

The 'Bel Canto'

Author(s): Herman Klein

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 65, No. 974 (Apr. 1, 1924), pp. 308-311

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912462>

Accessed: 23-09-2017 19:04 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*

Fortunately, such an aid is at hand in the Imperial Choir, founded fourteen years ago. The Doctor tells us that the Choir is blessed with loyal and energetic officers, whose efforts have met with a splendid response. Large contingents are coming from many of the chief provincial bodies—the Liverpool Philharmonic and Manchester Hallé Societies, the Bradford, Birmingham, Bristol, Hull, and Newcastle Festival Choirs, and the Wolverhampton Choral Society. London, the home counties, and the suburbs are well-represented by about a hundred choirs. The heavy expenses of some of the larger and more distant choirs will be defrayed in part by generous funds raised by the local mayors.

The musical results ought to be far better than those of the performances given by the Imperial Choir in Hyde Park in 1919. At Wembley the singers will be under cover, and the sound will be to some extent confined to the Stadium, instead of being diffused over an area of about a mile, as was the case at Hyde Park. (Readers will remember that the Hyde Park singing was more sonorous at a considerable distance than close at hand.) The acoustic properties of the Stadium have been tested, and are said to be remarkably good. Visitors may therefore count on hearing some imposing choral effects.

Here is an outline of the scheme of six concerts: On May 31, at 2.30, the programme will be of an 'Empire Day' character, with a selection of short works, such as Purcell's *Come, if you dare*, the fine chorus, 'Forward through the glimmering darkness,' from Parry's *War and Peace*, the conductor's own *Empire of the Sea*, a chorale from Mackenzie's *Jubilee Ode, Land of Hope and Glory*, &c., with a Haydn chorus—*Achieved is the glorious work*—by way of finale.

June 14 will be devoted to Handel, with four groups of extracts from *Solomon, Judas Maccabæus, Samson*, and *The Messiah*. This ought to be a particularly effective concert. There will be an element of the unusual, too, for *Sound an alarm* will be sung by all the tenors, and *Let the bright Seraphim* by all the sopranos, with twenty trumpets playing the obbligato.

On June 28 there will be a miscellaneous programme, opening with the march and chorus, 'Hail, bright abode,' from *Tannhäuser*, and including short choral works by Coleridge-Taylor, Harriss, Gounod, Barnby, Mendelssohn, Rossini, Sullivan, &c.

July 12 is Mendelssohn Day, with extracts from *Elijah, The Hymn of Praise*, and *Athalie*.

July 19 will be given up to selections from Haydn, German, Elgar, Bishop, Handel, Sullivan, &c.

The last concert, August 9, will consist of music by British composers—Sullivan, Elgar, Parry, Coleridge-Taylor, Holst, and Geoffrey Shaw.

Whatever views may be held as to the artistic value of musical performances on so vast a scale, one cannot withhold admiration for the enthusiasm, energy, and organizing ability of the man who not

only brought this huge choir into being, but is able to gather it together again fourteen years after its inception. During those years the choir, in degrees of strength varied to suit the circumstances, has taken part in a number of national events too familiar to recount. It is no ordinary feat to carry through a succession of events spread over a long and exceptionally difficult period. A good many musicians could manage to bring off a solitary coup; a series calls for a personality of unusual driving power. Dr. Harriss makes unsparing demands on himself, but even this would be of little avail without his gift of imbuing his huge force with a like zeal.

