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APPLYING BEL CANTO SINGING TECHNIQUE TO SOPRANO ARIAS FOR MODERN TIMES

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Abstract

This research article aims to present core principles of bel canto singing techniques in a concise and accessible form suitable for contemporary pedagogical and performance contexts. The study draws upon two nineteenth-century vocal exercise manuals authored by Manuel García and Mathilde Marchesi—both historically significant and widely used in their time, yet less familiar to present-day learners. Essential concepts from these manuals have been examined and synthesized to provide practical guidance for current practitioners of classical voice. Six soprano arias by Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti were selected as representative repertoire for analysis. These works exemplify the hallmark challenges of bel canto performance, including advanced vocal agility, refined control, nuanced ornamentation, and interpretive depth. Through structural and stylistic analysis, the research elucidates technical approaches and ornamentation strategies that support authentic

bel canto interpretation. The study culminates in a live performance designed to demonstrate the application of these findings. Beyond functioning as a practical extension of the research, the performance seeks to revitalize interest in bel canto arias and broaden public appreciation for this vocal tradition. In doing so, the research highlights the enduring pedagogical and artistic value of bel canto within today's classical singing landscape.

Keywords: Bel Canto technique, classical voice performance, soprano opera arias, singing treatise

บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิจัยฉบับนี้วิจัยทุ่มประสูตเพื่อถ่ายทอดองค์ความรู้เกี่ยวกับเทคนิคการขับร้องแบบเบลคานโตในลักษณะที่กระชับ ชัดเจน และสอดคล้องกับบริบทการเรียนการสอนในปัจจุบัน โดยอาศัยการวิเคราะห์ที่ทำรำแบบฝึกหัดจากคริสต์ศตวรรษที่ 19 จำนวนสองเล่ม ประพันธ์โดย มนูเอล การ์เซีย และมาทธิลด์ มาร์เคชี ซึ่งเคยได้รับการยอมรับอย่างกว้างขวางในแวดวงวอยซ์เปดาโกจีในยุคหนึ้น แม้ว่าในปัจจุบันทำรำดังกล่าวจะเป็นที่รู้จักน้อยลง ผู้วิจัยได้ดำเนินการศึกษาคัดเลือกสาระสำคัญ เพื่อให้ผู้สนใจสามารถนำไปประยุกต์ใช้ในการฝึกปฏิบัติได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ การศึกษาครั้นนี้คัดเลือกบทเพลงตัวอย่างจำนวน 6 บทเพลง ซึ่งเป็นอาเรียโซปราโนจากอุปรากรสายเบลคานโตที่ประพันธ์โดยวินเชนโซ เบลลินี และกาเอทานี دونนิเซตติ บทเพลงดังกล่าวได้รับการยอมรับว่าเป็นตัวแทนของคุณลักษณะเชิงเทคนิคระดับสูง ทั้งในด้านการควบคุมเสียง การใช้น้ําตประดับอันหลากหลาย และการตีความเชิงศิลปะ ผู้วิจัยจึงวิเคราะห์โครงสร้าง เทคนิคการร้อง และแนวทางการประดับเสียง ที่เหมาะสม เพื่อให้เกิดความเข้าใจอย่างเป็นระบบต่อรูปแบบการขับร้องในแนวเบลคานโต ผลการวิจัยจะถูกนำเสนอด้านการแสดงประกอบ ซึ่งมีเป้าหมายไม่เพียงเพื่อสาธิตผลลัพธ์ของการวิเคราะห์เชิงเทคนิคและการสร้างโน้ตประดับ หากยังมุ่งหมายพื้นฟูและส่งเสริมคุณค่าของอาเรียเบลคานโตให้เป็นที่รับรู้และเข้าถึงได้ในวงกว้างยิ่งขึ้น โดยสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงศักยภาพของแนวขับร้องนี้ต่อการศึกษาด้านการร้องเพลงคลาสสิกในสังคมร่วมสมัย

คำสำคัญ: เทคนิคการร้องเบลคานโต, การแสดงขับร้อง, เพลงร้องอุปรากรสำหรับโซปราโน, ทำรำขับร้อง

Background, context and significance

The term “bel canto” was widely used in the context of classical music. Thought to have originated in the 17th century, it remains the most performed style in the opera community today, thereby proving its continued relevance, with generations of singers striving to perfect the bel canto style. Although widely used terminologically, it remains esoteric and is on the decline due to a lack of modern updates and interest.

