

*BEL CANTO:*  
THE BEAUTY OF THE PAST IN THE VOICE OF THE PRESENT

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The beauty of the human voice has captivated and intrigued the ear of mankind since the beginning of time. Recognizing its rare and unique beauty among the world of sound, the art of music, throughout history, has aimed to capture the full and pure essence of the voice, discovering its capabilities and limitations in the search for virtuosity. As a result of the tireless efforts of singers to achieve the perfection of vocal beauty, eighteenth century vocal practice culminated in the art of *bel canto*, which presents itself as the epitome of vocal magnificence. Since its celebrated arrival into the world of virtuosic singing, the *bel canto* technique continues to be sought out as the means of attaining the true embodiment of beautiful singing. However, as the course of history has introduced the musical world to a variety of new vocal techniques that seemingly cater to the needs of the contemporary singer, both vocal pedagogues and musicologists have found reason to debate the disappearance of *bel canto*. However, in carefully analyzing the history of *bel canto* and tracing its origins throughout the course of vocal music history, it becomes apparent that elements of *bel canto* technique can be found throughout the developments of classical singing and are present in current aspects of vocal pedagogy. Despite its perceived extinction in the world of virtuosic singing, the origins of *bel canto* that are hidden beneath contemporary pedagogical methods reveal the potential for vibrant, beautiful and healthful vocalization, which caters to the extensive demands placed on the modern performer.

#### A Definition of *Bel Canto*

The nature of the phrase itself, as well as the long withstanding debate among vocal pedagogues in regards the designation of *bel canto*, has presented a great challenge in the ability to give a concrete definition of the term. The literal translation of the Italian phrase '*bel canto*' is 'beautiful singing'. However, it is not the meaning of the words themselves that are of primary concern but, more so, the technique represented by the term through which this 'beautiful

singing' is produced. Likewise, in order to adopt a clear and effective definition of the term *bel canto*, it is compulsory to consider the essential vocal elements that are necessary for the production of beautiful sound. Thus, research in the field of vocal pedagogy has concluded that the fundamental qualities needed for aurally pleasing vocal production in the art of *bel canto* can be deduced as follows:

- 1) The Voice: this element includes the physical make-up of the singer and the ear in regards to aural training and intonation.
- 2) *Sostenuto*: this element includes breathing, the formation of vowels and pure tone, as well as resonance.
- 3) *Legato*: this element includes movement through the scale, tonal color and the use of *chiaroscuro*.
- 4) Flexibility: this element includes relaxation of the body and articulators, as necessary for florid and virtuosic singing, as well as evenness of registers and tone, and the elasticity of the voice.
- 5) Phrasing: this element includes diction, expression, interpretation and emotion.<sup>1</sup>

The combination and collaboration of these five elements is what constitutes the art and technique of *bel canto*. It is “obvious that each and every one of these forms part of the *bel canto*; though only when all do so in the fullest degree of perfection is the highest result attained.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is the combination of these essential qualities of vocal technique that will serve as the traditional definition of *bel canto*. In consideration of this, the term *bel canto*, for the purpose of this paper, will not only be designated in regards to these four elements, but will also be transferred into the modern advances of present day vocal pedagogies. It is through an analysis under the rubric of these fundamental qualities of vocal production that the

development and existence of *bel canto* technique throughout history will be uncovered in order to reveal its continuous presence in the study of vocal virtuosity.

### The History of *Bel Canto* Technique

In order to effectively trace the elements of *bel canto* from its origins to its presence in vocal pedagogy of the present day, it is necessary that the major movements of vocal techniques and preferences throughout the course of music history be taken into account. Although there are many individual variations on techniques as well as varying transition periods between vocal movements throughout the course of music history, a succession of established pedagogies becomes evident. The main fundamental movements that provide a structure for the history of virtuosic singing that will be treated in this analysis are: *bel canto*, Verdian style, *verismo*, and Wagnerian singing. In considering these vocal movements, the four essential elements of beautiful, *bel canto*, singing can be effectively traced from a historical perspective.

#### *Bel Canto*

Serving as the first major movement in purely virtuosic vocal tradition, *bel canto* sets a precedent of perfection and beauty in the art of singing. In order to truly understand the importance of *bel canto* in the history of vocal pedagogy, it is necessary to survey its developments and origins. Research suggests that the beginnings of *bel canto* can be traced as an art form “commencing with Hellenic art and coming down gradually until the sixteenth century” and there exist “evidences of a continuous evolution in the spirit and forms of musical art leading...uninterruptedly step by step to monodic song and recitative of the seventeenth century.”<sup>3</sup> The foundation of virtuosic singing began to appear in the musical and poetic art of the ancient Greeks in the form of rhythm, by which accents and differentiating rhythmic meter served as a primary means of vocal expression.<sup>4</sup> This metrical means of expression was soon

