

‘Bel Canto’

A dream to aspire to, or an achievable reality.

‘Quite a bit about the concept of bel canto has long been open to interpretation, including the meaning of this loose term itself, which literally translates as beautiful singing’¹.

As a passionate operatic tenor, I am fascinated in exploring bel canto singing, otherwise known as ‘The Golden Age of Song.’ What is it about those early singers that won that acclaimed title compared to opera singers today? Were they superior in their vocal instrument and was it purely through the teachings of the bel canto technique, or were there other factors at play? Tommasini from the New York Times explains that “The term did not come into fashion until midway through the 19th century”². Does this mean the term should perhaps not become exclusive to an era and rather a term used to describe a sound quality? “Opera buffs today use the term bel canto all the time. Yet we each seem to bring a different set of assumptions to the concept”². Over the course of this year I have significantly developed my technique as a classical singer, but the question I want to ask myself is ‘could I in this present day develop a *bel canto* voice?’ In order to explore these questions, I will focus on two contrasting songs. The first, ‘O del mio dolce ardor’ from *Christoph Willibald Gluck’s* 1770 opera *Paride ed Elena* and the second, ‘Bring Him Home’ from the 1980 musical *Les Miserables* by *Claude Michel Schonberg* and *Alain Boublil*.

Bel canto - ‘beautiful singing’ - is a style and a genre of Italian opera singing that was prominent in the mid-18th and 19th centuries. Although the bel canto technique thrived in this time, it actually started alongside the creation of opera in 1601.

Before opera began, music was created purely to chant or to sing praises to the gods of different faiths and religions. Melody didn’t serve to lend expression to the words but solely as a decorative element. In fact, the church was strongly against vocal displays of a virtuosic nature, which is why there is little virtuosity in choral music of the time. This however changed very quickly as a group called the ‘Camerata’ were passionate about the recreation of the stage traditions of the ancient Greeks. This group was led by Count Bardi, and then eventually led by Jacobo Corsi. The Camerata came together and wrote *Daphne* based on the Greek story ‘Daphne and Apollo’. They were expecting this to be an evening's entertainment for their friends and family, but it turned out that the audience response was so great that Peri created ‘Eurydice’ to be performed on stage for the wedding of Henry IV of France; a roaring success. Suddenly, there was a remarkable display of vocal talent, and the virtuosity of the singer was fundamental to this style of singing. This sound came from extensive practice and study, resulting in a singer that had a vocal freedom not seen before. This meant that they had a uniformity to their voice no matter the pitch or length of the note or dynamic level. Bontempi describes this when talking about the castrato Baldassrre Ferri.

¹ Tommasini, A. Nov.28, 2008 *Bel Canto: Audiences Love It, but What Is It?*

² Tommasini, A. Nov.28, 2008 *Bel Canto: Audiences Love It, but What Is It?*

‘One who has not heard this sublime singer can form no idea of the limpidity of his voice, of his agility, of his marvellous facility in the most difficult passages, of the justness of his intonation, the brilliancy of his trill, of his inexhaustible respiration’³.

After the success of *Eurydice*, the Camerata grew more ambitious. Music for the voice at the time revolved around polyphonic writing and had nothing to offer in the way of dramatic action, so the Camerata decided to alter the style of choral composition and create the ‘*Dramatis Personæ*’⁴. This meant that selected individuals were chosen to have certain roles, and because of this they were given a melody to sing that was different from everyone else’s. This gave singers a chance to inject a bit of life and feeling into the performance, thus creating *monody*⁵.

After the monodic style was well admired by composers and audience members alike, the melody started to split into two main parts: the recitative, words that are sung as if they are being spoken, and the aria which is where the emotional part of the song and drama are expressed. These ideas came together over half a century until opera was truly born. It was so successful in Italy that 658 operas were composed during this period; Donizetti, Bellini and Rossini being some of the more famous names among them.

