

Title: Bel Canto: The Old Italian Vocal Technique and Its Golden Age

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Summary: This essay discusses the historical development of the vocal technique bel canto. It traces the golden age in the opera composition and the people behind the classic works in Italian Opera. This paper further discusses the techniques and training opera singers employ in order to perform classic pieces. It also goes through the comparison of bel canto singing technique and the Pop singing technique.

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A brief history of the Old Italian Technique of Singing

Literally meaning "beautiful singing," **Bel Canto** is a term quite popularly used by vocal music aficionados worldwide to refer the beautiful, florid style of singing used by Italian singers in both art song and opera. The bel canto emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it originates all the way through the Middle Ages. This technique in singing began in Italy about four centuries ago and is based on the ideas of ease, purity and evenness of tone production and agile precise and virtuosic use of the voice. It was widely used in during those times in both polyphonic and solo vocal music and then later developed into what is popularly known today as Italian Opera.

It was the search for "divine vocal beauty" in the late 1500's that led to the development and innovations of this technique. The search began around 1580 in the movement of the Count Giovanni Bardi of Florence, Italy to organize a group of intellectuals who would meet at his palace and informally discuss literature, science and arts, and sometimes even to perform new music, to revive the practices of ancient Greek music and drama. Among these intellectuals were Vincenzo Galilei, the father of Galileo,

and the composers Giulio Caccini, Jacop Peri, who were instrumental in creating what is known to be the first opera, Euridice.

From this origin, a highly respected and appreciated tradition of singing began to move on to the innovations in singing such as the Opera, where this technique has been mostly used during the peak of the said genre.

Bel canto was first used exclusively by men, particularly by male religious singers. This was the technique that was also used by Italian castrati. Later, it became famous through use by other operatic singers, notably sopranos.

The Opera

An opera, by definition, is simply a drama in which the characters sing, rather than speak, all or most of their lines. By virtue of this challenging task, this art form may perhaps be deemed as the most complex of them all, combining acting, singing, orchestral music, costumes, scenery, and some form of dance. Much adherent to Greek principles, the Opera uses the enormous power of music to communicate feeling. Music is believed to express emotions more adroitly than the spoken word. Operas skillfully exhibit how vocal and orchestral music can tickle most fancies, provoke intense contemplation, or move the audience to the most sorrowful of sentiments.

The first operas were composed and performed in Florence, Italy, during the Renaissance in the 1590's. Noblemen, musicians, and poets unearthed the culture of the ancient Greeks and used much of their philosophy. The *Camerata*, this elite group of Greek enthusiasts (meaning "men who meet in a chamber"), believed that Greek tragedies were sung rather than spoken. Taking much of Greek and Roman mythologies as their subject matter, this group developed their own version of the Greek tragedies.

They called their compositions *drama per musica* (drama for music) or *opera in musica* (musical work), the term “opera” being a shorter version of the latter. A member of the *Camerata* named Jacopo Peri composed in 1597 what is generally considered to be the first opera – *Dafne*.

Opera is known to have been widely declared as an art form in Western Europe during the baroque period in music history (1600-1750). Baroque music was generally elaborate and emotional; the term was borrowed from art and architecture to describe the ornate, over-ornamented, extravagantly decorative designs favored in that period. A chief reason why this term was used to characterize this period in music history was the period’s love for magnificence and splendor. Most baroque operas were first composed in Italy and primarily flourished and dominant in this country throughout most of the period. The first baroque operas consisted of recitatives, sung by soloists, and choral passages. A small orchestra accompanied the singers. During the 1600’s the aria gradually emerged functionally separate from the recitative. The former were pauses in the opera’s plot development (the recitative’s function), enabling the characters to express their emotions and sentiments while showing off their vocal prowess.

The first and one of the most popular opera composers in the baroque era is Claudio Monteverdi. His efforts made Venice the center of opera in the 1600’s. His first opera masterpiece, *Orofeo* (1607) served as a brilliant precedent to several masterful works to come. Throughout the 1600’s operas were being written, composed, and performed throughout Europe, but it was Italy that carried most of its fame and development.

