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From Italian Opera to Estill: An Overview of Bel Canto Style Singing Techniques from the Eighteenth Century to Modern Day

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From Italian Opera to Estill: An Overview of Bel Canto Style Singing Techniques from the Eighteenth Century to Modern Day

What is vocal pedagogy? Years ago, one might have argued that it was teaching singers to find and use their most beautiful tone possible. And while singers today still strive to sound beautiful, efforts have shifted to focus more on technique than on just merely tone production. Bel canto, literally translating to ‘beautiful singing,’ is a term that developed hundreds of years ago. It is still widely used today, but it is not understood in the same manner as it was originally intended. Bel canto was and is a very influential concept in vocal pedagogy – and though the definition has changed throughout time, the many techniques of bel canto are still being used today, and they impact modern genres as well as modern vocal pedagogical models such as the Alexander Technique and Estill Voice Training.

The original idea of bel canto style singing is associated with the rise of virtuosic singing and solo vocal repertoire. Opera became more common and a distinction was made between amateur singers and singers who stood apart from the rest in their tone, technique, and vocal expression.¹ Stark says in his book that modern voice scientists “try to isolate specific physiological, acoustical, and aerodynamic aspects of the singing voice.”² Though this scientific approach is much different than the essence of bel canto, it all stems from the same idea – trying to find and develop a personal vocal sound. There are many different aspects that go into the true eighteenth-century bel canto sound. Some of the features of bel canto training include registers, tone, and vibrato.

¹ James A. Stark *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), xvii.

² *Ibid.*, xvii.

Post-Renaissance Italy brought to us a beautiful age of vocal music.³ Previous to this period, the voice was a tool that was not used to the best of its ability. Found almost exclusively in chant and polyphony, the solo voice was, though vital to music, was not being used to its fullest potential. But when the invention of opera came about in the seventeenth century, the solo voice began to receive some of the recognition that it deserved. As the demands of vocalists increased, so did vocal pedagogy. Soon, schools for teaching voice started popping up, particularly in Florence, Rome, and Naples, which were designated to teach vocalists how to produce a beautiful sound. The schools found in these cities all came together to become known as the Old-Italian schools of singing.⁴ Most of the concepts of bel canto that will be discussed here will be theories of the Old-Italian School of bel canto singing.

One of those concepts is the theory of registration. A register is “a series of homogenous sounds produced by one mechanism.”⁵ These sounds differ from the other groups of homogenous sounds, and thus you get the multiple registers of the voice. There are a couple different theories when it comes to registration. The most widely accepted view on registers is the two-register theory, which says that there are two registers separated by a break.⁶ The two most commonly accepted registers are the chest register, or the *voca di petto*, and the head register, or the *voca di testa*.⁷ Lodovico Zacconi gives the most detailed early description of the two registers in his work *Prattica di musica* –

³ Cornelius L. Reid. *Bel Canto; Principles and Practices*. (New York, Coleman-Ross, 1950), 5.

⁴ Lucie Manen. *Bel Canto : The Teaching Of The Classical Italian Song-Schools : Its Decline And Restoration*. (Oxford; New York, 1987), 3.

⁵ Cornelius L. Reid. *Bel Canto; Principles and Practices*, 64.

⁶ James A. Stark *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, 81.

⁷ Cornelius L. Reid. *Bel Canto; Principles and Practices*, 64.

where he defined the two registers and noted his favor toward lower chest register voices than head voices.⁸

One of the biggest focal points of registration in the Old Italian school was transition points, or breaks. Uniting the registers was one of the toughest parts of being a classical singer, especially as a male. The way that Old Italian scholars went about this issue was to work merely on strengthening the register that was not as strong as the other.⁹ The small collection of notes that cause the break between registers is known as a vocalist's *passaggio*.

