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Bel Canto (HIP)

An Introduction to Historically-Informed, Re-Creative Singing in an Age of Rhetorical Persuasion, *c*.1500 – *c*.1830

Robert Toft

Contextual Considerations

To understand older styles of singing, we need to imagine those times before

- large concert halls (2000 – 4000 seats) had become the norm
- the modern grand piano
- conductors
- large, loud orchestras
- the metronome
- musicians prized "literalness," "evenness of expression," and invariable tempo
- the "school of sensuously pretty voice-production" dominated the vocal soundscape (*bel suono* instead of *bel canto*)
- the lowered-larynx technique and vowel modification became common
- people knew anything about formants,

and recognise times when

- performance spaces were smaller
- instruments were quieter
- scores were never meant to be read literally
- composers sometimes wrote down the notes they did not want vocalists to perform instead of the ones they wanted them to sing
- performers personalised the music through all sorts of modifications to the notated text and completed the creative process the composer had merely begun
- singing was based directly on speaking, and rhetorical principles of spoken delivery governed sung delivery

- singers performed with the larynx in the neutral position used for speaking and retained the vowels of speech
- the voice was regarded as a registral instrument and tonal contrast was the norm
- singers felt that an "addiction" to *vibrato*, as well as "forcing" the voice, would rob music of its emotional significance
- *messa di voce*, rhythmic *rubato*, tempo pliability, and prosodic delivery were the pillars of good style
- improvisation was the crowning glory of all training
- singers applied the devices of expression flexibly to suit the emotional content of the text.

Defining Bel Canto

Although the expression *bel canto* most likely refers to a style of singing practiced in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for the purposes of this website, I use the term generically to encompass all historic singing based on the art of the orator, primarily in the period from around 1500 to about 1830. Writers did not apply the words *bel canto* to a "school" of singing until the early 1860s, a time of nostalgia when people began to long for an earlier approach to performance that had started to wane around 1830 (for further information, see Duey 1951: 3-12). The so-called *bel canto* operas of the Bellini/Donizetti generation don't actually belong to the *bel canto* era, for at least one vocal tutor in the 1850s, Michael Balfe's *A New Universal Method of Singing* (1857: iii), refers to a new way of teaching required for the music of these composers. In fact, the operas of Bellini and Donizetti might best be viewed as music that ushered in a new era of singing, instead of works that represented the apex of the old *bel canto* principles of delivery. Moreover, late nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources would lead us to believe that *bel canto* was restricted to beauty and evenness of tone, *legato* phrasing, and skill in executing highly florid passages, but earlier documents describe a multifaceted manner of performance far beyond these confines.

From the sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century, principles of rhetoric, particularly those associated with *pronunciatio* (the division of rhetoric concerned with the delivery of texts), lay at the heart of vocal performance, and writers from Nicola Vicentino in 1555 to Charles J. Smyth in 1817 made the connection between the two arts explicit. Vicentino advised singers to use the orator as a model (fol. 94v) and Smyth believed that the finest readers would make the best singers (pp. 17-19). In the eighteenth century, Giambattista Mancini (1774: 150), echoing Vicentino's remarks, noted that in recitative singers should:

> "listen 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."

Vocalists of the time transferred these principles to the arias they sang, for as Richard Bacon explained in 1824, the techniques are "all capable of being applied to the air" (p. 83).

Primary Components

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 the time frequently through rhythmic *rubato* and the quickening and slowing of the

overall tempo, 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.

Reading the Notation

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.

Freedom of Rhythm and Tempo (Time)

From the late fifteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, writers regularly refer to altering notated rhythm (often to correct compositional errors) and/or to varying the beat (*battuta* or *tactus*), measure (*misura*), or time (*tempo*) within a work (that is, adjusting the speed of delivery to mirror the passions in the text), and even though compositional style changed dramatically between *c*.1500 and *c*.1850, these two practices seem to have remained in vogue for at least 350 years.

Authors from Angelo Poliziano (1498), through Giulio Caccini (1614) and Domenico Corri (*c*.1781), to Maria Anfossi (*c*.1840) and John Addison (*c*.1850) discuss the sort of flexibility that has disappeared in modern times, and while some musicians today argue that rhythmic freedom and variable *tactus* (beat) run counter to early seventeenth-century Italian practices, documents throughout the time period considered here, particularly from Italy, suggest otherwise (in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, writers often define *tactus* as the up and down motion of the hand in beating time).