The Italian opera in the late baroque period evolved into two distinct types – the *opera buffa* (comic opera) and the serious *opera seria*. The *opera buffa* was often performed in between acts of the *opera seria*, poking fun at everyday life. The characters represented all social classes of various occupations and performed in their own dialects. The *opera seria* were mostly stories of ancient monarchs and mythological gods and goddesses portrayed in spectacular sets and interpretations. These operas stressed coloratura singing and long arias. It was in this tradition that many singers were trained in a technique that emphasized skill and beauty of tone – the *bel canto*.

Much vocal artistry flourished throughout the 17th century. Conversely, the quality of operas declined in the turn of the century. The early 1700's saw much degeneration in the plot structure and characters. Most operas served as means through which its singers could engage in self-glorification. Non-Italians reacted actively to this decline, thus instigating the development of a new opera style known as the Classical Opera, spanning 70 years beginning 1750.

A key classical composer in this “revolution” is the German Willibald Gluck. His reforms included much simplification of the opera, rejecting the fantastic and grandiose methods. He believed that drama and music should be unified in opera, thus toning down the showy arias and other superfluous elements and making the story more believable. This is evident in his work *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1762). Another composer who shared the same sentiments was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. This lauded composer pedagogically related the instrumental and vocal music to the actions, using the music to carefully develop the personality of the characters. His best known operas are both in Italian and German: *The Marriage of Figaro*(1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787) (both in

Italian), and the German *The Magic Flute*(1791) and *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782).

The Zenith of the bel Canto

The 1800's ushered in a new movement wherein the *bel canto* reached its zenith. The Romantic Period beginning in the late 1700's to the mid-1800's emphasized emotionalism in the arts as well as in opera. The typical romantic opera had a setting in a nature, a theme based on folklore or the supernatural, and colorful music. It emphasized the imagination, subjectivity of approach, and creative freedom. Operatic music became more grandiose and lush. In grand operas composers typically used larger orchestras, gigantic choruses, and innovative harmonies. Changes in subject matter were also evident, with an abundance of faraway settings; intense, tempestuous romances; unstable or melancholic characters, or characters who were outcasts; nationalistic themes; and supernatural or magical elements. Along with this heavily emotional content, composers began to show a concern for realism and examine contemporary social issues. Although tales of royalty, mythological figures, or stereotypical comical personalities remained popular, operas soon featured characters with unfortunate and deplorable fates. It was during this period too, that the Italian opera was redeemed of its depreciated reputation. The *bel canto* style reached its peak under the auspices of the composer Gioacchino Rossini, and later on Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini.

This triumvirate ruled the destiny of Italian Opera. A key to the works of this distinguished trio lies in the *bel canto* ("beautiful song" or "beautiful singing"). It sought the perfection of tone and intonation, agility, elegance of phrasing, purity and beauty of

sound, smoothness of successive tones (called *legato*), perfection of control – the most exacting technical virtuosity. This style expressed the significance or the moods of the text. A wide range of expression was required from the singers, endowing them maximum power and variety of expression.

Most historians and musicians regard Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868), as the primary and superior perpetrator behind the *bel canto* style. This Italian composer was the most successful operatic composer of his time. Rossini was born at Pesaro in February 29, 1792 and received advanced training at Bologna. His second opera, *La Cambiale di matrimonio* (1810) received critical acclaim and made him an important force in Italian music. Rossini composed 37 operas, beginning with *Demetrio e Polibio* (1806) and ending with *William Tell* (1829). His opuses were known for their rich and catchy melodies, vitality, and expert vocal writing. Much of his great female roles were sung by his first the Spanish soprano Isabella Colbran. Rossini's most successful opera, and the only one that remains in the permanent repertoire, is *The Barber of Seville*, produced in Rome in 1816. In 1824 he moved to Paris, which was then the opera capital of the world, and translated a few of his operas to French and composed other French operas such as *Le Comte Ory* (1828) and the more sober *William Tell* (1829). After 1831, Rossini composed no further operas and during the rest of his life produced only one important work, the *Stabat Mater* of 1842. Despite his long retirement, he remained one of the great personages of the musical world and continued to attract admirers from high society, not only charming them with his music, but with his impeccable wit and humor as well. He

died in Passy, on November 13, 1868. Rossini's operas were the last and best in the Italian *opera buffa*, or comic opera, style.