Why was it so popular? Certainly impact was created through the lead parts with their incredible high notes and the astonishing cadenzas that went with them. Early Italians called the ability to improvise vocally *cantar al mente*⁶ and was seen as the highest level of the art form. Singers learnt the ways of improvisation quickly and soon the level of virtuosity stood out far beyond the ideals of the Camerata; as demonstrated by Benedetto Marcello from his pamphlet ‘*Il Teatro Alla Moda*’, “Singing the aria, he may well decide that he will pause where and when he pleases; in the cadenzas improvising such passages and embellishments that the orchestra director lifts his hands from the harpsichord ... He will treat the dramatic action according to his own caprice ... Singing the da capo he will change the whole aria to suit himself, even though his own changes have no connection whatever with the harmony of the author.”⁷

Opera had evolved into an endless cycle of virtuosic cadenzas, everlasting roulades, and trills that sounded like birdsong. Composers had given in to the new style of vocal display and adapted their writing to fit with the performer’s virtuosic talent. It is at this point in musical history that the art of singing had achieved the highest perfection, and the ‘golden age of song’ had begun.

‘*O del mio dolce ardor,*’ a bel canto aria, has all the musical features associated with the traditional understanding of the term, long phrases, tricky top note placements and virtuosic capabilities. This is a *da capo* aria, so in the repetition of the A section, there is room for *cantar al mente*. This aria is a good introduction to the style as

³ Bontempi, A. and Andre, G., 1695. *Historica Musica*. Perugia.

⁴ The characters in a drama

⁵ A single vocal melodic line that is accompanied

⁶ The early Italian form of improvisation

⁷ Marcello, B. 1745. *Il Teatro Alla Moda, O Sia Metodo Sicuro E Facile Per Ben Comporre, & Esequire L'opere Italiane In Musica All'uso Moderno*,. Venice.

melodically, it is quite simple, with only 2 sections. I found that when I sang this piece, my understanding of Italian vowels and their pronunciation started to flourish, my sound, resonate, and the top notes, ring out. The most challenging section in this song is the highest note which is an F#4. When I revisit this song in a few years, I would like to move the key up a bit, as I might have more higher notes in my tenor register. When it comes to the cadenzas, I feel like I could explore improvising during the second A section, like Ramòn Vargas does in his version of the song⁸. He altered the melody ever so slightly and yet it made a big impact on the harmony and therefore the feeling of the verse. In terms of whether I could have a bel canto sound when singing this song, I am working on the correct areas, but I will have to work on my technical development; a goal to aspire to.

Throughout my research, there are two things that stand out to me. The principles of tone production and vocal freedom, as Reid says in the book 'Bel canto: Principles and practices' 'Bel canto singing is impossible without vocal freedom, and true vocal freedom finds its expression in vitally resonant tones, covering a wide pitch range, in a complete control over extremes of dynamics and in ease and flexibility of execution'⁹. When a tone is produced correctly, it is because of good breath control, vocal fold function, position of the larynx, tongue, nose, and soft palate, as well as use of resonance in the head and throat cavities. If all of these are correct, then a tone can be considered a beautiful tone.

Donizetti's 'La Fille Du Régiment' has one aria that I'm particularly interested in, 'Ah Mes Amis.' Tonio enlists to be closer to Maria, who he loves dearly and this emotion is reflected in Javier Camarena's voice throughout the aria when he sang it at the Metropolitan opera in his 2018-2019 season¹⁰. This is one of the most technically challenging tenor arias, predominantly because of the nine high C's. Camarena summed up his experience with this aria¹¹ and I analysed what he did to see if it could benefit my research. The song is in French, but the emotions are understandable due to the music and the way he colours each word he sings. Because of his understanding of the text, he can emote and play with the dynamics of his own part as well as his accompaniment. This accompaniment follows impeccably with him, so they move as one. Whenever you hear him sing the word 'Militaire' which in the context of the song translates to 'Enlisted', you can hear both him and the accompaniment attacking each syllable of the word. His dynamic range is incredible and really helps him to express the meaning behind the lyrics. Even though the phrase 'pour mon âme' ('oh happy day') is a high C when this is sung, the strength of this note helps to express the journey of love he is about to have. He uses consonants such as "l" and rolled "r's" to launch into the next line, on the word 'flamme' which helps to keep the phrases even and legato¹².