accompanied by harmony, which, for the ancient Greeks, was defined by the tonal modes that became “the fundamental elements of melodic expression” and “coloristic musical expression, so much so, indeed, that they began to them use the word *cromos* (color) in defining the so-called chromatic genera and certain shades of intonation proper to certain genera of melody.”<sup>5</sup> As vocal music continued to develop, this collaboration of rhythm and melodic ‘color’ characterized the musical means of expression through the human voice. In the early times of the Medieval Renaissance, sacred music provided an inspiration for discovering the capabilities of the voice and thus, “in Gregorian chant we find embryonic forms of “intoned recitation” in which the form of the melody is none other than one wherein the singer, within the limits of his vocal compass and range of intonation, can endure it freely with an expressive vocal coloration according to his own temperament.”<sup>6</sup> In experimenting with the facilities of the voice in this way, there arose a search for perfecting and improving vocal coloration. Exercises such as the practice of *solfeggio*, developed in the eleventh century, enabled singers to not only acquire a sense of tonal command, but also obtained flexibility of the vocal organ. This vocal control was manifest in the melismatic passages of the *tropi* and *troparia* that appeared in liturgical chant and sacred music.<sup>7</sup> The elaborate musical lines that appeared in sacred music were soon adopted by secular endeavors of the traveling minstrels and troubadours, who paved the way for the developments of the Florentine *ars nova* of the fourteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Through the influence of the *ars nova*, the development of music settled in Italy and virtuosic singing came to adopt distinct Italian elements, including the development of the recitative and aria of the seventeenth century, which led to natural approach of solo vocal production that defines *bel canto*.

In Italy, vocal music embraced an ideal of releasing the pure and innate beauty that lies within the human voice, discarding any aim toward artificial or mechanical control. In the

opinion of research, the foundation upon which the early stages of *bel canto* technique are built can be considered as such:

“The human organ which produces or causes the production of the most beautiful tone possible, functions well in conformity with the plan of natural law; by training that organ from the beginning, for the production of the most beautiful tone, there was achieved a successful feat not only of artistic education but also of technical education, because it was only by means of such continuous correct functioning that the organ was strengthened, attained equilibrium in its peculiar operations, and gradually and naturally acquired all the qualities necessary for obtaining the most potent musical effects.”<sup>9</sup>

In considering this as a basis for developing the technique that eventually deemed itself under the term, *bel canto*, it becomes evident that healthful and natural vocalization was a defining aspect in what was regarded as beautiful singing.

Thus, now that a brief understanding of the historical development of *bel canto* has been established, a return to the five essential elements of beautiful singing can be made in order to evaluate the pedagogical aspects of the technique. The voice is “the human instrument, the basic creator of musical sound upon which the whole vocal structure is built.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, in order to create pleasing vocal sound, it is necessary that the vocal organ as well and the whole physique of the singer be in a healthful state. In the art of *bel canto*, the entire human body serves as a means of vocal production and expression. Of equal importance, and working in close collaboration with the performance of the voice itself, is the musical ear of the singer. In the development of *bel canto* technique, “the ear was given a place of importance, hardly subordinate to the voice itself”<sup>11</sup> and was considered “the natural means of learning music.”<sup>12</sup> In order to retain the free and natural tone that is a defining characteristic of *bel canto*, it is necessary that the singer possess a good musical ear and display diligence in training for tonal

precision in order to attain clear intonation. A natural approach to breathing, in accord with the physical structure and native functioning of the human body is another fundamental necessity in producing free and beautiful sound. In the art of *bel canto*, “since there are so many effects employed, good breathing is just as important as a good voice in order that the singer may have the necessary freedom.”<sup>13</sup> A characteristic aspect of breathing in the *bel canto* technique is *sostenuto*, which encompassed free, easy, and silent breath, managed economically, so that the intake of air is natural and subconscious, as is innate to the functioning of human body. Relaxed, but supported, breathing is crucial to the signature *messa di voce* of the *bel canto* technique and is attributed “to the fact that the breath is controlled and increased so gradually that the action of the glottis is so easy as not to toughen it.”<sup>14</sup> Breathing “should be done so that the singing will always be easy, for the breath should be managed in such a way that the singer is always free to use his voice flexibility in order to sing all the intervals, rhythms, cadences, etc. that are found in the course of singing.”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the practice of good breathing proves itself necessary in the production of legato, which is also a distinguished characteristic of *bel canto* singing. The ability to move freely and fluidly through voice with ease and produce a connection between tones is necessary in order to attain the vocal control required for beautiful sound. “It is true that *legato* must and should pervade-unless something else be indicated-every form of vocal phraseology”<sup>16</sup> in the *bel canto* tradition. The element of *legato* works in direct correlation with the relaxation necessary for the vocal flexibility. Research of early teaching methods in *bel canto* technique suggests that, in regards to flexibility, primary concern was given to the relaxation of the articulators. When singing “the soft palate, lips and teeth must make room and in no way hinder the tone “because they have no other duty than to stand aside modestly” and clarity in the voice is attained “when it comes out through the open mouth, freely from the chest, without forcing

and squeezing of the throat.”<sup>17</sup> This allows for free resonance in which the voice has the ability to move naturally with agility and precision. In the practice of *bel canto*, singers must aim for complete, yet controlled, relaxation of the articulators, resulting in the absence of vocal constriction or force of any kind. In this way also, it was possible for a singer to attain blending of the registers, which is necessary in the art of virtuosic singing. The registers “must be joined in such a way that the passing from one into the other is insensible”<sup>18</sup> because “virtuosity, the one quality of singing most highly developed in the age of *bel canto*, was impossible without the registers being perfectly blended.”<sup>19</sup> If this flawless unification of the vocal registers was attained, there resulted an evenness of the voice, which further exhibited the ideal natural and free sound. This not only provided for the desired tonal quality of *bel canto*, but also displayed a singer’s mastery of the technique

