

## Giovanni Battista Lamperti and his treaty, *Method in bel canto*

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**Abstract:** Born in Milan, Giovanni Battista Lamperti (the 24th of June 1839 - the 10th of March 1910) was the son of another famous singing teacher, Francesco Lamperti. He wrote a very important treaty for the singing generations to come: *Die Technik des Bel Canto*, in 1905, translated the same year, in English, by Theodore Baker (the Romanian translation from English and German by Tatiana Penelea and myself is called *Metodă în bel canto*). The Method proves the fact that he continued his father's tradition, adding a strong personal touch.

Considered to be a very severe teacher, G. B. Lamperti formed highly appreciated singers all over the world, such as Marcella Sembrich (1858-1935), Ernestine Schumann-Heink (1861-1936), Roberto Stagno (1836-1897), David Bispham (1857-1921), Franz Nachbaur (1835-1902) and many others.

The XIXth century vocal art treaties, just like the one mentioned above, are extremely important, for the teachers, as well as for the students from the Musical Interpretation-Canto section.

**Key-Words:** vocal pedagogy; singing technique; bel canto; the Lamperti school.

### 1. Introduction

In the XIXth century a few former great singers and teachers wrote pedagogical treaties about the vocal art, volumes of huge importance up until our days, there are especially remarkable two singing schools known after the names of their founders and masters: the Garcia School and the Lamperti School. The two schools represented a distinct vocal ideal, but the most important, different vocal philosophies. Francesco Lamperti (1811/1813-1892) tried to keep the old Italian vocal tradition, while Manuel García II (1805-1906) wished to develop it and even more to theorised it.

### 2. Contents

Francesco Lamperti (1811/1813-1892), the founder of the Lamperti school, son of a great Italian singer, was born at Savona and was a teacher at the Conservatoire in Milan, where, starting with 1850, had taught for quarter of a century. He was manager at *Filodrammatico Teatro* in Lodi. He attracted students from all over the world, from his class had graduated several of the greatest opera singers in the world such as Sophie Cruvelli, Emma Albani, Gottardo Aldighieri, Désirée Artôt, Sona Aslanova, David Bispham, Italo Campanini, Virgilio Collini, Franz Ferenczy, Friederike Grün, Teresa Stolz, Marie van Zandt, Maria Waldmann, Herbert Witherspoon and Lizzie Graham.

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He wrote many singing manuals (*Guida teorico-pratica-elementare per lo studio del canto*, printed in Milan, Ricordi Publishing House 1864; *Studi di bravura per soprano*, printed in Milan, Ricordi Publishing House 1875; *L'arte del canto*, printed in Milan, Ricordi Publishing House 1883; *Osservazioni e consigli sul trillo*) but, unlike Garcia, Lamperti was content to leave the physiological aspects to the medical area. In addition *Guida teorico-pratica-elementare per lo studio del canto* and *L'arte del canto* are translated by myself, the first published in 2015, the second is to be published in 2017. Nevertheless, F. Lamperti included in his manuals chapters from *Hygiene de la voix* (1876), written by the French doctor, specialist in pathological anatomy, dr. Louis Mandl.<sup>2</sup> In that book, Mandl introduced a new term: *lutte vocale*,<sup>3</sup> referring to the breathing control in singing.

Regarding Lamperti's pedagogy, we have a testimony from the Swedish canto teacher Hugo Beyer. In the summer of 1886, Beyer visited the tenor William Shakespeare (1849 - 1931), former student of Lamperti's, teacher at Royal College in London at that time. Beyer wrote that his exercises had been inspired by Lamperti's, they were a few, but the secret was the way they were done. They were short preparing exercises, diatonic and chromatic formulae, the accent falling especially on executing them perfectly.<sup>4</sup>

Lamperti father and son used a less scientific vocal terminology, the physiological aspects being left aside as unessential, considered to be more disturbing for the student rather than helpful. They sustained, as James Stark says,<sup>5</sup> the more traditional aspects of learning how to sing, believing that nobody can sing better only by knowing how the larynx looks like.

