

‘Reconstructing Historical Singing: Reality or Fantasy?’

Richard Wistreich

Diversity in Historically Informed Performance
King’s Place, 7 May 2016

MUSIC EXAMPLE 1 Alberto del Campo, ‘Vi ravviso, o luoghi ameni’ from *La Sonnambula*
1898

SLIDE

When it comes to historical singing you don’t get much more historical than that. You heard the voice of an otherwise unknown baritone, Alberto del Campo, who recorded that short extract from Vincenzo Bellini’s *La Sonnambula* in New York almost 118 years ago, on 6 June 1898, as a demonstration of Emile Berliner’s gramophone – the first recording and playback machine to use a flat disc, which improved considerably on the scratchy squawking of Edison’s cylinder recorder. There is enough clarity here for one to catch not just something of the emotional power of the interpretation, but also a sense of the singer’s technical style too. Perhaps even more forcefully than an old photograph, such a recording seems to offer a direct connection to a ‘real-time’ fragment of human communication taking place right inside a different historical era, and for that reason alone, it still makes my scalp tingle. We might be tempted to go further, and suggest that del Campo’s recording provides a sounding witness not only to his own, but also the generation of his teachers, and even, perhaps a very, very faint trace of his teachers’ teachers: let’s be generous and say this could take us – just – back to some echo of the composer’s own lifetime – Bellini died in 1835. So is *this* ‘historical singing’? If (and this is, as we’ll see, a complicated ‘if’) we wanted to try to reconstruct the composer Bellini’s ‘intentions’, would we do best to try to emulate – even to imitate – at least some aspects of Alberto del Campo’s performance?

Before committing ourselves, let’s hear another early recording of a singer, this one made in 1905 (I have slightly shortened it):

SLIDE**MUSIC EXAMPLE 2 Adelina Patti 'Voi che sapete' (1905)**

That was the voice of probably the world's first transatlantic superstar singer, Adelina Patti. As you heard – and the smiles, even occasional cringes suggest you did – this is a performance that we now find rather bizarre. It seems to conflict with just about everything that we celebrate, let alone encourage, in our modern notions of how Mozart's music should be sung. Quite apart from the inaccuracies of intonation, there are (to our ears) very pronounced glissandos and portamentos, both up and down; exaggerated rallentandos at cadences and accellerandos mid-phrase; not to mention the interpolation of appoggiaturas and breaks where they are not in Mozart's score and others left out where they are. And then there is the vocal sound itself. Even allowing for the limitations of the technology, which bleaches out the full range of frequencies, there are, nevertheless, clearly undisguised register changes, a wide open and almost baritonal chest note contrasted with a clear dropping of the palate to produce a sweet, almost girlish lightness for the top notes. There is almost no use of vibrato to colour the voice, even though Patti was 62 when the recording was made, 10 years after her farewell performance at Covent Garden. Is this the rather embarrassing self-indulgence of a singer who did not know she was past her prime, drifting dangerously in the direction of Florence Foster Jenkins, or is it, in fact, a very precise record of nineteenth-century performance style, that gramophone recording has itself, over the intervening 110 years, rather ironically, contributed to effacing?

SLIDE (BLANK)

In fact, careful analysis of the performance shows that, notwithstanding our initial scepticism, every one of Patti's performance decisions is not only very precisely tied to the accentuation of the text but also tallies closely with the hundreds of written-out interpretative annotations and technical recommendations by influential vocal teachers going back at least to the first half of nineteenth century when Patti learned her craft (she began performing aged 7 in 1851 and made her stage debut in New York in the title role of *Lucia di Lammermor*

1860 at — the age of 16). Her approach ties in with everything we know about the singer-led, improvisatory approach that characterised opera performance and probably other composed vocal music at least up until the advent of recording.