With complete utilization and understanding of the purely technical aspects of *bel canto* singing, expression comes into play as the driving force behind natural and beautiful singing. Expression plays an important role in inspiring the use of *messa di voce* in *bel canto* singing and also aids the singer in fully utilizing natural vocal colors to achieve this personal musical expression. However, it must be considered that, in as much as this perceived personal connection to music feeds technique, a good foundation on a technical level is necessary for a singer to deliver effective phrasing and expression:

“The principle of lightness of vocal emission, which had been used for the purpose of perfecting and maintaining the agility of the voice (is adopted) as fundamental, though not merely for the attainment of that purpose, but chiefly for arriving at a far more important goal—namely, purity of tone and flexibility of the voice, in both timbre and intensity, by means of the *accents* and their musical expansion or augmentation, these being the *exclamations*, the *note*



*filate* (sustained tones), the *messa di voce*, all serving to attain what was then called the *affetti*, that is to say, expressiveness.”<sup>20</sup>

Mastery of the *bel canto* technique is used as a means of expression, while expression inspires the utilization of the technique to the utmost and captivating perfection. Thus, this final factor completes the harmonious collaboration of elements that are necessary in the production of beautiful vocal sound.

In briefly examining *bel canto* technique from a simultaneously historical and pedagogical perspective, it becomes apparent that the ideal and desired vocal sound is a complete and perfect manifestation of the natural components of the human voice. Likewise, *bel canto* technique presents itself as fulfilling this musical requirement and satisfying the search for beauty in the human instrument. History has shown that “there is only one way to sing correctly, and that is to sing naturally, easily and comfortably.”<sup>21</sup> For this reason, *bel canto* rose to become the most sought after and accomplished vocal technique of its time and even today, hundreds of years after the age of its triumph, the musical world is in search of the revival and practice of ‘beautiful singing’.

### *Verdian Style*

As the pure practice of *bel canto* technique was substituted by new vocal approaches that resulted from societal changes in musical preference and a shift in vocal demand, other singing techniques began to arise in the world of virtuosic singing. One such style that was a result of this kind of musical change was Verdian singing. The Verdian style was developed based on the vocal demands placed upon the singer in Verdi’s operas as well as through critique and preference expressed by the composer himself.

In comparing Verdian style with that of *bel canto*, the five essential elements of beautiful singing can once again be taken into consideration in order find where the tradition of *bel canto*

still existed in this new approach to vocal virtuosity. In regards to the element of the voice, including intonation, it was necessary for the Verdian singer to have utmost musical talent and a good musical ear. Just as in the age of *bel canto*, compositions written for solo voice were virtuosic in nature, which required the performer to be a well-trained singer. The next element to be considered is that of *sostenuto* which, in the Verdian style, holds a different significance than in *bel canto*. In *bel canto* technique there is much emphasis given to the ease with which the singer achieves supported breath. On the contrary, the Verdian style cares little for making artistic choices in regards to breath and finds its primary concern to be diction and clear vowel formation. “Of all values a singer might possess, clear enunciation was easily one of the most important to Verdi” and “clarity of diction outweighs virtually all other qualities in a singer.”<sup>22</sup> It should be noted, though, that supported breath was still a necessary element of Verdian singing because of the continued presence of the *messa di voce*.<sup>23</sup> However, unlike *bel canto*, which aimed to form all things related to singing around the innate nature of the human voice, Verdian singing placed such stress on the formation of consonants and vowels that little care was given to whether the natural and free sound of the voice suffered in the process.<sup>24</sup> Thus the element of legato and tone was directly affected as a result of the conscious effort to ‘create’ consonants and vowels during singing instead of letting them naturally form within the resonance of the voice. In the Verdian style, there are two tonal qualities that are recognized, namely those of bright and dark vocal color. In providing a brief explanation of these two tonal qualities they can, from a historical standpoint, be described as such:

“As the voice ascends in clear timbre, the larynx ascends and the soft palate remains in a low relaxed position. For the dark quality, however, the larynx is kept low for every note, and the soft palate is raised.... The bright gives the chest register great brilliance and intensity, but if carried to excess leads to

harshness, the dark creates a roundness of tone and allows for the greatest volume, but if pushed to far renders notes dull.”<sup>25</sup>

Through the use of this deliberate coloration of vocal tone, it becomes obvious that the Verdian style began to veer away from the natural elements of the *bel canto*. An underlying component of *bel canto* technique was the aim for even and rounded vocal coloration throughout the range of the voice. Yet, in Verdian singing, there is obvious separation of tonal quality in the different registers. However, “the one articulatory technique that seemed to have survived intact is the *portamento*,”<sup>26</sup> which finds its origins in *bel canto*. The ability to utilize this *portamento* is directly related to flexibility and control of the vocal organ. As seen in the analysis of *bel canto*, it is of primary importance to relax the articulators, especially in regards to an open mouth, in order to allow for free and natural sound. However, in comparison to this, Verdian singing called for a more strident timbre in its technique, resulting in “the common admonition to open the jaw only a modest distance, enough to insert a fingertip.”<sup>27</sup> Although it became much more difficult to attain vocal flexibility as technique began to stray from the natural inclinations of the *bel canto*, even in the Verdian style, “the mastery of agility remained the key, the primary means of attaining not only rapid execution, but also timbral variety, dynamic flexibility and, ultimately, vocal longevity.”<sup>28</sup> This idea strongly reflects one of the leading concepts of *bel canto* that still existed in the Verdian style, and many rudimentary technical aspects of *bel canto* were still practiced in order to achieve this necessary flexibility. Lastly, the final element to be treated is the change in the use of phrasing and expression between the singing of the tradition school and that of the Verdian era. Expression is an important musical aspect of the Verdian style because, at that time, “Verdi and the pedagogues seem to agree that nuance lies in the heart of expression.”<sup>29</sup> However, since the time of *bel canto*, when a major means of expression was melody, the Verdian period evidenced a shift in which tempo inflection was a driving force in

