

Hunterian Associates Talk

Singing Treatises and their function

Today, if a person wanted to take singing lessons they would most likely go to the house of a singing teacher, stand in a room, maybe a living room or a converted bedroom. The singing teacher may have asked the person to bring a piece of music to sing or the teacher may start by asking the person to sing scales on a vowel like Ah, Eh or Oo. Perhaps the person is lucky enough to be taking singing lessons at university or at a conservatoire in which case the same scenario might play out but this time in a practice room of the institution. This set up encourages a very private setting where the secrets of singing tuition are a hidden code between the teacher and student. This set-up for the singing lesson has been so for at least three hundred years and perhaps even many years before this. This is why very little is known about singing tuition from before the mid-twentieth century, and yet the music especially from the 18th and 19th centuries such as arias and songs written by Handel, Mozart and Haydn continue to be sung by vocalists today. If it is true that singing lessons from the 18th century were as private as singing lessons in the 21st century, how do we know how 18th century vocalists practiced and developed the music? How did singers perform it when it was first written? How did it sound? Who were the singers who performed these songs? Why were they singing these songs? What did they hope to learn?

My name is Brianna Robertson and I am going to tell you more about singing lessons that took place during the late 18th and 19th century. There were several publications that discussed vocal tuition and these are called singing treatises. I have been looking in more depth at these treatises of which there are approximately 60 held in Special Collections. The treatises held here date from about 1742 through to approximately 1860 and each one provides another piece of the puzzle, painting a clearer picture of what may have taught during singing lessons of the 18th and 19th century and what the singer was expected to learn.

This may provide a little more insight into how singers of this period sounded and how the singing lesson altered and changed throughout this time to become the tuition that is recognised by most singers today.

What are singing treatises and how were they used?

Singing treatises are publications which advise a student or teacher in areas that a student of singing should learn to develop in order to become a successful vocalist. Many of the authors write their treatises specifically for the teacher and this is the case with one of the earliest treatises contained within the library – a translated edition of the treatise written by the Italian castrato Pier Francesco Tosi, which was translated by Mr. Galliard in 1742. Tosi outlines three main ‘aims and objectives’ if you will of his treatise called *Observations of the Florid Song*

1. I will in the first Place, endeavour to shew the Duty of a Master, how to instruct a Beginner well ;
2. What is required of the Scholar
3. With more mature Reflections, to point out the way to a moderate Singer, by which he may arrive at greater Perfection. (Tosi and Galliard, 1743, pp. 7)

These three objectives give us some idea as to how Tosi expected his work to be used:

1. He expected that the role of the teacher was to be responsible for all of the initial training of a student singer and this becomes very apparent when reading the work as much of his advice is directed towards how to teach rather than how to sing

2. Secondly, through his observations it becomes clear key areas the scholar was expected to develop, and these areas I will discuss in more detail later in this talk as many authors of singing treatise discuss the same matters

3. The third and final point is very interested, as Tosi shifts his narrative from addressing the teacher to addressing the student, which I believe is a clear indication that after a singer left the safety of the vocal lessons with their teacher, they continued to learn and develop in their singing ability. It might be hard to imagine people engaging in continued professional development in the 18th and 19th century, but this is very much what this resembles and suggests that the expectations of a professional singer was not so very different to the expectations we have of professionals today.

So Tosi's treatise was not a book that was to be privately studied from. It was expected that the teacher would use the book to assist students during their lessons pin-pointing key areas that the student should be instructed in.

This is the case with many of the treatises and the vast majority all tell us that the book is not to be used by the student alone to teach them how to sing, but rather that it should be used in conjunction with the teacher during the private lesson. So while many of the works vary in size from this small book written by Tosi, to much larger books; the works all would fit comfortably on a music desk or music stand. Most the authors in fact tell us that they have specifically made sure that their treatise is not too bulky in weight, with some authors even stating that they opted to miss out certain key areas to make sure the volume remained quite compact and this is quite revealing as it proves that singing treatises were written to be practical, rather than books that were used for private study.