The quotations below present a representative selection of information that confirms the importance of rhythmic and beat/measure/time flexibility in earlier musical cultures.

Altering the Notated Rhythm

According to writers from 1540 to 1840, singers should be wary of compositional defects, even in works by the most celebrated masters. Giovanni del Lago (1540: 40-41) offered this advice to composers:

> "do not commit barbarisms in composing notes to words; that is, do not place a long accent on short syllables or a short accent on long syllables, which is contrary to the rules of the grammatical arts, without which [that is, without these rules] no one can be a good musician, which [grammatical rules also] teach how to utter and write correctly."
>
> "non far barbarismi nel comporre le notule sopra le parole, cioe non ponete lo accento lungo sopra le sillabe brevi, over l'accento breve sopra le sillabe lunghe, quia est contra regulam artis

> grammitices, senza la quale niuno puo esser buono musico, la quale insegna pronunciare et scrivere drittamente."

These sorts of barbarisms forced singers to perform long syllables as short ones and short syllables as long ones (Vanneo 1533: 93r-93v), and since these errors violated basic principles of grammar, singers corrected problems they encountered by altering the lengths of the offending notes, or at least so suggested Biagio Rossetti in 1529 (fol. ciiv):

> "in hymns and proses or sequences, and in psalms and antiphons, one can make a master of the maidservant grammar, for when one delivers a short syllable, one should shorten the melody's note, even if there are two notes set to one short spoken syllable."
>
> "in hymnis et prosis vel sequentiis et in psalmis et antiphonis possumus de ancilla grammatica facere dominam, ut quando pronunciamus syllabam brevem debemus abreviare notulam cantus etiam si fuerint duae notulae supra unam syllabam dictionis brevem."

Along these lines, Andreas Ornithoparchus, writing in 1517 (p. 89 in John Dowland's 1609 translation), praised singers in the Church of Prague for making "the Notes sometimes longer, sometime[s] shorter, than they should," and at the end of the sixteenth century, Luigi Zenobi (*c.*1600: 80, 97) expected vocalists to improvise solutions to the errors of composers and copyists:

> "the eighth [quality ... for singing with assurance] would be that he [the singer], on finding an error, either by the composer or the copyist, would know how to improvise a remedy to the mistake."
>
> "la Ottava [conditioni ... per cantar securo] sarebbe, ch'egli, ritrovando errore, o di compositore, o di copia, sapesse rimediare improvisamente all'errato."

Furthermore, if vocalists did not correct the problems they found, Gioseffo Zarlino (1558: 341) felt they would fail to achieve a beautiful and elegant manner of singing ("viene a mancare il bello; & lo elegante modo di cantare"). In fact, the mispronunciation of words, especially when singing in another language, would, as Nicola Vicentino suggested in 1555 (fol. 85v), reduce native speakers to laughter:

> "if, ... for example, in the French, the Spanish, and the German language, they [singers] would pronounce long syllables short

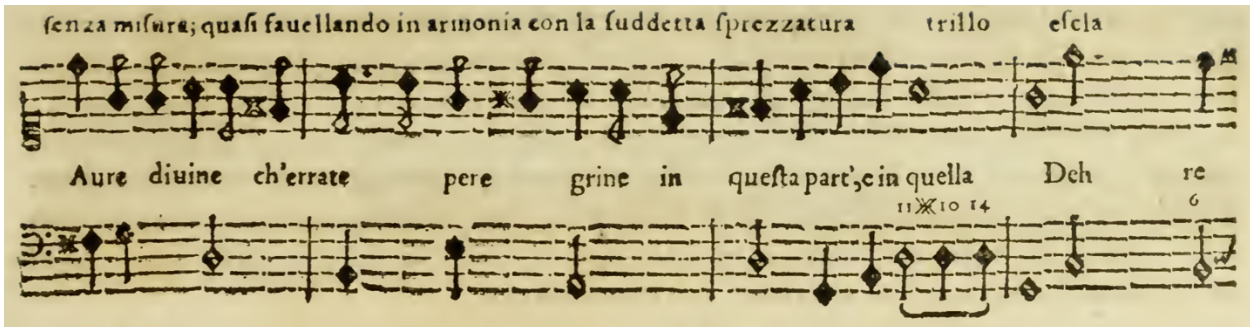
> and short [ones] long, that nation would laugh at such a pronunciation."
>
> "si ... (in essempio) come se nella lingua Franzese, & Spagnuola, et Tedesca, le sillabe loro lunghe fussero pronuntiate brevi, & le breve lunghe, la natione loro riderebbe di tal pronuntia."

