



# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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**Nemo Veritatem Regit**

**Nobody Governs Truth**

## Philosophical Practice and the Human Voice

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### Abstract

In this paper I wish to explore how philosophical practice may be of relevance for vocal studies and the development of the voice. I also argue that philosophical reflections, dialogue and conceptualizations can be a source of inspiration and clarification in vocal interpretations and performances. Further an awareness of a person's voice and how it is being used may give valuable information about that person and as such can be useful in philosophical consultations. The underlying idea here is that there is an intimate connection between a person's identity and his or her voice. Therefore, I believe philosophical consultations can be used when developing and using the voice in general, and, in particular, when it comes to singing, which is the focus in this paper. My starting point is in the Italian *Bel Canto* singing style, both in its original version as well as in its more modern interpretations by Cornelius L. Reid and Susanna Eken. With its focus on flexibility and clarity of the voice, this is a style of singing which harmonizes well with an aesthetic reflected in philosophical practice—through clear and flexible thinking.

**Keywords:** *Vocal studies, aesthetics, identity, vocal interpretation and performance, Bel Canto singing, therapy, philosophical diagnosis.*

Dialogue and various forms of counselling and therapy are already established as part of vocal education and as preparation for performances. Therefore, in this paper I will not dive into the rich amount of literature in fields like music therapy and psychotherapy. Rather, I will address the question of whether or not philosophical consultations are suited, and perhaps in some respects particularly well suited, for dealing with issues concerning the human voice. As a singer, for many years I have trained and performed in accordance with the Italian *Bel Canto* tradition. I find that this style of singing shares many of the principles I associate with philosophical practice. During my training as a philosophical practitioner in Oslo I learned to facilitate philosophical reflections through conversation. These conversations are aimed at attaining freedom, clarity and flexibility of thought. Similarly, while training the *Bel Canto* technique, one aims ideally at singing with clarity and flexibility and having one's voice move with ease through the widest possible range. Inspired by these apparent similarities I will therefore take this vocal style as my starting point in my exploration of philosophical practice and the human voice.

In particular I will examine the work of the vocal pedagogue Susanna Eken who pays special attention to the intimate connection between the voice and a singer's emotions and personality.

### The Italian *Bel Canto* Ideal

The term *Bel Canto* means something close to “beautiful singing” and commonly refers to an Italian style of singing from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. But what exactly does beautiful singing mean? This style has been understood very differently over the years. It ranges from *Bel Canto* singing being dramatic and powerful as interpreted by singers like Maria Callas, to more modern interpretations of the style as indicating sweet and light-voiced singing. However, some common aesthetics ideals such as pure intonation, and a flexible and free voice appear to be noncontroversial characteristics. In contrast, in eastern music, ‘beauty’

has another aesthetic norm when it comes to aspects such as colour and timbre. The *Bel Canto* style is also often contrasted with the German, Wagner-inspired singing tradition, a tradition that focuses on communicating the text and training voluminous voices capable of projecting over large orchestras. In the *Bel Canto* tradition, an emphasis was placed on beauty and in expressing emotions. The *Da Capo* phenomenon was one such way that allowed singers to improvise, express feelings and show off their virtuosity. It was a very popular tradition, but a tradition more alien to followers of the intellectual German style who sometimes claim *Bel Canto* singing consists of form and no content. According to Cornelius L. Reid in the book *Bel Canto Principles and Practices*, the *Bel Canto* style emerged from the development of opera (1601) and from early sacred music. It can be traced all the way back to *Schola Cantorum*, and the old Roman vocal school established by Pope Sylvester (314-336 A.D.)(Reid, 1972).

In what is termed the “golden age of song,” in post-Renaissance Italy, a Florentine intellectual and musical movement known as the Camerata attracted personalities such as the composer Giulio Caccini (1570-1618). They discussed the role and meaning of music and, in the spirit of humanism, were particularly inspired by the ancient Greek theatre, discussing musical interpretations of the tragedies. In the book *Philosophy of Music*, Peter Kivy claims that the Camerata were inspired by Plato and Aristotle and their view that Greek music had an impact on the emotions of the listener. “What the Camerata developed, then, was essentially the representation, in music, of human conversation.” Caccini as part of this group developed a style of music in which he wished to express the meaning of the music as clearly as it would have been done solely through the text. He authored the book *Le Nuove Musiche* (1601-02) of songs and madrigals which introduced the new monadic form. Caccini also taught singing and in his book he included theory on vocal technique and on how to express emotions through solo singing.

