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From Bel Canto to Wagnerian Drama: The Transformation of Vocal Aesthetics in *Die Walküre*

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Abstract

Starting from the bel canto tradition as its point of departure, this paper analyses the dramatic progression of vocal expression in Wagner's *Die Walküre*. It shows how, despite the singer possessing the bel canto skills of breath control and timbral shaping, Wagner transfigured vocal performance from an art of lineamental beauty into a vehicle of psychological power and dramatic agency. The paper contends that Wagner never denied the legitimacy of bel canto as such; rather, through the use of his own terms "endless melody" (unendische Melodie) and "total work of art" (Gesamtkunstwerk), he realised a new musical-dramatic unity that redirected nineteenth-century vocal aesthetics from an emphasis on "beauty of melody" to an emphasis on "truth of drama". In doing so, he not only transformed the nature of opera but also set a dramatic direction and objective for the modern vocal art.

Keywords

Bel canto; Richard Wagner; *Die Walküre*; vocal aesthetics

1. Introduction

Nineteenth-century European opera faced a crossroads between the "age of bel canto" and the "age of drama". The Italian bel canto style, focusing on the beauty of the musical line, purity of tone, and uninterrupted flow of voice, regarded the voice itself and its technical mastery as its aesthetic essence. However, with the rise of Romantic ideas and the mature conception of music-drama, Richard Wagner dramatically transformed the operatic world with his doctrine of the Gesamtkunstwerk—the "total work of art". In *Die Walküre*, Wagner finally broke the aria-recitative barrier and set the human voice free as a living entity in which music and drama are indistinguishably unified. Unlike verismo, Wagner did not discard the disciplines of bel canto—such as breath control, tonal unity, and vocal resonance—but he did endow them with dramatic truth and psychological significance (Pan, 2025). In other words, the "beauty of sound" ascends to the "truth of emotion". It is not only a historical process of vocal aesthetic transformation from bel canto to the Wagnerian school, but also a spiritual evolution of nineteenth-century European art from formal idealism to spiritual authenticity that Wagner's vocal language in *Die Walküre* realizes in *Die Walküre*.

2. The Vocal Aesthetic of the Bel Canto Tradition

2.1 Technical Characteristics of Bel Canto Singing

Bel canto places a premium on highly controlled respiratory support, resonance, and legato continuity. Its central tenets—appoggio (supported breathing) and legato (connected phrasing)—require the singer to maintain a steady flow of air through diaphragmatic engagement, thus assuring not only security of tone but also an organic connection

from note to note. A singularity of timbre over the registers renders resonance placement cohesive (teachers speak of voce unita—the "unified voice") (Li, 2025).

Tone color hue, dynamic gradation, and ornamental articulation are derived from this economy of breath, thus resolving the dichotomy between technical security and expressive nuance (Feng, 2022). The pure, round, easily produced bel canto tone is neither labored nor strained, nor in any way forced or dramatically demonstrative. Rather, it is an elegant result achieved from a state of poised equilibrium. Whether employed in the beautiful legato of a lyrical aria or in the sparkling tessitura of coloratura, the singer must maintain the melodic "singing quality" such that the sound possesses sculptural clarity but remains at its core humanly warm. These technical attributes define the concept of "bel canto" and separate it sharply from the later "Germanic" vocalism of declamation and dramatic expression.

2.2 The Aesthetic Ideal: The "Purity of Sound"

The fundamental tenet of the bel canto creed is "the beauty of the voice itself"—the notion that pure, balanced, and legato tone is the most precious of all artistic qualities. Such reasoning leads singers to view singing as "the art of sound" rather than "the representation of drama." Good melody and tonal equilibrium are more pleasing than the need for narrative or theatrical immediacy. The Italian maestri promoted piacere del canto—pleasure of singing—as the most basic goal of music: to please the listener, to charm him with timbre and melody.

This aesthetic preference created the lyrical personality of early nineteenth-century opera, in which a character's emotions were expressed through subtle and beautiful melodic invention rather than through verbal or dramatic conflict (Ye, 2021). The singer's skill and beauty of voice were the focus of audience interest; listeners came not to follow a plot but to hear human voice-sounds done well. Thus, bel canto is an idealized and symbolic aesthetic concept: a sound freed from semantic necessity, a self-serving art that reflects a purity and structural coherence analogous to the equilibrium between Classicism and Romanticism. This "purity of sound" would eventually give way to the dramatic authenticity of Wagner and his followers, but it is the essential starting point for tracing the historical development of European vocal aesthetics.

