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## **An improvisatory approach to nineteenth-century music**

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## Chapter 4. Improvised ornamentation in Bel canto

### 4.1 The influence of bel canto

The twentieth- or twenty-first-century perspective on pre-1800 music often shows a bias with respect to the importance that is attached to instrumental (as opposed to vocal) music. The majority of the compositions from that period which acquired canonical status in later times was written for instruments, or, like Bach's passions, contains a very substantial instrumental part. *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*, for instance, is generally seen as a paragon of Baroque counterpoint, and until quite recently even served as a *pars pro toto* for Baroque music in general, especially in music analytical circles: analysing Bach almost always means analysing his instrumental fugues. This view is at odds with the circumstances in musical life at Bach's time, when it was rather vocal music (read: opera) that occupied a central position. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a process of emancipation of instrumental music had started, which however should be seen as a counterpoint to the dominance of opera, rather than as a justification of our exclusive focus on the instrumental repertoire of that time. The situation of the *Concerts spirituels* in Paris, featuring instrumental and religious music, might serve as an example here: these concerts took place only during religious holidays, when the opera was closed. Also during the nineteenth century, the importance of opera remained very high, at least in terms of audience participation. The shifting of the balance from vocal to instrumental music happened at different speeds in different nations, Germany becoming the cradle of the development of symphonic music, whereas in France and Italy opera remained dominant for a long time. In France, the *Société Nationale de Musique*, intended to promote new French music and break the hegemony of opera, was founded as late as 1871. In Italy, opera can be said to have remained the most important musical art form until the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. In short, there is good reason to start this study's discussion of an improvisatory approach to scores with vocal music.

The international influence of Italian opera and the bel canto style of singing has been immense, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century. North of the Alps, this musical style was in the first place represented by Gioachino Rossini, whose 'fame surpassed that of any previous composer, as did, for a long time, the popularity of his work'.<sup>188</sup> From 1824 to 1829, Rossini was musical director of the *Théâtre-Italien* in Paris, a city where he was to settle permanently in 1855. In those days, Paris was regarded the capital of opera. When Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy visited Italy in 1831, he complained that all great singers such as Lablache, David, Lalande and Pisoni had left the country and were singing in Paris.<sup>189</sup> The highly influential Paris Conservatoire was directed by

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<sup>188</sup> Taruskin, R.: *Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol. 3. Oxford, 2005; 13.

<sup>189</sup> Mendelssohn Bartholdy, F.: *Briefe einer Reise*. Zürich, 1958; 102.

Rossini's compatriot (and friend) Luigi Cherubini from 1822 to 1842. Cherubini made the Italian school of singing the 'officially sanctioned method at that venerable institution'.<sup>190</sup> In Germany, Rossini's popularity was enormous as well, much to the distress of Robert Schumann. However, Schumann's father-in-law, the famous piano pedagogue Friedrich Wieck, advised German composers to learn from the Italians how to write for the voice in a way that would not 'destroy' it. Wieck wrote this in an educational book with a title that seems peculiar today, but actually stands in a tradition: *Clavier und Gesang* (piano and singing).<sup>191</sup> Ignaz Franz Xaver Kürzinger's *Getreuer Unterricht zum Singen mit Manieren, und die Violin zu spielen* (1763, reprints until in the nineteenth century) is based upon a similar combination. Whereas modern teachers would consider such professions too disparate to combine in one tutorial (even if they would feel competent), this was less unusual in the nineteenth century. Kürzinger wrote:

Alles, was man einem Singer saget, [soll] auch einem jeden Instrumentalisten nach seinem Art gesaget seyn.<sup>192</sup>

[Everything that holds true for a singer, also holds true for every instrumentalist in his own way.]

Also Wieck saw bel canto as the basis of any music-making.<sup>193</sup> Sigismund Thalberg's *L'Art du chant appliqué au piano* (published in the same year), a collection of keyboard arrangements of vocal music with a strong emphasis on bel canto, is founded on a similar view. The fusing together of vocal and instrumental music will be further explored in chapter 5. For now, it seems reasonable to assume that the importance of vocal music was not merely a matter of audience numbers. Vocality represented an intrinsic value in music in general.

#### 4.2 Bel canto performance practice as an example of an improvisatory approach

In his book *Belcanto*, Peter Berne characterises the Italian opera of the first half of the nineteenth century as a continuation of Baroque performance traditions with Romantic literary content.<sup>194</sup> I would like to follow here Berne's use of the term bel canto for the Italian opera tradition of the first half of the nineteenth century, as exemplified in the operas of Rossini, Bellini and the early Verdi. An important aspect of this tradition, Berne writes, is the contingent status of the musical score. In a typical early-nineteenth-century bel canto opera, the solo singer was the unquestioned centre of the performance, and at least as 'responsible' (to use a term employed by musicologist Peter Schubert) for the music as the composer. With the score, the composer delivered a skeleton – often written under enormous time pressure. Everybody, including the composer, expected the singer to take this

<sup>190</sup> Stark, J.: *Bel Canto: a History of Vocal Pedagogy*. Toronto, 2003; 4.

<sup>191</sup> Wieck, Fr.: *Clavier und Gesang*. Leipzig, 1853; 46.

<sup>192</sup> Kürzinger, I.F.X.: *Getreuer Unterricht zum Singen mit Manieren, und die Violin zu spielen*. Augsburg, 1763; 3.

<sup>193</sup> Wieck, Fr.: op. cit.; V.

<sup>194</sup> Berne, P.: *Belcanto. Historische Aufführungspraxis in der italienischen Oper von Rossini bis Verdi*. Worms, 2008.

score as a starting point for a unique performance, different every night. It was perfectly normal for a singer to adapt the *tessitura* of a solo part to his or her voice, to transpose an aria if needed, to change a part in order to make it more effective, and never to repeat a phrase exactly like the time before. Nobody would be surprised when a star singer would demand from the composer an alternative for an aria that was not to her liking, or when she would insert into an opera performance her favourite aria from a completely different opera or even, like Maria Malibran in Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'amore*, of her own making.<sup>195</sup> A definitive score did not exist. This was so in eighteenth-century Italian opera, and it continued to be during the first half of the nineteenth century. What some would denounce as mere conservatism actually constitutes an enduring and well-defined performance tradition with a corpus of interpretational habits that were not only expected from the singer by the audience, but also by the composer. One aspect of bel canto performance practice which is of particular interest here is the love for ornamentation. In this respect, too, it can be seen as a continuation of Baroque practices as described in the previous chapter. As Domenico Corri wrote:

No one can be called a singer of merit, but he who (...) executes with a variety of graces of his own, which his skill inspires him with unpremeditatedly: knowing that a professor of eminence cannot, if he would, continually repeat an air with the self-same passages and graces.<sup>196</sup>

The bel canto tradition, which occupied a leading position in the early-nineteenth-century music world, seems to constitute a clear example of an improvisatory approach to scores. The present chapter aims to analyse historical evidence of this improvisatory attitude; it also discusses how singers were able to apply unpremeditated ornamentation, and how modern performers may enrich their performances in a similar way.

#### 4.3 Sources of bel canto ornamentation

What we know about ornamentation practices in bel canto is mainly based upon two types of sources: singing treatises and singer's notebooks.

Many famous singers (often *castrati*) were also highly sought-after teachers, and wrote methodological works that reflected their view on the teaching of their art. Some of these books remained influential for a very long time. Pier Francesco Tosi's *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato* (Bologna 1723), for example, had been in use for more than a century. It appeared in many translations, sometimes with added commentary, as in Johann Friedrich Agricola's *Anleitung zur Gesangkunst* (1757). Even without explicit reference to specific

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<sup>195</sup> Heimgartner, M.: *Maria – Cecilia Bartoli*. Liner notes to Decca 4759077 (2007); 34.

<sup>196</sup> Corri, D.: *The Singers Preceptor*. London, [1810]; 9. Interestingly, Corri begins his treatise with a discussion of ornamentation. The Italian Corri was a student of Nicola Porpora, and moved to Edinburgh and later London to become an opera conductor, singing master, impresario and music publisher, and in this way contributed to the international influence of bel canto.

venerable authors, singing methods often show strong similarities in structure and didactic approach, thereby exemplifying the power of tradition in bel canto. The founding of the Paris Conservatoire in 1795 had a huge influence on pedagogical standardisation, and led towards an increase in the publication of methods, which were often published by the conservatory itself.

Though these books are sometimes explicitly addressed to voice students, for example Laure Cinti-Damoreau's *Méthode de chant*,<sup>197</sup> they are not meant for self-tuition such as some instrumental instruction works of the time, notably Carl Czerny's *Briefe über den Unterricht auf dem Pianoforte*.<sup>198</sup> This is not surprising because, as it is often stressed in singing methods, the role of the tutor is crucial. It is typical for vocal training that vocal technique cannot be developed separately from the voice itself; moreover, singers cannot hear their own voice as others hear it.

It is not always clear whether singing methods are to be understood as having a prescriptive or descriptive nature. In general, any teaching-method is prescriptive, but the fact that in bel canto methods much explanation happens by way of examples (especially with respect to ornamentation) brings in a descriptive element, thus blurring the difference. Moreover, most singing methods are also an artistic and pedagogical creed of the author. In this way methodical works can, with caution, be taken as an account of an established practice.

For this research, some two dozen singing methods have been investigated, mainly from the first half of the nineteenth century and all stemming from Italian bel canto or its sphere of influence. The most comprehensive and famous one is undoubtedly *École de García: traité complet de l'art du chant*, published in two volumes in 1840 / 1847 by Manuel García Jr. Manuel Patricio Rodríguez García was the son of the famous tenor Manuel del Pópulo Vicente Rodríguez García, and the brother of Maria Malibran and Pauline Viardot: a rare concentration of vocal stardom, representing the summit of Italian bel canto. Stunning examples of ornamentation can also be found in Laure Cinti-Damoreau's *Méthode de chant* (1849). Cinti-Damoreau was a French soprano who studied in Paris and became the favourite soprano of Rossini, who wrote for her the leading female roles in all of his Parisian operas.<sup>199</sup> A more methodical approach to ornamentation is shown by Luigi Lablache in his *Méthode complète de chant* (1840); finally, the German composer Peter von Winter dedicated the entire fourth part of his *Vollständige Singschule* (1825) to examples of ornamentation.

These sources, and many other ones not mentioned specifically here, were either written by singers from the world of Italian bel canto (who often travelled extensively), or by foreigners whom they had taught in Paris (such as Cinti-Damoreau) or occasionally elsewhere (such as Peter von Winter, who

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<sup>197</sup> Cinti-Damoreau, L.: *Méthode de chant, composée pour ses classes du Conservatoire*. Paris, 1849.

<sup>198</sup> Czerny, C.: *Briefe über den Unterricht auf dem Pianoforte, vom Anfange bis zur Ausbildung, als Anhang zu jeder Clavierschule*. Wien, [ca. 1830].

<sup>199</sup> Caswell, A.: 'Mme Cinti-Damoreau and the Embellishment of Italian Opera in Paris: 1820-1845'. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Autumn, 1975); 462.

had studied with Antonio Salieri). Despite the varied origins of these methods, they show many similarities, which accords with the homogeneousness of bel canto tradition; it is therefore justified to treat them as one corpus of source material. This expressly includes eighteenth-century methodological books that were still seen as normative after 1800.

It seems to have been a habit for singers to write down their own ornamentations to arias. In Benedetto Marcello's satirical pamphlet *Il teatro alla moda* (1720), the author 'recommends' that the *prima donna* asks her teacher 'to write for her all embellishments in a book especially provided for that purpose, and she will carry that book with her no matter where she goes'.<sup>200</sup> The still very funny text collects hyperboles by the dozen, and the pun here seems to be that the empty-headed *cantatrice* completely depends on her instructor for any decisions of artistic importance. However, such notebooks did exist, even in the nineteenth century. Laure Cinti-Damoreau wrote her variations down in a collection of notebooks that are being kept today in the Lilly Library at Indiana University (Bloomington). An anonymous example of a singer's notebook is the manuscript *Foà-Giordano 631* in the *Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino* (probably around 1835).<sup>201</sup> A well-known collection that is still in print is *Variazioni – Cadenze – Tradizioni*, compiled by vocal coach Luigi Ricci in the 1930's, though most examples are from a later period than the proper *belcanto*. Finally, the variants Rossini wrote himself are very interesting, for instance those for the part of Rosina in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.<sup>202</sup>

#### 4.4 *Changements*

##### *Changing the melody*

In the second volume of the *École de García*, Manuel García discusses in great detail the *changements* or *Veränderungen* – that is, changes to the vocal line as composed, to be applied by the singer. This category includes ornamentation, but also changes with different purposes; García writes that it can be 'necessary' for various reasons to modify your part. Some of these reasons are bewildering for a modern singer. It might be, García writes, that the tessitura of a part does not match the voice of the singer, or that the style of writing does not correspond with his or her vocal possibilities, e.g. by being too declamatory or too much filled with coloraturas.<sup>203</sup> In such cases the singer should not hesitate to adapt the vocal line, 'raising or lowering some passages, simplifying or embellishing others, in order

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<sup>200</sup> Marcello, B.: 'Il teatro alla moda – part I' (translated by Reinhard G. Pauly). *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Jul., 1948); 394.

<sup>201</sup> Moeckli, L.: 'Abbellimenti o fioriture: Further Evidence of Creative Embellishment in and beyond the Rossinian Repertoire.' In: *Beyond Notes: Improvisation in Western Music in the 18th and 19th centuries*, ed. Rudolf Rasch. Turnhout, 2011; 285.

<sup>202</sup> Rossini, G.: *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Critical edition, edited by Patricia B. Brauner. Kassel, 2008; 503-508.