Questions relating to whether or not, and in what way music has content, meaning and cognitive powers are widely discussed in philosophy of music. According to Kivy, in his book *Philosophy of Music*, Kant described music without words only as ‘the beautiful play of sensations’ and did not find that “the musical chain of aesthetic ideas succeeds in engaging the free play of the imagination and understanding.”(Kivy, 2002). According to this view, music gains content through text and not on its own and diverges as such from what can be taken to be Caccini’s view. So, what Caccini seems to have sought was a shift in the purpose of the music—for music to appeal to both the emotions and the mind. His new style, I guess by being simple, communicates the performers’ intentions and feelings more clearly than the more complex polyphonic music. In particular, one of his songs, “Amarilli, mia bella” is still very popular and may serve as an example. I find this song, due to both its simplicity and as well as its having parts well suited for vocal ornamentation and improvisation, a very good example of the early *Bel Canto* style. It also serves as an example of a piece of music where the text could be communicated in many different ways musically. I have myself performed this song on several occasions, and the flexibility of the song is something I really like. However, at the same time it is a challenge to sing it in an interesting way since the emotional depth has to come from the singer’s musical interpretation. In situations like this I believe I would have benefited from talking to someone, like a philosopher, to develop a richer and deeper understanding of the relevant concepts and emotions communicated through the text and music.

In the baroque period the most famous *Bel Canto* singers were *castrati*, well known for their advanced coloratura singing, timbre, great projection and vocal ranges spanning two or three octaves. This impressive technique was used to express richness and depth of emotion. However, I believe this level of sophistication also violated some of the core ideals of *Bel Canto*, namely, the idea of a free, unrestrained voice that is in accordance with the singer’s nature and that expresses his or her emotions and identity.

Today, only very few singers are close to approaching the level of ability set by the castrated singers of that time. One of these is the Italian *Bel Canto* singer Cecilia Bartoli who does so in her recording “Sacrificium,” where she sings the songs of the castrati. I find that castrati singing, due to the level of technical sophistication, creates tension between art and nature and between form and content, a tension or conflict perhaps contributing to the style losing its popularity when castrates were no longer socially accepted.

In more modern times, and in particular after the war, vocal teachers have taken up this old Italian tradition and developed the style to better suit the modern voice without the castrate’s physique, and have based it upon new knowledge concerning issues such as anatomy, physiology and acoustics. A pioneer in taking up the old *Bel Canto* tradition was the New York based vocal pedagogue Cornelius L. Reid (1911-2008) who wrote the trilogy on *Bel Canto* technique: *Bel Canto, Principles and Practices* (1950), *The Free Voice* (1965) and *Voice: Psyche and Soma* (1975). He created a school of singing based on functional vocal training which was founded upon the idea of sound ideally emerging from ‘natural functional activity.’ The voice is in a sense free, in that sound is not forced or produced, but rather spontaneous in its nature. It has natural ways to respond to its environment and to stimuli; therefore, vocal training involves presenting such stimuli. Commonly this kind of stimuli can take the form of vocal exercises known to produce a certain response. One example is stimuli that vary in pitch and intensity in order to make different muscles work differently so that there is a change from chest voice to head voice. The idea here is that when a singer is training his or her voice he or she is to produce tones not from concepts, ideas or preferences, but from stimuli as suggested or provided by the teacher. Being free in this sense means being free from concepts, and as such, perhaps in accordance with the Kantian attitude of disinterestedness. In general, functional voice training is based on the idea that every voice is unique, and, therefore, one needs to avoid imitation and presuppositions on how it should sound. I suggest that speaking to a philosophical practitioner could be another way to help a singer or speaker, through reflection, to become aware of aesthetic ideas or other mental restrictions limiting the freedom of the voice. Reid says that the technique is based upon developing the voice to the highest degree of flexibility and range. He describes the *Bel Canto* ideal as such:

When a tone is truly beautiful it signifies that the vocal mechanism is governed. *Bel Canto* singing is impossible without vocal freedom, and true vocal freedom finds its expression in vitally resonant tones covering a wide pitch range, in a complete control over extremes of dynamics, and in ease and flexibility of execution.(Reid, 1972)

Vocal freedom is in his opinion a feeling of freedom due to a lack of physical and muscular resistance. This feeling is intimately connected to physical sensations.

