

# "Bel canto: The Teaching of the Classical Italian Song-Schools, Its Decline and Restoration" By Lucie Manén

Philip Lieson Miller

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Miller, Philip Lieson (1990) ""Bel canto: The Teaching of the Classical Italian Song-Schools, Its Decline and Restoration" By Lucie Manén," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 9. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199003.01.9  
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol3/iss1/9>

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Lucie Manén. *Bel canto; The Teaching of the Classical Italian Song-Schools, Its Decline and Restoration*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. bibliography, 75p.

Bel canto, it is generally agreed, is a lost art. But what, precisely, was bel canto? The word is used to describe the singing of the great castrati, and the repertory of classic Italian airs is known as bel canto music; the term comes up again to cover the operas of Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini and the school of singers trained to sing them. But Philip A. Duey, in his study of the subject, states: "The term *Bel Canto* does not appear as such during the period with which it is most often associated, i.e., the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; this may be said with finality."

Lucie Manén as a singer was a casualty of World War II. A pupil of Anna Schoen-René, who in turn had studied with Marchesi and Viardot, she is chiefly remembered as Cherubino at Glyndebourne just before the outbreak of hostilities. Convinced that a singer should know something about the physiology of the vocal organs, she "qualified as a physiotherapist," to quote a note by Peter Pears on the back cover, "and became deeply involved in research into voice production for singing, chiefly at the Nuffield Institute, Oxford, and at University College, London." Among her pupils have been Elizabeth Harwood, Sir Geraint Evans, Sir Peter Pears, and Arda Mandikian. Her book has a preface by Brian Trowell of King's College, University of London, and a "preamble" by Dr. Jobst Fricke of the University of Cologne.

What we know of the early history of singing and the fabulous technique of the castrati is based on the music that was written for them and a few such sources as Caccini's preface to *Le nuove musiche* (1602) and the writings of Tosi and Mancini. Many modern teachers have written books on the secrets of the art, but according to Dr. Fricke

The Bel Canto teaching manuals have heretofore seemed to enshrine a mystery whose essence must have been passed by word of mouth from one generation of teachers to another: it is solely thanks to her exhaustive and many-sided researches that we are now in a position to understand and reconstruct their methods.

Manén tells us of her activities during the war:

I studied all the books that I could find in the British Museum (now British Library) on singing, voice-production and breathing. Much

to my surprise I soon realized that almost nothing that I read agreed with what I myself did and sensed when I was singing . . .

From an aged doctor who in his younger days had been a singer she acquired a book of exercises by maestro Alessandro Busti, published in 1865, and a "method" by Gaetano Nava (1876?) which confirmed her beliefs about the old masters of singing.

In the heyday of bel canto there was no "method" of teaching singing. The teachers, performers themselves, taught by imitation and by trial and error. "Caccini," she reminds us,

had no knowledge of the anatomical configuration of the larynx, nor the physiology of voice-production. It is only in recent times that we have been able to acquire such knowledge, through investigations using modern scientific equipments such as X-ray cine film machines.

As late as 1741 the French anatomist Antoine Ferrein discovered the vocal cords and established their function in the production of voice. And it remained for Francesco Bennati, an ear, nose, and throat surgeon who was also a singer, in 1832, to determine that there were actually two mechanisms for voice production. The first of these Manén calls the vocal-cord mechanism, and the second, "of special importance for the production and variation of Bel Canto timbres," the ventricular mechanism. After extensive tests and demonstrations never dreamed of by singers of the classical period, she bases her teachings on her findings.

"The ventricular mechanism," she says,

is the particular instrument for which classical Italian music should be sung, just as a violin sonata must be played, and can only be played adequately, with a violin.

A few singers today possess the bel canto technique. "Some are born with it, the 'natural' talents who use the ventricular mechanism quite unconsciously" — she mentions Placido Domingo — while "others have had to acquire their mastery of the classical art of singing through a rigorous course of study, as, for example, Maria Callas." But though she has much to say about the ventricular mechanism, the reader is left wishing for a more tangible explanation of the term.

Many reasons are given for the decline of vocal standards in recent years. To Manén the principal villain is Manuel Garcia the younger, whose fame was built in large measure on his invention of the laryngoscope. He made his debut in New York in 1825 as a member of his father's troupe, but according to Manén he was a failure and so took up teaching. *Some four pages are devoted to Garcia, and we are told that "it is not recorded if any of his pupils at the Royal Academy of Music, where he taught from 1848, subsequently became famous."* Nevertheless, Jenny Lind, Mathilde Marchesi, Sir Charles Santley, and Julius Stockhausen are known to have studied with him.

It is surprising in a book about bel canto to find no mention of such controversial matters as vibrato and tremolo. What Manén has to say about electronic music and the pernicious results of microphone technique is certainly cogent.

Lucie Manén is obviously a tireless researcher, and she has plentiful documentation for her conclusions. She has tested her theories with her own voice and those of her pupils. But as always is the case with books on singing, one can hardly expect to acquire the technique simply by reading about it.

Philip Lieson Miller