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## An Investigation of Italian Singing Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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AN INVESTIGATION OF ITALIAN SINGING PRACTICES  
OF THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
the Graduate Faculty  
Central Washington State College

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Education

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by  
George C. White  
August 1964

THIS PAPER IS APPROVED AS MEETING THE PLAN 2  
REQUIREMENT FOR THE COMPLETION OF A RESEARCH  
PAPER.

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Joseph S. Haruda  
FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
Importance of the Study. . . . .	1
Limitations of the Study . . . . .	1
Definition of Terms Used . . . . .	1
Aria da capo . . . . .	1
Ariette. . . . .	2
Bel canto. . . . .	2
Canzonetta . . . . .	2
Castrati . . . . .	2
Coloratura . . . . .	2
Esclamazione . . . . .	2
Gorgia . . . . .	2
Messa di voce. . . . .	3
Pasticcio. . . . .	3
Recitative . . . . .	3
Solfeggio. . . . .	3
Stile rappresentativo. . . . .	3
II. CHARACTERISTICS OF SINGING STYLES. . . . .	4
Teaching Methods . . . . .	4
Forms . . . . .	10
Bel Canto. . . . .	15
Precepts of Bel Canto. . . . .	15

CHAPTER	PAGE
The Castrati . . . . .	17
Performance . . . . .	19
III. SUMMARY . . . . .	22
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	24

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Many contemporary documented sources have substantiated the claims of earlier scholars that singing in the eighteenth century reached such a high point of skill and virtuosity that it has never since been equaled (7:192).

#### I. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

If the above is true, it would seem that an investigation of the early singing schools would be of value to contemporary teachers and students of singing, in as much as various vocal theories seem to advocate differences of opinion. One author states:

On a reduced scale the singer who wishes to succeed in all kinds of vocal work must follow the course of history. He must first master the fundamental laws of vocal art, formulated by the early Italian schools of singing (11:230).

#### II. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to the Italian singing practices of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

#### III. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Aria da capo. In this form of aria, the first section

(A) is repeated in total after the second (B), thus leading to the ternary scheme A B A.

Ariette. This is a term applied to a small aria, usually in binary form and lacking the musical elaboration of the aria.

Bel canto. The term denotes the Italian vocal technique of the eighteenth-century; emphasis is on beauty of sound and brilliancy of performance rather than dramatic expression or Romantic emotion.

Canzonetta. These were short vocal pieces of the late sixteenth-century which were in a lighter vein, much in the character of a dance song.

Castrati. The names castrati and musicos were those applied to the unsexed male singers of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (3:801).

Coloratura. This term is applied to the rapid passages, runs, trills and similar virtuoso-like material, particularly in vocal melodies of the eighteenth and nineteenth century operatic arias.

Esclamazione. A term used to denote a combination of crescendo and diminuendo which demanded a perfect command of the breath (5:28).

Gorgia. This referred to the late sixteenth-century method of improvised coloraturas used in the performance of motets, masses, madrigals, etc. (2:300).

Messa di voce. A special vocal technique of the eighteenth century bel canto, consisting of a gradual crescendo and decrescendo over a sustained tone (2:441).

Pasticcio. The literal translation is "pie" or "pastry" and has been used to describe a musical work, usually operatic, which includes contributions of various composers.

Recitative. This is a declamatory vocal style created to imitate the natural inflections of human speech.

Solfeggio. Vocal exercises sung to a vowel or to the syllables, these being used instead of a text.

Stile rappresentativo. This was a type of recitative associated with the monodic style of the early seventeenth century whose purpose was to heighten expression and represent feelings; a dramatic style of recitative (2:710).



## CHAPTER II

### CHARACTERISTICS OF SINGING STYLES

#### I. TEACHING METHODS

Although singing schools have been identified as early as the third and fourth centuries in the Scholae Cantorum, important teaching methods seem to have been instituted about the time of Guido d'Arezzo (1000 A.D.) with the employment of his solfeggio system. Later, choirmasters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries found this system adaptable for training choirs vocally, in addition to learning the rudiments of music. Such aids promoted a standard course of vocal instruction that proved itself superior to previous haphazard methods. The course, using syllables at intervals of seconds and thirds, attempted to obtain the best quality of the voice with clear and free delivery. When the intervals of the scale were mastered, series of vocal exercises became a part of the teaching material. Group instruction was popular.

