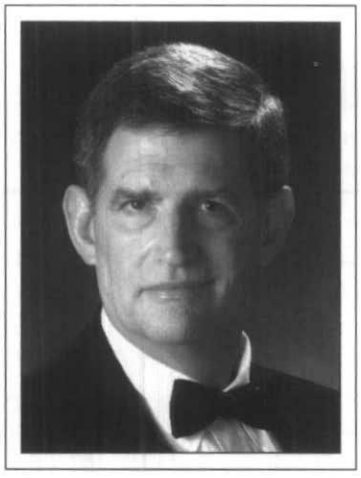
Belting: bel canto or brutto canto?



Robert Edwin

The request was a simple one. An adult classical student of mine asked if I would tape record a piano accompaniment of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" so that her eleven-year-old daughter could sing it in a talent show. Since I was familiar with the child and her singing, I asked mom if she wanted me to play it in a key that would allow the young singer to belt. "Oh no," said mom. "I want her to sing it like Kate Smith did."

When I informed her that Ms. Smith did indeed belt "God Bless America," the woman was aghast. "That's not belt," she said. "It sounds too pretty!"

Belting: bel canto or brutto canto? Beautiful singing or ugly singing? Our music community continues to struggle with defining, performing, and teaching vocal sounds that fall outside the parameters of classical or "legitimate" singing.

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According to my student, the term *belting* cannot describe accurately the perceived beauty of Kate Smith's voice. To her, belting is synonymous with loud, unattractive sounds that are more yelling than singing.

One of the major problems in defining belt is that the term *belting* covers an enormous amount of vocal territory, far more than its counter term, *legitimate,* or "legit" in Broadway shorthand. For example, there is the belting of the aforementioned Kate Smith, a belt/mix tone that, while chest voice dominant, includes a significant amount of cricothyroid (head voice) influence. Other female singers that use this style of belting include Barbra Streisand, Liz Callaway, and Linda Eder. Singers who may use more of their thyroarytenoid (chest voice) muscles in their voice production include Liza Minnelli, Georgia Brown, and Bernadette Peters.

Rock and pop singers such as Melissa Etheridge, Britney Spears, and Jessica Simpson, do not necessarily use more chest voice in their belting than their Broadway counterparts. Rather, they introduce irregular vibrations, or noise, into their vocal tone. The sound can be, among other things, raspy, breathy, fried, or twangy.

Rhythm and Blues and Gospel singers such as Mariah Carey, Yolanda Adams, and Aretha Franklin, use a style of belting that can put tremendous pressure on their vocal folds. With range-defying leaps to F_5 and higher, as well as assorted screams, shrieks, growls, and moans, the R & B/Gospel singer often tests the limits of the vocal mechanism.

All of the aforementioned styles of singing and countless subdivisions fall under the general heading of *belting.* How then do we sort through all these sounds and address the initial question—belting: bel canto or brutto canto?

The sagacious old phrase, "beauty is in the eye (or ear) of the beholder," may serve us well here. The Random House Dictionary defines the word *beauty* as a "quality giving intense aesthetic pleasure." A fisherman catching a record-breaking tuna may be moved to exclaim, "Isn't she a beauty?" when gazing upon his catch. Those who fail to see the tuna's beauty may not share the fisherman's aesthetic.

It follows then that someone who gains intense aesthetic pleasure listening to the emotive blues of the late Janis Joplin would be inclined to label her singing as beautiful, while someone else listening to the same artist may derive no pleasure at all and may even be inclined to label Janis's singing as ugly.

As teachers of singing, we need to understand that beautiful singing or ugly singing is an aesthetic issue, whereas technical efficiency or inefficiency is a functional issue. We know that bel canto can be produced inefficiently, and brutto canto can be produced efficiently. Our job is to see that *all* singing is produced as efficiently as possible given the technical and artistic demands of the style, be it Bach or rock or someplace in between.

For those of us who teach nonclassical vocal technique and repertoire, pedagogy means understanding and working with the increased

closed phase vocal fold pressure that belting requires, raspy or breathy phonation, resonance "twang," and the assorted screams, shrieks, yells, moans, and growls that have come to define a good portion of contemporary commercial music.

As teachers, we know there are potential dangers singers face regardless of their singing style. For example, we may see the singer who exceeds her vocal capacity and overloads her instrument to the point of hoarseness or worse; the young singer who tries to copy an older singer's sound but does not possess the vocal or emotional equipment to do it; the singer whose manager or agent tries to steer her in a direction that is not vocally or artistically healthy for that particular artist; or the singer who ignores the need for qualified vocal advice and counsel.

Whether perceived as beautiful or ugly, every style of singing should have in place a systematic vocal technique that supports that style's mechanical and artistic demands. One technique cannot serve all styles. If a singer learns classical vocal technique, it will serve classical-like singing. It will not, I repeat, will not serve the contemporary commercial singer. Paton's *26 Italian Songs and Arias* is not a necessary purchase for most nonclassical singers. Neither is training in the use of vibrato from the onset of tone, full and formal vowels, and an uninterrupted legato line. Let's make sure we are teaching vocal technique that benefits the style of the singer rather than trying to turn a perceived brutto canto into a bel canto.

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His diverse performing career is paralleled by an equally diverse teaching career. A leading authority on nonclassical and child vocal pedagogy, he practices what he preaches at his private studio in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. He serves on the adjunct voice faculties of New Jersey's Burlington and Camden County Colleges, and is a frequent faculty member of the Voice Foundation's Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice. *From 1996 to 1999, he was a contributing editor for* VocalEase *magazine. A member of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing, he has led master classes and workshops throughout the United States, as well as in Canada and Australia.*

In addition to writing "The Bach to Rock Connection" column since 1985, Robert Edwin has served NATS as president of the New Jersey Chapter, and as a presenter/clinician at national conventions, summer workshops, regional, and chapter events. His latest NATS responsibilities include national secretary/treasurer, and associate editor of the Journal of Singing.
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