically for the spiritual and moral edification promoted by Victorian church music.¹⁷ The idea that the experience of listening to music in cathedrals or chapels might elicit homosexual desires, perhaps unsurprisingly, finds no place in contemporaneous accounts of the cultural significance of Victorian religious music.

Any scholarly attention to this aspect of queer history has a duty to maintain a dual perspective. One must seek to historicize in a way that is sensitive to Victorian discourses on childhood and sexuality. Yet, as Rita Felski has argued, it is necessary to do so in a manner that does not seek to use history as an alibi.¹⁸ Rather than blotting out the feelings which colour our engagement with history, we must dispassionately admit to the awkwardness and discomfort that attach to our reading of Victorian accounts of pederastic desire. The discussion that follows presents its textual evidence and analysis in the familiar form of a systematic argument. A quite different approach might dwell on the oscillating feelings of empathy and disgust, identification and repulsion that accompany a reading of Symonds's *Memoirs* and letters. Immersing oneself in the minutiae of Symonds's life as mediated through his correspondence, one is inevitably drawn sympathetically towards a figure who so often seems crippled by his experience of sexual shame. Yet unfolding in the fragmented narrative of Symonds's correspondence with Henry Graham Dakyns, for example, is also a discomfiting revelation of Symonds's sexual desire for prepubescent boys and his calculated sexual grooming of the teenage schoolboys in his care.

A closer attention to Symonds's fascination with the voice of the chorister also offers new perspectives on the relationship between aesthetic experience, intergenerational desire and the emergence of queer

subjectivity in the works of this central figure in the history of homosexuality. Recent work by Stefano Evangelista and Jana Funke has contributed much to scholarly understanding of Symonds's engagement with Hellenic ideas of pederasty and his concerns about age-appropriate relationships.¹⁹ However, both take as their starting point Symonds's ideas on sexual desire as presented in the mature works of his final years, written in the 1880s and early 1890s. The discussion that follows focusses more closely on Symonds's experiences as a young man in the 1860s, as presented in his letters and his posthumously published *Memoirs*. Funke's work acknowledges Symonds's attraction to 'ephebic' youths, but overlooks his arguably more problematic infatuation, as a young man, with prepubescent boys.²⁰ In privileging Symonds's discomfort with intergenerational relationships in his later years over his earlier sexual attraction to children, Funke presents Symonds as a figure more easily assimilated to the norms of contemporary queer identity.

Discourses that eroticize the voice of the chorister are closely bound up with those that serve to legitimate the sexual abuse of children. While work by George Rousseau and others has done much to foreground the historical contingency of ideas of childhood and appropriate sexual behaviour, it is necessary to emphasize that the power disparities between children and adults within Victorian institutions such as Anglican cathedrals and Oxford college chapels have nevertheless remained broadly similar across time.²¹ In terms of their young age, frequently lower-class background and low position within an institutional hierarchy, choristers in Victorian England were clearly vulnerable to abuse. That there is not more historical evidence pointing to the sexual abuse of choristers in Victorian England seems more likely to be the result of institutional silencing, lack of reporting and systematic cover-up than of its not having occurred. More broadly, while there were well-established legal and social discourses relating to the sexual abuse of young girls in Victorian England, the sexual abuse of boys was almost never discussed. As Louise Jackson has noted, even when such abuse was recognized, it was 'frequently side-stepped and concealed'.²² Sexual assault experienced by boys was probably under-reported because of the shame of its victims. In the context of Symonds's own life, Sean Brady has noted the conspiracy of silence that surrounded the resignation of Charles John Vaughan, Headmaster of Harrow School, following his sexual involvement with his pupils.²³ The Victorian establishment was skilfully adept at protecting the reputations of those men implicated in the sexual abuse of children. One unfortunate effect of the archival silences that accompany such potential scandals is that an account of the

eroticization of the chorister must depend almost exclusively on the written testimony of the men who fetishized the voices of these children. The sexual abuse of children within religious institutions such as the Anglican and Catholic Churches continues to be a matter of grave concern today.²⁴ It is only right that our engagement with the often problematic relationship between adults and children in earlier historical periods continues to unsettle.²⁵

Victorian Choristers and the Construction of Vocal Innocence

Roland Barthes's essay 'The Grain of the Voice' has been instrumental in drawing attention to the singing voice as an object of desire.²⁶ Following Julia Kristeva's distinction between 'pheno-text' and 'geno-text', Barthes contrasts the 'pheno-song' with the 'geno-song': the former is the aspect of vocal performance connected with the rules of genre, the style of interpretation, the structure of the language being sung; the latter is the presence of 'the body in the voice as it sings'.²⁷ For Barthes, the revelation of this bodily 'grain', together with the manner in which it opens up an intimacy between the singer and the listener, allows the singing voice to become a pleasurable object of erotic desire. 'There is no human voice which is not an object of desire', Barthes suggests, because the singing voice represents 'the materiality of the body emerging from the throat'.²⁸ Barthes experiences an 'individual thrill' when listening to the 'bodily' voice of Charles Panzera, while he dismisses the apparently 'grainless' vocal style of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as 'an art that inoculates pleasure'.²⁹ Yet such an approach, while typically playful, is perhaps too rigidly schematic. Barthes's essay contributes much to his wider project of asserting the importance of pleasure and desire in the aesthetic encounter, but its framework remains an imperfect tool for analysing the manifold cultural meanings attached to the singing voice. Certainly, it does nothing to account for the manner in which resolutely 'grainless' voices, such as that of the chorister, become eroticized nonetheless. The training of the Victorian chorister's voice acts to eradicate all trace of the body from this voice. In doing so, it makes the voice perversely attractive to the Victorian listener as an object of fetishized innocence. Barthes fails to account for the desire invested in those voices that efface the body, deny the embodied aspect of the voice and resist corporeal intimacy between singer and listener. In order to account for the voice as an object of desire, it is necessary to turn to history in order to better understand the cultural meanings ascribed to such voices.

The angelic voice of the Anglican chorister is one of many emblems of childhood innocence manufactured by the Victorians. As Timothy Day has observed, the style of vocal production that characterizes the chorister – often described as ‘pure’, ‘otherworldly’ or ‘ethereal’ – emerged only in the latter part of the nineteenth century.³⁰ Such developments in English church music were closely connected to the influence of the Oxford Movement in the Anglican Church, and its reassertion of a religious spiritualism and ritualism imbued with a sense of aesthetic beauty.³¹ A number of critics have explored the manner in which the religious and aesthetic discourses that developed within such High Church and Anglo-Catholic traditions allowed for the articulation of queer desire.³² However, outside this narrow religious context, the development of the chorister’s voice can be better understood as a product of the wider Victorian fetishization of childhood innocence. Following from Philippe Ariès’s seminal – though now much challenged – work on the historical emergence of the idea of the ‘child’ in *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), the discursive construction of the ‘innocent child’ in literature and visual culture has been influentially examined by a number of critics and cultural historians.³³ The innocence of the idealized Victorian child is almost always present in descriptions of a beautiful ‘pure’ voice: a voice that soars out of the body, seemingly abandoning the embodied materiality that might taint it with desiring flesh. Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1884) – a novel in which, as Gillian Avery has noted, the word ‘innocence’ recurs ‘like the beat of a drum’ – is typical in this regard.³⁴ Cedric, the titular ‘Little Lord’, sings in church with a ‘pure, sweet, high voice rising as clear as the song of a bird’. The idealized tableau is completed when ‘a long ray of sunshine [. . .] slanting through a golden pane of a stained glass window, brightened the falling hair about his young head’. The child’s aural and visual beauty has evidently found the sanction of divine Providence, a view with which the reader is prompted to concur. Yet Hodgson Burnett’s text also reveals the manner in which the child’s voice becomes an object of adult desire. While the child sings, he is observed (and listened to) voyeuristically from the ‘curtain-shielded corner of the pew’ by his grandfather, who ‘forgot himself a little’ in ‘his pleasure in it’.³⁵ Despite the prevalence of the trope of vocal innocence, accounts of Victorian childhood have generally overlooked its significance as a key site in the construction of childhood innocence more broadly.

James Kincaid’s *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* argues that those Victorian discourses that insist so resolutely on the innocence of the child in fact act to constitute the child as an object of

erotic allure: 'The special construction of "the child" during [the nineteenth century] and slightly before it made it available to desire in a way not previously possible, made it available by, among other things, making it different, a strange and alien species that was once [...] continuous with the adult.'³⁶ In other words, discourses that relentlessly reinforce a rigid conceptual distinction between the 'Child' and the 'Adult' act to posit the former as a desired Other. Insistence on childhood purity and asexuality creates what Kincaid calls a 'subversive echo': the endlessly circulating virtues of childhood innocence become erotically alluring because they are so rigorously proscribed.³⁷ Kincaid's approach remains controversial. His style, characterized by the playfulness typical of much deconstructive criticism of the early 1990s, seems disengaged from the painful reality of sexual abuse. As Louise Jackson has noted, his critique fails to engage with feminist thought that has analysed sexual violence in relation to structures of power and authority.³⁸ Yet his central thesis is convincing and has provided the basis for subsequent work, such as Kevin Ohi's *Innocence and Rapture* (2005), which is unafraid to examine the manner in which the figure of the child often elicits covert sexual pleasure in Victorian literature and culture.³⁹

Significantly, this child's ethereal voice is the product of a mode of bodily training that often seeks to conceal the embodied origins of vocal production. Victorian vocal treatises on the voice of the chorister typically draw a distinction between the 'head voice' (or 'thin register') and the 'chest voice' (or 'thick register'). The main point of contention between these treatises relates to the extent to which each register should be used. Implicitly at stake here are questions of masculinity and embodiment: the more powerful, 'throaty' sound is claimed by a masculinist 'muscular Christianity', while the ethereal, disembodied voice is aligned with a High Anglicanism frequently castigated for its apparent effeminacy. Use of the head voice came to be one of the defining factors of the vocal style of the Anglican chorister. Proponents of the head voice described its sound as 'pure', 'sweet' and 'limpid',⁴⁰ while deriding the chest voice as 'rough', 'throaty', 'harsh' and 'strident'.⁴¹ Victorian voice trainers in the Anglican tradition would be highly unlikely to argue for the exclusive use of the chest voice: those who defended its 'power' and 'breadth' typically did so from a position critical of the Anglican musical establishment.⁴² Exclusive use of the head voice, they suggested, risks producing a sound that lacks 'verve', 'vigour' and 'character' and is defined by its 'colourlessness'.⁴³ The development of the head voice continued to be the primary focus of Anglican voice trainers until the 1950s, when figures such as George

