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Mozart's Da Ponte Operas and the *Bel Canto*

Annotated Bibliography

One of the most prominent composers of opera since the latter half of the 18th century is the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Lauded for his catchy melodies, notoriously difficult passages, and his structural brilliance, his operas remain as popular today as they were when they first premiered. At the same time as these operas were being composed, another movement was occurring within Italianate vocal music, that of “bel canto” or beautiful song. This movement, although highly disputed over its exact definition and origin appears to refer to a style of singing popularized in Italy within the 17th and 18th centuries that is characterized by incredible agility and tonal beauty, hence its name. Bel canto can also refer to a repertory of Italian opera composed in the early 19th century that is associated with composers like Gioachino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti, and Vincenzo Bellini. Despite Mozart and the bel canto era coinciding, it is less clear whether they had an impact on each other, or even if one could be considered a part of the other. Is Mozart bel canto? This essay seeks to answer this question by exploring what bel canto is and how it compares to three of Mozart's most famous works: the Da Ponte operas *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Così fan Tutte*, and *Don Giovanni*.

1. Angermüller, Rudolph. “(Johann Chrysostom) Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.” In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 2nd ed., Vol 17, *Monnet to Nirvana*. Edited by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, 276-347. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2001.

Written by Rudolph, Angermüller, a prominent German musicologist and Mozart enthusiast, this entry from the well-known music encyclopedia *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* is on life and work of the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. This entry provides a comprehensive view on the composer's life and work and is made up of three sections: biographical information, an overview of the music's development and style, and a full list of his works. The main sources of evidence for the biographical section of the entry are primarily made up of primary sources including correspondence by Mozart's father Leopold and Mozart himself and newspapers and pamphlets reporting on either his performances or new premieres of his works including the *Weiner Zeitung* and the *Notizie del Mondo*. The overview of his music and its evolution is primarily evidenced by a brief analysis of musical details within the pieces themselves that are labeled according to the Köchel catalogue numbers. Within both the first and second sections there are references to his Da Ponte trilogy either in relation to his life and activities or to point out specific musical details in the work. There is no reference to the concept of Bel Canto though.

2. Bandy, Dorian. “Mozart's Operatic Embellishments.” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 33, (2021). 1-23.

“Mozart's Operatic embellishments,” written by Dorian Bandy, a prominent musicologist who specializes in 17th, 18th, and 19th century music, is an examination of ornamentation and musical embellishment on Mozart's operatic arias. According to Bandy: “the culture in which Mozart worked prized improvisation, and this is reflected in the notational style of his compositions.” In

this article, Bandy first looks at some operatic models of embellishments present in his non-operatic arias, compares them to later operatic arias' ornamentation, determines their musical and aesthetic importance—of which he concluded that they were indeed a shaping influence of “the aesthetics of his compositional language as a whole”, and then finally comments on the difficulty of introducing these concepts into modern performance practice. His models of choice include instrumental works for keyboard like K. 457 and K.451 and notated embellishments from the arias “Ah, se a morir a chiama,” (*Lucio Silla*), “Non s’ò d’onde viene,” (K. 294) and J.C Bach’s “Cara, la dolce fiamma” (*Adriano in Siria*), which he compared to each other. He also contrasted these with excerpts of duets and arias from his more mature operas including *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan Tutte*. He also uses quotes from Mozart describing his compositional method in creating arias through arguments from Linda Tyler and James Webster, two other musicologists who wrote about Mozart. There are, again, no references to bel canto, but it is interesting that many stylistic choices Bandy describes correspond to 18th century techniques associated with bel canto singing.