expression and phrasing.<sup>30</sup> Another artistic choice in pertaining to phrasing in the Verdian style was the use of “tremolo...as a special effect that arises naturally when a singer is experiencing particularly strong emotions and that helps express these emotions to the public.”<sup>31</sup> Although a healthy pulse of the voice existed in the *bel canto* tradition as a result of correct oscillation of the vocal organ, research suggests that this so-called “tremolo” was a stronger sense of rhythmic wave in the voice, which resulted from a shift in technique. In comparison to the *bel canto* period, expression became an element of technique more so than a means of enhancing the purely technical aspects of the style.

In reflection of the Verdian style of singing, it becomes obvious that there were many changes the approach to vocal virtuosity since the reign of pure *bel canto* tradition. However, it is also quite apparent that many of the underlying and fundamental aspects of *bel canto* technique were still necessary to meet the vocal demands of the time. From a historical perspective, it is evident that, although his operatic writing called for a change in vocal style, Verdi preferred to work with singers trained in *bel canto* and his “regular battles with singers seem aimed not so much at producing a new kind of vocalist as trying to recapture the skills and flexibility of approach that- ideally at least-characterized with the old school.”<sup>32</sup> Even in a time when the glory of the *bel canto* period was not very far in the past, its value was recognized and an aim to capture and preserve its beauty in changing musical styles and demands was already a topic of concern in the musical world.

### *Verismo*

The next movement of vocal virtuosity to be discussed in its relationship to *bel canto* tradition is that of *verismo*. The origin of *verismo* can be placed as somewhat of a transition period that took place as a result of veering away from the conventions of the Romantic

melodrama.<sup>33</sup> Operas that are most often associated with *verismo* are Puccini's *Tosca* and *Il tabarro*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, and even some of Verdi's later works. Vocal music at this time became disconnected from displaying the capabilities of the voice through purely musical means and took on characteristics of dialogue or "singing conversations" in the aim for 'realism'.<sup>34</sup> In brief, the movement of *verismo* can be described as such:

"Vocal writing exploiting the high register of each voice type; irregular rhythms and phrases, spoken or shouted utterances, heavily charged melodies; 'psychological' rhythmic ideas, breathless harmonic rhythm, overall tonal stability; a dynamic progression through climaxes of tension, orchestra buildups and loud, excited vocal climaxes and recurring themes, mostly identified with the voice."<sup>35</sup>

When considering the five essential elements of beautiful singing that have been established, it is clear that the era of *verismo* brought about many changes in virtuosic singing. However, through analysis, it can also be concluded that there still remained influences of *bel canto* technique.

Concerning the voice and the ear, it is obvious that that nature of the music that would be sung in the *verismo* period required singers to show strength in both of these areas, especially in consideration of the leaps and chaotic melodic lines that characterized the music of this time. The elements of breath control and *sostenuto* showed a shift in the utilization of the breath in the *verismo* period as compared to that of the *bel canto*. In *verismo*, there still remained a strong need for supported and strengthened breath, just as in *bel canto*. However, the unapparent and silent breath that characterized *bel canto* was replaced with the use of exasperated and exaggerated breath, for the purpose of 'realistic' expression, which inevitably affected the constancy of tone. As a result of this, the tonal and *legato* aspects of *verismo* and *bel canto* varied greatly. There existed "balanced soft attacks, transparent tone and impeccable legato of *bel canto* on the one hand, with deliberate inequalities of color, harsh inflections and screams on

the other... (singers) often sacrificed beauty of tone and perfection of technique for constant nervous excitement and immediate expression.”<sup>36</sup> In consideration of this, a significant aspect of *bel canto* that was necessary in *verismo* technique was flexibility. Although the smooth and agile exercises of *bel canto* were not used in performance during the time of the *verismo*, it is most likely that, during this time, exercises of *bel canto* technique were still used in order for singers to attain the flexibility they needed without injuring their voices. It should be noted that, although certain aspects of *bel canto* were still utilized in this respect, the true ‘beautiful singing’ was not attained because the perfect collaboration of the five elements of *bel canto* was lacking. In conclusion, it is evident that expression in *verismo* directly impacted a change in vocal technique because with “the stylistic changes inherent in the operas came a new approach to acting and vocal interpretation.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the aspiration for ‘realism’ in the *verismo* defied the manifestation of the natural aspects of the human voice developed in *bel canto* singing.

### *Wagnerian Singing*

The last major movement in the development of vocal technique and style that will be treated is Wagnerian singing. The vocal changes that occurred with the performance of Wagner’s operas began to display a highly perceivable disconnect from the art of *bel canto*. As singing in the Wagnerian style seemed to create an entire technique and approach to singing itself, another critical paper, dedicated entirely to Wagnerian singing, would be necessary for a detailed examination of the essential elements of singing in this style. Therefore, for the purpose of this analysis, it will be sufficient to state that each of the five elements exist in the Wagnerian technique, yet they are utilized in very different ways.