Malcolm (Master of Music of Westminster Cathedral, 1947–59) began to develop a fuller, more robust chorister sound. Malcolm's methods aimed to reinstate something of the exuberance of boyhood that he felt had been dampened by Victorian propriety.⁴⁴

G. Edward Stubbs's *Practical Hints on the Training of Choir Boys* (1888) is typical of many late nineteenth-century vocal treatises in its demands for choir trainers to cultivate 'pure and musical' head voices over the 'rough and boisterous' chest voice.⁴⁵ Stubbs's later treatise – *Current Methods of Training Boys' Voices* (1898) – insists even more forcefully that the chorister should never sing with the chest voice. 'It cannot be asserted enough', he stresses, 'that the thick register of the boy voice is NOT what Nature designed for singing'.⁴⁶ The choirmaster should aim to 'eliminate entirely' the use of the chest voice by gradually extending the use of the head voice downwards into the lower register of the voice.⁴⁷ Francis Howard's *The Child-Voice in Singing* (1898) assumes a position similar to that of Stubbs. The focus of his treatises is on promoting the use of the head voice; the chest voice, he concludes, is 'wholly objectionable'. In practice, Stubbs's and Howard's insistence on the exclusive use of the head voice appears to have been a rather extreme position, and it is unclear how widely such an approach was adopted. A more typical approach was propounded by George Martin (Organist and Master of the Choristers of St Paul's Cathedral, 1888–1916) in his influential *The Art of Training Choir Boys* (1877). Rather than developing the strength of the head voice into the lower register, Martin's approach allowed for use of both chest voice and head voice. His 'golden rule' – upon which, he insisted, the 'whole secret of training boys successfully depends' – was that the chest voice should never be forced into the register above *b'*.⁴⁸ Vocal innocence is contingent, then, on maintaining the illusion of disembodiment, on attaining a mode of vocal production that disguises the means of its own production in the lungs, throat and diaphragm. Elimination of the 'chest' voice is motivated by a desire to disguise those vocal colours that seem to have their origins in the depths of the material body rather than the ethereal heavenly heights.

The disembodied phantasmagoria of the chorister's voice also accrues much of its cultural resonance from its dialectical opposition to the sensuous, vibrato-laden voice of the opera singer, particularly that of the operatic diva.⁴⁹ In texts such as George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1895), the physical power of the operatic voice threatens to emotionally overwhelm its listeners. When the novel's protagonist, Little Billee, listens to an Italian tenor, his voice is presented in terms that ascribe to it a pleasurable power of physical coercion that verges on the sado-masochistic: 'caught, surprised, rapt,

astounded, shaken, tickled, teased, harrowed, tortured, tantalized, aggravated, seduced, demoralized'.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the effect of the titular character's astoundingly virtuosic singing voice – a 'monstrous development of the human larynx' – reduces Little Billee to hysterical fits of sobbing.⁵¹ In Victorian novels, from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) to George Moore's *Evelyn Innes* (1898), the voice of the operatic soprano becomes so charged with sexual desire that it risks calling into question the virtue of the singer who produces it.⁵² For Walt Whitman – one of Symonds's most profound influences – the operatic voice was similarly sexually charged. The 'Song of Myself' (1855) is typical in its ecstatic praise of the erotics of the singing voice: 'A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me, / The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.'⁵³ As Koestenbaum has persuasively argued, such operatic voices became, in certain circles, 'the sound of nineteenth-century sexuality'.⁵⁴ The nineteenth-century operatic voice vibrates with desire because it draws the listener deep in to the recesses of the body through its visceral power and heft. In contrast, the voice of the chorister typically insists on disembodiment. It disavows the vibrating chest and throat, demanding a tone produced only in the head. In the process, it attains a state of what is resolutely referred to as 'purity': a vocal tone that implicitly connotes sexual innocence.

The Desired Chorister in Nineteenth-Century Literature

Such disembodied vocal innocence is consistently foregrounded in representations of choristers and singing children in queer nineteenth-century literature. These texts are notable for the extent to which they fixate not solely on the visual attraction of the desired child, but also on the apparently seductive timbre of the child's voice. For example, while a student at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1805, Byron notoriously fell in love with a fifteen-year-old chorister in Trinity College chapel, John Edleston: 'His *voice* first attracted my notice, his *countenance* fixed it, & his *manners* attached me to him forever.'⁵⁵ Edleston – who died in 1811 – was seemingly the inspiration for Byron's cycle of elegies addressed to 'Thyrza'. In 'Away, Away, Ye Notes of Woe!', the speaker is haunted by the 'well remember'd echoes' of Thyrza's voice, now transformed in his consciousness into a perpetually recurring funeral dirge.⁵⁶ Recollection of the voice of the departed is a familiar trope of the elegiac poetic tradition, yet the particularly intense poignancy invested in this lost voice surely suggests Byron's fixation with the beauty of Edleston's singing. While studying at Oxford, Gerard Manley Hopkins experienced similar desires, though he

acted with more characteristic self-restraint. In the extensive catalogue of confessed sins scrupulously recorded in his diaries, he admits in 1865 to 'looking at a chorister at Magdalen, and evil thoughts'.⁵⁷

In 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' (1889), Wilde's narrator speculates that Willie Hughes – the apparent dedicatee of Shakespeare's sonnets – may have started his life as a 'delicate chorister of a Royal Chapel'. Wilde's text offers a broadly historically plausible hypothesis that Hughes may have progressed from chorister to boy actor: in Elizabethan London, the so-called Children of the Chapel also intermittently performed as a troupe of child actors.⁵⁸ But in focussing on Hughes's 'clear and pure' voice the text also mobilizes this history as a site of queer pederastic fantasy.⁵⁹ Indeed, the association between aestheticism, sexual deviance and the desire for choristers was sufficiently well established by the late nineteenth century for it to become the target of thinly veiled satire in Robert Hichens's *The Green Carnation* (1894). Here, the corrupting affectation of Esmé Amaranth and Lord Reggie is marked by, among other things, their predilection for beautiful young choristers. These boys are 'magnetised' and 'mesmerised' by the sight of the eponymous flowers these men wear in their lapels, falling 'hopelessly in love'.⁶⁰ Fantasy of a more explicitly sexual kind is at play in Ronald Firbank's *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926), in which the titular character meets his end while lasciviously chasing a chorister around the altar of his cathedral in the nude.⁶¹

Assuming a position of greater moral earnestness, Vernon Lee sees the attraction towards choristers as symptomatic of abnormal sexuality. In *The Countess of Albany* (1884), the libertine poet Alfieri's early childhood is defined by the 'curious passion which he experienced for [...] little choristers'. 'Silently, painfully', Lee's narrator notes, 'he seems to have yearned for them in solitude'. This aspect of Alfieri's 'morbid and sombre passionateness' exemplifies the 'indefinable imperfection of nature, some jar of character, or some great want, some original sin of mental constitution, which made him different from other men'. Lee's text inverts the usual age hierarchy of Victorian pederasty – here it is a young child desiring other young children (who are, in fact, *older* than him) – but it nevertheless does so in a manner that invokes the spectre of *fin-de-siècle* homosexuality: this desire is silenced, tortured, joyless and prompted by an unnameable and pathologized fault of 'constitution' that threatens his masculinity.⁶²

The chorister frequently becomes an explicit object of sexual desire in what Timothy d'Arch Smith calls 'Uranian' literature (that is, explicitly pederastic, often quasi-pornographic, literature of the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries).⁶³ Such literature often depicts the desire of a priest for a chorister in his charge. In Cuthbert Wright's poem 'The Chorister' (1915), for example, the priest recognizes through 'the yellow incense haze' of his church the face of a chorister whom he knew previously only as a '[s]treet-arab, gutter urchin, child / Incontinent and wild.' The text objectifies the child as an object of eroticized innocence while also positing him as a sexually aware seducer: his face is '[w]hite-chinned, red-lipped and clear', but he is, in fact, a 'surpliced faun' – a Pan-like figure of disguised erotic excess.⁶⁴ A further dimension of erotic frisson is introduced by the class differential; the priest desires to 'slum it' with a '[s]treet-arab' from the lower classes. Perhaps the most notorious example of such pederastic literature is John Francis Bloxham's 'The Priest and the Acolyte' (1894), a work that Wilde was forced to confront in his libel trial of 1895.⁶⁵ Bloxham's story concerns the intense desire of the young priest Ronald Heatherington for his fourteen-year-old acolyte, and the shame that leads to their double suicide when their relationship is discovered. While Heatherington's victim is not a chorister, the text nevertheless dwells on the priest's attraction to his 'soft, shy treble'; he is 'aroused' by the 'soft and gentle' quality of the child's voice.⁶⁶

John Gambriel Nicholson's *The Romance of a Choir-Boy* (1916) represents the apogee of such pederastic fetishization of the voice of the chorister.⁶⁷ Nicholson's text recounts the pursuit by Philip – a 'hollow-cheeked and careworn' recent graduate from Magdalen College, Oxford – of the twelve-year-old chorister Ted: 'a wonderfully pretty boy for a rustic' (18, 9). Semi-autobiographical in its contents, the novel was written between 1896 and 1905 but privately published only in 1916. The novel's intention to erotically titillate is clear from the outset. Philip first notices Ted while observing him voyeuristically from the long grass beside a bathing pool, taking photographs of the boy as he removes his clothes. This pederastic trope is familiar from Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'Epithalamium' and the paintings of Henry Scott Tuke.⁶⁸ Philip's desire for the boy is justified in the text by the fact that he allows him to realize his musical potential: the working-class Methodist escapes his background to become an Anglican chorister. Eventually, Ted rejects Philip's increasingly overt sexual advances: Philip 'engineer[s] everything' so that they might share a bed together, but the boy is disgusted by this progression of intimacy (185). Philip eventually realizes that his desire for the child must remain idealized: mere transitory physical desires cannot be allowed to distort the deeper and more profound spiritual intimacies that he seeks.

