

The bel canto pedagogical concepts from the past centuries, basic principles for contemporary study

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Abstract: *The scientific research of the vocal art is an analytic, critical process of knowledge and has as main purpose to explain, understand, optimize and innovate the instruction and education activity, calling first on a theoretical exploration and then on a practical one of the functional and causal relationships among the pedagogical concepts and the artistic act.*

The scientific research specific to the field, which has become the major concern for some singing pedagogues, for some groups of associated specialists and for specialized institutions, intends to x-ray, know, understand and interpret on one hand the principles formulated by the singing studies in the past centuries and on the other the anatomical, acoustic and sound phenomena united in a cybernetic kind of relationship.

Key-words: *concepts; vocal art; bel canto; pedagogue; respiration; diction; vocal registers; dramatic expression;*

1. Introduction

The approach is presented as being complementary: the theoretical research, dominantly systematic and dynamic conceptualized, which is supposed to formulate theories, laws and models in search of new scientific information, to explain or optimize the vocal art in its whole and applicable research, which allows ideas and concepts to receive a practical form.

At the end there would be new sets of complex processes and arguments concerning the formative and creative methodologies of what we call orientation, optimization, innovation, prospect on the vocal theory and practice.

In order to achieve the educational objectives of the studying process, after a thorough research of some vocal art studies, I consider the *bel canto* pedagogical concepts of the past centuries to be a chance of renewal and progress towards coming out of the completely empirical state mainly based only on the teacher's personal experience, but mostly towards returning to the fundamental principles of voice education.

Instruments necessary to the methodological knowledge, the pedagogical concepts of past centuries in time, have proved their value, through increasing the efficiency of the creation act, avoiding some possible errors or cutting time or way to an adequate artistic expression. The art of singing, in its technique fundamentals, is not like precise sciences, always sensitive to being enriched with new discoveries all the time.

If we are to consider the enormous progress the science made along the last decades, we may observe that the remarkable theoretical-practical researches concerning the human voice have not contributed decisively to the development of the sound in the present.

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2. Bel canto

The XVIIth and the XVIIIth centuries were characterized by a few tendencies in voice cultivation. In fact the specific Italian style of singing was formed during this period but it was not understood until later, clarified under the name of *bel canto*, the ideal of singing, characterized through the complete control of the voice, and the evolution towards an exceptional art of ornamentation.²

The notion of *bel canto* is an ambiguous one, it may refer to an epoch, the time of the castrati, to a certain virtuoso singing style, or to certain composers and their style of composing. The notion itself appeared in the XIXth century, much latter after this style had disappeared and it denominated a certain art of singing and an artistic style.³

Along the years many specialists in the field have tried to give a complete definition to this notion. The musicologist John Barry Steane says that *bel canto* represents „the beauty of tone, the master of technique, the dedication to the art and the authority of style”⁴, and James Stark, whose explanation seems the most appropriate, says that „Bel canto is a concept which contains two separate but correlated issues. In the first place bel canto represents a refined method of using the singing voice where the source of the voice emission, the vocal apparatus and the respiratory system interact to create effects of chiaroscuro, appoggio and registers equalizing, a better flexibility of the tone and intensity and a pleasant vibrato. An attentive use of the singing voice includes different forms of vocal preparation, legato, portamento, articulation at the glottis, crescendo, de crescendo, messa di voce, mezza voce, ornaments and tweets and tempo rubato. In the second place, bel canto refers to any musical style which implies this kind of singing, expressive and exquisite. From the historic point of view, composers and singers have created the categories of recitative, melody and aria which use the advantages of these techniques, thing that led to developing different types of vocal expression. Bel canto has proven its value through the power to amaze, charm and not last, move the listener. As the musical epochs and styles have been subject to change, the bel canto elements adapted also to keep up with the new requirements, ensuring this way the bel canto continuity until our days.”⁵

In his book, *Storia del Belcanto*, the Italian musical critic Rodolfo Celletti concentrated on the esthetic of the *extravagante* Italian opera from the Florence epoch up until Händel and drew the line of the *bel canto* until Rossini (1792-1868), considering the latter as the last representative of the style. Celletti excludes from this definition the music composed in the Romantic period and hardly discusses the existence of the *bel canto outside* Italy. Other many contemporary specialists associate *bel canto* with Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini and maybe, Verdi’s early works.