The one who developed and promoted the principles of the Lamperti singing school, his son, Giovanni Battista Lamperti (1839-1910), was born in Milan where he studied at the beginning with his father and learned the art of teaching without precise intention. At the Milan Conservatoire he was taught, among other things, canto and piano. This helped him a great deal, what with him spending time accompanying his father's students, becoming this way a master of singing. Even if at first he had wanted to become an actor, he ended up successfully teaching opera singers at the Conservatoire where he himself had been a student.

The Lamperti school was highly appreciated in Milan, Paris, Dresda and Berlin being considered as a school which taught art as it had been by the great old masters. The knowledge had been passed on from master to disciple. In Lamperti the son's opinion there was no such thing as a *bel canto* teaching system.

The old Italian tradition is passed on through pieces of advice, determined by the concrete needs the teacher identifies on the student. Giovanni Battista Lamperti's favourite teaching method was the one with three or four students present at each lesson: they took turns to rehearse, each of them watching the others and thus learning. He was considered a severe, demanding teacher, who would compliment none of his students, but who knew how to enthusiastically salute their exceptional accomplishments. Many of his young learners became international opera stars - Irene Abendroth, Marcella Sembrich, Ernestine Schumann-

<sup>2</sup> Louis Mandl (1812-1881), doctor ordinary from Hungary, worked in France, author of more than twenty treatises and courses of Anatomy and Pathological anatomy, but also of works with major impact on the art of singing.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Mandl, *Hygiene de la voix*, Paris, J.-B. Baililliere et Fils, 1876, p.13.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Juvas Marianne Liljas, *A study of David Björling's way of teaching and the background to it in older traditions of teaching singing*, StockholmPublisher, Stockholm, 2007, p. 108-109

<sup>5</sup> James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1999, p. 44

Heink, Paul Bulss, Roberto Stagno, David Bispham, Franz Nachbaur, Signe Hebbe - or famous canto teachers - Marcella Sembrich.

Unlike his father he only wrote one manual: *Die Technik des Bel Canto*, now translated in Romanian and presented to all those interested in vocal art, where, like his father, he chose not to pay much attention to the physiological aspects<sup>6</sup> and mention them very little. This text must be understood in connection with the treatises his contemporary Manuel Garcia II wrote, who insists thoroughly on these aspects. That Lamperti does not elude them can be seen even from the first pages: "The true method of singing," he says, "is in harmony with nature and the laws of health,"<sup>7</sup> but also from the often quotations from doctor L.Mandl.'s book.

Francesco's son took his father tradition further, adding a strong personal touch. While his father rejects the idea of a correct singing in contemporary compositions, his son accepts this situation and tries to solve the technical difficulties the future singers may encounter: „A strong, thoroughly trained organ will by no means, as many erroneously think, be ruined by Wagner's music; the fatal mistake is rather, that unripe artists undertake the most difficult tasks before possessing the necessary ability.”<sup>8</sup>

Like his father, Giovanni sustains the Parisian phonologist Louis Mandl when talking about the correct breathing, namely the one on diaphragm, but at the same time he thinks that for a compressed breathing one also needs the help of the rib muscles. He considers breath mastering being the "foundation of any vocal study,"<sup>9</sup> acquired only under the teacher's direct supervision, otherwise the student may harm himself/herself, afterwards being much more difficult to fix what was harmed before.

Lamperti often refers in his book to the voice study, he insists upon a correct breathing and intonation, that is why the singer must have an adequate position in singing. He underlines the importance of exercising the vowels, the most important being, in his opinion, *a* and *e*. He classifies the voices and speaks about the study of ornaments. For him a good teacher is the one who would start the lesson by defining the voice of the future singer, and then give the student the possibility to achieve new sound levels (height, intensity, pitch etc), but also the resistance to tiredness. Using this differential method of vocal technique, analysing the human typology of the subjects, should lead to the same type of vocality, allowing similar sound range, not leaving behind, of course, the personal gift.