The Harvard Dictionary of Music by Willi Apel describes bel canto as “the Italian vocal technique of the 18th century, with its emphasis on beauty of sound and brilliance of performance rather than dramatic expression or romantic emotion.” In “National Schools of Singing” by Richard Miller, Bel Canto was described as a Musical term applied in the latter half of the nineteenth century to a style of vocal writing prominent in the writings of these three composers: Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti. Bel Canto simply means “beautiful singing” in Italian. Its two main pillars are “fioritura” (rapid execution of melismatic passages, or “runs” and feats of agility) and “sostenuto” (sustained, long, flowing legato) are the chief requirements of vocal skill. They characterize the bel canto style.

Bel canto singing is a style of singing that emerged in Italy during the Baroque period and reached its peak in the 19th century. It is characterized by a virtuosic, expressive vocal technique that emphasizes the beauty, clarity, and purity of the voice. Bel canto singing requires a high level of technical skill, including an extensive range, precise intonation, and a mastery of coloratura passages, or rapid runs and ornamentation. The style is also characterized by a focus on the emotional and dramatic content of the music, with singers striving to convey the meaning and feeling of the lyrics through their interpretation. Today, bel canto remains a highly esteemed and sought-after style of singing, with many operatic and concert performers striving to master its techniques and repertoire.

There is a detailed analysis by music pedagogue Robert Toft of what constitutes as bel canto singing. As stated in his book “Bel canto: A performer’s guide” the main features of the bel canto style were as follows:

- Use of accent and emphasis
- Matching vocal register and tone to the emotional content of the words

- An importance of creating phrases
- A delivery with several types of legato and staccato
- Use of portamento
- “Messa di voce” as the primary form of expression (Domenico Corri refers to it as “soul of music”)
 - Frequent alteration of tempo for example: rubato, accelerando, ritardando
 - The introduction of a wide variety of graces and divisions into both arias and recitatives
 - Gesture as a powerful tool for enhancing the effect of the vocal delivery
 - Vibrato primarily reserved for heightening the expression of certain words and for gracing longer notes.

The author investigates the history and characteristics of bel canto singing technique through studying bel canto vocal treatises: Ecole de Garcia: traité complet de l’art du chant or Garcia’s School: complete treatise on the Art of Singing by Manuel Garcia Jr. (published in 1856) and Méthode de chant théorique et pratique or Bel canto: Theoretical and practical vocal method by Mathilde Marchesi (published in 1887). Both were well-known upon publication in the 19th century. The author will create a concise, approachable reading of said treatises, which will be used to publicly present findings through a contemporary showcase relevant to the modern context, achieved through applications of Bel Canto soprano operatic methods.

Objectives

- 1) Create a concise, simply understandable, and updated reading of original bel canto method books to encourage uninitiated modern singers to practice this method.
- 2) Perform a creative showcase of the selected bel canto repertoires to promote bel canto method in the contemporary context.

Process/methods proposed

This project will employ a multifaceted research methodology to achieve its goals:

- 1) Review of primary sources: A core component will involve the in-depth study of selected 19th-century vocal method books, particularly those by Manuel Garcia Jr. and Mathilde Marchesi, focusing on their foundational principles and vocal exercise sections.
- 2) Secondary source analysis: Scholarly works and critical analyses of the bel canto singing method will be examined to gain a comprehensive understanding of its historical context, theoretical underpinnings, and contemporary interpretations.
- 3) Repertoire exploration: A selection of bel canto operatic arias for soprano will be chosen for in-depth analysis, focusing on technical demands, stylistic nuances, and historical performance practices.
- 4) Expert consultation: Collaboration with established vocal pedagogues and/or performers well-versed in the bel canto tradition will be crucial for insights on applying the studied methods to the chosen repertoire.
- 5) Didactic exercise development: Informed by the research findings, a practical, approachable vocal exercise regimen will be created, drawing on the principles of the studied bel canto methods and tailored for application to the chosen arias.
- 6) Meticulous documentation: Throughout the research process, comprehensive notes and citations will be maintained to ensure proper referencing and academic integrity.

How the outcome benefits society

- 1) Enhanced accessibility of Bel Canto: the research demystifies and demythologizes the bel canto method for singers and listeners, thereby providing them with direction for effectively practice and perfection of their bel canto repertoire, ultimately contributing to a larger pool of skilled, studied bel canto singers.
- 2) Revitalizing Bel Canto appreciation: by promoting the study and performance of bel canto repertoire, the research can renew public interest in classical music - highlighting the beauty and technical brilliance of bel canto singing which encourages active engagement with opera.