<sup>203</sup> García, M.: *École de García*, part 2. French / German edition; Mainz, n.d.; 53-54.

to suit them to the power and character of his vocal capability'.<sup>204</sup> Today, the situation is very different: usually, a singer is cast for a part on basis of her 'vocal capability', not the other way around. The modern practice not only reflects the change of status attached to the score, but also our deep reluctance to change anything to the notated musical text. Ironically, the basic intention of early nineteenth-century musicians was similar to ours: to touch and persuade the audience by utter artistic effectiveness. However, they took for granted that performers had developed their own styles, and that it is important to make optimal use of the vocal possibilities and characteristics of the singers – even if this meant changing the text.

### *Ornamentation as a manifestation of varietas*

From the perspective of improvisatory activity, however, it is the ornamental changes, rather than the adaptive ones, that occupy centre stage. They are a clear example of *varietas* in a musical performance (→ chapter 3.4). In his rendering of Tosi, Johann Friedrich Agricola calls *Mannigfaltigkeit* [variety] the *eigentliche[n] Endzweck* [real goal] of *Veränderungen*. (This remark supports his claim that it is even worse than a 'nauseating' abundance of ornaments when a singer uses the same ornament, 'probably learned by heart', twice.<sup>205</sup>) In the nineteenth century, a famous quotation comes from García, who writes:

A musical idea, to be rendered interesting, should be varied, wholly or in part, every time it is repeated. Pieces whose beauty depends on recurrence of the theme, - as rondos, variations, polaccas, airs, and cavatinas with a second part, - are particularly adapted to receive changes. These changes should be introduced more abundantly, and with ever-heightening variety and accent; the exposition of the theme alone should be preserved in its simplicity. (...) The preceding rules are confirmed by the practice of the best composers, who never repeat a thought several times without introducing new effects, either for voice or instruments.<sup>206</sup>

Domenico Corri even thought that

the repetition of words by the composer was no doubt intended for the purpose of giving the singer an opportunity for that display of ornament, which on their first utterance even common sense forbids, and it was from this consideration, that the Da-Capo in airs was first introduced, which allows the singer every latitude of ornament consistent with the rules of harmony, and the character of the composition.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> García, M.: *École de García*. Transl.: García's New Treatise on the Art of Singing; revised edition. Boston, n.d.; 59.

<sup>205</sup> Agricola, J.Fr.: *Anleitung zur Singkunst*. Berlin, 1757.

<sup>206</sup> García, M.: García's New Treatise... Boston, n.d.; 60.

<sup>207</sup> Corri, D.: op. cit., 3.

The most obvious manifestation of variety was within the performance of one piece, as described above; variety was also expected in different performances by the same singer, and finally the performance styles of different singers were expected to differ from one another. As Corri writes:

A singer, like an orator, will form to himself a peculiar distinguishing manner.<sup>208</sup>

Today, all types of variety mentioned here have virtually disappeared from classical music practice.<sup>209</sup>

It is true that during the bel canto period under consideration composers started to notate their own ornamentation in the score. However, it was not until Verdi that these embellishments were seen as a structural element of the composition; especially in Rossini and Donizetti they rather seem to be suggestions that could at will be replaced with alternatives by the singer, and that could be supplemented with additional ornamentation. Not only did singers invent their own variants, also Rossini himself suggested ‘personalised’ options to different singers.<sup>210</sup>

Musicological evidence of an ornamental practice in early-nineteenth-century bel canto singing is by now readily available thanks to scholars such as Austin Caswell and Laura Moeckli, though little seems to have permeated modern performances so far. One of the reasons for this might be that many singers simply don’t know how to make their own *changements*, premeditated or not – an idea that is confirmed by my own experiences with singers, both students and professionals. Incidentally, a similar contradiction occurs with respect to instrumental music. After all, already in 1925 Heinrich Schenker concluded that ‘our generation has wasted the art of diminution’ (→ chapter 3.2), a situation he recognised both in composing and in performance. In this chapter some suggestions on how ‘the art of diminution’ can be regained in modern music-making will be made. However, there might be another reason for the modern reluctance to apply extensive ornamentation to bel canto repertoire. The issue of adding ornamentation is often approached separately, being something highly unusual within a classical musical world that strives for *Texttreue*. It might very well be true that most singers (and conductors!) find the insertion of ornaments into an otherwise conventional (and therefore modern) style of performance simply unconvincing<sup>211</sup> – and that is quite understandable. The leading performance style of today, aiming for rhythmic and melodic exactitude, striving for homogeneousness and unity, and seeking a rich and sustained sound, somehow combines badly with the lightness and even light-heartedness of *ad libitum* embellishments. In the end it is the opposition of the present-day aesthetics of unity on the one hand, and an aesthetics of variety, such as developed in the previous chapter, on the other. With regard to bel canto, it is even somewhat artificial to isolate ornamentation from all factors which together form

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<sup>208</sup> Corri, D.: op. cit., 7.

<sup>209</sup> A jazz singer, however, would probably subscribe to all of them.

<sup>210</sup> Rossini, G.: *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (ed. Patricia B. Brauner). Kassel, 2008; 503-508.

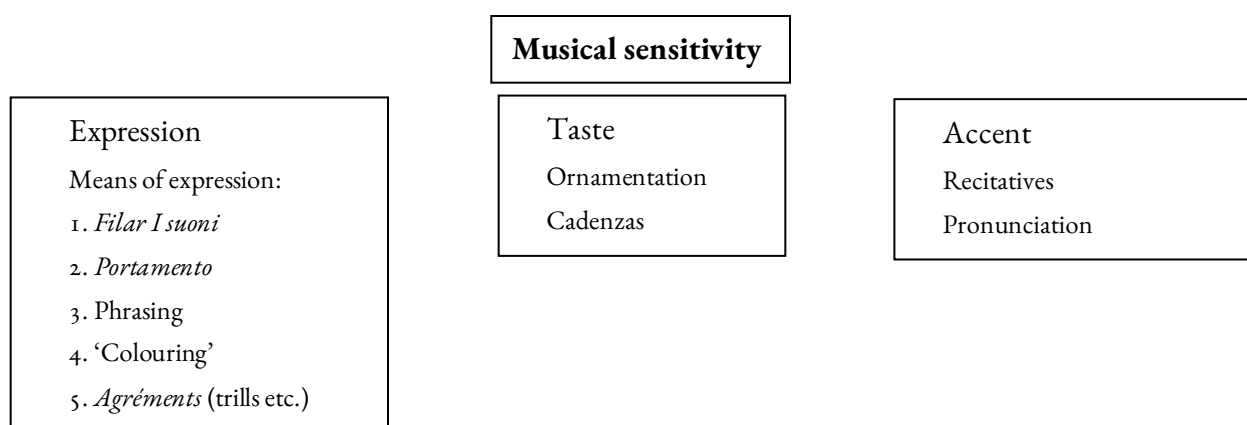
<sup>211</sup> Cf. Gossett, Ph.: *Divas and Scholars*. Chicago, 2006; 291.



a complex that in nineteenth-century treatises is usually termed ‘phrasing’ (*Vortrag, phraser, arte di fraseggiare*; → chapter 3.6.). As I will show, the terms entailed much more than they do today because they could comprise an adaptation of or digression from the text. They more or less coincided with the area of *elocutio* in ancient rhetoric.

### *Lablache’s taxonomy of musical ‘elocutio’ in bel canto*

The French-Italian bass singer Luigi Lablache put ornamentation in a more comprehensive framework. His *Méthode complète de chant* (1840) provides a clear overview of the elements of performance in a rationalist fashion. His organisation differs somewhat from García’s, but it is clear that free ornamentation forms, so to speak, the tip of an interpretational iceberg that itself is too often neglected today. In Lablache’s mapping of the terrain, the overarching term (the ‘iceberg’) is ‘musical sensitivity’ (*il sentimento musicale / le sentiment musical*).<sup>212</sup> It consists of three areas: (1) expression, (2) taste and (3) accent.



Lablache’s taxonomy will serve as a point of departure for the discussion of the issue in section 4.5. In the *Méthode*, the section on expression occupies by far the largest number of pages (about two thirds of the book). Lablache mentions several means of expression which as such exceed the scope of this study. Since they provide ornamentation with a context though, they will be discussed briefly here, especially the ‘colouring’ of a melody. The section on taste in the *Méthode complète* is very short, but important for this study because it highlights the topic of ornamentation. Incidentally, it is not entirely clear whether Lablache sees ornamentation and cadenzas as subcategories of taste, or that these three aspects are meant to be on the same level. Lablache’s concise treatment of the topic will be supplemented with material from other source texts. In particular, the subject ‘phrase’ will be of

<sup>212</sup> Lablache, L.: *Méthode complète de chant ou analyse raisonnée des principes d’après lesquels on doit diriger les études pour développer la voix, la rendre légère et pour former le goût*. [Paris, 1840.] Transl.: *Metodo completo di canto / complete singing method*. Milano, 1841 / reprint 1997; 101. The English term ‘sensitivity’ is taken from this edition.

fundamental importance to ornamentation as it is approached in this study, and even beyond to other forms of relative improvisation. Cadenzas will be discussed in chapter 10.2. Lablache's last section on *accent* suffers from a similar organisational lack of clarity; the topics of recitatives and pronunciation will be skipped here, but the *accent* itself is very important for an improvisational approach to scores.

## 4.5 Aspects of musical elocutio

### *a. Means of expression*

The first area of 'musical sensitivity' according to Lablache is termed 'expression'. The author quotes Rousseau's *Dictionnaire* – by then over 70 years old – for his explanation of the term expression:

EXPRESSION: Qualité par laquelle le Musicien sent vivement & rend avec énergie toutes les idées qu'il doit rendre, & tous les sentimens qu'il doit exprimer.<sup>213</sup>

[Expression is a quality through which the musician keenly feels and energetically renders all the ideas he must render and all the sentiments he must express.<sup>214</sup>]

It is important to note that expression here does not equal 'self-expression', as the term is often tacitly understood today.<sup>215</sup> For Rousseau it is the work, or rather the material, that requires the rendering of certain sentiments, and Lablache obviously sees it the same way. Also in this respect, the musician was like an actor. That this did not at all imply that the musician himself would remain untouched is once more clearly testified to by García:

Expression is the great law of all art. Vain would be the efforts of an artist to excite the passions of his audience, unless he showed himself powerfully affected by the very feeling he wished to kindle; for emotion is purely sympathetic. It devolves, therefore, upon an artist to rouse and ennoble his feelings, since he can only appeal successfully to those analogous to his own. The human voice deprived of expression, is the least interesting of all instruments.<sup>216</sup>

Probably unconsciously, García echoes Quintilian here, who 1750 years before instructed the orator in similar terms:

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<sup>213</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*. Paris, 1768; 210.

<sup>214</sup> Lablache, L.: op. cit.; 101.

<sup>215</sup> Self-expression and freedom of expression became important notions in twentieth-century art movements such as Expressionism and COBRA, but also in the artistic education at primary and secondary schools, especially after World War II. In music, they are often connected with the idea of free improvisation, for instance on the website of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre: <https://eamt.ee/en/departments/composition-and-improvisational-performing-arts/contemporary-improvisation/>.

<sup>216</sup> García, M.: *García's New Treatise...* Boston, n.d.; 67.

Nothing but fire can burn, nothing but water can make us wet, and “nothing gives colour but what colour has.” The first thing, then, is that those feelings should be strong in us which we want to be strong in the judge, and that we should ourselves be moved before we try to move others.<sup>217</sup>

Lablache writes that the quality of expression is something highly individual, but that it is essential to develop its means, the ‘material of expression’. These means are for him: (1) to swell and diminish the intensity of the notes (*filare i suoni*); (2) to glide between pitches (*portamento*); (3) to phrase; (4) to ‘colour’; (5) to perform the various ornaments of singing.

His detailed description of these elements depicts a way of singing that is altogether different from what most singers today probably grew up with. Indeed, there is evidence that around 1850, the singing style started to change to one that was more directed towards vocal strength, making more extensive use of the chest voice. The tenor Gilbert Duprez was famous for his innovative high c”, sung with the chest voice (*ut de poitrine*) – an effect that Rossini vehemently disapproved of: he compared it with ‘the squawk of a capon whose throat is being cut’.<sup>218</sup> Rossini’s ideal of vocalism might have been more in accordance with the words Alexis de Garaudé wrote in 1830:

Dans les voix de ténor, les sons de tête habilement employés ont un charme infini.<sup>219</sup>

[With tenor voices, the falsetto register, when well used, has a wonderful charm.]

This change seems to be at the root of the modern singing style. Indeed, the habit of adding ornamentation to composed melodies is believed to have disappeared after 1850. The changing taste coincides with the stylistic development in the works of Giuseppe Verdi, with *Un ballo in maschera* (1859) serving as a kind of watershed.<sup>220</sup>

The bel canto singing style as it appears from descriptions in Lablache, García and other nineteenth-century methods, must have been less powerful, but much more flexible, sensitive and highly virtuosic. It is especially the stress on the necessity ‘to give each phrase, each figure its appropriate colour’<sup>221</sup> that makes one suspect a style of singing which gave much more space to the individual quality of phrases and even words.<sup>222</sup> Lablache, for instance, advises the singer to stress or ‘lean on’ (*appoggiare*) notes on strong beats that are foreign to the accompanying harmony or to the key,<sup>223</sup> a rule that matches precisely what Quantz wrote in 1752 about playing dissonances generally

<sup>217</sup> Quintilian: *The Orator’s Education*, vol. 3, VI.2.28 (D. Russell, trans.). Cambridge, MA, 2001; 59.

<sup>218</sup> Quoted in: Stark, J.: *Bel canto*. Toronto, 1999; 73.

<sup>219</sup> Garaudé, A. de: *Méthode complète de chant*. Deuxième édition: Paris, 1854; 16.

