

Western University

Scholarship@Western

---

Historical Perspectives

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

---

2024

## 04 Reading the Notation

Robert Toft

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/belcanto\\_historical](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/belcanto_historical)

---

Singers in earlier times viewed the score quite differently from their modern counterparts. They realised that because composers usually notated songs skeletally, performers could not read scores literally, and to transform inexpressively notated compositions into passionate declamation, vocalists treated texts freely and personalised songs through both minor and major modifications. In other words, singers saw their role more as one of re-creation than of simple interpretation, and because the final shaping of the music was their responsibility, the songs listeners heard often differed substantially from what appeared in print.

Composers of the past did not notate subtleties of rhythm, phrasing, dynamics, pauses, accents, emphases, tempo changes, or ornamentation. Clearly, they had no desire (or need) to capture on paper the elements of performance that moved listeners in the ways writers from the time described. In the middle of the sixteenth century, Nicola Vicentino commented that “sometimes [singers] use a certain method of proceeding in compositions that cannot be written down” / “qualche volta si usa un certo ordine di procedere, nelle compositioni, che non si può scrivere” (1555: fol. 94v). Along these lines, Andreas Ornithoparchus, writing in 1517, praised singers in the Church of Prague for making “the Notes sometimes longer, sometime[s] shorter, then they should” (p. 89 in John Dowland’s 1609 translation). Around 1781, Domenico Corri characterised the relationship between performance and notation candidly: “either an air, or recitative, sung exactly as it is commonly noted, would be a very inexpressive, nay, a very uncouth performance” (vol. 1, p. 2). Charles Avison had already made this notion explicit in 1753 (p. 124): “the Composer will always be subject to a Necessity of leaving great Latitude to the Performer; who, nevertheless, may be greatly assisted therein, by his Perception of the Powers of Expression,” and a hundred years later voice teachers like Manuel García (1857: 56) continued to suggest the same thing – performers should alter pieces to enhance their effect or to make them suitable to the power and character of an individual singer’s vocal capability.

Other tutors reinforce this notion, and teachers of singing from the nineteenth century routinely advised performers to pay more attention to expressing the passion of the subject than to following the notation mechanically. In 1817, Charles J. Smyth pointed out that “singers are apt to deliver the words [in recitative] too strictly according to the time of the notes to which the composer has adapted the words. It was necessary for the composer to fill up his bar: but he never intended the singer should pay mechanical attention to his notation” (pp. 17-18), and in the middle of the century, John Addison considered the composer’s notation to represent only “the Skeleton of his ideas.” The rest, he maintained, “is left to the Singer, who must give the finish according to his taste and judgment” (c.1850: 29). In other words, since scores contained just the skeletal ideas of composers, singers could not present literal readings of the editions before them.