Wagnerian opera places “more emphasis on dramatic and declamatory elements” than that of previous operas, yet “also calls for beautiful tone and virtuosity.”<sup>38</sup> However, it should be

noted that this beauty and virtuosity took on a different meaning in comparison to that of the *bel canto* period. In singing the operas of Wagner, the music itself, does not allow for *bel canto* singing. “Not only was each syllable allotted to one note, but the voice, instead of trilling up and down the scale in steps, was required to rise or drop, sometimes a complete octave, tremolo was scarcely used at all and sustained notes occurred in nearly every bar.”<sup>39</sup> This way in which the singer was required to ultimately ‘throw’ or ‘place’ their voice in the direction of the music is opposed to the natural and sequential movement of the voice found in *bel canto*. However, similar to the ideals of *bel canto* technique, great flexibility in the voice was a requisite in singing Wagner’s works and the musical compositions of that time. Composers required “singers of great ability, else they spoil their voices by high notes, tonal acrobatics or intentional hardness of tone. That the singer who has acquired thoroughly the method of *bel canto* is best fitted for modern music is the opinion of many excellent judges, including Wagner himself.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it is evident that, even in a time when music and technique opposed the art of *bel canto*, it was still a sought after means of vocal training and, beneath the changes in vocal virtuosity, it must be found and cultivated to once again reveal the natural beauty of the human voice.

### *Bel Canto* Technique in Modern Vocal Pedagogy

Throughout the course of history, it is obvious that *bel canto* technique creates beautiful emission of the human voice that has been sought out, in some way, in all movements of vocal virtuosity. Likewise, modern vocal pedagogy continues this trend in search for ‘beautiful singing’ through the art of *bel canto*.

### *Bel Canto* Today

After the glorious reign of the *bel canto* period, it had seemed that “the old, robust voices capable of resistance and all-powerful are no more and the study of the *bel canto*, the Italian *bel*

*canto*, does not exist anymore.”<sup>41</sup> However, as the course of history has shown that neither singers nor *bel canto* that have fallen away from ‘beautiful singing,’ but rather, it is technique that has fallen into decay in vocal study. Vocalists have become “inferior in what should be the very basis of their equipment-in technique.”<sup>42</sup> Today, many teachers and singers, alike, claim to be practiced in the art of *bel canto* for the purpose of including themselves among the elite in vocal virtuosity. However, the credibility of whether or not these techniques truly represent the pure *bel canto* tradition is quite debatable. Likewise, in order to find true *bel canto* technique in vocal pedagogies today it is necessary to analyze elements of modern technique and find elements that draw directly from or build upon the unadulterated tradition of *bel canto*. Therefore, *bel canto* in modern vocal pedagogy can be found in analysis through a holistic viewpoint, which “doesn’t see singular phenomena in an isolated fashion, but discovers commonalities, categorizes, and brings seeming contradictions together...in this light, commonalities are to be searched for between:

- 1) The insights of anatomy, physiology, evolution, phonetics, acoustics, and mechanics
- 2) The “knowledge of the singer”, as transmitted through the centuries
- 3) The viewpoints of various vocal schools in the last century”<sup>43</sup>

This rubric, which is fulfilled through the previous historical analysis of presence of *bel canto* throughout developments of vocal virtuosity, leads to discovering its true presence in modern vocal pedagogy.

### *Modern Vocal Pedagogy*

Pinpointing the presence of *bel canto* in any specific technique or teaching style of the present day is an incredibly difficult, if not almost impossible task. So many different variations on vocal technique are taught by different teachers and practiced in different music schools and



opera houses around the world. As a generalization, many of the modern teaching methods that find themselves under the category of holistic pedagogy employ at least some elements of traditional *bel canto* technique. Holistic pedagogies aim toward using the entirety of the body, through natural means, as the human instrument. As science and knowledge of the functions of the human body, including the voice, have become more advanced, elements of the traditional *bel canto* technique have entered the realm of modern pedagogy in a more complex and scientific form.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, “through the connection of newest research results that support early insights, it enables greater theoretical knowledge that can be directly applied to practice and aids the voice in attaining greater abilities.”<sup>45</sup> In consideration of this, it is the widely held opinion of vocal pedagogues today that *bel canto* is one of, if not the most, desired and sought after techniques in vocal virtuosity because it offers “the most outstanding opportunities in mastery of vocal production.”<sup>46</sup> If the aspiring vocalist wishes to learn the true art of *bel canto*, care must be taken to gain a complete and sufficient knowledge of the tradition, by which the methods of every teacher, coach, and director can be weighed; for through vigilant assessment, genuine *bel canto* methods can be found with well-informed vocal instruction. The challenge of the present day, therefore, lies in discovering what teaching methods exist which encompass the tradition of *bel canto* and revive its beauty among modern scientific advances and contemporary vocal demand.

### The Liberation of Sound

As has been concluded, it is necessary to conduct a knowledgeable analysis of an individualized teaching method in order to discover whether or not its ideals are in line with the technique of *bel canto* tradition. Therefore, a technique, which most efficiently finds harmonious collaboration between the techniques of the ‘old school’ and modern advances and which, for the

purpose of this paper, will be deemed “The Liberation of Sound,” will be introduced in its innovative use of *bel canto* tradition within the parameters of present day vocal instruction.<sup>a</sup> This technique, as a whole, has been originated and is taught by the acclaimed performer and voice teacher, Verena Rein. Traveling to many well-known music schools across the globe, Verena Rein teaches masterclasses in which singers are trained in her technique, which is aimed at reviving traditional *bel canto* within the realm of modern research and vocal demand.