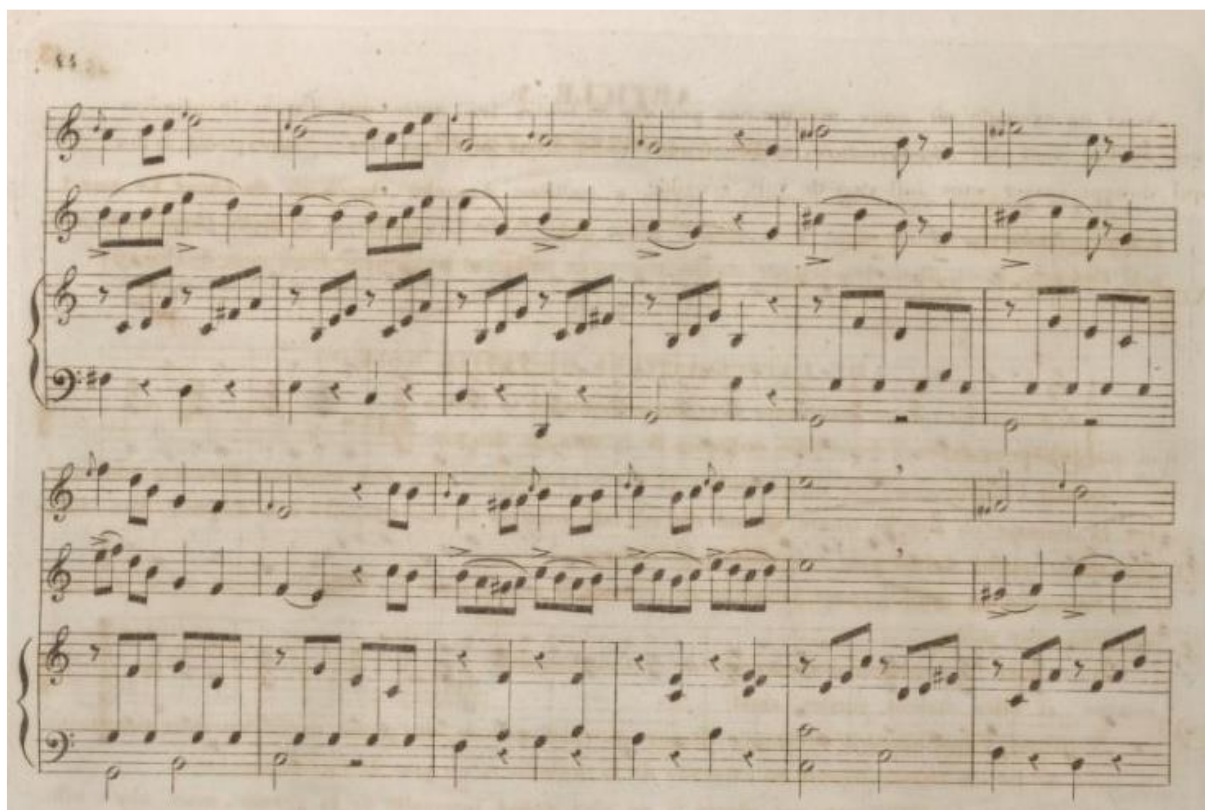
<sup>220</sup> Cf. Berne, op. cit., 196.

<sup>221</sup> Lablache, L.: op. cit., 104.

<sup>222</sup> Cf. García, M.: *García’s New Treatise*... Boston, n.d.; 73.

<sup>223</sup> Lablache, L.: op. cit., 104.

(*überhaupt*) louder than consonances.<sup>224</sup> Lablache even adds dynamic markings in an exemplary score, just like Quantz.<sup>225</sup>



Example 4.5.1

Interestingly, this way of applying the accent sign is reminiscent of the instrumental music of Franz Schubert, where it often seems to indicate a gentle increase to and decrease from a local dynamic peak, rather than a sharp and sudden ‘*sforzato*’ accent. Like Schubert, Lablache also sometimes stretches the accent sign, making it more similar to an ordinary diminuendo (from which it undoubtedly derives).

Though rarely mentioned, it appears that even within ornamental passages colouring would be appreciated; witness Giovanni Battista Mancini’s praise of Faustina Bordoni, who

sustained passages of three and six notes in such a new and also difficult way, and guided them with the right proportion without languishing in ascending as well as descending, giving also those shades of coloring which are so necessary in the blending of any embellishment.<sup>226</sup>

<sup>224</sup> Quantz, J.J.: *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversière zu spielen*. [1752] Reprint Kassel, 1997; 227.

<sup>225</sup> Lablache, L.: op. cit., 44.

<sup>226</sup> Mancini, G.B.: *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato* [1774]. Transl.: *Practical reflections on the figurative art of singing*. Boston, 1912; 38. Mancini was an Italian castrato and a famous singing teacher. Empress Maria Theresia of Austria invited him to Vienna to become ‘k. k. Cammer-Musicus’. The famous Bordoni was married to the composer Johann Adolf Hasse.

Lablache's 'materials of expression' concern parameters which can all be subject to an improvisatory approach to varying degrees: they are possible elements of relative improvisation (→ chapter 3.1). Since this study covers a much wider field, only one other aspect of expression will be elaborated, which as such is not mentioned by Lablache: expressive timing. It is described in great detail by García, and will be the subject of chapter 7.

The last 'means of expression' mentioned by Lablache is the performance of 'agréments': appoggiaturas and other small embellishments which form the counterpart of the *wesentliche Manieren* [essential ornaments] (→ chapter 3.3) of the eighteenth century. Though they were seen by several authors as building blocks of the more free embellishments, they were as such highly formalised and predetermined; therefore, they will not be discussed any further in this study.

Lablache's discussion of expression puts melodic embellishments into perspective. Once more I would like to stress that in bel canto, ornamentation is just one way to heighten expressivity in a performance. As Domenico Crivelli puts it in his method: it is added in order to enforce the sense of the words, and to penetrate the mind of the hearers with the sentiments of the poet<sup>227</sup> – in other words: to persuade. Seen thus, ornamentation is inseparable from the bel canto performing style in general.

### *b. Ornamenting with taste*

*Un Compositeur qui ponctue & phrase bien, est un homme d'esprit: un Chanteur qui sent, marque bien ses Phrases & leur accent est un homme de goût.*<sup>228</sup>

[A composer who punctuates and phrases well is a clever fellow; a singer who feels and marks well his phrases and their accent is a man of taste.<sup>229</sup>]

The type of improvised ornamentation this chapter focuses on is discussed by Lablache under the heading 'taste', forming the second area of musical sensitivity. Taste is a mysterious quality that is very often mentioned in early modern texts about music. In our time it may have lost its relevance as a criterion. Whoever refers to taste today easily invites suspicion on himself for nurturing elitist ideas. As the cliché goes, there is no disputing about tastes; but as Rousseau rightly remarks, this mainly concerns the individual tastes of people:

Dans tous ces cas, chacun n'ayant que son Goût à opposer à celui d'un autre, il est évident qu'il n'en faut point disputer.<sup>230</sup>

<sup>227</sup> Crivelli, D.: *L'Arte del Canto* [1841]. Transl.: *Instructions and progressive exercises in the art of singing*. Boston, n.d.; 7.

<sup>228</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*. Paris, 1768; 376.

<sup>229</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*. Translated by William Waring: *A Complete Dictionary of music*. London, 1779; 317.

<sup>230</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*; 235.

[In all these cases, each having only his own taste to oppose to that of another, it is evident, that there is no dispute to be made.<sup>231</sup>]

However, the taste musical treatises so often refer to is something more general:

Mais il y a aussi un Goût général sur lequel tous les gens bien organisés s'accordent; & c'est celui-ci seulement auquel on peut donner absolument le nom de Goût.<sup>232</sup>

[But there is also a general taste, on which all organised persons agree, and it is this only, to which we can absolutely give the name of taste.<sup>233</sup>]

Even though it might have become a less popular concept nowadays, it is important to take the historical notion of taste seriously in order to appreciate explanations such as Lablache's. The concept of taste emerged in the seventeenth century, and at first implied a quasi-objective and social phenomenon. In this sense, taste is something that 'one must have': it cannot be learned through demonstration, nor can it be replaced by mere imitation.<sup>234</sup> It is something supra-personal that unites kindred spirits (and may exclude outsiders). Rousseau continues his discussion in the *Dictionnaire de musique*:

Au reste, le Génie crée, mais le Goût choisit: & souvent un Génie trop abondant a besoin d'un Censeur sévère qui l'empêche d'abuser de ses richesses. Sans Goût on peut faire de grandes choses; mais c'est lui qui les rend intéressantes. C'est le Goût qui fait saisir au Compositeur les idées du Poète; c'est le Goût qui fait saisir à l'Exécutant les idées du Compositeur; c'est le Goût qui fournit à l'un & à l'autre tout ce qui peut orner & faire valoir leur sujet; & c'est le Goût qui donne à l'Auditeur le sentiment de toutes ces convenances.<sup>235</sup>

[Genius creates, but taste makes the choice; and a too abundant genius is often in want of a severe censor, to prevent it from abusing its valuable riches. We can do great things without taste, but it is that alone which renders them interesting. It is taste which makes the composer catch the ideas of the poet: It is taste which makes the executant catch the ideas of the composer. It is taste, which furnishes to each whatever may adorn and augment their subject; and it is taste which gives the audience the sentiment of their agreements.<sup>236</sup>]

Rousseau brings together here different applications of musical taste. The composer and the performer may be mentioned in many other treatises, but Rousseau includes the listener (*l'auditeur*) as well: taste is a social phenomenon indeed. Taste, one might say, constitutes a musical culture.

<sup>231</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *A Complete Dictionary of music*; 429.

<sup>232</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*; 235.

<sup>233</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *A Complete Dictionary of music*; 429.

<sup>234</sup> Gadamer, H.-G.: *Wahrheit und Methode* (gesammelte Werke 1). Tübingen, 1990; 42.

<sup>235</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*; 236.

<sup>236</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *A Complete Dictionary of music*; 429.

Characteristic is Joseph Haydn's famous approval of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's qualities as a composer, as rendered by his father Leopold Mozart in a letter to Wolfgang's sister Nannerl (16 February, 1785), in which Haydn mentions Mozart's taste in the first place:

H: Haydn sagte mir: ich sage ihnen vor gott, als ein ehrlicher Mann, ihr Sohn ist der größte Componist, den ich von Person und den Nahmen nach kenne: er hat geschmack, und über das die größte Compositionswissenschaft.

[Mr. Haydn said to me: I say to you in front of God, as an honest man: your son is the most important composer I know in person and by name. He has taste, and moreover, the most profound knowledge of composition.<sup>237</sup>]

At the end of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant legitimated the superiority of genius to any aesthetics based on rules.<sup>238</sup> To the Romantic generation, taste had lost its generalness and became less of a social phenomenon, making space for subjectivity and allowing a more important role for genius. It is significant for the 'conservatism' of bel canto that Lablache still overtly puts taste among the essential qualities of musical sensitivity. He distinguishes between the more common taste that is guided by fashion, and a highly idealised 'true' taste which

consists of an exquisite observance of appropriateness, of clothing oneself in the character of the piece being performed and of increasing the energy of it with analogous colors, and of correlating one's own feeling so well with that of the composer that there results a perfect whole, seemingly produced by a single mind.<sup>239</sup>

The 'lower' taste is interesting too because it is subject to change. Lablache writes that 'the ornaments that enchanted our parents now make us smile with pity'; therefore 'it would be superfluous to give fixed models here that may be good today but will perhaps in a short while have no value at all'.<sup>240</sup> That fashion could even change from place to place is shown in a remark by Ignaz Kürzinger in a chapter where he explains different ways of performing a trill:

Wer in beyden Arten wohl bewandert ist, der wird sich um so leichter nach dem Geschmack des Ortes, da er sich befindet, richten können.<sup>241</sup>

[Who is familiar with both ways, will all the easier be able to conform to the taste of the town where he is.]

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<sup>237</sup> Quoted in J. Irving: *Mozart's Piano Concertos*. London, 2017; 116.

<sup>238</sup> Gadamer, H.-G.: op. cit., 47.

<sup>239</sup> Lablache, L.: op. cit., 110.

<sup>240</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>241</sup> Kürzinger, I.F.X.: *Getreuer Unterricht zum Singen mit Manieren....* 1763, 35.

Such remarks illustrate to what extent a musical performance was an act of communication above everything else. About the use of ornaments, Lablache writes that ‘in the last sixty years [it] has come to be abused’. This is a recurring complaint in texts about ornamentation. However, ornamentation

seems to want to return within more moderate limits in our day. The composers themselves seem inclined to give to their ideas a new twist that, because there is something absolute or rigorous about it, puts a brake on the mania for adorning that has infected the more mediocre singers.<sup>242</sup>

As a singer, Lablache was primarily associated with Bellini, who could very well be one of the composers he is referring to in this fragment. Indeed, Bellini was known for a certain classical sternness, compared to Donizetti and Rossini.

The importance of ‘true good taste’ shows in two conditions that for Lablache are fundamental in ornamenting a melody:

1. The ornament must never distort or obscure the phrase.
2. The ornaments must always be appropriate to the character of the piece.<sup>243</sup>

To a modern reader, such requirements may look obvious enough. They are most likely meant by the author to prevent a ‘tasteless’ excess of added ornamentation, and twenty-first-century musicians will probably nod their approval (→ chapter 3.5). However, they warrant closer examination.

The second requirement, about the appropriateness of ornamentation to the character of a piece, will be familiar enough by now: it can be found in almost any contemporary explanatory text on ornamentation. Laure Cinti-Damoreau, famous for her unrestrainedly virtuosic *points d’orgue* and *traits* (cadenzas and ornamental flourishes), wrote in her *Méthode de chant* (1849):

The *points d’orgue*, *traits* and *rentrées* specified for the embellishment of a piece must above all bear the stamp of the piece to which they are attached; (...) one must take great care not to distort the thought of the composer by using embellishments in bad taste.<sup>244</sup>

But, as Austin Caswell remarked in an article on Cinti-Damoreau’s embellishments:

It is hard to find evidence of this advice among her own cadenzas and variants. Upon studying them, one is struck by the similarities of structure and the stereotyped melodic technique which make any of them resemble the others.<sup>245</sup>

Maybe we should not be too surprised about this tension between letter and spirit. The character of the composition may be one force that directs the musical content of the embellishment, but the

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<sup>242</sup> Lablache, L.: op. cit., 110.