Would Adelina Patti also have cringed on hearing this recording? Apparently not. The historian of singing, John Potter, relates ‘Not all divas were happy when they heard their own voice for the first time, but Patti was enraptured, remarking that it was no wonder she was who she was “Maintenant je comprends pourquoi je suis Patti ... Quelle Voix! Quelle artiste!” Patti’s manager and coach throughout her early career was her brother-in-law, Maurice Strakosch. He had studied and later played for the great Giuditta Pasta, who created roles for Donizetti and Bellini and sang Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* when Mozart, had he lived, would have been only 61. Might Patti’s ‘Voi che sapete’, then, not in fact be a reasonable starting place for reconstructing a ‘historically-informed’ Mozartian singing?

+ + + + + + + + + + + + +

It’s certainly a challenging proposal for singers, opera conductors and – dare I say it – singing teachers and coaches – but perhaps no more so than the challenges taken up by all kinds of very talented musicians who decided at various times over the course of the past 80 years or so to try, for example, Bach’s keyboard music on a harpsichord tuned in unequal temperament, to set up a violin with gut strings to play Beethoven, to rediscover the art of improvising their own cadenzas in classical piano concertos, or to revive the extinct *cornetto* in order to play Monteverdi. All of them were motivated primarily by informed curiosity, although increasingly, equally adventurous musicologists saw the potential for enlisting open-minded performers to create testing grounds (and latterly, justification for research grants), for their prime preoccupation, the scholarly editing of musical works. Indeed, musicologists have variously advised, inspired, cajoled and sometimes even bullied musicians into playing with history, and musicians have, by and large, profited hugely from the ways of thinking about music which such encounters engender, not to mention the screeds of freshly-edited repertoire provided for them to perform.

Both groups were fortunate at the start of the early music revival to encounter a music industry ready to support and help legitimise new ways of presenting not just the existing musical canon, but vast swathes of otherwise forgotten music, in order to satisfy market forces and take advantage of the energy for renewal offered by the new technology of the CD, which made its timely arrival in the early 1980s. But these opportunities — that have led to the now successful ‘main-streaming’ of much professional historical performance — have also involved sometimes far-reaching compromises between what the evidence of historical investigation reveals, and the everyday practicalities of musicians who need to get the job done, not to mention the tolerance of audiences to accept the implications of the application of the outcomes of research, especially when it comes to repertoire they know and cherish. A good example of this played out in practice has been the long-running clash between, on one hand, the hard evidence that almost all of Bach’s choral music was conceived for ensembles made up of single voices — that is one singer on each line — and on the other the resistance — including among otherwise committed historical performers — to giving up an anachronistic, but nevertheless deeply embedded notion of ‘choral’ performance.

This particular manifestation of musical tradition coming hard up against history was an interesting test of the limits of the symbiotic partnership between academic performance practice, musicology and the world of elite performers, which had shaped the preoccupations of the historical performance movement from the 1970s onwards. The case of Patti’s Mozart could theoretically become another one, but I am willing to bet that it’s unlikely to be tested in an opera house anytime soon. The very close scholar-performer relationship has, if anything, slackened over the past 15 years or so. For example, musicologists have published easy-to-use digests of the key points of once obscure treatises (quite often sloppily implying that these can be treated as incontestable ‘instruction manuals’), while performers have become increasingly confident — or at least, self-convinced — in their ability to make their own decisions about what makes a performance in some way ‘historical’. Indeed, as with the case of Bach’s choir, or another notorious sore point, the downward

transposition of sections of Monteverdi's *Vespers*, some musicologists now see that when the outcomes of their work do not fit the ways that performers want their early music to go, their painstaking evidential work is at best avoided, or worse, ignored.

In fact, in no aspect of historical performance is this more apparent, I'd argue, than the ways singers who claim to be 'historically-informed' actually use their voices to perform pre-Romantic music (and here I mean the period roughly before about 1790 and after about 1450 – medieval music presents its own set of historiographical problems and here is not the place to address them). Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the singing voice has been the elephant in the room of mainstream historical performance from the start. (And, to stretch the metaphor to breaking point, there are probably plenty of instrumentalists and ensemble directors who think this veritable herd of elephants – consumes a disproportionate share of the available resources in the early music zoo). In most areas in which early music is practised – concert hall, opera house, recording studio or conservatoire teaching room, singing has tended to claim – and often been granted – a kind of exemption from the implications of a grounded historical approach to performing the music of different eras, genres and places to which instrumentalists have been subject.

