Bel Canto Singing from Chinese Perspective

Zi Qi Yang

School of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, Zhejiang, China

Abstract: Western Bel Canto has always been literally translated as "Bel Canto singing" in Chinese, but in terms of historical development, Bel Canto not only refers to a singing method, but also a school, a style and an artistic concept. Based on the literature, this paper makes a historical review of the multi-concept orientation of Bel Canto, tracing the origin and development of the meaning in the history of Western vocal music. Based on the cultural differences between Chinese and Western music, this paper studies the Bel canto singing, European Bel canto singing and Chinese Bel canto singing from the perspective of "insiders" and "outsiders".

Keywords: Bel canto singing, Bel Canto school, Florence group.

1. What is Bel Canto Singing

It's the Italian word Bel Canto. The literal translation should be "to sing beautifully", which sometimes also means "beautiful song". Bel Canto is not only a method of sounding or singing, but also a style and genre of singing. The same word is translated as "Bel canto singing" when referring to the former case, and "Bel canto school" when referring to the latter case. More appropriately, it should be translated into "American singing method" and "American singing school".

Bel canto singing was created for the singing of the narrative and lyric musicals created at that time, so bel canto singing can be said to be the product of opera, is the product of Renaissance humanism. Bel Canto is not only a singing technique, a singing style, but also the embodiment of certain aesthetic principles and artistic thoughts. The ancient Italian Bel Canto school should first be regarded as a school of literary thought and artistic ideal, and then as a school of singing.

At the end of the 16th century in Florence, Italy, there was a group of humanist artists who often met in the palace of the "protectors of literature and art" Count Baldi and Count Corsi, and formed a like-minded group. Explore art theory and carry out various experimental creative practices. Their main intention is to combine music and drama to enhance the artistic appeal of musical works. They believed that the simple solo melody itself would bring life to the lyrics without complicated polyphonic counterpoint or decoration, so they concentrated on creating beautiful, simple, elegant, and moving melodies and arias. However, they do not exclude the use of quick flowery phrases, especially at the end of a piece or phrase. They think it can and should be used as long as it meets the needs of the content. They yearn for the artistic achievements and principles of ancient Greece, that is, the close combination of poetry, drama and music, and consider the Greek tragedy as an example of a comprehensive genre. It is also believed that polyphonic choral music covers the lyrics and lacks the vitality of image expression. Therefore, they decided to restore the recitative tone of the ancient Greek tragedies, and composed music with solo singing as the main means of expression.

In 1602, Caccini of the Group of Florence Rosa published a collection of vocal music, The New Music, in the preface, he explained the reasons for publishing this collection, he said: "When I see many works are broken and deformed by polyphony and decorative notes; When I see how badly music has been used to insert long, quick flowery phrases; When I also saw the indiscriminate abuse of the force of the music, the poor pronunciation of the words, and the improper use of trill, echo, and other grace notes, I therefore, with the encouragement of my friends, thought it necessary to publish my own compositions and to state in the preface some of my ideas for the promotion of monophonic singing." In the preface, he argued against "polyphonic music, which makes it impossible to understand the content of the lyrics, breaking the unity and rhythm, sometimes lengthening and sometimes shortening the syllables, the tone values, and distorting the lyrics to suit the needs of counterpoint." He also quoted the Greek philosopher Plato: "In music the words are first, the rhythm second, and the sound last." This is the principle and theoretical basis of the Bel Canto school's creation and singing. Caccini not only put forward the above artistic principles, but also put them into practice, and embodied them perfectly in his creative practice. The monophonic madrigals and arias in his vocal collection The New Music were an attempt to create a new vocal style, a kind of solo song accompanied by a numerical bass, an experimental preparation for later opera creation. Carcini's "Amarilli" is a classic of the Bel Canto school.

This kind of school, which emphasizes solo singing as the main means of performance, pays attention to the distinction of musical intensity, the exquisite pronunciation of words, the accuracy of grace notes, and the beauty of musical sentences, and takes the artistic theory of the Florence Rosa Group as its ideological system and creative principles, is the "Bel Canto School" and "American singing School".

2. The Origin of Bel Canto Singing

2.1 Why did Bel Canto Singing Appear

In order to imitate the recitative tone of Greek tragedy, Perry, Caccini and Monteverdi created a novel recitative tune, the recitative tone. It is different from the singing and melodic arias, and its melody is closely combined with the lyric content, emotional changes and the tone fluctuations of the language. According to the tradition of opera creation, aria is usually used as the focus of lyricism, and narration is used to develop the plot. In addition to narration and aria, there are also chorus and chorus in opera.