But eventually, vocalists and other musicians began to realize that there was much more to the voice than just the head register and the chest register. Thus began the further specification of vocal registers. In the eighteenth century, the idea of falsetto came to be. But in this time, the term "falsetto" referred to both the highest notes of the voice and the lowest notes of the voice.¹⁰ According to James McKinney, a modern voice pedagogue, there are four registers to the voice – vocal fry, modal register, falsetto register, and whistle register.¹¹ The vocal fry, also called *Stroh bass*, is the lowest vocal register. Its main use is to reach notes of extremely low frequency. Vocal fry can also be used therapeutically by students, helping them to produce lower notes.¹² The modal register is the normal speaking and singing register, probably most similar to the Old Italian school's definition of *voca di petto*.¹³ The falsetto register is above the modal register. The ranges of the two registers sometimes overlap, but the quality of sound is more

⁸ James A. Stark *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, 58.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹¹ James C. McKinney. *The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults*. (Long Grove, IL : Waveland Press, Inc., 2005), 94.

¹² *Ibid.*, 96.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 96.

breathy, which is why it is less preferred by the Italian School musicians.¹⁴ The falsetto register is probably most similar to the Old Italian school's definition of the *voca di testa*.

The last register defined by McKinney is the whistle register. The whistle register is the highest register above the falsetto. McKinney notes that it is difficult to develop research on the whistle register because of the way the vocal fold, epiglottis, and larynx work together. The inside of the throat moves in such a way to produce whistle tones that we cannot get cameras deep enough or far enough in the back of the larynx to observe the actions of the vocal folds during this fascinating vocal phenomenon. Like some other vocal qualities, it is something that is not performable by every vocalist. This may be because of physiological differences in the throats of different singers, or because of lack of knowledge regarding the technique. But, nonetheless, it is a register with a quality of its own.¹⁵ The whistle register is a very modern technique that is rarely used, and was not around during bel canto style singing.

Another largely discussed feature of Italian style singing is vibrato. Vibrato is a normal and healthy occurrence in the voice. It has been a recognized occurrence since as early as the third century.¹⁶ It is defined, according to Cornelius Reid, as “periodic changes of pitch taking place during the sustaining of a single tone.”¹⁷ But, in the early bel canto era, research shows that the existence of vibrato was probably not understood completely. Therefore it was most likely non-existent in the teaching of vocal techniques during that time.¹⁸ Any hint of tremulousness in the voice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries meant, in that era, that you had no control over your voice, and it

¹⁴ James C. McKinney. *The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults*, 100.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁶ Cornelius L. Reid. *Bel Canto; Principles and Practices*, 125.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁸ Toft, Robert. *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 92.

was considered an indication of poor singing ability. However, it was understood that in loud singing, vibrato was unavoidable. Therefore, voice teachers of that era encouraged their students to sing the highest of their notes light and musically in their head voice, not loudly, to avoid any kind of vibrato or tremolo.¹⁹ As time progressed, vibrato became a more accepted vocal quality for the enrichment and flexibility of tone, as well as the expression of feeling and emotion.²⁰

According to Stark, some of the major authors of early vocal pedagogy did not even mention vibrato or vocal tremulousness in their writings, while others seemed to reject it all together.²¹ Today, vibrato is a natural phenomenon that vocalists almost *always* use. Carl Seashore, vocal researcher at the University of Iowa, considered vibrato to be a “vocal ornament” that occurs instinctively during the act of artistic singing, even though it is not indicated to do so in the score.²²

Though vibrato may not have been popular in bel canto style singing, there were other ornamentations that were often used in vocal music. There was quite an extensive array of vocal ornamentations in the bel canto era, from delicate grace notes to massive and elaborate cadenzas.²³ Composers in this era did not always notate graces specifically. Vocalists had to interpret the musical notations for themselves, aiming to find the notes that were merely implied by the composers. One specific type of grace, the appoggiatura, was one of the most common and yet most artistically pleasing practices of this time.²⁴ But even in its simplicity, it has a natural and simple beauty. The appoggiatura is a

¹⁹ Toft, Robert. *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide*, 93.

