



The Difference Between Belcanto Repertoire and Pop Song

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Abstract. In today's diverse musical industry, Belcanto singing and pop singing, as two main genres, each contain a unique artistic style and expression. Although they are both comprehensive style of singing, which have great differences in the themes, traditions, and aesthetic standards as a student who has studied both Belcanto and pop singing, this study realizes that it is essential for music learners to understand the differences between the two styles, and to avoid confusion among future students in the learning process, also to explore the differences between Belcanto singing and pop singing, and analyze the similarities and differences between the two musical forms. Through the comparison and analysis of the nature of Belcanto and popular singing works, this article talks about techniques and characteristics, the presentation of the works, and the average production cost, and the differences are revealed. This study found that Belcanto singing focuses on vocal techniques and the continuation of classical traditions, and its interpretation requires higher musical skills and musicianship. Pop singing, on the other hand, tends to be concise and catchy tunes and lyrics, and pays more attention to the appreciation of a wide range of listeners. By dissecting these differences in depth, this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of musical experience, while providing some new perspectives and revelations for the field of music studies, thereby promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of musical forms and styles.

Keywords: Bel canto singing, pop singing, differences, vocal technique, musical effect.

1 Introduction

In today's musical landscape, Belcanto singing and pop singing represent two important genres, each with its own unique artistic style and expression. Although both are forms of music, the philosophies, traditions, and aesthetic standards behind them differ significantly. Belcanto vocal techniques focus on physical training and uphold classical traditions, requiring superb musical skills and expression. In contrast, pop singing is loved by a wide audience for its concise and simple tunes and lyrics.

This study aims to explore the differences and similarities between Belcanto singing and pop singing in terms of art, culture, and aesthetics. The author of this article has studied both Belcanto and pop singing and believes that there is a necessary connection between the two styles. This connection can help future students avoid confusion during their learning process. Therefore, this study will analyze Belcanto singing and pop singing from four perspectives: techniques, characteristics, work presentation, and production costs, to reveal the differences between them and explore how these differences affect the audience's perception and appreciation of the two styles.

For music enthusiasts and researchers, understanding the differences between Belcanto singing and pop singing is essential for expanding musical knowledge and appreciation. Through this discussion, we hope to provide readers with a comprehensive and in-depth understanding, enabling them to better appreciate and understand the unique charm of these two forms of singing.

Therefore, this study will compare and analyze Belcanto singing and pop singing from four perspectives: the nature of the singing work, the skills required by the singers, the presentation of the work, and the related procedures of post-production. This analysis aims to provide new perspectives and insights for in-depth discussions in the field of music research.

2 The Nature of the Song Repertoire

2.1 The Complexity Phrasing

The lyrics of Belcanto songs are usually more complex and elegant, with a more intricate [1] poetic structure compared to pop songs. Pop song lyrics, on the other hand, are typically more life-like, featuring shorter sentence lengths, a colloquial tone, and diverse forms that make them easier for listeners to understand and accept. For example, consider two songs that both address the theme of love: "How Can I Not Think of Her" and "Rare Lover." [2] "How Can I Not Think of Her" is very elegant and subtle in its emotional expression, using a lot of imagery such as "light clouds" and "breeze." The musical phrases are relatively long, and the literary component is high. An example lyric is, "Ah, the breeze blew my hair, teach me how not to want her," which uses the breeze to subtly express thoughts about the lover.

In contrast, the lyrics of "Rare Lover" are more straightforward and colloquial, making them easy to understand and sing. For example, the lyric "Running sweetly with your lover in the wind, shouting loudly that you are in love in vain, a voice you are willing, a voice I am willing to..." is direct and easy to hum. Belcanto song lyrics resemble rhyming poetry, while pop songs are more akin to prose or monologues, featuring more colloquial language. This distinction highlights the differences in complexity and accessibility between the two styles.

