

The shock of the old: Rediscovering the sounds of *bel canto* 1700–1900

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What is *bel canto*?



Beautiful singing—commonly describes the admired vocal practices (originating in Italy) that were prevalent in Europe during the period 1700–1900

Bel canto repertoire has been central to Western classical musical programming since its heyday

The aims of *bel canto*

The singers who originally performed this music had the ability to transform “the scores before them into passionate musical declamation by treating melodic lines freely and by personalizing the music through both minor and major modifications.”

Robert Toft, *Bel Canto: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 3

Donizetti *Anna Bolena* and Rossini *Gazza Ladra*, showing García's alterations.

The image displays two musical score excerpts. The top excerpt is from Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, featuring Anna's part in an *Allegro Moderato* tempo. The bottom excerpt is from Rossini's *Gazza Ladra*, featuring Ninetta's part in an *Allegro* tempo. Both excerpts show García's alterations to the original scores, indicated by the 'García' label above the notes.

ANNA.
Allegro Moderato.
DONIZETTI.
Anna Bolena.
Ti ram men - ta il mi - o cor - do gio non las - ciar - ti, non la - sciar - ti lu - sin - gar.
non las - ciar - ti, non lasciar - ti lu - sin - gar.

NINETTA.
Allegro.
ROSSINI.
Gazza Ladra.
Ah già di - men - ti - co i miei tor - men - ti quan - ti con - ten - ti.
di - men - ti - co i miei tor - men - ti quan - ti con - ten - ti.

Rossini *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, showing García's alterations.

The image displays a musical score excerpt from Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, featuring Count's part in an *Allegro* tempo. The excerpt shows García's alterations to the original score, indicated by the 'García' label above the notes.

COUNT.
Allegro.
ROSSINI.
Barbiere.
Del vol - can del - la mi - a men - to qual - che mos - - - tro sin - - - go - lar.
Del vol - can del - la mi - - - amen - to qual - che mos - - - tro sin - go - lar.

Bel canto sounds



Meryl Streep's impassioned speech in support of Hillary Clinton

Bel canto singers adapted their sound to the sense of the words to support an **impassioned discourse** thus positioning themselves as primary creators of meaning in the musical work.

The abandonment of bel canto creative practices

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.

What did *bel canto* sound like?



Early sound recordings capture the last representatives of the *bel canto* tradition.

The recordings provide tantalising glimpses of these singers' performance practices.

Bel canto singers on record:

Sopranos

Adelina Patti (1843–1919), Lilli Lehmann (1858–1929), Emma Albani (1847–1930), and Nellie Melba (1861–1931);

Contraltos

Marianne Brandt (1842–1921) and Ernestine Schumann-Heink (1861–1936);

Tenor

Gustav Walter (1834–1910);

Baritones

Peter Schram (1819–1895), Jean-Baptiste Faure (1830–1914), Sir Charles Santley (1834–1922), Victor Maurel (1848–1923), Lucien Fugère (1848–1935), Sir George Henschel (1850–1934), and Mattia Battistini (1856–1928).

Adelina Patti (1843–1919) sings W. A. Mozart “Voi che sapete”,
Marriage of Figaro, recorded 1905



58. N° 11. Aria.

Andante.

Cherubino.

Voi, che sa-pe-te, che co-sa camor, don-ne ve-de-te, sio i'hò nel cor?
 Ihr, die ihr Trie-be des Her-zens kennt, sprecht, ist es Lie-be, was hier so brennt?

don-ne ve-de-te, sio i'hò nel cor? quel-lo, ch'io pro-vo, vi-ri-di-
 sprecht, ist es Lie-be, was hier so brennt? Ich will's euch fa-gen, was in mir

ro, è per me nuo-vo, ca-pir nol sò, sen-toun af-fet-to
 wühlt, euch will ichs kla-gen, euch, die ihr fählt, Sonst wars im Her-zen

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Harvard University - Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library / Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 1756-1791. [Nozze di Figaro. Vocal score. German & Italian]. Le nozze di Figaro = Die Hochzeit des Figaro : eine comische Oper in 4. Aufzügen / in Musik gesetzt von W. A. Mozart ; ins Deutsche übersetzt vom Baron v. Knigge, und fürs Clavier eingerichtet von C. G. Neefe. Bonn: Simrock, [1796]. Merritt Mus 745.1.629 BMEQ

What do these recordings tell us about bel canto?

- retain elements of customs that reflect documentary evidence of late-18th- and early-19th-century practice

Clive Brown, *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 415–438; Robert Toft, *Bel Canto: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 234–35

- singers employed a mixture of high and neutral larynx positions and occasionally the lowered larynx (evidenced on recordings), naturally producing a spectrum of lighter sounds than is usually associated with the ‘modern’ mode of constant lowered larynx use

Robert Toft *Heart to Heart: Expressive Singing in England 1780–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 25–26

Sarah Potter, *Changing Vocal Style and Technique in Britain during the Long Nineteenth Century*. PhD thesis, University of Leeds (2014), p. 20.