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Giulio Caccini claimed in *Le nuove musiche* (1602: "A i lettori") that he had introduced a new type of music that allowed singers almost to speak in tones ("quasi che in armonia favellare"), especially if they used a certain noble negligence of song in their delivery ("una certa nobile sprezzatura di canto").

Although he did not explain what he meant by "negligence/*sprezzatura*" in *Le nuove musiche*, he defined the term in his 1614 publication *Nuove musiche e nuova maniera de scriverle* ("Alcuni avvertimenti"):

> "*Sprezzatura* [negligence] is that elegance which is given to song through the transgression of diverse *crome e simicrome* [eighth notes/quavers and sixteenth notes/semiquavers] on various strings [i.e., pitches], together with that [transgression] made in time. It [*sprezzatura*] removes from song a certain confining rigidity and dryness; thus it renders [song] pleasing, free, and airy, just as in common speech, eloquence and fecundity [abundant variety] make the matters on which one speaks easy and pleasant."
>
> "La sprezzatura è quella leggiadria la quale si da al canto co'l trascorso di più crome, e simicrome sopra diverse corde co'l quale fatto à tempo, togliendosi al canto una certa terminata angustia, e secchezza, si rende piacevole, licenzioso, e arioso, si come nel parlar comune la eloquenza, e la fecondia rende agevoli, e dolci le cose di cui si favella."

Hence, writers such as Caccini believed singers could make their delivery more eloquent if they altered the printed page to free songs from the "confining rigidity" of their notation. He even annotated a piece in *Le nuove musiche* to show singers where they might introduce this form of rhythmic negligence (excerpt from "Deh dove son fuggiti"):



The words above the passage, "senza misura; quasi favellando in armonia con la suddetta sprezzatura," may be translated as "without measure, as if speaking in tones with the aforesaid negligence."

In the preface to *L'Euridice* (1600: "A Lettori"), Jacopo Peri praised one of the most famous Italian singers of his day, Vettoria Archilei, for adding an elegance to his music that could never be written down or learned from the notation (see the last three lines of the quotation):

> "Signora Vettoria Archilei ... has always made my music deserving of her singing, adorning it not only with those *gruppi* and those long circlings of the voice, simple and double [?slower and faster divisions?], which by the nimbleness of her wit are found at every moment, more to conform to the custom of our times than because she supposes [that] in them consists the beauty and the force of our singing, but also with those charms and elegances, which one cannot write down, and [if] written one cannot learn them from the notation."
>
> "la Signora Vettoria Archilei ... ha sempre fatte degne del cantar suo le Musiche mie, adornandole, non pure di quei gruppi, e di quei lunghi giri di voce, semplici, e doppi, che dalla vivezza dell'ingegno suo son ritrovati ad ogn'hora, piu per ubbidire all'uso de' nostri tempi, che, perch'ella stimi consistere in essi la bellezza, e la forza del nostro cantare, ma anco di quelle, e vaghezze, e leggiadrie, che non si possono scrivere, e scrivendole non s'imparano da gli scritti."

Further information on the way singers put the final shape on the music they sang may be found in the anonymous treatise *Il corago, o vero alcune osservazioni per metter bene in scena le composizioni drammatiche / The Choragus, or Some Observations for Staging Dramatic Works Well* (*c*.1630). The author states the following in relation to pausing (p. 90):

> "One should not sing continuously, even if there is no pause in the musical part, but at the end of every *senso* [sense/thought], the singer should stop a while ..."
>
> "Non si deverà cantare seguitamente anchoré nella parte musicale non vi sia pausa ma ad ogni fine di senso si deve il cantare fermare alquanto ..."

