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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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03 Primary Components

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The fundamental elements of the old *bel canto* style centre on a range of interpretive devices, many of which had been derived from oration, that helped singers deliver texts expressively so they could move the emotions of listeners through a persuasive manner of communication. The style of singing in vogue during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, embodied the notion of expression, a concept defined by Charles J. Smyth in 1817 as “the best adaptation of sound to sense” (p. 11), and by adapting “sound to sense,” singers of the era uttered words and melodies so as to produce striking effects which forcibly appealed to the feelings (Turner 1833: 183). Truly effective delivery, then, could be achieved only through an intimate knowledge of expression, or at least that is what a number of writers from the early nineteenth century suggest, and in order for performers to sing expressively, they received training in an extensive range of vocal techniques that enabled them to transform mute scores into passionate declamation.

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century performers sang in an emphatic way and accented individual syllables appropriately, matched register and the tonal quality of the voice to the emotional content of the words, made rhetorical figures manifest through their voices, employed a highly articulated manner of phrasing (by incorporating grammatical and rhetorical pauses), varied delivery with several types of *legato* and *staccato*, liberally applied more than one type of *portamento*, considered the *messa di voce* speakers employed to be one of the principal sources of sung 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 (gesture does for the eyes what the voice does for the ears).

Singers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries employed similar techniques but did not write about them as extensively as voice teachers did in later periods. Nonetheless, many principles of delivery were identical to those of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, even though the style of music differed dramatically. For example, concepts surrounding phrasing did not change for at least 300 years, as discussions of pausing written in the middle of the sixteenth century are identical to those from the early eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries (compare John Hart’s 1551 text with Michael Maittaire’s writings from 1712 and Allan Griffith’s from 1865). Similarly, the idea of increasing and diminishing on individual notes (what became known as *messa di voce*) arose from the “natural speaking delivery of words” (Philipps 1826: 5), and Giulio Caccini wrote about this technique in the preface to *Le nuove musiche* (1602) in virtually the same way Thomas Philipps described it in 1826 (p. 5). Furthermore, the principles of prosodic singing had become well established by the time of Biagio Rossetti (1529: fol. ciiv), Giovanni del Lago (1540: 40-41), and Nicola Vicentino

(1555: fol. 85v), and teachers of singing in the nineteenth century, such as William Hamerton (1821: 21), Thomas Williams (1834: 2-4), Isaac Nathan (1836: 190), and Adolpho Ferrari (1857: 23-24), continued to instruct their pupils in an identical manner. Prosodic delivery required words to receive the correct accent (that is, stress should be laid on the appropriate syllable in multi-syllable words), and singers often had to alter the rhythmic profiles of melodies when composers committed “barbarisms” by inappropriately setting short syllables to long notes or long syllables to short notes.

The reason that certain facets of performance remained similar for so long can be attributed to the important role rhetoric played in the training of orators and singers between c.1500 and c.1830. One of the most important sources of information on delivery (*pronunciatio*) for sixteenth- to eighteenth-century writers remained Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* (c.95), and after the text’s resurgence in the fifteenth century, rhetoricians continued to refer to it throughout the *bel canto* era.