Results

From studying, analyzing, and practicing, the author has gathered the background information, summarized the main content and the vocal training methods of following two books, “Ecole de García: traité complet de l’art du chant” or Garcia’s School: complete treatise on the Art of Singing by Manuel Garcia Jr. (published 1856) and “Méthode de chant théorique et pratique” or Bel canto: Theoretical and practical vocal method by Mathilde Marchesi (published 1887). Finally, the author applied this knowledge to six arias in the Category of bel canto opera arias. The following songs are from composer Gaetano Donizetti: “Prendi, per me sei libero” from *L’elisir d’amore* (1832) and “Il dolce suono...spargi d’amaro pianto” (Mad scene) from *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and from composer Vincenzo Bellini: “Eccomi...O quante volte” from *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830), “Ah non credea...Ah non giunge” from *La sonnambula* (1831), “Casta diva” from *Norma* (1831), and “O rendetemi la speme...Vien, diletto” from *I puritani* (1835). The author hope that readers will study and utilize the findings for their benefit. The results can be summarized as follows.

Bel Canto Vocal method books

My exploration of bel canto pedagogy began with two key texts. The first was Manuel Garcia Jr.’s “Treatise on The Art of Singing.” Published in its final edition in 1924, this book is historically significant as one of the earliest documented singing methodologies. Garcia Jr.’s own father, Manuel Garcia Sr., was a renowned 19th-century singer, lending further weight to the book’s content. The second text, Mathilde Marchesi’s “Theoretical and Practical Vocal Method,” offered a complementary perspective. Praised for its clear and concise approach, this book remains a valuable resource in vocal pedagogy today. Its continued use in schools demonstrates its enduring relevance for singers of all levels. “Garcia’s Treatise on The Art of Singing” by Manuel Garcia Jr.

A. Treatise on The Art of Singing – by Manuel Garcia Jr. (1924)

Manuel Garcia Junior was a Spanish singer. He was also a music educator and a vocal pedagogue. His interest in singing and the production of the voice led him to invent the first laryngoscope. He was very experienced in vocal production. He was born into a family full of Musical prodigies and successful singers, his father,

Manuel del Pópulo Vicente Rodriguez García or Manuel Garcia Senior, was a very well-known operatic singer during the year of 1812 to 1827. Manuel Garcia Sr. was known for an unusual talent for singing. Manuel Garcia Jr. went through his father's practices and, adding his own discoveries and knowledge, produced this book. It explains the basics on how the voice is produced, what is the most efficient way to sing, and singing exercises to strengthen and improve the singing techniques.

There are 6 crucial aspects that determines how skillful the voice is to be utilized: The correct vocal anatomy, the correct understanding your vocal register and vocal quality, the correct formation of the voice, the qualification of the singer, the cultivated (or trained) voice, and lastly, the agility of the voice.

The author gives many exercises for singers to practice and follow daily. Examples of these exercises are illustrated in Figures 1–3.



Figure 1. Exercise no. 7, helps practice uniting the chest and the medium register.
Garcia's Singing School vocal method book. Page 11.



Figure 2. Exercise no. 10 focuses on increasing vocal agility. Page 11.



Figure 3. Exercises no. 28 and 29 focuses on ascending and descending melismatic passages. Page 14.

Manuel Garcia Jr. noted that the average practice time for beginners should not exceed five or six minutes. After that, the pupil should pause and take breaks, then continue the next session. However, after practicing for a week, the length can be extended but should still not exceed thirty minutes. Exercise should be sung slowly at first. The singer is encouraged to take breaths between every bar. After some improvements, the tempo can be increased and the breathing frequency decreased. The final goal is to be able to sing the whole passage in one breath with ease and comfort.

B. Theoretical and practical vocal method - by Mathilde Marchesi (1887)

Mathilde Marchesi (24 March 1821 – 17 November 1913) was a German mezzo-soprano, a singing teacher, and a practitioner for the bel canto method. She was a student of Manuel Garcia Jr. Later in life, she became a very successful teacher and was credited for teaching and nurturing many successful opera singers. Marchesi was committed to teaching in the bel canto style. She believes in the natural way of singing and gives importance to vocal registrations.

Bel Canto: A Theoretical and Practical Vocal Method (Originally in French: Méthode de chant théorique et pratique, Op. 31) by Marchesi was published in 1887. Her book is still widely used today and it is especially popular amongst soprano voices.

The following exercises serve as examples. Portamento is a vocal technique that involves connecting one note to another through a smooth sliding motion of the voice, as shown in Figures 4–6.