Bel canto expressive techniques emphasised the text, from Mozart to Verdi using:

- i) a generally narrower and less continuous *vibrato* than is currently employed (with some exceptions, for example in revenge arias)
 - ii) frequent and subtly varied *portamenti*
 - iii) marked alteration of note placements, rhythms, and tempi
 - iv) matching of register and tone quality to the emotions evoked by the text
 - v) highly-articulated phrasing and pauses to define rhetorical figures
- Robert Toft *Bel Canto: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

20th-century modern vocal (and instrumental) performance style

- i) meticulous score realisation
- ii) technical perfection (for example timbral evenness across the entire range of the voice)
- iii) notation delivered ‘artistically’ but within the boundaries of strict rhythm and tempo

Peres Da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)



The elephant(s) in the room, even today (including in HIP), are the **modifications to rhythm and tempo** that many historical written texts, including treatises and compositions, from antiquity to the early 20th-century, uphold as necessary in artistic performance, but that contravene the notion of score fidelity. Early recordings provide examples (often quite extraordinary by modern standards) of such modifications!

Sacrificing aspects of expressive interpretation for vocal projection:

- i) **modification of vowel sounds making words incomprehensible**
David Ffrangcon-Davies, *The Singing of the Future* (London: John Lane, 1905), pp. 263–264
- ii) **low larynx position to increase energy around 3000Hz - singer's formant**
Johan Sundberg, *The Science of the Singing Voice*, (Dekalb: North Illinois University Press, 1987), pp. 118–119
- iii) **a generally wide, continuous vibrato of unvarying intensity which maximised the richness of long, unarticulated lines and increased audible clarity throughout the vocal range**
Janice L. Chapman, *Singing and Teaching Singing: A Holistic Approach to Classical Voice* (San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2017)
- iv) **continual text emphasis, in which all syllables receive equal weight**
Robert Toft, *Heart to Heart: Expressive Singing in England 1780–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 74
- v) **a monochromatic approach to timbre, regardless of the emotional qualities of text and music**
Robert Toft, *Bel Canto: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 99

Research Questions:

How was the continuum of *bel canto* practice understood during this period?

How can classical singers and vocal pedagogues today rediscover how these sounds and styles might be creatively used, to bring us closer to *bel canto* composers' expectations?

Aims of the DP Project:

1) **to explore historical styles** for *bel canto* repertory through implementation of a new multi-modal methodology combining recording emulation, and practical and collaborative active experimentation

2) **to generate a taxonomy** of *bel canto* sounds and practices documented in research-based exemplar recordings, made in a range of settings, to inform and expand classical singing practice, teaching and scholarship

3) **to foster and influence change** in classical singing, disseminating the project's approach and findings (through symposia, written outputs, and video and audio recordings) to networks of educators, practitioners and industry in Australia and internationally.

Innovation:

international community of vocal practitioners will be subject to practice-led techniques that go above and beyond the current methods of learning *bel canto* repertoire (including in HIP)

firing their imaginations and empowering their artistic creativity

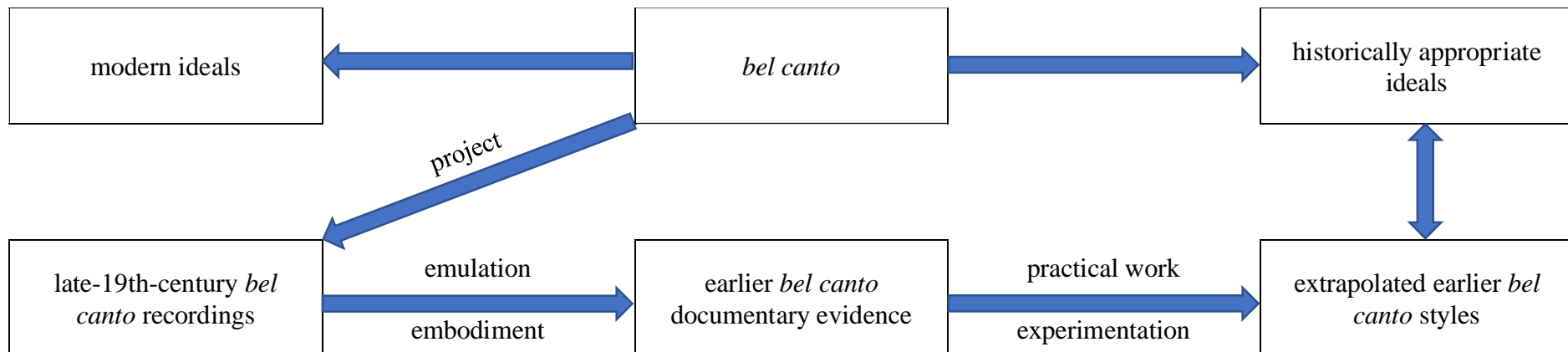
vocal practitioners will drive the creation of new knowledge of *bel canto* sounds and practices