3. Franzone, Margaret Smith. “The Revival of Bel Canto and its Relevance to Contemporary Teaching and Performance.” EdD diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 1971. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

This dissertation is written by Margaret Smith Franzone, a doctor in education major at Columbia University in 1971. It is a full-scale analysis of Bel Canto through its history, its definition/components, its revival in the 1950s and 60s as well as an attempt to answer if it is relevant within modern vocal pedagogy. Like Klein and Reid whom she frequently uses as evidence, Franzone defines Bel Canto as a technique that originated in the 17th and 18th centuries that consists of efficient resonance, tonal beauty, legato, clarity, agility, expressivity, and registration. She also agrees that bel canto techniques are still relevant and should remain at the basis of contemporary voice teaching, although she believes that training in atonal system and modern concepts like 12-tone rows and serialism is also imperative. Other pieces of evidence she uses are both primary and secondary writings by Tosi, Caccini, Garcia, Philip Duey, and Ida Franca, to name a few. She also used excerpts of music from the 17th-19th century that showcase bel canto concepts and overviews on 20th century sopranos who were part of the bel canto revival like Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland. Mozart and his works are mentioned in the historical overview of bel canto as an Austrian composer who used the bel canto style. She also analyses Mozart’s “Queen of the Night” aria (from *Die Zauberflöte*) to point out that its florid coloratura and extreme range indicated bel canto ideals. Thus, providing an argument that Mozart Operas could be included as part of the bel canto repertory.

4. Galliver, David. “Cantare con Affetto-Keynote of the Bel Canto.” *Studies in Music*, no. 8 (1974):1-7.

David Galliver was a British tenor and later professor of Music at Adelaide University. In this short article, he discusses the beginnings of the bel canto era through the creation of a new

style known at the time as the “cantare con affetto,” translated as “singing with emotion.” He first analyses components of the “cantare con affetto” and compares them to bel canto technique names later in the era. He also discusses how it developed out of the earlier “cantare con la gorga,” a “florid” style of singing that was popularized in renaissance era Italy. The main evidence he uses is musical examples and quotes from Giulio Caccini, Emilio de Cavaliere, Francesco Rognoni, contemporary teachers of this technique. He also included some 19th century bel canto sources including Zacconi, Busti, and Lucie Manén. Like Cornelius Reid and Herman Klein, Galliver mentions Manuel Garcia but instead states that he is a contributing factor of the decline of bel canto instead of a proponent of the technique. Reid does comment on this in his book by discussing how his early pedagogical experiments did contribute to the rejection of bel canto ideals but that by the end of his life, he rejected these experiments to focus on teaching bel canto techniques purely. There are no mentions of Mozart as this article focuses on the origins and early years of the bel canto era.

5. Goehring, Edmund J. “The Opere Buffe.” in *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart*, edited by Simon P. Keefe, 131-146. Belfast, Northern Ireland: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

In this essay by Edmund J. Goehring, Western University’s associate of Musicology and a founding member of the Mozart Society of Music, Mozart’s opere buffe, including the Da Ponte trilogy is explored both thematically and musically. Goehring argues that Mozart, through his comic operas, both subscribes to and rejects the teachings of the Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni, thus reforming and expanding the aspects of comic opera as a whole. The main pieces of evidence used are an analysis of Goldoni’s ideals and then a comparison to Mozart’s opere buffe in thematic material and characterization. Another piece of evidence is a musical analysis of several excerpts from his comic operas, with the most relevant to this essay being “O Statua Gentilissima” and “Ah taci, ingiusto core” from *Don Giovanni*. Finally, Goehring looks at the farcical aspect of a couple of operatic scenes including *Le Nozze di Figaro*’s Act 3 sextet and Act 2, scene 10 and 12 of *Così fan Tutte* and analyses them thematically. There is no mention of bel canto within this essay, but it still provides pertinent information into thematic and musical innovations present within the Da Ponte Operas.

6. Jandler, Owen. “Bel Canto (Opera).” Revised by Ellen T. Harris. In *Grove Music Online*, 2002.

Written by the former respected music professor at Wellesley, Jandler Owen, and later revised by MIT’s music professor Emeritus Ellen T. Harris, this entry is a condensed definition of the term “bel canto.” To do this they first listed the different definitions associated with it including stylistic elements and nationalities and eras associated with it. This definition also brought up contrasting vocal styles including the Wagnerian/German school style of singing and opposing opinions on the usefulness of the style. Finally, it covered some historical details about the creation of the term and when the “bel canto era” started to decline. The main evidence listed included books on the topic by Phillip A. Duey, Vittorio Ricci, and Cornelius Reid, among