<sup>243</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>244</sup> Cinti-Damoreau, L.: *Méthode de chant*. Paris, 1849; 93. Quoted in: Caswell, A.: ‘Mme Cinti-Damoreau and the Embellishment of Italian Opera in Paris: 1820-1845’. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Autumn, 1975); 482.

<sup>245</sup> Ibidem.



urge to display sheer vocal virtuosity may be another and equally strong motivation. In the art of Cinti-Damoreau the influence of the latter must have been considerable, bringing her enormous success but sometimes also critical remarks, such as this one by (her admirer) Hector Berlioz:

Many people might think that she has allowed herself to cover certain essentially beautiful and original pieces with ornaments, so as to alter their character and vulgarize their appearance.<sup>246</sup>

Also, the criticism that cadenzas for different pieces sound too similar is not confined to some bel canto singers: it could equally well apply to the collection of cadenzas (H 265) Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach wrote to his own keyboard concertos a century earlier.

Lablache's first requirement that ornaments should never distort or obscure the phrase becomes more interesting when it is recast in the affirmative: ornaments are meant to follow (and one might add, enhance) the phrase structure of a piece. In the next section I will elaborate on this fundamental concept.

### *c. Phrases*

What is a phrase? According to Corri, it makes the sense and meaning of a composition understood.<sup>247</sup> Chapter 3 precluded on the eighteenth-century meaning of the term. Rousseau's lucid definition of a musical phrase interestingly already juxtaposes the harmonic and melodic aspects of the phenomenon:

PHRASE: Suite de Chant ou d'Harmonie qui forme sans interruption un sens plus ou moins achevé , & qui se termine sur un repos par une Cadence plus ou moins parfaite.

Il y a deux espèces de Phrases musicales. En Mélodie la Phrase est constituée par le Chant, c'est-à-dire, par une suite de Sons tellement disposés, soit par rapport au Ton, soit par rapport au Mouvement, qu'ils fassent un tout bien lié, lequel aille se résoudre sur une Corde essentielle du Mode où l'on est.

Dans l'Harmonie , la Phrase est une suite régulière d'Accords tous liés entr'eux par des Dissonnances exprimées ou sous-entendues; laquelle se résout sur une Cadence absolue, & selon l'espèce de cette Cadence: selon que le sens en est plus ou moins achevé, le repos est aussi plus ou moins parfait.<sup>248</sup>

[Continuance of an air or harmony, which forms, without interruption, a sense more or less finished, and which is terminated on a stop, by a cadence more or less perfect.

There are two kinds of musical phrases. In melody the phrase is constituted by the air; that is, by a collection of sounds so disposed, whether in connection to the tone or movement, that they form the whole well united which is resolved on an essential chord<sup>249</sup> of the mode in which we are.

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<sup>246</sup> Quoted in Caswell, A.: op. cit., 469.

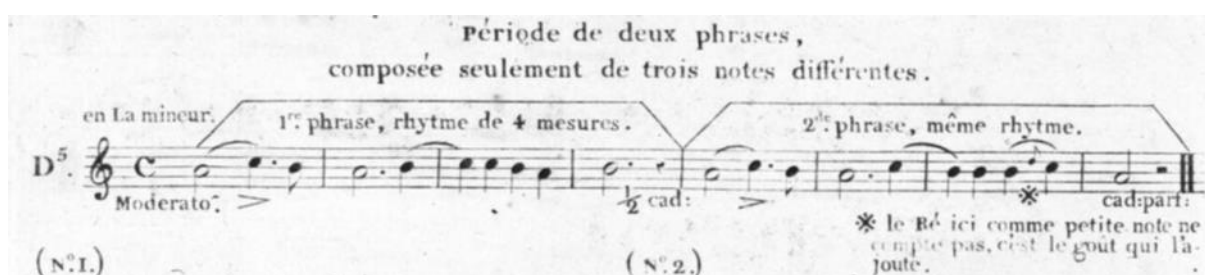
<sup>247</sup> Corri, D.: op. cit., 7.

<sup>248</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*; 370.

<sup>249</sup> In this case : a tone.

In harmony, the phrase is a regular continuance of concords all united together by dissonances, expressed or understood, which is resolved on an absolute cadence: according as the sense is more or less finished, the stop also is more or less perfect.<sup>250]</sup>

For the explanation of the concept ‘phrase’ both Lablache and García draw from Anton Reicha’s *Traité de Mélodie* (Paris, 1814). Reicha describes the form of a (classical) melody along the lines of a sentence in spoken language, with the half cadence representing a semicolon or a colon, and the perfect authentic cadence a full stop. A complete musical sentence is called a *période*, a shorter unit such as an antecedent or consequent is called a *phrase*. The length of a phrase is often four bars in moderate tempo, making it a unit which can be sung on one breath. In the following example two phrases combine to form a classical symmetrical period; the terms ‘antecedent’ and ‘consequent’ are not mentioned.<sup>251</sup>



Example 4.5.2

Lablache shows a similar though less thematically symmetrical example:<sup>252</sup>



Example 4.5.3

<sup>250</sup> Rousseau, J.J.: *A Complete Dictionary of music*; 317.

<sup>251</sup> Reicha, A.: *Traité de mélodie: abstraction faite de ses rapports avec l'harmonie; suivi d'un supplément sur l'art d'accompagner la mélodie par l'harmonie, lorsque la première doit être prédominante*. Paris 1814; Planches d'exemples, 49.

<sup>252</sup> Lablache, L.: *Méthode complète de chant*. Paris, 1840; 26.

The harmonic underpinning of the melodic structure is obvious, even though Reicha's book aims to focus on the melody (as the full title shows), resulting in a long list of possible melodic manifestations of various types of cadences (what Rousseau called *se résoudre sur une corde essentielle du mode où l'on est*). Harmonically a phrase finishes with a half or perfect authentic cadence, to which this *corde essentielle* of course contributes. The harmonic progressions of bel canto phrases tend to be relatively uniform, establishing a clear harmonic gesture with a strong orientation towards the cadence. The similarity of the progressions creates a sense of musical expectation regarding the course of harmony within the phrase – something that is often metaphorically described as musical direction. Thus the harmonic progression, guided by both contrapuntal and harmonic principles, is a *locus communis* because a similar harmonic motion occurs time and again, inviting endless melodic variants.

When such a progression is performed with (a) suitable instrument(s), this sense of direction can be expressed in dynamics and timing. The French type of reed organ, the nineteenth-century pressure harmonium as built by e.g. Alexandre, is such an instrument because it allows the player to sustain the chords and at the same time influence the dynamics by way of varying the pressure on the pedals.

#### [4.5 #1: Harmonic background of Lablache's example]

The clear phrase structure with many four-bar groups, very often leading to some type of cadence, results in a fairly simple and predictable harmonic language in bel canto that can even be termed commonplace. It is a predictability that should not be dismissed as superficial, but that on the contrary invites the play of ornamental variety. The rich chromatic type of harmony of which the works of Wagner are an exemplar precludes the addition of ornaments.

Since bel canto ornamentation is primarily based upon the harmonic background, as will be elaborated below, it tends to enhance these gestures, to increase the sense of direction, as seen in the example from Hiller's *Italiänische Arien* described in chapter 3.5 and 3.6.

#### *Phrase-based ornamentation*

Especially in faster music, the ornamented melody often was a variant of the composed one, not increasing (or even diminishing) the number of notes, rather than a version with added ornaments. García gives examples of this practice; one of them shows three *variazioni* to a passage in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. The original reads as follows:

ROS. min-cio a re-spi-rar ah tu so-lo a-mor tu

FIG. Donne donne eterni De - - -

se - i che mi de - vi con - so - lar ah tu

- i chi v'arriva chi v'ar-riva chi v'arriva aindovi-nar donne donne eterni

A 10039 A

Example 4.5.4: Rossini, G.: *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, act I, no. 15: Duetto (piano reduction).

It is a four-bar phrase, harmonically consisting of a perfect authentic cadence with a crystal clear direction. A reduction of the harmony, using ‘harmonic connections’ in the voice leading,<sup>253</sup> sounds as follows:

#### [4.5 #2: Harmonic background example 4.5.4]

As is often the case, the melody tends to follow one of the ‘background’ parts of the reduction, or to switch between them. In the Rossini example, the melody starts with diminutions on the soprano part of the reduction (blue ovals), switching to the alto part in the third bar (red ovals - here turned into the top voice, a procedure termed ‘register transfer’ (*Höherlegung*) by Schenker). García provides three alternatives to this phrase:<sup>254</sup>

<sup>253</sup> ‘Harmonic connections’ is the literal translation of the German *harmonische Verbindungen*. Though the term is rather uncommon in English, the concept is useful: it refers to a type of voice-leading where the individual voices either stay on the same note (in case of a common tone) or move by the smallest interval possible, usually stepwise. It is a type of voice-leading that results in the smoothest possible parts and in a sense can be seen as the most ‘basic’ one.

<sup>254</sup> García, M.: *École de García*, part 2. French / German edition: Mainz, n.d.; 57.

ROSSINI  
Barbieri  
Duetto.

*Bisina.*

ah tu so - lo a - mor tu sei che mi de - vi con - so - lar

ah tu so - - - lo a - mor mi de - vi con - so - lar

solo a - mor mi de - - - vi con - - - so - lar

Le premier trait offre plus de mouvement que le deuxième et le troisième, mais ceux-ci l'emportent par le brillant des intonations.

Die erste Figur ergibt eine grössere Bewegung als die zweite und dritte, aber diese überbieten die erste an Glanz der Intonationen.

Example 4.5.5

The first variant does not change the number of notes or the rhythm, it just shows a different melody (in the first two bars) on the basis of the same harmony. The other two variants feature different rhythms and more leaps. In this case, we cannot speak of diminution of the original melody because there are no long tones that are ornamented by dividing them into smaller values. Interestingly, García's alternatives follow the same succession of anchor tones from the reduction as Rossini's original melody: g – a – d – c – b. Strictly speaking this would not have been necessary: there are many more inner lines that are equally possible. From an improvisational perspective however García's versions stay close to an extempore practice. They strongly suggest that the singer held on to an inner line, a 'background' melody that came from the chord progression. It is a form of diminution after all, although the melody which serves as its basis only exists by implication.

It is interesting to compare García's ornaments with other material from the first half of the century, discussed here in chronological order. A unique and not very well-known source for early-nineteenth-century vocal ornamentation is the *Vollstaendige Singschule* (ca. 1825)<sup>255</sup> of the once successful German opera composer, violinist and *Kapellmeister* Peter von Winter. Winter, who was a student of Abbé Vogler and Antonio Salieri, composed operas in German but was strongly influenced by the Italian style. His vocal method, published at the end of his life, consists of four parts, the last one being an incredibly elaborated enumeration of examples of ornamentation. The sheer number of variants makes one wonder what was the intention of the author: to provide the student with a supply of ornaments that could be used when needed, or to prompt the creation of new ones by the singer? Unfortunately the accompanying text does not give a decisive answer. Bearing in mind, though, that (as Winter writes himself in the introduction) German singers had to perform operas in many different styles, composed mainly by foreign composers, it could be both: the familiarity with the bel canto style of performance may in some cases have been shallow.

<sup>255</sup> Winter, P. von: *Vollstaendige Singschule*. Mainz, [1825].



What makes Winter's book such a unique source is its comprehensiveness, which is even more interesting because his treatise does not stem from the core of the bel canto tradition, but from its sphere of influence. Winter's approach is similar to Quantz's (→ chapter 3.2): he gives a model in the form of a treble-bass outline (*Außenstimmensatz*), followed by a large quantity of possible embellishments. The models are without exception based upon very familiar loci. The harmonic pattern discussed above, for example, appears on pages 208-211, altogether more than 50 variants in 3/4 and 4/4 times. This is one page:



Example 4.5.6

The basic melody shown above no. 1 is plain and not to be compared with Rossini's melody discussed above; however, its jumpy character deviates considerably from any of the stepwise voices of the harmonic chord connections. The most likely inner voice that (vaguely) permeates most of the variants is:  $c \mid d \mid c b \mid c$ . Remarkably, Winter ornaments the I6/4 progression (last two bars) only in a few cases. A reason for this could be that he has given variations upon precisely this progression beforehand in an earlier chapter.<sup>256</sup>

The organisation of Winter's variants is strikingly unsystematic. In fact, the collection makes a very associative or even arbitrary impression. Variant no. 24, for instance, shown below, clearly builds

<sup>256</sup> Winter, P. von: op. cit., 206-207.

on no. 18 in the previous example (right column), but the two are separated by variants which introduce very different material such as large jumps and a more differentiated rhythm.



Example 4.5.7

We are fortunate that at least one comparable collection from the heart of Italian bel canto exists: in 1835, Manuel del Pópulo García, the father of the author of the *École de García*,<sup>257</sup> who was also famous as a pedagogue, published his *Exercices pour la voix*, which, as the title suggests, almost completely consists of exercises. The second half of the book shows examples of variants and themes with variations. The organisation of the ornamental variants is quite comparable with Winter:<sup>258</sup>



Example 4.5.8

<sup>257</sup> To avoid confusion (father and son carry the same name), in this study the father will be indicated as 'García père', the son as 'García fils'. When just 'García' is used, the son is meant.

<sup>258</sup> García, M. del Pópulo: *Exercices pour la voix*. Paris, [1835]; 40.

Contrary to Winter, García *père* does explain the purpose of the exercises:

J'ai varié de plusieurs manières les trois seules cadences connues jusqu'à présent en Musique, afin d'ouvrir un vaste champ et d'aider l'imagination des élèves; par ce moyen, ils pourront parvenir un jour à chanter d'inspiration, ce qu'on peut appeler sans contredit la méthode la plus plausible, (bien qu'elle soit très difficile) *surtout lorsqu'on ne dépasse pas les justes limites*. Par la même raison, j'ai varié aussi les motifs.<sup>259</sup>

[I have varied in several ways the only three cadences known in music up to now, with the purpose of opening up a rich field and stimulating the student's imagination. In this way, they will one day be able to sing extempore; it is without doubt the most convincing (though very difficult) method, especially when one doesn't pass the limits of correctness. For the same reason I have varied the motifs as well.]