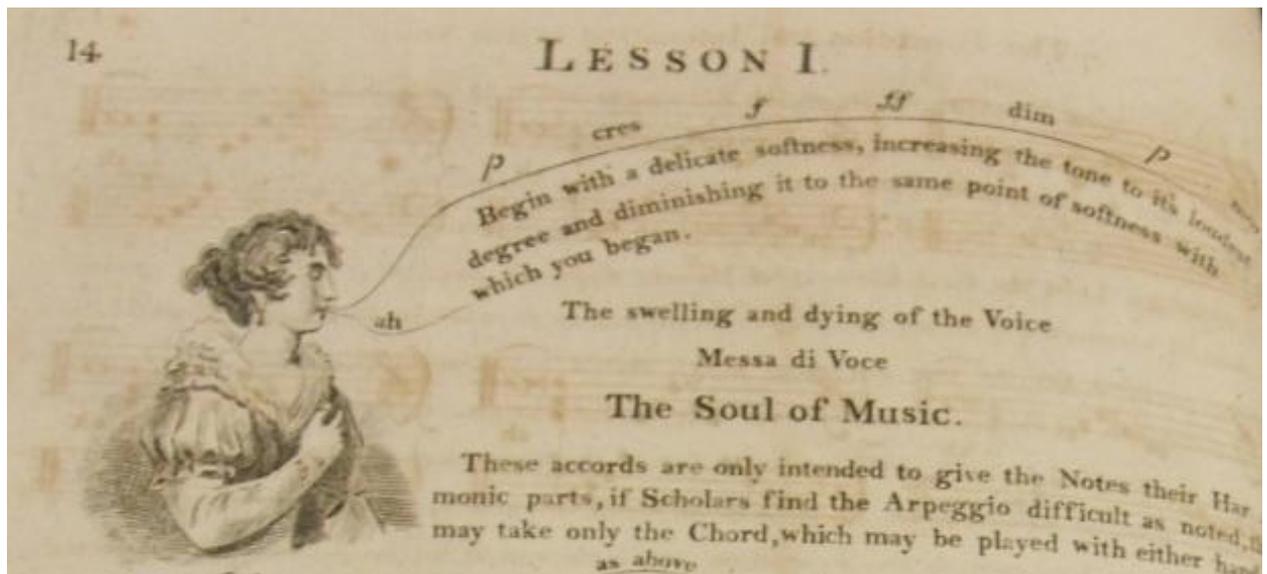
Where to begin?

Many of the singing treatises provide a lot of advice when it comes to the beginning of vocal training and a key area addressed is that a student before beginning singing lessons should be able to read musical notation. Now this is a very important area, as today there are singers who do not read music notation at all and learn the music by ear as it were; listening to songs and learning the music this way rather than reading notes. Obviously, 18th and 19th century singers did not have access to CDs, mp3s or ipods to be able to listen to songs repeatedly at will, so being able to read notation was vital to making sure that the singing lesson ran smoothly. There are some treatises that discuss singers who learn by ear, for example, the treatise written by Andrea Costa in 1838 called *Analytical Considerations on the Art of Singing*, tells us there are some excellent singers who learn in this way, however, he also calls these singers non-musical. So despite him saying they are excellent he does not describe them as musical. I can only assume that these non-musical singers learned by ear from the singing teacher playing or singing each line of a passage for the student until they picked up the melody, but obviously this is much lengthier process of learning and wouldn't really benefit the student after they had moved on from singing lessons.

The next piece of advice frequently given is that the student should learn how to perform the *messa di voce*. This is a vocal exercise that also appears as a vocal ornament in many songs and it sound like this

- Performance of the *Messa Di Voce*

Here is an illustrative example of the *messa di voce*. (Corri, 1810, pp. 14)



This exercise allows a singer to gain control over the volume of their voice right from the beginning of vocal tuition and it is actually now an exercise that does not appear in modern vocal tuition. In most treatises, the *messa di voce* appears in many of the first exercises a student is to perform and many authors encourage that it is performed over a long notes and short notes. This is particularly the suggestion in *The Singer's Assistant*. In this image, you can see that the author suggests the *messa di voce* should be sung on any note for a period at the teacher's description and the singer should swell their voice from the quietest to loudest volume and back to quietest. He then suggests that the singer do this exercise again but instead on a semibreve scale. (Unknown, 1822, pp. 3)

pp *crescendo for.* *ff* *diminuendo pia.* *pp.*

note, thus: the sound

EXERCISE.

VOCE. *p* *f* *p*

PIANO

FORTE.