Another vocal pedagogue inspired by the *Bel Canto* technique, and who has a holistic approach involving both the psyche and the soma, is Susanna Eken. She not only focuses on the instrument, the voice, but she also takes the whole person into consideration. This, I suppose, is the reason why she emphasises the importance of dialogue in her vocal classes to a greater extent than other vocal teachers I am aware of. She is also interesting because she teaches a technique that is not only aimed at the professional singer, even though this is her main concern, but also one that is valid for all kinds of vocal usages, including the speaking voice. In her book *Den Menneskelige Stemme (The Human Voice)* she says that in order to judge a student’s vocal talent, a voice pedagogue needs an analytical method. This method is used to diagnose the student, and is based upon analysing both the voice and the rest of the singer’s body. This is done in order to find the healthiest and most economical way to develop a student’s potential. As part of this analysis, dialogue plays a vital role. Eken says that a vocal pedagogue must also focus on both

hearing and seeing the student. Visually, a student's facial expressions and body language contain valuable information concerning his or her physical and psychological state. While listening to both the speaking and singing voice she observes both the aesthetic and the functional aspects of the voice. For, as Eken says, the quality of the voice tells us something about the person's personality and emotions, for the voice is closely related to our emotional life. So, understanding a person's psychological state is important when helping a singer to develop his or her voice. The intimate connection between the physical and the psychological states is very important in vocal training. There is one such example to be found in the importance of breathing correctly. Breathing is affected greatly by stress, and coping with stress is vital for good singing. Another instance is when all kinds of bodily tensions related to the psyche impact the voice. Good usage of the voice requires the freedom of both physical and psychological energy. Working with these bodily issues in vocal training may therefore result in unexpected and strong emotional reactions that one must know how to deal with. Therefore, she argues, vocal pedagogic work and psychotherapy have a lot in common. However, personally my vocal teachers have never suggested that I go to conversational psychotherapy to deal with issues like breathe control and tension. Instead, my teachers have suggested that I try *Tai Chi* and the Alexander technique, which have been very helpful to me. However, so I believe, conversations could have been helpful, too, and here philosophical conversations could have served as an alternative to psychotherapy. Questions for philosophical counselling, which, I believe, would be relevant for a singer both in a training situation and when performing are questions concerning identity, values and choices. This is because, as Eken says, developing the voice coincides with a wider personal development and is also due to what she refers to as the importance of the mental state in general. This, I believe, supports my view that philosophical counselling could possibly be a valuable approach for vocal training.

### **Philosophical Practice and Vocal Training**

Philosophical practice is concerned with existential questions related to freedom, anxiety and meaning. I find that these questions are of importance when developing and using the voice. When reading Eken it seems that she argues in favour of a way of teaching inspired by existentialism. She refers to Kierkegaard's famous quote about helping. His concept is to see a student where he is and start from there. Her approach is a pupil-oriented strategy, which is based upon observing the pupil's level of singing, his nature and potential. She says that the teaching strategy should vary depending on the type of pupil. This is in contrast to traditional voice training where the teacher's role takes on a more authoritative character and the training is less person-oriented and more general in its nature. It also fits in well with the idea that every voice is unique. So, in this respect, Eken's teaching philosophy correlates well with some basic principles in philosophical practice as I was taught during my education in Oslo, which include respecting the guest's autonomy, meeting the guest with an open mind and asking open-ended questions. In her book she claims that she uses a lot of time to speak to, look at and listen to her students in order to get to know both their physical and psychological state. However, to her the aim of dialogue is primarily not to get the student to reflect. Instead, dialogue aims at understanding where the student is physically and technically, and then to give help from that starting point. In a way, she works indirectly on affecting the psyche through working on the physical aspects. Dialogue plays a vital role for her in what she calls a diagnosis of the student. Perhaps diagnosis in this sense is a task for a philosophical practitioner, too? What could philosophical diagnosis possibly mean? Originally, the word meant something like obtaining knowledge about something, but more commonly it has been understood as attaining knowledge in order to fix something. In general, I suppose philosophical diagnosis could refer to understanding or conceptualising a person's worldview, self-perception or ideology, as well as understanding the causes of these. With regard to music and singing a broader understanding such as this could take aesthetic values, emotional issues and mental patterns or ways of