With the advent of the recitative, there arose the question of
what voice to sing with. The use of children's voices or falsetto contradicted the principles of the Florentine group's artistic creation, so they broke away from the constraints of conservative tradition and decided to adopt a natural voice, with men singing the male parts and women singing the female parts, in small venues such as the earl's house or the non-church.

In order for the recitation to have the same effect as the tragic recitation performed by the ancient Greeks on the square, weak falsettoes cannot be used, and sufficient breathing support and full and bright resonance, clear and authentic articulation, and a loud and distant sound quality are needed. In order to replace the majority chorus with solo singing, it is necessary to improve resonance to achieve sufficient volume. These prompted the members of the Florentine group not only to create, but also to study and solve the problem of how to sing. Therefore, based on the experience of predecessors, especially Wikipedia's three acts only for solo singing in the 16th century romantic opera "Anfipanaso", they developed the bel canto singing method.

2.2 Why was it born in Italy

Why did bel canto not originate in other countries but in Italy? Some people say that Italy is surrounded by the sea on three sides, with a pleasant climate that is suitable for developing a voice; Some people also say that Italian language has pure vowels and is most suitable for singing; Some people believe that Europeans have large noses, so their nasal cavities resonate well; Even some people have measured and studied the curvature and length of Europeans' hard lids to prove that they developed bel canto singing due to their different physiological characteristics. These explanations may seem reasonable, but they are not. Britain and Japan are surrounded by the sea on all sides, which has not led to the development of bel canto singing. Italian language has existed since ancient times, why did not bel canto develop before the 17th century? When it comes to differences in the physiological structure of ethnic groups, many excellent singers have also emerged among Asians and Africans. Therefore, the above explanations are difficult to convince.

From the perspective of historical development, from the second half of the 14th century to the early 17th century was the period when European capitalism sprouted and developed within feudal societies, and Italy was the country with the earliest embryonic stage of European capitalism. Venice in Italy is a port adjacent to Eastern Arab countries. As early as the end of the 10th century, it became a wealthy city engaged in Eastern and Western trade and slave trade. From 1095 to 1270, feudal lords in Europe, instigated by the Pope, launched the Crusade War, which destroyed the Byzantine regime of the Eastern Roman Empire and the monopoly of Arab merchants in Eastern commerce, while also bringing about cultural exchange between the East and the West. At this time, European port cities such as Venice, Genoa, Marseille, and Barcelona began to rise, establishing a commercial monopoly on the Mediterranean coast and Middle Eastern countries, thus becoming increasingly prosperous, and correspondingly promoting the development of natural sciences and literature.

Florence, Italy, was famous for producing wool and textile fabrics in the early 14th century and had initially formed a capitalist production mode. There were many handcraft workshops and over a hundred banks, with the Baltic family being the strongest among them. Starting from the mid-19th century, the Medici family engaged in a wider range of financial activities, expanding capital, and as a result, the wealthy Medici became the uncrowned king of Florence. He adopted a strategy of soliciting and slightly reducing taxes domestically to consolidate his position. At the same time, luxurious palaces and public buildings were built to promote art, attracting many famous architects, sculptors, painters, poets, etc., making Florence the cultural center of Italy and Europe at that time. At that time, Florence and other Italian cities were filled with talented people. Since the 14th century, there have been poets such as Dante and his "Divine Comedy", Petraca's sonnet lyric poetry, Boccaccio's "Decameron", and painter Giotto's oil painting. From the 15th century to the early 17th century, talents emerged one after another, such as painters Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, Raphael, and Michelangelo; Poets such as Ariostor, Tasso, and utopian socialist Campanella sparked a magnificent Renaissance movement.

It was in this fertile soil and historical background that opera and bel canto emerged, driven by the trend of thought in the Renaissance. Therefore, it can be said that bel canto is a product of opera, opera is a product of the Renaissance, and the Renaissance was a reflection of the economic foundation of European capitalism in the superstructure at that time. It is not surprising that bel canto, or the school of bel canto, has emerged in the cultural center of Europe - Italy. This is an inevitable result of the historical trajectory.

2.3 How to Form Bel Canto Singing Method

From the epic recitation of ancient Greece and the hymns of ancient Rome, to the polyphonic choir of the Middle Ages, and to the lyrical musicals of the early 17th century, the form of singing has gone through a process of developing from solo to choir, and then to more advanced solo. At the beginning of the 17th century, the "bel canto" solo was no longer the kind of solo that narrated stories and recited poetry. It had become a new school of thought, a more expressive vocal art.