Such methods were handed down from one generation to another until masters of the seventeenth century, employing this knowledge, developed a system of vocal technique that was destined to bring forth "some of the greatest teachers and singers the world has ever known" (12:4-5).

The severity of training in these early times is described by Bontempi at a papal singing school about 1624:

One hour was spent on the messa di voce (placing the voice) by the practice of a controlled crescendo-diminuendo effect on long, sustained notes together with the singing of intervals of special difficulty for the acquirement of richness of tone and true attack.

The second hour was given to the practice of the trill; the third to flexibility exercises and rapid roulades and, lastly, an hour was given to the "cultivation of taste and expression", that is in the vocal ornamentation which was expected of singers at that time.

All this was done under the watchful eye of the teacher, performed before a mirror to prevent untoward grimaces and facial distortions (3:812).

With the advent of monody by the Italian composer Caccini in the latter part of the sixteenth century, there developed a need for a corresponding growth of the vocal art (3:801). The system used was only the accumulation and perfection of the techniques of the earlier choral schools and Italy was recognized as the center of instruction. These techniques, used by the leading teachers, became known as the Italian method (12:5).

Beauty of tone was considered as the first requisite in singing. Beginning studies were based on correct intonation and singing musically. This was accomplished by employing a type of solfeggio called accentus. Two and three voice solfeggi were used for training in rhythm, attack and extension of the voice as well as to insure a smooth legato line (12:12).

The student began by developing the middle part of his voice first and much time was spent on finding the natural basic quality of the voice so that the singer could produce that quality at will. Pure vowel sounds were used (some teachers advocating the use of the open vowels (A and O) only and some using both open and closed (I and U)) at varying degrees of dynamic level with little attention being paid to volume of tone; it was taken for granted that if the voice developed in "beauty and fullness", the volume would increase (12:12).

After the middle part of the range was firmly established, range was extended in both directions by the use of scale passages on different vowel sounds, sung softly, taking the voice three or four notes above and below the middle octave. Tosi, a famous eighteenth-century teacher, also gave exercises to acquire agility, starting slowly and increasing the speed as the singer's flexibility increased (12:21).

The study of intervals was used and the esclamazione, referred to by some teachers of the period as messaggio di voce, was considered most important for equalizing the registers of the voice (5:28). Ornaments and divisions (runs) were taught after the esclamazione, and Caccini, borrowing from the Renaissance treatises on diminution, classified these

ornaments into five groups:

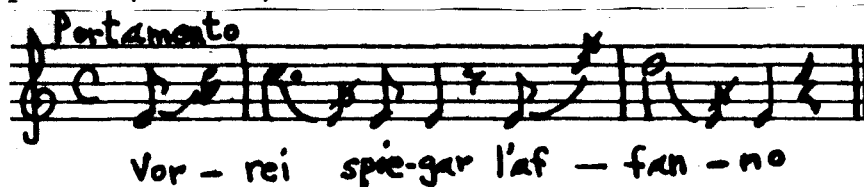
1. Passagi or scale passages.

Example 1 (2:214)



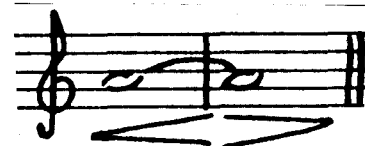
2. Accenti - breaking up the full length of the note by portamenti.

Example 2 (14:181)



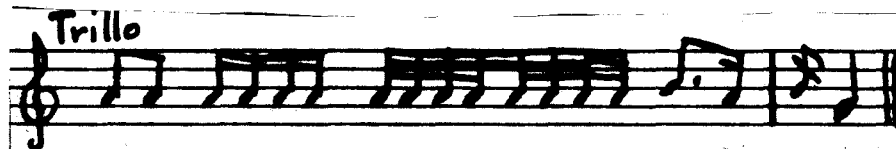
3. Esclamazione.

Example 3 (5:28)



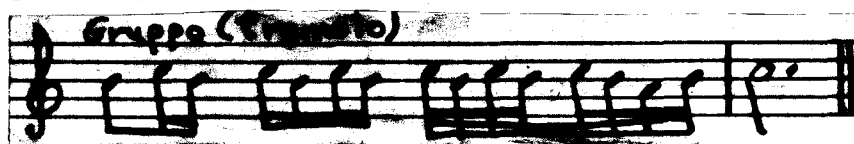
4. Gruppo. The gruppo of Caccini is referred to as trillo in the Harvard Dictionary and consists of the repetition of the same tone with changing rhythm.

