



A Compilation of Bel Canto Vocal Exercises for Middle School Students

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Abstract

This paper presents a Bel Canto vocal exercise designed specifically for middle school students. Aimed at supporting vocal development and musical appreciation, based on principles of Bel Canto singing with age-appropriate pedagogical strategies. It features a range of technique targeting breath control, tone quality, legato singing, and vocal agility, supported by relevant theoretical concepts. The inclusion of varied assessment tools and structured feedback promotes student growth and reflective learning. Additionally, the resource highlights the importance of emotional expression and performance skills in shaping a well-rounded musical education. This paper provides music educators with practical exercise tools to cultivate both the technical proficiency and enduring musical interest of young vocalists.

Keywords: Bel Canto, Vocal, Exercise, Middle school students

1. Introduction

Bel Canto, an Italian term meaning "beautiful singing," refers to a vocal style that emphasizes smooth, lyrical, and technically precise singing. It originated in Italy during the 17th and 18th centuries and is characterized by its focus on breath control, even tone production, and agility in vocal delivery. Bel Canto requires singers to master techniques such as legato, mezza voce, and coloratura, which allow for expressive and emotionally resonant performances. This style is often associated with operatic works by composers like Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini, who wrote music that showcased the virtuosity of the human voice. The essence of Bel Canto lies in its ability to convey emotion through vocal purity and clarity. Singers are trained to produce a seamless sound that flows effortlessly across registers, avoiding any harshness or strain. This style prioritizes the natural beauty of the voice, emphasizing a balanced tone and precise intonation. Bel Canto also places great importance on diction, ensuring that the text is delivered with clarity and meaning. The technique is often described as a marriage of art and science, requiring both innate talent and rigorous training to achieve mastery (Lin, 2023, 10 - 20).

The technical foundation of Bel Canto includes a strong emphasis on breath support, which allows singers to sustain long phrases without strain. Proper breath control is achieved through diaphragmatic breathing, ensuring that the voice remains steady and powerful. Additionally, Bel Canto singers must develop a keen sense of pitch and rhythm, as well as the ability to execute rapid passages with precision. These technical skills are essential for performing the demanding repertoire associated with this style, which often includes intricate runs, trills, and high notes. Bel Canto is often contrasted with other vocal styles, such as verismo

or Wagnerian singing, which prioritize dramatic intensity over vocal purity. While these styles may require a more forceful approach, Bel Canto remains focused on the beauty and elegance of the voice. This distinction has made Bel Canto a timeless and revered tradition in the world of classical music, influencing generations of singers and composers. Its principles continue to be taught in vocal studios around the world, ensuring that the art of beautiful singing endures (Su, 2021, 3 - 12).

Given its technical rigor and expressive depth, bel Canto serves as an ideal framework for developing young singers. Introducing middle school students to bel Canto techniques not only fosters proper vocal development but also cultivates musical sensitivity and artistic awareness from an early stage. This paper presents the development of a bel Canto vocal exercise tailored specifically to the needs of middle school learners, aiming to bridge vocal training with age-appropriate pedagogical strategies.

The exercise introduces middle school students to the principles of bel Canto singing, incorporating both practical exercises and theoretical concepts. The aim is to develop healthy vocal techniques while understanding the underlying musical theory. With essential theoretical concepts, helping middle school students understand the "why" behind their singing. Through this integration, students will develop both their vocal skills and their appreciation for music theory. The researcher needs to study the key words extracted from the study and read the related literature. This chapter includes a literature review on the following aspects:

2. Bel Canto's historical and technical foundation

2.1 Bel Canto's history

The origins of Bel Canto can be traced back to the Italian Renaissance, where the human voice was celebrated as the ultimate instrument of artistic expression. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Italian composers and singers began to develop techniques that emphasized vocal beauty and agility. This period saw the rise of the castrati, male singers who were castrated before puberty to preserve their high vocal range. These singers became the superstars of their time, captivating audiences with their extraordinary vocal abilities and contributing to the development of Bel Canto as a distinct style (Shen, 2024, 7 - 18).