This technique in which ‘the liberation of sound’ is acquired directly builds upon the long-established ideals that defined *bel canto* as the finest of all vocal technique for acquiring beautiful sound. This ‘liberating’ technique works with the traditional *bel canto* aim of cultivating the manifestation of the human voice through natural means in order to attain free resonance. Great emphasis is placed on working with the innate functioning of the human body, finding the way in which the human instrument can be utilized for the most beautiful and individualized vocal sound. The “technique does not rely on products of coincidence or traditionalized, unquestioned instructions which can lead to vocal problems, but is explainable and demonstrable through all registers. It enables great dynamic nuancing, an unusual range of color, and a natural articulation, as well as an individuality of sound with extraordinary effortlessness;”<sup>b</sup> all elements that resonate with the *bel canto* technique.

### *Pedagogy*

In analyzing this particular technique, the five essential elements of beautiful vocalization can be taken into consideration in finding its relationship to the art of *bel canto*. Interacting with the element of the voice, ear-training plays an important role in ‘liberating’ sound. The ear is

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<sup>a</sup> Note: The author of this paper has studied this technique privately under the instruction of Verena Rein and all knowledge and opinions are based on credible, first-hand experience under the instructor’s supervision.

<sup>b</sup> Verena Rein, in interview with the author, *Berlin, Germany*, December 10, 2013.

trained to recognize the “fine nuances of sound” and color in the voice.<sup>c</sup> The breath serves as a means of vocal coloration and control through the use of *inalare*, through which the singer achieves a full range dynamic control; air pressure is stabilized and never increased.<sup>d</sup> Working in direct collaboration with this is the “tactile sense of the tongue,”<sup>e</sup> which is necessary in learning to utilize the correct space in the mouth needed for free resonance. For *sostenuto*, this technique holds the same ideals of the traditional *bel canto* technique by asserting that breathing should be natural and in line with the innate functioning of the human body. With the natural and supported breathing practiced as part of this technique, the singer is able to acquire stabilized tone through which all vowels can be formed in a clear manner. In regards to vowel formation, the *schwa* [ə] is used to create the correct resonance space in the mouth and all other vowels are formed around the *schwa*. For the element of *legato*, this technique teaches the principles of the *bel canto* tradition. It places great emphasis on the importance of vocal exercises in which the perfect balance of tonal color and *chiaroscuro* can be attained. Flexibility is also an important element in ‘liberating’ the voice in order to gain free and natural resonance in singing. In consideration of this aspect of vocal production, the same model of relaxed and moveable articulators as seen in traditional *bel canto* is a guiding principle. However, this technique puts special emphasis on the freedom and movement of the tongue as well as ease in the articulators in regards to the formation of the *schwa* as part of the “Tongue Technique”; one of the major pedagogies of vocal production used in ‘liberating’ the voice. Lastly, phrasing and expression prove to be some of the most important characteristics of this technique, which, similar to the art of *bel canto*, enhance the technical aspects of the singing method. “When the singer is able to combine technical

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<sup>c</sup> Verena Rein, in interview with the author, *Berlin, Germany*, December 10, 2013.

<sup>d</sup> Ibid.

<sup>e</sup> Ibid.

aspects with a full expression, the voice is richer, freer and the singer has a message.”<sup>f</sup> Thus in analyzing this technique, it is apparent that it holds many of the same ideals as the traditional *bel canto* and provides for the harmonious collaboration of the five essential elements of beautiful singing, hereby serving virtuosic singing through ‘the liberation of sound.’

### *The “Tongue Technique”*

The tongue plays a crucial role in the ‘liberation of sound’ in this technique of vocal study. Verena Rein, the founder of this ‘liberating’ technique, stresses this importance:

“The tongue plays an important role in this technique: to sing with the tongue arched, moving it in a certain way causes almost instantly a sense of physical and vocal liberation. The tongue can be used to direct the tones to their respective resonance spaces (free resonance)... A singer who has learned how to use the tongue to direct the sound to the appropriate resonance spaces precisely will find it easy to make a smooth transition between vocal registers, constantly discovering new resonance points for the different vowels in each register and, most importantly, realizing that it is really possible to sing with a truly liberated voice.”<sup>47</sup>

Thus, this technique utilizes the “Tongue Technique” as a guiding principle of beautiful vocalization.

The “Tongue Technique” is a technique of vocalization established through the research of Bulgarian opera singer and voice teacher, Peter Gougaloff. It has been established as an important part of the ‘liberating’ technique because its founder, Verena Rein, had the privilege of studying this special approach under his instruction. Peter Gougaloff’s aim in creating this “Tongue Technique” was to find a way in which it is “possible for a singer to reach free resonance in all registers” of the voice.<sup>48</sup> The basis of this technique is a special ‘flexible’ and

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<sup>f</sup> Verena Rein, in interview with the author, *Berlin, Germany*, December 10, 2013.