Figure 4. Exercise no. 4 focuses on practicing the “portamento”.
Marchesi “Vocal method book Op. 31” Page 14.



Figure 5. Exercise no. 76, focuses on three-note (triplet) vocalization. Page 34.

Figure 6. Exercises no. 126-128 focuses on chromatic scales. Page 40.

For singers who have just started practicing, these exercises should be sung for only 5 to 10 minutes at a time. It is encouraged that the singer take long breaks between exercises, and the student should practice only 3 to 4 times a day. The frequency and duration of practice can gradually increase, by 5 minutes to half an hour. It should never exceed half an hour. For full effectiveness, the singer should practice with a full voice, but without forcing or shouting. The duration and frequency could be extended once the pupil is more trained.

C. Applying the findings to selected repertoires

After analyzing the content of the bel canto method books, the content was then applied to these following bel canto arias:

- a. Gaetano Donizetti: Prendi, per me sei libero from *L'elisir d'amore* (1832)
- b. Gaetano Donizetti: Il dolce suono...spargi d'amaro pianto (Mad scene) from *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835)
- c. Vincenzo Bellini: Eccomi...O quante volte from *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830)

In bel canto arias, vocal technique complexity is crucial. Each section of a song may require a specific vocal technique to be mastered. Singers should practice these techniques diligently to deliver a nuanced performance. Some prominent

bel canto vocal techniques include portamento, runs of ascending or descending scales (both diatonic and chromatic), messa di voce, sotto voce, trills, and turns.

Examples

The word “prendi” allows for the use of mezza di voce on the fermata in measure 7. The descending note after the fermata is performed with a tasteful



Figure 7. “Prendi per me sei libero” from L’elisir d’amore by Gaetano Donizetti, measure 6-10.

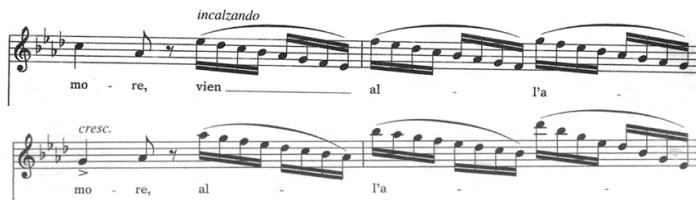


Figure 8. Descending runs from the aria “Vien diletto” from La sonnambula by Vincenzo Bellini, measure 65-68.



Figure 9. Descending chromatic run before ascending back up from the aria “Vien diletto”. Measure 71

portamento, followed by a turn in measure 10, as shown in Figures 7–9.

Sotto voce – literal Italian translation meaning “under voice”. To sing delicately and softly (Figure 10).



Figure 10. An opportunity for sotto voce on the word “speme” from “Vien diletto”. Measure 3

All the types of vocalization examples mentioned above are found in both Garcia's and Marchesi's method books. By aligning the exercises with the relevant sections of the aria we seek to improve upon, we can achieve effective point-to-point improvements. After diligently practicing and applying the techniques outlined in Garcia's and Marchesi's method books, singers should feel more adept at executing the various challenging aspects of these bel canto arias.

Video result from applying bel canto techniques in aria.

The researcher explored and applied bel canto singing techniques derived from the methodologies of Manuel Garcia Jr. and Mathilde Marchesi. This video presentation demonstrates my vocal development through a comparative analysis. The video features two recordings. The first, from February 2023, captures my initial performance of the cabaletta section from "O rendetemi la speme... Vien, diletto" in Vincenzo Bellini's *I Puritani*. The second clip, recorded for my final recital showcase in May 2024, serves as a practical demonstration of the progress achieved through the consistent application of bel canto principles over time.

This video focused on the cabaletta section of "O rendetemi la speme... Vien, diletto" from Vincenzo Bellini's *I Puritani* due to its technical complexity. The agility and vocal demands of this section presented a significant initial challenge. However, through consistent practice informed by bel canto principles and guidance from a qualified instructor, I demonstrated measurable progress in mastering this demanding repertoire.

The link to the video : https://youtu.be/DPkhhBsWJ0s?si=JZ15but6r_2NAOHv

Qr code to the video:



A video comparison showing the singer's progress on singing "Vien diletto"

D. Embellishments

Historically, bel canto singers embraced ornamentation as a display of virtuosity. Trills, mordents, turns, runs, and cadenzas were expected additions. However, the "come scritto" ("as written") style, employing minimal embellishment, has emerged as a contemporary performance practice. In the bel canto tradition, singers often added embellishments beyond what is written in the score. This study examines alternative approaches to this practice, with an example of an alternative version of the aria "Ah non giunge" by Vincenzo Bellini shown in Figures 1 1to 16.