The golden age of Bel Canto occurred in the 18th and early 19th centuries, coinciding with the rise of Italian opera. Composers such as Gioachino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti, and Vincenzo Bellini wrote operas that showcased the virtuosity of Bel Canto singers. These works featured elaborate arias with intricate ornamentation, demanding both technical precision and emotional depth from performers. The popularity of Bel Canto during this period led to the establishment of vocal schools and pedagogical methods that focused on developing the skills necessary for this style.

The decline of Bel Canto began in the mid-19th century, as operatic tastes shifted toward more dramatic and realistic styles. Composers like Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner sought to create music that emphasized storytelling and emotional intensity, often requiring a heavier and more powerful vocal approach. This shift led to a decline in the popularity of the traditional Bel Canto repertoire, as singers and audiences gravitated toward the new operatic trends. However, the principles of Bel Canto continued to influence vocal pedagogy, ensuring its survival as a foundational technique (Chen, 2020:4 - 14).

Bel Canto in the late 19th century, Marietta Alboni and the Decline of Bel Canto, Marietta Alboni (1823–1894) was one of the most renowned contraltos of the 19th century, celebrated for her rich vocal tone, impeccable technique, and artistry in the Bel Canto tradition. Trained under Gioachino Rossini, Alboni was deeply rooted in the classical vocal style that emphasized purity of tone, seamless legato, breath control, and expressive phrasing—hallmarks of Bel Canto singing.

In later years, Alboni reportedly kept handwritten notes or reflections expressing her concern and disappointment with the decline of Bel Canto technique and aesthetics during the second half of the 19th century. These notes provide valuable insight into the changing landscape of opera and vocal training during her lifetime (See Figure1). What Did Her Notes Reveal?

Loss of Vocal Refinement, Alboni lamented that younger singers were focusing more on dramatic power and volume rather than the technical finesse and vocal beauty that defined Bel Canto. Shift Toward Verismo, By the late 1800s, the operatic world was transitioning toward Verismo opera (e.g., works by Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and later Puccini), which emphasized realism, intense emotion, and dramatic expression—often at the expense of delicate vocal technique. Alboni also observed that audiences were beginning to favor spectacle and emotional extremes over vocal elegance and musical subtleties, pushing composers and performers in a new direction (Harold, & John, 1986, p.6) .

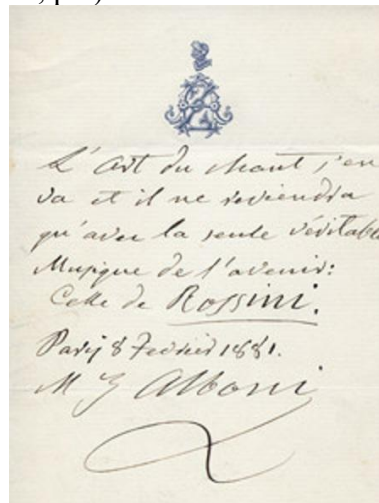


Figure1: Hand-written note by contralto Marietta Alboni about the decay of bel Canto in the late 19th century. The French text reads: "The art of singing is going, and it will only revert with the sole real music of the future: that of Rossini. Paris, 8 February 1881

The 20th century saw a revival of interest in Bel Canto, thanks in part to the efforts of singers like Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland. These artists brought renewed attention to the works of Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini, demonstrating the enduring appeal of the Bel Canto style. Their performances highlighted the technical and artistic challenges of this repertoire, inspiring a new generation of singers to explore its possibilities. This revival also led to a renewed focus on historical performance practices, as musicians sought to recreate the sound and style of the Bel Canto era. Today, Bel Canto remains a vital part of the classical vocal tradition, with its principles continuing to shape the training of singers worldwide. While the style has evolved over the centuries, its core emphasis on vocal beauty, technical precision, and emotional expression remains unchanged. Modern singers who specialize in Bel Canto are celebrated for their ability to bring this timeless art form to life, ensuring that its legacy endures for future generations (Ye ,2021, 20-30).