So, what did I learn from this performance and how can I apply it to myself? The words that you are singing need to be coloured in a way that the audience can connect to the meaning within the context of the phrase regardless of the language. Something else I will take away from this and apply to my other songs will be that no

⁸ PAKOFAG (2012). Ramon Vargas - O del mio dolce ardor.

⁹ Reid, C. 1950. *Bel Canto*. New York: J. Patelson Music House, p.19

¹⁰ Tikilin2010. A mes amis + Bis - Javier Camarena. YouTube.

¹¹ Classic FM. Javier Camarena Donizetti's "La Fille du Régiment" Classic FM Meets. YouTube.

¹² A smooth connected passage of notes.

matter how high the note is, it must be a seamless transition from one to the other otherwise the phrasing and sound you produce will sound uneven which is a trap I have fallen into in the past.

There are three types of tenor voices, which display different timbres and qualities within their sound.

A *leggiero* tenor has a high, light and agile voice. He is referred to as the light lyric tenor. Juan Diego Florez known as the 'high note king' of the modern era has been influential to me as a performer. The song I think displays his bel canto style of singing is Bellini's '*Son geloso del zefiro errante*' from La Sonnambula at the metropolitan opera in March 2009 with Natalie Dessay¹³. This performance really shows his range and dynamic control, like in the *messa di voce* exercise¹⁴. He changes his vocal colour to match the intended emotions and paired with his great acting skills makes him one of the best tenors of this modern era by far.

A *lyric* tenor has a warmer, fuller and heavier voice than the *leggiero* tenor and will tend to have stronger low notes but also easily move to high notes. The only tenor for me that epitomises this is the one and only, Luciano Pavarotti. The top B in '*Nesun Dorma*' from Puccini's '*Turandot*'¹⁵ seems impossible, but for Pavarotti it sounds flawless, with little effort and wins him the greatest tenor title from me.

The *spinto* tenor is a middle weight tenor voice, darker and larger than the *lyric* tenor voice. The lower and idle register is firmer, with more depth compared to the *lyric* tenor. Despite this, the *spinto* tenors still have all the high notes that the *lyric* tenors do. My favourite *spinto* tenor has got to be Jonas Kaufmann and his recording for Decca Classics in September 2010 of '*Vesti la giubba*' from Leoncavallo's short opera '*Pagliacci*'¹⁶. Canio finds out his wife is having an affair and enters a state of insanity. By rolling his r's and accenting each note as well as the thick orchestra behind him, this song bleeds with emotion and every note, at every dynamic level is full of colour and becomes an emotional piece for both the singer and the audience.

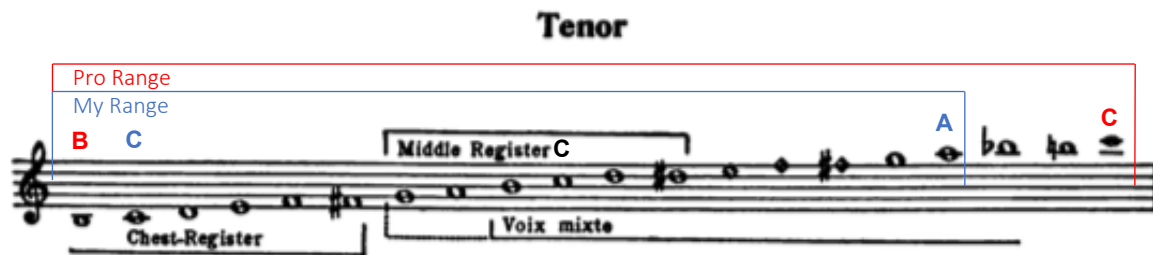
¹³ Poetic Freedom. Natalie Dessay and Juan Diego Florez sing Son geloso del zefiro errante. YouTube.

