

Mastering Bel Canto Singing Styles and Optimizing Teaching Methods from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Xianghao Wen*

School of Art and Media, Tongji University, Shanghai 200092, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Against the backdrop of increasing globalization and cross-cultural exchanges, the teaching and practice of bel canto singing styles are confronted with new opportunities and challenges. This paper aims to systematically explore the core elements of bel canto singing styles, the obstacles faced by learners from non-Western cultural backgrounds, and propose corresponding strategies for optimizing teaching methods from a cross-cultural perspective. The article dissects the technical characteristics of bel canto styles centered on “mixed resonance,” the aesthetic of “rounded and full” timbre, the “rational and restrained” emotional logic, and the cultural genes rooted in Western religion, humanism, linguistic characteristics, and classical aesthetics. It focuses on analyzing the specific obstacles encountered by cross-cultural learners at three levels: language and pronunciation, aesthetic concepts, and cultural psychology and thinking patterns, revealing how these differences lead to the dilemma of learners achieving “technical proficiency but stylistic distortion.” In response to the aforementioned issues, the article proposes a systematic set of teaching method optimization strategies. The research aims to provide theoretical references and practical pathways for bel canto teaching in cross-cultural contexts, facilitating learners in achieving a profound transition from technical imitation to cultural internalization, thereby enabling them to more accurately grasp and interpret the art of bel canto.

Keywords: Cross-cultural; Bel canto singing; Style mastery; Cultural genes

Online publication: October 26, 2025

1. Introduction

As a universal form of emotional expression shared by humanity, vocal art has seen increasingly frequent cross-cultural dissemination and learning. Bel canto, a singing art originating from the West with a rigorous system and profound cultural heritage, has gained widespread recognition and learning worldwide. However, when this art form, rooted in a specific cultural context, enters non-Western cultural settings, learners often face the dilemma of “resembling in form but not in spirit”: even if they master vocal techniques, they still struggle to truly convey the essence of its style. Currently, research on bel canto teaching primarily focuses on technical discussions or the integration of bel canto with Chinese national vocal music, while systematic studies that deeply analyze the underlying obstacles to style mastery caused by cultural gene differences from a cross-cultural perspective and propose systematic teaching optimization strategies remain insufficient. The language barriers, aesthetic conflicts, and cultural psychological divides that many learners encounter in practice have not received adequate theoretical responses and teaching guidance. Therefore, this paper aims to delve into the core

elements of bel canto singing style and the Western cultural genes behind them from a cross-cultural perspective, revealing the internal logic of its artistic expression. This study hopes to provide more targeted and effective theoretical references and practical pathways for bel canto teaching in cross-cultural contexts, helping learners overcome cultural barriers and achieve a leap from technical imitation to cultural internalization, thereby more accurately grasping and interpreting the unique charm of bel canto art.

2. Core elements and cultural genes of bel canto singing style

2.1. The essential characteristics of bel canto style

In today's diverse society, no single entity can develop in isolation, and vocal art is no exception. Only through mutual learning and reference can it achieve more long-term development. Mastering different singing styles represents an innovation in vocal performance techniques and offers significant implications for the development and innovation of vocal performance theory ^[1]. The essence of bel canto singing style lies in the high degree of unity between the "scientific vocalization system" and the "artistic expression logic." Its core characteristics can be precisely defined from four dimensions: vocal technique, timbre aesthetics, emotional transmission, and adaptation to musical forms. Centered around "mixed resonance," it forms a transparent, full, and penetrating sound through the seamless integration of the chest, pharyngeal, and head cavities, breaking through the physiological limitations of the human vocal range and intensity ^[2]. In terms of timbre aesthetics, it pursues a balance between "roundness" and "individuality," adhering to the classical Italian norms of full vowels while leaving ample room for interpretation in works from different eras. In emotional transmission, bel canto does not involve subjective outbursts but adheres to the "precise release under rational restraint," transforming emotions into controllable vocal parameters such as breath and intensity, achieving a combination of logic and emotional appeal. Additionally, it exhibits strong "era adaptability," adjusting its singing timbre according to the musical styles of different periods such as Baroque, Classical, and Romantic.

