Rehearsal Break

Vocal Versatility in Bel Canto Style

by

Ethan Sperry and Mary Goetze

When searching for repertoire, today's choral director has an abundance of choices, and increasingly the choices include music from beyond the traditional choral style that is rooted in Europe. Historically, when songs from non-European or American cultures were brought into the choral repertory, it was assumed that they would be sung with bel canto technique, especially since they were written in the standard ranges for SATB on treble and bass clefs. Today, a wide range of vocal models—both live and recorded—are close at hand, sometimes living within our communities, sometimes on recordings that accompany scores, and always on the internet.

When exploring music of cultures beyond western art music, we now can know how the songs are sung in their cultural context—the style and the vocal timbre. We are then confronted with questions: Should we ask bel canto-trained singers to approximate the timbre of other styles of singing? How do other vocal styles differ from bel canto? How could we as choral conductors teach an unfamiliar vocal technique? Will approximation adversely affect their hard-won vocal technique and our choir's sound?

In this article, the authors will attempt to answer these questions based on their exploration of repertory from around the globe. Each has taught numerous songs from diverse cultures, often without using notation, and always with a person or recording of singers native to the culture. While working with college-age students, the authors asked the students to approximate the vocal quality; the exploration was found to be rewarding musically and vocally, and most importantly culturally, for the process led to meaningful connections with the people of these cultures. Many students, especially those majoring in voice performance, attest to the fact that this vocal exploration has enhanced their bel canto singing. This should come as no surprise, as one of the most effective pedagogies for learning what something *is* comes from learning clearly what it is *not*.

The Why

Bringing a composer's musical intentions to life is at the heart of what it means to produce a successful Classical concert. Because many stylistic elements are not found on the printed musical score, especially in early music, Classical musicians pride themselves (deservedly) on the wide body of research that informs accurate performance practice. And Western music notation is much better at representing pitch, rhythm, and dynamics than it is at notating timbre. Timbre is, after all 25 percent of the essence of any sound (the other 75 percent being frequency, duration, and intensity).

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Just as singers change the timbre of their vocal production to suit Renaissance, Baroque, or Romantic music, we believe that the timbres that choral ensembles choose when singing non-western music are crucial to performing an accurate and respectful performance of music from another culture. After all, we wouldn't want the timbre of our music changed. In our work we have found that it is possible to approximate these sounds without negative consequences, and the exploration becomes a broadening experience both vocally and pedagogically. This exploration demonstrates our respect for the music itself and the culture it comes from.

The How

The exploration of vocal styles starts with a rubric of what bel canto singing is. While bel canto means many things to many different people, the majority of modern voice teachers agree that the following techniques are essential to creating the healthy sound that has been associated with western Classical singing:

- Onset of tone from the breath
- Lowered laryngeal position
- "Forward" placement of tone
- Blending of vocal registers to maximize range with a preference for head register

Other vocal styles can differ from bel canto by altering one or more of the variables above or by using special techniques not used in bel canto.

As we discuss methods for understanding how unfamiliar timbres may differ from bel canto, it is important to remember that the process is a simple exploration. Don't be afraid to let your ear be your only guide; invoke your natural imitative response and leave your previous training behind for a while. Work with a native singer or a good recording and compare yourself to the model. Pay special attention to matching the vowel color you are hearing *exactly*. Most of the changes described below result from physical changes, but the result we hear can often be described in terms of a different vowel.

Do not underestimate the joy that can be found in working with native singers from other cultures. What a wonderful experience it can be to bring guests into your rehearsal rooms to share their voice, their music, and their culture with you and with your students. Given the diversity in our communities and universities, you may have the perfect person in your choir already! If a native singer is not available, there are many wonderful recordings available to use as a guide (see page 65 for recording suggestions).

Since each singer learns differently, learning is enhanced when we have multiple strategies for approaching the same technique. Some work well by pure imagination and imitation, while others need more specific instructions. As you explore new vocal timbres on your own or with your singers, consider the timbre you have in mind and ask yourself specifically how it differs from bel canto using the following set of variables. To assist in your exploration, we discuss four ways in which vocal production may differ from bel canto: laryngeal position, registration, resonance, and special techniques.

Laryngeal Position

In contrast to bel canto, which calls for a lowered larynx and lengthened vocal tract, a shortened vocal tract produced by raising the larynx (or simply not lowering it) is common to numerous non-bel canto vocal styles. An effective method of finding this high position of the larynx is to speak the phrase "aw-oh," as it might be said if you dropped something accidentally. Traditionally this technique was used in singing out of doors or in dry acoustic settings, because it is characterized by a bright, loud sound to enhance the singers' carrying power. The *belting* technique common to many popular and gospel styles uses a high laryngeal position. Because the larynx can be raised when singing in either chest or head register, it can be used over a wide range of pitches.

