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WORLD VOCAL SCHOOLS AND THEIR DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS

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Abstract

This study provides a systematic comparative analysis of the major world vocal schools – Italian, German, French, Russian, and Anglo-American – examining their historical evolution, core pedagogical principles, and distinctive technical and aesthetic features. Using a historical-comparative method, the research draws on primary treatises on singing (Tosi, Mancini, Garcia, Lamperti, Lehmann), modern voice science literature, and representative operatic and chamber music repertoire. The analysis reveals clear paradigmatic features of each school: the Italian *bel canto* ideal of *appoggio* breathing, *chiaroscuro* timbre, and seamless legato; the German school's emphasis on textual clarity, powerful breath support, and *Sprechgesang* nuances; the French tradition of elegant *voix mixte*, nasal resonance, and precise declamation; the Russian school's synthesis of deep psychological expression with a chest-dominant, dramatic sound; and the Anglo-American tradition as an eclectic integrator of these approaches.

Keywords: *vocal schools, bel canto, voice pedagogy, national vocal traditions, singing technique, operatic performance.*

Introduction

The emergence of the operatic genre was preceded by a rather lengthy period of development of vocal art in Europe, connected, above all, with church music. Its first examples were born in the Renaissance, at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, within the circle of the Florentine Camerata as an attempt to “revive” the traditions of ancient art and to unite tragedy, music, and dance in a single genre (J. Peri, G. Caccini, M. da Gagliano). “In 1581, Vincenzo Galilei (the father of the famous scientist) carried out a historical investigation of ancient music

and published several ancient Greek hymns. Based on the notions of *melopoeia* in the ancient Greek theatre that he obtained in the course of his study, he arrived at the idea of creating a modern monody that would not be part of a polyphonic composition” (Otinova-Ordina E. E., 2014).

Vocal art is one of the most ancient and affecting forms of human musical expression, and it has developed in close connection with national culture, language, and aesthetic views. As professional opera, chamber music, and concert performance took shape in Europe between the sixteenth and

nineteenth centuries, distinct national vocal schools emerged. They followed their own paths not only in vocal technique but also in artistic expression, repertoire, and pedagogical approach. Today, the international opera stage and vocal pedagogy have acquired a global character under the mutual influence of these schools; nevertheless, an understanding of the fundamental features of each tradition remains essential for the professional singer and pedagogue. The aim of this article is to illuminate the distinctive characteristics of the major world vocal schools through comparative-historical analysis and to demonstrate their place in contemporary vocal education.

“The first opera is considered to be the performance *Dafne*, created in 1594 by J. Peri and O. Rinuccini. Its score, unfortunately, has not survived. In 1600, the composer and singer Giulio Caccini wrote the opera *Euridice*. This work was intended for the wedding of the French King Henry IV and Maria de’ Medici. Giulio Caccini himself trained singers. In 1600, the rulers of Florence were struck by the polished voices of Francesca and Settimia Caccini, the composer’s daughters” (Stockhausen, Yu., 2018). Their voices were cultivated in the spirit of those principles that enabled Giulio Caccini to become the founder of the Italian recitative manner of performance. In 1608, Monteverdi’s *Arianna*, to a libretto by O. Rinuccini, was performed in Mantua.

Main Part

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the principal differences between the schools are determined, first and foremost, by the phonetic structure of the language, the national musical forms (opera, Lied, mélodie, romance), and the aesthetic ideal (beauty, truth, elegance). As a result of the analysis, the specific technical and aesthetic code of each vocal school was identified.

1. The Italian Vocal School. The Italian school was formed on the basis of the *bel canto* (“beautiful singing”) tradition. Its principal features are: *appoggio* – low costal-diaphragmatic breath support; *chiaroscuro* – the ratio of bright and dark tones in the timbre; a high degree of legato, and the smooth blending of registers across the entire range

(mastery of *messa di voce*). The pure prolongation of vowels and the rapid, light articulation of consonants ensure a natural “flow” of the voice. Roundness, a metallic sheen, and emotional warmth prevail in the aesthetics of timbre. Pedagogically, the types of *l’arte del canto* (soprano, tenore, etc.) are oriented not toward a mould but toward the nature of the individual voice.

2. The German Vocal School. The German school took shape, in particular, at the end of the nineteenth century under the influence of Wagnerian music drama and the Lied genre. It rests on an equal synthesis of text (*Dichtung*) and music. Its principal features are: powerful breath pressure, an “instrumental” vocal direction, exaggerated clarity of consonants, and the *Sprechgesang* (speech-song) style. The sound is formed more on diaphragmatic support, with the tongue in a more retracted position, which imparts a darker, at times “covered” (*Deckung*) character to the timbre. The vibrato width may be slower than in the Italian school. Stamina and a wide dynamic range are essential for the German voice, especially in *Heldentenor* and high dramatic bass roles.

3. The French Vocal School. From the seventeenth century, beginning with the operas of Lully, the French school has been founded on speech intonation and elegance. Its distinctive features are: *voix mixte* (mixed head resonance), a slight tendency toward nasal resonance, short and precise consonant sounds, and declamatory expression. Clarity, transparency, and lightness are valued in the timbre; high notes are often performed in a mixed register with a falsetto hue. This tradition gave rise to the *haute-contre* (high tenor) voice type. The demands of diction include the complexities associated with the nasal vowels and the *e muet* phonemes of the French language.