After I performed this exercise, I realised that it also allows a singer to gain a lot of control over the breath, especially when performing it over long notes. If the singer miscalculates how much breath they need to perform it then they could run out of air very quickly as it takes a lot of breath control to crescendo the voice or make it louder, but even more breath to make the voice quieter.

Sol-fa Syllables



Leo, Durante, Scarlatti, et Al. A new edition of Solfèges d'Italie, 1820

The next area is that students of singing were encouraged to learn was how to perform the notes using sol-fa syllables. How many of you have seen The Sound of Music- so that song Do a deer a female deer is all about the sol-fa syllables Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti, Do. However, the sol-fa syllables in Italian, which most of these treatises refer to do not say Ti but instead say Si instead. Ti was not brought in until a much later period. The theory with these syllables is that they would help a singer learn how to sight-sing, that is reading the notes straight off the page without much help from instrumental accompaniment and it was also thought the syllables would better a singer's tuning. By the later treatises, from about 1840 onwards, what is interesting is that discussion of the sol-fa syllables does not frequently appear and in fact one of the later works written in 1860 by Rimbault he says that the Latin syllables or the sol-fa syllables are "sometimes" applied to the note names. (Rimbault, 1860, pp. 13) His use of "sometimes" demonstrates that these syllables had fallen out of fashion, though they were still occasionally used by some teachers of singing.

Sometimes singing teachers did not always agree on how to use the syllables. Some of the treatises suggest that Do should always appear on the note C no matter the key signature of the piece. Other treatises suggest that Do should be on the tonic note of the piece – so if the

piece was in D major, then Do would be D, Re on E etc. And then there were some teachers who advised students not to use sol-fa at all and to simply sing on a vowel. This is clearly the suggestion in Smith's treatise as he writes exercises with both Sol-fa and to the syllable La implying that Smith did not think sol-fa helped a singer gain better tuning or a better ability at sight-reading and probably suggested the use of sol-fa for those who were used to using the syllables. (Smith, 1828)



Solfeggi

The third area and next progression in the vocal lesson was that the student was to perform many solfeggi or solfeggio exercises. These solfeggi are long complex exercises, similar to instrumental exercises, which developed the singer's flexibility and musicality without them having to worry about lyrics. From this period on, almost all the singing treatises contain written solfeggio. They are quite strenuous exercises and most authors warn against performing these before the student is capable. Most authors advised that these should

be performed using the sol-fa syllables as it would help the student to improve their sight-reading, tuning and be able to navigate these complex exercises quite quickly. Here is the image of a solfeggi exercise written by Rauzzini and someone has pencilled in the sol-fa syllables underneath. (Rauzzini, 1816)

