

## A Vocal Approach of the Bel Canto Tenors

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**Abstract:** *The revival movement of the Italian bel canto and the singing technique practiced by tenors of the early 19th century are some of the main topics of my research. The paperwork proposes to readers a comprehensive approach to the music terms “vocal virtuosity” and “bel canto” in connection with tenor voice. I hope the results to overcome the scientific barrier, and to propose to the current generation of masculine singers real and applicable solutions to the problems of the bel canto repertoire, especially in understanding and solving the hardest virtuosity passages.*

Key-words: *virtuosity, bel canto, tenors, opera, performing arts.*

### 1. The element of virtuosity

Virtuosity, manifested in diverse forms, has always accompanied the musical genre of opera throughout its existence. In its turn, the vocal virtuosity of the tenor voice has seen several evolutionary phases, from the excessive ornamentation of the melodic discourse to the attainment of the highest notes, some inexplicable without a comprehensive approach to the trajectory of this type of voice.

The vocal style of the modern tenor is an evolutionary product developed by the Italian singing school during three centuries of metamorphoses. For a fair understanding of this route, it is necessary to study methods and models of singing technique used by the best virtuoso tenors of the bel canto era, in an attempt to recreate their vocality. Every opera singer knows intuitively that for singing a bel canto opera, the ideal vocality is different from that encouraged by the romantic or postromantic repertoire.

According to *The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language*, the term ‘virtuoso’ [*virtuoz*] has its etymological origin in Italian form *virtuoso* and / or

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in the French form *virtuose*, both forms borrowed from the Latin *virtus*, and refers to the 'person who perfectly masters the technique of a musical instrument'. Virtuosity in music is most likely born from the competitive nature of the musicians, and thus becomes an attribute to the musical act long before the merger between music and poetry. The metamorphosis of the polyphonic madrigal in monody conveyed the virtuoso gene from the church singers to the professional vocalists, initiating "the first golden age of the virtuoso soloist" (Potter 2009, 9). Given that the opera is one of the baroque creations, virtuosity is explained as an organic feature of it. The opera show was being built to impress acoustic and visually through virtuosity.

## 2. What does *bel canto* really mean?

The term *bel canto*, also adopted by the Romanian musical language, is formed by ligature of the words of Italian origin *bel* (beautiful) and *canto* (singing), literally translating 'beautiful singing'. The famous French dictionary *Larousse* defines the term *bel canto* as 'the art of singing based on the beauty of sound and virtuosity'. Associated with an ideal type of vocal art practiced by the old Italian singing school, the term *bel canto* acquires multiple valences for 21st century musicology. It can designate a singing technique and also a period of the musical genre of opera represented by a repertoire similar in style. The historiographic legend according the culmination of this art was attained at the beginning of the 19th century by the composers of the 'bel canto era', Italians Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti, is often criticized by important musicologist voices. They claim that the works of the three composers only respond to a small part of the *bel canto* stylistic features. In any case, an exclusive association of the *bel canto* expression with the triad of the composers indicated leads us to a false supposition. According to the *Grove Music Online* dictionary, 'Generally understood, the term 'bel canto' refers to the Italian vocal style of the 18th and early 19th centuries, the qualities of which include perfect legato production throughout the range, the use of a light tone in the higher registers and agile and flexible delivery' (Jander 1998).

During the musical history, there was a tendency to obscure the term *bel canto*, associating it with a period when the poor drama and the over-saturation of musical ornaments became labels of style. The term *bel canto* is first used by the French writer Stendhal in his book *Life of Rossini* (1823), a biographical novel

reflecting in a realistic and subjective manner the cultural life of the time. Rodolfo Celletti emphasizes that 'Terms like *'belcanto'* and *'belcantismo'* were unknown in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They spread, in Italy and abroad, between 1820 and 1830, precisely at a time when bel canto opera was on the wane [...]. The term bel canto was thus used in a polemical and nostalgic sense' (Celletti 1991, 13).

The disappearance of the *castrato* and their virtuoso abilities will in time build the myth of the bel canto, whose definition was not considered appropriate for any general or music dictionary before the 1900s. Although some of its theories are not fully shared by contemporary musicology, Rodolfo Celletti remains one of the first and few musicologists to seriously treat the historical significance of the phenomenon. Celletti marks the bel canto golden period between the 17th and the 18th centuries, indicating Claudio Monteverdi as initiator, Georg Friedrich Händel as the top of the pure bel canto and Gioachino Rossini as the last great exponent of the style. In favor of his theory, Celletti associates some rossinian pages with a *'grand finale'* of bel canto art, affirming firmly that 'To apply the term *'bel canto'* to later composers is misleading, if not erroneous' (Celletti 1991, 9). Although the grace of ornate singing is only sporadic in Donizetti's and Bellini's creations, the lyricism of their cantilenas remains a proof of their music connection with the bel canto art.

