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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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06 Rhetoric and Oration

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In the sixteenth century, Thomas Elyot (1546: fol. 41v) defined rhetoric as “the science, wherby is taughte an artificiall fourme of spekyng, wherin is the power to perswade, move, and delyte.” Numerous textbooks on the art of persuasive speech survive, and the writers dealt fully not only with the construction of impassioned discourse but also with the various devices speakers could use to capture the minds of listeners. Traditionally, rhetoricians divided their art into five areas: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio* or *decoratio*, *memoria*, and *pronunciatio*. *Inventio* entailed finding the subject matter, and in *dispositio*, orators arranged or ordered the material to suit their purpose. Once the material had been arranged, *elocutio* involved amplifying and decorating the discourse with fine words and sentences. Speakers then memorised (*memoria*) and delivered the speech, *pronunciatio* being concerned with the techniques of delivery orators employed to move the passions of listeners.

Within these five areas, many rhetoricians considered *pronunciatio* to be pre-eminent. Thomas Wilson’s remarks (1553: 33, 432) typify the period:

“Demosthenes therefore, that famouse Oratour beyng asked what was the chieftest point in al Oratorie, gave the chiefe and onely praise to Pronunciation, being demaunded, what was the seconde, and the thirde, he still made answere, Pronunciation, and would make none other aunswere ... For though a manne can finde out good matter, and good woordes, though he canne handsomely set them together, and cary them very well awaie in his mynde, yet it is to no purpose, if he have no utteraunce [delivery] ... Arte without utteraunce can dooe nothyng, utteraunce without Arte can dooe right muche.”

But, of course, by Wilson’s day the attributes of persuasive delivery had been known for centuries. Quintilian (c.95), for example, mentioned not only the characteristics of good reading but also the fundamental role a knowledge of *elocutio* played when orators prepared their delivery:

“Reading [aloud] remains for consideration. In this connexion there is much that can only be taught in actual practice, as for instance, when the boy should take breath, at what point he should introduce a pause into a line, where the sense ends or begins, when the voice should be raised or lowered, what modulation should be given to each phrase, and when he should increase or slacken speed, or speak with greater or less energy. In

this portion of my work, I will give but one golden rule: to do all these things, he must understand what he reads.”

“Superest lectio, in qua puer ut sciat, ubi suspendere spiritum debeat, quo loco versum distinguere, ubi claudatur sensus, unde incipiat, quando attollenda vel summittenda sit vox, quo quidque flexu, quid lentius, celerius, concitatus, lenius dicendum, demonstrari nisi in opere ipso non potest. Unum est igitur, quod in hac parte praecipiam: ut omnia ista facere possit, intelligat.”
(Trans. in Quintilian I, 147.)

In other words, in order to speak eloquently one must understand the structure of the text and use the techniques of *pronunciatio* (some of which Quintilian lists) to impress the figurative language of the text (*elocutio*) upon listeners. The function of *pronunciatio* and *elocutio*, and hence the goal of persuasive discourse, then, was to imprint the affections of the text in the souls of listeners (Wright 1604: 124).

From the sixteenth century forward, writers on singing expected vocalists to base their delivery on the practices of oratory, and in 1555 Nicola Vicentino captured the essence of the approach (fol. 94v):

“The experience of the orator teaches this [the value of changing tempo (*mutare misura*) within a song], for one sees how he proceeds in an oration – for now he speaks loudly and now softly, and more slowly and more quickly, and with this greatly moves his auditors; and this way of changing the tempo has a great effect on the soul. And for this reason one sings the music from memory ready to imitate the accents and effects of the parts of the oration, [for] what effect would the orator make if he recited a fine speech without regulating his accents, pronunciations, fast and slow motions, and soft and loud levels of speaking? That would not move his hearers. The same should occur in music, for if the orator moves his auditors with the aforesaid devices, how much more powerfully would music, recited with the same devices, accompanied by well-united harmony, make a greater effect.”

“La esperienza, dell’Oratore l’insegna, che si vede il modo che tiene nell’Oratione, che hora dice forte, & hora piano, & più tardo, & più presto, e con questo muove assai gl’oditori, & questo modo di muovere la misura, fà effetto assai nell’animo, & per tal ragione si cantarà la Musica alla mente per imitar gli accenti, & effetti delle parti dell’oratione, & che effetto faria l’Oratore che recitasse

una bella oratione senza l'ordine dei suoi accenti, & pronuntie, & moti veloci, & tardi, & con il dir piano & forte quello non muoveria gl'oditori. Il simile dè essere nella Musica. perche se l'Oratore muove gli oditori con gl'ordini sopradetti, quanto maggiormente la Musica recitata con i medesimi ordini accompagnati dall'Armonia, ben unita, farà molto più effetto."

Michael Praetorius said virtually the same things in 1619 (p. 229):

"Just as the concern of an orator is not only to adorn an oration with beautiful, pleasant, and vivid words and magnificent figures but also to pronounce correctly [that is, to use good delivery] and to move the affections: now he raises his voice, now he lets it fall, now he speaks with a voice sometimes intense and soft, sometimes whole and full: so must a musician not only sing but sing with art and grace so that the heart of the listener is stirred and the affections are moved, and thus the song may achieve the purpose for which it was made and towards which it is directed."

"Gleich wie eines Oratoris Ampt ist / nicht allein eine Oration mit schönen anmutigen lebhaftigen Worten / unnd herrlichen Figuris zu zieren / sondern auch recht zu pronunciiren, und die affectus zu moviren: In dem er bald die Stimmen erhebet / bald sinken lesset / bald mit mächtiger und sanffter / bald mit ganzer und voller Stimme redet: Also ist eines Musicanten nicht allein singen / besondern künstlich und anmütig singen: Damit das herz der Zuhörer gerühret / und die affectus beweget werden / und also der Gesang seine Endschaft / dazu er gemacht / und dahin er gerichtet / erreichen möge."

In the eighteenth century, Giambattista Mancini (1774: 150) applied these concepts to recitative:

"Also pay attention 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."

References to oration as a model for singing continued well into the nineteenth century, and in 1834 Thomas Williams wrote:

"to become an Orator in Song, it is indispensably necessary that the true sense and meaning of the words should be strictly attended to, and the breath be taken according to the proper punctuation, just as if the vocal passage, instead of being sung, were read by [one] adept at elocution" (p. 2).

Thirteen years earlier, William Kitchiner (1821: 70) had summarised the connection between speaking and singing with these words: "briefly – The Art of Singing Effectively, – is to Sing every word with the same Accent and Emphasis, as you would Speak it," and Thomas Welsh (c.1825: 25) agreed: "the nearer Singing can approach to fine [spoken] eloquence the better."

As these quotations demonstrate, fundamental principles of performance in the age of rhetorical persuasion remained similar, if not identical, throughout the period covered in this website.