2.2 The Overall Difficulty of Belcanto Songs is Higher than That of Pop Songs

Belcanto songs may have a wider vocal range, requiring the singer to master at least two octaves and include various vocal expressive qualities, such as flowery, dramatic,

and lyrical styles. Take the classic art song "Élégie" sung by the famous Spanish tenor José Carreras as an example. According to the score[3] and Carreras's singing[4], the song presents significant challenges in vocal range. The lowest note of this art song is A6, and the highest note is F5, spanning 14 degrees. The first word in the first sentence requires an octave jump, necessitating a smooth and graceful transition, which cannot be achieved without professional Belcanto training. Additionally, the melody of the song is not flat compared to an average pop song. Despite the song's desperate and mournful atmosphere, each phrase varies in its attack, sometimes in B4, sometimes in E5. This variability requires sufficient breath support, correct vocal techniques, and a deep understanding of the song's beauty and content to sing it perfectly.

Belcanto singing typically requires performances in grand theaters or halls, sometimes accompanied by orchestras of up to thousands of people. Although the José Carreras concert may only feature piano accompaniment, it is essential to sing without a microphone due to the historical origins of Belcanto before the advent of electronic sound amplification in medieval Europe. Theaters are designed to enhance sound transmission, but using one's entire body to project over a large orchestra without modern sound equipment is a significant physical and psychological challenge[5]. This high difficulty and standard of performance are why Belcanto singing is not as accessible as pop singing, representing a higher art form.

While some pop songs may match the vocal range of Belcanto opera excerpts or art songs, they are generally less demanding in terms of pitch. Pop songs are suitable for most singers, including those trained in Belcanto, without requiring extensive vocal skills. For instance, the song "Subaru" by the famous Japanese singer Shinji Tanimura[6] differs significantly from "Élégie." The singing range of "Subaru" is between C4 and E5 spanning 10 degrees[7], which is smaller than the range in "Élégie." Additionally, the overall melody of "Subaru" has relatively gentle ups and downs, with each phrase having smaller interval spans between notes. As a pop song, it does not require the singer to sing every word beautifully and mellowly but rather to integrate emotions and understand the creative background. If the singer comprehends the song's emotions, they can sing it sincerely from the heart. This illustrates the difference in overall difficulty between Belcanto and pop singing, highlighting why pop singing is more accessible and easier to perform.

2.3 Bel Canto Songs are Sung More Technically than Pop Songs

Belcanto songs, whether they are opera excerpts or art songs, are generally more demanding than popular songs. In opera and other forms, there are often minutes or even tens of minutes of singing required to showcase the singer's skills and expressiveness. For example, in the famous aria "La donna è mobile" [8] from Verdi's opera "Rigoletto," we can observe the characteristics of Jussi Björling's performance: (1) Fullness of Expression: Every word and sentence he sings is full of emotion. (2) Timbre: His vocal texture is bright, pure, and clear. (3) Ornamentation: He uses ornamental techniques in some of the words to embellish and beautify the song.

These characteristics stem from the nature of Belcanto singing, which requires full and strong cavity resonance. Each word and phrase must be delivered with fullness,

testing the singer's breath control. Additionally, due to the opera's plot requirements, many singing passages, such as "La donna è mobile," require decorative sounds like vibrato and coloratura to portray characters effectively. The Duke of Mantua's portrayal as unruly and seeing women as playthings necessitates such embellishments. Belcanto singing also involves steady breath support, resonance, and the basic requirement of not using a microphone. Therefore, singing Belcanto songs, especially opera excerpts, is extremely demanding for many singers.

In contrast, pop singing benefits from electronic amplification equipment such as microphones, making it less technically challenging. For example, the classic song "Maria"[9] from the musical "West Side Story" has a lower overall difficulty in singing techniques compared to Belcanto songs. While it also expresses the emotional depth of the protagonist, its performance is more lyrical and stable rather than dramatic and technically complex like "La donna è mobile."

Overall, this highlights the difference in technical difficulty between singing Belcanto songs and pop songs.