¹⁴ 'Placing the voice' Messa Di Voce is an exercise where you maintain a single note and going from the quietest dynamic to the loudest dynamic possible while transitioning through the vocal breaks seamlessly.

¹⁵ Warner Classics. Luciano Pavarotti sings "Nessun dorma" from Turandot (The Three Tenors in Concert 1994). YouTube.

¹⁶ Decca Classics. Jonas Kaufmann - "Vesti la giubba" - Pagliacci, Leoncavallo. YouTube.

Once the tenor voice matures, fully settles and undergoes a lot of training the tenor should be able to sing with this range¹⁷.



I feel I will eventually fall into the *lyric tenor* category as I have a lot of *squillo*¹⁸, meaning that I have quite a resonant tone with a lot of 'ping' to it. This is beneficial for all tenors but in particular for lyric tenors as they rely on the resonance to produce their highest notes. My voice has the range of A3 to A5 and having a two-octave range means I have the potential to sing a wide variety of repertoire in varying keys. Looking at the tenor range, it demonstrates a range of B3 to C5. This range is one of a fully developed (older) and trained operatic tenor. Not that I don't have a lot to learn, but I do feel I have the capacity to achieve these high notes through training as my voice matures and that's very exciting.

So, can bel canto singing be alive today and be transferred to singers across different genres, such as within musical theatre with the crossing of opera singers into more commercial music? In the New York Times article, I referenced earlier, it states how writers like Sondheim and Schoenberg are writing in an 'operatic way'. When looking at shows like *Sweeney Todd* or *Les Misérables* it is clear they both follow a through composed structure. There is little or no dialogue in both of these shows, the scores have a huge orchestra and vocal music that is similar to recitatives and arias. This may offer a chance for bel canto singing, for instance in the song 'Bring Him Home', this would be achievable, but the performers decision on how to portray the character is what becomes the overriding factor in how this is sung.

I had the joy of performing Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*. The role is vocally demanding for a variety of reasons, the range, the large amount of recitative like sections, the changing tempos and the sheer quantity of singing. I gained the best performance by approaching the role using an operatic method, rather than a musical theatre approach, in the belief that bel canto does have a role to play as a singer in both modern musical theatre and traditional opera.

The biggest challenge was the A4 and the G#4 at the top of my range. When I tried singing these full voiced, my larynx would keep rising, so I used my mixed voice, and this proved more successful. If I was to sing this again in four years, I feel I'd be able to stretch the dynamic range within my phrasing to make the louder parts bleed with more emotion. Musically, this song has the capacity to allow for a bel canto style, with melodic elements and vast dynamic contrast at the end of the song, but I would never classify it as traditional bel canto. For me that will always stay in the operatic world.

¹⁷ LAMPERTI, G., BAKER, T. and Heidrich, M. (1905). *The Techniques Of Bel Canto*. P.24.

¹⁸ The resonant sound that opera singers produce in order to project their voices.

In conclusion, the majority of music listeners these days wouldn't run towards opera as a popular choice. It has become more of a niche for a particular audience type, but that doesn't mean that bel canto singers don't exist. I think they are very much still among us across all types of music, but I believe the world of opera will always 'own' this term, despite the age of its music. The bel canto style is definitely an aspiration that I will never stop working to achieve. I can continue to train and learn the technique of a bel canto singer and try to achieve the vocal freedom associated with this, but the main thing that will aid me, is time. Tenor voices continue developing into their late 20s, so this is definitely the beginning of a long and exciting road ahead to make this an achievable reality! Who knows, the new golden age of singing could be right around the corner and bel canto could be a big part of it.

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