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# Bel Canto: An Analysis from Birth and Background to Musical Benefaction

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# BELCANTO

An Analysis from Background and Birth to Benefaction

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Kaitlin Kohler

Cedarville University

# What is *bel canto*?

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- Beautiful singing
- Emphasis on the solo voice
- Highly expressive and emotional
- Quote from Robert Toft
- Many historians believe *bel canto* originated with Giulio Caccini, the alleged founder of the aria for solo voice with instrumental accompaniment.
- Reality: there are more avenues of origin than one man. *Bel canto* comes from many different Italian musical traditions.

# from Robert Toft:

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“*Bel canto* performers sang in an emphatic way, accenting individual syllables appropriately; matched register and the tonal quality of the voice to the emotional content of the words; employed a highly articulated manner of phrasing; varied their delivery with several styles of legato and staccato; liberally applied more than one type of portamento; considered *messa di voce* to be one of the principle sources of expression; altered tempo frequently through rhythmic rubato and the quickening and slowing of the overall time; introduced a wide variety of graces and divisions into the music they sang; and regarded gesture as a powerful tool for enhancing the effect of their delivery. They reserved vibrato, however, for heightening the expression of certain words and for gracing longer notes.”

Robert Toft, *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

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# *Bel canto's* BACKGROUND

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- Polyphony and homophony grew from Gregorian chant's monophony
- Homophony led to madrigals and pastorals
- Highly expressive and emotional
- The *Camerata*: an informal academy that met in Count Giovanni Bardi's salon to discuss music and drama
- Monteverdi and *Orfeo*
- Mozart and *opera buffa*

# Forefathers: Mozart and Da Ponte

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- Librettist bends to the will of the composer; music is most important
- Bel canto cadence already visible in Da Ponte's poetry
- *Una donna a quindici anni* from *Così fan tutte*

# from Lorenzo da Ponte:

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Dunque solo in questo seno (Therefore only in this breast)

Questa legge in me vivrà (This law in me lives)

E tu poi da un duro freno (And you then from a hard restraint)

Cerca pur felicità. (Search for pure happiness.)

Joseph Louis Russo, *Lorenzo da Ponte: Poet and Adventurer* (New York: AMS Press 1966), 27.



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Andante

U . na don . na a quin . di . cian . ni dee sa . per \_\_\_\_\_ o . gni gran

Andante

*f* *p*

mo - da; do . ve il dia - vo . lo ha la co - da, co . sa è be . ne, e mal co -

# *Bel Canto's* BIRTH

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- Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini
- Vocalist is triumphed—diva, prima donna
- Smooth legato through entire range
- Messa di voce (in Estill, this is called fold mass)
- Effortless embellishments
- “Casta Diva” from *Norma*

# Bellini: “Casta Diva” from *Norma*

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# Benefaction: Modern Impact of *Bel Canto*

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- Merely supporting accompaniment—rather simple
- Vocalist is triumphed—diva
- Modern pop songs hold many of the same melodic qualities as 19th century Italian *bel canto*

# “Someone Like You” by Adele

The image displays a musical score for the song "Someone Like You" by Adele. It is presented in two systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major), and the time signature is 4/4.

**System 1 (Measures 4-6):**

- Chords:** D (measures 4-5), A (measure 5), C<sup>9</sup>m/G<sup>9</sup> (measures 5-6).
- Vocal Line:** 1. I \_\_\_\_\_ heard that you're \_\_\_\_\_ set-tled down, \_\_\_\_\_ that you \_\_\_\_\_
- Piano Accompaniment:** The right hand plays a steady eighth-note pattern, while the left hand plays a simple bass line.

**System 2 (Measures 7-8):**

- Chords:** F<sup>9</sup>5 (measures 7-8), D (measure 8).
- Vocal Line:** \_\_\_\_\_ found a girl \_\_\_\_\_ and you're \_\_\_\_\_ mar-ried now. \_\_\_\_\_
- Piano Accompaniment:** Continues with the same rhythmic pattern as in the first system.

# BIG IDEA

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- Many vocal music traditions led to the genesis of *bel canto*
- *Bel canto* is a very specific tradition that originated in the 19th century in Italy
- It has a significant lasting impact in the 21st century