3. Current trends in Bel Canto instruction

In many middle schools, Bel Canto is introduced as part of the music exercise, providing students with an opportunity to explore classical vocal techniques. However, the teaching of Bel Canto in this context often faces challenges due to limited resources and time constraints. Many schools lack specialized vocal instructors, and music programs may prioritize ensemble singing over individual vocal training. As a result, students may receive only a basic introduction to Bel Canto principles, with limited opportunities for in-depth study (Jiang, 2022,

p.7), in Despite these challenges, some middle schools have successfully integrated Bel Canto into their music programs, often through partnerships with local arts organizations or professional vocal coaches. These programs aim to expose students to the technical and artistic aspects of Bel Canto, fostering an appreciation for classical music and vocal performance. Students who participate in these programs often report increased confidence in their singing abilities and a deeper understanding of vocal technique (Xu, 2023, 9-21).

The teaching of Bel Canto in middle schools is also influenced by the broader trends in music education. With the increasing emphasis on standardized testing and core academic subjects, arts education has often been marginalized. This has led to a reduction in the time and resources allocated to music programs, making it difficult for schools to provide comprehensive vocal training. However, advocates for arts education continue to highlight the benefits of programs like Bel Canto, which can enhance students' cognitive, emotional, and social development. Technology has played a growing role in Bel Canto instruction, particularly in schools with limited access to specialized teachers. Online resources, video tutorials, and virtual masterclasses have made it possible for students to learn Bel Canto techniques from experienced professionals, even in remote or underserved areas. These digital tools can supplement traditional instruction, providing students with additional opportunities to practice and refine their skills. However, the effectiveness of these methods depends on the availability of technology and the support of educators (Tang, 2020, p. 8).

Looking to the future, there is a need for greater investment in music education to ensure that Bel Canto and other vocal traditions can thrive in middle schools. This includes providing schools with the resources to hire qualified vocal instructors, as well as creating opportunities for students to perform and engage with classical music. By fostering a love for Bel Canto at a young age, schools can help cultivate the next generation of singers and music enthusiasts, ensuring that this timeless art form continues to inspire and enrich lives (Gu, 2022, 89-90).

4. Pedagogical value and structure of an exercise

3.1 Meaning of Exercise

An exercise is a tool used by students to practice and reinforce their learning in a structured manner. It typically contains a series of exercises or tasks designed to help students apply the concepts they have learned in class. Exercises are commonly used in subjects such as mathematics, language arts, and science, where practice is essential for mastery. By completing exercises in these books, students can develop their skills, identify areas for improvement, and build confidence in their abilities (Zhang, 2023, 113-119). The meaning of an exercise extends beyond its physical form; it represents a space for exploration and growth. For students, it is a personal record of their progress, showcasing their efforts and achievements over time. Teachers also use exercises to assess students' understanding and provide feedback, making them an integral part of the learning process. In this way, exercises serve as a bridge between instruction and independent practice, helping students consolidate their knowledge and develop critical thinking skills (Liu, 2023, 60-67).

Exercises are particularly valuable in promoting active learning, as they require students to engage with the material rather than passively absorb information. By working through exercises, students can test their understanding, experiment with different approaches, and learn from their mistakes. This process of trial and error is essential for deep learning, as it encourages students to think critically and develop problem-solving skills. Exercises thus play a key role in fostering a growth mindset and a love for learning (Wang, 2023, 6-16).

Songs suitable for practicing singing for middle school students include: "Red Bean Song", "Where is Happiness", "Plum Lady Song", "Love of the Republic", "May You Have a Crystal Heart", "Don't Blame My Mother", and "Homesickness Song" are very suitable for singing practice. Don't sing "Red Bean Song" at the beginning. You can sing "My Dear" and

"Nina" first, because Italian songs are more suitable for our voices and allow the throat to sing in a more relaxed state.

