

AESTHETIC CONCEPTS OF THE BEAUTIFUL VOICE

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What is a beautiful voice? This adjective is widely used by performers, singing teachers, clinicians, lay audiences, opera house producers and the like. The term *belcanto* might best represent the concept in an historical musicological context and is an example of how a concept behind a term can change over time – the term could already be found around 1600 and is still used today. While a translation of *belcanto* as “beautiful song” seems obvious, it appears that the Italian term might have been understood as “correct” or “suitable” until the 19th century. Nonetheless, the concept of *belcanto* cannot only be explained by a simple translation, as at that time it stood for the highest, technical achievement of the voice, for the purpose of a most differentiated vocal performance. In the 19th century, the term drifted from a “correct” song to a “beautiful” song, possibly as a response to the putative downfall of Italian Art Singing. In the course of the 20th century, the term lost its traditional complexity and is nowadays used as a buzzword lacking a clear definition (see Seedorf, 2016).

Most research has investigated the concept of the beautiful voice rather indirectly. For instance, vocal performances can be examined in terms of vocal qualities of the healthy voice in comparison to pathological sounding voices (e.g., RBH or GRBAS scale; Hirano, 1981), or in terms of vocal gesture or vocal technique in lyrical singing (Henrich et al., 2008), or compared across professionals and non-professionals (Nawka & Wirth, 2008). In other words, previous work was typically not focused on the experience of beauty but rather on the identification of healthy, technically correct, or more generally, ‘good’ voices. Conceivably, the impression of a beautiful voice might differ depending on the listener’s profession and expertise. To address this issue, it is necessary to actively involve participants from these different fields related to the singing voice (i.e., clinic, pedagogy, physiology, acoustics, musicology, as well as performers and audience) and focus specifically on the notion of beauty. Such an interdisciplinary approach aims at clarifying what ‘beautiful’ means for different audiences, to better understand the concepts underlying it, and to facilitate communication between fields.

The members of the panel represent different fields and contribute to the discussion from their specific angles. We include researchers with a background in speech science, phonetics, acoustics, physiology, psychology and musicology. The goal is to tease out conflicting as well as complementary concepts of the beautiful voice, which will enrich the understanding of different viewpoints of the panelists as well as the audience.

In order to examine current concepts from different angles, we propose an exploratory approach, which should engage not only the panelists but also involve the participants in a vibrant discussion. The basis of the discussion will be a dataset from a current study, conducted at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, with a collection of verbal descriptions of the beautiful voice. Participants, confined to lay listeners and professional singers, were asked to describe what is a “beautiful” operatic voice, in addition to questions about what makes it “interesting”, “touching”, or “technically correct”. By examining the semantic content of the answers and comparing adjectives used to answer the proposed questions, this study aims at providing adequate material to be completed and discussed. We might be able to differentiate between certain aspects of the voice between fields, e.g. the importance of technical aspects and/or emotional descriptions and preferences within certain professions.

The members of the round table will present the collected data and provide interpretations from their specific perspective in order to develop jointly a concept of the beautiful voice, leading to further questions and encouraging the participants to discuss the proposed interpretations. The output of the proposed round table (based on the data collection and the discussion) will be summarized in a publication available to the public.

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