It is possible to discern a certain stylistic difference. Generally speaking, Winter's examples seem to have a less clear direction than García *père*'s material. The many unadorned third bars in Winter stop the rhythmic flow in a peculiar way, and the inner melody is often less consistent. As a result, the embellishments sometimes fail to reinforce the melodic and harmonic urge towards the cadence at the end of the phrase. The examples of García *père* look more organic and goal-oriented.

A beautiful example of an embellishment that excitingly increases the direction of the original is this variant on a phrase from Daniel Auber's *opéra comique L'Ambassadrice* in Laure Cinti-Damoreau's *Méthode de chant*.<sup>260</sup>



Example 4.5.9

The original consists of a sequence that is, though virtuosic, musically inconspicuous. The variant contracts two bars by replacing them with a chromatic scale, thus both melodically and rhythmically creating an effect of floating over the metric structure and obscuring the harmonic progression. In the last bars the metric grip is restored vigorously with a waltz-like motif that builds up by increasingly large melodic leaps. As a result the slightly decreasing tension in the original phrase is replaced with the contrary effect in the variant.

In general, the variants and ornamentations as shown in bel canto sources and in Winter's book consist of quite straightforward material that in a conventional way circumscribes the local harmony (a background against which Cinti-Damoreau's chromatic scale comes as a surprise): we find

<sup>259</sup> García, M. del Pópulo: op. cit., 5.

<sup>260</sup> Cinti-Damoreau, L.: *Méthode de chant*. Paris, 1849; 101.



arpeggiations, unaccented and accented passing tones, suspensions and neighbour notes. Compared with the Renaissance material of Ganassi (→ chapter 3.2), they look much less diverse rhythmically. The nature of the various ornamenting patterns will be discussed in more detail in chapter 9.5.

A valuable aspect of Winter's extensive collection is that it, because of its comprehensiveness, also provides an encompassing list of melodic / harmonic patterns that apparently ought to be ornamented. García *père*'s claim that he shows variants on 'the only three cadences known in music until nowadays' seems a bit too easy in this respect. Whereas Alexis de Garaudé, for instance, contents himself with just one example of a (cadential) melodic turn<sup>261</sup> to be ornamented, Winter begins his catalogue of *fioritures* with a rather exhaustive line-up of melodic progressions (without bass) that bear similarities to Reicha's melodic cadential turns. Winter then proceeds with variants of the perfect authentic cadence as described above. That he had concrete and familiar situations in mind is revealed in the following example, which shows a type of peroration that concludes many Rossinian cabalettas:<sup>262</sup>



Example 4.5.10

<sup>261</sup> Garaudé, A. de: *Méthode complète de chant*. Paris, 1854; 267.

<sup>262</sup> Winter, P. von: *Vollstaendige Singschule*. Mainz, n.d. [1825]; 212.

Note the suggested internal parallel fifths in the implied two-part texture in bars 3-4 of no. 2 and in no. 7,<sup>263</sup> or the openly parallel octave with the bass in bars 3<sup>IV</sup>-4<sup>I</sup> of no. 4. In Winter's defense, though, it has to be said that Louis Spohr, who visited Italy in 1816, had already clearly expressed his irritation about the lack of *Reinheit der Harmonie* (harmonic purity) he encountered in the work of 'the newer Italian composers', for instance in 'bad' doublings or open consecutive fifths.<sup>264</sup> The ornaments in García *père*'s exercises are not completely free from some careless voice leading either. Apparently, the Italian demands (to which Winter conformed) were in this respect less strict than the German ones. This all concerns composed music; it goes without saying that in extempore ornamentation 'accidents' may occur that would be avoided when the music is notated.<sup>265</sup>

The treatment of cadences occupies the most space in Winter's book, mainly because cadences (and half-cadences) are given in several keys (the variations are new, not transposed). This suggests that the book was a collection to be chosen from, not a source of inspiration for improvisations. However, the different keys may have served different voice types, rather than different passages in vocal literature. Winter continues with cadenzas on fermatas. Because they are of a different nature from ornamentation as it has been discussed so far, fermatas (both vocal and instrumental) will be dealt with separately in chapter 10.2. The work finishes with exercises, theme and variations and *solfeggi*.

It is remarkable that Winter omits all textual correlations. In reality the text must have had a key role in the way how ornamentation was applied. The necessity 'to give each phrase, each figure its appropriate colour'<sup>266</sup> was already mentioned above, and primarily depends on the text. García *filz* pays attention to the possibility of 'imitating the feeling or the idea'<sup>267</sup> by way of ornamentation. As an example of such text illustration, he shows an ornamented version of an aria of Cimarosa as it was usually sung by his father. The exuberant *fiorituri* evoke the flying gallop mentioned in the text.

<sup>263</sup> All other variants avoid these fifths, most of them by harmonising the F in the bass with a IV instead of a II6.

<sup>264</sup> Spohr, L.: *Selbstbiographie*, erster Band. Kassel, 1860; 307.

<sup>265</sup> That the latter phenomenon had been familiar and accepted for centuries already is seen for instance in th *Organistenprobe* from Hamburg (1725), as rendered by Johann Mattheson (quoted in Schwenkreis, M. (ed.) *Compendium Improvisation*. Basel, 2018; 10). This text specifies the audition requirements for the job of organist at th cathedral church in Hamburg. The candidates had to improvise (*aus dem Stegreif auszuführen*) a fugue on a given theme; afterwards they were required to hand in a composed version of the same assignment within two days. The motivation for the latter was that while improvising, a performer might mistakes that he would be able to avoid while proceeding slowly (*wenn man langsam verfährt*).

<sup>266</sup> Lablache, L.: *Metodo completo di canto / complete singing method*. Milano, 1841 / reprint 1997; 104.

<sup>267</sup> García, M.: *École de García*, part 2. French / German edition: Mainz, n.d.; 59.

CIMOROSA  
Matrimouco  
segreto  
Aria.

con tutta forza.

i ca - val - li di ga - lop - po senza po - sa cac - - - cie - rà

Variante de Garcia père.  
Veränderung von Garcia dem Vater

val - li di ga - lop - po senza po - sa cac - - - cie - rà

9779.

Example 4.5.11

To summarise, an analysis of notated embellishments convincingly shows that in bel canto, ornamentation was always based upon the harmony, and at the same time originated in anchor tones. When the ornamentation was rather a variant of an already flourishing passage, such as in the Rossini example at the beginning of this section (ex. 4.5.4), the anchor tones were often hidden because the original melody itself was already a diminution of a simple melodic framework. In the case of ‘diminutions’ such as in the Cimarosa fragment above, it is clear that the ornament flows from the anchor tones (marked in the example above), which keep their places in the metre. García writes:

Appropriate ornaments always heighten the effect, when terminating a portion of a phrase. Thus placed, they have the charm of novelty, and make no changes in essential parts of a melody, – that is, in notes which are placed on the down beats. These notes, besides containing the rhythmic accent, fulfil prominent functions in harmony; hence they should be cautiously modified by ornaments, lest the melody be entirely transformed.<sup>268</sup>

It seems appropriate to equal García’s ‘notes on the down beats’ with anchor tones as mentioned above. His description is more practical than analytical: he puts a principle that stems from the earliest practices of diminution (→ chapter 3) in the form of practical advice that a singer can use straightforwardly. García’s ‘rule’ is not completely sound: it only refers to the situation that there are harmonic tones on the downbeats (and, presumably, passing notes on the weak beats). Taken as a signpost rather than as a law, however, and interpreted in accordance with a singer’s intuition, García’s advice helpful for any singer familiar with bel canto. It should also not be forgotten that in eighteenth-century Italian vocal training, still based upon solmisation, the structural function of downbeats was often acknowledged; in passages of an ornamental nature, singers did not sing solfege syllables for each note individually, but rather sang the passage on the name of the first note (*traits*).<sup>269</sup>

<sup>268</sup> García, M.: *García’s New Treatise...* Boston, n.d.; 60.

<sup>269</sup> Baragwanath, N.: *The Solfeggio Tradition: A Forgotten Art of Melody in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Oxford, 2020; Kindle edition, loc. 357.

The same still occurs in Corri:<sup>270</sup>



Example 4.5.12

Though early nineteenth-century methods often discard the ‘old-fashioned’ solmisation system<sup>271</sup> and adapt more modern forms with fixed note names, the acquired awareness of a hierarchy of structural and ornamental tones within a melody most likely remained untouched by this change. Finally, the quotation from García confirms the important principle that bel canto ornamentation tends to intensify the directional movements within musical phrases.

#### *d. The right accent*

The last area of musical sensitivity according to Lablache’s mapping of the terrain is called somewhat mysteriously ‘accent’ (*accento*). Confusion might arise because of the most common musical meaning of the word in many languages, namely the emphasis placed on a particular note or group of notes. This is not how the word is used here: Lablache refers to the more general meaning of an *accent oratoire*, an intonation that matches the sentiment or the idea of a passage, the tone of the voice, or even a way of expression. This use of the word ‘accent’ is more usual in Italian and French than in English and Germanic languages.<sup>272</sup> García uses the term *accent pathétique* that he describes as ‘l’expression ajoutée à la mélodie’<sup>273</sup> [the expression that is added to the melody].

Lablache uses the term as a nineteenth-century successor of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *Affect*. What counts is to recognise the proper *accent* of a piece of music, its character, primarily on the basis of indications of tempo and character such as *adagio*, *agitato*, etc., in combination with the content of the text and the character of the music. Lablache warns his reader that a piece

<sup>270</sup> Corri, D.: op. cit.; 43. Yet another nineteenth-century example is Bernardo Mengozzi’s singing method for the conservatory of Paris (Mengozzi, B.: *Gesanglehre des Conservatoriums der Musik in Paris*. Leipzig, 1804; 38).

<sup>271</sup> E.g. Corri (p.8) who advocates a fixed-do-system, or Benelli (p.17) who prefers letter notation.

<sup>272</sup> <https://www.littre.org/definition/accent>; <http://www.etimo.it/?term=accento&find=Cerca>

<sup>273</sup> García, M.: *École de García*, part 2. French / German edition: Mainz, n.d.; 69.

can be sung with expression, yet with a false accent. Indeed, if in an Andante one used the expressive means appropriate for an Agitato, it would seem ridiculous and exaggerated. And if on the contrary an Agitato is sung like a simple Allegro, it will be cold and unmoving.<sup>274</sup>

Naïve though this may sound, what Lablache is explaining here is the importance of recognising genre-specific loci communes (→ chapter 12). It is essential to recognise the musical meaning of a score, and to choose the appropriate mode of expression. This clearly concerns all elements of ‘musical sensitivity’, but in the context of this study the focus has to be on ornamentation. A line-up of embellishments such as Winter’s easily makes one forget about the intimate connection between ornament and ‘accent’. Many authors mention the importance of such a correlation, but only a few give actual examples. One of them is García, who provides two ornamented versions of the beginning of Count Almaviva’s cavatina *Ecco ridente il cielo* from the first act of Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.

ALMAVIVA. Andante, sempre a tempo.

ROSSINI. Barbiere.

Ec - co ri - den - te il cie - lo spun - ta la bel - la au - ro - ra e tu non sor - gian -

Ec - co ri - den - te il cie - lo spun - ta la bel - la au - ro - ra e tu non sor - gian -

- co - ra e puoi dor - mir co - sì ah sor - gi mia bel - la spe - me

- co - ra puoi dor - mir co - sì ah sor - gi mia bel - la spe - me

vie - ni bel i - dol mi - o ren - di men cru do oh di - o lo stral lo

vie - ni bel i - dol mi - o ren - di men cru do oh di - o lo stral lo

stral che mi fe - ri lo stral che mi fe ri

stral che mi fe - ri lo stral che mi fe ri

Example 4.5.13

<sup>274</sup> Lablache, L.: *Metodo completo di canto / complete singing method*. Milano, 1841 / reprint 1997; 112.



García writes:

It will be at once perceived that the style of our last example is too languid for the character of the brilliant Count.<sup>275</sup>

Lablache even offers a range of various ornamentations of a phrase according to different ‘accents’.<sup>276</sup>

Example 4.5.14

Such examples invite the modern musician to develop a sensitivity for the expressive side of ornamentation, rather than focusing exclusively upon the technical aspects, as so easily happens.

#### 4.6 Stepping-stones towards improvisatory bel canto ornamentation

##### *Unpremeditated ornamentation*

The ample number of available notated variants as they were sung by famous soloists raises the question to what extent this practice can be regarded as improvisatory. Were embellishments in fact composed, i.e. written down beforehand, or were they created extempore? In general, this recalls my considerations in chapter 3.7 regarding the eighteenth-century practice. An important difference, however, is that so many singers *notated* their own variants, or that their variants were passed down (with reference) by others. The argument that variants were written down for students or amateurs who couldn't invent them on the spot (as in the case of Mozart; see chapter 3.5) might not hold here since they were primarily notated by professionals for their own use. Is it true, then, that the notated

<sup>275</sup> García, M.: *École de García*. Transl.; García's New Treatise on the Art of Singing; revised edition. Boston, n.d.; 59.

<sup>276</sup> Lablache, L.: *Metodo completo di canto / complete singing method*. Milano, 1841 / reprint 1997; 90.

ornaments clearly show that the habit of performing unpremeditated variants had disappeared in the earlier nineteenth century?