What distinguishes this text from other pederastic literature is its peculiarly intense focus on the visual and aural aspects of desire. The text closes with a detailed description of Philip's extensive collection of pederastic photographs, and the reader becomes complicit in Philip's visual pleasure as the text dwells on the details of each image: names, ages, bodies, positions, states of (un)dress. The narrator's intense attraction to the singing voice is presented in a similar way. The music of the Anglican liturgy becomes associated with Philip's desire for young boys. While Philip voyeuristically observes Ted from a distance, the narrator notes: 'A chant by Attwood was running in his head. An old Oxford episode made that chant very reminiscent of love to him [. . .] Now he tried to fit a new personality to its haunting melody' (73). The text teasingly refuses to reveal the precise details of this 'old Oxford episode', but it is clearly implied that Philip has fallen in love with a chorister before, and that this attraction is closely connected with this boy's vocal performance. 'As a Magdalen man', the narrator tells us later, 'Philip knew what [. . .] good boys' voices were' (76–77). Here, an unidentified psalm chant by Thomas Attwood operates in a manner akin to the 'petite phrase' in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1913–27), allowing Philip to nostalgically recapture the intensity of his lost desire.⁶⁹ He seeks to retain the thrill of this musical memory while substituting his previous object of desire for a new chorister, Ted.

Nicholson's text dwells insistently on the timbre of Ted's voice: it is 'clear, sweet and mellifluous as a thrush's note'; a 'glorious, pure soprano, soaring and vibrating' (76). This insistence on purity coincides with a less-than-subtle erotic suggestiveness. Philip listens 'enraptured to a boy possessed of a *natural organ* second to none he had ever heard in his life' (77, italics added). The voice assumes the status of phallus, penetrating the ear of the 'enraptured' passive listener. The pinnacle of Ted's musical achievement occurs at a service in St Paul's Cathedral, attended by thirteen hundred choristers from around the country. The scenario seems purposefully designed as an indulgent pederastic fantasy. Ted has been chosen as principal treble at this grand service. Philip's reaction to Ted's solo – sung in his 'superb soprano' – is similarly redolent of sexual excitement: 'His eyes were closed, his lips apart, and he drew his breath with quick little inspirations; his hands tightly gripped the back of the chair in front of him; his body swayed a little as though he was in a dream' (91).

In a later episode, Philip listens 'in a mellow haze of ecstasy' at evensong to 'the boys' high *penetrating* treble [. . .] *soaring up* like a tongue of flame on the top notes, and *sinking back*, as if in exhaustion, to the lower

ones [...] The effect was repeated – its repetition enhancing, and *driving home* the lovely cadences’ (154–55, italics added). The repeated mechanical movements of these penetrative voices, combined with their climactic ‘driving home’ and post-coital ‘sinking [...] in exhaustion’ leaves little to the imagination. In the text’s final description of Ted’s musical prowess, Nicholson even more explicitly elides the experience of listening to the child’s voice with that of passive sexual pleasure. Philip revels in the ‘exquisite delicate ecstasy [...] of the *penetrating* modulated tones; the *sharp* enjoyment of a subtle sensuous sensation, that was half *torture*, half *delight*’ (199, italics added). Nicholson wilfully evokes decadent excess with his Wildean word choice (‘exquisite’, ‘delicate’) and excessive sibilance.

Curiously, Nicholson characterizes this chorister’s voice in terms similar to those used by Henry James in *Portraits of Places* (1883) when he hears the choir of King’s College, Cambridge. Here ‘the beautiful boy voices rose together and touched the splendid vault’, where they ‘hung there, expanding and resounding, and then, like a rocket that spends itself, they faded and melted’.⁷⁰ James’s imagery of ascent, tumescence and climax is rendered additionally suggestive by the comparison of these resounding voices to a conspicuously phallic ‘rocket’. In this context, the word ‘spend’ retains its slang associations with ejaculation and orgasm. It is interesting to note that when James came to make changes for the New York Edition of ‘The Pupil’ (1891, rev. 1908) – his exploration of the intensely fraught desires underlying a teacher–pupil relationship – he compared the pubescent Morgan Moreen’s exclamations of being ‘ashamed’ to ‘a ring of passion, like some high silver note from a small cathedral chorister’.⁷¹ Here, the purity of the child’s unbroken voice functions as one of a number of textual emendations that serves to render the pederastic nature of Pemberton’s love for the child more explicit.

What such texts share is a fixation on the chorister’s voice as an emblem of desire that is disembodied: the child’s voice is always presented in terms of its mobility and its dislocation from the material body that produced it. While Victorian fiction is replete with examples of the eroticized throat and mouth of the soprano and tenor, depictions of the chorister’s voice insistently see it ‘soar’ away from the body. The desire for the voice of the chorister can be understood as part of a broader queer attachment, as explored in Chapter 2, to the disembodied and the immaterial – or, at least, an indulgence in the fantasy that sexual desire might be redeemed through its disembodied idealization into the aesthetic.

John Addington Symonds: *Music and Desire*

Such idealization is central to the personal writings of John Addington Symonds. The young Symonds is preoccupied with the question of how one might idealize one's sexual desire; as a young man, much under the spell of Plato, he is fixated with ideas of how such feelings might be idealized, so that they leave behind the tainted desiring flesh and embrace instead an elevating disembodied spirit. In his experiences of music – singing in particular – he most pressingly faces the difficulty of achieving such idealization: music at once speaks of the exalted, spiritual realm, while drawing him back continually to the visceral materiality of the desiring body. Before proceeding to focus on the significance of the voice of the chorister in Symonds's writings, it is thus instructive to provide a broader overview of the place of music in Symonds's life. While Symonds's interests in painting, sculpture and photography have been examined by a number of critics, his engagement with music has received little critical attention.⁷²

Although he was never a particularly talented musician, music was one of Symonds's greatest enthusiasms from an early age. As a schoolboy at Harrow, he was keenly involved in the chapel choir and campaigned vigorously for the improvement of musical standards at the school. It was 'really dreadful', he wrote to his sister Charlotte, that a school of four hundred boys could produce 'no good singing'; the school's relentless focus on sports, he complained, left no time for music practice.⁷³ From his teenage years onwards, as attested by his letters, he had a voracious appetite for classical music of all kinds: opera (Mozart, Bellini, Verdi, Wagner); oratorio (Handel, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Spohr); orchestral music (particularly, Beethoven); lieder (Schubert, Schumann). While he was a student at Oxford, Symonds's non-academic reading was dominated by biographies of and novels about composers and musicians, such as Victor Schoelcher's *The Life of Handel* (1857) and Elizabeth Sheppard's *roman-à-clef* of Felix Mendelssohn, *Charles Auchester* (1853).⁷⁴ At the age of twenty, Symonds claimed to have read George Sand's *Consuelo* (1843) – a voluminous account of the intrigues of the life of an Italian opera singer – no fewer than six times.⁷⁵

In his quest to establish himself as a writer upon leaving Oxford, Symonds attempted to publish a number of pieces of music criticism. He had little success. In early 1863 he submitted an article entitled 'Music' – of which no copy survives – to the quarterly magazine the *National Review*. When it was returned to him with extensive corrections,

he decided not to seek to publish it elsewhere.⁷⁶ Later that year, he began composing a 'long analytical description of the Messiah' and planned to engage in similar 'musical rhapsodizing' upon Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, though neither piece was ultimately published.⁷⁷ Symonds also submitted an essay on Beethoven to *Macmillan's Magazine* in the early 1860s, but this was rejected by the magazine's editor, the leading Beethoven scholar George Grove.⁷⁸ It is unsurprising that Symonds failed to establish himself with writings on music: as he privately admitted to his sister Charlotte, 'music is not my forte, nor is it part of my education'.⁷⁹ Although the keenest of musical consumers, Symonds had formal training in neither music theory nor musical performance, and he himself believed that the perceptiveness of his criticism was hampered by his lack of practical musical proficiency. In his letters of this period, descriptions of music typically take the form of impressionistic reveries in which musical experience is transmuted at length into descriptions of colourful landscapes and tumultuous weather. Such descriptions were hardly uncommon in the 1860s, but they looked back to the figurative language of E. T. A. Hoffmann's musical Romanticism, rather than attaining to the analytical rigour expected of music criticism once it had emerged as an academic discipline.⁸⁰

Symonds subsequently dealt with music in only a handful of his published works. 'Cherubino at the Scala Theatre', discussed in Chapter 1, combines an impressionistic account of a performance of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* with a symposium-style debate on the nature of musical meaning. 'Palestrina and the Origins of Modern Music' in the seventh volume of Symonds's *Renaissance in Italy* shows the breadth of his knowledge of musical history, but lacks the rapt intensity of musical description found in his letters and the *Memoirs*.⁸¹ Such an accusation could not be made of Symonds's sketch 'Beethoven's Concerto in E Dur' (1893), his contribution to Lord Alfred Douglas's short-lived undergraduate journal *The Spirit Lamp*. Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 becomes in Symonds's imagination a work of decadent excess; its orchestral timbre provokes 'shuddering thrills' that resonate viscerally through the desiring flesh: it is 'beyond *pure* music', not wholly 'legitimate'.⁸²

Symonds's engagement with musical culture was curtailed towards the end of his life by his Alpine isolation in Davos. There were occasional concerts by visiting musicians; Symonds's letters to Horatio Forbes Brown, for example, include enthusiastic accounts of a Beethoven piano concerto

and a recital including 'Bach's supreme chaconne'.⁸³ Nevertheless, it is clear that Symonds missed the vibrant musical culture he left behind in England. Lamenting his inability to travel to Bayreuth to hear Wagner's *Parsifal* in 1884 due to ill health, he wrote to Mary Robinson, 'I feel that the greatest art-evolution of my epoch is going on beyond my reach of experience – as much beyond it as if it were on the Moon.'⁸⁴

The experience of music in Symonds's writings is frequently connected with the negotiation of intense sexual desire. 'Music', he noted in his diary in 1871, 'intensifies what is within those whom [one] loves' – that is, afforded a power to heighten the force of desire.⁸⁵ A lack of 'music' functions repeatedly as a figure for the absence of sexual 'spark'. When Symonds reveals in the *Memoirs* the intense feelings of disgust, embarrassment and humiliation that accompanied sexual intercourse with his wife, he laments that he 'missed something in the music – the coarse and hard vibrations of sex, those exquisite agonies of contact'. The only desire he feels for her is 'too pure, too spiritual, too etherealized'.⁸⁶ The physical materiality of music – its vibration in space, the manner in which it is felt by the body – stands as a metaphor for desire expressed physically in sexual intercourse. In similar terms, one of Symonds's most overtly homoerotic texts, 'In the Key of Blue' (1893), recruits a synaesthetic language of Whistlerian impression, combining metaphors of the musical and the visual to celebrate the 'symphony of hues' of the naked male body.⁸⁷ Elsewhere, Symonds frequently alludes to musical examples in his letters to express the exhilaration, misery and frustration of his unrequited or unconsummated same-sex desire. At the conclusion of a letter to Henry Graham Dakyns, Symonds laments the fact that Norman Moor, a school pupil with whom he has become intensely besotted, 'just cares for me' – that is, is not sexually interested in him. Symonds gestures towards the 'thunder obbligato' that concludes Robert Schumann's setting of Heinrich Heine's 'Ich grolle nicht' in the song cycle *Dichterliebe* (1840). Schumann presents Heine's poem as an insistent declaration by a spurned lover that he will heroically endure his rejection, having realized the cruel true nature of his beloved. The repeated subdominant and tonic chords in the piano accompaniment with which the song closes ironically over-perform this insistence, suggesting that the lover is merely disguising his emotional upset with a gesture of bravado. Symonds's reference is evidently a shared private joke between the correspondents, but by appending this reference to the close of his letter, he seems to acknowledge to Dakyns that he recognizes the slight ridiculousness of his melodramatic lament.