The singing style of "bel canto" is actually inseparable from the musical terms "sweet, soft" or "amoroso", and can even be said to be synonymous. There are two reasons for the formation of this style.

The first reason is the theme. Under the impact of the humanistic trend of thought, the feudal, theological, and ascetic strange orange has been broken; As a result of "personality liberation", love has become a strong and prominent theme in literature and art (including music). The music works of this period extensively reflect the themes of love, such as longing, admiration, sorrow, joy of encountering, pain of falling in love, elegant demeanor, seductive posture, noble sentiments, pure friendship, sweet memories, and happy longing. In order to express these contents, a unique style is naturally formed in singing: it cannot be rough or forceful, but can only be soft and sweet, delicate and stretchy, gentle and serene. These factors are precisely related to relaxed and natural vocalization, which forms the singing style of bel
canto based on relaxation, nature, beauty, and softness. At the same time, precisely because this beautiful and gentle singing style dominates, it also prevents shouting and shouting from exhaustion, which is beneficial for protecting the vocal cords and extending the singing life.

Another reason for forming the singing style of bel canto is the skill. Firstly, in terms of composition techniques. Due to the relatively simple harmony at that time, I had not yet mastered the complex dissonance; The rhythm and color changes are also relatively flat; The musical means required to describe tragic passions have not yet emerged, making it difficult to express dramatic conflicts and contradictions. They are only good at expressing harmonious, peaceful, clear or slightly sad emotions and content. Secondly, in terms of instruments and instrumental accompaniment techniques. At that time, the instruments were not yet developed, and the performance techniques of instrumental music were even more backward (the use of tremolo and simplified chords in string music only started from Monteverdi). Not only could they not play the magnificent and dramatic power of modern orchestras playing symphonies or modern operas, but they also could not match the singing techniques of human voices, so they could not play too many dramatic accompaniment effects. The third and more important technical reason is in terms of vocal techniques. At that time, the main requirement for bel canto was to have a rich, bright, resonant, and lyrical sound quality, and to sing smoothly and coherently; The sound should be soft, accurate, and lightweight; During singing, there should be no strong stress or extremely loud volume. However, techniques such as the intense and contrasting dramatic timbre and volume changes in late 19th century opera performances were not yet known at that time; The so-called "close" singing method has not yet been discovered, and the problem of male voice's high pitch has not been solved, and only natural or falsetto singing is used for high pitch. At that time, the highest range of the works did not exceed the g-tone, with a focus on the beautiful mid range as the main expressive sound area, so it was only suitable for expressing lyrical and gentle emotions and content.

3. Chinese Bel Canto Singing Method

In the 1940s, bel canto singing was introduced to China with the return of Chinese vocal students studying abroad and the arrival of some Russian singers and vocal teachers, represented by Huang Youkui, Yu Yiyi, Zhou Xiaoyan, and Lang Yuxiu. In the 1950s, Bulgarian vocal professor Cherkin gave two lectures and one demonstration teaching in music colleges (90% of art colleges offer bel canto methods and good singing state, it has gradually established the basic attributes of voice training methods in singing. It is a beautiful "comprehensive singing" style that combines Western European classical music as the main body with Chinese local music (including academic ethnic singing). This singing style emphasizes the integration of Chinese and Western music and artistic fusion, and belongs to the singing method used by professional singers. From the perspective of social influence and value status, as it belongs to the mainstream part of contemporary music culture (professional groups such as national opera houses and orchestras mainly focus on bel canto singing), this singing style accounts for an absolute large proportion of concert performances in concert halls, and is also an important teaching content in vocal music teaching in music colleges (90% of art colleges offer bel canto singing majors). As a result, it has received high attention from the industry, and this aesthetic "comprehensive singing" style has shown a vigorous development trend in contemporary Chinese vocal art, becoming a new highlight of contemporary Chinese vocal art.

4. Conclusion

Bel Canto is a product of the European Renaissance, as well as an opera, and a product of historical and cultural trajectories. Its meanings include bel canto, bel canto, bel canto school, bel canto school, beautiful singing, beautiful songs, etc. It is a term with multiple meanings and interpretations. Bel Canto has different stylistic characteristics during different periods.
of development in the history of European vocal art; After its introduction to China, the combination of Chinese language tones led to the development of bel canto. Bel Canto is an important product in the development history of vocal art both domestically and internationally, and research on it still needs to be deepened.

References