* * * * *

One might well argue that singing presents a fundamentally different case to that of instrumental playing, because of the fact that, unlike, say, the piano or the oboe, the human voice box itself is an unchanged and unchanging instrument. This position was unequivocally stated a few years ago by the early opera conductor and erstwhile singer, René Jacobs, in an interview with *Le Monde*. **SLIDE** 'There are no Baroque voices: unlike instruments, which become outmoded and develop, the voice does not evolve. The only thing of which we can be sure is that voices today are identical to those of the past'. But if there are no 'baroque' voices (and, by implication, no 'medieval', 'renaissance', or for that matter, 'romantic' or even 'modern' voices), then Jacobs's logic would suggest that although you might make more or less historically-informed gestures towards stylistic differences between repertoires (such as in ornamentation or, perhaps, language), at the level of vocal

sound production itself, you should simply stick confidently and faithfully to the apparent ‘certainties’ of some universally agreed notion of ‘proper singing’.

Seen in the context of all the other premises of the historically informed performance movement, this looks like a seriously irrational side-stepping of a whole range of issues, including not only questions of historical evidence and the possible fruits of experimentation, but also fundamental ideological implications for how we construct our notions of what might constitute this ‘proper singing’. It is, however, the position that has by and large been accepted, adopted, and promoted both in the profession, and — particularly significantly for most of today’s professional singers — in the conservatoire, right up to the present time.

In purely evolutionary terms, it’s true that the mechanism of the human vocal tract today is certainly identical with that of, say, a sixteenth-century singer, and although we have no Renaissance larynxes in pickling jars to test this, we do have early anatomical drawings, such as this one **SLIDE**, published by Julius Casserius in his *Anatomical History of the Organs of Voice and Hearing* in 1601. But there is a deeper problem with Jacobs’s premise, for we only need to open our ears to the almost limitless different ways in which humans use their voices to sing, to realise that unlike the *physical organ*, vocal production is culturally, even ideologically, constructed. Just shuffle through the Spotify catalogue for ten minutes and you can listen to examples of wildly different vocal productions in the contemporary indigenous singing of South Africa, Mongolia, Tuva, Bulgaria, or Egypt, not to mention soul or rock singing, hip-hop, choral evensong or, indeed, reissues of Adelina Patti’s greatest hits. The hard fact is that we can have only the most tenuous of notions of how singing sounded before the age of those who began their careers in the middle of the nineteenth century and then lived long enough to leave a recorded trace. Thereafter, any sort of ‘historically-informed singing’ becomes, to put it mildly, a highly speculative concept.

SLIDE (BLANK)

Now this might come as a bit of a surprise to those who think that there is, of course, something not only instantly recognisable as ‘historically-informed singing’, confirmed by the

fact that a sizeable number of fine singers manage to make careers specialising in pre-Romantic music. Whether it is a certain kind of light soprano or tenor sound, the pure intonation and homogenous balance of vocal ensembles doing their best to eschew vibrato in the performance of Renaissance polyphony, or the often impressive application of stylistically-appropriate ornamentation to written lines of Baroque music, surely 'early music singing' is not only all around us, but in rude health? Well, there is certainly plenty of often extremely polished singing of early music to be heard, but in terms of actual vocal production and thus the sound that we are now so accustomed to, there is little about it to merit the epithet 'historical'.

The fact is that, with some exceptions, what all these professional singers actually practise is a more or less adapted, but completely conventional 'modern classical technique', based on the process of depressing the larynx and manipulating the soft palate in order to elongate the vocal tract. This amplifies the so-called singer's formant, to give 'mature singing' its particular carrying power and timbre, and – importantly – its recognisability as 'proper singing'. It has been practised by, and taught to professional art music singers only since around the beginning of the nineteenth century, mainly because of its obvious mechanical advantages in making the singer more audible in large spaces with their bigger orchestras, and as a result of a sustained teaching tradition and a proven track record of being robust and adaptable, it has successfully established itself worldwide as 'the sound of Western classical singing'. It is thought-provoking that before the time of Rossini, as the notes got higher, singers almost always allowed the larynx to rise naturally, rather like rock singers do now, rather than consciously lowering it or at least resisting its natural elevation, as in modern classical technique.