Symonds and the Choristers: Bristol and Oxford

Symonds's negotiations of music and desire are at their most fraught in his involvement with choristers. The chorister's voice, in Symonds's earliest writings, at first seems to represent an emblem of idealized beauty, capable of transmuting erotic desire into something nobler. Yet despite their apparent promise of ethereal disembodiment, such is the embodied reality of these voices that they continually draw Symonds back towards the temptations of the desiring flesh. The place of the chorister's voice in these private personal writings can be brought into sharper focus in the light of his published works, especially his poetry. Symonds's little-known sonnet 'The Chorister' (1883) is particularly illuminating in this respect:

Snow on the high-pitched minster roof and spire:
 Snow on the boughs of leafless linden trees:
 Snow on the silent streets and squares that freeze
 Under night's wing down-drooping nigh and nigher.
 Inside the church, within the shadowy choir,
 Dim burn the lamps like lights on vaporous seas;
 Drownsed are the voices of droned litanies;
 Blurred as in dreams the face of priest and friar.
 Cold hath numbed sense to slumber here! But hark,
 One swift soprano, soaring like a lark,
 Startles the stillness; throbs that soul of fire,
 Beats around arch and aisle, floods echoing dark
 With exquisite aspiration; higher, higher,
 Yearns in sharp anguish of untold desire!⁸⁸

The sonnet is closely attentive to the movement of the voice in space. Here, the thrilling force afforded to the chorister's voice accrues through its contrast with the stillness that precedes it. The repeated inverted feet in the octave give a sense of sound being dampened down: the 'silent streets' muffled in the fallen '[s]now', the voices '[d]rownsed' in the haze of incense. The snow falling through the 'night' becomes the soft-feathered wing of a bird, 'down-drooping' over the nestling cityscape. The flatness of this soundscape is captured in the dull assonances – 'shadowy', 'vaporous', '[d]rownsed', 'voices', 'droned' – that render 'numbed' sense in a state of 'slumber'. At the volta on line 9, the 'swift soprano' – the chorister's voice – rises up to break the silence. The movement of this voice is energized not only through Symonds's sibilance ('soaring', '[s]tartles the stillness; throbs that soul') but also from the iambic regularity of line 10, which is surprisingly buoyant after the metrical complexity of the lines that precede it. The sibilance that powers the chorister's voice to fill the 'arch and aisle'

leaves its traces also in the forceful and percussive inverted feet – ‘Startles’, ‘Beats’, ‘Yeans’ – that express the ‘anguish’ of the sestet.

In a way similar to Symonds’s more private personal writings, the poem negotiates the boundaries between idealized and fleshly desire. The ‘throbs’ and ‘[b]eats’ of the voice see it presented as a pulsating heart. Yet the expansive tumescence of this fleshly throbbing organ, as it ‘floods’ the space of the ‘arch and aisle’ and rises climactically ‘higher, higher’, certainly hints also at an oddly phallic agency. The voice’s ‘exquisite aspiration’ indicates, for Symonds, both the delicate ascendance of the pure soul to paradise and the thrilling material presence of the singer’s eroticized breath. This knowing ambiguity signals that the ‘untold desire’ belongs not only to the voice, or to the child singer, but also to the Victorian fetishistic listener, unable to sustain the idealizing claims of disembodied vocal innocence.

The ‘minster’ of the sonnet is St Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna: the poem is based on one of Symonds’s dream visions, recounted in ‘Winter Nights at Davos’ in *Italian Byways* (1883), in which this is made clear.⁸⁹ The text nevertheless gains an indirect association with the Oxford college chapels of Symonds’s youth through its mode of publication and material circulation. In autumn 1883 Symonds received a request from Thomas Herbert Warren – then a fellow at Magdalen College – to submit his work for inclusion in a new weekly newspaper, *The Oxford Magazine*. In response, he sent the magazine’s editor three sonnets, including ‘The Chorister’, that were subsequently to be collected in *Vagabunduli Libellus* (1884). The poem looks back to and draws on Symonds’s experiences in Oxford as a much younger man.

From 1858 to 1863, Symonds divided his time between his family home at Clifton Hall House, Bristol, and the University of Oxford. He regularly attended choral services at Bristol Cathedral and, in Oxford, at Magdalen and New College chapels and occasionally Christ Church Cathedral. Over the course of these years, Symonds engaged in a series of increasingly emotionally fraught relationships with a number of choristers he heard singing in these institutions. When not studying at Oxford or at home in Clifton, Symonds spent much of his spare time over the course of these years visiting a succession of English cathedral cities. Between 1859 and 1862 his letters to Charlotte detail attendance at services at St Paul’s Cathedral, London (January 1859) and the cathedrals of Durham, Bangor and York (June 1859), Chester (August 1861), Norwich (October 1861) and Worcester (April 1862). Symonds’s letters focus particularly on his musical experiences during these visits, dwelling in most detail on the

musicianship and vocal quality of the choirs he hears. In Durham in June 1859, Symonds enthuses to Charlotte that the cathedral has ‘the best Trebles in England’.⁹⁰ In Worcester in April 1862 he notes that ‘the choir [...] seems glorious & will soon be finer still’.⁹¹ Chester’s cathedral choir, in comparison, is ‘good – not brilliant but sound & sturdy’.⁹² After a trip to Norwich Cathedral in October 1861, Symonds writes nostalgically to his sister: ‘I wonder what has become of the solo boys I heard sing “Oh rest in the Lord” & “I know that my Redeemer liveth”’. One of them was called Smith, I think.’⁹³

Symonds’s first significant same-sex relationship was with Willie Dyer, a chorister at Bristol Cathedral. Symonds first met Dyer in April 1858, when he himself was aged seventeen. Dyer, born in April 1843, was fourteen years old at the time.⁹⁴ While their relationship was almost entirely unphysical, it was nevertheless one of the most significant of Symonds’s life. From the perspective of the *Memoirs*, written over thirty years later, Symonds would reflect: ‘I have never felt the same unreason and unreasoning emotion for any other human being.’⁹⁵ Significantly, his first encounter with Dyer occurred just after the ‘revelation’ of his discovery of same-sex desire expressed in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.⁹⁶ Symonds places a remarkable emphasis on the quality of Dyer’s singing voice. His account in the *Memoirs* of his first encounter with Dyer in Bristol Cathedral is as follows:

[M]y eyes fell on a chorister who sat nearly opposite the stall which I had taken. His voice charmed me by its sharp ethereal melancholy. In timbre and quality it had something of a wood instrument [...]. As I gazed and listened through the psalms and service and litany, I felt that a new factor had been introduced into my life. The voice dominated. But the boy who owned the voice seemed the only beautiful, the only flawless thing I had ever seen.⁹⁷

Symonds draws attention to both the visual and the aural nature of his desire for the child. Indeed, Symonds’s rapt accounts of his visits to the cathedral return repeatedly to these twin attractions: ‘[l]ooking at the boy in church, *hearing* him sing’; ‘kneeling in cathedral stall, *listening* to anti-phones, *gazing* on beautiful faces’.⁹⁸ Here, Symonds’s visual objectification of the child is clear. Yet, as the text insists, it is the voice that ‘dominated’. Symonds’s fixation on the child’s voice presents it as an object independent of the child’s appearance or physical body: the voice that ‘dominated’ is conceptually separated from ‘the boy who owned the voice’. Indeed, the voice is afforded its own disembodied agency. It moves from ‘[h]is voice’ – tied closely to the body from which it is emitted – to ‘[t]he voice’. Symonds

invokes the familiar trope of the voice as a means of seduction : '[h]is voice charmed me'. The voice is the active subject of the sentence here, not the child, and it thus becomes an abstracted seductive force. In this way, the text can insist upon the 'flawless' sexual innocence of the child – it is the voice, not the child, that acts to seduce – while simultaneously investing the child's voice with sexual desire. The text leaves the nature of this voice's 'domination' ambiguous. It is the domination of the aural over the visual, but also the domination of the voice over the listener, the rendering of the listener joyfully passive. The voice's capability to 'charm' is attributed to its 'sharp ethereal melancholy'. Such disembodied otherality might be seen to reflect the transcendental mysticism of Tractarian Anglicanism (associated by the young Symonds with what he experienced as the 'aesthetic ecstasy [. . .] called religion') or the imperative expressed in Plato to idealize bodily sexual desire through the aesthetic.⁹⁹ Yet Symonds is also drawn towards the voice's evocation of pain and sadness. Here the voice's signification shifts again: the voice functions as an intimate revelation of Dyer's (apparent) inner self. The melancholy of the voice becomes key to its enticing quality: Symonds is drawn to Dyer by a sense of shared sorrow.

In 1860 Symonds – now aged twenty – became infatuated with another Bristol Cathedral chorister, Alfred Brooke. In contrast to his love for Dyer, Symonds's intense desire for this fourteen-year-old found expression only in his imagination. Nevertheless, the textual traces of this unfulfilled desire provide useful insights into Symonds's fetishization of the singing voice. Symonds's relationship with Brooke has been the subject of some confusion in accounts of Symonds's life: Grosskurth presents Symonds's sexual fantasies relating to Brooke as if they recount actual events; Rousseau conflates Alfred Brooke with Willie Dyer, erroneously suggesting that Symonds fell in love with Brooke while both were pupils at Harrow; Brady incorrectly states that 'Alfred Brook' [sic] was 'a fellow undergraduate' at Oxford.¹⁰⁰ Given such confusion, it is necessary to clarify the nature of Symonds's relationship with Brooke.

