

The Shock of the Old: Rediscovering the Sounds of Bel Canto 1700-1900

The term bel canto—beautiful singing—commonly describes the admired vocal practices (originating in Italy) that were prevalent in Europe during the period 1700-1900 (Toft, 2011 and 2013). Bel canto repertoire has been central to Western classical musical programming since its heyday. Remarkably, the singers who originally performed this music had the ability to transform “the scores before them into passionate musical declamation [veritable orations] by treating melodic lines freely and by personalizing the music through both minor and major modifications” (Toft, 2013, 3). This was what composers from the period expected and, indeed, required. Research has established that when first performed, this repertoire sounded very different to today’s performance conventions (Wistreich, 2000; S. Potter, 2014). Yet, little work has been done to rediscover how this singing might actually have sounded. This information cannot be recovered from music notation (scores) as only some fundamental musical practices of the era were captured; widely accepted conventions of singing were not notated.

Bel canto involved a range of creative liberties in realising the composer’s expectations that were progressively abandoned during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in favour of a more literal reading of the musical notation. It utilised myriad speech-derived effects and associated tonal colours—quite different from modern practice—to communicate to listeners the meaning, effect, and affect of the words (Toft, 2013, 4; Brown, 1999).

This presentation will illuminate a novel practice-led methodology including historical recording emulation (Stage 1) followed by practical and collaborative active experimentation (Stage 2) using cyclical research processes (piloted in previous international research), that has been developed for a three-year funded Discovery Project Project DP220101596 (2022-2025) recently awarded to Professor Neal Peres Da Costa - project lead Sydney Conservatorium of Music (SCM), The University of Sydney, with co-investigators Associate Professor Helen Mitchell - SCM, Dr. Paul McMahon (professional tenor), Professor Clive Brown - University for Music and Performing Arts Vienna, and Professor Robert Toft - Western University Ontario. Musical examples demonstrating aspects of the methodology and the relationship between artistic practice and research will be drawn from previously piloted work by the investigatory team.

References

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Dr. Neal Peres Da Costa is Professor of Historical Performance and Associate Dean of Research at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney. An internationally-recognised performing scholar, Neal has received many accolades for his ground-breaking monograph *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), the complete Brahms' Sonatas for solo instrument and piano (Bärenreiter, 2015/16) co-edited with Clive Brown and Kate Bennet-Wadsworth, and the online Performing Practice Commentary (co-produced with Clive Brown) to the 2020 Bärenreiter edition of the Beethoven Sonatas for Piano and Violin. Neal is Chief Investigator on three Australian Research Council Discovery Project grants, *Deciphering nineteenth-century pianism: invigorating global practices* (2017), *Hearing the music of early New South Wales 1788-1860* (2021), and *The shock of the old: Rediscovering the sounds of bel canto 1700-1900* (2022). Neal is an Australian Recording Industry Award winner with an extensive discography.