French vocal art as a national phenomenon took shape in the second half of the seventeenth century. The founder of the national operatic and vocal school is Jean-Baptiste Lully. Lully’s opera theatre, which emerged under the strong influence of the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, required from the singer an affected declamation. This performance style became the defining feature of the French school of singing.

“In the eighteenth century, French performance experienced a crisis. The affected declamation, appropriate in Lully’s works, became absurd when performing the operas of Jean-Philippe Rameau and Italian composers. The reform of operatic art, prepared by a century of intellectual development and the activity of the encyclopaedists – Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, d’Alembert, and Grimm – is associated with the work of Christoph Willibald Gluck. Gluck’s motto – “truth, simplicity, naturalness” – became the foundation of the performing style of French opera singers” (Yaroslavtseva, L. K., 2004).

Despite the historical progressiveness of Gluck’s operatic reform, the vocal art of France at the end of the eighteenth century could not rival the Italian. This is easily explained by the declamatory nature of French operas, which did not foster the development of such qualities as cantilena, beauty of timbre, or agility technique.

In order to accomplish the task he had set, Duprez gave the following recommendations:

- 1) sing exercises on the closed vowel “a”;
- 2) perform them unflinching with full voice, but without forcing;
- 3) the initial exercises should consist of sustained notes (the diatonic scale in whole notes);
- 4) from the very first steps, the student should be taught to inhale, retain, and skillfully expend the acquired amount of air;
- 5) do not force the lower notes when singing wide intervals;
- 6) soften the notes that precede the “transition” and “round” those that follow;
- 7) learn mental singing: hear the sound that is to be sung;
- 8) expand as far as possible the boundaries of chest resonance.

The significance of Duprez’s work *L’Art du Chant* (“The Art of Singing”) lies in the fact that it was here, for the first time, that the necessity of covering (rounding, darkening) the upper range of the male voice was theoretically substantiated. It is for this very reason that Duprez entered the history of performance as a reformer of vocal art.

4. The Russian Vocal School. The Russian school began in the nineteenth century under Italian (initially Glinka and Italian ped-

agogues) and French influence and acquired a national character. Its principal hallmark is profound psychological expression and the phenomenon of the “Russian bass.” Technically, it is characterized by the maintenance of chest resonance across the entire range, a broad and dark timbre, and a powerful dramatic accent. Chaliapin’s performative realism fully united vocal action with stage action. In breathing, low diaphragmatic support, a “free larynx,” and a high position of the soft palate play an important role. The timbre is dense, rich, and saturated with deep emotion; portamento and dynamic contrasts are actively employed as means of expression.

5. The Anglo-American Vocal Traditions. England shaped its own style through oratorio performance (Handel, Mendelssohn) and the demand for precise diction in the English language. The United States of America, on the other hand, created an eclectic pedagogical model based on a synthesis of European schools. Here, an individual anatomical-physiological approach, voice therapy, and interdisciplinary research take precedence. The modern American school, through pedagogues such as R. Miller, proposes a universal methodology that stands “above national styles.”

Discussion

The differences among national vocal schools are not accidental but are directly linked to the articulatory demands that the phonetics of a language place on the vocal organs. The breadth of the pure vowels in Italian (a, e, i, o, u) leads to a stably low position of the larynx and the relatively free shaping of the palate. The complex consonant clusters and covered vowels (ö, ü) in German, by contrast, require muscular breath support and a more active engagement of the back of the tongue. The nasal vowels of French have paved the way for a lower descent of the soft palate and nasal resonance. Palatalization and broad vowels in Russian encourage the predominance of the chest resonator. At the same time, the aesthetic ideal also determines the orientation: Italians have placed the “beautiful voice” first; Germans, “truth of word and music”; the French, “refined taste”; and Russians, “spiritual expression.”

In the twentieth century, a strong synthesis among the schools occurred as a result of

recording technologies, international tours, and migration. “For example, in modern opera, performers who united the Italian *bel canto* technique with German textual clarity (M. Callas, D. FischerDieskau) forged a universal model. Today’s leading conservatoires often teach on the basis of “comparative vocal pedagogy,” encouraging students to master elements of several schools. Nevertheless, the balance between language and style is preserved in any mature performance: performing a German Lied without Italian *legato*, or a French *mélodie* in a German declamatory manner, is considered stylistically incorrect” (Lamperti, D. B.).

Conclusion

The world vocal schools – the Italian, German, French, and Russian traditions – are not only historical and cultural monuments but remain the foundation of contemporary professional vocal performance. Their distinctive characteristics manifest themselves

in breath technique, resonance balance, articulation, and aesthetic ideals. Language phonetics and national aesthetics form the basis of these differences. Modern globalized vocal pedagogy, without denying national styles, is proceeding along the path of synthesizing them and adapting them to the individual voice. This article provides a systematic knowledge base for those interested in vocal performance and pedagogy and creates a foundation for future interdisciplinary research.

The world’s vocal schools occupy a significant place in the development of vocal art. The Italian school is distinguished by the traditions of *bel canto*, the Russian school by artistic expression and vocal power, the German school by textual interpretation and dramatism, and the French school by elegance and stylistic precision. The experience of these schools serves as an important source in the advancement of contemporary vocal pedagogy and performance art.

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