Alfred Brooke was born in Bristol in 1846. It appears that Symonds first met him in September 1859, at the home of the Reverend John Guthrie. The party was attended by a number of clergy associated with Bristol Cathedral, along with the choristers. The group performed music for the assembled guests. Symonds's account of the evening notes that 'we had nice Madrigals etc.: poor little Brooke came rather to grief in "As pants [the] hart"¹⁰¹'.¹⁰¹ Symonds seems subsequently to have strongly associated Brooke with the words of Psalm 42 or, perhaps, musical settings of this text.

During university vacations from his studies in Oxford, Symonds returned home to Bristol, where he regularly attended services at Bristol Cathedral. It was here that he first became infatuated with Brooke. Symonds's *Memoirs* recount:

I fell violently in love with a cathedral chorister called Alfred Brooke. The passion I conceived for him differed considerably from my affection for Willie Dyer. It was more intense, unreasonable, poignant – at one and the same time more sensual and more ideal. I still think that this boy had the most beautiful face I ever saw and the most fascinating voice I ever heard.¹⁰²

Symonds characteristically draws attention to the beauty of both Brooke's voice and his physical appearance. That his voice is 'fascinating' – in its contemporary meaning, spellbinding or enchanting – casts the boy as akin to a Siren, whose erotically alluring voice entices the pacified, weak-willed listener. Through his voice, the child becomes the seducer of the adult.

Incorporated in the *Memoirs* is what Symonds calls a 'prose dithyramb' – an ecstatic Dionysian hymn of praise – recounting his intense desire for Brooke. Symonds asserts in the *Memoirs* that the passage was composed 'in 1865 when the tyranny had been overlived but still vibrated in memory'.¹⁰³ That the 'tyranny' of Symonds's desire for Brooke should 'vibrate' suggests something of its connection to the 'vibrating voice' that instigated this desire. The passage's Biblical diction, archaic syntax and repetitive use of the first-person pronoun, alongside its joyfully self-assertive homoeroticism, represent Symonds at his most Whitmanesque, and it seems likely that it was composed in the wake of Symonds's discovery of the poet he viewed as a revolutionary proponent of liberated individualism.¹⁰⁴

But while the dithyramb's exalted tone of Old Testament prophecy certainly echoes Whitman, its Biblical allusions can also be placed within the Anglican tradition with which Symonds was closely familiar. The dithyramb bears an epigraph from the Latin Vulgate: '*Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum*', the opening verse of Psalm 42 (in the King James Version: 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks'). In heading the dithyramb with an epigraph from scripture, the text consciously echoes the form of the Anglican sermon, familiar from regular church attendance but also through widely circulated printed copies. Each of the sermons in John Keble's *Sermons for a Christian Year* (1827), for example, begins with a single verse of scripture, which introduces the passage upon which the sermon is based.¹⁰⁵ Part of this undoubtedly reflects Symonds's desire to reclaim something of the spiritualism of Tractarian Anglicanism in order to incorporate it into a more enthusiastic,

sexually liberated vision of what he called the 'illimitable symphony of cosmic life'.¹⁰⁶ Symonds's dithyramb subsequently contains nothing that approaches the equivalent of a theological exegesis that one would expect from a sermon, but it does proceed to draw specific parallels between the psalm and Symonds's experience of his desire for Brooke ('I thirst for him as the hart panteth after water brooks').¹⁰⁷ The 'brook' referred to in Psalm 42 is, of course, treated as a playful pun on the name of Alfred Brooke himself.

In contrast to those texts that dwell on the disembodied ethereality of the chorister's voice, Symonds's here focusses on the visual delight in Brooke's body, listing each detail of his anatomy with an intensity reminiscent of Whitman at his most rhapsodic. Brooke's voice leads him *into* the body. This lengthy description presents Brooke as if engaged in the act of singing: the text peers through the child's open lips into the 'humid' space of his 'large red [...] mouth'; inside it sees his 'vibrating voice', an animated larynx; it dwells upon the child's 'athletic throat and well-formed breast', from which this voice originates. There is 'invitation in the ringing voice; a readiness to grant favours': the intense, assertive power of the child's singing is a signal of his erotic availability, his apparent willingness to engage sexually with the listener. Later, the seductive force of the voice is asserted once again: 'the fascination of his voice and breathing drowsed me'. Within its erotically charged context, the voice's power to impose upon the listener a 'drowsed' tiredness suggests the alluring pleasures of sexual passivity: the voice renders the listener dominated, vulnerable, powerless.¹⁰⁸

In Symonds's dithyramb, the metaphor of 'panting', through which the psalm expresses the longing for God, becomes another image associated with the eroticized voice. The rapid rise and fall of the diaphragm, the shallow inspiration of the lungs, the swift movement of breath: panting animates the same anatomical machinery used by the singing voice, but it does so in a way that undoes the rigid bodily discipline demanded by vocal technique. In the psalm, such 'panting' is prompted by the deer's thirst, a metaphor for the soul's longing for divine salvation. Here, the desire for the divine is transformed into something explicitly sexual: it is the panting of sexual excitement, of coital exertion – the panting, perhaps, of the *heart*.

Symonds's erotic revelry is not just inspired by Brooke's voice and body, but also draws upon his recollection of performances of Anglican choral music. References to liturgical performances of settings of Psalm 42 occur repeatedly in his letters from around this time. In April 1859 Symonds heard 'a nice service at Magd[alen]' which included Handel's setting of 'As

Pants the Hart'. 'It was well sung', he noted in a letter to Charlotte, 'but I have *often* heard it done better'.¹⁰⁹ In December 1860 Symonds attended a service at Christ Church Cathedral expressly to hear Mendelssohn's 'As Pants the Hart' sung by Frederick William Pacey, a thirteen-year-old chorister. As noted above, it was the same setting of this text that Symonds heard Brooke struggle to sing in September 1859. In June 1858 Symonds wrote to Charlotte that the 'dear little boy' Willie Dyer had sent him the music for 'As Pants the Hart' 'as arranged in solo & septette'.¹¹⁰ This liturgical choral music is recollected by Symonds as part of the process of 'mental masturbation' – the phrase is his own – that motivated his erotic writings.¹¹¹

It should be noted that, despite the intensity of Symonds's feelings for Brooke, it is unclear how well he knew him. The *Memoirs* insist that the erotic 'prose dithyramb' is entirely the product of 'dreams and visions', an assertion supported by the marginal note scrawled in frustration on Symonds's manuscript: 'Would to God that I had fraternized with him! Would to God that I had sought and he had suffered that carnal union.'¹¹² Given Symonds's insistence that his desire for Brooke 'runs like a scarlet thread through [his] diaries of several years', it is surprising that he never mentions Brooke in his letters to Henry Graham Dakyns. In other respects, their correspondence discloses in frank detail the persistent, often tortured desire these men felt for children and young adolescents (e.g. the children of Tennyson; their school pupils Norman Moor, Arthur Carré and Cecil Boyle).¹¹³ It seems unlikely that Symonds's relationship with Brooke progressed beyond the level of private fantasy; had it done so it seems highly likely that Symonds would have discussed it with Dakyns, with whom he is typically frank in his correspondence.

It was at Oxford that Symonds's involvement with choristers was finally to cause a scandal. Any possible scandal arising from Symonds's love for Willie Dyer was avoided by the intervention of Symonds's father, who did all he could to curtail the relationship, while Symonds's painful obsession with Alfred Brooke appears to have been kept secret even from his closest friends. The circumstances of the Oxford episode have been dealt with at length by George Rousseau, so need only be summarized here.¹¹⁴ In 1862 Charles Shorting, a former friend of Symonds who held a grudge against him, wrote to the fellows of Magdalen College – where Symonds had recently been elected as a probationary fellow – accusing Symonds of harbouring impure desires for the choristers at Magdalen. Symonds had indeed developed an intense attraction to an eleven-year-old chorister, Walter Goolden. Precisely what attracted Symonds to Goolden remains

unclear, though letters from Symonds to his sister suggest that he admired his voice: he is referred to in passing as 'a good treble'.¹¹⁵ However, there is nothing to suggest that Symonds acted on his desires. In the investigation that followed, Symonds was exonerated. Nevertheless, he emerged from the proceedings thoroughly humiliated, and the emotional turmoil of the events took a severe toll on his health. He resigned his fellowship and left Oxford shortly after. Rousseau carefully situates the episode within the intensely homosocial atmosphere of Victorian Oxford, noting Symonds's position in an 'Arcadian' pederastic subculture in which choristers were frequently objectified by older men. He ultimately concludes that attraction to choristers may have been connected to class disparity, but he overlooks the significance of the fact that these children were most closely associated with their singing voices.