### 3. A short voyage to the first tenor vocality

'The modern tenor voice is the product of many centuries of evolution: a process that began slowly in the early medieval period [...] and accelerated rapidly from the eighteenth century onwards to become the complex voice of today's opera houses and concert halls' (Potter 2009, 1). The sound reconstitution of the first vocal form of the operatic tenor shapes a hybrid voice, resulting from the combination of masculine mature baritone and tenor voice. The musicologist Rodolfo Celletti identifies the 'vulgar' and 'common' stamp of the *baritenor* voice, as perceived in baroque, more with the voice of the baritone than with the modern tenor model. What is essential is that the singing technique of the incipient tenor form did not force the voice to go beyond its natural boundaries, in other words, the earliest male opera singers only used their natural emission register (modal voice). English musicologist John Potter uses the phrase *'open speech-like sound'* (Potter 2009, 17) to describe the colour of the sound produced by the first tenors, whose purpose

was to facilitate both the mobility of the sound and the clarity of the text, the intrinsic beauty of the sound being of less importance. Eclipsed by castrati, the tenors will perform in 18th century only in *mezzo-carattere* or less-spectacular roles (burlesques). Wanting to regain their position, the tenors will reinvent themselves in a new vocal manner imitating the *castrato* model, by treating their vocal cords like a two-register instrument, using the full voice mechanism (*voce naturale, voce piena*) and also the *falsetto* singing. Although we cannot consider *castrato* singers the direct ancestors of tenors, we need to become aware of their strong influence in the evolutionary process of tenor voice.

The audience's taste for 'white voices' has deviated the development of 18th century tenor voice from strong and robust voice style practiced nowadays. In order to better understand the bel canto tenors sound, we will need a correct interpretation of the specialized literature and a comprehensive understanding of the bel canto registers terminology. The vocal registers are often misunderstood because we tend to erroneously allocate it many valences. Of all the voice register models, the emission and the resonator ones create the biggest confusion. Therefore, we need a clear model to understand the differences between them. The emission register differentiates the sounds produced according to the vibrating pattern of the vocal cords, resulting the full voice or the *falsetto*. In its turn, the resonant register differentiates the sounds according to where they are amplified, resulting the chest (*di petto*) and the head resonance (*di testa*). I avoid using tricky expression like 'head voice', 'chest voice'.

Although Rodolfo Celletti has been raising a flag for more than a century now that interpreting the term *falsetto* may give rise to confusion in interpretation, the term remains unclear at present. 'The castrati had used for their high notes a sort of reinforced falsetto or *falsettone*, sufficiently round and bright [...] furthermore, that they adjusted the intensity and strength of the chest notes to bring them to some extent into line with the *falsettone*' (Celletti 1991, 113). Therefore, the *falsettone* emission, taken over by the first generations of bel canto tenors, implies the amplification of *falsetto* sounds using the same mechanisms used in the normal emission register by exerting an additional force in the union of the intermembrane portions of the vocal cords.

The term *tenore contraltino*, associated with the Italian bel canto period, designates the highest tenor form existing in the Apennine Peninsula. In Italy, they also held the title of *tenorini*, a name that meant a category of tenors capable of singing extremely high. According to Rodolfo Celletti, the *contraltino* tenors used the *falsettone* register from the notes A4 or B4 upwards, unlike the baritenors who

were changing the emission register starting with the G4 or A4 flat. The delicate and subtle passage from full voice register to *falsetto* was one of the top techniques studied by the *contraltino* tenors under the guidance of the castrato singers. The French cultural centre represented by Jean-Philippe Rameau, who sceptically adopted the cult of the castrato singer, promoted a custom version of the high tenor type that he entitled *haute-contre* or *tenor-aigu*.

#### 4. Bel canto tenors

The top tenors of the early 19th century will have a decisive role in the gradual process of melismatic suppression of masculine voices. These virtuoso performers who will change the trend are performing artists, best of the best, performers of the most difficult bel canto roles. The exaggerated vocal virtuosity, used in the compositional style at the end of the bel canto era, is largely due to the fabulous vocal capabilities they have mastered. One example is the *tenore contraltino* Giovanni Battista Rubini, also called the 'The King of Tenors' (Marek 2013, 123). Using the *falsettone* singing technique, Rubini could impress audiences by his voice bursts in the overtop high notes, which made the composers of the time, especially Bellini to whom he owes the celebrity, to compose specific opera roles created for his fantastic capability. Amazed by his technical and interpreting abilities, composers choose him as the prototype of the romantic hero with tragic fate in bel canto manner. Rubini made the absolute premiere for seven male Donizettian roles created specifically for his extraordinary voice. The *baritenor* Domenico Donzelli is another important voice of the early 19th century. Musicologist Dan H. Marek is convinced that he has had a notable influence on the Donizetti's taste for male voices. Donzelli will promote the *di petto* style of singing in the high pitch of full voice, a style that Gaetano Donizetti will encourage. The vocal achievement of *voix sombre* technique, also called the *voix couverte* (covered voice), acquired by the French tenor Gilbert Louis Duprez, under the close supervision of Donizetti, will mark the birth of modern romantic tenor.

