



## ***Bel Canto* on Broadway: *Bel Canto* as a Genre-neutral Vocal Technique**

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Every singer in every genre needs a reliable technique in order to meet the demands of their respective repertoire. Increasingly, new methods are appearing, especially in the Pop and Musical Theatre genres, that promise a fast track to success. The goal of these methods is not the process of building a voice, but an immediate result. This approach often appeals to young singers, as it corresponds to the spirit of the times. The voice is insufficiently developed to accommodate the desired vocal qualities.

*Bel Canto* offers a vocal technique that enables the highest technical perfection and mastery of all means of expression. Only when the voice has developed its full functional potential does the singer have complete artistic freedom.

*Bel Canto* is a term that is frequently used to describe a technique of vocalism, but is rarely concretely defined. Among teachers of singing there is very little consensus as to the actual method of instruction. The existent writings of the masters of *Bel Canto* leave much open to speculation. However, from the information that we do have, certain basic principles can be surmised.

In “*Bel Canto, A History of Vocal Pedagogy*,” James Stark states: “*Bel Canto* does not apply to just one stylistic era, nor is it a single way of using the voice or a specific set of stylistic conventions. Rather it is based upon certain irreducible vocal techniques that set it apart from the other kinds of singing. These techniques can be adapted to a wider variety of musical styles from several historical epochs without losing their integrity as fundamental vocal principles.”

To take it one step further the *Bel Canto* technique can be applied universally to almost *all* genres of singing. With this technical foundation, the choice of genre is open to the singer. It also provides the basis for singing in two or more vocal styles. Over the centuries the repertoire has changed dramatically, but the human voice has remained the same.

*Bel Canto* is based on empirical teaching, not scientific research. This is confirmed in the words of Bontempi in “*Historia Musica*” (1695): “Our opinion is that everything which is derived from experience has no need of reasoning.”

Cornelius Reid’s life’s work was devoted to the reproduction of the vocal culture of the 18th and 19th centuries. Reid combined the vocal visions of the *Bel Canto* masters with empirical observation and an understanding of contemporary, scientific thought. Reid called his approach, “Functional Voice Training”. It was his goal to combine the principles of the masters of the *Bel Canto* with modern scientific study and years of empirical research.

From their writings we can ascertain that the *Bel Canto* teachers observed that the voice is divided into two registers, *voce die petto* und *voce die testa*, and took the first steps in developing the principles of functional voice training. Their work was, to a great extent, focused on the development of the registers and their unification.

The principles of Functional Voice Training are not to be understood as a method. The principles are based on natural laws. When adhering to these inviolate vocal laws it is possible to work precisely, individually and effectively.

Why the name “*Bel Canto*”?

When a vocal sound is truly beautiful, it reconciles aesthetics with natural functions. A “beautiful” tone knows no boundaries. The “beautiful” tone is not a question of aesthetics, but a result of the innate reflexes of the voice.

Every sung tone consists of pitch, dynamic and vowel. These three parameters have a corresponding reaction in the function of the laryngeal muscles. Thus, they are directly linked to a certain setting of muscle activity in the vocal processes. There is a direct correlation between a musical stimulus and a vocal response. As a result, it is possible to stimulate the targeted vocal functions and systematically train and coordinate the laryngeal muscles by means of specifically applied vocalizes.

The voice is self-regulating and when properly stimulated responds appropriately. Since the inner mechanics of the voice belong to the involuntary muscle system and cannot be acted upon directly, it is necessary to develop stimuli to activate the natural reflexes of the voice. The stimuli, in the form of vocal exercises, are not arbitrary, but are composed specifically to address the current vocal issue at hand.

It is imperative that the vocal pedagogue develop a highly trained skill for functional listening, as the inner muscles of the voice are not visible. The teacher must be equipped to diagnose vocal faults by aurally analyzing the perceived sound qualities.

Subsequently, and equally as important, the vocal teacher must understand how the individual vowels, pitches and dynamics effect the vocal mechanism. With experience it is possible to create effective vocalizes using these three component parts in an endless variety of ways that address almost any vocal issue.

The goal is to give the singer the vocal means to meet the demands of the chosen repertoire, irrespective of genre.

## **Bibliography**

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