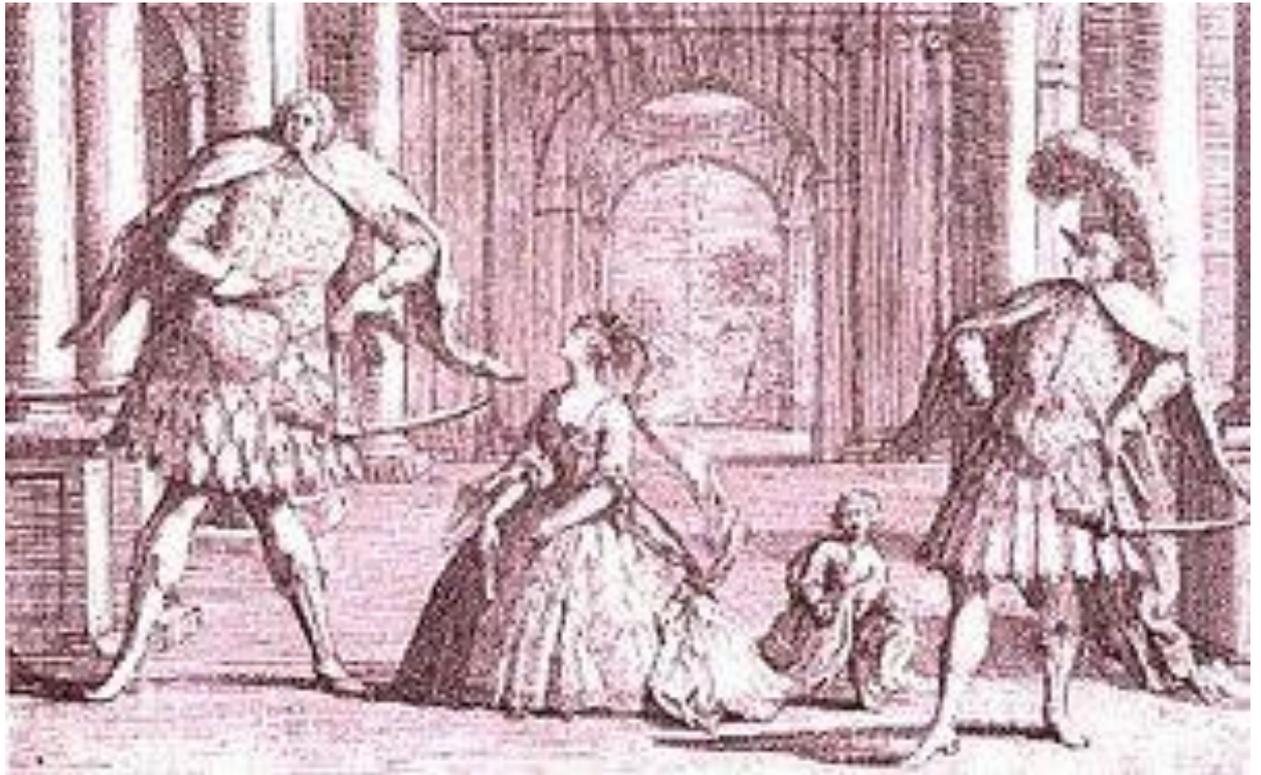


I am now going to perform for you now one of these solfeggi exercises. This solfeggio appears in a treatise written by Guiseppe Aprile in the late 18th century, though it was translated into English by Mr. Cook and published in Britain in 1805.

What is important to note is that solfeggi were to be sung before a student was ever to perform songs. That is the advice of many of the authors writing between the late 18th and early 19th century. These exercises are written in many different styles, some in a more dramatic style and some featuring popular passages from operatic arias. In the solfeggio I just performed I can hear hints of The Queen of the Night aria written by Mozart, who did base the foundations of the aria on these exercises. They developed a singer's flexibility,

articulation and durability. If a singer could not perform these solfeggi, then they were warned off singing at all and this is highlighted in a biographical treatise written by Henriette Wainewright who said despite have a sweet, flexible voice with perfect tuning; her weak lungs stopped her from developing further. (Wainewright, 1836) I believe that these exercises allowed a singer to understand what their voice was capable of before they started to perform songs that may have encouraged them to force the breath or range of their voice. They perhaps also allowed a singer to develop the sound of their own voice, whereas performing a song they may have been encouraged to mimic the voice of their favourite singer who had performed the song on stage or at a concert.

The vast majority of these treatises include written solfeggi, but what is intriguing is that the treatises written by castrato singers most often describe their solfeggi for the more advanced student rather than for the beginner. The castrati were men who had retained their high voice from childhood because they had undergone an operation, to remove their testicles. This operation was carried out between the age of 8 and 12 years old (before puberty had begun) and it meant that instead of the larynx in the throat growing to adult size; it would remain small in length like a child's. Once the operation had taken place, the boy would continue musical training for many years, most debuting on the operatic stage by their late teens. The castrati were incredibly popular singers who appeared in theatres throughout Europe and Britain and contemporary accounts from the period suggest that the castrati did not sound like children and this is perhaps due to other anatomical changes that occurred due to the operation. Many contemporary accounts of the appearance of castrati describe these men as growing incredibly tall with long gangling limbs. There are many caricature drawings of these men towering over their prima donna colleagues, including this one that shows the two castrati Senesino and Berenstadt towering over their prima donna colleague, Francesca Cuzzoni. See how tall they are depicted next to her and they look particularly oddly shaped.



Caricature of a performance of Handel's Flavió, featuring Berenstadt on the far right, the soprano Francesca Cuzzoni in the centre and Senesino on the left
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Senesino,_Cuzzoni,_Berenstadt.JPG)

Their chests are also described as growing enormously wide and many researchers have theorised that it is possible the large size of the chest contributed to their extraordinary singing ability. The singing voice of the most famed castrati was described as brilliant, flexible and powerful.