Example 4 (2:543)



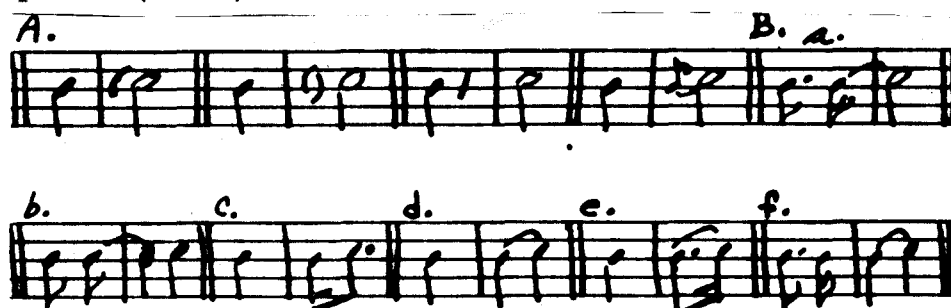
5. Trillo. This consisted of notes of changing pitch and was also referred to as gruppo and later called the tremolo.

## Example 5 (2:543)



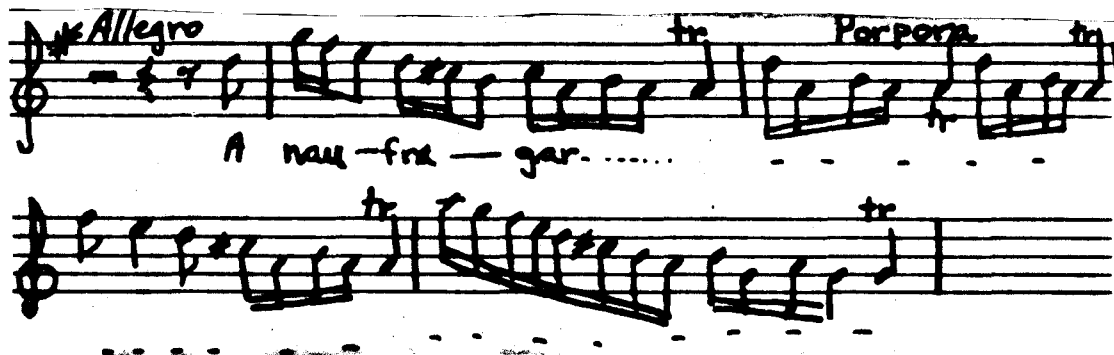
In addition, the Lombardi rhythm ( *f* *f* ) further enhanced the style of singing by its sobbing effect (5:28) and Tosi mentions the teaching of the appoggiatura with various methods of performance (12:21):

## Example 6 (2:42)



Early teachers established a system based on a progressive pattern of exercises. In addition to the vocalises, music theory was taught and some required the playing of the clavichord (12:14). Many masters were famous singers themselves and some were composers, writing their own exercises as evidenced in the following excerpt written by Porpora:

## Example 7 (3:803)



Teachers who left written vocal instructions include Bovicelli (1594-1660), Caccini (1560?-1615?), Zacconi (16th Century), J. Cruger (1598-1662), Severi (died 1630), Mazzochi (1585-1646), Tosi (1647-1727) and Mancini (1716-1800). Although these teachers span two centuries, they apparently were in agreement on nine fundamental essentials of the "Old Italian Method" (6:21):

1. The development of the voice requires a number of years of intensive effort. Bovicelli insisted on five years - Porpora reportedly taught Caffarelli for six. This meant regular daily work with the master.

2. Common practice was to begin the training in the middle of the voice. Caccini advocated the use of six notes for the first part of the training (for sopranos, F above middle C and ascend a sixth). The exercises were simple diatonic ones on open vowels. Rapid scales were not used at first and opinion was divided as to the wisdom of using sustained tones.

3. Forced tones were avoided; singing too loud or soft was considered a dangerous procedure.

4. The importance of singing sustained tones was stressed. Some said at the beginning of study and some said facility in scale passages was necessary before sustained tones could be safely attempted. Messa di voce was considered a splendid aid in developing vocal skill.

5. Agility of the voice, singing of florid passages and embellishments of all kinds, was one of the last phases of training to be attempted.

6. The voice was said to have certain changes of quality or register. Mancini believed there were two, head and chest; Tosi believed there were three in the soprano; chest, throat and falsetto (the last beginning at C or D above middle C). It was believed that the voice should be trained so that there was no perceptible change in registers, but no specific instructions are given as to the procedure.

