

THE COLORATURA SINGING TECHNIQUES AND DEVELOPMENT OF COLORATURA

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Abstract

The development of coloratura singing techniques is deeply influenced by cultural traditions and stylistic preferences within different musical genres and historical periods. Cultural factors shape the specific vocal ornamentations and agility required for coloratura singing, reflecting the aesthetic values and performance practices unique to each culture. The word 'coloratura' comes from the Italian word col-oratura, which is a synonym for a form of bel canto singing. It was born in Italy in the early 17th century and bel canto singing occupies a very important position in the development of Italian vocal singing. No matter how it develops, the vocal achievements in any period afterwards are developed on the basis of the Italian bel canto school. It pursues smooth and easy singing as its ideal and goal, and requires a mellow, full and lyrical voice: the ascending and descending notes of the scale should be unified, without obvious signs of voice zone conversion, and should have smooth legato, correct pitch, good starting and perfect ending, etc. This article presented (1) the coloratura singing techniques (2) the development of coloratura.

Keywords: Coloratura; Singing; Techniques; Development

Introduction

The word 'coloratura' comes from the Italian word col-oratura, which is a synonym for a form of bel canto singing. It was born in Italy in the early 17th century and bel canto singing occupies a very important position in the development of Italian vocal singing. No matter how it develops, the vocal achievements in any period afterwards are developed on the basis of the Italian bel canto school. It pursues smooth and easy singing as its ideal and goal, and requires a mellow, full and lyrical voice: the ascending and descending notes of the scale should be unified, without obvious signs of voice zone conversion, and should have smooth legato, correct pitch, good starting and perfect ending, etc.

Coloratura singing originated from early European polyphonic music. According to records, the earliest polyphonic music was the 'Organum' produced in the Middle Ages, which had only two parts. The upper part was Gregorian chant, called the main part, and the lower part was the organum part parallel to the upper part by four or five degrees. Organum developed into the flower-singing organum, or the gorgeous organum, in the early 12th century. The lower part of the gorgeous organum changed from the original fixed tune to a single-note 'sustained tone', the so-called fixed part, and the upper part was decorated on the original basis. When these two parts moved relative to each other, it was called disconte. Subsequently, the 'Disconte' school was formed in Paris, France, which was composed of some composers, performers, music theorists and singers at that time. One of its representatives was Leonan of Notre Dame de Paris at that time. His representative work was: the church song collection 'Organum Dacheng', which included nearly 100 pieces of polyphonic music used in the annual mass and daily service of Notre Dame de Paris Cathedral. The characteristics of his polyphonic music are: Gregorian chant is placed in the low voice, and a decorative, lively, one-note polyphonic melody is placed above it. The polyphonic genre of the gorgeous organum reached a historical peak in his creation. It can be seen that the earliest coloratura singing originated from the gorgeous organum in polyphonic music. This style of music is easier to express the composer's own thoughts and feelings. It is undoubtedly a qualitative leap for the solemn and unchanging chants. Not only that, this polyphonic writing has gradually developed from the original two parts to three parts, four parts, and even several parts, forming a completely different new style from the chants (Du, 2020).

This period is the heyday of polyphonic music. Church music is dominant. Music is given the moral function of educating people and making them abandon evil and do good, rather than for appreciation and entertainment. Christianity does not allow people to sing love songs, but only solemn and quiet songs praising the Lord. Secular music is strictly restricted. People followed the teachings in the Bible that 'women should keep quiet in church'. The church did not allow women to sing in church, and male voices were not competent for the high voices in church singing, so boys were used to sing the high voices. However, the singing life of boys is very short. Generally, they will enter the voice change period at the age of 14-15. In order to solve this problem, 'falsettists', that is, adult men singing falsetts to replace children's voices, came into being. The most famous falsettists at that time were 'Spanish falsettists'. Their vocal range could reach the range of sopranos, and their singing skills were very high. They could sing difficult coloratura tunes. At that time, the high voices of church choirs across Europe were almost monopolized by Spanish falsettists, but unfortunately their training methods were lost. At that time, some scholars believed that the Spanish falsetto singers were the castrati who later dominated the European vocal stage for nearly two centuries, such as Monaldi and Fantoni in Italy. They believed that the parties concealed the fact of castration, but there are still objections to this statement. Some scholars believe that such falsetto singers do exist. In any case, the singing skills of the Spanish falsetto singers at that time did contribute to the further development and improvement of coloratura singing. The more famous falsetto singers at that time included: Tomas Luis da Victoria, Cristobal Marales, etc.