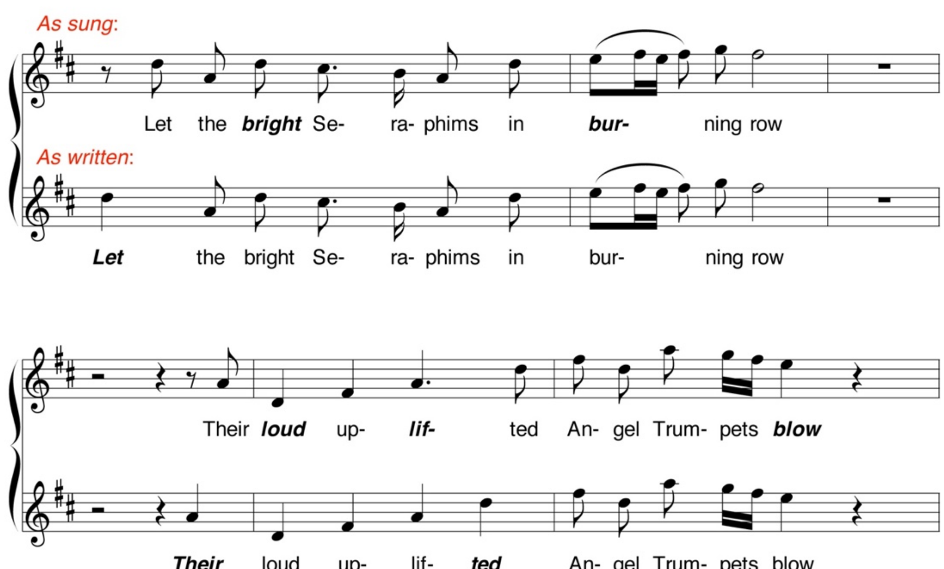
This tradition continued into the eighteenth century, and around 1781, Domenico Corri characterised the relationship between notation and performance unambiguously (p. 2):

> "Indeed, either an air, or recitative, sung exactly as it is commonly noted, would be a very inexpressive, nay, a very uncouth performance; for not only the respective duration of the notes is scarcely even hinted at, but one note is frequently marked instead of another, as is the case where a note is repeated, instead of that note with its proper *appoggiatura* or grace."

Moreover, William Kitchiner, writing in 1820 (unpaginated), was of the opinion that:

> "The finest Compositons do not produce half their effect, if the words and the music are not in perfect unison; and we have heard even the strains of the sublime Handel, and our Orpheus Britannicus Purcel, however delightful to the ear, sometimes fail of producing half the impression they are capable of making on the mind, from being sung with an injudicious accent."

Thus, we see in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that singers continue to be warned about the trustworthiness of notation, no matter how exalted the composer. Kitchiner provided examples of the problems singers face, and in Handel's "Let the bright Seraphims" from *Samson* (1743), he thought vocalists would falsely emphasise "let" and "their" and incorrectly accentuate "uplifted" if they read the notation literally (see the illustration below). The longer values Handel assigned to "let" and "their" emphasised the wrong words, instead of the correct ones, "bright" and "loud," and the quarter note/crotchet Handel used for the final syllable of "uplifted" would accentuate the last syllable and not the middle one.



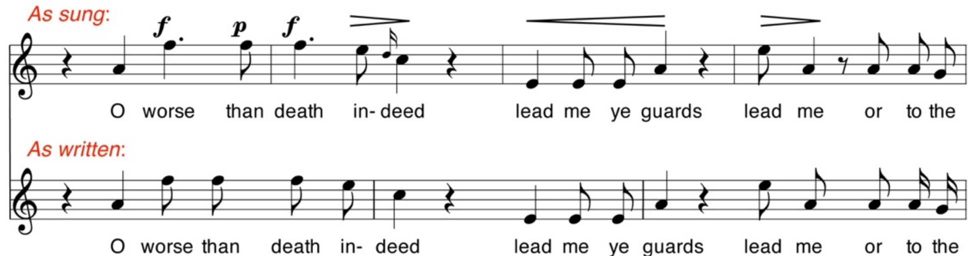
The following year, Kitchiner generalised his concerns (1821: 64): "unfortunately for Singers, Composers do not always write down their ideas, exactly as they intend to express them, and Songs seldom can be sung exactly as they are set down," particularly in strophic songs, as J. P. Le Camus had suggested (*c*.1835: 88):

> "it is very rare that the melody written for the first verse can be exactly adapted to the others. The Singer's intelligence must then make up for this defect, by altering or diminishing the value of the notes, in order to avoid resting on short or intermediary syllables."

