

2013

"Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide" by Robert Toft

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Recommended Citation

Poriss, Hilary (2013) "'Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide" by Robert Toft," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 18: No. 1, Article 5. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.201318.01.05
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol18/iss1/5>

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Book Review: Toft, Robert. *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-19-983231-6.

Hilary Poriss

The title of Robert Toft's book is accurate, if bland; one might have hoped for something a little racier. *So You Think You Can Sing Bel Canto?* comes to mind, for such a title would have evoked the challenges presented on every page of *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide*. Specifically, Toft seeks to understand how modern singers might emulate the art of *bel canto* singing, a style that reigned supreme in Italian theaters, concert halls, and churches throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries but which today represents a lost tradition. Toft's attempts to define "bel canto," and, more importantly, to rediscover its techniques and recreate its sonic atmospheres, are by no means exceptional. Indeed, the question "What is bel canto?" arises frequently in studies of Italian opera, and there exists a small body of work devoted entirely to this enquiry: Rodolfo Celletti's classic *Storia del belcanto*¹ and Lucie Manén's less familiar but no less interesting *Bel Canto: The Teaching of the Classical Italian Song-Schools*² are two of the most important. Unlike these previous studies, however, which lay out a history of opera through the voice and its literature and engage only occasionally with questions of performance, Toft's book is wholly dedicated to an exploration of how today's singers might recreate the vocal ethos that their predecessors once produced.

The premise on which Toft builds his study is familiar: *bel canto* style required, and still requires, singers to participate in opera, if not as co-composers, at least as co-creators. In his words, "... performers saw their role more as one of re-creation than of simple interpretation, and the music an audience heard often differed substantially from what appeared in print" (p. 3). But how might one recreate a score by Handel, Mozart, Rossini, and many others in a "historically accurate" manner? To put this question differently, how can a singer *think* like Angelica Catalani or Giuditta Pasta (if such a thing is even possible)? Thanks to the work of Philip Gossett,³ Will Crutchfield,⁴ Austin

1. Rodolfo Celletti, *Storia del belcanto* (Florence: La nuova Italia editrice, 1983). Translated by Frederick Fuller as *A History of Bel Canto* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

2. Lucie Manén, *Bel Canto: The Teaching of the Classical Italian Song-Schools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

3. Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).



Caswell,⁵ and others, these questions have already been addressed. *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide* offers singers even more information, providing a detailed, step-by-step guide on approaching and performing a score as Catalani, Patti, and many others might once have done.

To compile this guide, Toft drew on a wealth of contemporary sources, including over 125 vocal tutors and treatises, some of which might be familiar to the reader (those by Domenico Corri⁶ and Manuel Garcia the Younger,⁷ for instance), and many others which have languished in relative obscurity since their publication. While Toft's main period of interest falls between 1780 and 1830, his sources date as far back as the 1770s, since the earlier books "document the beginnings of the style" (p. 17), and as far forward as the 1860s, since later publications drew heavily on the influence of the past. Given the comprehensive nature of this survey, it is strange to find a few important sources missing: Laure Cinti-Damoreau's *Méthode de chant* (1849) and Pauline Viardot's *École classique du chant* (1860) come to mind, to say nothing of Viardot's *Un heure d'étude* (1880), published too late for Toft's study. Nevertheless, Toft's bibliography, which includes a separate section for these books, serves as a wonderful resource on its own for those interested in vocal pedagogy and the proliferation of "how-to" guides during this time period. In addition to these books, Toft consulted several hundred scores published with expressive markings indicative of the *bel canto* style, as well as newspaper reviews that recorded contemporary responses to the most successful singers of the time period.

This book is divided into two parts. The first, "The Principles of *Bel canto*," contains an introductory chapter followed by five more, each of which focuses on a particular technical area of *bel canto* performance: chapter 2, "Phrasing"; chapter 3, "Altering Rhythm and Tempo"; chapter 4, "Tonal Contrast, Register, and Vibrato"; chapter 5, "Ornamentation"; and chapter 6, "Dramatic Action." The four chapters that concern vocal matters are all densely packed with information. Chapter 2, "Phrasing," for instance, opens with a lengthy discussion of pauses and breathing, illustrating how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century singers articulated their texts: "Vocalists equated these stops to the diverse shades of color painters employed to let objects stand out distinctly to the eye, for if artists allowed colors to run together indiscriminately, viewers would be unable to distinguish the figures in a painting" (p. 20). Following this detailed

4. Will Crutchfield, "The Prosodic Appoggiatura in the Music of Mozart and His Contemporaries," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 42, no. 2 (1989): 229–274 and "Vocal Performance in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 611–642.

5. Giuditta Pasta, "Mme Cinti-Damoreau and the Embellishment of Italian Opera in Paris: 1820–1845," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 28, no. 3 (1975): 459–92.

6. Domenico Corri, *The Singer's Preceptor* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1810).

7. Manuel Garcia, *Traité complet de l'art du chant* (Paris: Chez l'auteur, Rue Chabanais, No. 6, 1847) and *New Treatise on the Art of Singing* (London: Cramer, Beale, and Chappell, 1857).

explanation of how to translate commas, colons, periods, and various other punctuation marks from the poetic text into expressive breaks within the music, Toft illustrates how this approach to phrasing differed depending on whether the singer was performing a recitative or an aria. The second half of the chapter discusses vocal inflection, exploring how singers would deliver musical works with varying degrees of light and shade, and it concludes with a section on connecting notes, explaining where and how *sostenuto*, *legato*, and *portamento* might be applied to reflect the *bel canto* style.

