

BEL CANTO AND BRASS PLAYING

by Charley Davis

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The Bel Canto School was the most famous of all vocal schools dating back to the 16th century and is still, to a great extent, in practice today. The relationship between the Bel Canto techniques and brass playing can be applied to the teaching and development of skills of any instrumentalist.

The earliest lessons stressed purity of sound and intonation. The fundamental of sound production is the first requisite; that is the production of a beautiful tone. Great care must be taken to instill the concept of tonal quality in the student's mind. The knowledge of fundamentals and the perseverance to master them was the key to success in the Bel Canto school. The masters would work this out through the slowest passages, utilizing the most simple melodies and scales with constant attention to the tone quality. By controlling the tone and later the mechanics a performer would then concentrate on phrasing and other subtleties of the music. Nothing was more important than constant review of fundamentals of tone production. The masters of Bel Canto formed correct habits of tone production first.

This is much the way many successful brass teachers and players approach playing today. Through long tones and lyrical melodies brass players can achieve great success. The concept of a beautiful sound should be practiced in this manner. Tone should be considered the primary building block.

A beautiful tone is regarded as the result of properly functioning vocal mechanics. Anything short of a beautiful tone is attributed to faulty muscular coordination. This is exactly the same for singers and brass players. The practice where technical aspects are separated from those of overall tone production leads to a condition we've all heard: that is a player who can tongue or play with great technique but has a very unpleasant sound. The masters of Bel Canto believed everything is subordinate to a free and lyrical sound. Technique and articulation come after the tone has been mastered.

The player can gain control over muscular activity through indirect methods, not by concentrating on any specific muscle activity. It is impossible to control every muscular act since many aspects involved in proper tone production are involuntary. When the player focuses on tone, and not muscular activity, the involuntary activity will become more controllable. The problems then are psychological not physical. There are many teachers and players who stress the physical aspects of playing brass instruments. This frequently leads to a strained, less free sound. When a player concentrates on tone quality, physical problems will, for the most part, correct themselves. By simply achieving a clear beautiful sound, many physical problems are mastered. When a player begins to hear the proper

quality in his or her own tone, they are well on their way to mastering most physical problems.

The most important thing a player can do is to listen for a free, open sound. This cannot be overemphasized. Each player must become sensitive to imperfections of tone. The primary aim of brass players is, as the Bel Canto masters sought, to attain purity of sound.

A strained, tense sound should not be changed by attempting to open the throat, release tensions, or relax the throat. When a person tries to direct muscular action, it only leads to an increase in tension already present and exacerbates the problem. When players turn their attention to the quality of sound, the tone will become more free and more clear. By thinking of sound quality, it is possible to rebuild or retrain a player with physical problems. Through repetitiveness, the player will learn what a quality tone feels and sounds like. There is a direct parallel between a player's physical efficiency and a quality sound.

Bel Canto masters accomplished concepts of tonal values through imitation. Many times, the teachers set examples for the students. In the case of brass players, I feel it is important for the teacher to play during lessons so the student can learn by comparison. Students can learn by listening to other players who exemplify the quality of sound characteristics they desire. Each person has a unique contribution to make to music through their own sound and musicality. Imitation should both be a literal reproduction of the teacher, but a way to become aware of the general characteristics of a quality sound. The Bel Canto masters would sometimes imitate the problems of the student in order to make the student aware of faults which he might not have otherwise noticed. Imitation of the sort is nothing more than ear training. It teaches an awareness of characteristics that comprise a quality tone.

Young players should observe as many great players as they can. Recordings provide a good resource for this, but cannot equal the example set by live performances because recording technology can create a false representation. In time, with natural maturing, the student's own sound will develop. Tensions and a quality sound cannot exist together.

The mind is the creator of the concepts you apply to playing. Faulty concepts make playing or singing much more difficult. If a player thinks of his sound and a relaxed breath and forgets about embouchure, many problems will clear up. Players need to incorporate the right kind of thinking to coordinate mind and body. Proper mental conditioning is the key factor that separates great performers from all others. Mental conditioning determines a player's level of success.

Concentration is, in part, the elimination of distractions. If a musician's thoughts are turned onto subtle mechanical details of performance, their mind takes over and their body does what it is told. This is usually much more exaggerated than one wishes it to be. If, on the other hand, players concentrate on the creation of a beautiful sound and a relaxed breath, they will train their body to do the correct physical activity.

Relaxation is also important in concentration. Concentration does not mean dig in or try harder. The harder a player tries does not always mean the better they do. If they can eliminate the distractions and concentrate on the task at hand, playing a beautiful tone, they will be successful. The use of imagery is an excellent tool in developing a relaxed mental approach. Much of playing a musical instrument is kinesthetic, visual and auditory imagery. The imagination of an individual sets the path of success or failure in life as it does in performance of a musical instrument.

The Bel Canto techniques present a wonderful source for methods of teaching and playing that many instrumentalists have overlooked. I have not covered the Bel Canto approach to breathing here. This is a subject worth looking into and will be covered in another issue.

ABOUT CHARLEY DAVIS - Following a number of years as lead trumpet with the Woody Herman Band and the Buddy Rich Big Band, as well as travelling as lead trumpet with Frank Sinatra and Paul Anka, Charley Davis makes his home in Los Angeles. For the past 12 years he's been one of the most respected studio musicians on the West Coast. Charley is in demand as a soloist and clinician and is available for bookings through Colin Music 212-581-1480.