2.2. The Western cultural genes behind the bel canto style

The bel canto singing style is not an isolated art form; its formation and development are deeply rooted in the soil of Western culture. Religious traditions, the spirit of humanism, linguistic characteristics, and classical aesthetic paradigms collectively constitute its core cultural genes, determining the artistic orientation and expressive logic of the bel canto style. The Christian religious tradition serves as its origin, with medieval church music laying a foundation of solemn and pure timbre and resonance techniques in pursuit of a sense of sanctity and penetration ^[3]. The spirit of humanism during the Renaissance acts as its core driving force, prompting bel canto to shift from serving religious purposes to showcasing the charm and rich emotions of the human voice, becoming an art form centered on "humanity." The linguistic characteristics of Italian, with its full vowels and light consonants, directly shape its singing form characterized by "vowel-dominated, smooth lines." The Western classical aesthetic pursuit of "harmony and balance" establishes an artistic paradigm for bel canto that emphasizes the coordinated unity of breath, resonance, and articulation, as well as restrained and rational emotional expression. These four major cultural genes collectively determine the unique artistic orientation and expressive logic of bel canto.

3. Obstacles and challenges in grasping the bel canto style from a cross-cultural perspective

3.1. Language and pronunciation obstacles

Language serves as the fundamental medium for expressing the bel canto singing style. The core vocal logic and articulation norms of bel canto art are deeply intertwined with the phonetic characteristics of the Latin language family

(including Italian, French, German, etc.), creating inherent phonetic barriers for non-Western native language learners^[4]. Learners often encounter issues where the compound vowel habits of Chinese lead to blurred, distinct vowels and dispersed resonance, which are required in bel canto. Additionally, the tense and sustained consonants in Chinese can easily interfere with the “light touch” articulation of bel canto, disrupting the continuity and smoothness of the sound^[5]. Furthermore, the placement and flexibility of stress in Chinese often conflict with the stress requirements in bel canto works, which serve musical rhythm and emotional expression, thereby undermining the rhythmic quality of the pieces. The most prominent issue lies in the fact that the inherent tonal system of Chinese directly affects pitch, resulting in pitch deviations or emotional misalignments during singing, making it difficult to achieve a high degree of integration between phonetic rhythm and musical rhythm, and deviating from the core style of bel canto, which emphasizes the unity of voice and words (i.e., the core of the Italian bel canto keyword “legato”).

3.2. Differences in aesthetic concepts

The aesthetic system of bel canto style originates from the dual pursuits of “rational balance” and “individual expression” in Western classical aesthetics, which significantly differ from the aesthetic paradigms of traditional Eastern vocal music. This conflict in aesthetic perception constitutes a core obstacle to mastering the style in cross-cultural learning^[6]. Bel canto originates from Western classical aesthetics, pursuing a “clear and full” timbre and “rational restraint” of emotions, emphasizing the realization of individual expression within technical norms. In contrast, Eastern vocal music places greater emphasis on a “personalized and freehand” timbre and the “free expression” of emotions, highlighting the inheritance and imitation of tradition. These fundamental differences often lead learners to become rigid or deviate from norms in terms of timbre, lose control or become emotionally cold in expression, and struggle to strike a balance between norms and innovation in artistic interpretation, preventing them from truly mastering the essence of bel canto’s style, which harmoniously blends voice and emotion.

4. Barriers of cultural psychology and thinking patterns

The profound connotations of the bel canto style stem from Western cultural psychological structures and thinking patterns. These implicit differences at the cultural level are often more challenging to overcome than linguistic or aesthetic disparities, becoming an “invisible barrier” to grasping the style in cross-cultural learning^[7]. Western culture emphasizes individualism and outward emotional expression, requiring singers to dare to display their individuality. In contrast, Eastern culture tends towards collectivism and inward emotional restraint, causing learners to often feel psychologically constrained and perform in a restrained manner, unable to reach the core of the bel canto style. Meanwhile, the Western linear logic and precise analytical thinking patterns are reflected in the rigorous system of bel canto techniques and musical structures, which contradicts the Eastern habit of focusing on holistic perception, making it difficult for learners to accurately grasp technical details. Furthermore, a lack of understanding of Western cultural symbols, such as religion and mythology, in bel canto works further prevents learners from conveying the profound spiritual connotations of the works. These deep-seated differences collectively lead learners into a dilemma where “technique is in place but style is distorted.”

5. Optimization strategies for bel canto teaching based on cross-cultural understanding

5.1. Transformation of teaching philosophy

The transformation of teaching philosophy is the core prerequisite for optimizing cross-cultural bel canto teaching. It necessitates breaking away from the singular perception of “technology first” and establishing a teaching orientation that prioritizes “culture as the foundation and technology as the tool,” integrating cultural understanding throughout the entire teaching process^[8]. Traditional bel canto teaching often centers on “imitation-replication,” requiring learners to replicate