3. The Dramatic Transformation of Wagnerian Vocal Art—Centered on *Die Walküre*

3.1 Wagner's Concept of Music, Drama, and His View of Vocal Expression

Wagner's conception of music drama evolved as a radical response to the practice of nineteenth-century opera in general. For his purposes, the traditional structure of Italian opera was divisive, separating music and drama as though they were unrelated entities: the aria served as a showcase for virtuoso display, the recitative as a means of expository narrative. It was, in his view, this very separation that was detrimental to the dramatic whole. In essays such as Art and Revolution and The Artwork of the Future, he articulated the notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk—the "total work of art"—which called for an organic unity of poetry, music, dance, and the visual arts in service of a holistic dramatic truth (Xie, 2021).

Here, within this system, music is no longer a means of surface ornamentation or auditory sweetness; it is a means of psychological truth and dramatic propulsion. "The purpose of singing is to express thought through sound," and therefore, vocal art must serve this dramatic intention as the poetic extension of language itself. Wagner's concept of the Endlose Melodie ("endless melody") broke through the traditional segmentation of the music, binding melodic continuity directly to dramatic motion and thus eliminating the conventional division between aria and recitative. In this regard, the musical line is a continuous flow of expressive speech. From a vocal-aesthetic standpoint, Wagner condemned empty displays of vocal technique. He demanded that the singer be "the voice of the drama" rather than "performer of sound." Here, vocalization must serve emotion and meaning, not some mechanical form. The harmonic language, continuous orchestral texture, and contrapuntal structure of the music all demanded of the singer extraordinary vocal projection, linguistic clarity, and psychological depth. Here, the voice was no longer separate from the orchestra but one of several narrative forces, synchronized with leitmotifs and dramatic rhythm (Sun, 2025). By embedding the phonetic rhythm of the German language into the vocal line, Wagner also amplified both realism and psychological tension. In this way, he redefined the function and aesthetic value of singing itself, decisively shifting European opera from a melody-centered art to a drama-centered total art.

3.2 The Inheritance and Transformation of Bel Canto in *Die Walküre*

Although Wagner's vocal theory was extremely revolutionary, *Die Walküre* rejects bel canto doctrine not at all, but rather, relegates it, by means of a kind of dramatic alchemy, to a new psychological and situational use. The rules of bel canto—steady breath support, timbral unity, and vocal connection—are maintained, but re-channeled to a new set of psychological motives and situations. The Italian ideal of legato fluency remains, but Wagner converts that lyrical continuity into a sort of speech-like current, a stream of emotional energy that reflects the psychological state of the characters.

In the dialogue between Brünnhilde and Wotan, the vocal line eschews the pretty legato lines of Italian lyricism, but the continuity of breath still sustains the coherence of the voice. Thus, in this sense, Wagnerian singing dramatizes the breath itself—breath is both the physiological and emotional basis of performance. This "dramatization of breath" is not a rejection or negation of bel canto, but a re-finement of it.

Wagner also expands the bel canto concern with tonal balance and smoothness to a new psychological color and symbolic resonance. In *Die Walküre*, each of the principal characters has a specific tonal quality that reflects his or her dramatic significance: the tenor sings of Siegmund and possesses heroic brightness tinged with tragic nobility; the soprano represents Sieglinde and glows with human warmth and tenderness; the soprano soloist sings of Brünnhilde and unites warrior-like strength with feminine tenderness (Fu, 2025). Timbre has left the category of mere sonic aesthetic and externalizes the inner world and ultimate destiny of each character. Wagner requires that the singer maintain vocal beauty and balance while shifting resonance and dynamics to a more dramatic effect. Thus, *Die Walküre* represents a Wagnerian vocal ideal not opposed to, but reborn by means of, bel canto.

3.3 Analysis of Representative Scenes

Siegmund's aria "Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond" ("Winter Storms Have Vanished in the Moon of May") offers one of the most lyrical moments in *Die Walküre* and one of the archetypal examples of bel canto combined with Wagnerian style. The melody is Italianate in its grace and breadth, and it expresses Siegmund's new love and hope upon recognizing Sieglinde. The singer must produce even tone, sustained breath control, and facile phrasing—characteristics of the bel canto tradition. Moreover, the passage is hardly an aural tableau set apart from the rest of the work; the harmonic "love motif" is musically present throughout, and the melody no longer functions merely as a decorative surface but as a psychological and narrative force. The singer consequently must strike a middle ground between ornamental beauty and dramatic authenticity, modulating the timbre to convey a state of consciousness that fluctuates between tenderness and passion—thereby making Siegmund's new outlook audible.