Historical musicology nominate the French tenor Gilbert Duprez as the first tenor to sing a high C5, in an opera theatre from Lucca (Italy), described then as coming 'from the chest' ('*do di petto*', '*ut de poitrine*'), without using the *falsettone* emission, a method of singing successfully imposed six years later in the Parisian lyrical environment. However, it exists a few hypotheses that tend to contradict, even dismantle the 'sacred' myth of the '*do di petto*', one of them

supported by Italian musicologist Marco Beghelli (Beghelli 1996). The vocal reform of tenor's voice initiated by Duprez was not immediately adopted, but only launched a trend of transition from pure bel canto technique to a new vocality called *di forza*. The vocality based on chest resonance at the top of the vocal range, will be proved fatal to some tenors. Americi Sbigoli, trying to imitate Domenico Donzelli's singing style *di forza*, dies on the stage after a burst of a blood vessel from his throat. Also, the French tenor Adolphe Nourrit will commit suicide after many unsuccessful attempts to learn the new vocal technique encouraged by Donizetti. The Donizettian Society's website contains several epistolary fragments of Adolphe Nourrit's wife which describe in detail Gaetano's opinion about tenor vocality. Donizetti, before Verdi, plays a crucial role in final shape stage of the modern tenor voice, by the taste it encouraged for dark and robust sounds, contrary to all the perceptions inspired by bel canto technique. The Donizettian influence is evidenced by the letters of Adolphe Nourrit's wife, Adèle, who observes worried her husband's radical vocal transformations: 'his head voice is gone, his *mezza voce* is gone... He is darkening it as Donizetti required... it is nothing new that the development of the chest voice extinguishes the head voice and the half-voice. Rubini almost never uses the chest voice' (Potter 2009, 49).

## 5. Case study

I avoid using tricky expression like 'head voice', 'chest voice' in my classroom due to the possibility of being misinterpreted. In pedagogical practice, before starting the singing lesson with new students, I dedicate two class hours to a theoretical explanation of the singing technique, in which I include terminological clarification and extensively describe the differences between emission and resonance registers.

Here are some practical examples. I choose a range common to both registers of male emission (for example C4-C5 scale) or a single note (for example G4) which I sing alternately in full and *false* voice. After that I sing it in full voice using more head resonance and again with more chest, without changing the vocal cords pattern. The same I do in *false*. Students easily notice that each of the emissions can be sung differently, either more lyrically by amplifying the head resonance, or more dramatically by using more of the chest 'voice'. Sometimes, I ask them in which emission or resonance register I sang a certain vocal passage.

This exercises naturally raises for my students the question as to whether the terms ‘head/chest voice’ still have the same applicability. In this way, they can find themselves the difference between the change of emission, that occurs in the larynx where the real ‘voice’ is, and the change of resonance, that is a natural consequence of the first one. I am not totally against using the terms ‘head voice’ / ‘chest voice’ but I have to make sure that my students understand correctly the physiological reality behind the production of the human voice and that they clearly realize the difference between an emission or a resonance brake point (passage).

## 6. Conclusions

The evolution of opera as a musical genre, but also of its audience, determines the way the singer relates to virtuosity. The purpose, effects and implications of the use of vocal virtuosity in opera music have been and continue to define how us, the interpreters, perceive from the semantically musical point of view the creation of the opera in general and particularly that of bel canto. Perfect technical proficiency must only be one method leading to the ideal interpretation, in which the dramatic expression takes precedence over the sound production.

The birth of the modern tenor voice, by eliminating the *falseto* / *falsetone* emission in favor of using the full voice register, and by widening the thoracic resonance register (*di petto*) to the detriment of the *di testa* one, marks the end of the bel canto tenor era. In accordance to the exposed evidence, tenor Domenico Donzelli was the first tenor to experience the robust timbre effects, Gilbert Duprez the first tenor who succeeded in impose the trend of the new singing style internationally, and Gaetano Donizetti the first composer who encouraged the vocal-stylistic transition of the tenor’s voice.

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