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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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## 08 Old vs New

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*Old vs. New:  
Why is the bel canto style different from the way singers perform today?*

Robert Toft

People often ask this question, and the answer is somewhat complex, with a number of factors coming into play. I offer the points below as an introduction to some of the issues involved, especially in relation to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

- in earlier times, singers compartmentalised their thoughts through the insertion of grammatical and rhetorical pauses (phrasing) and took breath frequently. Performers paused, on average, every fifth or sixth word (Robertson 1785: 75), and this produced a highly articulated delivery (this degree of compartmentalisation continued into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – leading actors in Italy, England, and Germany introduced pauses on some of their recordings as often as every third word).
- vocalists considered *messa di voce* the “soul of music” (D. Corri 1810: i. 14) and used the device on single notes, as well as across phrases
- in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, singers regularly applied several types of *portamento* in accordance with the emotional character of the text
- performers sang prosodically, ensuring that the correct syllable in a multi-syllable word received the stress, placed emphasis on the important word or words within a phrase or sentence, while relegating unimportant words to relative obscurity (Walker 1781: ii. 15, 25), and corrected a composer’s false accentuation and emphasis by altering the notated rhythm
- singers treated tempo freely, employing both *tempo rubato* and the quickening and slowing of the overall time
- vocalists added a wide variety of ornamentation to the music they sang (ranging from simple graces to complex divisions), and by 1828 critics called florid execution the reigning taste of the public (*Examiner*, 24 February 1828: 115)
- by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, singers had begun to experiment with a lowered-larynx position; that is, the increased resonance and greater complexity of the frequency spectrum associated with the lowered-larynx technique promoted by Manuel García (and others) does not seem to have formed part of what singers learned prior to this time. In fact, it appears not to have become the norm until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (A well-documented discussion of this new phenomenon can be found in Sarah Potter’s PhD dissertation, chapter 2.)
- as the “school of sensuously pretty voice-production” gradually became common at the end of the nineteenth century, some observers began to complain about the new

monochromatic approach to timbre, saying that if they had heard a singer in one role, then they had heard that singer in every role (Ffrangcon-Davies 1905: 14-16)

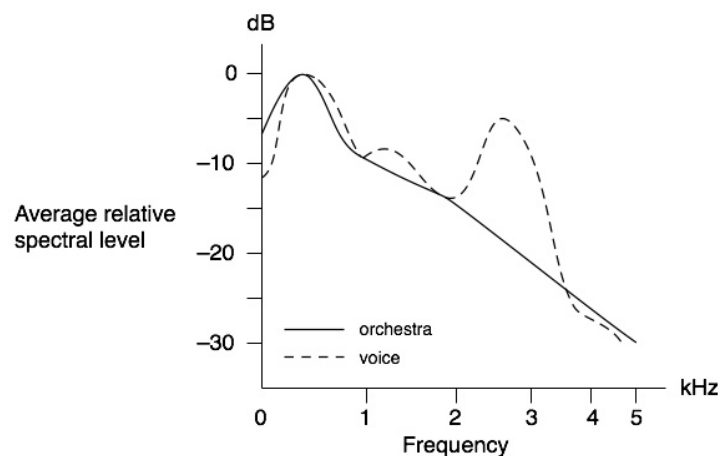
- singers today use the chest tonal quality throughout their entire range, whereas vocalists in the *bel canto* era employed the differing tonal qualities of the chest and head registers for expressive purposes. In fact, as a melody rose in pitch, singers routinely switched from chest to head voice. The *voce di petto* had a full and sonorous sound, but the *voce di testa* was known for its soft, artificial quality. According to William Gardiner (1832: 145), Giuditta Pasta's two registers were so distinct that if she sang a passage in one voice and then repeated it in the other, "you might suppose it proceeded from the voice of another person." For the most part, singers delivered florid passages *sotto voce*; that is, they sang them with less force and with a subdued tonal quality (Bacon 1824: 101; Anfossi c.1840: 71), especially in the "higher part of the scale," where singers like Giuditta Pasta and Henriette Sontag resorted to a "silken sort of under-voice – a kind of female *falsetto stop*" to help them facilitate the execution of embellishments (*New Monthly Magazine* 24 [May 1828]: 203).
- in addition, singers in earlier times linked timbre and emotion directly, varying the tonal quality of their voices accordingly (from smooth and sweet to thin and choked to harsh and rough). In fact, Maria Anfossi observed around 1840 that "the greater the passion is, the less musical will be the voice that expresses it" (c.1840: 69), and by giving each sentiment a distinct mode of expression, vocalists approached what William Newton called "the language of nature" (1861: 90).
- pitch rose by at least a half step over the nineteenth century, and vocal music written in the tradition of Meyerbeer, that is, the music of Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi, required a new style of teaching (Balfe 1857: iii)
- Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi wrote about a third higher for sopranos and tenors than Paisiello, Cimarosa, and Rossini, and because the general *tessitura* (the middle part of the voice commonly used to deliver the dramatic portions of an opera) had risen from c'-e" to e'-g", the range of the chest voice had to be expanded upwards (Balfe 1857: iii). This may be one of the important differences between earlier styles of singing and the manner that became prevalent later in the nineteenth century. In the earlier periods, teachers repeatedly warned vocalists not to force the chest voice up too high (they should switch to head voice for higher notes), but as the general *tessitura* of operatic parts rose, the *voce di petto* had to rise with it.
- the instrumental forces used to accompany singers (particularly pianos and orchestras) were becoming louder and performers had to be heard over them in large performance spaces. Yet in the early nineteenth century, a time when instruments were relatively quiet, reviewers noted that Angelica Catalani, a singer who in comparison with other vocalists of her day had an unusually powerful voice (a writer in the *Examiner* called it "stentorian" – 6 March 1808: 158), was one of the few people who could actually fill a large theatre with sound (*Times*, 15 December 1806).
- as early as 1600, at least one composer recognised that because singers could not be heard in larger spaces, they might be tempted to force the voice, which would have a