These principles applied to both aria and recitative, and the attitude towards the performance of composed recitative was summarised in the middle of the nineteenth century by John Addison (*c*.1850: 29):

> "In the notation of Recitative, ... altho' the Composer may have arranged the progression of the notes, so as to suit the natural inflections of the voice, according to the Poetry, yet they can only be considered as the Skeleton of his ideas, the rest is left to the Singer, who must give the finish according to his taste and judgment."

This notion harkens back to Corri's statement from *c*.1781 quoted above, and in 1810 (Vol. 1, p. 70), Corri provided an example from Handel's *Theodora* (1750) to show what he meant:



Around 1840, Maria Anfossi (p. 69) confirmed that in her day performers still needed to be wary of the sorts of compositional deficiencies that had plagued vocal works since the sixteenth century:

> "This musical license of shortening the duration of one note, and increasing the length of another, is also of great use in correcting a false accentuation of the words; as when, by an oversight of the composer, or of the copyist, a note set over the accented syllable is of equal or even less value than the notes assigned to the unaccented ones of the same word."

In fact, singers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently used *tempo rubato* (stolen or robbed time) to correct the errors Anfossi identified. Domenico Corri defined the term in 1810 (p. 6):

> "*Tempo Rubato* is a detraction of part of the time from one note, and restoring it by increasing the length of another, or vice versa; so that, whilst a singer is, in some measure, singing *ad libitum*, the orchestra, which accompanies him, keeps the time firmly and regularly."

In 1824, Richard M. Bacon (p. 84) explained how the practice of "robbing" time could be used to remedy poorly set words:

> "*tempo rubato*, or the taking of a portion of the duration from one note and giving it to another, is one of the greatest helps to powerful elocution in singing, and enables the singer frequently to throw great force upon a word of importance, which would otherwise be deprived of its meaning by the passage to which it is attached ... indeed we frequently find long and short syllables, or such a trisyllable as repentance (which consists of a short, a long, and a short syllable,) set to notes of equal times. In this case, common feeling dictates the propriety of shortening the first and last, and allowing the time thus taken, to the middle note – in short, wherever it is possible, without absolutely disturbing the rhythm or those accents with which the cultivated ear cannot dispense, the time of the notes should be made to conform to the syllabic arrangement of quantity as completely as possible."

Varying the Speed of Delivery

In the late fifteenth century, Angelo Poliziani (1498: Bk. 12, fol. pviiir), in a letter to Pico della Mirandola (*c*.1488), described the changes a young singer, Fabio Orsini, had made in his speed of delivery when he sang a solo song:

> "He then delivered a heroic song that he himself had recently composed to honor our Pietro dei Medici ... The voice itself was not entirely that of someone reading aloud nor entirely that of someone singing, but yet both could be discerned, neither separated from the other. Nevertheless, it was varied according to what the passage required, either even or modulated – now punctuated, now continuous, now raised, now restrained, now subdued, now vehement, now slow, now swift, always faultless, always clear, always delightful, the gesture neither indifferent nor sluggish but yet not affected or offensive. Anyone would have said that a young Roscius [the ancient Roman actor] was on the stage."
>
> "Pronuntiavit heroicum deinde carmen, quod ipse met nuper in Petri Medicis nostri laudem composuerat ... Vox ipsa nec quasi legentis, nec quasi canentis, sed in qua tamen utrunque sentires, neutrum discerneres: varie tamen prout locus posceret, aut aequalis, aut inflexa, nunc distincta, nunc perpetua, nunc sublata, nunc deducta, nunc remissa, nunc contenta, nunc lenta, nunc incitata, semper emendata, semper clara, semper dulcis, gestus

> non otiosus, non somniculosus, sed nec vultuosus tamen, ac molestus. Rosciolum prorsus aliquem diceres in scena versari."