According to Richard Miller there is, from the vocal point of view, no clear difference between Mozart and the so called *bel canto* literature of the XIXth century, represented by Bellini, Rossini and Donizetti.⁶ The author explains: „The problem is not of style and repertoire, but of vocal technique, because the vocal freedom is essential for all the styles and

² Cf. Anna Eugenie Schoen-Rene, *America’s Musical Inheritance, Memories And Reminiscences*, G.P. Putnam’s, New York, 1941, p. 10.

³ Cf. Richard Miller, *National Schools of Singing*, The Scarecrow Press, Oxford, 2002, p. xvi.

⁴ John Barry Steane, *The Grand Tradition: Seventy Years of Singing on Record*, Portland, Amadeus Press, 1993, p. 15.

⁵ James Stark, *Bel canto: a history of vocal pedagogy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2008, p. 189.

⁶ Cf. Richard Miller, *op.cit.*, p. xvi.

repertoires. One cannot interpret Bach and Puccini with the same degree of vibration or vocal colour, but there is no need for two different vocal techniques to succeed in both repertoires. The physiology and acoustic of the vocal instrument are unalterable givens.”⁷

After Philip A. Duey (*Bel canto in Its Golden Age*, 1951) and Henry Pleasants (*The Great Singers*, 1966), the notion of *bel canto* did not enter the common vocabulary before the end of the XIXth century, highlighted by the invectives addressed by the supporters and detractors of Wagner’s works. The Italians grouped behind the notion of *bel canto* as a reaction against the declarative style of Wagner and precisely this polemic made the notion famous.⁸

According to Stark, the musicologists, canto professors and science men seem to agree that the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries have been characterized by an exceptional use of voice, which started with the easiest forms of vocalism and amateur singing. It is obvious that the notion of *bel canto* refers to several periods and historical styles⁹ but, besides the *bel canto era* and the *bel canto style* in opera, it is important to emphasize that the interpreters can and must use the *bel canto method* when singing Verdi, or in Verdi’s influence period or Wagner and even in contemporary music.

Although in the canto studies some aspects of voice education are controversial or interpreted differently, the contemporary researchers and pedagogues emphasize the basic principles, the criteria and laws which are or should be the foundation of voice education. The unanimous opinion is that, without knowing the basic principles of the anatomical-physiological elements of the phonic apparatus, of the functional methods of voice education, there is not possible the creation of a voice with multilateral tonal qualities, with technical flexibility and complexity.

Knowing the basic pedagogical principles and the collaboration between student and teacher are extremely important in vocal education. After having researched several studies, I intend to highlight a series of principles of the correct, complex education of a singer’s voice in formation.

3. Pedagogical concepts

The respiration, one of the most important functions of the human organism, has a decisive role in the vocal art. All pedagogues, even since the XVIth century, considered that a beautiful phrase, a correct articulation, a correct emission and projection of the tone, achieving *messa di voce* and perfectly integrated ornaments in the melodic line, in other words a perfect control of the voice is possible only when respiration is also perfectly controlled. The problem of respiration was always connected to the one of sustaining the sound, the *appoggio*. Francesco Lamperti, whose school settled the importance of a correct respiration, said: „But even the colour of the voice, depends, if not mastered well, on the wrong way of breathing in and out, and is precisely the reason I insist on the importance of the study of a proper respiration, and I say it is the absolute necessary basis to succeed in singing and I need to convince that the respiration school is a special art useful to a good education of the vocal apparatus.”¹⁰

⁷ Cf. Richard Miller, *op.cit.*, p. xviii.

⁸ Cf. James Stark, *op.cit.*, p. xviii.

⁹ Cf. James Stark, *op.cit.*, p. xix.

¹⁰ Francesco Lamperti, *L’Arte del canto*, Milano, Ricordi, 1883, p. 17.

The legato and the diction, as professor dr. Duțescu also observes, are well known and precised notions. Their correct achievement, in the old canto school style, is possible only on well controlled respiration. Of an utmost importance is that the tone emission was not allowed to disadvantage the articulation, but also that the exaggerated education of singing on an exaggerated articulation disturbs the vibrato, the continuity of the legato, the aesthetic of tone atac, the phrase on controlled respiration. Francesco Lamperti defined the legato as the capacity to prolong the notes, this being an essential quality of the human voice. „The student must achieve a special study for their connection, when they have the same hight as well as when they do not. Who cannot make a legato cannot sing.”¹¹ Viktor Fuchs, in a plastic expression, calls the control of respiration, the head resonance and the legato, as being the three angels of the singer, the most important elements in the voice study.