detrimental effect on the communication of emotion:

“when performing in very large rooms [those that hold more than 1000 people], it is not possible to make everyone hear the words; whence it would be necessary for the singer to force the voice, which, as a result, [would] diminish the passion.”

“che rappresentandosi in Sale molto grandi, non è possibile far sentire à tutti la parola, onde sarebbe necessitato il Cantante à forzar la voce, per la qual causa l'affetto scema.” (Cavaliere 1600: A' Lettori)

- indeed, the size of a space could lead vocalists to use continual emphasis – in 1821, William Kitchiner (p. 39) suggested that singers might try to make words more distinct in large assemblies by dwelling upon the individual syllables which make up the words, that is, by placing equal weight on the syllables, instead of rendering the text in the natural (prosodic) manner of private discourse
- other early nineteenth-century writers also cautioned singers not to force the voice, lest performers turn their sounds into “shrieks” (*Singer's Assistant* 1821: 32) or “crack” the notes (after his London debut in Cimarosa's *Penelope*, the tenor Domenico Crivelli was criticised in the *Times* because “once or twice, where he attempted to force a passage, he cracked the note” – 13 January 1817)
- over the latter part of the nineteenth century, the earlier experimentation with a lowered larynx gradually led to the adoption of the technique as the normal method for coping with the size of venues and the demands of orchestras
- the lowered larynx created a larger resonant cavity, and with this technique, singers found that they could concentrate the energy of their voices in a specific frequency band. The Swedish tenor Jussi Bjorling was one such singer who could be heard clearly over an orchestra, and after analysing his singing, researchers found a pronounced increase in energy between 2500 and 3000 Hz (see the graph below, which is modelled on the original diagram). Orchestras, on the other hand, produce quite a bit of energy around 500 Hz and considerably less in the 2500 to 3000 Hz range. Hence, singers trained to concentrate their energy in a frequency band well above that of an orchestra find it easier to be heard over that orchestra.



- to keep the “ring” of the voice in that frequency band, the shape of the resonant cavity has to remain relatively stable, and this hinders a singer’s ability to differentiate vowel sounds as much as listeners need for words to be discerned clearly. Moreover, modern methods of vowel modification do not seem to have formed part of the training vocalists received during the *bel canto* era (for a discussion of vowel modification, see Ophaug 2017).
- the loud singing necessitated by large halls and loud orchestras prevents singers from performing in the subtle ways required by the old *bel canto* style
- the *bel canto* manner of delivery originates in and best suits smaller rooms (perhaps up to 600 seats).