7. Clarity of diction was stressed, but again, specific directions are not given.

8. Sincere interpretation was highly regarded.

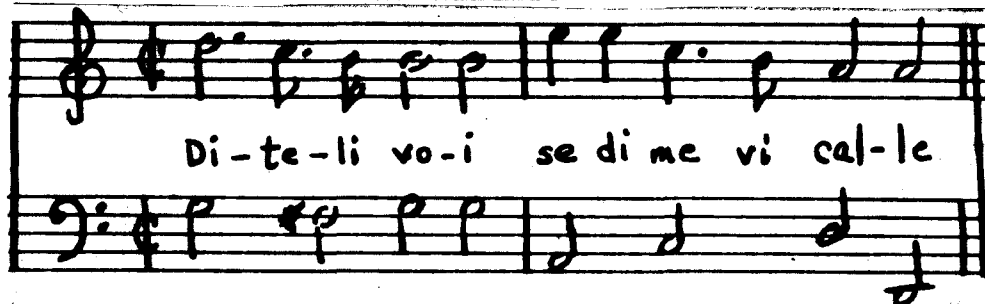
9. Little was said about breathing other than the singer should stand with good posture and breathe easily (6:22).

## II. FORMS

The emergence of the stile rappresentativo, about 1600, has often been regarded as the most important turning point in the entire history of music. With the publishing of Caccini's Nuove Musiche (New Music), in 1601, this new type of musical recitative, brought about by a group of Florentine

intellectuals interested in reviving the style of the Greek drama, became established as a revolt against the contrapuntal forms of the previous era. It was felt that the use of solo voice with simple chordal accompaniment would make the meaning of the texts clear. It was in the operas of Caccini and Peri that the recitative assumed its definite style (5:25-26).

Example 8, Caccini: Nuove Musiche (10:242).



Ornamentation, a hold-over from the Renaissance ideal of florid song, was employed when the composer wished to emphasize certain words or important ideas of the text. This practice, referred to as gorgia, was the basis for the later cadenza passages employed in the eighteenth century (5:27).

Monteverdi, perhaps the first real genius of operatic composition, realized that recitative was monotonous, so he interspersed them with choruses, duets and trios as well as some instrumental interludes (10:253). The music, being subservient to the spoken word, resulted in much rhythmic flexibility; thus, Monteverdi recommended that some of his music be performed senza battuta (without measure) for more "affective delivery" (9:45).



Other terms employed in the early collections applicable to solo singing included ariette and canzonette. Two books by A. Brunetti, titled Scherzi, Arie, Canzonette and Madrigali (1618), included compositions in strophic form. Strophic variations, termed arie by early Baroque composers, employed the same bass line for all stanzas with a varied melody (9:53).

In 1626, Mazzocchi, in the preface to his opera La Catena d'Adone, spoke of the tedium of the recitativo, pointing up the reaction of the middle Baroque composers towards a distinction between the recitative and aria, and resulting in the Bel Canto style in which the music of the aria was coordinated, rather than subordinated, to the words. With such an alteration, the recitative assumed a more rapid and less melodic character known as recitativo secco or "dry" recitative as opposed to the simple Bel Canto melodies of lilting flow and short phrases (9:45). Example 9, Mozart: Don Giovanni (10:266).

Don Giovanni.                      Leporello.

Lep-o-rel-lo, where are you? I'm here to my misfortune, and

Later, a distinction was made between the recitativo secco and the recitativo stromentato, the latter type employing an instrumental accompaniment.

Example 10, Handel: The Messiah (8:7).

Com-fort ye, com-----

The arioso, a style between the recitative and aria, illustrates the "roundness and coherence" that occurs in melody when the accompaniment is set in a definite rhythmic pattern (13:21).

Example 11, Bach: Cantata No. 61 (13:21).

