



1741 portrait of composer George Frideric Handel by Thomas Hudson. *Public Domain*

WHAT'S A COUNTERTENOR?

The term “countertenor” has a long history. Its earliest use refers to a specific harmony part in polyphonic choral works of the 14th and 15th centuries. Women were not allowed to sing in church – a main source of choral music at the time – so some male singers using falsetto would sing the high parts, sometimes joining the young boys of the choir. Eventually, the word “countertenor” came to refer generally to male singers who use their voices in a high range comparable to that of alto, mezzo-soprano, or soprano singers.

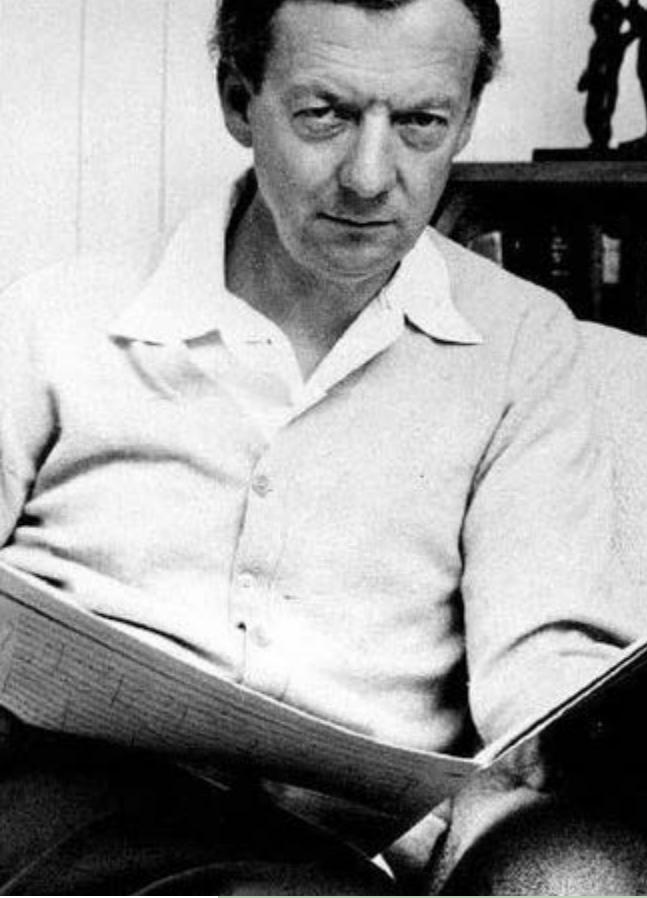


Photo of composer Benjamin Britten by Hans Wild for *High Fidelity* magazine, 1968. Public Domain

By the time opera started emerging in 17th-century Italy, a fashion for *castrato* singers also emerged, and their unique sound made them the pop stars of Baroque opera. Within the century, changing musical tastes and medical ethics led to the decline of this practice, though castrati were not banned by the Vatican until 1903. In modern performances of Baroque operas, roles originally written for *castrati* are typically sung by countertenors. Many of these Baroque roles that are still popular today come from the operas of George Frideric Handel (1685-1759).

Today, there is disagreement among voice teachers, voice scientists, and even singers themselves about what makes a countertenor.

Is “countertenor” a unique voice type, a specific way of training the male voice, some combination of the two... or something else? The debate continues, but one misconception that can be cleared up is the idea that all modern countertenors sing entirely in *false alto*, a lighter mechanism or way of producing higher pitches without engaging the full voice. If you listen to a modern professional countertenor singing opera, you will likely find that they are engaging their voice fully, and using a wide range of dynamics, tone colors, and expressive choices. Moreover, most singers who train the higher register of their voice so they can sing countertenor repertoire are also fully capable of singing in the lower tenor, baritone, and sometimes even bass registers, as well. Some countertenors may focus primarily on training their higher range, while others may choose to practice singing every note they have, from top to bottom. Operas of the Classical, Romantic, and 20th-century traditions rarely, if ever, included parts for countertenors. Some notable exceptions include Benjamin Britten’s operas *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1960) and *Death in Venice* (1973), Philip Glass’s *Akhnaten* (1983), and Jonathan Dove’s *Flight* (1998). Among new operas being written today, countertenor roles are becoming increasingly common, exploring a vast array of characters, settings, and dramatic possibilities. In fact, in BLO’s production of *The Seasons* – a new work that fuses Baroque music with a newly written libretto by a living playwright – you will hear not one, but two countertenors sing the roles of The Poet and The Painter!

Anthony Roth Costanzo and Kangmin Justin Kim, whose performances you will hear in *The Seasons*, are internationally known in the world of



Countertenor John Holiday in BLO's September 2024 production of *Mitridate, re di Ponto*. Photo by Nile Scott Studios

opera. Some other popular countertenors include Jakub Józef Orliński, who sang at the opening ceremonies of the 2024 Summer Olympics; Philippe Jaroussky, who started as a violinist before turning to singing; and John Holiday, who has appeared on NPR's Tiny Desk concert series and joined BLO's cast of *Mitridate* earlier this season. But countertenor singing is not exclusive to opera – just ask Chris Colfer and Alex Newell of *Glee* fame!



Glee's Alex Newell. Photo courtesy of Atlantic Records. Creative Commons



Glee's Chris Colfer at the 2011 Time 100 Gala. Photo by David Shankbone. Creative Commons