Figure 11: (above) Alternative version from "Ah non giunge" by Vincenzo Bellini. (below) original written version.

Figure 12: (above) Alternative version (below) original written version from "Ah non giunge" by Vincenzo Bellini. From measure 91.

Figure 13: (above) Alternative version (below) original written version from "Ah non giunge" by Vincenzo Bellini, from measure 96-99.

Figure 14: (above) Alternative version (below) original written version from "Ah non giunge" by Vincenzo Bellini, measure 104-105.



Figure 15: Original cadenza of “Ah non giunge” from measure 107-108.



Figure 16: Optional ending cadenza.

E. Outcome Showcase

On May 12th, 2024, at 1:00 PM, the researcher presented a culminating performance in room C312 at the Princess Galayani Vadhana Institute of Music. The performance featured the researcher as the vocalist, accompanied by a pianist. The performance included a brief introduction outlining the research and a slideshow providing concise details about each aria.

The performance garnered positive audience feedback, particularly regarding the clarity and precision of the executed vocal techniques. This newfound confidence empowered the researcher to explore Musicality and creativity within the repertoire with greater ease, resulting in a significantly more enjoyable experience for both performer and audience.

Furthermore, the program selection proved successful. Audience members expressed familiarity with some pieces, while others sparked their interest, prompting them to explore and learn more about these operas and arias.

Conclusion

From all the researched knowledge: learning to sing the bel canto songs, researching and creating new embellishments for said songs, studying the bel canto method books, practicing and applying the techniques from the books to the songs, and finally, presenting to the public in a form of showcase. The researcher has gathered the following:

5.1 Appreciating the bel canto genre:

The foundational stage of this research involved a deep exploration of the bel canto genre. This entailed understanding its unique characteristics, the technical

demands placed on singers, and the enduring appeal of bel canto operas and music. Recognizing the delicate nature and technical virtuosity of bel canto singing fostered a profound appreciation for this genre. This newfound appreciation, in turn, broadened my perspective on classical singing as a whole. Furthermore, it sparked a deeper engagement with music in general, fostering an openness to inspiration from a wider range of Musical styles.

5.2 Encouraging the use of bel canto exercises in school:

Through a dedicated study of Garcia's and Marchesi's vocal treatises, the researcher identified these resources as potentially valuable tools for cultivating singing technique. These treatises offer a structured framework for singers to build consistent practice routines, promoting discipline and fostering a long-term commitment to vocal development. This structured approach may be particularly helpful for singers seeking to establish or refine their practice habits. Additionally, the treatises present a wealth of creative and diverse vocal exercises. The researcher's personal experience suggests that consistent practice of these exercises leads to increased confidence and a noticeable improvement in the ability to execute challenging vocal elements within a piece. These findings support the potential benefits of incorporating vocal method books more widely in both academic and private vocal instruction.

5.3 The variety of embellishments:

The research explored a diverse range of embellishments, encompassing both established and lesser-known examples. This exploration informed the creation of a performance that incorporated a curated selection of embellishments from various sources. Additionally, the researcher collaborated with music experts to develop new embellishments for specific moments within the chosen arias. This approach aimed to revitalize familiar repertoire by introducing fresh sonic elements and maintaining audience engagement.

This practice of incorporating novel embellishments into established works aligns with a call for greater artistic agency within the operatic tradition. It encourages singers to embrace a bolder approach, take calculated artistic risks, and prioritize creative expression. By engaging in a deeper exploration of the music, singers can develop a nuanced understanding that empowers them to exert greater creative

control over their interpretations. Furthermore, this practice offers a compelling solution to combat performance fatigue, allowing singers to revisit familiar repertoire with renewed artistic interest.

5.4 Promoting and contributing to the opera community:

The culminating public performance served as a catalyst for the researcher's deepening engagement with the bel canto genre and its rich traditions. This experience sparked a passion for further exploration of bel canto singing, paving the way for future research endeavors.

The showcase aimed not only to present the arias themselves but also to provide introductory information, fostering a broader appreciation for bel canto repertoire. This approach served as artistic advocacy, piquing audience interest in the genre. Indeed, several audience members expressed a desire to learn more about bel canto operas, underscoring the showcase's success in promoting public engagement with classical music. This positive outcome suggests the potential for similar initiatives to inspire students and music enthusiasts to become more actively involved in Thailand's classical music scene.

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