*Largo*  
Sie-he, sie-he! Ich ste-ke vor der Tür und Klop-fe an

Cavalli, in his opera Giasone (1649), foreshadowed the aria da capo by returning to the first part of the aria at the end. With such composers as Handel, Scarlatti and Pergolesi, the aria da capo assumed various types: aria cantabile, slow and flowing and usually pathetic in style; aria di portamento, slow also but with stronger rhythm and wider intervals; aria parlante was declamatory; aria di mezzo carattere was an air of character with a fusion of styles; aria di bravura, in which every possible opportunity was given the singer for display of agility; aria a' imitazione, various types of descriptive pieces such as warlike airs with trumpet obbligato, hunting songs with horn accompaniment, echo songs with obbligato flute passages or vocal trills suggestive of the warbling of birds; aria all'unisono in which the instruments supported the voice in unisons or octaves; aria concertata, similar to the aria di mezzo carattere or parlante with a more elaborate accompaniment and aria senza accompagnamento, an aria without accompaniment. The cavatina, a shorter and simpler style than the aria generally in one section without repetition, was also used (9:47).

The accumulated styles of the seventeenth-century composers became known as the standard Italian opera tradition used in the opera houses throughout Italy in the

eighteenth century and aria da capo became defined as a purely musical form, distinctly opposed to the dramatic principles of the early opera. Composers, realizing that these symmetrical tunes pleased the public, made them a vehicle for pure vocal display, throwing overboard any pretense of dramatic sincerity (10:266).

### III. BEL CANTO

The Bel Canto Period (1600-1775) means beautiful singing (12:15). The term has been used to describe the style of singing used in the Baroque era and techniques employed have been carefully outlined by those authors who adhere to bel canto as a method of singing.

#### Precepts of Bel Canto

Precepts of the system were a very simple set of rules:

1. Sing with open throat.
2. Sing the tone forward.
3. Support the voice.
4. Sing on the breath.

To further explain, the throat should be open in a natural way without direct muscular control and the tone determined by a straight-forward characteristic of delivery. Support of the tone should be received by means of the ear and not by developing any particular muscles so that the best tones

seem to "float on the air" with the impression that the breath was exhaled in an easy manner, much as normal breathing (12:17-18).

Ross, in his book Secrets of Singing, discusses some of these ideas in making a comparison of several different schools of singing:

#### Pedagogical Concepts

1. The objective of vocal training should be to develop in the mind of the student the right concept of a beautiful tone.
2. With the singing voice as the tonal output of the singer.
3. Based on vocalization, registrations, and vowel purity.

#### Breathing Concepts

1. The art of breathing rests fundamentally upon the art of tone production.
2. Let the beauty of the voice breathe for you.
3. The breath pressure should not be regulated or controlled because of any necessity for saving it, but solely for the purpose of meeting the energy requirements demanded by pitch and intensity.
4. The old Italian method emphasized natural breathing.

#### Phonation Concepts

1. Tonal beauty is vowel purity and clarity.
2. The art of singing lies in the avoidance of rigidity and the adoption of the open throat.

#### Articulation Concepts

1. Sing on the vowels.
2. Everything must be made subordinate to a free-flowing legato line, with every vowel perfectly formed and executed.
3. Carry the voice from vowel to vowel "like a string of pearls", without disturbing or

interrupting the flow of sound. Consonants should be quick, firm, and distinct, but not distracting.

#### Quality Concepts

1. Resonance is one of the primary goals of every known system of voice training.
2. There should be one resonance quality throughout the voice.

#### Dynamic Concepts

1. Seek quality; quantity will come.
2. Quality strengthens the voice more than volume.
3. Practice slowly with a light vocal quality.
4. *Messa di voce* is the only means of obtaining mastery of dynamics.
5. Never "build on the soft" unless the emphasis is actually being placed on "building".

#### Range Concepts

1. If you hear a beautiful tone, your range will increase.
2. After the middle octave is firmly established, the next is to extend the range in both directions.
3. A blended, seemingly one-register line of quality is the ultimate aim (14:27-36).

### IV. THE CASTRATI

Since much of the vocal music was sacred from the time of Gregorian chant through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the practice of using only men, with occasional help of boy singers, was adhered to. With the advent of increased vocal ranges, such as the employment of the bass voice in the Flemish School around 1450, high melodic lines increased in importance. Boy singers were used to carry these parts, so the problem of finding the best possible

singers for the papal service was accentuated by the changing voice of these boys when they reached the age of puberty (2:682). Due to this, the custom of preventing the voice from changing by artificial means was introduced, a practice which flourished in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Boys with musical talent and beautiful voices were selected by teachers and directors of church choirs to be prepared for careers as professional singers (12:29). By the end of the seventeenth century, these singers were the usual feature in Italian churches, in spite of papal decree which frowned on the practice. They were used almost exclusively in Italian opera, beginning with Monteverdi's Orfeo (1608) (7:196).