The solfeggi were the backbone of a castrato's vocal tuition and though it is possible that the castrati may have been at an anatomical advantage compared to other singers, it is my belief that it was their vigorous training using these solfeggi that allowed their voices to become brilliant, flexible and powerful. Those castrati who marketed their solfeggi to a more advanced student advised that these exercises should be performed everyday as this would improve a singers control and flexibility. They were a key stepping stone to the performance

of operatic songs that often did include long coloratura passages similar to the solfeggi exercises.

Song-Study

Once a singer had become proficient in solfeggi studies only then were they allowed to move onto the study of songs and even when moving into this area there was a clear progression on how to tackle song study.

Authors encouraged singers to perform the songs to sol-fa syllables initially, treating it like a solfeggio study and this would allow the singer to navigate any difficult passages that may crop up within the song and practice these to sol-fa in isolation. It would also allow the singer to become very familiar with the melody and accompaniment without having to worry about the lyrics.

Next the singer was expected to study the lyrics and practice pronunciation. It is unclear how many of the authors asked a student to do this but one author, a castrato called Pergetti who wrote his treatise in 1845 writes that a student should study each song like poem – for ‘what is song but poetry’. (Pergetti, 1845) This would allow the singer to engage with the flow of the text, emphasising key points of expression, articulating each consonant and vowel. Pergetti then encourages the singer to match the flow of the lyrics and all of these aspects practiced when reciting the words into the music. This level of detailed focus would have made the lyrics very clear and precise but would have strongly connected words and music together. This aspect still continues to be taught in modern vocal tuition but not always at this level of focus. The fact that Pergetti is talking about it at all perhaps implies that some singers were not as clear in their expression and pronunciation, therefore causing similar complaints as can be heard today – that lyrics are garbled and lost though a beautiful melody can be heard.

The combination of these two exercises would allow the singer to become accomplished at the music and the lyrics, but it would also allow them to engage with the expression and emotions to be conveyed within the song.

Many songs from this period, as I have already said, mimicked solfeggi exercises, in that there were passages within certain song that were similar to instrumental exercises, so to become skilled at performing these types of songs a singer would need to possess a flexible voice that was durable so that they could perform these complex passages. Such is the case with a very popular aria of the period which appeared in the opera *Artaxerxes* by Thomas Arne called *The Soldier Tir'd*. I am going to perform a section of this aria for you now

Though many of these treatises do not contain songs, there are quite a few that do. For example, *The Musical Companion*, which is quite a small book, contains instructions for 'the beginner' but instead of containing many solfeggi exercises it contains many editions of songs popular to the period. (Plumstead, 1833) This is where the aria I have just performed has come from. This is quite telling, as it informs us what songs and arias were popular at the time, but it also tells us that by 1830 beginners and amateurs were expected to be able to perform these popular arias. Dilettante culture had been on the rise since the late 18th century and a popular hobby for young dilettante women was to learn how to sing and perform their most favourite arias and songs at parties. So some of the singing treatises, like *The Musical Companion* were not used with the dual function of teaching amateurs and professionals but were marketed at amateurs only, providing them with editions of simpler versions of complex operatic arias so that these could be performed in a more domestic setting.

Accompaniment

This brings me to accompaniment. Now some of you may think that it is strange that I have no keyboard instrument with me today and instead I am accompanied here by Imogen Webb on the cello. Well, by this period the vast majority of songs would have been accompanied by the piano-forte, but there were still a few publications that write a figured bass accompaniment. Figured bass accompaniment is a bass line with numbers written underneath that indicates the notes in the chord. Usually the most common instruments playing this kind of accompaniment is a bass instrument such as the cello and a harpsichord.