During the early sixteenth century, writers began to describe the practice of varying the speed of delivery in terms of the elevation and suppression of time. Giangiorgio Trissino (1524: fols. C3r-v) depicted the abilities of Isabella d'Este in self-accompanied song:

> "But when, then, this woman turns to sing a few [songs], especially to the lute, ... [she] diligently preserves the harmony, in a manner that in not one way oversteps the boundaries of rhythmic propriety, but moderates the song with elevation and suppression of the *tempo* [time], and maintains concordance with the lute, and at once accords her language, and one and the other hand [in playing the lute], with the inflections of the song."
>
> [Amongst other things, Trissino seems to be saying that the accompaniment followed Isabella's vocal inflections.]
>
> "Ma quando poi questa alcuna volta canta, e specialmente nel liuto, ... il serbare diligentissimamente l'harmonia, in guisa che in niuna cosa il rithmo si varchi, ma a tempo con elevatione, e depressione misurare il canto, e tenerlo con lo liuto concorde, e ad un tratto accordare la lingua, e l'una, e l'altra mano, con le inflexioni de i canti." (Cited in Prizer 1999: 49).

By the middle of the century, the close relationship between speaking and singing had been further elucidated by Nicola Vicentino, when he advised singers to model the practice of moving or changing the measure (*muovere la misura / mutare misura*) on the art of the orator (the quotation below is from a chapter of his treatise that discusses ensemble performance: "A method for singing in consort every kind of composition" / "Regola da concertare cantando ogni sorte di compositione," 1555: fols. 94r-94v):

> "The experience of the orator teaches this [the value of *muovere la misura / 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 moving the measure 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 ...

sometimes [singers] use a certain method of proceeding in compositions that cannot be written down, such as uttering softly and loudly or quickly and slowly, and following the natural course of the words, to move the measure to demonstrate the effects of the passions of the words and harmony. It will not seem a strange thing to anyone, this method of changing the measure all at once [that is, suddenly], for it is understood that while singing in consort, where one has this change of measure, it is not an error. And a composition sung with a change of measure is more pleasing by means of that variety than [a composition] continued to the end without being varied. And experience with such a manner [of singing] will make everyone secure [in it], for in vernacular works, one will find that this procedure will please listeners more than the measure always continuing in one manner, [for] one should move the measure according to the words, more slowly and more quickly."

"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 ...

qualche volta si usa un certo ordine di procedere, nelle compositioni, che non si può scrivere, come sono, il dir piano, & forte, & il dir presto, & tardo, & secondo le parole, muovere la Misura, per dimostrare gli effetti delle passioni delle parole, & dell'armonia, ad alcuno non li parrà cosa strana tal modo di mutar misura, tutti à un tratto cantando mentre che nel concerto s'intendino, ove si habbi da mutar misura che non sarà errore alcuno, & la compositione cantata, con la mutatione della misura

> è molto gratiata, con quella varieta, che senza variare, & seguire al fine, & l'esperienza di tal modo farà certo ognuno, però nelle cose volgari si ritroverà che tal procedere piacerà più à gl'oditori, che la misura continua sempre à un modo, & il moto della misura si dè muovere, secondo le parole, più tardo, & più presto."

Around 1600, Luigi Zenobi (p. 101) commented that singers "should at times carry their voices with disregard, at times with a dragging manner, at times with a gallantness of motion." / "Deve tall'hora portar le voci con disprezzo, tall'hora con modo strascinarle, tall'hora con galanteria di motivo."

This notion of varying the speed of delivery according to the passions of the words was echoed by Girolamo Fescobaldi in his discussion of the connection between playing toccatas and singing madrigals (1615: "Al lettore"):

> "First, that one ought not in this way of playing be subject to beating [keeping time], as we see employed in modern madrigals, which although difficult one makes easy by means of beating, delivering it [beating or keeping time] now languidly, now swiftly, and also sustaining it in the air according to their [the madrigals'] passions, or the sense of the words."
>
> "Primieramente; che non dee questo modo di sonare stare soggetto a battuta, come veggiamo usarsi ne i Madrigali moderni, i quali quantunque difficili si agevolano per mezzo della battuta, portandola hor languida, hor veloce, e sostenendola etiandio in aria secondo i loro affetti, o senso delle parole."

