

# Elements of the *Bel canto* Style

*Bel canto* is Italian for "beautiful singing" or "beautiful song"

## An overview of *bel canto* opera

In the first half of the 19th century, a school of vocal writing known as *bel canto* flourished, with Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini the best-known composers. The *bel canto* style is characterized by a flowing melodic line that is enhanced by complicated vocal acrobatics such as frequent scales, difficult trills, and other technical feats. *Bel canto* composers often wrote for the best available singers who could fully exploit the opportunities for vocal display in their roles, who could sing the long melodic phrases with great vocal flexibility and control. Not only is the term *bel canto* used to describe a specific period in opera history that peaked in the 1830s, but also a technique of training the voice.

## *Bel canto* went in and out of fashion

Before the *bel canto* era, Mozart's Classical style was in favor. Then, in the early 1800s, the operas of Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini were all the rage. *Bel canto* repertoire began to go out of fashion during the latter years of the 19th century, when the operas of Wagner, Verdi, and Puccini held sway. The *bel canto* composers influenced Verdi; he was Bellini's equal in expressive writing, Rossini's equal in ensemble writing, Donizetti's equal on every way, and better than all of them in composing hit tunes. Fortunately, in the 1950s, a renewed interest in *bel canto* opera music, with its lively rhythms and "hummable" tunes with beautiful orchestral accompaniments, brought many operas to the stage again.

## Features of the *bel canto* style:

- vocal mobility, evenness throughout the voice, beautiful singing
- singing that includes accents and emphasis
- extensive ornamentation, fast scales, cadenzas
- matching tonal quality to emotional content of the words
- highly articulated manner of phrasing
- delivery varied by several types of *legato* and *staccato*
- liberal application of *portamento*
- frequent alteration of tempo through *rubato*
- *vibrato* used for heightening expression of certain words
- occasional patter songs used for comic effect



Gioachino Antonio  
**Rossini**  
(29 February 1792–  
13 November 1868)



Domenico Gaetano  
Maria **Donizetti**  
(29 November 1797–  
8 April 1848)



Vincenzo Salvatore  
Carmelo Francesco  
**Bellini**  
(3 November 1801–  
23 September 1835)

## Most *bel canto* operas were created by three Italian composers:

**Rossini** (birthplace: Pesaro, Italy)  
 Gioachino Rossini wrote 39 operas, most in the *opera buffa* style, and became the dominant composer of Italian opera during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is still recognized as the greatest Italian composer of his time. He set new standards for both comic and serious opera before retiring from composition at the height of his popularity. Not only did Rossini write memorable, tuneful music, but he was also known for his wit and his love of food. He made a huge impact on the operatic form. The composer's musical signature was his use of extended passages of music that increased in volume and intensity, earning him the nickname "Monsieur Crescendo".

**Donizetti** (birthplace: Bergamo, Italy)  
 Gaetano Donizetti was a prolific composer of operas (70) in both Italian and French, symphonies, string quartets, songs, and many other vocal works. His instrumental compositions included concertos, quartets, sonatas, and chamber music. His music represents a transitional stage in operatic development between Rossini and Verdi. Donizetti was a friendly, loyal, and sincere man, supportive of fellow composers and other artists.

**Bellini** (birthplace: Catania region of Sicily, Italy)  
 Vincenzo Bellini was a child prodigy and was able to support himself solely by his opera commissions. Known for his long-flowing melodic lines, he was named "the Swan of Catania". The composer earned praise from Wagner, Liszt, and Chopin.

<b>Notable <i>bel canto</i> operas</b>	
<b>Gioachino Rossini</b>	
<i>Tancredi</i>	1813
<i>L'italiana in Algeri</i>	1813
<i>Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra</i>	1815
<i>Il barbiere di Siviglia</i>	1816
<i>Otello</i>	1816
<i>La Cenerentola</i>	1817
<i>La gazza ladra</i>	1817
<i>Armida</i>	1817
<i>Mosè in Egitto</i>	1818
<i>La donna del lago</i>	1819
<i>Semiramide</i>	1823
<i>Le comte Ory</i>	1828
<i>Guillaume Tell</i>	1829
<b>Gaetano Donizetti</b>	
<i>Anna Bolena</i>	1830
<i>The Elixir of Love</i>	1832
<i>Lucrezia Borgia</i>	1833
<i>Maria Stuarda</i>	1834
<i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>	1835
<i>Roberto Devereux</i>	1837
<i>La favorite</i>	1840
<i>The Daughter of the Regiment</i>	1840
<i>Don Pasquale</i>	1843
<b>Vincenzo Bellini</b>	
<i>Il pirate</i>	1827
<i>I Capuleti e i Montecchi</i>	1830
<i>Norma</i>	1831
<i>La sonnambula</i>	1831
<i>I puritani</i>	1835

### Principal sources:

*The Great Composers: The Lives and Music of 50 Great Classical Composers*, by Jeremy Nicholas, © 2008, Quercus, London ML390.N57 2008

*Opera for Dummies*, by David Pogue & Scott Speck, © 1997, Foster City, CA MT95.P68 1997

What exactly is *bel canto*? It's a way of singing and, for some, an addiction. - The Washington Post, Online essay by Anne Midgette