²⁰ James A. Stark *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, 144.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

²² *Ibid.*, 138.

²³ Toft, Robert. *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide*, 106.

²⁴ Edward Foreman. *The Art of Bel Canto In The Italian Baroque: A Study of The Original Sources*. (Minneapolis, MN, 2006), 283.

“leaning note that approached the main note by step from either above or below and deducted its value from the principal note.”²⁵ The appoggiatura is the base ornamentation of the bel canto style, from which all other ornamentations stemmed.

Another common type of grace was the gruppetto, or the turn. Turns helped to add color and interest to a fairly monotonous melodic line by embellishing a specific note within the line. A good turn is executed in a very light and quick manner, not drawing attention away from the main pitch, but rather adding background decoration.²⁶ It should be used sparingly. Even though this grace is used to alleviate monotony, too many turns can then make the melody line too tedious and busy.²⁷ It is the vocalist’s job to interpret the music well and decorate it appropriately.

Another type of grace ornamentation in the bel canto style of singing is a trill. Trills are used much more carefully to create a very meaningful effect. Trills could vary in loudness, tonal color, and velocity and force to help convey the desired sound.²⁸ A few slow repercussions within a trill might express “sorrow and tenderness” whereas a trill of greater force and velocity might express a feeling of passion.²⁹ Pier Francesco Tosi, famous castrato singer and writer on music, notes eight different types of trills – covering a tone, covering a semitone, half (short) trills, a trill that rises in pitch imperceptibly, a trill that descends in pitch imperceptibly, a slow trill, a redouble (fast) trill, and the biting trill.³⁰ This minute ornamentation of the trill eventually progressed and became what we

²⁵ Toft, Robert. *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide*, 111.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

³⁰ Edward Foreman. *The Art of Bel Canto In The Italian Baroque*, 294.

know today as *coloratura* – a decoration to vocal line that is the result of very quick notes in succession, creating a kind of “trembling” sound.³¹

Another of the most popular *bel canto* style techniques of singing is the *messa di voce*. *Messa di voce* is a term indicating a shift in dynamics while also shifting between two different vocal registers.³² It takes place usually on a sustained pitch. The pitch begins quietly in the falsetto register, and while the pitch crescendos, the voice reaches the fuller timbre of the chest or well-supported head register. The timbre, intensity, and volume then diminish back to the original quality.³³ A well-executed *messa di voce* is an excellent indication of mature vocal coordination.

Although all of these above techniques originated in and became popular during the eighteenth century, their importance in vocal music has not diminished today. Popular singers of our era took the ideas of *bel canto* opera and turned them into a new style. Henry Pleasants authored an article about the ways we see the influence of *bel canto* singing in the modern genre of twentieth-century jazz. *Bel canto* concepts like *tempo rubato*, *portamento*, and various graces, like the *appoggiatura*, are seen all throughout the music of Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan, and Ella Fitzgerald.³⁴ But beyond these things, Pleasants notes that the biggest similarity between the contemporary popular singing style and Baroque classical singing is the way that music is used to serve the text.³⁵

Ornamentation and other vocal devices in opera were almost always placed strategically in order to emphasize the meaning of the text. In opera, we call this idea text painting or word painting. Text painting is not an idea that has lost its spark – actually

³¹ Lucie Manen. *Bel Canto*, 63

³² James A. Stark *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, 116.