3 The Skills Required by the Singer for the Work

3.1 The Difference in Timbre and Texture

Bel canto singing has a tradition of sound texture that emphasizes elegance and solemnity. Through correct vocal training, singers can move seamlessly between high and low registers [10]. However, because of the strict and somewhat monotonous vocal techniques, Belcanto singing is not as inclusive of other singing methods. This leads to the classification of Belcanto singers into six voice types: soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, and bass. Although each voice type has its own characteristics in timbre and style, the core singing form remains quite singular. Historically, there have been some Belcanto singers who stood out, but Belcanto's overall lack of inclusiveness, along with fixed requirements and continuously refined training methods, has limited its development in modern society. After Belcanto singing entered academic institutions, it further constrained its evolution.

In contrast, pop singing places more emphasis on the singer's unique timbre and personalized expression, without prescribing a "correct" vocal method. Pop singers can employ a variety of vocal techniques, such as vocal fry, which, although not conventionally beautiful, possesses a distinct and appealing ruggedness. Ethereal sounds in pop can create a light, clear, and even heavenly effect, giving listeners a sense of transcendence. Moreover, pop singing can integrate other singing methods, such as traditional Chinese opera, enhancing its diversity and appeal. The versatility and adaptability of pop singing contribute to its broader economic impact compared to Bel canto singing.

3.2 The Use of a Microphone or Not

Conventional Belcanto singing usually does not require a microphone. This is because Belcanto singing involves the coordinated use of the mouth, nasopharyngeal cavity,

chest cavity, and frontal cavity, along with breath control in the head, oropharyngeal, and thoracic vocal areas. This technique gives Belcanto singing powerful penetrating power, allowing the sound to reach every corner of a grand theater or concert hall without the need for amplification equipment [11].

On the other hand, pop singing typically relies on microphones for amplification and sound effect processing to enhance the sense of presence and emotional expression. Pop singing emphasizes a natural sound, using the singer's most natural voice. The involvement of the human vocal cavities is not as extensive as in Belcanto singing, primarily involving the mouth, nose, and laryngopharyngeal cavity. Due to the characteristic of air leakage through the oral cavity, pop singing lacks the strong penetration of Belcanto singing. Without amplification equipment, it would be challenging to project the sound to every audience member.

Moreover, microphones and sound processors can modify the singer's timbre, enhancing their performance. The development of high-tech electronic devices has been crucial to the evolution of pop music, enabling it to achieve its distinct sound and widespread appeal [12].

3.3 Articulation Differences

Belcanto singing focuses on the technical and normative aspects of vocalization, emphasizing resonance and voice masking. This style places great importance on the accuracy and clarity of word articulation, contributing to the beauty and penetration of the voice. For example, in Peter Schreier's performance of "Gute Nacht," [13] the articulation is very clear, formatted, and standardized. Each word perfectly fits and corresponds to each note in a specific rhythm, with the pronunciation falling precisely on the cavity, breath, and overall resonance.

In contrast, the articulation in pop singing is closer to everyday speech and can be adjusted according to emotion and rhythm. Pop singing does not emphasize the accuracy and clarity of articulation as much as Belcanto singing. For instance, in John Denver's "Perhaps Love," [14] his articulation mirrors the speed and tone of daily speech. The rhythm of his articulation is more relaxed and casual compared to "Gute Nacht," creating a natural, free-flowing atmosphere typical of pop music. This casual style often includes a narrative or conversational flavor, which is more accessible and relatable to the audience. This distinction in articulation highlights the different technical demands and expressive goals of Belcanto singing and pop singing.

4 Presentation of the Work

4.1 Selection of Accompaniment Instruments and Style of Arrangement

The accompaniment of Belcanto music is usually more discreet to highlight the singer's voice and performance. Typical accompaniment instruments include piano, violin, cello, clarinet, and French horn, with arrangements leaning towards classical and conservative styles. For example, in the classic art song "Mattinata" [15] composed by Leoncavallo, the accompanying instruments feature a configuration common in

classical music. The arrangement, set in a 6/8 time signature, conveys the rigor, elegance, and slightly clumsy rhythm characteristic of classical music, even when expressing themes of love.