Coloratura Singing Techniques

Coloratura is a unique singing skill in vocal singing, which is very difficult, especially when the independent cadenza passage appears in the high pitch or super high pitch area. This requires us to open the throat correctly and expand the diaphragm reasonably to make the breath collide with the vocal cords. On this basis, we must also maintain the lightness of the voice and the continuity of the breath. There are also many common characteristics in the singing of coloratura arias. Most of them are expressed in the form of scales, arpeggios, staccato and repeated homophones. They are often sung in staccato, and the ups and downs of the melody lines are used to enhance the expressiveness of the song. The singer can express his or her emotions through the changes in the

melody, and improve the artistic aesthetics and appeal of the work. This is mainly reflected in the use of breath, language articulation, and emotional processing (Guan, 2005).

Breathing: No matter what style of song you are singing, the singer must use his breath correctly, especially the independent cadenza in the song must be supported by a stable and coherent breath. For example, there are long independent cadenza passages in 'The Thousand-Year-Old Iron Tree Bloomed' and 'Mayila Variations'. When singing, the diaphragm should be expanded reasonably so that the breath can cleverly collide with the vocal cords, maintain the continuity of the voice and the elasticity of the abdominal muscles, deliver air evenly, avoid pushing of the voice, achieve sound unity, and strive to make each note sound clear like particles. At the same time, we should keep the larynx stable. The higher the pitch, the more we should use the strength of the waist. We should not let the larynx move up with the breath. We should pay attention to the unity of the vocal range when exchanging between the vocal ranges. Only in this way can we maintain the fluency, flexibility and elasticity of the voice line.

Language and pronunciation: When singing coloratura songs, in order to be able to express the true feelings and give the songs artistic appeal, we must sing with clear pronunciation and rich voice, so as to convey the thoughts, emotions and artistic connotations of the songs to the audience. Therefore, pronunciation is very important in singing. For example, when singing 'The Prairie in July' and 'Ballet in Spring', you should keep your mouth open vertically, pronounce the beginning of each word quickly and clearly, pay attention to relaxing your jaw, and quickly lower your jaw after pronouncing the word. You should pronounce the word naturally, maintain the continuity of breath and the beauty of sound on the basis of clear articulation, so as to accurately express the emotions of the song.

Emotional processing: The creation of any coloratura song must be comprehensively analyzed from the background of the work, the composer's creative intention, thoughts and emotions. To express the artistic effect of the song, the emotions in the work must be invested in every singing link. Only through correct singing skills and one's own understanding of the song can fully reflect the emotions in the work and achieve a perfect singing effect. Taking the song 'The Thousand-Year-Old Iron Tree Blooms' as an example, the song starts

with the word 'ah' as a foil to express the protagonist's excitement, bringing out the unsure and involuntary joy of the deaf-mute after he can speak. This seemingly simple word 'ah' requires the singer to instantly capture the protagonist's excited and excited emotional burst point to produce a strong artistic effect (Cui, 2020).

The Development of Coloratura

The Origin and Development of Coloratura in Europe: In the 14th century, Italy began the Renaissance in order to establish a bourgeois cultural system, and reached its heyday in the 16th century (in the late 16th century and early 17th century, it affected the field of music). Coloratura singing gradually became glorious during this period. The ideological system of the Renaissance is humanism, singing the slogan of 'return to Greece, return to nature', believing that people are flesh and blood and should express personal emotions. Music began to go out of the church and gradually got rid of the control of the church. Secular music, especially love songs, went to the world. In the 15th century, the Dutch school of music pushed polyphonic music to its peak. The choral works they created had a large number of fast scales, arpeggios, and light and gorgeous ornaments, which had strict requirements on the singing skills of the singers. Around the middle of the 16th century, the content of decorative singing began to appear in European music papers, and the vocal style of decorative singing appeared. Decorative singing means that when the singer sings, he can freely 'add flowers' to the original simple melody to decorate the original melody. (Guan, 2005: pp18-23) It can be seen that the coloratura singing was originally called decorative singing. When the decorative singing emerged in the singing world at that time, it was opposed by many old forces, who believed that it was 'bad singing and aesthetics'. Such evaluation also shows that at that time, decorative singing was not perfect and was not accepted by the public. However, this singing style is suitable for expressing strong emotions, which laid a solid foundation for the birth of opera and bel canto later (Zhou, 2003).