For Example, "Red Bean Song" 红豆词 (See figure2)

红豆词
(女声或童声三部合唱)

[清]曹雪芹作词
刘雪庵作曲
黄友棣改编

中速 (♩ = 84)

滴不尽 相思血泪 抛红豆， 开不完 春柳春花 满画楼。

睡不稳 纱窗风雨 黄昏后， 忘不了 新愁与旧愁。

Figure 2: "Red Bean Song" 红豆词

The song uses "red beans" song as a metaphor for lovesickness, and uses parallel sentences to depict the lover's state of being sick with lovesickness and unable to sleep. At the end, it uses green mountains and clear waters to represent the lingering love. The song adopts a multi-sentence musical structure, with a counted rhythm running through the beginning and the end, and uses rests to create a blank artistic conception. The song needs to maintain the lyrical nature of the melody when singing. The musical style incorporates the graceful characteristics of the art songs of the Republic of China period.

The speed of a song affects the atmosphere of the entire song. However, this problem is often overlooked by ordinary singers. "Red Bean Song" is an example. Its speed is originally andante, but many people sing it as adagio or lento, which makes it lifeless and "dragging" and "pulling" to make people feel bored. Therefore, mastering the speed of "Red Bean Song" is the first condition for successful performance.

Rests have the function of promoting vivid performance in songs, especially lyrical songs. This problem is also often misunderstood. It is generally believed that it is a rest. In fact, that is only one of the reasons. There are more important ones: breathing, plot transition, shallow climax foreshadowing, unfinished meaning of the song (the idea that silence is better than sound at this time). For example, the seventh bar of this song "I can't sleep well", the ninth bar "I can't forget", and the fifteenth bar "I can't open my brows, and I can't stand the unknown night", the rests after them all have the meaning of unfinished feelings. To express its effect, the best way is to shorten and weaken the music before the rest, so as to show the implicitness

of the phrase.

Slur is a common sign for lyrical songs, which indicates that the singer's voice should be expressed in a smooth and soft tone. The singing arc should not be dragged and connected randomly. The starting sound of the arc should be slightly strengthened, and the rest of the sound in the line should be gradually sung weaker, which is similar to the singing method of "weakening". For example, the word "new" in the ninth bar of "new sorrow", "with" and "old" in the tenth bar, and "end", "mirror", "in" in the thirteenth bar, etc., should all be performed by grasping the key points of slur singing.

It is common for students to have slogan-like pauses when singing "can't open their eyebrows, endure the unknown leak", especially in the second time "brow" and "leak", which are more likely to have pauses. This slogan-like pause seriously destroys the lyrical and beautiful melody line of the song.

The design and content of exercises can vary widely depending on the subject and grade level. Some exercises are structured to follow a specific exercise, with exercises that align closely with classroom instruction. Others may offer more open-ended tasks, allowing students to explore topics in greater depth or at their own pace. Regardless of their format, exercises are most effective when they are tailored to the needs and abilities of the students, providing an appropriate level of challenge and support. In addition to their academic benefits, exercises can also help students develop important life skills, such as time management, organization, and self-discipline. By regularly completing exercises and reviewing their work, students learn to set goals, manage their time effectively, and take responsibility for their own learning. These skills are not only valuable in school but also in later life, making exercises an important tool for personal and academic development (Chen, 2023, 80-88).

3.2 Concept of Exercise

The concept of an exercise is rooted in the idea of active learning, where students engage with the material through practice and application. Unlike textbooks, which primarily provide information, exercises are designed to encourage students to interact with the content, solve problems, and complete tasks. This hands-on approach helps students internalize the material and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Exercises are thus an essential component of a well-rounded education, complementing classroom instruction and independent study (Zhao, 2023, 56-79). Exercises are often structured to follow a logical progression, starting with basic concepts and gradually increasing in complexity. This scaffolding approach ensures that students build a strong foundation before moving on to more advanced topics. By providing a clear and organized framework, exercises help students stay focused and motivated, making it easier for them to track their progress and achieve their learning goals. This structured approach is particularly important in subjects like mathematics, where concepts build upon one another in a sequential manner (Zhou, 2023, 66-82).