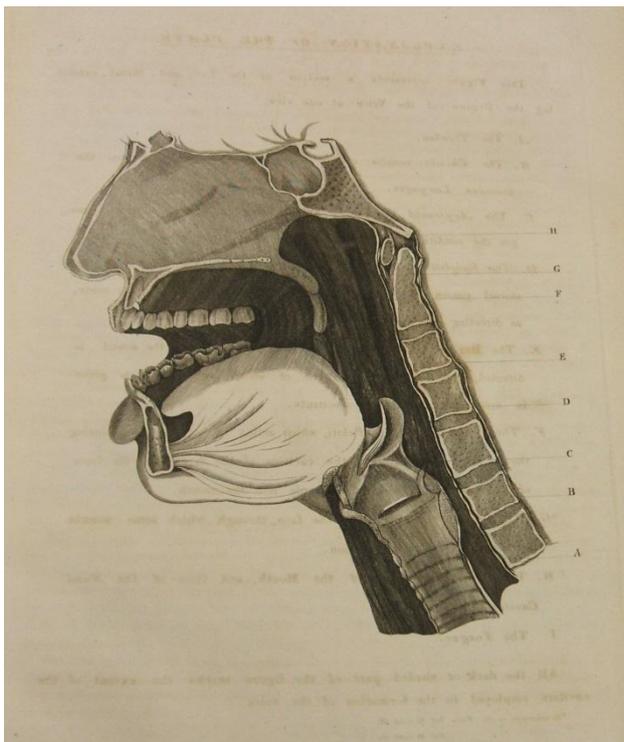
Giuseppe Aprile, *The modern Italian method of singing, with a variety of... examples and thirty six solfeggi*, 1805

However, this does not necessarily mean that it has to be a bass and keyboard instrument, as singers could be accompanied by the bass alone. In particular *The Musical Companion* does not write figures at all and the majority of the songs only have a bass line written in with a limited treble line, so my belief is the author was providing singers with the

opportunity to be accompanied by a variety of instruments. Today, Imogen and I are exploring a different kind of accompaniment in the cello.

Enlightenment

Now the 19th century was a period where culture and thinking were changing. It was the time of enlightenment and there was a shift in focus towards science and anatomical study. This is also reflected in the singing treatises. Singing treatises as the 19th century progressed started to depict the anatomy of the throat with quite a few illustrating the head and the throat. Here is an example of such an illustration by John Addison in his 1836 treatise. (Addison, 1836)



Quite a few of the authors try to explain vocal defects and problems by referring to the vocal anatomy and there are some treatises particularly by the later period that do not talk about sol-fa, solfeggio or songs at all and instead specifically talk about how to form the voice by referring to the anatomy. This is the case with a publication from 1850 by F. Romer entitled *The physiology of the human voice* and he says within his work 'I do not consider it necessary for every singer to study minutely the whole mechanism of the vocal tube; but the master should explain as simply as possible the two points at which sounds may be produced in the vocal instrument: for instance, the first point may be called the lungs and the second point the upper part of the throat (that part commonly termed *Adam's apple*).' (Romer, 1850)

Understanding the vocal anatomy and how to use it effectively is now a key area of modern tuition and it is in these mid-nineteenth century publications where we can see the beginnings of this understanding. There are a few treatises prior to these mid-19th century publication that also discuss vocal anatomy, for example contained here in the library is a rare treatise arranged by T. Bolton called *Treatise on Singing Containing Anatomical Observations by the late John Hunter on the Management and Delivery of the Voice with Appropriate Exercises, Songs, etc.* John Hunter, brother of William Hunter was more greatly involved in dilettante culture because of his wife who was an avid singer and piano-forte player. Within the treatise, Bolton tells us that Hunter had provided his observations for a Mr. Theodore Smith who was a singer teacher in London and that Mr. Bolton acquired Hunter's observations to use in his own treatise. Hunter passed away in 1793, therefore putting the writing of his observations somewhere before this, which is evidence that singing teachers were looking to anatomical observations to use in their singing lessons by the late 18th century. While Hunter's observations are more of common sense, such as to stand with a good posture and not to strain the voice, there is a detailed description of the working of the

larynx and ligaments in the throat which, is rare to appear in a work of this kind during this period.

By 1850, works of this kind were becoming more common but what were also common were teachers using these observations of the vocal anatomy to warn students against the dangers of bad singing.

Though teachers had always advised not to sing for too long if tired and not to force the volume or range of the voice, now teachers were explaining using the vocal anatomy as to why this was injurious to the voice. This led to one of the most famous studies being carried out on the voice. Manuel Garcia II spent the majority of his life studying the vocal anatomy and relating this to singing method. He presented a famous paper to the Royal Society of London entitled *Observations of the Human Voice* and many of his treatises discuss in great detail anatomy and the art. We have one of his treatises here in the library as well, but it is a publication from much later in his life. Though he does discuss vocal anatomy, he focusses his treatises on the art of singing reflecting on the singing style of his youth.