The other extreme is illustrated by the final struggle between Brünnhilde and Wotan—Wotan's Abschied ("Wotan's Farewell")—which serves as a model of dramatic authenticity in Wagnerian singing. As Brünnhilde confronts her father's judgment, her tone ranges from defiant anger to piteous resignation, and her mood reflects the emotional journey of love and rebirth. The vocal line lacks regular melodic contours but it unites speech rhythm and tonal curve to produce a high degree of immediacy and emotional truth. Here, the need for vocal beauty is subordinated to the spiritual intensity of the moment—singing becomes the voice of the soul itself. Wagner's integrated use of declamation and lyricism makes sound into the language of consciousness. Such passages demand more than virtuosic technique; they require the ability to express psychological movement in tone.

In this way, *Die Walküre* finally seals the historical compromise between "the beauty of melody" and "the truth of drama" and establishes Wagner as the composer who would relegate the "verdi-singer" to the realm of the past.

4. From "The Beauty of Melody" to "The Truth of Drama": The Historical Shift in Vocal Aesthetics

4.1 The Logic of Aesthetic Transformation in Nineteenth-Century Vocal Art

In mid-nineteenth-century Europe, culture was undergoing a transformation from the classical formalism of the Classicists to the emotional expressivism of the Romantics. Under the influence of Romantic ideas, art, which had been confined within the symmetrical and ordered ideals of Classical beauty, began to pursue ends of emotional authenticity and spiritual significance (Liu & Wang, 2025). It is in opera that this development was most evident. From Rossini and Bellini to Verdi, the legacy of the bel canto tradition had brought melody to its highest development, but it was also this high development that made evident the limitations of the music: a lack of dramatic truth. Wagner

was the music counterforce to this empty dramatic closure. He declared that 'music must be the blood of the poetic drama'. For him, vocal art could no longer remain an exhibition of tonal delight: it had to be the instrument of psychological revelation and narrative development.

Consequently, the new focus of vocal aesthetics was no longer the 'pleasantness of sound', but rather, the 'authenticity of expression'. Good technique and beauty became means, not ends, subservient to the end of expressing inner feeling. This was the spirit of Romanticism: an end to formal perfection and a beginning to subjective truth. This reorientation fundamentally changed the place and role of the singer. The performer was no longer a 'craftsman of tone', but rather, an 'embodiment of drama'. Rhythm and meaning of language took precedence over decorative melody as the new structural basis of music. Thus, Wagner's Endless Melody did not only represent a compositional development, but also a philosophical development: music developing from the former state of formal artifice into the latter state of lived experience.

4.2 "Dramatized Bel Canto": Toward an Integrated Aesthetic

Although Wagner inaugurated a new era of vocal drama, the aesthetic ideal of bel canto was not extinguished. Quite the contrary: many singers and composers of the twentieth century have striven to resolve the conflict between technical beauty and dramatic truth—a hybrid aesthetic, which I call "dramatized bel canto." This integrated approach incorporated the Italian tradition of controlling breath, tone, and legato continuity while rejecting bel canto's nineteenth-century formalism in favor of Wagner's "new German singing"—that is, an emphasis on expressive depth and the linguistic immediacy of dramatic speech. In all of these idioms, singers no longer seek to display vocal brilliance for its own sake. Technical achievement is now the means by which the dramatic context mediates the dramatic text. The "beauty of tone" and the "truth of emotion" are held in finely balanced tension. I hear this approach not only in the music of Strauss and Puccini, but also in many examples of "modern musical theater"—in which, as in all true singing, the voice is no longer an end in itself, but an instrument of drama.

In this sense, "dramatized bel canto" represents the mature stage in the evolutionary development of an art that has transcended the conflict between beauty and truth, form and content, sound and meaning. Contemporary singers must master bel canto technique and dramatic art in order to succeed in the demanding repertoire of "psychologically complex" roles composed since the mid-nineteenth century." Dramatized bel canto" is at once a continuation of the bel canto tradition and a reference to the revolutionary legacy of Wagner and his followers. This integrated aesthetic restores singing to its essential humanistic spirit—the quest for beauty—without sacrificing the pursuit of truth. In this sense, singing in the era following Wagner is not the death of bel canto, but its rebirth as a higher synthesis of beauty and truth.

5. Conclusion

From bel canto to Wagnerian drama, vocal art traversed a historical arc from "the beauty of melody" to "the truth of drama." In *Die Walküre*, Wagner did not discard the bel canto heritage; he reanimated it through theatrical recontextualization, transforming song from a display of virtuosity into an instrument of thought and emotion. This transformation not only revolutionized the aesthetic paradigm of nineteenth-century opera but also charted the path for the future of vocal art. Through his integration of linguistic rhythm, psychological depth, and motivic development, Wagner made the voice the "language of the soul," achieving a unity between artistic form and human spirit. His conception of dramatized bel canto stands as both a transcendence of tradition and a higher sublimation of vocal beauty—an enduring synthesis in which the beautiful and the true find harmonious reconciliation.

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