THE 'BEL CANTO'

BY HERMAN KLEIN

What is the *Bel canto*? The literal meaning of the term, as most are aware, is 'The Art and Practice of Beautiful Singing.' It is not exactly a term in common use, but singers generally surmise that it is intended to refer to an ideal kind of vocal art associated with the old Italian school, and not encountered so readily as cabbages and turnips and the other vegetables that ordinarily adorn a musical greengrocer's shop. Curiously enough, it never occurred to me to use this term as a title for the lecture which I gave at Wigmore Hall a year ago. Hoping to appeal to a wider public, I simply called it 'How to sing Mozart,' to interest a few of the people who are supposed to worship the very name of Mozart. Alas, it didn't crowd the hall! But after the notices had appeared, there was a different tale to tell: everybody wanted me to repeat the lecture. I declined to do so, because I knew that if I did, the singers who ought to have come to take a cheap lesson might again stop away, while the professional 'dead-heads' would surely be disappointed if they did not receive free tickets. So I resolved, after reading those notices, to publish my lecture in book-form as an 'essay,' much amplified and improved; and then it was that the term *Bel canto* first crossed my mind. If, I thought, the music of Mozart suggests and requires only beautiful singing, that must be the right name for the little book; and its 'particular reference to the singing of Mozart' can serve for the sub-title. The result so far has proved that no mistake was made.

Now it is my object to avoid so far as possible any vain repetitions of the statements of fact—the technical details, the plain, ordinary words of advice—that are to be found in this Essay of mine. I have no desire to bore those who have read it, and still less desire to 'choke off' those who might have some idea of buying it. There can be no necessity for me to describe in these columns what really constitutes 'beautiful singing.' I am as perfectly certain that readers are capable of recognising and acknowledging what we call the *Bel canto*, the instant they hear an

example of it. The misfortune, of course, is that there is so little of it to be heard. And why? 'Ay,' as Hamlet says, 'there's the rub!' What is the reason of this amazing rarity, which seems to be growing more marked as time goes on? We read and hear all sorts of explanations for it, most of them pitched in a minor, negative key; but they do not help us as a rule to arrive at the truth, much less to find the remedy. It is of no use, for instance, to tell us that the voices no longer exist. We know better. They are discoverable in all parts of the globe—the more remote and Antipodean the more likely. It is equally absurd, in my opinion, to assert that the race of fine teachers ended with this or that man. I don't believe it. There are teachers as capable and discerning to-day as ever there were. Then we are told that this or that secret of the art has been lost, stolen, or mislaid—I am not sure which. Anyhow, I don't believe that either; for, to tell the truth, there was never any actual secret to lose, steal, or mislay.

Nevertheless, there must be a fundamental cause for this prevalent rarity of exemplars of the *Bel canto*, and it lies, to my thinking, in just as many contributory reasons as there are contributory factors in the great combination which makes up the art of the *Bel canto* itself.

If there were any real secret it would reside, I think, in that word 'combination.' We are working for high ideals—call it perfection if you will. How can we arrive there except by the perfect union of perfect materials, the latter backed by natural instinct, disposition, environment, brains, industry, and general conditions, which are also perfect for the purpose? That is the combination for and with which we have to strive. We shall attain it about as frequently as the man who plays all his life for the big prize in the Italian lottery. It is a game of 'Lotto.' There are five numbers in the winning line, and if you guess only one you gain some sort of prize. If you guess two or more you are extraordinarily lucky; but if you guess the whole *combinazione* you win a fortune. We may aptly inquire, 'Is there such a thing as the 'imperfect' *Bel canto*? To which I would answer, Yes; just as there are degrees of beauty in all Art and perceptible blemishes in Nature herself. It depends really upon what qualities we include in that which I have termed 'The Art and Practice of Beautiful Singing.' Let us suppose these qualities to be grouped under five headings, akin to the five numbers of the *combinazione* in the lottery. They would stand as follow:

- (1.) Voice (includes ear and physique).
- (2.) Sostenuito (includes breathing, vowel-formation, resonance).
- (3.) Legato (includes the scale, light or dark tone, colour).
- (4.) Flexibility (includes all florid singing).
- (5.) Phrasing (includes, diction, expression, and all interpretation).

It will be obvious that each and every one of these forms part of the *Bel canto*; though only when all do so in the fullest degree of perfection is the highest result attained. That is the equivalent of getting every figure correct in the numbers on the 'Lotto' line.