In contrast, the accompaniment of popular music tends to be richer and more diverse. It often includes classical instruments like piano and violin, alongside modern instruments such as electric guitar, drums, and bass. The arrangement styles in pop music are more modern and varied. For example, in Yoshisuke Kuwata's song "White Lovers," [16] the accompaniment includes classical instruments and electric guitar, a product of modern technology. The harmonic accompaniment further adds to the diversity. The song is arranged in a 4/4 time signature, offering a changeable beat. It begins with a lyrical feel, "The night is deep, and the snow is gradually accumulating," and progresses to a dramatic and passionate climax in the chorus. This dynamic and varied arrangement contrasts with the more uniform and structured feel of "Mattinata," reflecting the flexibility and modernity of pop song arrangements.

Overall, these differences in accompaniment and arrangement illustrate the distinct approaches of Belcanto and pop music. Belcanto maintains a classical, understated accompaniment to emphasize vocal performance, while pop music embraces a broader range of instruments and styles to create a more varied and dynamic listening experience.

4.2 Different Forms of Performance

Belcanto songs are often performed with a focus on solemnity and the display of vocal technique. The performance emphasizes technical elements such as *Messa di voce* (the gradual crescendo and decrescendo of a single note) and resonance. For instance, in the Italian folk song "Marechiare," performed by José Carreras [17], his use of technical muted notes enhances the emotional expression in certain parts of the song. Carreras's performance is also marked by a formal presentation, including a suit and minimal movement, which underscores the seriousness and technical precision of Belcanto singing.

In contrast, pop songs are typically performed in a more dynamic and lively manner. There are fewer strict requirements for vocal skills such as articulation and breathing. For example, in Cho Yong-pil's "Friend," [18] the performance is characterized by greater freedom. Cho Yong-pil is able to wear casual attire, move around the stage, interact with the audience, and adapt the song to the mood of the scene. This flexibility and engagement with the audience highlight the informal and versatile nature of pop performances.

These differences in performance styles underscore the distinct approaches of Belcanto and pop music, with Belcanto emphasizing technical precision and formality, while pop music embraces a more relaxed and interactive approach.

4.3 The types of Costumes for the Performances are Different

In Belcanto performances, costumes are typically classic and formal. Singers often wear suits, tuxedos, or costumes that correspond to opera characters. This formality is

due to the dignified, solemn, and serious nature of Belcanto works, which include oratorios, art songs, and operas. These performances usually require not only elegantly dressed performers but also a formal dress code for the audience. Costumes related to opera characters are worn to enhance the stage effect and maintain the authenticity of the performance. Concerts featuring Belcanto music generally mandate formal attire, including suits and ties, to uphold a polished and professional appearance, reflecting the high standards of the genre.

In contrast, pop music performances offer more flexibility in costume choices. Performers may opt for formal attire during special events or musical performances but also frequently wear fashion-forward, trendy, or casual clothing on stage. The lack of strict dress codes in pop music reflects its diverse and eclectic nature, where multiple styles coexist. Consequently, pop music performers have the freedom to select a wide range of outfits, from formal wear to casual attire, without the constraints typically associated with classical performances.

Overall, the difference in costume styles highlights the contrast between the formal, traditional presentation of Belcanto music and the more relaxed, varied approach of pop music.

5 The Relevant Procedures for Post-Production are Different

5.1 The Recording Price of Belcanto Music is Higher than the Recording Price of Popular Music

The recording and production of Belcanto music generally involve more intricate processes and higher costs compared to popular music.

For Belcanto music, several factors contribute to its higher recording price: (1) Pre-Production Costs: The initial stage, which includes composition and preparation, is often expensive, ranging from hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars. Belcanto music typically features complex symphonies, chamber music, or operas, necessitating a significant budget for orchestration and arrangement. (2) Recording Costs: The recording process for Belcanto music requires selecting specialized studios and engineers to ensure top-quality sound. This includes costs for studio rental, recording equipment, and technical personnel. For example, at MK-Studio, the rental fee for a large studio is about 400 yuan per hour, while a smaller studio costs around 300 yuan per hour. Additional expenses include mixing (500 yuan per song), sub-tracking (2000 yuan per song), and fees for directors and producers (2000 yuan per song). Mastering, which can cost over 10,000 yuan, and multiple recording sessions further increase the total expense. Thus, recording a single Belcanto song could cost upwards of 1,148,000 yuan, considering multiple sessions and high-quality standards. (3) Post-Production Costs: The complexity of Belcanto music also drives up post-production costs. The mixing and mastering processes require substantial expertise and resources, contributing to the overall higher expenditure [19].