The articulation, the diction, the legato and the phrase are tightly connected and have common principles of education. A legato is beautiful only when the notes are linked by the same tonal colors and each tone is individualized.

About the correct articulation and legato, someone once said, and it is something many pedagogues have forgotten, that acquiring a type of musical phrase in words and passage notes is not possible unless the emerging tone functions independently of the articulation process.

The old school develops an expressive and accessible way of singing, its masters concentrating on producing perfect sounds. The concept of resonance or focusing concentrated the sound in the atac place. The voice was always concentrated on the pressure point which spanned the sound, the resonance depending on the tone of the note. The result was a voice which sounded as beautifully as possible, but did not change the individuality, the main sound. The way of singing allowed the singer to color the sound he produced according to the message he transmitted.

The register notion appears for the first time at the beginning of the XIXth century, one of the many who tried to give it a possible definition being Manuel Garcia the son: „By register we refer to a series of subsequent and homogeneous sounds, starting with the lowest and ending with the highest, produced by developing the same mechanical principle and which nature is completely different from another series of sounds subsequent and homogeneous as well, produced by another mechanical principle. Thus all the sounds which belong to the same register are of the same nature...”¹² The singing teachers at the end of the XIVth century until the XVIIIth century, and we remaind here Pier Francesco Tosi and Giovanni Battista Mancini, speak about *voce di petto* and *voce di testa*, called *falsetto* or *falsettone*, with drawing attention to the interpreters to study and use them both. They also speak about equalizing them, because if the voices' union is not perfect then it loses its beauty.

Around 1800 the theory of the three registers for the women's voices crystallized: chest, middle or intermediary and head and two registers for men, the middle male register is called „mixt”¹³, this notion being taken and used in the most important studies of the XXth century. In others opinion there were three registers, both in male and female voices, which varied according to each voice.¹⁴

¹¹ Francesco Lamperti, *Guida teorico-pratica-elementare per lo studio del canto*, Milano, Ricordi, 1864, p. 9.

¹² Manuel Garcia, *Traité complet de l'art du chant en deux parties*, Paris, 1847, p. 6.

¹³ Francesco Lamperti, *Guida teorico-pratica-elementare per lo studio del canto*, Ricordi, Milano, 1864, p. 2.

¹⁴ Giovanni Battista Lamperti, *The Technics of Bel Canto*, Schirmer, New York, 1905, p. 10.

Unlike the Garcia school, the Lamperti have shown that the articulations and registers are not situated on certain tones, the passage notes of junction, being more like in an interval of several notes.¹⁵

Being aware of the gravity of misunderstanding of the issue, the pedagogues from the past tried to explain the equalizing of registers, showing that supporting voice on respiration, voice legato, must be regarded as a whole rather than as separate parts.

The agility in singing is described by the Lamperti school as executing a succession or an ensemble of sounds on vowels with more or less rapidity and can be evidenced in at least four ways: *portamento*, *legato*, *picchettata* and *martellata*,¹⁶ Garcia, along *portamento* and *legato* adds *marcato*, *staccato* and *aspirato*.¹⁷ It is of utmost importance to understand that vocal agility is achieved after a rigorous flexibility exercise and that it is a useful for the *fiorito* style as well as for the declarative one.

All the vocal works composed before the half of the XIXth century are rich in ornaments, marked with signs, supplementary notes or groups of notes which have as purpose to enrich and embellish the melodic line. Monteverdi, at the beginning of the XVIIth century, introduces the notions of stile *fiorito* and stile *spianato*. Called in Italy *abbellimenti*, they are compulsory in *bel canto* and serve to the expressive immersion.

Pier Francesco Tosi's study dedicates only to the appoggiatura and other signs preceding the *atac* of a note forty pages, to the *tweet* twenty-eight, and to the passages twenty-six pages. This explains the necessity to study the characteristic forms of the *fiorito canto*, without which interpreting the musical works of the epoch would have been impossible.

A thorough documentation on the ornaments used by the old school as well as indications regarding the individual way of using them by the singers at the beginning of the XIXth century, have been made by Manuel Garcia in his 1847 study.