Chapter 3, “Altering Rhythm and Tempo,” begins with a tutorial on distinguishing between accent and emphasis and how to apply this distinction to individual vocal lines: “Accent referred to the pronunciation of syllables within words and denoted the stress placed on a single syllable to distinguish it above the others, whereas emphasis [. . .] related to the force of voice laid on an entire word or group of words to bring the associated ideas to the attention of listeners” (p. 73). The second half of the chapter instructs singers on when and where to properly apply *tempo rubato* and other variations in the fluidity of tempo. While the concepts in chapter 3 represent important components of expressive singing, Toft explains that the techniques explored in chapter 4, “Tonal Contrast, Register, and Vibrato,” were considered fundamental in allowing singers “to project the emotions they felt directly into the hearts of listeners” (p. 85). Thus, for instance, vibrato was used sparingly by vocalists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reserved for “poignant emotions such as intense grief, anguish, anger, revenge, anxiety, shame, and terror” (p. 94). Chapter 5, “Ornamentation,” is the lengthiest and most detailed in the book, and the section on *appoggiaturas* is notable, providing the most thorough discussion of this ornament in the literature. It alone is worth the purchase of the book.

These four chapters are lavishly accompanied by musical examples, all of which are beautifully laid out, and which add a welcome audible dimension to the discussion. The strength of these chapters, moreover, is that they provide clear and precise guidelines for singing in the *bel canto* style while simultaneously empowering singers to approach this music with a sense of imaginative interpretation. As Toft emphasizes throughout his book, *bel canto* style was as diverse as its many practitioners. If applied correctly, therefore, the principles presented should not result in one uniform interpretation of a musical work; rather, they are meant to open up new opportunities for expressive understanding, allowing singers to become creators in their own right.

The final chapter in part one of Toft’s book, “Dramatic Action,” sets off in a different direction, focusing on acting and gesture rather than on vocal concerns. Distinct here, too, is Toft’s approach to this subject matter, which relies almost entirely on only one source, Gilbert Austin’s *Chironomia* (1806), a book which was written for spoken-word actors but was frequently consulted by singers as well. In the first half of the chapter, Toft summarizes Austin’s theories of gesture, noting that feet and legs serve to ground the orator’s body, allowing the hands and arms—the “grand instruments” of gesture—to move in and out of a series of stylized poses. Descriptions of these gestures

are accompanied by Austin's diagrams illustrating where an actor would place an arm and how he or she might position the hands. The second half of the chapter applies Austin's theories of gesture, for which he established a notational system, to a musical work: Stephen Storace's "The Curfew Tolls the Knell of Parting Day." Toft selects this work because the poem on which it is based, Thomas Grey's "An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," was one of the texts that Austin notated in *Chironomia*. Toft thus conflates the two sources, layering Austin's analysis onto the musical setting and arguing that the gestures Austin prescribes for an actor are the same ones that *bel canto* singers might have used when performing the music. Although more speculative than other sections of this book, the analysis is fascinating, offering a glimpse not only into how musicians might have sounded while singing this piece but also what their physical movements were.

Part two puts the theories and ideas presented in part one to work, offering six editions of arias, or recitatives and arias, by Handel, Gluck, Sarti, and Mozart. Each edition provides one, two, or three different versions of the music derived from contemporary sources. For example, the score for Handel's "Armida dispietata/Lascia ch'io pianga" (*Rinaldo*) reproduces only Henry R. Bishop's interpretation of the score, while the edition for Handel's "Oh Worse than Death Indeed/Angels Ever Bright and Fair" (*Theodora*) includes vocal lines drawn from three distinct sources. While singers might take their initial cues from these variations, ornamenting and phrasing the music as notated, Toft's goal is for singers to move beyond what they see on the page, personalizing the music through the principles acquired in the first part of the book.

A few minor inaccuracies appear here and there in *Bel canto*. Most notably, the jacket description states that there is a "companion website offering demonstrations of the principles involved," but unfortunately, no trace of such a website exists. One hopes that the site is forthcoming, for such a resource would undoubtedly be enormously helpful to singers engaging with the ideas presented throughout the book. In his introduction, moreover, Toft writes that he "also includes discussions of Adelina Patti," in part because recordings of Patti exist and can thus be referred to quite easily. While there are some passages concerning this singer, there are not enough, it struck me, to highlight her participation, particularly when other singers—Giuditta Pasta, Angelica Catalani, and Gertrud Mara—all make frequent appearances throughout these pages as well.

These complaints are small, however, and they do not diminish the major contribution that Robert Toft has made in *Bel canto: A Performer's Guide*. This book represents required reading for anyone interested in taking up the art of *bel canto* singing, either as a career or an avocation. Moreover, although Toft's intended readership primarily consists of contemporary singers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Italian operatic repertoire, readers who are vocal pedagogues, historians of Italian opera, and composers setting out to write for the voice will also benefit greatly from this book's contents. It is worth noting that Toft is a vocal coach, and that this book was developed "on the ground" in a class that he teaches at the University of Western Ontario. This

direct link to practice, as well as the years of experience that have gone into the creation of this guide, are palpable throughout the book, imparting a sense of new life to the style of *bel canto* singing.