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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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07 Persuasive Singing

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When preparing operatic roles for performance, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century singers were taught to become the characters in their texts; that is, they feigned the affections of the person they represented to make that individual seem to appear before the eyes of listeners. In other words, performers treated both recitatives and arias in a *prosopopoeia*-like manner, outwardly projecting the inner thoughts and passions of their characters so that listeners could discover the secret affections of another's heart. Rhetoricians defined *prosopopoeia* as "a fayning of any person, when in our speach we represent the person of anie, and make it [him] speake as though he were there present" (Fraunce 1588: fol. G2r). Quintilian and Henry Peacham the Elder further explained the technique: the orator personifies the inner thoughts and affections of an absent person, making that person actually seem to appear before the eyes of the hearer (Quintilian: IX, 390-91; Peacham the Elder 1577: fol. O2r-v).

In learning to feign passions, singers imitated real life and followed a traditional approach that dated back to at least the early seventeenth century. They first observed people "appassionate," taking note of "how they demeaned themselves in passions ... what and how they spoke in mirth, sadness, ire, fear, hope, &c, what motions were stirring in the eyes, hands, body, &c" (Wright 1604: 179), and then tempered excessive behaviour with prudence, for true emotion, such as anger and grief, lacked art. In short, orators and singers imagined themselves to be in the situation of the person they represented, uttering the very same words that person would have said, so they could unite voice and gesture to portray the text's thoughts and emotions naturally and convincingly.

But in order to discover the proper manner of delivery, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century singers studied the sentiments of recitatives and arias and analysed the structure of the sentences before them. They first recited the words as a spoken dramatic reading and then transferred as much of the spoken expression to their singing as possible, their method of achieving an eloquent delivery generally following these steps:

- write out the sentences without stops, that is, without punctuation (Sheridan 1781: 108)
- study the meaning of the words to gain insight into the leading passion of the piece (García 1857: 69)
- examine each sentiment developed in the text and decide which emotions should be exhibited prominently (García 1857: 69)
- mark the important words, in order to emphasise them (Sheridan 1781: 110; D. Corri 1810: i. 68; Kitchiner 1821: 61)

- add pauses, both grammatical and rhetorical, to reinforce and clarify the sense [pauses are the blank spaces speakers and singers insert in sentences to compartmentalise ideas so listeners can easily grasp the thoughts] (Sheridan 1781: 109; Lanza 1820: iii. 43; Molineaux 1831: 24; Balfe c.1850: 11)
- declaim the text eloquently, that is, utter impressive thoughts in an impressive manner (Balfe c.1850: 11)
- use this spoken expression as the basis for singing, and sing as if reciting a fine speech; that is, where appropriate, adjust the music to match the spoken delivery (H. Corri 1826: 32; Maynard 1853: 32; Wass 1855: 32).

As early as 1498, this dramatic style of delivery had been documented, for Angelo Poliziano (fol. pviir) described the persuasive effect Fabio Orsini's singing had on listeners:

"a certain most agreeable voice flowed into our ears or rather truly into our hearts so that in fact ... I was almost transported outside of myself moved no doubt by an unspoken feeling of some utterly divine pleasure"

"suavissima quadam voce sic in aures nostras illapsus, immo vero in praecordia est, ut me quidem ... pene extra me rapuerit, certe sensu tacito divinae prorsus cuiusdam voluptatis affecerit."

In 1528, Baldassare Castiglione similarly reported on the effect Marchetto Cara had on his hearers:

"by a delectable way, and full of plaintive sweetness, [he] moves and penetrates the soul, gently imprinting in it a delightful passion"

"per una via placida, & piena di flebile dolcezza intenerisce, & penetra l'anime, imprimendo in esse soavemente una dilettevole passione" (taken from the polyglot edition published in 1588: I, 37, fol. F4v).

Throughout the sixteenth century, both orators and singers employed voice and gesture to bring forth the emotions of the text: "the passion passeth not only thorow the eyes, but also pierceth the eare, and thereby the heart" (Wright 1604: 175). But these channels worked effectively to stir the minds of others only when the orator/singer first became moved by the passions in the text, for as Thomas Wright commented "it is almost impossible for an Orator to stirre up a Passion in his auditors, except he bee first affected with the same passion himselfe" (1604: 172).

Vocalists sang *piano e forte* and *presto e tardo* to conform to the ideas of the composer and to impress on listeners the passions of the words and harmony. Vincenzo Giustiniani (c.1628: 108) characterised the approach a group of singers in Italy had taken in the latter part of the sixteenth century:

“by moderating and increasing their voices, *forte* or *piano*, diminishing or swelling, according to what suited the piece, now with dragging, now stopping, accompanied by a gentle broken sigh, now continuing with long passages, well joined or separated [that is, *legato* or detached], now groups, now leaps, now with long trills, now with short, and again with sweet running passages sung softly, to which one unexpectedly heard an echo answer; and principally with facial expressions, glances, and gestures that appropriately accompanied the music and sentiment; and above all without disgraceful movements of the mouth, hands or body which would not address the purpose of the song; and with [their] enunciation they made the words clear in such a way that one could hear even the last syllable of every word, which was never interrupted or suppressed by passages and other embellishments.”

“col moderare e crescere la voce forte o piano, assottigliandola o ingrossandola, che secondo che veniva a’ tagli, ora con strascinarla, ora smezzarla, con l’accompagnamento d’un soave interrotto sospiro, ora tirando passaggi lunghi, seguiti bene, spiccati, ora grupi, ora a salti, ora con trilli lunghi, ora con breve, et or con passaggi soavi e cantati piano, dalli quali tal volta all’improvviso si sentiva echi rispondere, e principalmente con azione del viso, e dei sguardi e de’ gesti che accompagnavano appropriatamente la musica e li concetti, e sopra tutto senza moto della persona e della bocca e delle mani sconcioso, che non fusse indirizzato al fine per il quale si cantava, e con far spiccar bene le parole in guisa tale che si sentisse anche l’ultima sillaba di ciascuna parola, le quale dalli passaggi et altri ornamenti non fusse interrotta o soppressa.”