On February 9, 1600, to celebrate the wedding of King Henry IV of France and Maria de' Medici, 'Euridice' composed by Peri and Caccini and written by Rinuccini was performed in Florence, Italy. This opera is called 'the first opera' by others, and this year also became the beginning of opera. At that time, there was no word 'opera', and 'Euridice' was also called 'lyric musical'. In the 1630s, Cavalli of the Venetian School called this type of work 'opera'. With

the birth of opera, the composition technique gradually transitioned from polyphonic music to tonal music, and from chorus to solo expressing personal emotions, so the art of sound was reflected, and 'bel canto' was born, and gradually improved with the development of Italian opera. With the birth of opera and bel canto, coloratura singing, which was called 'decorative singing' at the time, officially entered the historical stage in the form of opera performance. During this period, the most representative figure of decorative singing was Giulio Caccini (1546-1618). In the preface of his own book 'New Music' (*Lenuove musiche*) in 1602 and his other book 'New Music and New Methods of Composition' (*Nuove musiche e muova maniera di seiviverle*) written in 1614, he elaborated on the style of decorative singing and some complex techniques that the voice should achieve when singing. In 'New Music', Caccini pointed out that coloratura decoration should not destroy its content. It is allowed to use ornaments and coloratura phrases in appropriate places. It is believed that 'long coloratura phrases are only suitable for places that do not require strong expression, and are only suitable for long notes and the brilliant coda at the end.' (Guan, 2005: pp71-83) Vocal theory also developed during this period. Among them, Lodovico Zacconi, an Italian singer, theorist, composer and conductor, put forward his views on coloratura writing and singing in his book 'Practical Music': If a singer only uses coloratura phrases occasionally, then the audience will always wait with anticipation, and will praise him highly, hoping that he will sing some more brilliant coloratura phrases... Let the audience have few coloratura phrases, but they are very good, which is better than letting the audience get bored with countless clumsy coloratura phrases and leave dissatisfied. (Guan, 2005: pp88-93) It can be seen that the original coloratura singing did not allow the singer to add embellishments to the cadenza at will. The cadenza was only used as a tool to match the development of musical emotions and a means of expressing personal emotions.

The 'golden age' of singing that people talked about in history refers to the early 18th century to the early 19th century. The protagonists on the stage during this period were the well-known 'castratos'. This century was the glory of castratos and the golden age of 'coloratura' singing. 'Castratos' are boys who were castrated in childhood. The voices of castrated boys are still children's, but their bodies will develop like normal people, so castratos will still have the vocal cords of children, but also have the strong physique of men. After professional training, they will use their extraordinary lung capacity and strong physique to

support a thin vocal cord, and they have created a miracle of sound. This period was an era when castrati singers shone brightly. The singing characteristics of this period were that castrati singers used a lot of decorative coloratura singing on the stage to compete with each other. They could sing unimaginable high notes, which excited the audience and won the audience's applause and affirmation. It was precisely because of people's aesthetic issues about sound and castrati singers' fascination with coloratura singing at that time that opera became a tool for castrati singers to show their vocal skills and power. Composers of this period only created the outline of operas, and the real content depended on singers' improvisation. The real singing level of singers was not only determined by their natural voices and singing skills, but also by the singers' improvisational composition skills and improvisational singing of decorative phrases, especially the improvisation of decorative phrases, which was a touchstone for singers. Operas at that time used endless decorative phrases, music passages, and vibrato, allowing singers to sing freely, add flowers freely, and play freely. Famous castrati during this period include Farinelli (1705-1782), Gaetano M. Caffarelli (1710-1783), Senesino (1680-1759), Giovanni Carestini (1705-1760), Giovanni-Battista Valluti (1781-1861), etc.

In the early 19th century, 'castrati' gradually disappeared from the opera stage. In 1829, the retirement of the famous castrati Valluti marked the end of the golden age of castrati. The use of castrati in churches ended later. The last castrati, A. Moreschi (1858-1924), also recorded records in the early 20th century and officially retired in 1913. In Germany in the 19th century, people were extremely critical of castrati, but since the birth of bel canto, castrati were the earliest practitioners of bel canto. They created the golden age of bel canto and the golden age of coloratura singing. They made great contributions to vocal art. The coloratura singing method they created laid a solid foundation for the development of coloratura art in the future. We should carefully study their coloratura singing skills and feel proud of their hard-working spirit.

Coloratura singing gradually became standardized during this period, in sharp contrast to the decorative singing of the 17th and 18th centuries. Coloratura phrases were no longer the main body of the whole song, but a means to highlight drama and express emotions in opera performances. Singers no longer changed the composer's score at will to show off their superb singing

skills. The status of composers was improved. All this was due to the rise of grand opera and the reform of opera by a group of outstanding composers. Although coloratura was no longer the main part of the opera, the operas created by composers during this period all contained many decorative passages and cadenzas. Starting from Rossini, it was stipulated that singers were not allowed to change the score at will, but must sing according to the content of the score and were not allowed to show off their skills without considering the plot. Therefore, the most prominent feature of the large number of coloratura passages in the opera arias of this period and the exaggerated coloratura of the 17th and 18th centuries was that the coloratura passages were used to express the characters' personalities and emotions. The most representative operas using coloratura technique during this period include: Mozart's *The Magic Flute*; Weber's *The Freeshooter*; Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and *William Tell*; Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *The Favorite* and *L'elisir d'amore*; Bellini's *La Somnambula* and *The Puritans*; Johann Strauss II's *The Bat*; Verdi's *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata* and *Un Ballo in Maschera*; Puccini's *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Turandot*.