³³ *Ibid.*, 117

³⁴ Henry Pleasants. *Bel Canto in Jazz and Pop Singing*. *Music Educators Journal*. 1973, 54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 54

quite the opposite. Modern musicians use word painting so prevalently that sometimes the listener doesn't even realize that it happens. Frank Sinatra was the master of subtly slipping in musically stylistic ornamentations to highlight the meaning of his lyrics, whether that was through the use of various types of appoggiaturas or his use of tempo rubato.³⁶

Tempo rubato was often found in music of the bel canto era. Literally translated to “the stealing of time,” tempo rubato is roughly defined as “the singer’s freedom to alter musical rhythms for the sake of expression.”³⁷ Pierfrancesco Tosi describes the stealing of time through rubato as a “glorious theft.”³⁸ Rubato is different, however, from *accelerando* or *ritardando* – which are less free and more calculated. In tempo rubato, the accompanist maintains the tempo while the vocal performer takes freedom with the rhythms. In *accelerando* or *ritardando*, the singer and accompanist speed up or slow down the tempo along with each other.³⁹

There are also other types of rhythmic flexibilities. One example is Sean-Nos singing. Sean-Nos is an old Irish tradition in which a high female voice sings unaccompanied with great ornamentation and rhythmic freedom.⁴⁰ Rubato and other rhythmic freedoms are a more regular practice in jazz and other contemporary styles than they were in the classical style, but the idea was originally taken from the operas of

³⁶ Henry Pleasants. *Bel Canto in Jazz and Pop Singing*, 55.

³⁷ James A. Stark *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, 173.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 173.

³⁹ Toff, Robert. *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide*, 79.

⁴⁰ James A. Stark *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, 175.

Donizetti, Mozart, Rossini, and then were later seen in the instrumental works of composers such as Chopin and Saint-Saëns.⁴¹

Another Old-Italian concept that can be readily found in contemporary music is the *messa di voce*. In the eighteenth century, the *messa di voce* was when a vocalist initially began a pitch quietly, then grew the pitch dynamically to a beautiful forte, then slowly brought the dynamic level back down again.⁴² In jazz, this is heard often, but is often referred to as phrase carryover. In a phrase carryover, the melody is sustained from one phrase and grows into the next phrase, artistically connecting the two phrases together.⁴³ It creates an effect similar to the classical *messa di voce*, simply placing it between two phrases rather than in the middle of a single pitch.

One thing that was largely important in opera singing was smooth transitions between vocal registers. Today, the transition between vocal registers, as well as the smooth grabbing and releasing of notes, is a vocal technique that teachers work on regularly with their students. Smooth transitions are a huge part of the modern vocal studio teaching technique known as Estill Voice Training. In Estill, the transition between pitches, or the way your vocal folds begin or release a pitch is called onset and offset.⁴⁴ According to Jo Estill, the creator of the Estill Voice Training practices, there are three different types of true vocal fold onsets: glottal, aspirate, or smooth.⁴⁵ A glottal onset occurs when air bursts suddenly through tightly closed vocal folds, like when saying the exclamation “Uh-Oh.”⁴⁶ An aspirate onset is when air audibly escapes through vocal

⁴¹ James A. Stark *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, 174.

⁴² Henry Pleasants. *Bel Canto in Jazz and Pop Singing*, 54.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 59

⁴⁴ Krzysztof Izdebski. *Emotions in the Human Voice*. (San Diego: Plural Publishing, Inc.), 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 86

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 86

folds that are not tightly shut, like when pronouncing an ‘H’ sound at the beginning of a phrase.⁴⁷ The last onset option according to Estill is a smooth onset. The smooth onset is the vocal onset that is most often found in classical singing and opera.⁴⁸ The smooth onset is produced when the flow of air is coordinated with the adduction of the vocal folds, creating a pure and clean vowel sound.⁴⁹

Estill’s most famous contributions to the vocal pedagogical world are her definitions of the six Estill voice qualities. The six different voice qualities were discovered by listening to music and distinctly recognizing six different sound qualities present in all vocal sounds.⁵⁰ The six qualities include speech, falsetto, sob, twang, opera, and belting. Each quality has its own applications and limitations, and most of the qualities, in some way, can be found throughout, and were developed from, Western classical singing.⁵¹