‘soft’ movement of the tongue in which it guides the sound of the voice into the specific spaces of ‘free resonance’ for each vowel sound, thus creating and even an natural tone throughout the full range of the voice. It features a collaborative use of the *schwa* [ə] the *urvokal*, and the Russian Cyrillic vowel, [ы], which is “an old ancestral vowel from which all other vowels have developed. The *schwa* is significant in singing because “integrated into any vowel, it gives the tone an ideal overtone spectrum, making the voice carry clearly and helping singers to reach their own unique vocal timbre.”<sup>49</sup> The *urvokal* also “has an ideal spectrum of overtones” and “may be formed all over the hard palate with the tongue being continuously adjustable.”<sup>50</sup> This unique characteristic of the *urvokal* allows for different spaces of resonance for each and every specific vowel sound. The way in which these vowels are utilized in this technique can be most clearly explained in the following:

“Peter Gougloff attained a constant presence of the *schwa* [ə] and all similar vowels formed all over the hard palate by pulses of the tongue which he trained by working with the vocal exercises he had developed. Due to this technique, all vowels can swing freely in the (head) bones without losing their overtones. The result is a balanced, sonorous, vibrating, effortlessly sounding and individual voice with a lot of carrying capacity.”<sup>51</sup> (See exercises in the next section)

The proper use and training of these vowels within the production of all vocal sounds also leads to an “ideal, elegant vibrato (8 vibrations per second) through all registers of the voice” and also “leads to a pleasant and natural articulation and allows a new color of interpretation.”<sup>52</sup> Thus the use of the “Tongue Technique” caters to the natural vocal production that defines the beauty of the voice in the art of *bel canto*.

### *Exercises*

In order to apply the healthy and beautiful benefits the “Tongue Technique” to vocalization, it is necessary that the singer be dedicated to practicing the exercises specifically

designed for learning this technique. These exercises will be discussed in brief in order to demonstrate the way in which this technique utilizes natural resonance through the vowels.



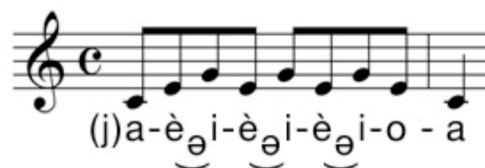
Example 1

The exercise in Example 1 utilizes the vowels in a flowing and ‘wavelike’ motion in which the singer is able to explore the different spaces of free resonance along the hard palate, in order to provide for proper vowel modification throughout the whole range of the exercise.<sup>53</sup> In this exercise, “only the oral <sup>54</sup>cavity, the *inalare* and the tongue movement are used, with the tongue more or less arched, depending on the pitch of the tone, and smoothly forming to the contours of the oral cavity.”



Example 2

The exercise in Example 2 features the exercise of a sustained note on the fifth in order that the singer learns to simply use the tongue to reach the peak of the exercise. The singer should aim to find free resonance on the third and, with a movement of the tongue, “the tone is then just passed onto the fifth, using [ə] to initiate and carry the tone along.”<sup>55</sup>



Example 3

The exercise in Example 3 utilizes a repetitive motion from the third to the fifth in order that the singer may learn to make a smooth transition between the *schwa* and the other vowels. To accomplish this, “the tongue is pulled back after the [è] and then rolled forward in an arching movement” and “at the highest point of this arch, the vocalist forms the [ə] to make a short pause before smoothly flipping the tongue forward to reach the [i].”<sup>56</sup> Mastery of this exercise provides for a clear and natural sound between vowels and tones.



Example 4

The main goal of the exercise in Example 4 is to further utilize the tongue movement and vowel positions that were introduced in the first three exercises. It incorporates a greater use of the [ə] for practicing transitions between resonance points along the hard palate throughout the registers and vocal range. In order to achieve this freedom, “the back of the tongue is relaxed and raised throughout the whole exercise, effortlessly bringing the tones forward through circular (rotating) movements.”<sup>57</sup>



Example 5

The last exercise to be discussed, as seen in Example 5, trains the singer in finding balance and evenness in the registers through the use of *inalare*. “With regard to this octave exercise, it means that directly after the [i] on the fifth, which if formed behind the upper front teeth with the tongue arched, the tongue is first pulled back on the [a] on the same note and then moved into the

[ə] over an arch.”<sup>58</sup> Then, after momentarily dwelling on this ‘free resonance’ it is “released into the [ы] to reach the octave”<sup>59</sup>

This is only a brief introduction to the training principles of the “Tongue Technique”. However, with proper instruction and practice, the singer who wishes to embark on the quest of ‘beautiful singing’ may wish to utilize the elements of this technique in order to achieve clarity of tone, evenness of the registers, and ease of the voice in a natural and healthy way.<sup>g</sup>

### Using a Modern Approach to *Bel Canto* for Beautiful Sound

The virtuosic singer of today undergoes many stresses and demands that had not existed in the age of the *bel canto*. Thus, in order for vocalists to incorporate traditional *bel canto* techniques into contemporary performance, it is necessary that there be congruent collaboration between the ideals of the past and the vocal demands of the present. In this way, the aspiring singers of today may attain ‘the liberation of sound’.

### *Modern Vocal Demand*

The demands placed upon the modern singer continue to become increasingly extensive as new compositions, research, and preferences persistently appear in the musical world. In the realm of professional performance, the virtuosic singer is expected to sing almost any role in any style that meets the classification of their voice type. This presents a challenge in the practice of *bel canto* because the singers “of that period did not know the way of singing and repertoire would change throughout the centuries.”<sup>h</sup> In considering of the use of the ‘liberating’ technique in regards to the demands placed on the singer of today, Verena Rein reflects on the benefits of placing traditional elements into present standards: “This technique, with its natural breathing,

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<sup>g</sup> Note: More information on the “Liberation of Sound” and how to perform and practice these exercises can be found in Verena Rein’s DVD, “The Liberation of Sound,” which is listed in the bibliography.