After several centuries of germination and development, coloratura singing gradually became standardized in the 19th century. After entering the 20th century, coloratura art continued to prosper on the basis of continuous development, and a group of world-renowned coloratura singers emerged, such as American Maria Callas, Australian Joan Sutherland, Korean Cho Sumi, Chinese Zhou Xiaoyan and Dilbaier, as well as a series of excellent coloratura vocal works, such as *The Nightingale*, *Carnival of Venice* and *The Swallow*. The development of coloratura during this period was also reflected in film dubbing, such as the classic coloratura segments in Oscar-winning films such as *Tomb Raider* and *The Fifth Element*, which made great contributions to the development of coloratura singing (Ximeng & Yimsangyard, 2023).

The development of coloratura in China: In the early 20th century, China and Europe began a preliminary two-way cultural dialogue and exchange, and social and political changes inevitably led to the transformation of music culture. With the rise of new-style schools, a new musical form, 'school music', emerged. 'School music' borrowed the melodies of European, American and Japanese songs to fill in the lyrics, creating a new genre different from

traditional Chinese music, and also marked the beginning of China's modern music and cultural history.

In 1927, Xiao Youmei and Cai Yuanpei founded the first independent higher music school, the National Conservatory of Music. The school became Asia's top music school in just a few years. The school hired many foreign experts to teach, such as Soviet vocalist Su Shilin, and also hired a group of Chinese musicians who returned from studying abroad to teach at the Conservatory of Music, such as Ying Shangneng and Zhao Meibo. They sorted out and summarized the knowledge they learned, combined with the level of vocal development in my country at that time to conduct vocal teaching, and made great contributions to the spread and development of Western bel canto singing in China.

In the early 20th century, some Chinese musicians visited foreign countries to learn scientific singing methods and singing skills, and brought back coloratura techniques and gradually applied them to song creation, resulting in many representative works. (Zhou, 2003) The first work with coloratura techniques in my country was 'Sleeping Song' written by Zhou Shuan and published in 'Chinese Music' in 1930. It is a lullaby sung by a mother to her child. The lyrics are simple, and the theme is varied as many as seven times. The basic method is to add flowers. Starting with 'Sleeping Song', Chinese composers have become more and more proficient in the use of coloratura techniques and have created a large number of representative coloratura vocal works, such as: 'Grassland in July' and 'Torches of Torch Festival' by Shang Deyi; 'A Lark Flying to the Military Camp' by Jiang Yimin; 'Colorful Clouds and Flowers' by Lu Zaiyi; 'Birds Singing in the Wind' and 'Songs Without Words' by Liu Cong. These works reflect the social status quo and people's spiritual outlook at that time, make up for the gap in coloratura vocal works in my country, and promote the development of vocal art in China (Chen, 2021).

New Knowledges

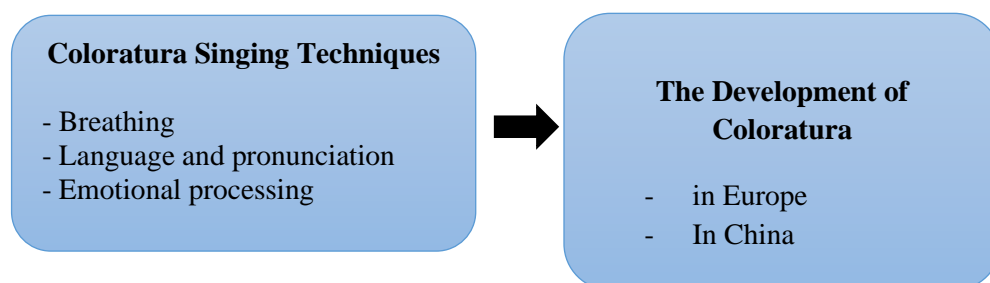


Figure 1: Diagram of Coloratura Singing Techniques and Development

Conclusions

With the increase in the number of coloratura songs and the improvement of the level of Chinese vocal singing, a large number of outstanding soprano singers active on domestic and foreign stages have also emerged in China, such as the late vocal educator Mr. Zhou Xiaoyan, the world-renowned lyric coloratura soprano singer Dilibaier, famous singers Huang Ying, Wu Bixia, Mo Hong, and the younger generation Chang Sisi, Chen Lili, etc. Their singing methods adhere to the concept of combining Chinese and Western styles, which has further developed coloratura singing in China.

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