But why this fuss anyway? As we all now know—and in case we had not worked it out for ourselves a long time ago, a number of music philosophers have gone to great lengths to inform us — what we in the so-called historically-informed performance project have been up to for the last forty years apparently has little or nothing to do with the genuinely historical. It has to do with the modern: 'it is the sound of now, not then' as it was

so succinctly put by the musicologist Richard Taruskin, a good 40 years ago. Our pursuit of historical 'truth' is and always was an illusion – in fact, we have always picked and chosen from those bits of historical evidence that have best fit our notion of how we wanted music of the past to sound. HIP is, in fact, an archetypal product of industrial modernism, with its elevation of the values of functionality, clean lines, and reproducibility.

But, if it works and if even the directors of historically-informed music ensembles and the specialist critics of *Gramophone* magazine are satisfied, why shouldn't we be? If singers never actually had an early music revolution to compare with that of instrumentalists, who cares?

Well, perversely perhaps, I do. Not because I am the mischievous iconoclast I once was, who together with my colleagues in my ensemble, Red Byrd, in an effort to throw off the shackles of Oxbridge chapel choir vocal authority, did rather outrageous things to the Tudor church music that had nurtured our early musical lives. Rather, because as a singer as well as a historian, I am still as thrilled by the feeling of being able to apply my own voice to test out the evidence of my research as I was, when in the mid-seventies I was lucky enough to come to London as the early music revival was still in its teenage experimental years, and I discovered that 'proper singing' simply did not answer the demands of much of the sixteenth and seventeenth century song that I wanted to perform. And as a historian, I also recognise that in order to understand the documents of the past, whether scores, treatises or witness reports, it's necessary to develop a deeply contextualised sympathy with the culture in which they arose.

So, to return to what you might now think is the somewhat disingenuous question I posed in the title of my talk, could we even begin to reconstruct 'historical' singing'? And could we try to do it effectively within the context of the world of 'historically-informed performance' whose myriad contingencies I have very briefly sketched above? And if we could reconstruct, say, aspects of early Baroque Italian vocal technique, what would it be like? Would we like it? Would it be worth the effort? Let's see what we think after the final part of my talk, when I

have given a few examples of what we might learn from the earlier history of vocal technique and what it might entail to put the evidence into practice.

+ + + + + + + + + + + + +

In 1668, the French composer and music theorist, Bénigne de Bacilly, wrote that there **SLIDE** are ‘three qualities necessary to sing well’ which are ‘the voice, the disposition, and the ear, or intelligence’. It’s not at first sight a particularly obvious list (I’ll come in a moment to ‘disposition’), but this tripartite curriculum is found in largely similar versions in vocal treatises spanning the mid-sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, so let’s use his headings.

First, over the timespan that historians nowadays call the early modern period (roughly 1500–1800), Voice was considered by most philosophers in the dominant Aristotelian tradition to be essentially an honorary sixth member of the five-part sensorium of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. In his most important book about the human body, *De Anima* (Of the Soul), Aristotle establishes from the very outset the privileged role of the voice as the meeting point between the interior and exterior, between the ineffable and the manifest: **SLIDE** ‘Voice is a kind of sound characteristic of what has soul in it; nothing that is without soul utters voice’. Casserius, the famous anatomist whose drawing we saw earlier, balanced his own pragmatic interest in the voice as an organ of flesh and sinew, by reference to Aristotle’s disciple, Galen, who had declared that **SLIDE** ‘speech is the interpreter of our reasoning and intellect, the unfold of all our conceptual thoughts, and, in the like manner, the active component of our soul. For our verbal expressions are the indices to the passions of our beings’. Now, right up until the late nineteenth century’s most influential singing teacher, Manuel García II, developed his laryngoscope in 1854 and became the first person finally able to watch the vocal folds in action during speech and singing, scientists laboured under a fairly profoundly mistaken understanding of how the voice works in practice. In the time of Monteverdi, for example, Galen’s description was still

taken as gospel, and to explain it I will enlist the help of the French popular scientist, Pierre de la Primaudaye, the nearest I can find to a sixteenth century Brian Cox:

SLIDE/SLIDE

Our soule useth thoughts and discourses which, cannot be declared as long as it is inclosed in this tabernacle of flesh...And so wee say that there are two kindes of speech in man, one internall and of the minde, the other externall, which is pronounced, that is the messenger of the internall, that speaketh of the heart.

Therefore that which is framed in voice, & brought into use, is as a river sent from the thought with the voice, as from his fountain.

The motivation to expel this internal discourse to the outer world is sparked by the impulse of reason, but the medium is mechanical. In classic Galenic physiology, air is drawn into the body in order to cool the heart which is always in danger of overheating because of the passion of the soul. As it is expelled in its heated form, it beats against the walls of the trachea creating sound in the form of unmodulated voice. The pitch and articulatory power of this column of air depends on its speed and its temperature. The column of air then reaches what Primaudaye calls **SLIDE** ‘the head of the rough artery, commonly called the knot or joint of the neck or Adams morsel, being fashioned like to an Almain flute’ (in other words, the larynx) where, in order for the air to resonate and make sound, it is now turned back on itself to reverberate and this is the reason why the trachea is formed from gristly rings which according to tradition, help the process of redirection.

Against the background of this profoundly mistaken anatomy, we might, however read rather carefully the words of a number of contemporary musical sources. First, with regard to the idea of inner and outer speech, the Introduction to Ottavio Durante’s book of solo motets, published in 1608, just a year after Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* provides a precious insight into the interpretative process of singing and relates to Bacilly’s third curriculum element – ‘the ear, or intelligence’:

SLIDE

Singers must strive to grasp the sense of what it is they have to sing, especially when singing alone, so they can understand it in themselves and make it their own, in order to be able to bring their listeners to the same understanding, which is their principal purpose. They must take care to sing in tune, to sing *adagio* (that is, with great freedom of rhythm), to give forth the voice with *gratia* and to pronounce the words distinctly in order to be understood, and if they want to add *passaggi* they should remember that not every *passaggio* is suitable for good *maniera* in singing.

The advice ***begins*** with what we might now consider to be the reflective process of ‘internalising and making the text one’s own’ and this is then ***followed*** by consideration of the technical suggestions for what to do when the inner voice is expelled, all of which strongly imply technical decisions and actions to be taken *in the moment of performance*. Singers at this time thus construed the voice as primarily a means to convey their own understanding of a text, and in technical terms to privilege the following key parameters in order to articulate it: good intonation, graceful ‘giving forth of the voice’, freedom of rhythm, clear pronunciation of the text and stylish and appropriate *passaggi*. If we recognise nearly all of these priorities in our contemporary aesthetics, nonetheless, the means by which an early seventeenth-century singer would have realised them (especially the *passaggi*) and the vocal sound that would have resulted would almost certainly have been very different to a performance by a trained singer today.

Primaudaye’s ‘Adam’s morsel’ is a reminder to singers of the perennial fact that you can’t touch your voice or have it manipulated manually, as a violin teacher might demonstrate bow-hold or finger position to a pupil: the nearest you can get is to place a finger lightly on your Adam’s apple and feel the movement of your larynx as you sing. As I have already described, the technique by which singers can greatly increase the volume of the voice and carry the full chest voice up higher still by *depressing* the larynx was a development of the early nineteenth century, described in print for the first time in a serious singing treatise only in 1847 by the great singing pedagogue – and inventor of the

laryngoscope – Manual Garcia II. But back in 1636, Marin Mersenne, in his exhaustive investigation of the function of the human voice, states unequivocally that **SLIDE** ‘the larynx rises up when we sing high... the larynx goes down when singing low’. This is in essence repeated more than a century later by another singing teacher, **SLIDE** Jean Antoine Bérard in 1755 who, in a mechanistic attempt to explain the way in which the voice changes pitches in the same way as stringed instruments, advises the student to place a finger on the larynx and to note how it rises by steps as the sung notes get higher. However ambitious his theory, the experiment demonstrates for us precisely the vocal technique of an eighteenth-century professional singer and teacher and corroborates Mersenne’s observation.

