

Music

Bel Canto: Audiences Love It, but What Is It?

By [Anthony Tommasini](#)

IN 1858 Gioachino Rossini, wealthy, well fed and, at 66, retired from the opera business for nearly 30 years, bemoaned the decline in the heritage of Italian singing during a conversation with friends in Paris. “Alas for us,” he is reported to have said, “we have lost our bel canto.”

He was referring to the art of singing as it flourished in Italy from the mid-1700s through the first decades of the 19th century. He might also have been referring to the approach to writing operas by the Italian composers who were steeped in the bel canto singing tradition. It is not really clear.

Quite a bit about the concept of bel canto has long been open to interpretation, including the meaning of this loose term itself, which literally translates as beautiful singing. (Or beautiful song. See what I mean?) But one indisputable point is that the singing tradition for which Rossini was waxing nostalgic was not known as bel canto during the decades when it was supposedly thriving.

The term did not come into fashion until midway through the 19th century. To speak of the bel canto era in opera is like referring to the Lost Generation of young Americans, mostly creative types, who flocked to Paris during the 1920s. Only after the fact, through the propaganda of Ernest Hemingway, did those expatriates discover that they had been lost.

Opera buffs today use the term bel canto all the time. Yet we each seem to bring a different set of assumptions to the concept.

So here is one opera lover’s attempt to explain bel canto as I understand it, a primer of sorts, along with recommendations of a few recordings for those who don’t want to wait for the presentations of bel canto operas next year at the Metropolitan Opera to bone up. Mary Zimmerman’s production of Donizetti’s “Lucia di Lammermoor” will be revived in late January with Anna Netrebko in the title role, and Ms. Zimmermann’s new production of a Bellini classic, “La Sonnambula,” opens in early March, starring the soprano Natalie Dessay and the tenor Juan Diego Flórez, two leading exponents of bel canto repertory.

In its narrowest sense bel canto opera refers to the early decades of 19th-century Italian opera, when Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti dominated the field. But the overall concept of bel canto started much earlier, with a consensus among opera enthusiasts that there was nothing more ravishing than a beautiful voice singing a beautiful melodic line beautifully, especially a melodic line driven by a sensitive musical setting of a poetic and singable text.

The technique of singing that produced the desired results valued smooth production, or legato, throughout the entire vocal range. Ideally, you did not want to hear singers shifting gears as their voices moved from low to middle to high registers. Also prized was the ability to execute effortlessly all manner of embellishments - rapid-fire runs, trills and such - the better to decorate vocal lines. So the use of a lighter yet penetrating sound in the upper register was crucial to the style.

But as the Romantic movement took hold in the 19th century, the public taste for operatic drama evolved. Composers started writing works that demanded more intense and powerful singing. Voices grew weightier. A telling example of the shift in fashion was the acclaimed tenor Gilbert Duprez, born in Paris in 1806.

In his early days Duprez was a “tenore di grazia,” a light lyric tenor with an agile and flexible voice, which he showed in roles like Almaviva in Rossini’s “Barbiere di Siviglia.” But increasingly he displayed dramatic intensity, notably in Rossini’s “Guillaume Tell” and later in operas by Donizetti and Berlioz. He is believed to have been the first tenor to sing a high C not with the lighter, ringing so-called head voice but with a full, powerful chest voice. It drove crowds wild, but it drove Rossini crazy. He likened the sound to “the squawk of a capon with its throat cut.”

A tenor’s high C’s can still drive audiences wild. Last season, though Mr. Flórez was completely charming and sang beautifully as Tonio in the Met’s production of Donizetti’s “Fille du Régiment,” he garnered excessive attention for his dispatching of the tenor’s showpiece aria with its nine high C’s. When Luciano Pavarotti sang this bel canto tour de force, he stunned his audiences by tossing off those notes with astounding power. His voice was an uncanny hybrid, combining the colorings and agility of a lyric tenor with an enormous sound. When a light-voiced lyric tenor like Mr. Flórez sings the aria, it is not all that hard. Still, Mr. Flórez is a gift to bel canto opera fans.

The other historical dimension of the bel canto era has to do with the nature of the operas written for voices steeped in the practice. Since beautiful singing carried the day in the bel canto tradition, it was natural to compose music that would showcase such vocalism. For me the most fascinating element of the practice has to do with the approach to writing melody.

The melodic line is everything in a bel canto opera, not just in the arias but in the elaborate scenes that contain them. Those scenes offer long stretches of lyrically enhanced recitative and extended spans of arioso, a halfway station between full-out melody and conversational recitative.

Catchy tunes in all styles of music tend to have something in common: they are laid out in symmetrical phrases with simple melodic riffs that are repeated. Think of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” Or the operatic equivalent of a catchy tune, Figaro’s “Non più andrai” from Mozart’s “Nozze di Figaro.” Such melodies are analogous to poetry written in symmetrical verses with lines of equal length and repeated phrases.