Be aware that when the larynx is not

lowered, the pharyngeal space in the back of the throat is somewhat smaller. This makes available a different, brighter set of vowel colors, all of which will have less depth than those present when the larynx is lowered. While these vowels have less space, they also take less air to sustain, which may account for their use in cultures where everyone sings instead of just a small number of professionals.

Registration and Pitch

In bel canto training, the head voice predominates, and an emphasis is placed on smooth transitions between the head and chest registers, usually by bringing the head voice down through the *passaggio*. The ranges of the singing voice are generally outlined by the treble clef for women and the bass clef for men.

Many other cultures use the chest voice almost exclusively, working to bring it as high as possible. In these cases, the vocal ranges for women are lower and often extend well below the treble clef. Other traditions call for the use of male falsetto, the upper limits of which are well beyond the top of the bass clef.

One myth of bel canto is that it is unhealthy to sing in chest voice all the time. This is contradicted by generations of singers from myriad cultures who sing for hours a day in their chest voices with no vocal harm. However, singing in one register naturally tends to strengthen the muscles used in that register, while those used in the other registers tend to weaken. Thus, singing in chest voice a great deal can weaken the head register. Similarly, countertenors who sing primarily in falsetto often have trouble accessing their head and chest registers.

Resonance

In general, it is the shape of the resonators that account for much of the variation in vowel colors and thus vocal timbres. In bel canto, pharyngeal space (the space in the back of the mouth and throat) is increased to make a large resonating area. The lowered larynx and raised soft palate are the basic elements used to achieve this increase in space. However, the throat, mouth, and nose can be opened, closed, combined, or shaped in a variety of ways to produce a broad range of vocal timbres. (Just think of the sounds your students were making on the first day of choir; then think about why and what has changed since that day.) Many cultures create far less pharyngeal space when they sing, and many prefer a lowered soft palate and/or a higher laryngeal position as discussed above. For some, the oral cavity can even be thought of as having a horizontal shape, with the teeth closer together and the corners of the mouth extended toward the cheeks.

And of course, vocal resonance depends not only on the size and shape of the resonating spaces that are open or closed but also on where the sound is placed within this space. Bel canto textbooks often refer to the "forward placement" of sound within the oral cavity, but experience has shown that there are far more forward placements to be found in the voice than what bel canto thinks of as forward.

At one extreme, there are some styles where *nasality* is a desirable characteristic. This might be termed an extremely forward placement of sound. There are varying degrees of nasality possible, depending on the size of the opening into the nasal resonators, and some of these require the lowering of the soft palate. This is a relatively easy effect to achieve.

We have had success with our singers discussing forward/back placement of sound on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the darkest (placement very far in the back of the throat, which often sounds to our singers like an extremely aged church choir), and 10 being the brightest (Mickey Mouse comes to mind). It is very important that the extremes of the scale used vastly exceed the range of sounds that we might find beautiful or even useable, as that is the only way to truly understand the full spectrum of sounds the voice can make. Then we ask students to hold a long tone for an extended period (perhaps 8 beats) while modulating the placement from 1 to 10 or 10 to 1. This can be done on any vowel and will sound different for each vowel chosen. Once students are comfortable with the full spectrum, we might then draw some benchmarks, such as the following:

1-2 = too dark to be used for anything other than humorous effect

3 = Slavonic church music

4 = British church music

5 = What we have probably been using in our normal choral singing

6 = Italian bel canto solo singing

7 = Modern pop singing

8 = Indian (not Native American) or Chinese singing

9-10 = too bright to be used for any thing other than humorous effect

Once this scale is established, it might

be useful to sing the long tones again while restricting the modulation of placement to the range of sounds they will be using to sing the pieces you have chosen for the upcoming concert or even just the range they will be using in that day's rehearsal.

Special Techniques

Ornamentation can take a variety of forms beyond the trills and mordents for which we have notation. Singers may slide heavily between two pitches or move in precise, even slurs as in western art music. Many traditions employ ornaments, such as trills and turns, but the character of the ornament is totally different because of the fundamental vocal production—i.e., high or low larynx, chest, or head voice. For instance, singing with a high laryngeal position may result in a trill that is more angular in character than the bel canto trill. In some styles, a trill may be between pitches that are a half or whole step apart and may be executed at various speeds and durations. We have found that ornaments that cannot be easily notated are best learned by imitation. This can be done by having a native singer come to your rehearsal or by imitating a specific recording. It is worth noting that many of our leading jazz programs ask their students to listen to great solos from recordings as a core element of their study of how to improvise.

Bleating is a technique not found in western art music except perhaps as an ornament in the early Baroque period. The bleated sound wavers but with minimal change of pitch. The technique is simple, for children sometimes bleat skillfully when imitating animal sounds. Similarly, *pulsations* involve repeated accents added to a sustained pitch. Variations in both pitch and dynamic level may occur on each of the pulses. The motion is usually slower than trills or bleats, and the pitch shift may be as wide as a third.