the vocal positions and performance techniques of Western singers while overlooking the impact of cultural differences on stylistic expression. In contrast, the optimized teaching philosophy places “cultural interpretation” before technical training, guiding learners to first understand the cultural context of the work and then achieve stylistic expression through technical means. For instance, before teaching excerpts from *La Traviata*, teachers should systematically explain the social landscape, aristocratic culture, and women’s fates in 19th-century France, enabling learners to grasp Violetta’s complex emotions of “yearning for love yet fearing societal norms.” Subsequently, vocal techniques can be designed in accordance with these emotional logics, ensuring that technical training serves as a support for emotional expression rather than an end in itself^[9]. Simultaneously, it is essential to establish a teaching philosophy with a “bidirectional cultural perspective,” avoiding the perception of Western culture as the “sole standard.” Instead, learners should be guided to understand bel canto styles through comparison. Teachers can introduce aesthetic differences between Eastern vocal music and bel canto, such as comparing the graceful and expressive qualities of the Chinese folk song *Missing My Mother* with the straightforward and unrestrained nature of the French art song *Nell* in terms of tone and emotional expression. This enables learners to recognize that the uniqueness of bel canto styles is not an “absolute superiority” but an artistic choice within specific cultural contexts. This philosophy respects the cultural essence of bel canto styles while preventing learners from falling into the traps of “cultural inferiority” or “cultural exclusion,” encouraging them to embrace and interpret bel canto art with a rational attitude.

5.2. Expansion of teaching content

To address the knowledge gaps in cross-cultural learning, it is necessary to transcend the limitations of a “technically one-dimensional” teaching content and construct a three-dimensional knowledge system that interweaves “culture-technology-music,” achieving a systematic and multidimensional understanding of knowledge. In the cultural knowledge dimension, it is essential to supplement with a “Western Cultural Foundations Module” and a “Work Cultural Background Module.” The former covers a brief history of Western religions, the development of humanism, and the language and culture of the Latin language family, helping learners establish a macro-level cultural awareness. The latter, tailored to specific works, delves into their cultural symbols and emotional logic. For instance, when explaining “*Messiah*,” it is necessary to elucidate the connotations of religious symbols such as “redemption” and “faith,” as well as the emotional expression norms of Baroque religious music, enabling learners to understand the stylistic roots of the work’s “solemn and sacred” character^[10].

In the technical knowledge dimension, it is necessary to conduct “cross-cultural adaptability optimization” and design specialized content to address the weaknesses of non-Western native language learners. In terms of pronunciation training, a “Basic Course on Chinese and Foreign Pronunciation” should be added, focusing on comparing the vowel pronunciation differences between Chinese and languages such as Italian, German, French, Russian, and English. Specialized exercises like “vowel elongation drills” and “vowel continuity drills” should be designed to overcome pronunciation barriers. Regarding vocal techniques, the teaching approach should be adjusted according to the physiological and aesthetic characteristics of Eastern learners. For example, the concept of “mixed resonance” can be translated into step-by-step training involving “breath support-pharyngeal cavity opening-head cavity vibration,” and the Eastern concept of “sinking qi to the dantian” can be used to connect with the breath control techniques of bel canto, reducing the difficulty of comprehension^[11]. At the same time, technical training should be deeply integrated with cultural and musical content. For instance, when training in “the legato techniques in Puccini’s works,” it is essential to incorporate the cultural context of the Romantic period and elucidate the connection between Puccini’s technical approaches and the concept of “emotional liberation,” thereby infusing technical learning with cultural significance^[12]. In terms of musical knowledge, it is crucial to strengthen the interconnected teaching of “style analysis and musical expression,” covering the bel canto style characteristics of different periods in Western music history, the analysis of musical structures in works, and the corresponding relationship between “musical elements and emotional expression.” For example, when analyzing “The Girl with the Flaxen Hair” in *Manon Lescaut*, it is necessary to consider the structural characteristics of the rondo form and explain how musical repetition and variation serve the character’s “unrestrained and wild” personality expression.

Additionally, this should be linked to technical training, enabling learners to clearly understand the roles of coloratura techniques and tempo variations within the musical structure, thereby achieving a closed loop of “cultural understanding - musical analysis - technical application.”

5.3. Innovation in teaching methods

To break through the emotional and cognitive barriers in cross-cultural learning, it is necessary to innovate teaching methods, focusing on diverse interactions and situational experiences to enhance learners’ sense of participation and immersion, thereby deepening the transition from “cognition” to “experience”^[13]. In terms of diverse interactions, methods such as “cross-cultural comparative discussion” and “collaborative group exploration” can be adopted. The former involves designing discussion topics centered around the differences between Chinese and Western vocal music, guiding learners through teacher facilitation, learner contributions, and case comparisons to clarify the characteristics of bel canto styles through critical thinking. The latter divides learners into groups and assigns tasks such as “researching the cultural background of a work” and “style imitation and comparison,” fostering a deeper understanding of culture and style through collaboration. Situational experiential teaching is a key approach to breaking through cultural and psychological barriers. It can be achieved through methods such as “role simulation,” “scene restoration,” and “multimedia immersion.”