[let’s try!]

The evidence for high- or floating larynx vocal production in pre-Romantic technique (and also basically what just about all singers outside the relatively narrow confines of Western classical art-singing also do today) is further reinforced in my final example, which tackles the remaining element in Bacilly’s vocal tool-box, *disposition*.

Marin Mersenne named *flexibilité* as a basic requirement of a good voice, which he defines as **SLIDE** ‘nothing else than the facility and the disposition that the voice has to pass through all kinds of progressions and intervals, both rising and falling and the making of all kinds of passages and diminutions’. There can be no doubt that the precise singing of melismas (*passaggi*) and rhetorical ornaments (*accenti*), which are an enduring feature of vocal music from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, required and requires mastery of throat articulation – in Italian, *cantar di gorga* – which in turn appears to be the technical essence of that elusive precondition of good singing: *disposition*. **SLIDE** ‘Disposition is a certain facility in the performance of everything having to do with singing. It has its location in the throat’ Bacilly (1668). The ability to control rapid opening and closing of the glottis to make very fast and precise note articulation goes against normal modern vocal technique, dependent as the latter is on depressing the larynx to maximise dynamic power, which makes *cantar di gorga* impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, the sources are absolutely clear on the matter, and without a flexible, swift and accurate disposition in order to sing passages

and ornaments in the throat (they are indeed called *gorgie* in Italy in the Baroque), no singer in the Renaissance, Baroque, or Classical periods could hope to be taken seriously as a professional.

SLIDE (BLANK)

The principal way that disposition is displayed in singing is in the perfect execution of the *trillo*, which is the exercise used to practise disposition in the first place. The *trillo* itself is in fact the fastest possible repetition of the tone, and once mastered, it opens the door to all the other types of articulation figures in the singer's armoury: *gruppo*, *tirata*, *cascata*, *ribattutta di gorgia*, *tremolo*, the diminutions of the Renaissance, and the *accenti* and *passaggi* of the Baroque, the latter still being prescribed by Domenico Corri in his *The Singer's Praeceptor* in 1810.

So how is it done? A number of otherwise helpful sixteenth- and seventeenth-century singing teachers try to describe the technique in print, only to concede that *disposition* can only really be learned by imitating someone who can demonstrate it in the flesh, 'just like a bird learns by observing another', says, for example, Michael Praetorius in 1619. I am inclined to believe that this is not simply the usual evasive language of singers, but rather a recognition of the special problem of describing throat articulation in words alone. But in 1620, Francesco Rognoni, member of a family of virtuoso musicians from Milan, published a page of graded vocal exercises (probably the earliest we have) **SLIDE**. The first, entitled 'Modo di portar la voce' – literally 'the mode of carrying the voice', **SLIDE** shows a very simple ascending and descending scale, in which each tone is divided into a dotted minim tied over to a crotchet. The rubric explains: 'the *portar della voce*, which should be done with grace, is made by reinforcing the voice on the first note little by little, and then making a *tremolo* on the crotchet'... before passing to the next note.

The second exercise, interestingly labelled 'Accenti' (the name given to short articulatory ornaments directly linked to text expression in early baroque vocal music), is very closely related to the 'modo di portar le voce'. Out of these two emerge all the other basic ornaments and expressive articulations: the *gruppo*, simple and double, which is the

equivalent to the later shake or trill, and **SLIDE** the 'tremolo', clearly a trillo-like note repetition of limited duration that arises out of a dotted note movement, itself a useful re-animator of the flexibility of the glottis during a melismatic phrase. The Venetian, Lodovico Zacconi, writes in 1592 **SLIDE** 'The *tremolo*, that is, the trembling voice, is the true door for entering into the *passaggi* and for mastering the *gorgie*, because a ship sails more easily once it is already in motion'. The 'trillo articulation' in the throat can only work if the voice is not pressured in the larynx, the mouth is relaxed and the dynamic level of sound not too high.