Some of these observations are quite detailed and contain a lot of complex jargon that only an expert teacher would be able to simply explain, which leads me to think that this was done deliberately so that students would go to 'qualified' teachers who appeared to have expert knowledge of the science and the art. But there are many of the teachers – going back to Pergetti, who had celebrated a wonderful career before turning to teaching; his focus on anatomical science is limited, instead focussing on the progressive studies of the art as can be seen in the earlier treatises.

Advanced Treatises

Later treatises also do recommend that students study from earlier treatises, for example, some authors recommend treatises written by Rauzzini, Aprile and Corri. While

Corri's treatise is perhaps today slightly more well-known than Rauzzini and Aprile, all three are not very well-known in the wider singing community, but they were clearly very well-known in the 19th -century long after the authors were dead. Rauzzini and Aprile were both castrati and both of their treatises contain solfeggi exercises only with some observations. Solfeggi are not performed by modern singing lessons, so this is perhaps why they have fallen out of living memory, but they reveal something about 18th and 19th century singing tradition. Why were these volumes recommended where others were not? Having sung some of Rauzzini's solfeggi myself, I can say that they are definitely for a more advanced student as they are quite vocally strenuous, but they do secure the breath control and encourage the singer to stay relaxed and free, which is key to good vocal technique. Trying to perform these exercises by forcing or tensing just makes the solfeggio sound awful and the vocalisations simply do not work as they lack flow and flexibility making the movement slow, rigid and clumsy.

So if this work was for the more advanced student, what about the other treatises? Who were they for? I have touched a little on this already. Some of the works it is clear that they are aimed at a more professional student for example, Rauzzini, Crescentini, Aprile's and Pergetti's treatises I think fall into this category as they all contain complex solfeggi and Pergetti's treatise addresses specific styles of singing similar to styles that would be seen on the operatic stage. While this can be seen in treatises for amateurs, I believe the music is more complex and point towards an aspiring professional rather than an amateur dilettante.

Other treatises are clearly marketed to both the amateur and professional for example, Corri's *The Singer's Preceptor*, Lanza and Smith. Lanza in particular splits his volume into different sections and points out that if a student is not intending to study professionally they can jump to section 3 missing out exercises in section 2. Marketing works to several different kinds of singers was a good way of ensuring that the work sold to as many different people as

possible. Otherwise it could be very easy for a singing teacher to purchase one work and use this to train all of their students. Stating that a work was for both amateur and professional students would encourage more buyers but also encouraged students to only use the work for personal study and not to attend a teacher. This was one of the dangers of marketing a work like this, but this is probably why authors stated outright that they should be used in conjunction with singing lessons.

Training in a classroom setting

I believe that the majority of treatises were expected to have been used during private vocal tuition of either an aspiring professional or amateur student but there were a few treatises that were intended to train students in singing in a different kind of setting.

Massimino, Schépens and Mainzer's works were intended to be used as mass teaching studies for use in the classroom. (Mainzer, 1841, Massimino and Green, 1825, , 1830)

Though Mainzer is the only treatise to ignore discussing ornamentation and solfeggi and the other two, though not going into as much detail as some of the other treatises, do discuss similar key elements in vocal training. While they do differ in some respects to other treatises in that there is more of a focus to teach music notation and congregational singing, they do reveal that there were certain similar expectations all singers were likely to obtain and that is intonation and a flexible voice.

