

Classical 'bel canto' singing has become an endangered species

by Kathy Wolfe

"How are we going to reintroduce the joy of singing which was uniquely found in the old Italian school of *bel canto*? Or must *bel canto* be relegated to the museums of music history?" This and other questions on the future of singing and music were debated by voice teachers, singers, and musicologists at "Studies in Bel Canto," a week-long 1993 Summer Vocal Institute held by the Graduate School of Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City on June 21-25.

Convened and moderated by Dr. Jan Eric Douglas, president of the New York Singing Teachers Association and coordinator of vocal studies at Teachers College, the symposium also featured music educator Craig Timberlake, the recently retired chairman of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing; voice teacher and author Cornelius Reid, who has just published his fifth book on vocal technique, *Essays on the Nature of Singing*; and opera critic Henry Pleasants, author of *The Great Singers*.

The speakers brought out the shocking truth that great singing, and therefore great Classical music, is almost extinct, and is in far more danger than the spotted owl or other creatures bemoaned by the media.

Mr. Pleasants went so far as to insist that "*bel canto* is dead — we may as well give up on it. It belongs in a museum, as a historical relic. Nothing has been written since [Puccini's last opera] *Turandot* by a composer who cares about singing."

Dr. Douglas, who raised the questions above, and other participants insisted that teachers and singers must do everything possible to reintroduce true *bel canto*. But all agreed that the crisis is severe.

Bel canto, Italian for "beautiful song," was developed in the 15th century Golden Renaissance to train singers from childhood whose voices would be capable of a wide, three-octave range with grace, speed, and agility in all the ranges — voices which last into the singer's old age. A familiar example of *bel canto* is the seemingly impossible phenomenon of the opera singer's voice filling a huge hall without amplification. The Classical teaching method is to place a candle before a student's mouth; a *bel canto* tone, however penetrating, will not move the flame, for the action is not percussive, and thus virtually no air escapes the mouth.

Registration, pitch, and education

Panelists blamed the collapse of *bel canto* on ever-lower standards for vocal training, the crass commercialization of singing in ever-larger halls, and especially upon the arbitrary rise of modern pitch. Tenor Carlo Bergonzi's warning, at the Schiller Institute's April 8, 1993 New York master class on the "Verdi A," that rising pitch worldwide threatens the very existence of opera, was noted and echoed by several panelists.

Dr. Douglas opened with a sketch of the history of *bel canto*, stressing that the term denotes in particular a "compositional technique" for singing that was at its height during the 17th century. At that time, the composers themselves were trained as *bel canto* singers to write in a flowing, "vocal" long line for all music, both vocal and instrumental. The singers, too, were so well trained that they were expected to compose theme and variations to complete a composition at the performance by creating *floriture* (embellishments) upon the main theme.

He also noted that the "aim of *bel canto* is to evoke a sense of wonder" through the singer's art, utilizing differing vocal timbres, colors, delicacy of phrasing, and lyrical abandon, which "dispense with realism" in the vulgar sense of simple descriptions of the sensual, in favor of communicating a world of musical ideas.

Author Cornelius Reid, addressing the principles of *bel canto* technique, stressed that, unlike today when teachers "do their own thing," the old *bel canto* teachers held "common principles," universal principles, which may be efficiently passed on to new generations. He stressed that the concept of vocal registers, *registrazione*, was the basic philosophy of the Italian teachers throughout the era of high *bel canto* into the early 19th century. "As soon as the concept of registration was discovered," he stressed, "the vocal results of the teaching began to expand, and they developed more highly skilled singers. Before that, singing was very primitive."

Reid elaborated his theory with many very useful older recordings of great singers, well-known from his books, in which each distinct human voice register corresponds to the use of a different muscle system which controls aspects of the larynx. A voice register is a "physical mechanism in the

instrument” which, when called upon, produces a different tone quality. Especially instructive was his comparison of the control over the voice by the conscious ability to shift registers shown by the great *bel canto* tenor Tito Schipa. Schipa’s version of Donizetti’s aria “Una furtiva lagrima,” with its exquisite soft notes, was miles above a recording by Mario del Monaco in the more forced “modern” style.

“Today’s elevation of the pitch is monstrous,” Reid also pointed out, especially in its deleterious effects on voice registers. “We’re going to break our instruments and our throats if it keeps rising.” He noted that the different registers of the voice “reveal a certain texture,” and if the texture that the composer had in mind was designed at a certain pitch, “and then you raise the pitch 4 or 8 Herz or more, you get to the point where the texture that he had in mind is destroyed, because the voice produces another texture at the higher pitch.”

