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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

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02 Defining Bel Canto

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Although the expression *bel canto* most likely refers to a style of singing practiced in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for the purposes of this website, I use the term generically to encompass all historic singing based on the art of the orator, primarily in the period from around 1500 to about 1830. Writers did not apply the words *bel canto* to a “school” of singing until the early 1860s, a time of nostalgia when people began to long for an earlier approach to performance that had started to wane around 1830 (for further information, see Duey 1951: 3-12). The so-called *bel canto* operas of the Bellini/Donizetti generation don’t actually belong to the *bel canto* era, for at least one vocal tutor in the 1850s, Michael Balfe’s *A New Universal Method of Singing* (1857: iii), refers to a new way of teaching required for the music of these composers. In fact, the operas of Bellini and Donizetti might best be viewed as music that ushered in a new era of singing, instead of works that represented the apex of the old *bel canto* principles of delivery. Moreover, late nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources would lead us to believe that *bel canto* was restricted to beauty and evenness of tone, *legato* phrasing, and skill in executing highly florid passages, but earlier documents describe a multifaceted manner of performance far beyond these confines.

From the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, principles of rhetoric, particularly those associated with *pronunciatio* (the division of rhetoric concerned with the delivery of texts), lay at the heart of vocal performance, and writers from Nicola Vicentino in 1555 to Charles J. Smyth in 1817 made the connection between the two arts explicit. Vicentino advised singers to use the orator as a model (fol. 94v) and Smyth believed that the finest readers would make the best singers (pp. 17-19). In the eighteenth century, Giambattista Mancini (1774: 150), echoing Vicentino’s remarks, noted that in recitative singers should:

“listen to the speech of a good orator, and hear how many pauses, what variety of sounds, and how many different emphases he uses to express his meanings. Now he raises his voice, now he lowers it, now he hurries it, now it becomes harsh, and now he makes it sweet, according to the various passions that he intends to stir in the listener.”

“attenti pure al discorso d’un buon Oratore, e sentirete quante pose, quante varietà di voci, quante diverse forze adopra per esprimere i suoi sensi; ora inalza la voce, or l’abbassa, or l’affretta, or l’incrudisce, ed or la fà dolce, secondo le diverse passioni, che intende muovere nell’Uditore.”

Vocalists of the time transferred these principles to the arias they sang, for as Richard Bacon explained in 1824, the techniques are “all capable of being applied to the air” (p. 83).