The sound attack, in Lamperti's vision, is done firmly but slender, directly, projecting the voice to an imaginary balance point, sustained by the breath, as if the process of breathing in is prolonged, the voice floating on the breath, on the air flow, this way the sound coming out without other noises. Maintaining a good balance of the air flow influences the resonance of the pharynx, and the resonance of the upper palate influences the resonance of the throat, being mutually interconnected.

The work of guiding voices must begin with prudence, taking into consideration the nature of the vocal organ, and must be determined with precision by the weave of the voice, there where the student utters the sounds most comfortably, freely and effortlessly, achieving the highest vocal range.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 43

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *The Technics of Bel Canto*, editura G. Schirmer, New York, 1905, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Battista Lamperti, op.cit., p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni Battista Lamperti, op.cit., p. 9.

The resonance, which includes terms like *voice placement*, or *voice focusing*, has been analysed by him also. Giovanni uses suggestive images to illustrate the correct sensations in singing. For example, he claims that the balance point for the medium register tone is "the front part of the hard palate" and that the interpreter should constantly feel the tone in the head.<sup>10</sup>

Speaking about registers, he says that general rules are difficult to set, the highest level of interpretation being achieved when they "mix,"<sup>11</sup> the secret being a correct breathing.

G.B. Lamperti, like his father, underlines the importance of binding the sounds with *legato*,<sup>12</sup> that is passing gently and continuously from one sound to the other, offering some exercises also. The multitude of *Nota Benes* which fill the chapter show, on one hand the importance he gives to the subject, but also the author's awareness about its sensitivity. All the *Nota Benes* are addressed to the teacher.

Speaking about the feminine voices, G.B. Lamperti shows that, although there are differences between a colour soprano and a dramatic soprano, the voice of the latter being a little less flexible, with a more developed chest register, the study goes identically for both.

He notices that the beginning is made, both for feminine and masculine voices, with developing the medium register, which is the only possible basis for a healthy natural register because forcing the chest register leads in time to losing the right sounding, the register changes being clearly noticed.

He also points out the existence of some feminine voices whose registers are blended from birth, but he thinks that the teacher should continue the exercises otherwise this natural gift may be lost.

He recommends his students to always execute carefully the passage scales, he names them "tones closed to changing the register,"<sup>13</sup> to pay attention to the register change when the breath should be calm and easy.

G.B. Lamperti was convinced that the male voices, besides the three: chest, middle and head, have another register which he called "voix mixte,"<sup>14</sup> named by others, wrongfully so, he thought, *falsetto*. Neglecting the last one could be the main reason why many tenors "often mistake quantity of tone for quality."<sup>15</sup> He believes that the tenor should learn to mix the medium register with the so called *mixt voice*, the main objective being the blending of the whole vocal range.

The perfect breath control is, in his opinion, more important for this vocal category than for any other.

To low voices he reminds that forcing the chest register may lead to losing one's voice. The colours should be executed with complete flexibility, in a style he called *sostenuto*, never

<sup>10</sup> „The point of aim for the tone of the Medium Register is the front of the hard palate”, Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> „The following tone must be bound closely to the much as in piano-playing, when the first finger must not be lifted till the second one strikes. Therefore, do not sing the notes detached!” Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

in haste, rather slowly, and those who don't have natural talent should not waste time studying them.

Regarding the ideal voice colour, he uses the old term *chiaroscuro*, Giovanni Lamperti indicates opening the sound with a *dark tone*, starting point for *chiaroscuro*, avoiding a too light or white quality of the sound. He never uses the words *covered tone*, because, in his opinion, it may mislead the students.