During his time at Oxford, Symonds's letters often dwell upon the performances and vocal quality of trebles to the exclusion of the other musical performers at the services he attends. In October 1858 he enthuses about a rendition of 'How Beautiful Are the Feet' from Handel's *Messiah* at Magdalen, 'sung very nicely by a good treble'.¹¹⁶ Later that term, he attends 'a splendid service at New College' which includes 'I Waited for the Lord' from Mendelssohn's *Lobgesang* sung 'by two boys in unison', which provides, he says, 'a pleasing effect'.¹¹⁷ In the course of his correspondence, he repeatedly praises the vocal beauty of an assortment of Magdalen choristers without once offering Charlotte an assessment of the standard of singing by the lay clerks or, indeed, of the playing of Magdalen's organist. While the arrival at Magdalen in January 1860 of John Stainer as organist passes without comment, Symonds's letters are otherwise closely attentive to changes in musical personnel. In December 1860, for example, he sorrowfully laments the fact that New College has 'lost [...] their best treble' and that another favourite chorister, Henry Homer Page, has departed from Magdalen for Rugby School.¹¹⁸

It is clear from Symonds's *Memoirs*, and from historical work undertaken by Rousseau, that Symonds was one of a number of students who were in some way attracted to choristers in Oxford in the 1860s.¹¹⁹ When he first arrived in Oxford, his friends included Edward William Urquhart, who, he reports, 'had high church proclivities and ran after Choristers'. His friend Randell Vickers was 'a man of somewhat similar stamp'. 'In their company', he notes, 'I frequented antechapels and wasted my time over feverish sentimentalism'.¹²⁰ Symonds also became 'intimate friends' at Oxford with Charles Shorting, a friendship terminated when the latter's 'conduct with regard to boys, especially the choristers at Magdalen,

brought him into serious trouble'. Symonds later blamed Shorting for bringing his 'peculiar atmosphere of boy-love into [his] neighbourhood' around 1862.¹²¹ There is ample evidence to suggest that Symonds harboured strong desires for prepubescent boys long before this point in time, though an important distinction is that Shorting appears to have acted on such desires much more readily.¹²²

The proximity of choristers to older students was certainly of some concern to Oxford college authorities around this time. At New College in 1860, for example, James Edwards Sewell (Warden of New College, 1860–1901) wrote of William Tuckwell (Headmaster of New College School, 1857–64): 'I quite approve of the principle which he has acted upon in discouraging communications between the boys under his care, and members of the University not actually related to them, and having no special interest in them, or claim to acquaintance with them.'¹²³ Similar concerns were raised repeatedly about such fraternization between boys and students at Magdalen College. In 1864 the choristers were instructed to proceed directly to the vestry before the start of services, and, at their conclusion, to return to the choristers' school without delay. If they went into an undergraduate's room without permission, they were told, their punishment could be dismissal from the choir.¹²⁴ In 1874 a notice was placed on the door of Magdalen College hall stating that 'Any undergraduate detected speaking to a chorister will be sent down and the chorister expelled. Or if found asking to his rooms will be expelled.'¹²⁵ The rule appears to have been actively enforced. In June 1881, for example, Frederick Bulley (President of Magdalen College, 1855–85) sent down for the rest of term one student who had invited a chorister to his room, and rusticated four other students who were 'found to have repeatedly broken the Rule which prohibits all communication with the choristers'.¹²⁶

Symonds's *Memoirs* suggest that one function of the consumption of these voices was to strengthen homosocial relationships between male undergraduates in 'Arcadian' subcommunities based upon shared sexual and aesthetic tastes. Symonds's accounts of listening to choristers as an undergraduate appear not to have been solitary experiences, but rather communal ones in which he was joined by other young Oxford contemporaries. Parallels might be drawn between Symonds's fetishization of the voice of the chorister while at Oxford and his eroticized aesthetic consumption of photographic nudes of young men in his later life. Stefano Evangelista has noted Symonds's interest in the late 1880s in photography, particularly of nudes of young men in a Mediterranean setting, by artists

such as Wilhelm Von Gloeden. Symonds was an avid collector of such images and circulated them among friends with similar sexual tastes (such as Henry Graham Dakyns, Edmund Gosse and Charles Kains-Jackson). While Evangelista is careful to note the problematic issues of exploitation that such photographs raise, he also suggests that they may have nevertheless played a more positive role in establishing discourses of homosexual emancipation. Such photographs, he suggests, acted as 'a material referent to cement a shared sexual identity'; in doing so, they 'helped to develop a language about male homosexuality that is based on desire and eroticism rather than medicine ("inversion") or the ancient world ("pederasty")'.¹²⁷ If the consumption and circulation of quasi-pornographic images can promote the development of community among sexual minorities, communal musical listening might also provide a forum in which such groups establish shared aesthetic codes, tastes and practices. The consumption of choristers' voices in 1860s Oxford can be understood as an early example of the 'aestheticism' of the following decades, which, as Matt Cook has argued, 'provided a model for a complex identity based on beauty and the senses, rather than on social and cultural conformity or biological determinism'.¹²⁸ Comparison might be drawn with the episode in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, in which a group of young men listen to Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, the 'Pathétique', reproduced on the pianola in the privacy of their rooms at Cambridge.¹²⁹ The shared consumption of music which, as the text later makes clear, was explicitly understood as an encoding homosexual desire becomes a means for fostering an emergent sense of queer community.

Class disparities may have also played some role in Symonds's attraction towards choristers. The role of asymmetric social hierarchies in the apparent production (or intensification) of desire has been well documented, particularly with regard to the history of homosexuality.¹³⁰ Yet an apparent class disparity between working-class choristers and more affluent listeners provides only an imperfect explanation for why these boys became the object of pederastic desire. Alan Mould suggests that there was a general shift across the course of the nineteenth century, in which choristers were drawn increasingly from middle-class families.¹³¹ Such a trend is reflected in the choristers to whom Symonds listened in Oxford and Bristol. Alfred Brooke was the son of a music teacher and thus, like Willie Dyer, of a class background considerably lower than Symonds's.¹³² Census records indicate that, after leaving Bristol Cathedral as a chorister, Brooke worked in a series of generally insecure jobs on the cusp of the lower middle class: bank clerk, travelling salesman and, eventually, like his father, music teacher.¹³³

But while the choristers with whom Symonds became infatuated in Bristol were of a lower social class, those in Oxford came from a broader range of class backgrounds. Walter Goolden, for example, was the son of a London doctor with an address in the desirable environs of Hyde Park.¹³⁴ After the scandal surrounding Symonds, he went on to become a scholar at Merton College and graduated with a first-class degree in Natural Science in 1871.¹³⁵ Frederick Pacey was, as the son of a bookseller, from a more modest background. Nevertheless, his training as a chorister appears to have provided the basis for later social advancement: in 1871, at the (unusually advanced) age of twenty-four, he commenced a Bachelor of Music degree at St Mary Hall, Oxford. Another favourite chorister, Henry Homer Page at Magdalen, was the son of a rector from Suffolk. Victorian choristers, then, were quite different in their class identity from, for example, the more obviously lower-class Venetian gondoliers or Swiss farmhands whom Symonds was to take as his lovers later in his life. The desired status of the chorister might better be understood through particular attention to the voice and the symbolic weight of beauty and loss invested in that voice's transience.

A Boy's Voice Broken

While the communal consumption of choristers' voices in Victorian Oxford can be understood to provide an affirmative basis for shared queer sexual identities, it also represents an investment in an aesthetic object defined by its transience and impermanence. The chorister's voice attains a special attraction because of the knowledge that its beauty cannot be sustained. In this respect, it takes its place alongside a panoply of cherished emblems of loss that populate queer Victorian literature: A. E. Housman's Shropshire lads, doomed to an early grave; Walter Pater's 'diaphanous types', preordained to victimhood; Vernon Lee's spectral eighteenth-century operatic voices.¹³⁶ The chorister's voice functions, in this respect, as a figure of the negativity that theorists such as Heather Love and Lee Edelman have identified as a pervasive psychic substrate in queer culture.¹³⁷ Far from being a vehicle for the 'reproductive futurism' that Edelman convincingly locates in Victorian culture's idealization of 'the Child', the vocal purity of the chorister is underwritten by its refusal of future possibility: the inevitable break that occurs with the arrival of puberty.¹³⁸

The fact that the chorister's voice is always doomed to 'break' is central to the manner in which it becomes eroticized. In Victorian vocal treatises

the transition made by the boy's voice around puberty is always figured as sudden and momentous. Discourses placing heavy emphasis on the breaking voice can be shown to reinforce the process through which the child is posited as categorically distinct from the adult. Following Kincaid, it is precisely this relentless emphasis on the child's *difference* from the adult that sees the 'innocent child' become eroticized. While this trope is applied to both the speaking and the singing voice, its results are portrayed as particularly dramatic in the context of the latter. As present-day musicologists have emphasized, the conception of the boy's voice suddenly 'breaking' fails to acknowledge the gradual nature of the change in the child's voice. Choir trainers today are more likely to recognize the fact that the boy's voice begins the process of change at the very onset of puberty.¹³⁹ In contrast, Victorian treatises on the chorister tend to emphasize an abrupt, catastrophic vocal failure. George Martin's account is representative in this respect:

He is admitted to the choir, and for about two years he appears to be of no appreciable value. At eleven, or thereabouts, perhaps, his voice begins to show signs of development and promise. He continues to improve until he is about twelve, then possibly for two years or so his voice is at its best. Then comes total collapse.¹⁴⁰

The hyperbolic conclusion of Martin's narrative of vocal development – '[t]hen comes total collapse' – is humorous both in its melodrama and in its sheer certitude. The contrast between this short, blunt sentence and the longer, more grammatically complex, preceding sentences provides added emphasis. The latter contains none of the hesitant qualifiers of the preceding sentences ('about', 'thereabouts', 'perhaps', 'possibly'). This break is sudden, final, irreversible, cataclysmic. Such rhetoric reflects more general Victorian conceptions of puberty, which is often figured as a sudden, radical change: 'a complex *revolution* is effected in the human economy at the ages of puberty'; 'genital organs *suddenly and astonishingly* develop' and 'sexual desires are awakened'.¹⁴¹ As Kincaid has noted, while in earlier periods childhood seemed to be defined by ideas of dependence, by the Victorian period, the new dividing line appeared to relate to puberty. The suddenness of puberty allows the Victorians to draw a clear line between the 'child' and the 'non-child'.

In this manner, the figure of the 'broken' voice can be understood to act within wider discourses on childhood to reinforce the idea of the child as a class distinct from the adult. Discussions of the 'breaking' voice frequently note that it coincides not just with the other secondary physical changes

that mark the onset of puberty, but also with the ‘moral and intellectual change’ understood to signal the transition to adulthood.¹⁴² Symonds himself reflects such a position in ‘A Problem in Modern Ethics’ (1891), where he notes that ‘at the age of puberty [. . .] a boy distinguishes himself abruptly from a girl, by changing his voice and growing hair on parts of the body where it is not usually found in women’. Puberty is figured as an ‘abrupt’ transition. Indeed, in Symonds’s consideration of ‘the mysterious dubiety of what we call sex’, he suggests that it is precisely the very abruptness of gender differentiation at puberty that can lead to ‘sexual inversion’.¹⁴³

Symonds’s letters written while at Oxford often note with sadness the departure of favourite choristers from the chapels he attends. His fascination with this moment of vocal transition is most evident in his sonnet ‘A Boy’s Voice Broken’ (1884).¹⁴⁴ Symonds’s sonnet not only reveals the elision of vocal failure with the loss of innocence but also allows for a broader consideration of the way in which the materiality of the singing voice is mediated through the technology of verse. Yopie Prins’s discussion of the complexities with which Victorian lyric poetry transforms the speaking voice into metrical utterance – what she calls ‘voice inverse’ – is instructive in this regard.¹⁴⁵ Prins’s focus is on uncovering how attention to Victorian musical settings of poetry might reveal alternative strategies for imagining the metrical ‘voicing’ of poetry. But her work also alerts us to the manner in which verse can foreground the awkward transformations of the material voice.