The mores of the times which prevented the use of women on the stage of early opera, found the castrati in both male and female roles; however, in the eighteenth century when many fine women singers were used in the opera, the castrati still held his ground by reason of his sheer vocal superiority. He had been educated from early childhood in the famous conservatories of the Italian cities; this training giving him a solid grounding in musicianship and "really miraculous vocal technique" (7:196).

This was the period of such great male sopranos as Farinelli, Cafarelli, Senesino, Gizziello and others whose

popularity gained such heights that they became the "adored monarchs of the musical world". Operas were often written with a particular singer in mind, with the result that they became a showpiece for the display of vocal abilities (10:270). Though the voices, known as voci bianchi (white voices), were less sweet and expressive than those of women, they were more powerful and flexible, and the quality often remained for as long as forty years (7:196).

### Performance

Inasmuch as the melodic line was of great importance in the eighteenth-century opera, plots became subservient to the display of the singer's virtuosity (1:374). When coloratura is mentioned today, it is usually associated with the soprano; in Baroque opera, all voices, including alto and bass, were expected to be proficient in the art of florid song (6:20). Singers were judged on their ability to introduce various kinds of embellishments in the repeated sections of the aria, implying that they had to have some creative ability as well as vocal (1:374).

The singer's individual performances made such impressions on the public that they became the ruling power of the opera, prescribing rules to composers in regard to the number and type of arias to be performed, who would sing them, and the style employed in their composition.



every performer was to have at least one aria in each act, but no one might have two arias in succession; no aria could be followed immediately by another of the same type, even though performed by a different singer; the subordinate singers must have fewer and less important arias than the stars; and so on (7:186).

Customs of Italian opera prescribed six persons; three men and three women. The men were always sopranos or tenors and the hero was usually an artificial soprano. The use of the baritone voice was unknown but occasionally a bass part was written for one of the men (10:272).

The singer, when engaged for an opera performance, would either improvise his own florid passages or have them written out by his teacher.

Example 12, Handel: Serse (7:194).

(written)

Om . . . . . bnd mai

(Performed)

tr. ①

Continuo

If a particular aria was disliked, one from a different opera was inserted or a new one composed, sometimes by a different composer from the original work. This was the style of the pasticcio opera and it grew to such lengths that an

opera could be seen in which each act could have been written by a different composer, with the plots having little coherence and unity (7:187).

The power of the singers was extended to such a ridiculous state that Tosi criticized:

Every air has (at least) three Cadences, that are all three final. Generally speaking, the Study of the Singers of the present Times consists in terminating the Cadence of the first Part with an overflowing of Passages and Divisions at Pleasure, and the Orchestre waits; in that of the second the Dose is encreased, and the Orchestra grows tired; but on the last Cadence, the Throat is set a going, like a Weather-cock in a Whirlwind, and and Orchestre yawns (7:193).

Rewards for a successful vocal career were so great that parents would offer a boy for emasculation at the slightest sign of a promising voice, with the result that Dr. Burney stated:

these pathetic creatures could be found in every town in Italy without any voice at all, or at least without one sufficient to compensate for such a loss (2:196).

These criticisms, in addition to the operatic reforms of such composers as Jommelli, Traetta and Gluck, who strove to break down the rigidity of the old opera framework by emphasizing dramatic sincerity, brought about a decline in the popularity of the castrati in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Rossini and Donizetti were the last important composers to write for these singers (7:196).

## CHAPTER III

### SUMMARY

One might argue at this point as to the validity of the term bel canto, since beautiful singing has been the concern of most vocal teachers from the beginning of the art to the present day. In comparing the foregoing precepts of bel canto to the conclusions reached previously on teaching methods, there is a great similarity. This similarity tends to make the writer agree with the statement:

Bel canto, the beautiful singing of every type of vocal music, including florid music, is an end result....It is a result, not a method (4:12).

It is true that vocal theories of today are many and varied. Perhaps the straight-forward, simple approach of the early Italian method, emphasizing a natural and unforced type of tone production, would help to alleviate some of the confusion of present theories. The flexibility and command of the vocal processes displayed by early singers, would certainly be of value to the singer of today. On the other hand, the bel canto style embraces only one style of singing; today's singers are required to perform various styles from all periods and schools of music. In addition, the large orchestras, pitch precision required by contemporary music, and dramatic demands made upon present performers make an exclusive return to the Baroque somewhat unrealistic.

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