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Historical Perspectives

Bel Canto (HIP): An Introduction to Historically
Informed Re-Creative Singing in an Age of
Rhetorical Persuasion, c. 1500- c. 1830

2024

01 Contextual Considerations

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To understand older styles of singing, we need to imagine those times before:

- large concert halls (2000 – 4000 seats) had become the norm
- the modern grand piano
- conductors
- large, loud orchestras
- the metronome
- musicians prized “literalness,” “evenness of expression,” and invariable tempo
- the “school of sensuously pretty voice-production” dominated the vocal soundscape (*bel suono* instead of *bel canto*)
- the lowered-larynx technique and vowel modification became common
- people knew anything about formants

and recognise times when:

- performance spaces were smaller
- instruments were quieter
- scores were never meant to be read literally
- composers sometimes wrote down the notes they did not want vocalists to perform instead of the ones they wanted them to sing
- performers personalised the music through all sorts of modifications to the notated text and completed the creative process the composer had merely begun
- singing was based directly on speaking, and rhetorical principles of spoken delivery governed sung delivery
- singers performed with the larynx in the neutral position used for speaking and retained the vowels of speech
- the voice was regarded as a registral instrument and tonal contrast was the norm
- singers felt that an “addiction” to *vibrato*, as well as “forcing” the voice, would rob music of its emotional significance
- *messa di voce*, rhythmic *rubato*, tempo pliability, and prosodic delivery were the pillars of good style
- improvisation was the crowning glory of all training
- singers applied the devices of expression flexibly to suit the emotional content of the text.