others. It also included quotes from both Wagner and Rossini, the latter found within Michotte's book *An Evening at Rossini's in Beau-Sejour (Passy)*. There are finally references to some late 19th to early 20th century texts on the topic including a quote by F. Sieber from an 1887 song collection called *Il bel Canto*, and Hey's *Deutscher Gesangunterricht*. There are no mentions to Mozart, although one of the definitions states that singing styles appeared to have not changed between the 18th century (Mozart's time) and the early 19th century when the three great bel canto composers (Bellini, Rossini, Donizetti) lived, which could be usefully contextually in this topic.

7. Klein, Herman. *The Bel Canto: With Particular Reference to the Singing of Mozart*. London, England: Oxford University Press, 1923.

In this 1923 essay/guidebook, English music critic and voice teacher Herman (also spelled Hermann) Klein discusses the concept of "bel canto" or "old Italian school" singing and how it relates to technical requirements of singing works by Mozart. Klein references bel canto to be a specific style of singing/vocal technique that originated in Italy. and insists that Mozart's vocal works and especially his operas, ought to be sung in this style. He also goes on to give a surface-level description of bel canto techniques and how they can be applied to singing Mozart, with emphasis on his operas. The main evidence he references is from his former voice teacher Manuel Garcia, a prominent vocal pedagogue of the bel canto style of singing and the inventor of the first laryngoscope. He also references the writings of Mozart's biographer Otto Jahn, and performances of Mozart's operas by notable 19th century singers including Adelina Patti, Theresa Tietjens, and Giuditta Pasta.

8. Marchesi, Mathilde. *Theoretical and Practical Vocal Method*. 18th ed. London: Marylebone Press, 1899. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31970001229316&seq=6>.

This pedagogical guidebook is a primary set of exercises and pedagogical principles by Mathilde Marchesi, a prominent 19th century vocal pedagogue and mezzo-soprano Mathilde Marchesi. Marchesi was, like Herman Klein, a student of Manuel Garcia and a proponent of the bel canto. The first part of her book includes an overview of basic vocal functions including alignment, mouth shape, respiration, onsets, registers, and an overview of how to study and analyze the exercises in first the book and later in songs and arias. This overview is followed by a set of exercises that cover different vocal skills including onsets, portamento, scales, sustained tones, trills, triplets, etc. The second half of the book is made up of vocalises that incorporate each of the different components highlighted in the exercises within the first half of the book. Most of the evidence from *Theoretical and Practical Vocal Method* is practical application used by Marchesi in her teaching studio. This guidebook does not mention Mozart nor his operas but instead is an excellent primary source for seeing the components in training within the bel canto style.

9. Melba, Nellie, vocalist. *The Complete Victor Recordings*. Recorded with Orchestra conducted by Walter B. Rogers, Gabriel Lapiere, pianist, and Frank St. Leger. pianist. Recorded 1907-1916. RCA Victor/Romophone 81011-2, 1994. 3 CDs.

Nellie Melba was a prominent soprano in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A student of Mathilde Marchesi, she was known for championing the bel canto style of singing, so much so that American music critic and contemporary W.J. Henderson described her as “the foremost living exponent of the art of bel canto.” Between the years 1907-1916 she recorded over 63 songs with the Victor Talking machine company, converted to cd form here. A recording of note for this essay is track 13 where she sings “Voi che Sapete” from Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, showing in real time how Mozart was sung in the bel canto style in the past.

10. Michotte, Edmond. *An Evening at Rossini’s in Beau-Sejour (Passy)*. Translated by Herbert Weinstock. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968.

<https://archive.org/details/richardwagnersvi0000mich/page/n15/mode/2up>.