The concept of an exercise also emphasizes the importance of repetition and reinforcement in learning. By repeatedly practicing a skill or concept, students can strengthen their understanding and improve their performance. Exercises provide a space for this repetitive practice, allowing students to work through problems multiple times until they achieve mastery. This process of reinforcement is crucial for long-term retention and application of knowledge, making exercises a valuable tool for learning (Wu, 2023, 70-75). Another key aspect of the exercise concept is its adaptability to different learning styles and needs. Exercises can be customized to suit the abilities and interests of individual students, providing a personalized learning experience. For example, some students may benefit from additional practice in specific areas, while others may need more challenging tasks to stay engaged. By tailoring the content and difficulty level of exercises, teachers can ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential (Zheng, 2023, 2-12). The concept of an

exercise also extends to its role in fostering independent learning. By working through exercises on their own, students learn to take initiative, solve problems, and seek help when needed. This independence is an important skill for lifelong learning, as it prepares students to take charge of their own education and pursue their interests beyond the classroom. Exercises thus serve as a tool for empowering students and encouraging them to become active, self-directed learners (Sun, 2023, 1-11).

3.3 Process of Exercise

The process of creating an exercise begins with identifying the learning objectives and outcomes for a particular subject or topic. Educators must determine what students need to know and be able to do, and then design exercises that align with these goals. This process involves careful planning and consideration of the exercise, as well as the needs and abilities of the students. The exercises should be challenging yet achievable, providing students with opportunities to practice and apply their knowledge in meaningful ways (Xu, 2023, 44-51).

Once the learning objectives are established, the next step in the process is to develop the content for the exercise. This includes writing questions, problems, and tasks that cover the key concepts and skills. The content should be organized in a logical sequence, starting with basic exercises and gradually increasing in difficulty. Visual aids, such as diagrams, charts, and illustrations, may also be included to enhance understanding and engagement. The goal is to create a comprehensive and user-friendly resource that supports student learning.

After the content is developed, the exercise undergoes a review and revision process to ensure its quality and effectiveness. Educators, subject matter experts, and sometimes even students may be involved in this process, providing feedback on the clarity, accuracy, and relevance of the exercises. Revisions are made based on this feedback, with the aim of creating a polished and effective learning tool. This iterative process helps to refine the exercise and ensure that it meets the needs of its intended audience. The next step in the process is the production and distribution of the exercise. This may involve printing physical copies or creating digital versions that can be accessed online. In some cases, exercises are integrated into learning management systems or educational apps, allowing students to complete exercises electronically. The format and delivery method should be chosen based on the needs and preferences of the students and teachers, as well as the available resources and technology (Ma, 2023, 70-83).

The process of using the exercise in the classroom or for independent study begins. Teachers guide students through the exercises, providing instruction, feedback, and support as needed. Students work through the exercises at their own pace, applying what they have learned and practicing their skills. The exercise serves as a record of their progress, allowing both students and teachers to track achievements and identify areas for improvement. This ongoing process of practice, feedback, and reflection is essential for effective learning and skill development (Zhu, 2023, 84-93).

3.4 Evaluation of Teaching Methods

The evaluation of teaching methods is a critical component of educational practice, as it helps educators assess the effectiveness of their instructional strategies and make informed decisions about how to improve student learning. This process involves gathering data on student performance, engagement, and satisfaction, as well as analyzing the impact of different teaching approaches. By evaluating teaching methods, educators can identify what works well and what needs to be adjusted, ensuring that their instruction is aligned with the needs and goals of their students. One common approach to evaluating teaching methods is through formative assessment, which involves ongoing feedback and reflection throughout the learning process. Formative assessments can take many forms, such as quizzes, class discussions, and peer

reviews, and are designed to provide immediate feedback to both students and teachers. This feedback allows educators to make real-time adjustments to their teaching methods, addressing any gaps in understanding or areas of difficulty. Formative assessment is particularly valuable for promoting active learning and fostering a growth mindset among students. Another important aspect of evaluating teaching methods is the use of summative assessments, which measure student learning at the end of a unit or course. Summative assessments, such as exams, projects, and portfolios, provide a comprehensive overview of what students have learned and how well they have mastered the material. By analyzing the results of these assessments, educators can determine the overall effectiveness of their teaching methods and identify areas for improvement. Summative assessments also help to ensure that students are meeting the learning objectives and standards set by the exercise (Hu, 2023, 93-111).