<sup>h</sup> Verena Rein, in interview with the author, *Berlin, Germany*, December 10, 2013.



free sound, richness of colors, and more stays in line with the aim of *bel canto*. Because of today's challenging differences in styles, the bigger theaters and concert halls, we need a technique that is developed and has concrete answers for the contemporary singer.”<sup>i</sup>

Verena Rein's technique, which has been referred to as “The Liberation of Sound,” finds a balance, which not only allows the singer to have confidence and security in being able to meet the stresses of the present day, but also allows the vocalist to conquer these difficulties in a healthy manner without damaging the voice.

### *Singing in Style*

The technique contained in the “Liberation of Sound” allows the singer to place the beauty of the *bel canto* era into the interpretation and performance of all styles that are demanded of today's singer. Thus the one main difference, which allows for all styles to be sung with the sound and technique, is:

“the usage of the tongue movement and the *schwa*. The tongue directs the sound to the appropriate resonance spaces. With a change of spaces (pharynx, soft palate, cheeks, lips, mouth, jaw), the exact place of the *schwa*, working in collaboration with other vowels, including the *urvokal*, and the dosing of the *inalare*, the singer can precisely influence the color and forming of the tone.”<sup>j</sup>

In this way, the singer has the control of the voice necessary to sing in all classical styles. The vocalist has the ability to utilize vertical space and the resonance created by the *urvokal* to get “a clear, light and brilliant sound, which is also grounded”<sup>k</sup> as is needed in singing Mozart. For the music of Verdi, the singer is able to create a wider space in the mouth and incorporate a greater

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<sup>i</sup> Verena Rein, in interview with the author, *Berlin, Germany*, December 10, 2013.

<sup>j</sup> Ibid.

<sup>k</sup> Ibid.

sense of *inalare*, allowing the singer to “use more lower formant by opening the body deeper.”<sup>1</sup> In contemporary and baroque music, which calls for less, if any, vibrato, this technique allows for the singer to sing with a perceivable ‘straight tone’ “without becoming stiff and losing connection to the lower body” through the means of *inalare*. Thus, it becomes apparent that this ‘liberating’ technique finds the ideal balance of traditional elements of *bel canto* and innovative elements of vocal technique in order to cater to the modern demands through the means healthy and beautiful vocal production.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, through this analysis, it becomes evident that the art of *bel canto* is still alive and vibrant in vocal pedagogy today. Although the change in vocal style and preference throughout the centuries challenged its survival in the world of vocal virtuosity, elements of traditional *bel canto* technique can be found throughout historical developments of vocal music. Likewise, through careful analysis and understanding of specific modern techniques, the art of *bel canto* can still be found in teaching methodologies of the present day. With the correct combination of the ideals of the ‘old school’ of *bel canto* and the vocal innovations of the present day, the contemporary vocalist is able to healthily meet modern demands with outstanding, natural vocal beauty. Thus, it is truly possible to manifest the ‘beauty of the past in the voice of the present’.

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<sup>1</sup> Verena Rein, in interview with the author, *Berlin, Germany*, December 10, 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Klein, "The 'Bel Canto'," *The Musical Times* 65, no. 974 (1924): 309, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912462>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Giulio Silva and Theodore Baker, "The Beginnings of the Art of "Bel Canto": Remarks on the Critical History of Singing," *The Musical Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1922): 54, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/737912>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 54-56.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 56-57.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 60-61.

<sup>10</sup> Herman Klein, "The 'Bel Canto'," *The Musical Times* 65, no. 974 (1924): 309, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912462>.

<sup>11</sup> Philip A. Duey, *Bel Canto in Its Golden Age: A study of Its Teaching Concepts* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1951), 90.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Herman Klein, "The 'Bel Canto'," *The Musical Times* 65, no. 974 (1924): 310, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912462>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 107-108.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 124-125.

<sup>20</sup> Giulio Silva and Theodore Baker, "The Beginnings of the Art of "Bel Canto": Remarks on the Critical History of Singing," *The Musical Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1922): 63-64, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/737912>.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 233.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 233.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 256.

<sup>33</sup> Andreas Giger, "Origin, Corruption, and Redemption of an Operatic Term," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60, no. 2 (2007): 290, accessed November 29, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jams.2007.60.2.271>.

<sup>34</sup> Adriana G. Corazzol and Roger Parker, "Opera and Verismo: Regressive Points of View and the Artifice of Alienation," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 5, no. 1 (1993): 48. Accessed November 29, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/823749>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 40-41.

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<sup>36</sup> Andreas Giger, "Origin, Corruption, and Redemption of an Operatic Term," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60, no. 2 (2007): 303-304, accessed November 29, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jams.2007.60.2.271>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 301.

<sup>38</sup> Philip A. Duey, *Bel Canto in Its Golden Age: A study of Its Teaching Concepts* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1951), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Joanne Holbrook, "The Triumph of the Dramatic Soprano," *The Musical Times* 79, no. 1146 (1938): 586, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/923115>.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Geoffrey Thompson, "The Decline of Fine Singing," *The Musical Times* 75, no. 1101 (1934): 985, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/917931>.

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