The interpretation was considered by the pedagogues in a direct connection with technique and style, being dependent also on the accumulation of encyclopedic knowledge by the lyrical artist. The singers were capable of communicating the content of the repertoire in a manner, for us the today people, quite direct, without too much philosophy. Many times they were the first interpreters of the newly composed music, the composer cooperating with them directly, this way, guided and helped by their singing technique, the author would transpose his ideals into reality.

Manuel Garcia, being questioned if a play allows several interpretations, answered: „Because sounds do not express exact ideas, but only aroused sensations, a given melody may express different meanings and it can be executed in different ways. Nevertheless, certain musical forms, such as the progressions, the appoggios, the dissonances, the prolonged notes and the successions of the same value have accents which must be respected,” and: „A powerful means to stimulate the mind to a vivid concept of the subject is to imagine that subject standing in front of you and allowing that phantom to sing and dance, carefully criticizing both efforts; then when you are completely satisfied with the results, you must imitate them perfectly. By the precise reproducing of the impressions suggested by this creature of fantasy, the artist will obtain stunning effects. (...) Another way is to remember a similar situation from a work of art, for example if we need to study Desdemona's scene from

¹⁵ Francesco Lamperti, *Guida teorico-pratica-elementare per lo studio del canto*, Ricordi, Milano, 1864, p. 2.

¹⁶ *ibidem*, p. 7-8.

¹⁷ Manuel Garcia, *Hint on Singing*, New York, Ascherberg, 1894, p. 20.

the second act of Rossini's *Othello*, *L'error d'un infelice*, we can think about one of Magdalena's paintings at Christ's feet.¹⁸ He adds that the means to render the general aspect of a composition being determined, each subordinate idea must be brought out.

Francesco Lamperti, speaking about the necessary qualities to devote to singing, asserts: „Voice isn't everything! The singer must interpret the poet's and composer's ideas and in order to do that he must be at the same time endowed by nature with feelings and with a great soul. Without these qualities the singer or interpreter is incapable of transmitting. Under the guidance of a good master, the student will get a certain energy, an appearance of the dramatic, but this will never produce anything else but an artificial expression of imitation and will deprive the public of the force and effectiveness of the natural. One must not yet mistake the feeling for uncontrolled agitation, a common fault among the singers, they stand opposite to each other like gold versus glitter, gold has a value through itself, while glitter is just imitation, fake.”¹⁹

The dramatic expression is the representation of emotions which are not brought up by present events or conditions, but they are the result of mental exposure of emotions, conditions and events. The pedagogues of past centuries thought that an interpretation cannot be authentic without a real expression, being inseparable in the vocal art. For a real transposing, it was not enough for the musical score to be correctly executed, in tempo, phrase, stylistic notions, even in a remarkable interpretation there must have been expression. The expressiveness was considered like a look on a parallel reality or a transcendental sphere of music.

Tosi, to draw the expression, shows that one cannot sing without heart, without feeling, and the truth of his words stood the test of time: „What a great master is the heart! It tells that itself, beloved singer, and it tells it with gratitude, for you wouldn't have become the most distinguished in your science if you hadn't been its disciples.”²⁰

Manuel Garcia says that art includes all means of expression, but it uses only the adequate ones and that each individual has a distinctive way of expressing which is in itself real and impressive.²¹

The composer and publicist Isaac Nathan (c.1791-1864) says that the great secret of a genius is the power of expression, the expressiveness. Because it is rarely acquired, existing only in the presence of a natural talent, it depends on the proper feeling and perception and on their activation.²²

4. Conclusions

Educating the voice represents a complex process, characterized by progressive accumulations in fundamenting the theoretical and practical field, process which is anchored in the natural gift and in the organized instruction and which unfolds towards shaping certain concepts and a system of voice education in order to favor a harmonious vocal and artistic development.

¹⁸ Manuel Garcia, op.cit., p. 59.

¹⁹ Francesco Lamperti, *L'Arte del canto*, Milano, Ricordi, 1883, p. 18-19.

²⁰ Johann Friedrich Agricola, *Anleitung zur Singkunst*, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 2002, p. 135.

²¹ Manuel Garcia, op.cit., p. 70.

²² Isaac Nathan, *Musurgia Vocalis*, Londra, Fentum, 1836, p. 199.

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