Abstract:

Luciano Pavarotti and Joan Sutherland were masters of the opera style known as bel canto, or “beautiful singing.” Sutherland’s facility for highly ornamented music, Pavarotti’s beauty of tone, and their thrilling high notes were main reasons for their success in this repertoire. We chose six bel canto operas that the duo recorded and selected scenes that are accessible for undergraduate singers, specifically sopranos and tenors. Through transcriptions of ornamentation, interviews, listening analyses, and an extensive literature review, we created “listening guides” that students and teachers could use in their own study. By learning how these great artists influenced bel canto, future singers are able to integrate their individual style into the body of work that has already been established by Pavarotti and Sutherland. To illustrate our findings, we presented a lecture-recital in which we performed four scenes from the listening guides.

Research Process:

The team compiled an annotated bibliography of opera scores, opera recordings, articles, and books on the singers and composers.

The team transcribed interviews as well as musical ornamentation and cadenzas, conducted an interview with previous Metropolitan Opera artist Cynthia Munzer, analyzed their performances in the six operas, and extensively reviewed literature.

The team selected six bel canto operas that the duo recorded and identified scenes accessible to undergraduate singers, focusing on soprano and tenor roles.

We created “listening guides” that students and teachers could use in their own study of the bel canto style, supplying models for what Pavarotti and Sutherland’s stylistic choices look and sound like.

To illustrate our findings, we presented a multi-media lecture-recital in which we performed four scenes from the listening guides and shared our research results.

We found that Sutherland attributed much of her success to her technique, which she broke down into three categories: breath, support, and projection. Pavarotti’s success was also founded on his technique, which was based on proper breath support and covering through the passaggio.

Conclusion:

This project defines and records the stylistic choices of Pavarotti and Sutherland and presents the bel canto style in a format accessible to the undergraduate performer.

Much of the bel canto repertoire is too advanced for the average undergraduate singer, but those operatic scenes that are accessible provide a unique opportunity for young singers to learn and absorb the style.

Our interview with mezzo-soprano Cynthia Munzer provided us with a firsthand account of what performing with the duo was like, as well as what she learned from them in regards to technique and rehearsal routines. This project makes this interview and others with Pavarotti and Sutherland previously untranscribed available to interested scholars and students.

Examples from Listening Guides:

The six listening guides present the following:

- Background information on the opera and composer
- A list of performances and recordings by Pavarotti and Sutherland
- A summary of the plot and list of roles
- A list of available editions of the opera score with suggestions for which to purchase
- A list of other notable performers of the roles and video recordings of other performances
- One to three suggested scenes from the opera that are appropriate for undergraduate students

This scenes sections are broken down further into the following categories:

- A suggested score to use and page numbers on which to reference the scene
- A list of roles and a plot summary of the scene
- The range and tessitura of each role in the scene
- A section detailing the stylistic choices of Sutherland and Pavarotti in the scene, which can also include written cadenzas and ornamentations
- A section explaining why that scene is appropriate for undergraduate performers and any vocal challenges to consider when casting

Lecture Recital:

During the lecture-recital we presented information about Pavarotti and Sutherland, including their collaboration and influences on each other and bel canto opera. We provided visual aids as well as videos of interviews and performances by the duo through a PowerPoint presentation we created. Finally, we performed four opera excerpts with incorporated material from the listening guides.

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Questions?

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