In contrast, the production of popular music is typically less expensive due to its lower complexity: (1) Simpler Production Process: Popular music generally involves less complex arrangements and fewer instruments compared to Belcanto music. This

results in lower pre-production and recording costs. (2)Recording Costs: The cost of recording popular music is usually lower. For instance, at MK-Studio, the mixing cost for a simple pop song ranges from 5000 to 20,000 yuan, and mastering costs between 5,000 and 10,000 yuan. Thus, the total recording cost for a pop song might reach up to 349,000 yuan, significantly less than for Belcanto music.

Overall, the economic costs associated with recording and producing Belcanto music are considerably higher than those for pop music due to the former's greater complexity and demands in the production process.

5.2 Recording and Acoustic Environments are Different

The recording and acoustic environments for Belcanto and popular music differ significantly due to their respective requirements and production practices.

Belcanto music:

(1) Recording Locations:

Professional Studios and Concert Halls: Belcanto music is typically recorded in professional recording studios or concert halls with superior acoustic design. These venues are chosen for their natural soundstage, which provides the appropriate reverberation and acoustic reflections necessary to capture the singer's and instrumentalists' true sound.

Acoustic Design: The natural acoustics of these environments help to emphasize the purity and subtlety of Belcanto performances.

(2) Equipment:

Microphones: High-end condenser microphones are used to capture the delicate nuances of the singer's voice. These microphones are designed to capture the full range of subtle vocal details.

Preamplifier and Converters: High-quality preamplifiers and analog-to-digital converters are essential for maintaining the high fidelity of the sound signal.

Recording Method: Single-track recording is often employed to preserve the purity of each sound element. The microphone's placement is meticulously adjusted to achieve the desired sound field effects.

Pop music:

(1) Recording Locations:

Flexible Environments: Popular music can be recorded in various settings, including professional studios, home studios, or even portable recording devices. These environments typically have a dry sound, which can be advantageous for adding sound effects and processing later in the production process.

Dry Sound Environment: This flexibility allows for a wide range of sound effects and processing to be applied during post-production.

(2) Equipment:

Microphones: The choice of microphones in popular music recording is often based on the characteristics of the singer and the desired sound. This may include condenser microphones for clarity or dynamic microphones for robustness.

Recording Interfaces and DAWs: Various recording interfaces and digital audio workstations (DAWs) such as Pro Tools, Ableton Live, and others are used to manage and process recordings.

Recording Method: Multi-track recording is commonly used, allowing different sound elements—such as vocals, musical instruments, and electronic effects—to be recorded separately. This facilitates detailed post-processing and editing. Segmented recording is also used, which involves editing in sections to ensure the best performance of each part.

In summary, the recording and acoustic environments for Belcanto music are characterized by their emphasis on natural acoustics and high-end equipment, whereas popular music benefits from a more flexible recording approach and diverse equipment options.

5.3 Mixing and Mastering

The mixing and mastering processes for Belcanto and popular music reflect their different artistic priorities and production techniques.

Belcanto music:

(1) Mixing:

Natural Timbre and Sound Field: The mixing process for Belcanto music emphasizes preserving the natural timbre of the vocals and instruments. The goal is to retain the authentic sound of the recording environment as much as possible.

Balance and Clarity: Careful attention is paid to achieving a balanced mix where each vocal part and instrument is clear. This involves appropriate equalization (EQ) and compression to enhance clarity without over-processing the sound.

Minimal Processing: Effects are used sparingly to maintain the purity of the performance. The focus is on achieving a natural and elegant sound, rather than dramatic alterations.

(2) Mastering:

Conservative Approach: Mastering in Belcanto music is typically conservative, aiming to optimize the dynamic range and frequency response while preserving the naturalness of the sound.