Role simulation requires learners to delve deeply into opera scripts, analyze the cultural backgrounds and personality traits of characters, and engage in integrated training in vocal, acting, and physical expression for role portrayal. For instance, when singing an excerpt from Gianni Schicchi, learners are encouraged to emulate Rinuccio’s “passionate and unrestrained” nature, breaking free from the constraints of emotional restraint through the coordination of body language and vocal intensity. Scene restoration involves creating simple stage settings and pairing them with costumes and props to recreate the cultural context of the work. For example, when performing excerpts from Puccini’s operas, a European classical setting can be arranged to allow learners to experience the “elegant and romantic” ambiance within the context. Multimedia immersion utilizes audio, video, VR, and other technologies to restore the creative background and performance settings of the works. For example, VR technology can transport learners “into” the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, allowing them to feel the atmosphere of an opera performance, or live performance videos of Western singers can be played to analyze the connections between their timbre, emotions, and cultural expression, enhancing intuitive experiences. Simultaneously, it is essential to establish a “process-oriented evaluation system” tailored to diverse teaching methods. The evaluation content covers cultural knowledge mastery, technical application, and stylistic expression, while the evaluation approach adopts a comprehensive model of “classroom performance + group achievements + singing demonstrations,” encouraging learners to explore styles through experience rather than merely pursuing technical precision. Through diverse interactions and situational experiences, learners can transition from “passive reception” to “active participation,” deepening their cross-cultural understanding through practice and achieving precise mastery of styles.

6. Conclusion

As an important treasure of Western culture, the art of bel canto singing is undergoing a profound transformation in its global dissemination and teaching, shifting from technical transplantation to cultural internalization. From a cross-cultural perspective, this paper reveals the deep-seated obstacles faced by non-Western learners at the levels of language, aesthetics, and cultural psychology by analyzing the core elements and cultural genes of bel canto styles. Ultimately, it constructs a teaching optimization system centered on the principle of “culture as the root and technique as the application.” The strategies proposed in this paper remain a theoretical framework, and their effectiveness in specific teaching practices requires further testing and refinement based on the characteristics of different regions and learners. Future research could focus on developing more practical cross-cultural vocal music teaching materials, designing a quantitative style evaluation system, and utilizing new technologies such as artificial intelligence to assist in cultural context simulation teaching.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Jiang Y, 2021, Exploration of Ethnic and Bel Canto Singing Styles: Taking Wu Bixia as an Example, thesis, Qingdao University.
- [2] Cao L, 2023, Exploration of Bel Canto Singing Style and Vocal Techniques. *Daguan*, 2023(6): 97–99.
- [3] Zhu Z, 2012, Performance of Bel Canto Singing in Xinjiang Ethnic Style Compositions: Taking Four Works as Examples, thesis, Xi'an Conservatory of Music.
- [4] Zheng B, 2014, Practical Application of Bel Canto Singing in Yunnan Yi Ethnic Style Compositions: Taking Songs “The Joy of the Torch Festival,” “The Night in the Mountain Village,” and “A Nest of Sparrows” as Examples, thesis, Yunnan Arts University.
- [5] Wu S, 2011, Discussion on National Characteristics in Bel Canto Style Singing: Taking My Experience in Singing “The Lament of the Yellow River” as an Example, thesis, Xiamen University.
- [6] Ma L, 2016, The Embodiment of “National Style” in Chinese Vocal Works in Bel Canto Singing. *Journal of Nanyang Normal University*, 15(7): 54–56.
- [7] Dong P, 2021, Analysis of Bel Canto Singing Style in Chinese Art Songs. *Journal of Pu'er University*, 37(3): 68–70.
- [8] Peng L, 2022, Research on the Integration of Bel Canto Singing Techniques and Styles with Chinese Indigenous Vocal Art in Vocal Music Teaching. *Home Drama*, 2022(17): 132–134.
- [9] Gao B, 2016, Analysis of Singing Methods and Styles in Bel Canto. *Northern Music*, 2016, 36(17): 69.
- [10] Ou L, 2011, A Brief Analysis of the Style of Singing Chinese Poetry Art Songs in Bel Canto. *Popular Literature and Art*, 2011(16): 3.
- [11] Pan J, 2023, A Comparison of the Traditional Chinese Vocal Style and Western Bel Canto Singing, thesis, University of Nevada.
- [12] Lani J, 2003, Bel Canto and the Art of Singing. *Opera Journal*, 36(3–4): 3–36.
- [13] Sperry E, Goetze M, 2014, Vocal Versatility in Bel Canto Style. *The Choral Journal*, 55(2): 61–65.

Publisher's note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.