The evidence for the opposite comes, surprisingly, from a singer who may have notated most variants of all: Laure Cinti-Damoreau. In the introduction to her *Méthode de chant*, she explains that the repertoire she used to perform in Paris was rather limited, and that as a consequence she really felt the need to sing different *traits* to the same pieces every evening, something which was appreciated very much by her regular listeners, who rewarded every new appoggiatura to one of their favourite pieces with a warm applause. Apropos of this facility to change ornamentation on the spot, Cinti-Damoreau continues with a story about a duet in dialogue-structure she had to sing with a famous guest star one day. During the performance, the other singer unexpectedly changed all ornaments they had rehearsed before,<sup>277</sup> forcing Cinti-Damoreau, who had the answering part, to do likewise. She managed to improvise new ornamentations, and the performance was acclaimed more than ever. She concludes:

Tirez de ce récit une leçon, mes chères élèves; sans l'habitude que je m'étais faite de varier tous les thèmes, de jouer, à force de travail, avec toutes les phrases musicales, j'eusse été certainement moins heureuse dans mes inspirations.<sup>278</sup>

[Dear students, please learn one lesson from this story: when I would not have acquired this habit of varying upon all tunes, of playing (through hard work) with all musical phrases, my flashes of inspiration would definitely have been less felicitous.]

Whereas Cinti-Damoreau indicates the continuous search for variants with the beautiful word *jouer* (to play), García in a most interesting passage uses the word *improviser* (*cantar alla mente*):

Comme l'étude des ornements exige beaucoup d'exercice et qu'elle doit conduire l'artiste à improviser des variantes (*cantar alla mente*), mérite distinctif du chanteur éminent, le maître ne saurait trop exercer l'élève à varier lui-même les morceaux. Il est bon que l'élève fasse beaucoup d'exercices de ce genre et essayer plusieurs variations, plusieurs traits différents sur le même passage; de cette sorte, les observations critiques du maître porteront plus de profit. D'ailleurs, ce que l'on doit désirer, surtout chez le jeune artiste, c'est la fécondité, la correction viendra plus tard; elle sera le fruit naturel des leçons et de l'expérience. Dans le travail que nous conseillons, la correction du maître doit à la fois faire disparaître les fautes et conserver, autant que possible, les intentions du jeune auteur. La critique la plus instructive est celle qui améliore une œuvre sans la détruire.<sup>279</sup>

[Since the study of ornaments requires much practicing and should enable the artist to improvise changes (*cantar alla mente*), a distinctive virtue of an eminent singer, the teacher cannot exercise the

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<sup>277</sup> In duets, it was usual to agree beforehand upon the ornamentation.

<sup>278</sup> Cinti-Damoreau, L.: *Méthode de chant*. Paris, 1849; dedication ('À mes élèves').

<sup>279</sup> García, M.: *École de García*, part 2. French / German edition: Mainz, n.d.; 54.

student enough in making his own variations. It is good when the student does many exercises like this and tries out many variants, many ornaments on the same passage; the critical remarks of the teacher will then be very useful. Especially with the young artist, one would desire productivity, correctness will follow later; it will be the natural fruit of the lessons and of experience. In the education as we advise it, the tutor's correction should make disappear the mistakes and, as much as possible, save the intentions of the young author. The most instructive critique improves a work without destroying it.]

It is telling that this passage is lacking in the revised English edition of the book: evidently an improvisatory approach to ornamentation was seen as less essential by the time of its publication (probably 1871).

Cadenzas were also supposed to be extemporised (Corri: 'Cadenzes are an extemporary Fancy';<sup>280</sup> William Leopold Grosse: 'a cadence is an extempore passage'<sup>281</sup>), but they will be treated in chapter 10. A last testimony of the naturalness of an improvisatory attitude comes from an anecdote about Manuel del Pópulo García. García *père* was teaching the young tenor Adolphe Nourrit (a friend of Frédéric Chopin), who sang an aria from Domenico Cimarosa's opera *Il matrimonio segreto*.

Arriving at a cadenza, Nourrit executed a florid line of quite good taste. "Very good. Sing me another one." Nourrit did a second one. "Sing me another." Nourrit sang a third. "Sing me another." "I'm out of ideas," Nourrit responded. "After three cadenzas!" A real singer must be able to improvise ten – or even twenty if he so desires. For the only true singer is the one who is a true musician."<sup>282</sup>

### *Playing with the score: harmony*

The last sentences in the previous quotation of García  *fils* betray a great pedagogue: it takes courage to let a student (who at this stage is not a beginner anymore) 'play around', trusting that the intuition and experience of the student and the efforts of the tutor will in due course lead towards the desired result. On the basis of my experience, this would also be valuable advice for a modern singer trying to learn improvising ornaments: play with the score! Don't be afraid of mistakes! The first requirement is to actually come up with something. Though this might sound simple enough, musicians know how difficult already this can be, especially for a modern classically trained musician, who is used to aspiring for the highest technical standards, while at the same time being out of touch with bel canto as a living musical language. If the modern way of striving for perfection discourages one thing, it is this very capacity to *jouer*. It requires no less than a completely different approach to music-making. Let it then be a comfort to singing students that even the great García considered this worth mentioning!

<sup>280</sup> Corri, D.: op. cit., 75.

<sup>281</sup> Grosse, W.L.: *Grosse's Instruction in Singing*. London, n.d.; 12.

<sup>282</sup> Ernest Legouvé, *Soixante ans de souvenirs*. Paris, 1886. Quoted in: Radomski, J.: *Manuel García (1775-1832)*. Oxford, 2000; 266-267.



A next thing to be aware of is the crucial role of harmony. Many nineteenth-century authors stress the importance of being familiar with the principles of harmony and composition; Corri for instance writes that without knowledge of the rules of composition, ‘no ornaments of cadenzas, graces, shakes, &c. &c. can be adapted, conformably to the laws of harmony and modulation.’<sup>283</sup> Cinti-Damoreau’s cadenzas clearly show a keen sense of harmony, and García warns the ‘student who has become an artist’, namely when he is ready to learn about ornamentation, that ‘knowledge of harmony has become indispensable’.<sup>284</sup> Without understanding of harmony there can be no acceptable ornaments – but what is this understanding of harmony?

Today, many musicians tend to answer that question in terms of the harmony classes they received at the conservatory. Modern harmony teaching generally has a strong analytical and reflective component, which is natural since its aim is to understand a musical language of two centuries ago. Nineteenth-century harmony pedagogy, by contrast, taught the principles of a living musical language, which made it more practice-oriented by default. The goal of classes during which ‘the rules of composition’ were taught was primarily to learn how to compose music according to the current expectations and taste (→ chapter 12). The question as to what extent singers were receiving such classes cannot be answered in general, but we may assume that it was only natural when a singer would play the piano at a reasonable level, and therefore had a certain practical knowledge of harmony. The singing methods contain many exercises that are supposed to be accompanied by the teacher; it is interesting that the more old-fashioned ones still rely on the tutor’s capability to accompany from a figured bass, like Benelli (1814),<sup>285</sup> as it had been a common practice in the eighteenth century, while more and more often the accompaniments are written out in four parts – a clear indication that the practice of figured-bass-playing had become a relict in the nineteenth century. But as a vehicle of harmony teaching, the figured bass remained of importance during much of the nineteenth century. ‘Understanding harmony’ would in this context mean being able to realise a figured bass, to harmonise a melody, to apply correct voice leading – in writing and on the keyboard.

For a modern singer (like for any classical musician) it is absolutely advisable to be reasonably fluent on a keyboard instrument, preferably the piano. The fact remains, though, that the training of a classical musician today is generally much less focused on creating ‘new’ music<sup>286</sup> and more on performing scores. As a result, even skilled pianists today are not automatically successful in the creative sphere. The ability to come up with good-sounding harmonic progressions does not follow

<sup>283</sup> Corri, D.: op. cit.; 1.

<sup>284</sup> At least, in the original text (p. 54); the revised edition in English both dropped the matured student and weakened the necessity of harmonic knowledge, saying that ‘some’ knowledge is necessary.

<sup>285</sup> Benelli, A.: *Regole per il canto figurato / Regeln für den figurirten Gesang*. Dresden, n.d. [1814].

<sup>286</sup> In inverted commas because the word ‘new’ didn’t have the modern connotation yet in the period under consideration; new music as meant here could (and can) be very commonplace without any problem. See chapter 12.2.

as a matter of course. In addition, in the modern situation of hyper-specialisation it can easily happen that someone is a great singer without ever having learnt to play the piano at all. Consequently, the attention of this singer – or any player of a melody-instrument in the same situation – tends to be directed exclusively towards the melody, not to harmony. Therefore, the question should nowadays be: how can a singer integrate the harmonic aspect of music with the melody-focused approach he naturally has? This is neither about analysing the harmonic structure of a score nor about being able to play the piano accompaniment: it is about including the harmonic parameter in the musical imagination, the ‘inner hearing’.

The significance of this idea of course by far exceeds the area of vocal performance, and it will therefore be elaborated further in chapter 14. What matters here is how singers can develop sufficient familiarity with the harmony of a passage that they would like to vary upon. On basis of lessons I gave to singers from a wide scope of professional development, it can be supposed that it is helpful for a singer to actually sing these chords. In many cases, this requires a reduction of the texture of the accompaniment to its basic harmonic manifestation. Since the musical imagination of the singer has to be activated, the best way to do this is through sound: either by the singer playing the chords, or by listening to another pianist or even a recording. Starting with the (probably simplified) bass line, the chord structures can be aurally acquired as intervallic structures over the bass, and sung accordingly. The result will be an arpeggiation of the important chords as they appear above the bass (without necessarily using the term ‘inversions’). Analysis in the form of describing scale degrees, inversions, harmonic functions, etc., is a useful way to conceptualise the harmonic progressions, but certainly cannot replace this crucial aural step.

When it comes to *jouer* with a passage, the aural imagination of the harmonic component is indispensable. While the principle explained above can be applied to a variety of harmonic patterns (→ chapter 11.5), in the specific case of bel canto ornamentation the range will be much more limited. Following the ideas of Lablache, it will be good to be well aware of the phrase structure of a piece, and to select one particular phrase to ‘play’ with, as Cinti-Damoreau advises. The harmonic progression will most likely be a variant of a perfect authentic cadence. One could pick one of the models used by Winter or García *père*, but it might be more appealing to choose a phrase from an existing composition. García provides the reader with a list of pieces he considers ‘well chosen’ for the study of ornamentation.<sup>287</sup>

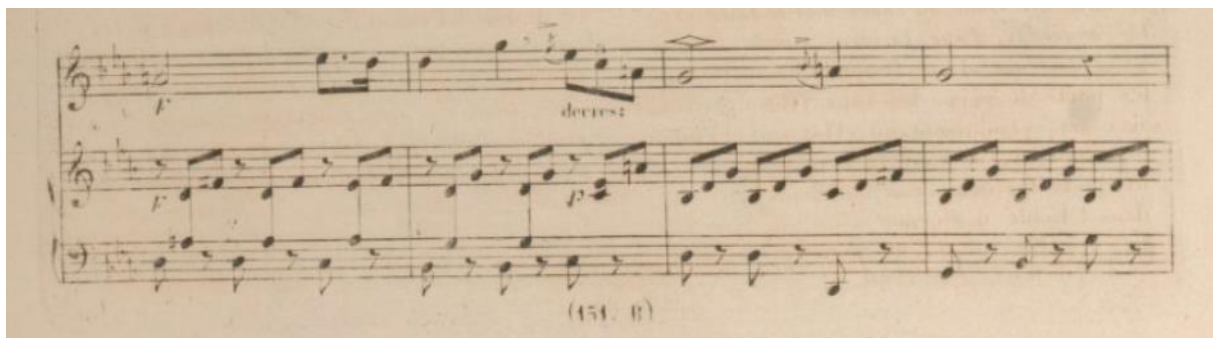
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<sup>287</sup> García, M.: *École de García*, part 2. French / German edition: Mainz, n.d.; 56.

CAV.	«Sovra il sen la man mi posa.»	<i>Sonnambula.</i>
RONDO.	«Ah non giunge uman pensiero.»	<i>Sonnambula.</i>
CAV.	«Una voce poco fa.»	<i>Barbiere.</i>
RONDO.	«Nacqui all' affanno.»	<i>Cenerentola</i>
RONDO.	«Tanti affetti al cor d'intorno.»	<i>Donna del Lago.</i>
VARIATIONS.	«Nel cor piu non mi sento.»	<i>La Molinara.</i>
AIR.	«Di piacer mi balza il cor.»	<i>Gazza ladra.</i>
AIR.	«La placida campagna.»	<i>La principessa in Campagna.</i>
AIR.	«Jours de mon enfance.»	<i>Pré-aux-Clercs.</i>
AIR.	«Dieu! que viens-je de lire?»	<i>Ambassadrice.</i>
AIR.	«Des l'enfance les mêmes chaînes.»	<i>Serment.</i>
AIR.	«Voyez-vous là-bas»	<i>Sirène</i>
AIR.	«Ah! je veux briser ma chaîne»	<i>Diamants de la Couronne.</i>

Example 4.6.1

Alternatively, one could use the *Leçons* Alexis de Garaudé included in his *Méthode*, which have the explicit (and quite unique) goal of serving as *une espèce de canevas à broderies*:<sup>288</sup> an ‘outline left to the performers abilities to colour’, as Burney wrote (→ chapter 3.2), in other words: etudes for ornamenting (see appendix). This is one phrase, taken from De Garaudé’s first *Leçon*; it consolidates a modulation to the key of g minor.<sup>289</sup>



Example 4.6.2

The reduced harmony in this case practically coincides with the piano accompaniment. Singing the chords in an arpeggiated form focuses on their interval structures, as was mentioned above. The traditional graphic representation of this approach to harmony is the figured bass. In my view there is nothing against reviving this no longer current notational system, even for musicians who will never play basso continuo; after all, music from the figured-bass era is a natural part of our current music culture, which was much less the case in the nineteenth century. A figured bass reduction of the example above reads:

<sup>288</sup> Garaudé, A. de: *Méthode complète de chant*. Paris, 1854; 268.

<sup>289</sup> Garaudé, A. de: op. cit., 269.



