The Bel Canto Choral Transformation: Creating the beautiful, energized, blended ensemble sound you’ve always dreamed of
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Introduction
Often as conductors and choral singers, we are so intent on learning the right notes, the exact rhythms and the sounds of foreign languages for that big upcoming concert that we neglect to work on one of the most important aspects of the choral art: the beautiful and expressive voice of the choir itself. Bel canto vocal principles have been defining and creating beautiful singing for a very long time. Although the systematic application of these principles has generally been reserved for the solo singing voice, it cannot be denied that, whether singing in a solo or choral setting, we all possess the same vocal equipment. Since beautiful sound and expressive singing should be as important in choral as in solo singing, it would seem that these time-proven gems of vocal wisdom have much to offer the art of choral singing when applied appropriately. We all want to sing in tune, with a beautiful, complete tone that is energetic yet not effortful. The successful application of the principles outlined in this session has been known to provide just that.

Bel Canto (General)
- What is beautiful singing? Can it be defined? Achieved? What is it that makes a beautiful voice a technically proficient voice?
- Singers’ ears and sensations are their greatest teachers. As conductors, and indirectly, voice teachers, we should guide choristers into what they should be feeling and listening for.
- Seek energy; avoid effort.
- Self-sustaining energy is found in the proper relationship between vibration (nothing to do with vibrato), resonance and breath management.
- The intimate and interdependent relationship of these three elements is the appoggio or balanced tonus upon which the voice relies.

Il Respiro (The Breath)
- The objective of the respiro is to establish an environment in the body which will be conducive to beautiful, energized, effortless singing. Inhalation is where the instrument is created and prepared.
- One must breathe from within, allowing breath to effortlessly and passively drop into the body, appearing in the midst of a vacuum.
- “Silent renewal of the breath takes place within postural quietude” (F. Lamperti)

La lotta vocale (The Vocal Struggle)
- The ongoing struggle in the singer’s body that exists between the breath, which wants to leave the body, and the voice, which wants to inhabit or indwell the body.
- The voice should always be undergirded by a sensation of emptiness.
- Inalare la voce: Inhale the voice.

Chiaroscuro Resonance Balancing
- Bright-Dark resonance which exploits all of the vocal tract’s acoustic abilities. All vocal sounds are to be balanced and complete - an acoustical yin-yang approach
- Helps to develop an ensemble’s three-dimensional tone, which envelops audiences in a different, more expressive manner, giving them an auditory, full-spectrum rainbow of harmonic sound.
- The best remedy for Irritable Vowel Syndrome: many vowels, but one underlying vocal quality.
- One of our best allies in our search for both fine intonation and ensemble blend.
- Helps us to concentrate on the tone rather than the muscle. All muscular movements are commandeered indirectly by your conception of and attention to the tone.
The Focused Core of Vibration

- Focused vibration excites resonance and true resonance is not possible without it – A singer’s tone can only be as good as the vibration that feeds and inspires it.
- Vibration is not synonymous with vibrato.
- Should we be afraid of vibration in choral singing?
- The vocal folds are not meant to whistle but to vibrate - sing on the vibration rather than on the breath.
- More power for less effort – the key behind ‘vocal projection’.

Appoggiare la voce (Vocal Support)

- Lean the voice into the body. The body is the vessel of the voice and must accept and not reject it.
- Don’t project or support the voice out of the body with excess pressure sent from below. Rather, lean it into the open body which accepts and beautifies it; it will then project in an un-harsh manner.
- Appoggio is a top-down, quality-of-tone approach rather than a pushed, bottom-up approach.
- Helps keep fatigue at bay by keeping excess pressure and tension away from the larynx. It puts the work where it should be so that self-sustaining vocal energy can be maintained.

La nota mentale (The Mental Note)

- The preparation of vocal energy upon inhalation requires engaging the imagination and conception of tone prior to making a sound.
- Provides very clean onsets as well as exciting final chords.
- The very last thing to be heard at the end of each phrase and piece is beautiful, energized tone followed immediately by a respiro (inhalation), rather than an exhalation. The acoustic response of halls is improved with these fully energized endings.

Sostenuto

- What to we want to sustain when we sing? Chiaroscuro resonance and the focused core of vibration (i.e. vocal tonus)
- Claude Debussy: “The most beautiful music happens in between the notes”.
- Don’t ‘diction sing!’ - the syllable is the enemy of the phrase. Instead, use tonus-enlivening articulation.
- Julius Stockhausen: “Consonants are to vowels what blinking is to the eye”.

Messa di voce (The ‘Putting forth’ of the voice)

- The full swell of the voice from pp to ff and back to pp on one pitch and on one breath while maintaining evenness of tone and of pitch.
- One of the greatest technical tests of the voice and pillars of the bel canto manner of singing.
- Also one of the greatest register-equalizing exercises.
- A tremendous help in achieving a lyrical, mixed-voice quality in an ensemble, so necessary for expressive singing at softer dynamics.
- Will help the voice to carry more easily and text to be understood at softer dynamics.

Aggiustamento (Resonance adjustments in upper voice)

- The vocal folds want to know nothing of altitude. We maintain a homogenous environment with laryngeal stability by adjusting the vowel in ascending lines.
- The aim is for the tone to sound even as you ascend (it shouldn’t sound adjusted).
- It is the oscuro element that is added, but all of the chiaro must remain.
- Lamperti: “When ascending the scale, the breath takes the opposite direction of the pitch”.
Closing Comments

It is my hope that the principles outlined above will provide conductors and choristers alike with a renewed passion for the beauty and unique, almost limitless possibilities of the human voice. We are all so privileged to take part in the process of rehearsing and performing great music with this most natural, yet sometimes problematic, of instruments. I would encourage conductors not to attach too much weight to the inherent value of the vocalise or warm-up exercise. Although vocal exercises are very useful tools for vocal development, they have no intrinsic power to transform singing when not attached to ears, sensations and minds that are listening/feeling for and thinking about the principles of beautiful sound outlined above. May the sound and sensation of your voice, or of your choir’s voice, in and of itself be the most compelling and gratifying component of the exciting performances you give.

Laurier Fagnan – Biography

With a doctorate in choral conducting and a master’s degree in vocal pedagogy, there is nothing Laurier Fagnan enjoys more than inspiring choral singers to make the most beautiful sound possible. He has served as vocal coach/clinician for many choral festivals and has offered hundreds of workshops in vocal technique to choirs from Whitehorse to Paris. He is Associate Professor of Music at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, where he conducts the dynamic Chorale Saint-Jean. He has served as President of the Alberta Choral Federation and is co-chair of Podium 2016, Canada’s next national conference and festival of choral singing. His dissertation titled “The Acoustical Effects of the Core Principles of the Bel Canto Method on Choral Singing” has won national prizes in Canada and the US (Julius Herford Award). He is director of the Bel Canto Vocal Acoustics Lab at the University of Alberta and has just released an instructional DVD that combines the practical application of bel canto principles to choral singing with innovative vocal acoustics analysis techniques from IRCAM in Paris. The endless possibilities of the human voice never cease to amaze him.

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