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) began with very Rossinian compositions but gradually developed dramatic strength and his own musical identity. This Italian operatic composer was born in Bergamo and educated in music at the Naples Conservatory and at the Liceo Filarmonico, Bologna. He composed 65 operas and operettas. Unlike Rossini whose success occurred early in his career, Donizetti did not become widely known until his 33rd opera, *Anna Bolena*, was produced in 1830. The most important works of Donizetti are the grand opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), his most popular work, based on the novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* by the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott; the grand opera *Linda di Chamounix* (1842); and the light operas *L'elisir d'amore* (The Elixir of Love, 1832), *La fille du régiment* (The Daughter of the Regiment, 1840), and *Don Pasquale* (1843). Although only deemed second to Rossini, Donizetti greatly contributed to the development of the *bel canto*. He was also well known for his ability to compose an opera in an astonishingly short time.

Quite different from the former two is Vincenzo Bellini (1801-35). A *bel canto* composer himself, his opuses lacked humor and were more inclined to intensely amorous compositions with ethical confrontations that most often ended in tragedy. Bellini was born in Catania, Sicily, and trained at the Conservatory of Music, Naples. The premiere of his first opera, *Adelson e Salvini*, in 1825, attracted Domenico Barbaja, the director of the San Carlo Opera, Naples, and La Scala, Milan. Barbaja commissioned Bellini to

compose *Bianca e Gerlando* for San Carlo in 1826 and *Il Pirata* for La Scala in 1827. Both operas were very successful. In 1831 the premieres of two of Bellini's most famous operas, *La Sonnambula* (The Sleepwalker) and his masterpiece, *Norma*, brought him international fame. *I Puritani*, his final opera and one of his best works, was produced the year he died. Bellini was a meticulous craftsman, cultivating his natural gift for melancholy melody. He was highly sensitive to the relation between text and music. His work is characterized by brilliant and graceful melodies, designed chiefly for virtuoso singers.

The Bel Canto Technique

Characteristics of the singing technique

Bel canto is often characterized as a technique whose secret lies in the continuity of tone. Singers educated under this technique are known for their ability to pass from one musical phrase to the next with little to no interruption. It is also known for its naturally contoured sense of vocal line, its brilliant florid passages, and other technically demanding aspects. The strive for a pure legato sound (the clean, steady, stable passing from one note to the other without any vocal irregularity or interruption between tones) is one of the most treasured aspects of this technique. Another main aspect of this technique is the emphasis on the agility of the voice --a mastery of vocal control rarely found in other types of singing. Another very important and perhaps one of the most bespectacled elements of this technique is its use of florid and fluid vocal embellishments that is accounted for the agility of the voice of its singers.

The Italian language itself plays an important role in the development of the technique. With its very phonetic characteristic, Italian words often contain consonants strung together with vowel sounds, which makes the language fluid and when spoken correctly, it resonates in the facial structure. The vowels also help in creating continuous, long lines in singing. Another contributor to the continuous line is the little distinction between the start of tone and the intake of breath.

How these characteristics are brought about: how Bel Canto is employed

Despite the "mystery" shrouding this technique, its principles are quite simple. There are only around four key elements of this technique in singing namely, proper breathing, adequate support, opening of vocal cavities, and forward projection of the tone. Seemingly few, these elements would take several years of training to be fully mastered and developed.

The proper employment of the bel canto is very much dependent on the teaching style upon which it is instructed. Teaching this technique is very tricky, since the principles of this technique are to be mastered internally. The old Italian masters relied on a system of teaching and listening to their pupils. When the student created a tone or sound that was of admirable quality (according to the principles of Bel Canto), the master would urge that pupil to repeat the sound until it was memorized. This is not to say that the technique is one that just employs a trial-and-error system since there are major technical elements that are taught to the students of this technique. The techniques however follow the same pattern all throughout the life of the student, from his/her very first lesson until he/she becomes a professional.