Example 4.6.3

For a proper and effective ‘understanding’ of the harmonic phrase, it will be good for the singer to explore the voice leading as well. By starting on a random tone from the first chord, the singer can sing one of the voices of the ‘harmonic connections’ as described in section 4.5 while the harmony sounds – in reality or in the imagination – and then proceed with the other voices. Rather than trying to apply the well-known voice leading rules (which suppose an overview of all voices, and hence are thought for a keyboard player or composer), it will be wiser to focus on the contrapuntal relation between one harmonic voice and the bass, for instance in avoiding parallel perfect consonances. (A good exercise is to play the bass and at the same time sing the harmonic voice, something that players with very modest keyboard skills can also learn.) Next the original solo melody can be reduced to its basics (i.e. stripped of composed ornamental material) and be compared with the harmonic voices. By means of such preparatory exercises, the harmonic structure of a phrase ideally has been made part of the musical imagination of the singer, and the foundation of any improvised ornamental structure has been laid. It is true that when a singer is completely unexperienced in this, the harmonic material from this single example might be too limited for developing a skill in this field. Indeed a proper basis in ear training will facilitate much of what follows.

### *Playing with the score: melodic patterns*

On basis of a well-integrated harmonic understanding of the phrase, it will be good to follow García’s advice and try out different melodic possibilities over the harmony. This is the moment where the question of musical style becomes more important. In this very specific instance of relative improvisation within a well-defined stylistic context, most likely both singer and audience tend to expect ornamentation that convincingly suits this context. This might sound like a truism, but when one improvises a long cadenza it might be an artistically justifiable and even interesting choice to do the opposite and aim for a stylistic clash. In the case of embellishments to a melody, however, such a clash would simply sound like a mistake. This stylistic correctness in the first place relates to the treatment of dissonances, which as it were frames and limits the melodic possibilities. It has been said that the history of Western musical styles from the pre-Classical period to around 1900 is characterised by an ever-increasing acceptance of dissonance.<sup>290</sup> The position of bel canto on this gliding scale is pretty much on the consonant side, by and large ruled by late-eighteenth-century

<sup>290</sup> Cf. e.g. Schönberg, A.: ‘Gesinnung oder Erkenntnis’ [1925] (in: *Stil und Gedanke*. Frankfurt, 1976), and *Harmonielehre* (Wien, 1911).

principles. This means, for instance, that unprepared accented dissonances are actually always appoggiaturas, and that the use of chromatics is restrained. Another feature the bel canto-style has in common with the classical style (as in Haydn and Mozart) is the very clear harmonic orientation towards the three primary degrees, but as a matter of course this aspect rather concerns situations in which the harmony can be determined by the performer, such as cadenzas.

Within this frame it is very well possible to ‘play’ with a phrase and find all kinds of stylistically possible melodic variants, and as a stage on the way towards real *belcanto* ornamentation this is certainly an advisable thing to do. However, this is not yet what one would call ‘ornamentation’. As was shown earlier, ornamentation proper often takes what I termed ‘anchor tones’ as its starting point. A short formula can be varied and amplified by adding ornamental flourishes ‘on the weak beats’, as García explained. A good example, already briefly mentioned above, is given by De Garaudé (for the full example, please see the appendix):<sup>291</sup>



Example 4.6.4

<sup>291</sup> Garaudé, A. de: *Méthode complète de chant*. Paris, 1854; 267.



Note that De Garaudé's use of the word 'phrase' for such a short formula is atypical, even in the context of his own work.<sup>292</sup> When a complete phrase (in the sense of a longer unit, usually four bars) is ornamented, it is principally a matter of joining together figures such as those shown above. The following example by Cinti-Damoreau (ex. 4.6.5), taken from Isabelle's aria in the second act of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*, shows how the firm harmonic basis enables her to increase the distances between anchor tones, with longer embellishments as a result. In the second bar of the model for instance, she only uses the high a'' as an anchor tone and not the d#'', which gives her much more freedom to come up with virtuosic variants on the B7 chord. Also note how already in the first variation she varies upon the second halves of the fifth and sixth bars by getting rid of the appoggiaturas in the original, and choosing for the harmonically important tones c#'' and d#'', supported harmonically by secondary dominants. This focus on harmony opens the passage for the inventive upward chromatic scales in variation 3.<sup>293</sup>



Example 4.6.5

Especially in fast movements the variants can develop a rhythmic continuity, as in the Rossini-example in section 4.5 (ex. 4.5.4).

<sup>292</sup> Garaudé, A. de: op. cit., 136.

<sup>293</sup> Cinti-Damoreau, L.: *Méthode de chant*. Paris, 1849; 97.

A modern reader who is confronted with notated examples of bel canto ornamentation can be baffled by the sheer virtuosity of many of them, an impression that only increases when vocal cadenzas are taken into account. It is a degree of virtuosity that many singers nowadays haven't attained and that to us seems to have almost instrumental characteristics. This is another instance that suggests a deep separation between the early-nineteenth-century way of singing and modern vocal technique. Also in this respect, a much greater flexibility seems to have existed in the nineteenth century, as opposed to a more sustained, powerful but also stiffer tone production today. One not only wonders how singers managed to sing so fast, but also how they were supposed to come up extempore with such fast passage work. The latter question arises from the experience that there is a limit to the possible speed of thinking during improvisation. Undoubtedly this is a personal limit, prone to development by training, but most improvisers will agree that being in control becomes problematic when the density of musical events crosses a critical point.

One and the same answer is proposed to both questions here. I would like to suggest that both circumstances – the unusual vocal virtuosity and the speed of the extempore passages – can be explained by taking the bel canto system of vocal training into account. Bel canto ornamentation, including cadenzas, tends to be built on a repertoire of specific melodic patterns such as scales (diatonic and chromatic), arpeggios and all sorts of little motifs around one tone. It is exactly these patterns which give the embellishments such an instrumental ring, since the same patterns occur very often in instrumental etudes and virtuosic music from this period. As for vocal music, they show most clearly in cadenzas, which have not yet been discussed. A more systematic overview of ornamental loci therefore will be given only in chapter 9.5. The point here is that these very patterns were meticulously trained in technical exercises that formed the heart of bel canto vocal training. This not only answers the question how this degree of virtuosity was attained, but also explains why it must have been very well possible to improvise such virtuosic music: the patterns were to a certain extent automatised and therefore callable. Singing fast scales as part of daily practice makes it much easier to use scale patterns in an improvised ornament than when one hardly works with such technical exercises, as seems to be predominantly the case today.

Though there are certainly differences between bel canto singing methods, the overall structure many of them have in common is based upon exercises and *solfeggi*. Basic skills are at first addressed in exercises that are invariably organised as sequences on the major or minor scale, accompanied by a piano harmonisation. The *solfeggi* are accompanied as well and serve as vocal etudes in which the material from the exercises finds a more musical application.

For the purpose of this study, the many exercises that aim to improve the agility of the voice are especially interesting. It would be incorrect to assume that all bel canto singing students had to pass through the same mould. Mancini writes:

The pupil is mistaken when he thinks that only agility can bring success to a singer, and the teacher is wrong in his belief that a person having a heavy and raw voice, can change it with study and make it agile and paste-like.<sup>294</sup>

Not every singer had to become a coloratura specialist! On the other hand, the training was very much focused on technique, and agility was developed as a matter of course.

García is again the most exhaustive source for this type of vocal training. Exercises such as those shown below (ex. 4.6.6)<sup>295</sup> reveal a strong similarity with instrumental drills from the first half of the nineteenth century; the most famous (though rather late) example is probably Charles-Louis Hanon's *Le pianiste virtuose* (1873).

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Example 4.6.6

By practicing similar exercises intensively, a student not only developed the agility of the voice, but at the same time became familiar with a large quantity of patterns that could be used in ornamental situations. To some this may sound a bit uncreative and disappointing, as if chunks of music are ‘recorded’ in memory, ready to be used in appropriate situations. I believe that this idea would be incorrect. What is being ‘automatised’ with such exercises is not in the first place the melodic shapes as such: after all, the exercises explore more or less any (harmonically and melodically) possible

<sup>294</sup> Mancini, G.B.: *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato* [1774]. Transl.: *Practical reflections on the figurative art of singing*. Boston, 1912; 148.

<sup>295</sup> García, M.: *García's New Treatise...* Boston, n.d.; 24.



An example may clarify this. An unexperienced improviser might in the spur of the moment get the idea to use a scale as an ornament, for instance in order to connect two anchor tones at an octave's distance. Surely, the singer will be familiar with the 'tune' as such of a rising major scale. This familiarity in itself however does not yet guarantee its successful use in an ornamental situation. What is necessary is the capacity to 'plan' the application of the 'tune' of a rising scale in the specific rhythmic situation of that moment. Experiences with students show that this needs to be practised: the matter is not only at which tone to arrive, but especially when this happens. It is by exercises such as the following one that rhythmic standard solutions for this type of situations become internalised:



man sein. Aber in ähnlichen Passagen hat man nur die erste und die Schlussnote zu brechen, die man jedesmal zu rechter Zeit erreichen muss, mais dans cette formule d'agilité on ne doit considérer que le point de départ et le but qu'il faut toujours atteindre à temps.

<sup>297</sup> Long, M.: *Le piano*. Paris, 1959; 51.

In reality, however, the performance of this type of virtuosic chromatic scales demands a very thorough internalisation of the rhythmic structure. How this could work becomes clear in an exercise of Lablache.<sup>299</sup>



Example 4.6.9

By practicing slowly in this manner, the shapeless whole of a long chromatic scale gets subdivided into smaller units with the compass of a third. Performing chromatic scales as *gammes lancées* means concatenating these internalised building blocks – a process that in itself might become an automatism. Lablache’s division of a rhythmically amorphous lot into groups of three or four matches the way in which classical musicians still practise: musical imagination tends to organise patterns in groups of three or four or, occasionally, five or at most six tones. It is exactly this type of organisation that also forms the basis of the countless technical exercises as in García’s *École*. Consequently, the figures in the example from García’s book (cited above) will be imagined by most singers as two groups of four instead of one group of eight notes.

Finally, it is interesting that García invites students to design their own exercises, namely by turning any technical problem into a sequence exercise such as the ones printed in the book. He even explains how a pattern can be modified in order to provide a smooth connection to the next degree in the sequence (another passage that is missing in the revised English translation).<sup>300</sup> Whereas García *fils* advised the student to write down his own exercises, his father, García *père*, is said to have invited the student to produce them on the spot, according to María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo, comtesse de Merlin, who was his student in the 1820’s:

A mesure que l’instrument de la voix se perfectionnait, García faisait exécuter jusqu’aux exercices les plus difficiles pour la rendre apte à surmonter tous les obstacles; mais il indiquait rarement un trait à ses élèves: il leur faisait un accord sur le piano, puis il leur disait: «Faites ce que vous voudrez... encore... encore un... encore.» Et souvent de recommencer dix et vingt fois. Qu’en résultait-il? Que l’élève faisait selon sa voix et selon son âme, et que, par conséquent, ses traits étaient toujours bien exécutés et gardaient un caractère d’individualité qui, tout en lui appartenant, se trouvait en harmonie avec le gout

<sup>299</sup> Lablache, L.: *Méthode complète de chant*. Paris, 1840; 66.

<sup>300</sup> García, M.: *École de García*, part 2. French / German edition: Mainz, n.d.; 82.

du moment, dont il suivait, sans s'en douter, les inspirations. Un autre avantage de cette manière de faire le trait était que l'élève devenait maître de l'instrument à force d'exercer ses propres inspirations, et que si, au moment de commencer un air, il se trouvait mal disposé, il pouvait substituer subitement un trait à un autre, sans crainte ni hésitation.

[To the degree that the vocal instrument was progressing in perfection, García had the student execute up to the most difficult exercises in order to make the voice capable of surmounting all obstacles. But rarely did he indicate a specific trait [embellished passage] to his students. He played them a chord on the piano, and then said to them: "Do what you wish... again... another one... again." Often beginning again ten or twenty times. What was the result of this? That the student performed according to his voice and according to his soul, and that, consequently, the passages he sang were always well-executed and retained a character of individuality which, belonging completely to him, was in harmony with the taste of the moment, following those inspirations without doubting himself. Another advantage of this manner of doing the *trait* was that the student became master of the instrument by means of exercising his own inspirations, and that if, at the moment of beginning an aria, he found himself ill-disposed, he could substitute suddenly one *trait* for another, without fear or hesitation.<sup>301</sup>]

Sometimes the idea comes up that, in order to approach a specific historical performance style, today's musicians should be trained in the same way as the musicians of the period in question. Improvisatory bel canto ornamentation might seem to be a clear-cut instance for such an approach. To conclude this chapter, the value of this idea will briefly be examined.

### *Early techniques and modern vocal training*

In 2008, the German *Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* made an attempt to put together an overview of current views on the teaching of music theory at German *Hochschulen*.<sup>302</sup> The responses were very diverse, and local situations and teaching personalities turned out to be hard to compare. If this is true for a relatively well-defined area within a homogeneous category of institutions of higher music education in one country, it seems that one should be very careful about making firm pronouncements about something such as vocal teaching in general, let alone two hundred years ago. At best general tendencies can be pointed out – which however can be very significant. Modern classical vocal teaching, for example, is at least as diverse as the world of German music theory; on the other hand, the demands made by the international concert world upon a singer's competence are relatively stable. As a negative result of this, it has become quite common to complain about uniformity in modern performance.

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<sup>301</sup> Merlin, María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo, comtesse de: *Madame Malibran*. Bruxelles, 1838; 34-35. Translation: James Radomski. Quoted in Radomski, J.: *Manuel García (1775-1832)*. Oxford, 2000; 265-266.

<sup>302</sup> Kühn, C.: 'Musiktheorie lehren. Zu einer Umfrage an den deutschen Musikhochschulen.' *ZGMTH* 7/1 (2010).