A Boy’s Voice Broken

Summer hath come! The world is ripe for song!
 Pant forth thy passionate pain, thou nightingale!
 Brown moonlight fills the broad ambrosial vale,
 Where deep-embowered I wait and listen long! —
 So cried the boy. When, hark, the hurrying throng
 Of thick notes prelude that final wail!
 Thrilled by the sound divine, his lips grew pale;
 Some god unknown within his heart was strong.
 Then silence fell. He, soaring on the wings
 Of song, poured his soul forth in rivalry:
 Till, at heaven’s height, where the rapt spirit springs
 By one quick bound up to infinity,
 The boy’s voice failed. Love’s hour had come. The lute
 On which Love plays, must first be smitten mute.

In its contest between the singing nightingale and the singing child, Symonds’s sonnet invokes a broader dialectic between the transcendent lyric voice (of which such birdsong is a familiar trope) and the embodied

material voice. In doing so, it reflects what Marion Thain has identified as something of a preoccupation of late nineteenth-century poetry. Here, the boy is prompted into song through his 'rivalry' with the 'sound divine' of the nightingale. But there is a tension between the Romantic imagery of idealization ('the wings / Of song', the 'rapt spirit', the rise of the voice to 'infinity') and a more somatically grounded language of the body. The nightingale's song – a curiously sensuous and breathy 'pant' – is registered through an affective 'thrill' on the 'pale' 'lips' and the stirred 'heart' of the boy as he listens. The penultimate line of the poem makes clear that the boy's loss of voice equates to the loss of innocence: 'The boy's voice failed. Love's hour had come. The lute [. . .]'. The 'voice inverse' of failed material speech is registered through its metrical mediation. The caesuras introduced by the full stops act to emphasize the import of the vocal break, drawing a stark division between childhood innocence and sudden adolescent sexual awakening. The metre draws the reader to place stresses on each of the monosyllables of 'boy's voice failed'. Only after the literal and metrical break of the caesura does the line fall back into regular iambs. The innocent child (and the idealized lyric voice) remain, through this metrical strategy, ultimately insulated from sensuous vocal materiality. The chorister's voice remains untainted by the sexual and is thus, perversely, maintained as an object of eroticized innocence.

The 'thick notes' of the nightingale are also those of the boy's voice as it teeters on the brink of failure, reflecting a common trope in Victorian writing about the breaking voice. The child's voice is commonly understood to grow in strength and beauty up to the point at which it breaks. 'For the year or two preceding the break of voice', Howard enthuses, 'the brilliance and power of boys' voices, especially in the higher tones, is often phenomenal'.¹⁴⁶ The idea recurs repeatedly in Symonds's writings. In a letter to Horatio Forbes Brown praising the '[d]eep incommunicable spirit-speaking power of voices' – discussed below – Symonds dwells on his sensuous attraction towards 'a contralto of extraordinary force and volume and vibration': 'a boy's voice on the point of breaking proved by its incomparable thrill'.¹⁴⁷ In 'A Problem in Greek Ethics', Symonds compares the 'bloom of youth' celebrated by the Greeks – 'that [moment of] corporeal beauty, unlike all other beauties of the human form' – to the fullness of the boy's voice just before it breaks. This climax of 'corporeal loveliness', he suggests, 'marks male adolescence no less triumphantly than does the male soprano voice upon the point of breaking'. It is the 'very evanescence' of this 'bloom' that makes it so very desirable to the Greeks, Symonds argues, 'since nothing more clearly characterizes the poetic myths

which adumbrate their special sensibility than the pathos of a blossom that must fade'.¹⁴⁸ Symonds's desire for the voice of the chorister may be understood in similar terms.

Indeed, as both Kincaid and Jackson have noted, many accounts of Victorian pederasty are motivated by a desire to resist the idea of transience, to fix the child in a state of perpetual innocence. 'The prosaic fact that children do not stay children', Kincaid observes, 'takes on an enormous psychological and poetic force in the imaginings of child-love'.¹⁴⁹ The most effective way of infinitely postponing the arrival of adulthood is through death, hence the popularity among Victorian authors of killing off the innocent children that populate their stories.¹⁵⁰ Such a pattern is borne out in Victorian stories invoking the figure of the innocent chorister, often tales of religious instruction published for mass consumption by organizations such as the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. Texts such as the anonymous *Michael the Chorister* (c. 1870) and *Little Walter: The Lame Chorister* (1856) and Bingley Roel's *Chorister Jim: The Yorkshire Choir Boy* (1897) follow a predictable, morally instructive narrative arc: an innocent child overcomes his tendency towards occasional (if fundamentally mild) naughtiness; he turns towards God in an act of repentance; he becomes the victim of some sort of violence or illness; he places his trust in divine providence; ultimately, he dies peacefully, resigned to any misfortune he may have faced.¹⁵¹ Importantly, the chorister in such Victorian narratives never lives long enough for his voice to break. The point at which the voice changes is invested with such significance because it stands as a point of metaphorical death. As a category of identity, the chorister cannot exist after the voice changes, for the chorister is defined by his pure, prepubescent vocal tone. The voice of the chorister becomes cherished, desired, fetishized because it is doomed to perish.

The desire for the voice of the chorister can thus be understood in its historical context as bound up with the eroticization of childhood innocence in Victorian culture, a discourse maintained through a rigid conceptual division between adulthood and childhood. The insistent trope of the vocal 'break' acts to reinforce this division, while also positing the child's voice as a figure of inevitable loss. Yet such historical contextualization fails to fully account for the intensity of desire invested in these voices, both in Symonds's writings and elsewhere. Symonds's writings can profitably be read in the light of psychoanalytic theory to usefully illuminate the manner in which the chorister's voice becomes desired precisely as a psychic emblem of loss.

The Chorister's Voice as Lost Object

Symonds's *Memoirs* describe his recollection of listening to the voices of choristers as a child and the emotional awakening this experience prompted within him:

I was in the nave of Bristol Cathedral during service time, lifted in my nurse's arms and looking through the perforated doors of the organ screen, which then divided nave from choir. The organ was playing and the choristers were singing. Some chord awoke in me then, which has gone on thrilling through my lifetime and has been connected with the deepest of my emotional experiences. Cathedrals, college chapels, 'quires and places where they sing' resuscitate that mode of infancy. I know, when I am entering a stately and time-honoured English house of prayer, that I shall put this mood upon me like a garment. The voices of choiring men and boys, the sobbing of antiphones and lark-like soaring of clear treble notes into the gloom of Gothic arches, the thunder of the labouring diapasons, stir in me that old deep-centred innate sentiment.¹⁵²

In turning to his childhood experiences to account for the intensity of his subsequent 'emotional experiences', Symonds uses an autobiographical trope common to many writers associated with Victorian aestheticism. Walter Pater's 'The Child in the House' (1878), Vernon Lee's 'The Child in the Vatican' (1881) and John Ruskin's *Praeterita* (1885) each explore the impact of the Wordsworthian 'child as father to the man' on the development of the emotional and aesthetic sensibilities that subsequently coloured their lives and works.¹⁵³ But the passage also reflects a wider concern more specific to Symonds's *Memoirs*: the origins of sexual desire and how one might understand such desire. In this respect, the passage describes one of two 'primal scenes' narrated in the *Memoirs*. Later in his narrative, Symonds presents in more explicit terms the awakening of his first feelings of same-sex desire: he experiences erotic dreams involving Bristolian sailors. Here, the precise nature of 'the deepest of [Symonds's] emotional experiences' remains unclear: the passage certainly addresses a residual attraction towards religious feeling, but its reference to the 'chord' of desire that has 'gone on thrilling' through the author's lifetime seems to speak of emotions rather more erotically charged. The division may, in fact, be an artificial one: in both the *Memoirs* and *Walt Whitman: A Study*, Symonds reconceives of religion in terms of a 'cosmic enthusiasm', in which intense religious feeling and sexual desire become deeply intertwined.¹⁵⁴

The connection that the passage draws between an infantile moment of enraptured listening and the subsequent experience of desire can be

usefully illuminated by psychoanalytic approaches to the voice. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the voice and the gaze are added to the list of desired objects – the phallus, the breast, excrement, money, offspring – posited by Freud. As such, the voice and the gaze become the object of ‘invocatory’ and ‘scopic’ drives, which sees them inserted into a psychic system through which they become eroticized.¹⁵⁵ The significance of the gaze – and its associated site of infant ego-formation, the mirror scene – has been recognized in a great deal of subsequent psychoanalytic criticism. While the ‘voice’ as an object of desire has received less critical attention, it nevertheless forms a central part of the psychoanalytic system of theorists such as Guy Rosolato and Didier Anzieu.¹⁵⁶ Kaja Silverman’s *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* remains among the most influential discussions of Lacanian and post-Lacanian theories of voice, while in more recent works, Mladen Dolar and Steven Connor have also developed their ideas on voice within this psychoanalytic tradition.¹⁵⁷ For the purposes of this discussion, the theories of Rosolato, Anzieu and Michel Poizat are particularly illuminating.