Yodeling can be found on nearly every continent and in a variety of forms. Yodeling is essentially an abrupt alternation between registers. The most common forms shift between a low pitch in the chest and a higher pitch in the head voice register. As with fast melismatic singing, any singer can learn to yodel, but some are much more suited to this technique than others. Because the smooth transition between registers is emphasized in bel canto training, some trained singers may find this especially challenging. While yodeling is pervasive around the globe, it is nearly always practiced by a soloist rather than an ensemble.

The unique technique called *overtone* or *harmonic* singing, known as *Khöömii* or *Xöömei,* originated in the steppes of Central Asia and has found its way into western choral music (e.g., Karlheinz Stockhausen in the 1960s, and more recently Australians Sarah Hopkins and Stephen Leek). While this term encompasses several distinctly different styles, we include here the one in which the melody appears in high overtones.

The high, whistle-like sounds are actually the amplified overtones that are present in the pitch, which is usually sung in chest voice. In phonating, the singer generates a very bright base fundamental tone with a slightly high larynx. The tone is affected by the changing shapes of the various resonators. For instance, a slight movement of the tongue can result in a different overtone. Typically the pitch of the fundamental is constant, while adjustments in oro-pharynx change the pitch of the overtone.

Building on our previous exercise, we ask our singers to sing a very bright (8 on a scale of 1-10) "ee" vowel on a comfortable pitch in their middle voice. Overtones become more present when the fundamental pitch can be muted, so we next ask singers to close the shape of the lips in front to create the sound "ur" (as in fur). This will mute the fundamental pitch and highlight the overtones present. We then ask the singer to experiment with different vowel shapes in the back of the mouth (possibly by moving the tongue or altering the pharyngeal space) all the while keeping the "er" shape of the lips in front. Singers should find that different vowel shapes emphasize different overtones.

Naturally, the best way to learn is from someone from the culture who can serve as a live vocal model in rehearsals. But whether live or recorded, encourage your singers to share their impressions and physical sensations with you and one another as they explore matching vocal timbres. As part of rehearsals, it can be helpful and informative to record the group, play the recording back, and compare the timbre to the model.

Conclusion

Consistently, singers have found the experience of approximating vocal timbres to be a rewarding one. For one thing, it is a way of knowing our own instrument better, which is capable of producing a wider variety of sounds than any of the "out-of-body" instruments we have invented. By exploring their ways of singing, we often come to a clearer understanding of how and why our way of singing came to be and gain a greater respect and command of that as well.

The choices we make in repertory and the way we perform it clearly reflect the purposes we have for including music from diverse sources. Undoubtedly, there is room for a variety of approaches

to vocal timbre. But approximating vocal timbre is an important gesture because it honors *their* way of singing as well as the people and the culture from which the song comes. In short, and perhaps most importantly, it is a way of building a bridge of respect and friendship.

Author's Note

Many sections of this article draw upon Mary Goetze's previous work, written with Cornelia Fales and Wolodymyr Smishkewych. "Exploring the Universal Voice," in *The Cambridge Companion to Choral Music,* Andre de Quadros ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). CJ

The authors recommend the following recordings that are available on iTunes as examples of some of the alternate styles of singing discussed in this article. While many equivalents can be found online via sites such as YouTube, readers should consider supporting musicians through the purchase of recorded music.

Singing in Chest Register

Song: Odoya (Men)	Performer: The Rustavi Choir	
Song: Ayo, Ayo (Women)	Performer: Alexandra Youth Chorus	(South Africa)
Song: Baba Baxolele (Men)	Performer: Alexandra Youth Chorus	(South Africa)

Higher Laryngeal Position

Song: Kaval Sviri	Performer: Cosmic Voices of Bulgaria
Song: Shomyo	Performer: Todai-Ji Priests (Japan)

Minimized/Horizontal Pharyngeal Space

Song: Hich Hich Hichaki Aaye Re	Performer: Kishore Kumar (India)
Song: Suyuu Jazi	Performer: Salamat Sadikova (Kyrgyzstan)
Song: Feng Yang Hua Gu	Performer: Pan Lingxin (China)

Nasality

Song: Kaval Sviri	Performer: Cosmic Voices of Bulgaria
Song: Ute Sun Song	Performer: Valerie Naranjo (Native American)
Song: Avaguli	Performer: Jiamila (China – Female)
Song: Wo Ai Gu Xiang	Performer: Yang Songshan (China – Male)

Bleating

Zeertub Shii	Performer: Lianhua (Mongolian – Female)
Ala-Tan-Chi-Chi-Ge	Performer: Zhagedasurong (Mongolian – Male)

Yodeling

Song: Dande	Performer: Shona Mbira (Zimbabwe)

Overtone Singing

Song: Steppe Kargiraa (low fold position)	Performer: Fedor Tau (Mongolia)
Song: Khoomei (high fold position)	Performer: Fedor Tau (Mongolia)

All of the Above (Horizontal Pharyngeal Space, Glottal Onset of Tone, Male Falsetto, and even some yodeling)

Song: Ha-Cha	Performer: Black Lodge Singers (Native American)