And in Germany, Michael Praetorius (1619, Bk. 3, Pt. 2, Ch. 8: 79) said more or less the same thing:

> "For to sing without law or measure is to offend God himself, who assigns everything number, weight, and measure, as Plato says. But nevertheless, according to the text's meaning, to use by turns now a slower *tactu* [beat], now swifter, has a singular majesty and grace, and song is wonderfully adorned."
>
> "Nam sine lege & mensura canere, est Deum ipsum offendere, qui omnia numero, pondere & mensura disposuit, ut Plato inquit. Sed tamen pro ratione Textus interdum tardiore Tactu, interdum celeriore per vices uti, singularem majestatem & gratiam habet, & Cantum mirificè exornat."

Later in his publication, Praetorius reinforced the notion (Bk. 3, Pt. 3, Ch. 1: 112):

> "But so often the composition itself requires, as well as the text and meaning of the words on their own, that one sometimes, but not too often or really too much, moves the *tact* [beat] now quickly, now again slowly."
>
> "Es erfordert aber solches offtermahls die composition, so wol der Text und Verstand der Worter an ihm selbsten: das man bisweilen / nicht aber zu offt oder gar zu viel / den Tact bald geschwind / bald wiederumb langsam fuhre."

Daniele Friderici (1619: Ch. 7, Regula 16) further documented the practice of varying the beat:

> "in singing, one never intends a monotonous beat [*tact*] to be conducted and felt, rather [the beat should] be in conformity with the words of the text. Hence, the beat must indeed be set so that an agreement and decorum will be kept. Thus, cantors err, who measure out the beat just as uniformly lined up as the clockwork mechanism [measures out] its minutes."
>
> "Im singen soll durchaus nicht einerlei Tact gespühret und geführet werden / sondern nach dem die worte des Textus sein / also muß auch der Tact gerichtet sein / also das eine convenientz, unnd decorum behalten werde. Irren demnach die Cantores / welche den Tact so schnurgleich abmessen als das Uhrwerck seine minuten."

As these quotations demonstrate, the custom of beating time flexibly dates back to at least the late fifteenth century, and in the early seventeenth century, Vincenzo Giustiniani (*c*.1628: 108) gave a detailed description of the performing style a group of singers employed in the late sixteenth century (note that Giustiniani's mention of "stopping" is similar to Frescobaldi's idea of "sustaining [the beat] in the air"):

> "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."

> "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."

Moreover, according to *Il corago, o vero alcune osservazioni per metter bene in scena le composizioni drammatiche* / *The Choragus, or Some Observations for Staging Dramatic Works Well* (*c*.1630), the practice of singing freely (that is, without a steady beat) also applied to early seventeenth-century *stile recitativo*. In chapter fourteen of the manuscript ("Whether the reciting style ought to be sung with a beat or without" / "Se lo stile recitativo debbia essere cantato a battuta o senza," pp. 89-90), the anonymous author mentions that although some musicians perform *stile recitativo* with a beat (primarily for the greater *sicurezza* [assurance or security] of the singer and accompanist), the common feeling and fashion among those who sing on the stage is indeed not to employ a beat ("il commun sentimento et usanza di quelli che cantano in scena si è di non usar battuta"). The writer then offers the following explanation for what was apparently the norm. Because perfection in taking the reciting style to the stage lies in displaying and imitating a natural manner of discourse ("perché consistendo la perfezione dello stil recitativo portato in palco in mostrare et imitare il modo naturale di ragionare"), an actor ("l'attore") not only needs to stop and sigh at length ("dovendo l'attore fermarsi, sospirare a lungo") but also should follow the force of the passions freely, which is of great importance in reciting well ("liberamente assecondare l'impeto dell'affetto, il che è di molta importanza per il recitar bene").

If we move ahead to the early nineteenth century, Charles J. Smyth (1817: 17-18) said something comparable for recitative, the reciting style of his day (see, in particular, the last four lines of the quotation):

> "Singers are apt to deliver the words too strictly according to 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. Some passions require rapidity; others should be delivered slowly ... the best Italian masters ... leave it entirely to the singers to accelerate or relax the time, agreeable to their feelings."

Seven years earlier, Domenico Corri (1810: 70) had expressed a similar opinion:

> "No particular degree of Time is marked to Recitative, but it is left to the Singer to prolong or shorten notes, which he ought to do agreeable to the passion and accent of the words,"

and previously in his treatise (p. 6), Corri had discussed varying the speed of delivery under the heading "Quickening or Retarding of Time":

> "Another improvement, by deviation from strict time, is to be made by the singer delivering some phrases or passages in quicker or slower time than he began with, in order to give emphasis, energy, or pathos, to particular words."