In addition to formal assessments, educators can also evaluate teaching methods through informal observations and feedback from students. Classroom observations allow teachers to see how students are engaging with the material and interacting with each other, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of their instructional strategies. Student feedback, whether through surveys, interviews, or informal conversations, can also offer important perspectives on what is working well and what could be improved. This qualitative data complements the quantitative data from assessments, providing a more holistic view of teaching effectiveness (Guo, 2023, 15-25).

3.5 Tools for Assessment

Assessment tools are essential for measuring student learning and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching methods. These tools can take many forms, including tests, quizzes, rubrics, and portfolios, and are designed to provide objective and reliable data on student performance. By using a variety of assessment tools, educators can gain a comprehensive understanding of what students know and are able to do, as well as identify areas for improvement. The choice of assessment tools should be guided by the learning objectives and the needs of the students, ensuring that the assessment is aligned with the goals of instruction (He, 2023). One commonly used assessment tool is the rubric, which provides a clear and consistent framework for evaluating student work. Rubrics outline the criteria for success and describe different levels of performance, making it easier for educators to assess student work objectively and provide constructive feedback. Rubrics are particularly useful for assessing complex tasks, such as essays, projects, and presentations, as they allow for a more nuanced evaluation of student performance. They also help students understand the expectations for their work and how they can improve. Another important assessment tool is the portfolio, which collects and showcases a student's work over time. Portfolios provide a comprehensive view of student learning, allowing educators to assess growth and progress across multiple assignments and projects. They also encourage students to reflect on their learning and take ownership of their work, fostering a sense of pride and accomplishment. Portfolios can be particularly effective in subjects like art, writing, and science, where students can demonstrate their skills and creativity through a variety of work samples (Gao, 2023, 15-25).

Technology has also expanded the range of assessment tools available to educators, with digital platforms and software offering new ways to measure student learning. Online quizzes, interactive simulations, and automated grading systems can provide immediate feedback to students and teachers, making it easier to track progress and identify areas for improvement. These digital tools can also support personalized learning, allowing educators to tailor assessments to the needs and abilities of individual students. However, it is important to ensure that technology-based assessments are used in conjunction with other tools to provide a balanced and comprehensive evaluation of student learning (Liang, 2023, 30-40). The effectiveness of assessment tools depends on their alignment with the learning objectives and

the context in which they are used. Educators must carefully select and design assessment tools that are appropriate for the subject matter, the students, and the goals of instruction. They must also ensure that assessments are fair, valid, and reliable, providing accurate and meaningful data on student performance. By using a variety of assessment tools and continuously refining their approach, educators can create a robust and effective assessment system that supports student learning and growth (Song, 2023, 9-29).

5. Conclusion

Bel Canto, rooted in the vocal traditions of 18th- and early 19th-century Italy, is characterized by its emphasis on tonal beauty, seamless legato, breath control, and expressive clarity. This historical and technical foundation continues to influence classical vocal training, though contemporary instruction faces challenges in preserving its purity amid evolving musical styles and performance demands.

Modern trends in Bel Canto instruction reveal a renewed interest in historically informed practice, often blending traditional techniques with contemporary pedagogical methods. Teachers are increasingly tailoring instruction to individual vocal development, incorporating physiological understanding and diverse repertoire to keep the style relevant and accessible. The pedagogical value of structured Bel Canto exercises lies in their ability to cultivate technical mastery while nurturing expressive artistry. Well-designed exercises—focused on breath management, vowel clarity, agility, and tone consistency—provide a systematic approach that builds foundational skills and supports the long-term vocal growth of students across various musical genres. Songs suitable for practicing singing for middle school students include: "Red Bean Song", "Where is Happiness", "Plum Lady Song", "Love of the Republic", "May You Have a Crystal Heart", "Don't Blame My Mother", and "Homesickness Song" are very suitable for singing practice. Don't sing "Red Bean Song" at the beginning. You can sing "My Dear" and "Nina" first, because Italian songs are more suitable for our voices and allow the throat to sing in a more relaxed state.

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