

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

James Stark. *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. xxv, 325.

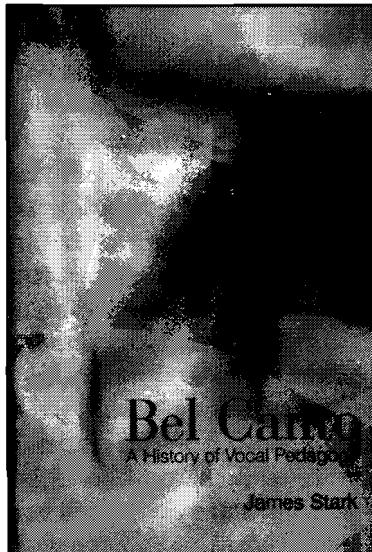
Few topics cause more discord than the pedagogy of the classical voice. Almost all singers of note (along with others of no reputation) teach the art of singing, and a great many have ventured into print. Battles between different schools of pedagogy have continued unabated since the earliest authors of instructive texts in the age of *bel canto* (literally "beautiful voice," a 19th century term retrospectively applied to that landmark of the first "Golden Age" of singing, the art of the castrato). Consequently a measure of success in any book about singing is the degree of balance and fairness shown to opposing views.

Singer, voice teacher, and musicologist James Stark's new investigation of the history of vocal pedagogy ranges from the early 17th century *bel canto* to contemporary vocal methods employing the fruits of modern scientific investigation into physiology and acoustics. Stark is clear and comprehensive in his survey of a wide variety of materials, balancing well-researched historical information with technical knowledge. He explains in the preface that his book is

intended primarily for voice students and teachers who may need a scholarly road map in order to navigate through the maze of materials that bear upon the subject, but it is equally suitable for anyone who has a serious interest in singers and singing.

The heart of the book is the vocal method of Manuel Garcia II, which Stark places at the centre of classical singing methods and sees validated by 20th century scientific enquiry.

His book is organized into seven chapters, an appendix, and a comprehensive and most useful list of references. The first five chapters deal with the effect of the vocal tract in resonance; vocal registers; breathing; and vibrato. Chapter Six describes specific vocal techniques in musical expressiveness, and Chapter Seven returns to the earlier definition of *bel*



canto, seeking to ally that definition with Garcia's method and consequent vocal pedagogies. The appendix details the results of the author's series of scientific experiments conducted in laboratories in Groningen over a period of several years.

In Chapter One, Garcia's familiar but much misunderstood term *coup de glotte* is examined and related to modern views of onset, processed phonation, and "flow" phonation, including a simple but accurate description of the structure of the larynx and the actions of the vocal folds and musculature in phonation. It is rare to find this complex information so clearly presented. As an apologist for Garcia, Stark substitutes the term "firm phonation" for *coup de glotte* and describes it as "the single most important pedagogical concept in the history of singing."

Chapter Two examines the resonance of the vocal tract, described as *chiaroscuro*, from its inception in the work of Mancini to the recent books of Richard Miller. Stark again ties the phenomenon to Garcia's glottal closure theories, stating that a firm onset will create a sound source rich in high frequency, enhanced and further brightened or darkened by adjusting the vocal tract shape to produce the light/dark professional voice quality. He notes with a degree of sarcasm that there is little scientific proof of the validity of resonance imagery in teaching, yet is fair-minded enough to observe that many successful singers have used this method.

Vocal registers present a significant challenge to the singer and teacher alike. Stark's conclusion is that more research is needed for a complete understanding of the subject, but holds that apparently Garcia was right in assigning different registers to "different mechanical principles." This chapter is a comprehensive collection of theories concerning vocal registers with copious quotations from major sources.

Chapter Four is a comprehensive historical survey of breathing pedagogies with particular emphasis on *appogia* and *lutte vocale* (the "vocal struggle"), and in this regard Lamperti is acknowledged as a vital source. There is also a most useful survey of modern research into subglottal pressure and neuro-muscular control systems.

In Chapter Five Stark approaches the matter of vibrato (or, as he rather strangely calls it, "vocal tremulousness") by embarking on a long description of the history of vibrato, or rather lack of it. He pays considerable attention to the early "period" when the modern opera singer's warm, wide vibrato was apparently not used. In consequence, the author ventures into a somewhat less than clear argument about what "vibrato" is. Again there is a comprehensive account of modern research, but in his

conclusion Stark is led into a backwater argument about historically accurate performance practice.

Chapter Six approaches the difficult subject of musical and vocal expressiveness. This material includes an interesting and perhaps useful analysis of historical "vocal matters." Obviously words and their expression in music constitute what some critics have called a "word-tone relationship" of central importance in singing. Stark extends this to a "word-note-tone relationship" and details the history of vocal idioms and their part in vocal expressiveness. There is once again a very useful compilation of sources with many definitions of Italian singing terms with quotations from major authors and critics. Unfortunately, the chapter concludes with a long exposition on the problem of what a singer's voice actually contributes to the emotion of an aria, with reference to Gluck's *Che faro*. This unnecessary elaboration of quite a simple point confuses rather than elucidates.

Finally, Chapter Seven returns to the original thesis of *bel canto* and Garcia, and Stark re-describes beautiful singing as it changes throughout the history of singing. This includes a description of the castrato phenomenon, which he relates interestingly to modern androgynous role-modelling in popular singing.

The appendix, which in my case fails to convince, relates Stark's own research to the earlier arguments about vocal technique and once again strives to use modern physiological analysis to justify Garcia's 19th century opinions (as redefined by Stark).

This book attempts a great deal and in large measure succeeds. It deserves to be a vital source in University libraries and singing teachers' studios and will surely be used as a text for many vocal pedagogy courses. In his preface Stark says his book is premature and overdue. It is in my opinion certainly overdue, and a fine contribution to the literature of vocal pedagogy.

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