For both Mladen Dolar and Michel Poizat, the voice becomes invested with desire because it retains within it a psychic trace of an excessive pre-symbolic *jouissance*.¹⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, both locate the desire for the voice as originating in the psychic drama of infantile development. In Poizat’s theory of the pleasures of listening, the infant emits a primal cry – a pre-linguistic expression of pure vocal sonority linked to feelings of want and displeasure. The primal cry is answered by the mother: the mother attributes meaning to the cry, and responds by providing the infant with some form of comfort (such as the breast). In the mother’s response to the cry, the infant’s primal need is fully and perfectly satisfied: it is the scene of what Lacan calls ‘primary *jouissance*’.¹⁵⁹ A trace of this *jouissance* becomes incorporated into the infant’s psyche. The second cry of the infant becomes an explicit demand for something, and it requires a response. The mother responds to the second cry of the infant, but her response is not identical to her first response to the primal cry. This response cannot recover the initial *jouissance* invested by the infant in the primal cry. The primal cry becomes an irrecoverably lost object (what Lacan calls an ‘objet a’). There is a constant, futile desire to return to this lost primal cry and to re-attain the *jouissance* with which it is invested.¹⁶⁰ Beyond this mythic scene of early childhood, the voice becomes a space in which the fantasy of recovering lost *jouissance* can be endlessly re-enacted. While the voice enters into signification (and the lack that is always bound up with such signification), it nevertheless maintains a residue of what Gérard Pommier

has called 'the skeletal remains of its sonorous materiality'.¹⁶¹ All voices are haunted by the spectral remnants of the primal cry. Poizat argues that we are forever engaged in an attempt to recover this 'lost sonorous materiality, now dissolved behind signification'. This lost voice represents that which is, at a subconscious level, a 'totally purified, trans-verbal state, experienced [...] as the primitive encounter with *jouissance*'.¹⁶²

The passage from Symonds's *Memoirs* above can be understood to narrate a recollection of this primal scene of listening. Certainly, its repeated gestures towards 'deep-centred', 'innate', 'deepest' emotions signal a turn towards the unconscious. In narrating a moment of enraptured infantile musical listening, the text looks back to the moment of primal *jouissance* associated with the initial experience of aural pleasure: '[s]ome chord awoke in me then'. That this aural pleasure becomes an object of desire is clear from the manner in which desire itself is figured as a 'chord' that 'thrills' within the listener's body ('in me'). Subsequent experiences of music 'resuscitate that mode of infancy'; they recall traces of this initial auditory pleasure first experienced by the infant. Significantly, the passage reveals the listener's inability to fully recover the pleasure of this primal *jouissance*. The listener remains 'divided' from the source of aural pleasure by 'perforated doors'. While the initial experience of aural pleasure is perceived in terms of bodily depth ('[s]ome chord awoke *in me*'), subsequent attempts to recapture this 'mood' act only upon the surface of the body ('I shall put this mood *upon me* like a garment') (italics added). Donning such a 'garment' suggests an attempt to reclaim the comforting, enveloping bath of sounds experienced by the child in earliest infancy, but it also represents another form of *barrier* between primal *jouissance* and attempts to recapture this pleasure.

These images of spatial partition – 'the perforated [...] screen' that 'divided nave from choir' – also represent another form of division closely bound up with the infant experience of the voice: the division of the infant's sense of self from the maternal body, and the associated emergence of infantile subjectivity. That the infant is held in the arms of its nurse evokes the spectre of maternal care while signalling its loss: the nurse is a substitute for the mother, but her care can never match that provided by the actual mother. Building upon Lacan's theories, Guy Rosolato postulates a primal listening experience, defined by the enclosure of the infant by the maternal voice and associated with plenitude and bliss.¹⁶³ He views this as the prototype for all subsequent auditory pleasure, especially that which arises from listening to music. The maternal voice, he suggests, surrounds the infant in a calming and protective aural blanket; it 'bathes it

in a celestial melody whose closest terrestrial equivalent is opera'.¹⁶⁴ This imaginary period of aural plenitude exists prior to the infant's psychic differentiation from the mother, that is, the infant's formation of a sense of self independent from the mother. The infant responds to the maternal voice by attempting to harmonize with her. The process of harmonization can be fully realized only once the infant and mother have become differentiated from one another. Through the process of harmonizing with the mother, the infant thus comes to conceive of itself, in what Rosolato calls an 'acoustic mirror', as a subject independent of the mother. The differentiation of the subject from the object – the infant from the mother – is viewed by Rosolato as an experience of division, loss or lack. The experience of music evokes this psychic drama of separation from the mother and desire for return: 'Harmonic and polyphonic display can be understood as a succession of tensions and releases, of the union and divergence of elements that are [...] opposed in their accords, in order to be resolved in their most simple unity. It is then the whole drama of separated bodies and their reunion which supports harmony.'¹⁶⁵ Didier Anzieu suggests a similar model, through which the infant's sense of subjectivity emerges from its primal experience of sound. Anzieu proposes the concept of the 'skin-ego'. During the earliest stages of development, he suggests, the foetus or infant forms a unified ego from the psychical absorption of experiences upon the surface of its body.¹⁶⁶ At such early stages, Anzieu suggests, the infant's sense of sound is more developed than its sense of sight. The division between haptic and aural sensation is sufficiently fluid that the infant perceives of itself as being caressed and soothed by the touch of sound. The infant is immersed in what Anzieu calls a 'sonorous envelope', a bath of sounds that surrounds the infant, formed by the echoing interchanges between the mother's voice and the child's own sounds. This 'sonorous envelope' acts as the auditory equivalent of Lacan's mirror-stage: a 'sound-mirror' or 'audio-phonic skin'.¹⁶⁷ The infant comes to understand its own unified selfhood through the interaction between its body and the sounds that surround it.

Rosolato's and Anzieu's theories of voice are particularly useful for making sense of another account of rapt musical listening relayed by Symonds in a letter to Horatio Forbes Brown. The account is worth quoting at some length:

Deep incommunicable spirit-speaking power of voices. I think now there is nothing like a voice for teaching me about the soul. I think there is nothing I could fall in love with but a voice. I think I love that best, and that reveals most of the life I love.

I was sitting this evening at half-past eight, smoking under the vine at the end of my terrace, when a beautiful thing happened.

A clear soprano voice, strong but not full, the untrained voice of a girl, I thought, of about eighteen years, from behind the wall, back to back with me, gave out a simple melody. The melody was old, probably of Italian origin, either used for hymns in the church service or caught up from some organ recital.

She sang and paused.

Then she sang again; but this time the same melody was repeated on the second by a contralto of extraordinary force and volume and vibration. It overwhelmed me with its richness. I tremble when I remember it. But this was no voice of woman or of man. It was a boy's voice on the point of breaking proved by its incomparable thrill, by a something indescribable, suggestive of chords resonant within the larynx.

They sang together, against each other, in harmony, and then at last in unison. And after I had listened breathless, the melody was (for them at any rate) played out, and I heard the noise of feet that moved upon the street, and words and low laughter [...]

I shall never know anything concerning those two lives, the ripened womanhood of one so musically blended with the broken boyhood and just budding manhood of the other.¹⁶⁸

The passage imputes to the singing voice a power to disclose to the listener the hidden depths of his own selfhood. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it re-enacts the discovery of infantile subjectivity in what Anzieu calls the 'sonorous envelope'. The maternal voice of the girl – inherent in her 'ripened womanhood' – is 'musically blended' with that of the boy, who here stands for the infant. Such 'blending' represents the blissful state of the infant when still undifferentiated from the mother. The boy's voice exists on a threshold akin to that of the infant. Just as the boy's voice is 'on the point of breaking' as he confronts his 'just budding manhood', the infant faces a similar psychic dislocation from the mother. In the light of Rosolato's theory, the meandering duet between the 'contralto' voice of the young boy and the 'clear soprano' voice of the young girl restages the harmonizing of the infant and the maternal voices, through which the infant develops his subjectivity in the 'acoustic mirror' formed by their mutual sounds. The boy's voice responds to that of the girl with an identical melody, but repeated 'on the second' – that is, transposed a tone up from the girl's melody. The aural effect of this is an awkward dissonance between these two opposing voices. Yet as they continue their duet,

these polyphonic voices (moving 'together', 'against each other') gradually converge 'in harmony, and then at last in unison'. The infant responds to the sounds emitted by the mother, and through this process of harmonization his sense of independent subjectivity emerges. This emergence is ultimately tainted by a sense of lack, of loss: the boy's 'extraordinary' voice must break, leaving behind his 'broken boyhood'. The pleasure of listening to these voices – a pleasure that expresses for Symonds 'something indescribable' about his selfhood – might be accounted for, as Poizat has suggested, by the manner in which they elicit physic echoes of these infantile experiences.

The voices in this scene acquire added intensity from the fact that their source is concealed. In *La voix au cinéma*, Michel Chion discusses the uncanny nature of what he calls 'acousmatic' voices: a voice when it is divorced from its source, he suggests, acquires an added authority and surplus of meaning, but it is nevertheless accompanied by a strong desire to locate the body from which it is emitted.¹⁶⁹ As Steven Connor similarly notes, such 'sourceless [...] sound' is typically experienced 'both as a lack and an excess; both as a mystery to be explained, and an intensity to be contained'.¹⁷⁰ Symonds narrates his experience in a manner that makes a virtue of his lack of visual connection with the young singers: he purposefully delays the revelation that the second voice he hears is that of a boy in order to emphasize that he himself only gradually decoded the mysterious gender identity of this voice. He introduces an additional strangeness to this voice through what is presumably a spelling mistake: the power of the boy's voice is 'suggestive of *chords* resonant within the larynx' (italics added). The voice is described as possessing the uncanny ability to produce multiple musical notes simultaneously. Implicitly, the lack of visual stimulus might be understood to heighten the sensation of listening. Yet there is a sadness here too: Symonds will 'never know anything concerning those two lives', for their voices leave behind no enduring, material referent from which he might know them again in the future. They are sustained only by an aural trace which, the text suggests, will continue to 'pla[y] out' in Symonds's memory.

Such psychoanalytic theories of voice reach beyond the immediate cultural context of Symonds's musical experiences to provide an alternative perspective on the strange significance of the child's desired voice in his writings. They suggest another way of approaching those ideas of loss, lack or insubstantiality that attach to the chorister's voice – lost innocence, inevitable vocal failure, immaterial disembodiment. A close examination of Victorian vocal treatises demonstrates that the voice of the chorister was

never solely the natural product of the child's body. Vocal purity, so closely bound up with Victorian ideals of childhood innocence, was the deliberate product of training techniques designed to create the impression of the voice as naturally disembodied. It was the apparently disembodied nature of such vocal innocence that paradoxically saw it become such a prevalent object of sexual desire in *fin-de-siècle* pederastic literature. If the often unsettling nature of the Victorian aesthetic consumption of such voices is confronted, it becomes possible to move debates in queer musicology beyond their redemptive impulse and consider more carefully the complexities of queer encounters with the singing voice. Such an approach challenges queer scholars to reassess assumptions about the ways in which the singing voice is conceived as a site at which queer subjectivities come into being, calling for a more nuanced account of the dynamics of power at play in the desiring musical encounter. The chorister's voice gains much of its status as an object of desire in Victorian queer literature because of what it refuses: the sexual knowledge of adulthood; the sensual embodied forcefulness of the tenor or soprano voice; the possibility of a future. In maintaining the poise of innocence, the chorister's voice is also required to efface the place of the body in vocal production. In contrast to such a determined denial of the embodied nature of musical experience, the next chapter turns to consider the queer significance of tactile experience in representations of music.