One overwhelming characteristic of ‘classical music’ (i.e., the modern practice of music-making on the basis of scores from the past) is the enormous scope of repertoire that is involved. The situation Winter signaled in Germany has now expanded beyond the imagination of an early-nineteenth-century musician:

Der italienische Opernsänger hat immer seine Gesangstücke aus derselben gefälligen Schule vorzutragen; dem Opern Compositeur wird von jedem Sänger das Tonregister vorgeschrieben, in welchem sich die Cantilene bewegen soll. (...) Der deutsche Sänger ist gewöhnlich in dem Falle in dem kurzen Zeitraume eines Monats eine Gluckische, Cherubinische, Rossinische und Mozartische Oper vortragen zu müssen. Welcher charakteristische Unterschied bezeichnet nicht die Compositionen dieser Meister?<sup>303</sup>

[The Italian opera singer always performs music from the same comfortable tradition; every singer tells the opera composer in which register the aria should be written. (...) The German singer usually has to perform within the time-span of one month operas by Gluck, Cherubini, Rossini and Mozart. How different are the characteristics of the compositions of these masters!]

His twenty-first-century counterpart can draw from a repertoire that encompasses more than ten centuries. As was mentioned in chapter 1.3, the modern musical practice we call ‘classical music’ has its *raison d’être* in musical scores, and therefore it is self-evident that the teaching of singing also usually draws on musical compositions from a variety of periods. These are often ‘masterworks’, or at least compositions that are still seen as valuable today, a judgment that is subject to change. It is interesting in this respect to follow the developing taste by comparing older editions of long-lasting collections for teaching purposes such as *Das Lied im Unterricht* with newer ones which show significant changes in content. With respect to bel canto, we can be sure that our idea of the repertoire (dominated by star-composers such as Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini) differs considerably from the picture that arises from the theatre programs of that time. We are cherry-picking from the ever growing body of musical compositions, creating our own classical truth. Stylistic diversity nowadays is a matter of course for stages and for musicians alike, which reflects in vocal training. No singer can survive by performing exclusively in a stylistic environment that is as focused as Laure Cinti-Damoreau’s or Maria Malibran’s was. As a result, many singers are only superficially familiar with the styles they perform, even much more than their German colleagues in Winter’s days.

With respect to both vocal and instrumental technique, there is a strong tendency today to increase virtuosity by means of studying well-chosen repertoire, not by practicing separate dry exercises. It is not unlikely that this development goes hand in hand with a spectacular growth in scientific knowledge of human physiology over the past century, and more recently of psychological and neurological aspects of practicing and performing. In my view, this knowledge is primarily being

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<sup>303</sup> Winter, P. von: *Vollstaendige Singschule*. Mainz, n.d. [1824]; 3.

deployed to increase efficiency and to prevent injuries. The mechanical repetition of exercises, for instance, is often seen as something mindless that should be avoided. However, this modern attitude discourages ‘playing with’ the score in the sense described in this study, because it tends to understand the notated music as a technical task that should be fulfilled. To be sure, the advice to apply various ways of practising is a common one. As natural trumpet player and study coach Susan Williams puts it:

Practicing a piece or phrase in a variety of ways – even ways you would not dream of performing it – results in better learning and enhances confidence. Rather than only varying single aspects (e.g. tempo, rhythm, articulation, dynamics), it is better to vary the entire character or emotion associated with a piece. For example play a segment as if it is a lullaby, a march, with a light dancing quality, or in a sombre introspective way, etc.<sup>304</sup>

The techniques Williams suggests – she also advises repeating sections in a random order<sup>305</sup> – surely are valuable ways to avoid ‘mindless repetition’. However, I argue that this is not what Cinti-Damoreau meant by ‘jouer’. The purpose of exercises as mentioned by Williams is to say something different with the same notes, whereas Cinti-Damoreau asks her students to say the same thing with different notes.

Another feature of modern singing teaching is that only with very few exceptions, professional musicians receive their training at official institutions such as conservatories, *Hochschulen* or universities. The organisation of such institutions is roughly similar worldwide: there is a study program with various subjects, of which the actual singing lesson is only one; different subjects are generally being taught by different teachers; there are exams, which means that there have to be standards; standards imply at least a certain amount of agreement on the content of subjects. In short: modern professional musical training is institutionalised. No matter how important the differences between institutions, the student’s education has to meet an extensive range of requirements. Where an early-nineteenth-century pedagogue could still refer to ‘good taste’, the role of this concept has, in a way, been taken over by the apparent objectivity of ‘learning outcomes’.<sup>306</sup>

The situation during the first half of the nineteenth century could hardly be more different. Conservatories derive their name from the Italian *conservatori*, originally schools where orphans were educated in music: the opulent Roman Catholic church music was always in need of singers and other musicians. The first secular conservatory was founded in Paris in 1795, initially with a similar but secularised purpose: to train musicians for official celebrations. During the nineteenth century, many more were founded across Europe and the United States; however, by no means did the

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<sup>304</sup> Williams, S.: *Quality Practice: A Musician’s Guide*. Bremen, 2017; 46.

<sup>305</sup> Williams, S.: op. cit., 48.

<sup>306</sup> The insight that modern ‘assessment criteria’ are to a large extent arbitrary, or at least based upon choices with histories, will play an important role in chapter 7.

nineteenth-century conservatory have an exclusive claim on professionalism that its modern counterpart possesses.<sup>307</sup> Many famous nineteenth-century composers and performers did not study at a conservatory, and many famous musicians who were also sought-after as a tutor did not teach at such an institution.

Nineteenth-century musical education must have been very diverse. Even comparing only the conservatory curricula from that time with today's would require a separate study. Many methods that play such an important role in this chapter were written for the Paris conservatory, such as those by Mengozzi, De Garaudé, García and Cinti-Damoreau – but with respect to ornamentation, they describe a world that was already in the process of decline. Thanks to Countess Merlin, we have some detailed (though anecdotal) reports about the teaching of García *père*; though it would be incorrect to generalise here, his teaching is still important for this study since he was regarded as a world class singer as well as a brilliant pedagogue in his day. Therefore his work with students may serve as a paragon of bel canto teaching. His attention was not directed to vocal technique exclusively, but to musicianship in general. García's teaching laid the foundation for his son's famous method, and he taught his two daughters who both were to become world famous singers: Pauline Viardot and Maria Malibran. Both girls were imbued with music in their childhood because their father made them sing with the family in salons, thus developing their intuitive musicianship. They studied piano from the age of five before they started to study voice seriously, with additional lessons in counterpoint, fugue and composition.

This might still sound like an ideal world to a modern singer, but the surprise comes with the actual vocal teaching. From the moment when Maria began serious study, her father exclusively allowed her to sing exercises (scales, solfeggios)!<sup>308</sup> García must have been aware that this can be very tedious: he writes in his *Exercices pour la Voix* (dedicated to the Countess Merlin) that one of the most important qualities a singing student needs is *une grande dose de patience*.<sup>309</sup> This was the tradition of teaching as he knew it. Allegedly the famous Italian master Nicola Porpora had his student, the equally famous castrato Caffarelli, sing exercises for years and never leave the master's studio, until he told him one day: 'Go, my friend, you are the best singer of Italy and of the entire world'.<sup>310</sup> In the end García *père*'s students were allowed to learn arias, however without text! As Countess Merlin writes, one day he would judge the student to be an artist, and say to him in the best

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<sup>307</sup> It still happens today that brilliant young talents receive their musical training outside a conservatory, but on a much smaller scale than in the nineteenth century.

<sup>308</sup> Radomski, J.: *Manuel García (1775 – 1832)*. Oxford, 2000; 268-269.

<sup>309</sup> García, M. del Pópulo: *Exercices pour la voix*. Paris, n.d. [1835]; 10.

<sup>310</sup> Radomski, J.: op. cit., 270.

tradition of Porpora: ‘You are a singer: out into the world, *you can go*.’<sup>311</sup> Needless to say, this behaviour would cause some difficulties in a modern conservatory environment...

The picture that appears from such anecdotes is a completely different relation between preparation and performance, compared with nowadays. Whereas most modern performers tend to practice to perfection the act of performing itself in all its details, the old Italian school of bel canto prepared the basis, the capacity to perform, and let the performance itself be a unique event. It is the improvisatory approach in due form! This attitude made it possible for singers to work in a musical world that demanded originality. Of course, postponing the text while learning an aria did not imply any negligence of the words; on the contrary. The musicologist James Radomski quotes George Sand, who witnessed Pauline Viardot’s first performances in Paris:

Si elle adopte un trait, si elle prononce une phrase, elle en rétablit le sens corrompu, elle en retrouve la lettre perdue.

[When she takes up some line, when she pronounces a phrase, she re-establishes in it the sense that had been corrupted, she finds therein the lost letter. 312]

The most stunning example of the improvisatory approach comes from an anecdote about García *père* as a singer. García was engaged for an opera production in Naples, with Isabella Colbran (later to become the wife of Rossini) as his partner. García didn’t like the opera, and refused to learn his part by heart and only recited during the rehearsals with his score in his hand – including the dress rehearsal. Colbran was of course extremely worried about the quality of the nearby performance, but García assured her that it would be all right. He asked the prompter to speak his text clearly, ‘and as for the music, I’ll take care of that’. At the premiere, it turned out that García had used the rehearsals to learn the harmonic background of the music, which enabled him to completely improvise his part on the provided harmony during the performance.<sup>313</sup>

Let us return to the question put at the beginning of this section: could a modern singer decide to completely adapt the bel canto way of vocal training? There are a few circumstances that would make this very difficult.

*a.* Training only the general capacity and leaving the performance to the stage requires something fundamental: an absolute familiarity with the musical language of the composition. The García family must have been breathing the music they performed; it was around them all the time – and the same thing goes for other singers from the same tradition. There is no way a singer nowadays can get close to this situation because bel canto operas irrevocably belong to the past.

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<sup>311</sup> Quoted *ibidem*.

<sup>312</sup> ‘Le Théâtre-Italien et Mlle. Pauline García.’ In : *Revue des deux monde* (February, 1840); 587. Quoted in: Radomski, J.: *op. cit.*, 270.

<sup>313</sup> Radomski, J.: *op. cit.*, 267-268.

b. Something we know very little about is the frequency and the length of nineteenth-century singing lessons. This may have varied greatly, but it is not unlikely that the contact between teacher and student in those days could be much more frequent than what is feasible nowadays within a conservatory environment. In his *L'Art de toucher le Clavecin* (1716), François Couperin advised the harpsichord teacher never to let a beginning student practice without his presence, and even to lock the instrument and to keep the key.<sup>314</sup> It seems plausible that an average singing lesson was more like practicing with the student than working on interpretation – if only because repertoire occupied such a small place. It is true that several important methods pay a lot of attention to interpretation, García *fil's* method above all. These books, however, functioned within a conservatory environment, and were partly intended for ‘outsiders’ who did not always have this innate familiarity with the bel canto style. The approach of García *père* was already old-fashioned by then. Other aspects are the length of the period a tutor was involved with a student, and the age at which the professional training took place. Reports about this are contradictory, but generally, the age at which singers made their debuts seems to have been earlier than nowadays.

c. The vocal training in the heyday of bel canto was not only focusing on a very well-defined and narrow repertoire; it was also assuming a very wide range of compositional quality within these boundaries. It should not be forgotten that ornaments and variants were also supposed to improve less interesting music – music that generally is no longer being performed today. Already at that time, García *père's* abovementioned *tour de force* would not have been accepted if the opera in case was regarded a masterpiece. If we would imitate the training method in all details, we probably should also imitate all aspects of the musical practice – including the constant production of new pieces under very high time pressure. It is clear that we can't.

On the other hand: if we would like to regain something of this improvisatory approach, if we accept that extempore ornamentation is an essential feature of performing bel canto music, we cannot ignore the methodical prerequisites as they already existed at that time. A singer who intends to make stylistically convincing ornaments needs to internalise ornamental loci: there is no other way to propel the imagination. We will never be like early nineteenth-century Italians: our horizon will never coincide with theirs. We can, however, attempt to fuse horizons, enriching modern training techniques with the essentials of bel canto teaching. How precisely this should be done in practice is not a question that can be answered here, if alone because the author lacks expertise in this area. As will be shown in chapter 5, there are many similarities with instrumental training; the issue of practising technical exercises is relevant there as well. One important difference though, worth mentioning here, is that, differently from instrumental music, the virtuosity<sup>315</sup> in vocal compositions

<sup>314</sup> Couperin, F.: *L'Art de toucher le Clavecin*. Paris, 1716 ; 7-8.

<sup>315</sup> In this context, ‘virtuosity’ refers mainly to the agility of the voice.



rarely reaches the level that is attained in some exercises – and in notated ornamentation. This means that, more than in the case of, e.g., piano music, the decision to develop vocal technique only by means of repertoire implies that the level of virtuosity will remain limited. In short, whoever only practices compositions is not likely to be able to perform the more difficult forms of ornamentation. Therefore, there is not only a musical but also a technical reason to somehow incorporate the kinds of exercises typically used in nineteenth-century bel canto training. Perhaps García's advice to create your own exercises is precisely the way to incorporate those nineteenth-century drills within a modern understanding of technical training.

There is one more way in which scale-based technical exercises can be helpful in modern music education: they are a great way to practice ear-training, especially when students think out their own patterns. Sequencing a pattern throughout the entire scale develops the musical imagination and increases the awareness of the relation with the tonic. It is a type of exercises that can easily be extrapolated to other modes than just major and minor, in this way approaching a daily practice in jazz training.

At the end of this chapter I would like to emphasise once more that adopting a historically inspired improvisatory approach to bel canto means embracing the idea of 'musical sensitivity' in all its aspects. For singers, this entails a true paradigm-shift, and especially the institutionalisation of music education is a huge barrier in this. What I hope is that the same impetus that led conservatories to put 'improvisation' on the agenda may awaken the curiosity of young singers to explore forgotten traditions in order to fertilise modern performances. Even though this chapter only offered some 'stepping stones', they hopefully can be of some value for the guidance of the development of a historically inspired vocal training. More original examples will be much needed by singers who intend to broaden their vocabulary; for a selection of these I refer to the appendix of this study.