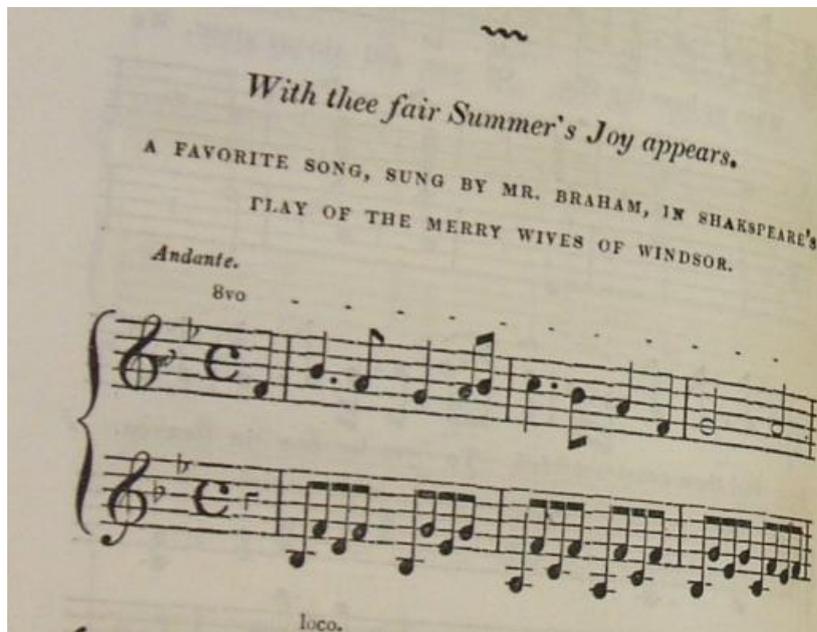
There are only a few treatises here examined that state a specific age at which a student should embark on vocal training, and it would appear that as the 19th century progressed, the recommended age at which a student should embark on vocal study increased. Many of the early authors such as Tosi and Aprile as well as these authors who recommend their works to be used in a classroom setting tell us that students should begin vocal training at a very young

age; approximately 8 or 9 years old. Castrati would have had to begin studying at a young age because by 8 or 9 they were already being considered for the castration operation and they would only be considered if a teacher thought their voice was capable or remaining beautiful after the operation. But, those treatises written further into the 19th century that have a more anatomical/scientific focus recommend that singers do not begin until after puberty. Now for boys this may seem obvious as their voice would need time to adjust after it had broken, but authors' also recommend that girls do not start singing until 13 or 14 years old. Today, we know that girls do experience a vocal break, similar, though not as dramatic as a boy and is virtually unnoticeable, but does cause certain issues if a girl is already engaged in serious vocal training. It is surprising that authors during this period are recommending girls not to begin training until after puberty, considering it is unlikely they knew about the female vocal break.

So when looking at treatises of the late 18th / early 19th century it is likely that children were expected to be able to perform from these works, whereas the later treatises are most likely intended for a teenage student. Today, it is recommended that singers do not begin serious training until 16 or 17 years old.

Returning to the early treatises and what songs they contain. Well, they do contain the most popular arias that appeared in opera during this period, but they also contain traditional songs from Scotland, Ireland and England, but this does not suggest that only amateurs performed these more traditional songs. In fact, many of the treatises tell us which singer the song is most associated with for example; in *The Musical Companion* it provides headings such as *Gentle Youth! Ah tell me Why, sung by Miss Stephens in Love in the Village*, or as can be seen here on this image where this song noted as being a favourite of John Brahams. Right away those who had purchased the treatise would know that this song appeared in a particular

opera, for example *Love in the Village*, which was popularly performed at the time and that the singer who most often sang it was Miss Stephens.



W.H. Plumstead, *The musical companion*, 1833

Operas at this period were not autonomous compositional works, but in fact many of the songs could change depending on the cast. Singers could substitute in their favourite arias, or composers could write a new aria specifically for them. How the treatises were additionally marketed was by listing the singer who was the best known to have sung the songs that are contained within the work as (and it tended to be amateur performers) who wanted to perform their favourite song by their favourite singer.. Quite a lot of the traditional songs that appear within works are also associated with professional singers and this could have been because the professional singer often performed a particular traditional song at a concert or gathering. Mr. Braham frequently appears within the works as performing traditional songs from Scotland.

One of these songs is contained within Corri's *The Singer's Preceptor* and it is a song that I am sure you will all recognise. However, from the notation some of the rhythms do differ

from how we all know the song. This is perhaps because Corri made a mistake when writing it down, or perhaps this is how Mr. Braham performed the song? It is unclear which of these scenarios it might be, but what is clear is that when examining the music in the treatises one does have to be open to interpretation. Without recordings from this period I cannot always be certain if the music is being performed as the singers from this period once performed it. But what I do believe is that something of the tradition has been preserved within these treatises and with a closer more detailed examination we may be able to unlock some of the secrets of bel canto.

I am now going to finish up by performing the traditional song described that was popularised by Mr. Braham. It is called Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgot.

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