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

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What is *bel canto*?

- Beautiful singing
- Emphasis on the solo voice
- Highly expressive and emotional

Quotation 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.
“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.”

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Bel canto’s BACKGROUND

- 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

- 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:

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.)

Forefathers: Mozart and Da Ponte

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- *Una donna a quindici anni* from *Così fan tutte*
Un' donna a quin di cian ni dee sa per o gni gran

mo da; do ve il dia vo lo ha la co da, co sa è be ne, e mal co
Bel Canto’s BIRTH

- 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
Benefaction: Modern Impact of *Bel Canto*

- 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
BIG IDEA

• 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