Clearly, just like in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, flexible time was linked to the emotional qualities of the text. In 1820, Ephraim Reed wrote (p. 23):

> "The performer therefore should endeavor, as far as possible, to acquire a complete knowledge of the tune, its connection with the sense of the words, the peculiar accent, and the energy and force, which the music derives from the subject. He will then be enabled to quicken or suspend the velocity of the movement, agreeably with the change of the subject, and thereby diversify and give effect to the performance."

And in 1833, J. Feski observed that flexibility of tempo had become an expectation of the public (*Caecilia* 15: 270):

> "*Ritardando* and *accelerando* alternate at every moment. This manner has already become so established in the minds of the musical public that some are of the firm belief [that] a *diminuendo* must decelerate, a *crescendo* accelerate; a tender phrase (e.g., in an *allegro*) will be performed more slowly, a powerful one more quickly."
>
> "Jeden Augenblick wechseln ritardando und accelerando. Diese Manier hat sich bereits in den Köpfen des musikalischen Publikum so festgesetzt, dass Manche der festen Meinung sind, ein Diminuendo müsse retardirt, ein crescendo accelerirt; ein zarter Satz (z. B. in einem Allegro) langsamer, ein kräftiger, schneller vorgetragen werden."

As the quotations above show, the practice of quickening and retarding time was known in the late fifteenth century and continued well into the nineteenth century (in other words, this type of flexibility originated long before the 1800s). Indeed, a number of sources recommend linking the speed of delivery, that is, quicker or slower movements, to the various states of mind exhibited by the character in the text. Moreover, *tactus* (the up and down motion of the hand in beating time) certainly was not immutable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for throughout the eras considered here, the beating of time in measured music (*aria*) changed in accordance with the passions singers needed to arouse in listeners, while in unmeasured music (*stile recitativo* and later recitative), sources indicate that many performers seem to have set aside regular time altogether.

I give Isaac Nathan (1836: 290) the final words on the freedom singers once enjoyed (the following quotation is Nathan's paraphrase of a passage from the 1767 English translation of Francesco Algarotti's treatise on opera):

> "I coincide with Algarotti, that there are certain suspensions of the voice, certain short pauses, and a certain insisting on one place more than another, that cannot be communicated [in the score], which are therefore resigned to the singer's sagacity and discretion: for it is in such minute refinements that chiefly consists the delicacy of expression, which impresses the sense of the words, not only on the mind, but on the hearts of all who hear them."

Rhetoric and Oration

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 therfore, that famouse Oratour beyng asked what was the chiefest 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, concitatius, 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 lebhafftigen 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 Endschafft / 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.

Persuasive Singing

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. pviiir) 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."

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

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 time freely, employing both *tempo rubato* and the quickening and slowing of the overall tempo
- 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

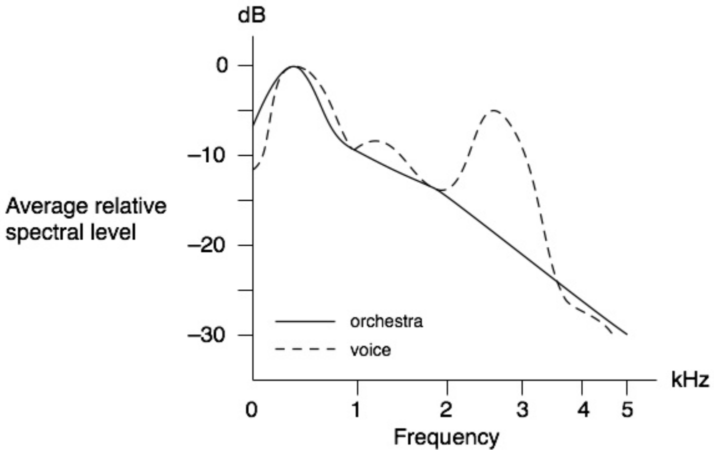
until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (A well-documented discussion of this new phenomenon can be found in Sarah Potter's PhD dissertation, chapter 2.)

- 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* rose 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 possible far sentire à tutti la parola, onde sarebbe necessitato il Cantante à forzar la voce, per la qual causa l'affetto scema." (Cavalieri 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 début 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 a 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).

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