(1.) Look how often you groan over the *Vox et praeterea nihil*. For what the voice does alone is far from being the whole of the *Bel canto* any more than the ability to sing well can satisfy without beauty and charm of vocal tone. There must be both elements present in the ideal combination. The reason why the voice comes first into consideration and retains the foremost place throughout, is that it is the human instrument, the basic creator of musical sound upon which the whole vocal structure is built. There is, of course, a vast difference between being gifted with a beautiful voice and being what is called a 'born singer'; but that is another question. The organ remains the prime essential; the supremacy of the tone is, save in the rarest instances, paramount. It serves to convey the melody of the song to the ears of those who listen; and the more beautifully it does so the more beautiful the music seems to be. The simpler the vocal line the greater the need for irreproachable *timbre*, emission, and management of the tone.

These are qualities that appeal not only to critics but to the least cultivated audiences who love what they term 'good singing.' Hence their positive dislike for the so-called *vibrato*, or anything approaching it. They ask, How can a man presume to be a draughtsman if his hand trembles so that he cannot draw a straight line? They want their beloved Mozart tune pure and free from this aspen-leaf-like delivery; and they are right. Any sort of *tremolo*, natural or acquired, has no place in the *Bel canto*; its presence at once obliterates the word *bel*. In the same way, the slightest deviation from the pitch upsets the whole effect. The singer must, therefore, have an impeccable ear. I do not for the moment enlarge upon the question—how far, or in what manner, it is possible for competent instruction to avert or to cure either of the vicious faults just referred to. I merely state that both things are possible, though I greatly prefer the prevention to the cure. But let me add that, if I have heard both the *vibrato* and false intonation from the mouths of many artists whose names were famous in the 'palmy days' of opera, they ceased from that moment to be in my estimation true exponents of the *Bel canto*. I except one or two in whom the *tremolo* appeared only with advancing years; for example, Santley. But from first to last Patti, Tietjens, Nilsson, Scalchi, Trebelli, Sembrich, Patey, Sims Reeves, Edward Lloyd, Ben Davies, Jean and Edouard de Reszke, Lassalle—to name only the pick of those great singers whom I have heard myself—never betrayed the smallest suspicion of it.

(2.) It is somewhat difficult to separate from each other the first and second factors in our

scheme, so closely are breathing, vowel-formation, and resonance bound up with the questions relating to the organ itself. Nor have I space to dwell on these at the length they deserve. The science of breathing is of vital importance, but, being the most elusive, it is the most neglected. Correct diaphragmatic breath-pressure is unquestionably the surest guarantee of a steady tone and of every practicable gradation of tone-power. Easy, natural, phonetically-accurate vowel-formation has to allow the resultant tone a direct, uninterrupted access, not only from the larynx to the mouth, but to the whole of the resonating cavities or chambers that are provided for the purpose of reinforcing that tone. Here delicacy of adjustment, true balance between force and resistance, in a word, equal proportion and elasticity everywhere, can alone bring about the perfect result.

(3.) The value of the perfect scale is inestimable. The art of achieving it is both under-estimated and misunderstood. With the singing of the scale is interwoven the blending of the registers, the direction and management of breath-support on ascending and descending passages, the realisation that the tone is permanently centred in the *masque* (as is the picture upon the screen), and that it is by means of the resonance, not the action of the throat-muscles, that we anticipate the pitch of the rising scale—just as it is by the maintenance of that resonance that we prevent sudden drops and changes of mechanism in the descending scale. To these last, as to the abuse of the medium and chest registers by pushing the tone upwards with excessive breath-force, may be attributed the so-called 'breaks' which render an even scale impossible, and create some of the worst ills that beset the human voice.