And finally, once the glottis is freely moving, comes perhaps the hardest part of all: to keep the *portamento* going whilst articulating fast in the throat. Many would say that this is a contradiction in terms, but in fact it merely needs a careful balance between freedom in the larynx and continuous *legato* tone. Zacconi sums it up perfectly:

SLIDE

Two things are necessary to whoever wishes to practise this profession - chest [the chest cavity, rather than the voice register] and throat; chest in order that a great quantity and number of figures can be carried through to the proper end; throat to be able to deliver them with facility.

Let's finish by listening to how this can all work out in practice, in a very rare example of a modern singer who, searching for technical solutions to the performance of music such as Monteverdi's *Orfeo* that conventional operatic training simply could not answer, devoted years to study on his own and also seeking out models to imitate 'as a bird learns from another', and was finally able to realise a piece of printed music that would otherwise be quite impossible to perform with a modern technique. The song, 'Indarno Febo' is by Francesco Rasi, who created the role of Orfeo for Monteverdi. **SLIDE** Here is the score – perhaps you can just see that it contains a long chain of demi-semi-quavers in the middle of the page that can only make sense at very high speed. The singer is one of my early role-models, Nigel Rogers. Before we listen to Nigel perform it, here is a short example of the

singing he eventually found to serve as inspiration, the old art of *disposition* having otherwise entirely died out: it is part of a classical *rag bihag* sung here by the great Ajoy Chakrabaty.

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 3 *Rag bihag*

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 4 'Indarno Febo'

So, to conclude: how far have we got with answering my question? First, any claims to the real possibility of reconstructing historical singing *as it would have sounded* in the past are spurious and a forlorn hope. But we can consider 'reconstruction' in the way that archaeologists as well as cultural and social historians do, as a project of collecting fragments from which to make informed guesses that are always provisional and subject to change as the interpretation of the evidence changes. It is, I hope now clear, that if we want to make a serious claim to be practising 'historically-informed' singing we must adhere to basic principles of historical rigour – that is, maintaining a lively curiosity and openness to changing our practices as evidence changes; and not just cherry-picking evidence that fits our pre-conceived ideas or tastes and ignoring what does not. So, when we go to all the trouble of using exactly the appropriate breed of early eighteenth-century *oboe da caccia* to accompany a super-charged falsettist using a completely modern technique to perform a Bach aria, let's be clear about any claims we make for its methodological hybridity.

Should we hold singing to the same standard of historical proof as instruments? To answer this we must return to the inherent intangibility and ephemerality of voices, that militates against the kinds of organological clarity that players can theoretically at least enjoy. On the other hand, the voice is a phenomenally flexible instrument and amenable to experimentation that most instrumentalists can only dream of (I think here, for example, of my professional lutenist friends who must own upwards of six or seven instruments just to cover the relatively short time-span of their repertoire, while I carry my instrument around with me and I don't even need a case).

Would we want to sing Palestrina, Monteverdi, Bach, Handel or Mozart with a wide range of very different techniques and vocal productions, which would, in turn, quite possibly entail new vocal timbres that could well go right against our desire to sing as beautifully as possible and also upset the expectations of our audiences? Well, as we have seen, even with Adelina Patti, aesthetic values are in almost constant flux and taste is subtle and fragile. One of the most ubiquitous descriptors for the best voices in the early modern period was the word 'sweet' – it is almost impossible to imagine or interpret this utterly historically contingent word without recourse to our own very subjective sense of what it means to each of us.

Finally, there is, of course, absolutely no obligation for anyone to engage with historical sources at all – there is nothing whatsoever 'wrong' with re-imaginings of old music or performances that deliberately go against historical knowledge. It is perhaps only important to avoid making claims about being 'informed', if one is not.