As Reid puts it in a forthcoming interview with *Fidelio* magazine, “In great Classical compositions, each musical line, each individual pitch, has a specific *emotional* quality in the human voice, which is distinct from every other sung note. The human voice when it sings a B-flat has a textual quality, an emotional quality, which is distinct from that of a B-natural. Thus, of course, if the composer writes something at a certain pitch, and we move the pitch around, either up — or down — we destroy the composer’s intentions.

“This is integral to the poetic singing of a text. One of the most important principles for the singing student to learn is that, just as a conductor will *orchestrate* the string voices distinctly, to create a dialogue as heard against the wind voices and so on, so the singer must *orchestrate* the interpretation of an aria, such that the many hues and textures of the human voice create different musical voices.” These musical voices are destroyed by raising the pitch, he said.

Craig Timberlake, a singer and regular columnist for the *National Association of Teachers of Singing Journal*, also stressed the need to return to the original intention of the *bel canto*-era composers. “The composers knew what they were doing,” as he put it, “as many of us today do not!” He stressed that the true *bel canto* singers’ tradition could be traced teacher to pupil, in the line from Joseph Haydn’s teacher Nicholas Porpora, to Johannes Brahms’s collaborator, the tenor Julius Stockhausen.

Classical music is not for museums

Timberlake also distributed a 1974 press release by the American Academy of Teachers of Singing urging that vocal music be performed at the original pitch. “A Recommendation for the Correction of Pitch of Performances of Singers in Opera, Oratorio, and Choral Music of 1620-1820” states that “it is astounding that such a fundamental aspect of musical performance has been so overlooked as that of original pitch, and the consequent harm done to voices trying to adjust to modern pitch. . . . There seems to be a ‘conspiracy’

against the registers of the voice, and the vowel-pitch relationships for which Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart wrote.” The argument is sound, despite a factual error accepting Alexander Ellis’s false 1885 assertion that Classical composers wrote at A-422. It has since been demonstrated that the Classical pitch was in the range of A-427-432, derived from the Classical C of 256 Hz.

“The American Academy of Teachers of Singing recommends that in concert singers be allowed to perform in the pitch for which the music was written,” the release concludes. “This procedure will create an authenticity of performance that will replace the false brittleness of many performances of music of that period. There will be a whole new, relaxed and happy audience for this beautiful vocal music, when the tension of the high pitch is removed; a new depth and warmth. In performance at the original pitch, there should be a new, free outpouring of beautiful singing, in which excellence, rather than exhibition of high notes, prevails. Voices can better obey the law of Nature, than the opinions of man. Welcome Beauty! Welcome Nature! Welcome voices which are unhampered in their ability to express the musical poetic intent of the composers.”

Debate: kitsch vs. classical

A debate broke out at the final session when Jan Douglas asked panelists, “Can we bring back great *bel canto* singing today?” Henry Pleasants shocked the audience with the answer “No!” and insisted that the classics belong in a museum. Not only are the great teachers all dead, he said, but singers, who used to grow up behind the plow, simply aren’t strong enough these days, orchestras are too big, conductors are too anti-voice, and modern pitch, while horrendous, simply cannot be lowered. Pleasants explained that this was why he had given a speech the day before (puzzling to many at the time) promoting Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and other postwar pop artists, because of their “expressive phrasing.” We’ve just got to accept the degradation of modern culture, was the not-so-subliminal message.

The other panelists — and the audience — flatly rejected Pleasants’s view. “If the principles of *bel canto* can’t be revived, then I’m not interested in any music!” said Professor Reid. Craig Timberlake again praised Carlo Bergonzi’s April demonstration of the superiority of the Verdi C-256 (A-430) pitch at Carnegie Hall, as evidence that musicians can band together to lower the pitch and raise the musical level, and asked this writer, a representative of the Schiller Institute and one of the organizers of the Bergonzi event, to stand for applause. A student from Toronto raised her hand to protest that she had recently enjoyed singing Mozart at the lower tuning, and a Columbia student insisted that violinists as well as singers were joining the movement to lower the pitch, because of the destructive effect of high modern pitch on the strings of the old Stradivarius violins (all built for playing at C-256).