On the other hand, the true art requires a *legato* in which the voice glides imperceptibly from the middle of one note to the middle of the next, without alteration of vowel shape or of resonant position. It requires an equal command of the light and dark *timbres*—the former for the rapid scales and florid passages that are to be executed with combined speed and brilliancy; the sombre tone for the slower scales and for passages that demand a serious, a dramatic, or a declamatory character. This darker tone owes its peculiar qualities, be it remembered, to the deeper position of the larynx, to the enlargement of the pharynx, and to the more extensive use of the resonating cavities at the back of the nose. Without the aid of these accessories such an attribute as colour or variety of colour in singing would be practically impossible. All these things must, therefore, be absolutely indispensable to the accomplishment of the *Bel canto*.

(4.) It seems reasonable to conclude that our fourth factor, namely Flexibility and Florid Singing, has been allowed for and considered in the section I have just dealt with. Yes; but not adequately. It is true that the *legato* must and should pervade—unless something else be indicated—every form of vocal phraseology. The smooth,

even 'tone—perfectly sustained, spread, as it were, over the surface of the melody, be it glassy or rippling or billowy—is the real *cachet* of the beautiful singer. Without it how can you do justice to the sublime solos of Handel, of Bach, of Haydn, of Mozart? But I think this great feature of the *Bel canto*, rare as it has become, is still to be heard. It is still practised, and therefore available, at the hands of a few distinguished artists, who have devoted the necessary time and labour to mastering it. This is not the occasion for mentioning names, but I fancy most of us can do that for ourselves—on the fingers of two hands, or even one. Anyhow that 'secret' has not been lost!

But in the rendering of the great 18th-century masters—to go back no further—there is a something that has been lost, if only quite recently (perhaps, therefore, only 'mis-laid'), which was a highly-cherished characteristic of the school of the *Bel canto*. You are only too well aware that these old masters did not content themselves with plain, straightforward melodies. It was their habit to embroider them. The modern generation asks, Why, in heaven's name, if they could write such delicious tunes, did they not 'leave well alone'? Why not? Because, experiencing the sensations peculiar to their epoch, they did not feel that they had expressed themselves in sufficiently varied fashion unless they introduced some vocal contrast redolent of the art of their day. They were not in a hurry to reach the *coda*; and, unlike most modern composers, their first thought, as a rule, was to 'give the singer a chance.'

Well, they often did so by dint of every florid device that occurred to them—runs, divisions, ornamentations, brilliant passages of every imaginable description; yet always (such was their genius and their skill) conceived in the spirit of the rest of the piece—that is, in complete harmony with the main design, and no less calculated, according to their belief, to give it vivid and vigorous musical expression. Naturally, therefore, they expected from the singer a rendering entirely in character with their music—not merely a neat execution of their runs and ornaments, but, together with the right energy and accent, a faithful portrayal of the emotion or sentiment conveyed by the text.

It is the power or the understanding to do this that I find missing in the oratorio singers of to-day. Indeed, I may say that I have heard no examples of what I may call the heroic oratorio style for a very long while. The last Englishman who possessed it in the supreme degree was Santley. When he sang *Why do the nations?* or *Revenge, Timotheus*, you felt that his runs were something more than exercises thrown in for effect. They illustrated and enforced the argument of his theme. Again, I have never heard anyone sing *Rejoice greatly* or *From mighty Kings* as did Tietjens. Nilsson sang one and Adelina Patti the other brilliantly enough, and so that their luscious tones penetrated to the farthest corners of the

centre transept of the Crystal Palace. So far, it was *Bel canto*, to be sure. But neither of those gifted sopranos imbued their runs with the extraordinary dramatic quality, the intensity of exaltation, that Tietjens brought to bear, and, as I am told, Jenny Lind had brought to bear upon the same music before her. Far back in the 'seventies, too, I heard several times another great oratorio and opera singer, a *basso cantante* named Agnesi, a favourite at all the festivals, as well as at Her Majesty's Theatre. His *coloratura* was like a woman's, his Rossini as easy and graceful as the song of a bird. But in Handel he declaimed his runs with just that wonderful dramatic sense that I speak of, and made them contribute their full share towards the realisation of the poetic idea. How I wish that this rare and remarkable feature of bygone Handelian singing could be revived!

