Belting: bel canto or brutto canto?

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 belting 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 of their thyroarytenoid (chest voice) muscles in their voice production 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 F5 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 non-classical vocal technique and repertoire, pedagogy means understanding and working with the increased
Robert Edwin

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