Translated by Herbert Weinstock more than a century after the events mentioned in the book take place, *An Evening at Rossini’s in Beau-Sejour (Passy)* is a written memoir by Edmond Michotte, a 19th century pianist and composer and friend of Gioachino Rossini, one of the most well-known bel canto composers of the early 19th century. In this memoir, Michotte describes a small evening party between Rossini and some of his closest friends: Marietta Alboni (contralto) Prince Josef Poniatowski (composer), Jacque-Leopold Heugel (music critic), Pierre Scudo (tenor and journalist) and Michotte himself. At this evening party, after a performance of two songs and one aria by Alboni, Rossini lectures to the group about the concept of bel canto, its components, how it should be taught, and its decline. The evening ends with his telling the story of his failed premiere of *il Barbiere di Siviglia*, and his meeting Maria Malibran, one of the great singers of the 19th century. One of the most memorable quotes is Rossini’s exclamation: “Ahi noi! Perduto il bel canto della patria! (Alas for us, our homeland’s bel canto is lost).” Rossini that the components of bel canto is split into three components: the instrument (voice), the technique, and the style. He also believed one of the reasons the bel canto declined was the castrati’s disappearance. His main evidence included referring to a variety of training techniques that he taught as a voice teacher, and references to some of the great singers of the bel canto era such as Giuditta Pasta, Henriette Sontag, Isabella Colbran and Maria Malibran. These techniques and singers are also mentioned by both Cornelius Reid and Herman Klein but, unlike Klein, Rossini did not find the voice of Adelina Patti as good, although he said her voice was not bad. There are no mentions to Mozart in this book but within the accompanying book *Wagner’s Visit to Rossini*, Rossini talks about how he used to study *Le Nozze di Figaro* and considered him one of the great masters of musical composition, an interesting point to acknowledge.

11. Reid, Cornelius L. *Bel Canto: Principles and Practice*. New York: Coleman-Ross Company inc., 1950.

Written by Cornelius L. Reid, a prominent vocal pedagogue with a specialty in the concept of bel canto, this book is an in-depth exploration of the concept of bel canto: its definitions, its history, its components, and its decline through the prominence of opposing concepts. Cornelius Reid wrote this book because he believed that “it is imperative at this time to restate and re-examine those basic principles of tone production used so successfully in establishing what is now known as the Bel Canto tradition.” He defines bel canto as a method of singing or, as he terms it, “tone production” that was created in 17th and 18th century Italy and continued until the middle of the 19th century. This sentiment is shared by Herman Klein and Mathilde Marchesi whom he references several times throughout the book, although his text is more in-depth than Klein’s and less based around vocal exercises than Marchesi. Other evidence he uses for his analysis is primary source writings from the three composers/ singers/pedagogues in the 17th and 18th centuries: *Observations on the Florid Song* by Pietro Francesco Tosi, *Practical Reflections on the Reflections on the Figurative Art of Singing* by Giovanni Battista Mancini, and *Nuove Musiche* by Giulio Caccini. He also explores quotes from singers of the bel canto era like Farinelli and more modern pedagogues like Manuel Garcia and, as mentioned before, Marchesi. There are very few references to Mozart except for a reference to a famous singer who was a contemporary of Mozart and a quote by his father Leopold on vibrato.

12. Scherer, Barrymore Laurence. “Speaking of Style: Francisco Araiza Considers the Differences between Bel Canto and Mozart.” *Opera News*, February 2, 1991. Music Index.

Written for *Opera News* in 1992, New York music critic Barrymore Laurence Scherer interviews renowned Mexican tenor Francisco Araiza. Araiza particularly specializes in singing Mozart opera and was named Kammersänger of the Vienna Staatsoper in 1988. He also simultaneously gained renown in singing bel canto works by Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini. The first part of the interview, which is most relevant to this essay, discusses Araiza’s thoughts on how he sings Mozart versus his bel canto repertoire. The second half of the interview diverges into his thoughts on singing and performing lighter Wagner roles like Lohengrin and Parsifal. According to Araiza, Mozart style and bel canto style are completely different, a fervent contradiction to Herman Kleins’ 1923 book on the same subject. Araiza argues that Mozart’s music calls for “a kind of instrumental approach to vocal production” and that although bel canto requires “the singer maintain a similar flawless line, it offers a whole lot more freedom.” His main evidence includes comparisons of arias from *Die Zauberflöte*, *L’elisir d’amore*, and *Don Giovanni* and how he sings them according to their structure.