The first most basic, and perhaps the most important principle in bel canto singing, is proper breathing, which is probably the first thing every bel canto teacher would teach a student. At this point, it may seem as if that bel canto singers would employ such a complicated otherworldly form of breathing, however, such is not the case. Bel canto singers breathe the way humans are designed to breath and that is through the diaphragm - in lay man's terms, breathing with the belly. Such kind of breathing is very different from what teachers in Physical Education teachers refer to when they say, "inhale and exhale" (wherein the chest rises and falls). In diaphragmatic breathing, it is the abdominal cavity that expands rather than the chest cavity in response to the muscular activity of the diaphragm. This type of breathing is most natural to humans as it is the one employed by infants and also by adults when they are asleep.

The second important element in bel canto singing is support. This is brought about by the proper contraction of the abdominal cavity, which brings about a strong "grounding" or foundation upon which the activities in the upper/vocal cavities stand on. This is quite essential for bringing about the characteristic long and uninterrupted lines in bel canto singing. This contraction is done in conjunction with proper breathing. This also helps prevent the development of tension in the upper cavities, which are supposed to be in a most relaxed disposition while singing.

The third important aspect of bel canto singing is the opening and relaxation of the upper/vocal cavities. This is where the characteristic resonance of bel canto singing is made possible. Traditional teachers would often describe this as a yawning and hollow positioning of the mouth, forming an "acoustic dome" inside the head through the mouth and the throat. Technological innovations helped examine this closely describing it as the

raising of the upper palate, the hollowing of the pharyngeal cavity, and the lowering of the larynx, as often used by more recent vocal pedagogues.

Once again these principles seem very simple and very easy. However, as experience throughout the entire history of this technique tells, it takes rather a very long time for these techniques to be fully mastered, developed, and ingrained in students' systems (depending also on the physical characteristics, i.e. maturity, of the students), which makes its singers highly applauded.

Comparison with mainstream popular singing in the 20th century

Apart from performance practice, the main difference between bel canto singing and pop singing lies on the vocal resonator being used. While pop singers use the chest cavity as their main vocal "amplifier" (which is the same resonator used in speaking) bel canto singers use the upper head cavities (nasopharyngeal) as vocal resonators. As a result, bel canto singers are able to "throw" their voices in a very large concert hall with a big audience, without microphones. In fact, well-trained bel canto singers are able to out-sing even a 50-piece orchestra with little difficulty. The most probable reason for the development of this technique is the need for vocal projection in theaters during the times when this technique was developed. Obviously, there were no microphones during the renaissance era, much less during its early development, and most probably there is a need for performers of those times to be able to project their voices to the very last row in a hall. This also allows for ability of bel canto singers to be clearly heard even when singing in pianissimo, and in actuality this allows them to sing very high notes without

much vocal pressure than can be often seen being done by pop "belters" when singing high notes.

Another lesser-noticed difference is the training process of the two types of singing. While pop singers usually start performing at a relatively young age compared to bel canto singers due to the less attention paid to training, bel canto singers usually can only start performing in their mid twenties (for females) and in their late twenties (for males). So much time is devoted and invested in training for the bel canto technique for it requires such a demanding endeavor as described in the previous sections, however in pop singing, singers can start performing whenever they like (or whenever they are discovered). The greater consequence is however seen in the lesser-known difference between the two styles, and that is the greater "life span" of bel canto singers as compared to pop singers when it comes to their vocal health. The Bel canto technique's principles protect the vocal system in its high regard for the proper use of the vocal apparatus. Indeed, pop singers boast that what they are doing is singing on speech level, however, little do they know that it is actually more harmful to sing in this manner. The reasons presented could well explain why professional bel canto singers can extend their careers well into their seventies, peaking on their forties and fifties, while pop singers are expected to retire by their mid thirties, and if they are lucky, by their fifties.

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The bel canto technique is considered by others as a "dead" and obsolete art form. However, the slowly, but steadily moving attempts at its preservation and revival prove that it is rather a living tradition that will continue to exist and be passed to the next generations. This technique is not only an endeavor that is created for the pleasure of its

followers, but is rather a reminder, or perhaps even a living picture of history that reflects the lives of the people during the times of its development.