Methodology

Three constituent methods provide logical steps in recovering knowledge and experience of *bel canto*:

- 1) emulation of early recordings of singers
- 2) practical experimentation with documentary evidence to extrapolate earlier vocal sounds and practices
- 3) knowledge creation through active collaborative performance trials and critical listening

Conceptual Framework



Systematic process

i) will develop new understanding of *bel canto* by singers, for singers

ii) will also advance knowledge of music history, performance practice, and vocal repertoire in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Preliminary Research:

a) recording emulation (piloted at SCM):

repeated listening, annotation of performance characteristics, embedding of technical and expressive skills, recording (audio and video), listening back, critical comparison, journaling, workshopping and peer review, and further embedding of practices through practise

b) performance practice archival work

Recording Emulation

Gustav Walter (1834–1910) sings
Schubert's *Am Meer*
Recorded 1904



SCM postgraduate student Angus Ledgerwood's
emulation of Gustav Walter's 1904 recording
of Schubert's *Am Meer*



Credit: ONB Bildarchiv
Austria
Copyright: ONB Bildarchiv
Austria

Archival Research Work:

the research team will explore historical styles for *bel canto* repertory by undertaking comprehensive mining of documentary sources

treatises, journals, correspondence, reviews, annotated editions, and online resources of word-searchable databases containing historic newspapers and journals, such as British Periodicals, AustriaN Newspapers Online (ANNO), Haithi, and Archive

Practical Research Work:

Community of vocal practitioners will:

- i) undertake practical experimentation with *bel canto* repertoire in group workshops to realise new styles
- ii) trial interpretations at venues offering appropriate acoustic, size and setting: historic house drawing rooms, theatres, and churches
- iii) focus on *bel canto* expressive practices without having to resort to the type of vocal projection that larger concert spaces tend to encourage.

Modularised delivery

Foundation module: early recording emulation

Practice-led modules: extrapolating 18th- and 19th-century *bel canto* focussing particularly on varying styles of theatrical and chamber recitative; arias in operas, oratorios, and secular cantatas; and lieder/song, moving backwards sequentially from the late-19th to the early 18th centuries

Two pathways to knowledge building

Cyclical Work: vocalists' practical experimentation with documentary sources “influences reconsideration of sources and theories, and in turn further practical experimentation”

Sarah Potter, *Changing Vocal Style and Technique in Britain during the Long Nineteenth Century*. PhD thesis, University of Leeds (2014), p. 10.

Collaborative Active Experimentation:

- i) through recording emulation, vocal practitioners will have honed their listening acuity for unfamiliar vocal qualities and styles
- ii) they will think critically about and discuss the vocal techniques that *bel canto* pedagogues in the pre-recorded era prescribed to achieve qualities and styles, and will take particular note of the language in contemporary reviews and accounts to describe the resulting sounds

Helen F. Mitchell, “Perception, Evaluation and Communication of Singing Voices.” In Scott D. Harrison, & Jessica O'Bryan (eds.), *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014)

Cyclical Practice-led Research Processes



Pilot exemplar work

Schumman *Dichterliebe* op. 48 (composed 1840)

Experimental practice-led interpretation based on early recording emulation and extrapolation (through cyclical research processes) of mid-19th-century practices in singing and piano playing

Koen van Stade – baritone

Neal Peres Da Costa – replica Viennese grand piano after J.B. Streicher (c.1868)

Recorded in Verbruggen Hall, Sydney Conservatorium of Music (December 2020)

Things to listen for:

- 1) text clarity and rhetorical delivery**
- 2) elements of tempo rubato and tempo modification**
- 3) portamento and vibrato**
- 4) piano practices**
- 5) similarity with practices on early recordings**

VII.

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Nicht zu schnell.

mf Ich grolle nicht, und wenn das Herz auch bricht.

ein ppsch e - wig verlör' - nes Lieb, e - wig verlör' - nes Lieb, B ich grol - le

less nicht, ich grol - le nicht! Wie du auch strahlst in Di - a - man - teu - pracht, es fällt kein

sabito rit 8 22 2 Strahl in dei - nes Herzens Nacht. Das weiss ich längst.

(97) 11

intense 21 Ich grolle nicht, und wenn das Herz auch bricht. SLOW Ich sah dich ja im

more intense 8 Trau - me, und sah die Nacht in dei - nes Her - zeus Rau - me, und sah die Schlang, die dir am Her - zen

ritard. 14 fröst, ich sah, mein Lieb, wie sehr du e - lend bist. Ich grolle nicht, ich grolle

ritard. nicht.