Emphasis on Delicacy: The emphasis is on refining the recording to enhance its delicate qualities rather than pushing for excessive loudness. The final product aims to reflect the subtlety and elegance of the original performance.

Pop music:

(1) Mixing:

Complex and Diverse Techniques: The mixing process for popular music often involves a wide range of effects and plug-ins. This includes:

Equalizers: Tools like FabFilter Pro-Q and Waves SSL G-Equalizer are used to adjust the frequency response of the audio track, targeting specific frequency bands to enhance or reduce.

Compressors: Devices such as Waves CLA-76 and Universal Audio LA-2A control the dynamic range, smoothing volume changes and adding density.

Enhancement of Vocals and Melodies: Popular music mixing frequently involves techniques like automatic tuning, delay, and reverb to enhance the expressiveness of the vocals and main melodies.

Rhythm and Dynamism: The bass part is processed to ensure rhythm and dynamism, contributing to the overall impact of the track.

(2) **Mastering:**

Loudness and Impact: Mastering for pop music aims for greater loudness and impact, using multi-segment compression, limiting, and other techniques to increase the overall volume.

Consistency Across Playback Devices: The frequency response and stereo width are adjusted to ensure the track sounds consistent across various playback devices, from headphones to speakers.

In summary, Belcanto music mixing and mastering prioritize the preservation of natural sound and subtlety, while popular music focuses on engaging listeners through elaborate sound processing and loudness. These approaches reflect the distinct goals and styles of each genre.

6 Conclusion

This study has explored the fundamental differences between Belcanto singing and pop singing, examining aspects such as the nature of the singing work, the skills required of the singer, and the procedures involved in the presentation and post-production of the work. The key findings are as follows:

(1) **Nature of the Singing Work:**

Belcanto Singing: This style emphasizes vocal purity and technical precision, focusing on breath control and resonance. The music is traditionally arranged to highlight the natural timbre and harmony of the voice, with a strong emphasis on classical and conservative arrangements.

Pop Singing: Pop music prioritizes personalized expression and emotional conveyance. The use of microphone technology and various effects enhances the expressiveness of the voice, with a tendency towards more modern and diverse arrangements that often include synthesizers and percussion.

(2) **Skills Required of the Singer:**

Belcanto Singers: These performers must master complex vocal techniques and maintain precise breath control and resonance. Their training focuses on achieving a pure, resonant sound that can be delivered without amplification.

Pop Singers: Skills in pop singing include the ability to convey emotion and adapt their vocal style to various effects and technologies. The use of microphones and vocal processing tools is integral to their performance, allowing for greater flexibility and personal expression.

(3) **Post-Production Procedures:**

Belcanto Music: The recording and mixing processes emphasize the preservation of natural sound quality and clarity. Mastering is done conservatively to maintain the delicate characteristics of the performance.

Pop Music: The production involves extensive use of effects and plug-ins to create engaging soundscapes and dynamic contrasts. Mastering focuses on achieving high loudness and impact, with adjustments made to ensure consistency across different playback devices.

7 Implications for Music Education and Career Development

(1) Educational Institutions: Music schools and institutions should develop detailed and personalized teaching programs that cater to the diverse needs of students. This includes providing training in both Belcanto and pop techniques, as well as modern production methods.

(2) Cross-Border Application: Belcanto singers: Those interested in expanding their audience can benefit from integrating modern production techniques and elements of pop music into their performances. This approach can help them reach a broader audience and enrich their musical style.

Pop Singers: For pop singers exploring Belcanto, systematic training in classical vocal techniques and musical understanding is essential. Modern production methods can then be used to enhance the traditional songs and create a contemporary appeal.

(3) Interdisciplinary Training: To improve employability, educational institutions should enhance interdisciplinary training, offer more internship opportunities, and encourage independent creation and performance. This approach will help students develop versatile skills and adapt to various musical fields.

In summary, blending the technical and artistic elements of Belcanto and pop singing can create unique musical styles that appeal to a wide range of listeners, particularly younger audiences. By fostering a more integrated approach to music education and production, students can better prepare themselves for successful careers in the evolving music industry.

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