But the bel canto melodies that most captivate me are those that spin out in long, elegant, endless lines that almost disguise the phrase structure of the melody. For a modern equivalent, think of the Beatles' song "Yesterday," with its elusive and haunting melody. A prime example from bel canto would be Norma's aria "Casta diva" from the Bellini masterpiece that bears her name.

The elaborately ornamented phrases of "Casta diva" sensitively elongate every syllable of the Italian text. But the result is a melody that seems to hover wondrously above the undulant and respectful accompaniment pattern.

It's easy to poke fun at those simple, some would say simplistic, accompaniment patterns in a bel canto aria, or the oom-pah-pah's in an early Verdi aria, which Wagner mocked, likening Verdi's orchestra to a big guitar. Verdi understood, however, that when a melody was pure, strong and beguiling, it was enough for an accompaniment to provide harmonic support and rhythmic lift. Defending Verdi's standard approach to aria writing, Stravinsky, no less, in his "Poetics of Music," wrote that "there is more substance and true invention in the aria 'La donna è mobile,' for example, in which the elite saw nothing but deplorable facility, than in the rhetoric and vociferations of the 'Ring.' "

As every opera historian will say, the problem in talking about early-19th-century bel canto opera is that no work from that era relied solely on creating longspun phrases of ethereal melody. Bellini was probably the purest bel canto master, but an opera like "Norma" is rich with declamatory vocal writing, fits of Romantic passion, fearsome outbursts for the volatile tragic heroine in which the soprano must summon chilling power and dispatch quick-paced lines full of daring leaps.

The practice of bel canto in its purest form had enormous influence on subsequent composers. Donizetti cleared the path that Verdi followed. Verdi became a bold innovator later in his career, but early on he struggled to find a balance between transcending the parameters of opera as it was practiced and honoring the bel canto heritage to which he was beholden.

It's a wonder that Chopin, born in 1810, never tried to write an opera, because he was completely smitten with bel canto works, especially Bellini's. Chopin's melodies, like the opening theme for the soloist in the Piano Concerto No. 1, composed in 1830, sing with the long-lined, profoundly melancholic elegance of a bel canto melody. Chopin and Bellini sometimes seem like distant composer cousins drawing from the same creative well.

Listen to the scene at the beginning of Act II of "Norma," which appeared the year after Chopin's concerto. When the title character, a druid priestess who has secretly violated her vows and given birth to two children by an occupying Roman, contemplates killing them, she pours out her anguish in a profoundly sad melody, "Teneri figli" ("Tender children"). There are remarkable similarities.

Even Wagner was influenced by the principles of bel canto opera, though he did not like to admit it. His early works, especially "Das Liebesverbot," have set-piece arias with florid melodies and chordal accompanimental patterns, the whole works.

Naturally, Wagner, who debunked just about everything, described bel canto singing as blandly lyrical and obsessed with vocal niceties. He called for a German school of singing that would bring spiritually vibrant and profoundly passionate qualities into vocal artistry.

For sure, Wagner demanded new levels of vocal power and stamina from singers. Yet at other times he supported the essential approach to singing that the bel canto tradition espoused. Brünnhilde has extended passages of elegiac melodic lines. Even in her trademark “Hojotojo!” battle cry, she must execute a long trill. The German soprano Lilli Lehmann, who participated in the first complete “Ring” production at Bayreuth in 1876, would later become renowned both as Brünnhilde and as Norma and considered the roles complementary. More recently Jane Eaglen also sang both prominently, though how well she handled Bellini’s florid vocal lines was a hot topic among operagoers.

As for the bel canto approach to melodic construction, Bellini and his generation were hardly the first to compose long, winding vocal lines. What could be more melismatic and endlessly melodic than medieval chant? And in the arias of his Passions and cantatas, Bach could spin a florid melodic line as well as any bel canto master.

Think of the artful pop songs of Rufus Wainwright, who knows opera like an expert and is nearly finished writing one. Or of Burt Bacharach’s dreamy melodies, like the quirky song “Alfie,” which does its thing, complete with twists and turns, oblivious to phrase structure.

And though Stephen Sondheim has a love-hate attitude toward opera, many of his melodic lines show its influence. In “No Place Like London” from “Sweeney Todd,” the title character, an avenging barber, gives hints of his woeful story to the sailor Anthony (“There was a barber and his wife”) through a slow accretion of melodic phrases that grow increasingly prolonged and anguished. Verdi could not have done it better.

I would like to think that the practice of writing free-roaming melodic lines, which continues, is in part a result of early-19th-century Italian opera, which empowered composers to push the practice to the hilt. Whatever you want to call it.

But one thing about opera hasn’t changed since the days of Rossini’s maturity. Buffs are always complaining that singing was better in the old days.