*Messa di voce* was considered by him to be the most difficult problem of vocal technique, accessible only to advanced students because one needs several muscles to hold breath than to speak on the breath. Lamperti adds: „The *messa di voce* is produced solely by breath-control.”<sup>16</sup>

*Portamento* is especially analysed by Lamperti because „When (...) the appoggio (point of support) is abandoned, the result is an awkward drawl, or (if taken slower) a long-drawn howl, a very common fault.”<sup>17</sup>

Towards the end of the volume he approaches the problem of the ideal language for singing, considering to be the Italian one. „Language and Song rarely go hand in hand. The Italian language is the chief exception to this rule, being the one best adapted for artistic song on account of its wealth of vowels and lack of aspirates.”<sup>18</sup> He goes beyond this statement and shows how to acquire the correct release of sound, using vowels and consonants from German and English, very helpful for teachers as well as for the students.

The approach of the final issues (*Some remarks on the musical style, Word about the role study, Taking care of the voice, Hygiene*) reveals a fine connoisseur not only of the technique but also of the *bel canto* style. In order to learn more profoundly the interpretation in *style*, he recommends *Traité de l'expression musicale*, by Mathis Lussy (+ 1910),<sup>19</sup> volume which he considers to be of reference. He also gives examples of „simple” arias, (to notice that today they are no longer considered to be simple) to be studied after finishing the vocal exercises.

About studying the roles, he weeps the fact that those who study singing lack the patience and energy of those from the past, because they sang a few roles, and only those right for them, while the contemporary singers, and he gives the example of the colour soprano, have to sing today Rosina, tomorrow Mignon and then Walkure. He closes with a tough but true verdict: this fact betrays lack of commitment and it is a sin towards the spirit of art.

„The description of the phases which must be overcome in order for a role to be well *prepared*, is in my opinion, very important.” „Whoever would be an opera-singer, should early gain familiarity with the stage. After finishing, or even during, his vocal course, he must learn the elements of the mimic art, and take lessons in acting. While studying a role, the dramatic connection is important for correctly grasping its meaning.”<sup>20</sup> He closes up by

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<sup>16</sup> „The *messa di voce* is produced solely by breath-control. The spinning-out of the tone (*filare la voce*) is very difficult; it must be managed with the utmost circumspection”. Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Mathis Lussy (+ 1910), musicologist and music professor in Paris, in the treaty mentioned below he tries to explain philosophically the elements of musical expression (*Traité de l'expression musicale*). In 1880, together with Ernest David, writes the work, awarded by the French Academy, *Histoire de la notation musicale depuis ses origines*, published in 1882. In 1902 he settles in Montreux. He also wrote *L'anacrouse dans la musique modern*, published in 1903.

<sup>20</sup> Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

saying that an interpreter is mainly asked to have profound feelings rather than bubbling, vulgar declamation! „A beautiful voice without emotional power is like a lovely woman without wit.”<sup>21</sup>

The conclusions are flooded with advice and statements which should be read and learned by all the pupils and students from canto section. The last sentence is optimistic, mobilising and hope giving, the canto students being recommended to push aside all the reckless, risky theories and all the artificial influence and return to a natural, simple method!<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, we shall say that the pedagogy of the vocal art from the XIXth century becomes majorly important thanks to the bel canto style and technique. Bel canto, notion characterised by „beauty of tone, mastering technique, dedication to art and style authority”<sup>23</sup> is Lamperti's purpose and key element. His pedagogical activity, highly appreciated at that time, contributed to the formation of high quality vocal interpreters and implicitly to the development of musical dramaturgy. His treaty as well as other vocal art *methods* of the XIXth century, are mainly important, for the teachers, for the students but also for the next generations of interpreters.

The manual has been translated in English by Theodore Baker, after the German volume, and published at New York in 1905. William Earl Brown, one of his students, uses his sayings in his work *Vocal Wisdom: Maxims of Giovanni Battista Lamperti*, also published at New York, after his death in 1931. This last book which is on the point of being translated in a future volume, is frequently used in the specialised literature and is considered a symbol of the Lamperti School.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> John Barry Steane, *The Grand Tradition: Seventy Years of Singing on Record*, Portland, Amadeus Press, 1993, p. 15