Speech quality, also identified as modal speech or chest voice, is a vocal quality heard in every day speech. It is comfortable and powerful at lower pitch levels. It can sometimes be found used effectively in opera recitative.⁵² Sob Quality has a very dark timbre and can often be found in older choral pieces and some chant pieces, as well as soft lullabies.⁵³ The quality that is most obviously connected to eighteenth century opera is the opera quality – “a full, rich, powerful classical quality with ring or *squillo*.”⁵⁴ Within the opera quality, there is always vibrato. The sound is perceived as a dark and

⁴⁷ Krzysztof Izdebski. *Emotions in the Human Voice*, 87

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 87

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 87

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 92

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 93

⁵² *Ibid.*, 94

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 94

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 95

brilliant sound. The sound quality must be able to cut through the accompaniment of the orchestra that is usually found in operas.⁵⁵

The new and modern vocal models we have today develop most of their ideas by taking old Italian Bel Canto singing techniques and putting scientific evidences behind them. Both Estill and the Alexander Technique, another modern vocal model, are built off of the evidences proven through scientific research on the relationship between posture and vocal fold vibration.

The main focus of the Alexander Technique is the placement of the different parts of the body to create the most supported and beautiful tone possible. F.M. Alexander, creator of the Alexander Technique, was a solo performer and the director of the Sydney Operatic Conservatorium.⁵⁶ Alexander developed his technique after watching himself in a mirror – watching his own posture and watching how his voice was affected after changing his posture.⁵⁷ The technique focuses on placement of the head, neck, shoulders, and back. Alexander emphasizes using correct posture in every day activities such as sitting, writing, and driving.⁵⁸ Correcting posture in these activities will make it more natural to transfer correct posture over to singing. “Efficient posture ensures that the supporting muscles of the voice function with the right degree of effort.”⁵⁹

Alexander Technique also places a lot of emphasis on correct breathing. Whereas good posture requires stability, good breathing requires free range of motion.⁶⁰ The Alexander Technique aims to bring these two things together so that the singer achieves a

⁵⁵ Krzysztof Izdebski. *Emotions in the Human Voice*, 96

⁵⁶ Robert Macdonald. *Secrets of Alexander Technique*. (London, 2001), 12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 14

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 76, 84, 92

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 144

full, empowered, resonating sound. When breathing for singing, most vocalists merely focus on the breath in. But if you focus on your breath out, a natural and deep intake of air will naturally be your body's reaction.⁶¹ F.M Alexander suggests that you should initially practice breathing in a lying down position. This will train your body to understand the feeling of a correctly expanding and collapsing rib cage, subsequently allowing you to transfer that feeling to your standing posture. Correct breathing practices and good posture go hand in hand. A good singing posture will allow you to breathe fully, and full breaths will expand your rib cage in a way that leads to good posture.

Bodily posture in the Estill Voice model focuses around the idea of anchoring.⁶² Anchoring is meant to create a feeling of support without causing negative tension. Anchoring can be done using the head, neck, and torso. In head and neck anchoring, the nape of the neck aligns with the cervical vertebrae to create an intense, supported, energetic vocal tone.⁶³ In torso anchoring, the vocalist drops the shoulders while simultaneously lifting the sternum. This causes the rib cage to expand and elevate, similarly creating the supported and energized tone that singers look for.⁶⁴

The eighteenth century brought vocal music to new heights. The solo voice went from a tool used merely in the church to an art form all its own. Teachers today have learned so much from the Old-Italian school and the efforts that they made. Vocal music today is filled with the techniques of the bel canto style. Though vocal pedagogy will continue to grow and change as we learn more about the voice, the basics of singing will always remain the same.

⁶¹Robert Macdonald. *Secrets of Alexander Technique*, 145.

⁶² Krzysztof Izdebski. *Emotions in the Human Voice*, 91.

⁶³ Ibid., 91

⁶⁴ Ibid., 91

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