(5.) In what I have just been saying I may have trespassed slightly upon points that properly belong to the fifth section of my scheme. If so, it only proves how closely these various branches of the subject are allied; and, besides, there was already much more to say on such topics as Phrasing, Diction, Expression, and Interpretation, than space could possibly permit me to add now. It might suffice to observe that the *Bel canto* is bound up with the demonstration of all these attributes. So it is. But everybody does not believe it. There are to-day those who think, in their wisdom, that the grand old school of Italian singing, taught by Manuel Garcia, Lamperti, and a few of their contemporaries, paid little heed to the form or character of the musical phrase; to the value of the consonant; to the pure sound of vowels other than those of their own language; to the vocal colour demanded by the sense of the text; or, in short, any *nuance* of utterance or expression that might perchance interfere with the uninterrupted flow of this precious *Bel canto*. Nothing could be farther from the fact. The combination which the old teachers sought to embody in their art was not less rare and wonderful than that which they looked for and sometimes discovered in the virgin talent of their pupils. I repeat that the *Bel canto* must be all-comprehensive to be worthy of the name. It must be all-beautiful. It must be beautiful in itself, and it must lend an additional beauty to the music which it interprets; it must, moreover, reflect and convey the beauty of the language to which that music is allied. The pitfalls of speech and language seem to be endless, bottomless. Yet good singing can avoid or overcome them all. It unites singing and speaking into a single act, merges the word into the tone, and makes each free from the interference of the other, whilst preserving the true sound and the natural quality of both. The rest lies with the mentality and temperament of the artist.

The present-day tendency to exaggerate is responsible for many evils, and each nationality appears to encourage exaggeration in some form

or another. The predominant sin is the *vibrato*, which began in France, extended to Italy and Russia, and has now secured an alarming hold in England. The countries most free from its pernicious influence are probably Germany and America, though they too have their national vocal sins. But if British singers can check their inclination to be throaty; if the French and the Americans can avoid being nasal; if the Italians and Russians can keep their voices steady; and if the Germans can obtain sympathetic tone by using their hard palates less—then what will there be to prevent the universal recognition and adoption of the *Bel canto* by all who are capable of recapturing the method of it.

I want to conclude these remarks with a word on the subject of Tradition. It is a matter of great importance, and one on which I have been slightly misunderstood. I have never for a moment held the belief that obedience to a traditional rendering of 18th-century music—particularly that of Handel and Mozart—should hamper the singer's conception or individuality of expression. I have never had in mind the kind of tradition that could compel such a thing. There is no hard-and-fast rule either way. If the singer adhered strictly to every note exactly as it appeared upon the printed page he would incur the charge of not knowing his business. If he altered phrases, varied the ornamentation, or introduced appoggiaturas in places where they were not indicated, he would be liable to be told that he was taking unwarrantable liberties with the text. Certain things have to be done in a certain manner; and the manner in which they were done during the composer's lifetime, with his approval, is the manner that should set the example for all time.

Tradition is the sole means for handing that authority down from generation to generation. Therefore, where there is an alternative choice, let us do our utmost to get hold of the *right* tradition; and, when we have done so, mind that we follow it and stick to it! Then it will justly fill its place in the art of the *Bel canto*.

A CRITIC ON HIS CRITICS

By M.-D. CALVOCORESSI

Shortly after my *Principles and Methods of Musical Criticism* had appeared, a friend and colleague of mine said to me: 'One of these days I shall pull that book of yours to pieces.' And before I had found time to frame a suitable reply, he added ruefully: 'But you don't mind: it will only give you more to write about.'

He was altogether right. Nothing could please me more than to see every point in my book dissected and discussed, for only thus can the needful testing of my assertions or suggestions be carried further than I was able to carry it.

Of course, I am as eager to take part in the further stages of the conflict as I was to start it going. Hence this article, whose sole object is to