thinking that restrict a singer's vocal abilities into consideration. It could also relate to not using diagnosis as a means to fix a problem or illness, but rather as a means to attain wisdom to enable the human voice to be heard and understood. For Eken, there is a very intimate relationship between voice and identity. She concludes her book by setting the ultimate goal for classical singing tuition and training to be a voice capable of "reproducing and interpreting our western cultural heritage of texts and music, as if it was nature, as if it was a spontaneous and direct expression of a state or emotion." (Eken p. 110, my translation.) So, vocal training in this respect may be viewed as culture naturalized—cultural identity transformed to personal identity. This is in accordance with other well known music pedagogies, like the Suzuki method, which aims at internalizing musicality and style.

So, according to my reading of Eken, dialogue to her is primarily a tool for diagnosis in the sense of getting knowledge in order to fix a problem, rather than aiming at stimulating the pupil's own reflections. It often takes the form of an interview, where the questions asked appear to aim at judging a student's potential and challenges in an already existing aesthetic and musical landscape. This is where I believe a philosophical practitioner could contribute because he or she could ask more open-ended questions aiming at opening up a landscape rather than narrowing it down.

To better understand in what way philosophical counselling could be integrated into a vocal pedagogy like Eken's, I would like to explore what she characterises as one of the most important questions she asks her students: Why do you want to sing? The reason she does this is that she believes that she is more able to help someone after she finds out why he or she wants to sing. Based upon her experience as a vocal teacher Eken has found that, roughly speaking, there are three different answers to this question, due to there being three types of singers. I will look at her descriptions of these types to see if, each in their different ways, they could benefit from philosophical counselling. Another approach for a philosopher could be to ask the same question as Eken, but without the concepts of types guiding the dialogue. In this way a philosophical practitioner could open up a different landscape than what Eken would by her method. In the book *Filosofi for livet (Philosophy for Life, my translation)* Helge Svare and Henning Herrestad cite Anders Lindseth when he says that the philosopher's task is to create a room or space where the conversation takes place. Ideally, the philosopher is to listen with an open mind and with an interest in letting the guest's voice be heard. It is the guest's story and life which is at stake. In relation to this I believe that the philosopher's task could be to facilitate the conversation and to ensure that the ethical, rational and aesthetic qualities of that space support the authenticity of the conversation. This I imagine to be an authentic and dynamic space that also enables the unknown to unfold. In this respect I consider a philosophical conversation a creative and artistic process. But, how can this idea be connected up with Eken's ideas of types? I will now try to explore this question.

The first type's strength, due to his or her personality, is in a strong belief in him or herself. For this type, singing publicly is the same as occupying space; it is in a way an aggressive act where others are sometimes pushed to the side. This also implies that a singer will be vulnerable due to exposing his or her emotions and expressing themselves. Therefore, good self-esteem is a strength that allows a singer to cope with receiving feedback from others, feedback which may involve critiques. These kinds of singers express themselves naturally and with ease. Conversely, they sometimes may be boring to listen to in some people's opinion due to lacking the excitement of a more nervous singer. I think that when working with singers who could improve the way in which they express themselves, a philosopher could inspire the singer to explore emotions and concepts related to the material he or she is singing and in turn stimulate the singer's creativity and expand his or her ideas as to how to interpret a song. Last year I presented a paper at a conference held by the International Grieg Society in Copenhagen. My paper, entitled *Solveig's Song in Light of*

*Søren Kierkegaard*, aimed at showing how philosophical reflection and conceptualisation can be valuable for a singer in offering different interpretations of a song. This is done not only in a conceptual or intellectual way, but also by inspiring the singer emotionally. More precisely, I discussed whether Solveig is in despair or not in the Kirkegaardian sense. Whether Solveig is in despair or not, I argued, implies different vocal interpretations of the song. However, what I did not discuss in the paper was if philosophical counselling could be one way of achieving a reflective state of mind that opens one up towards different vocal interpretations of a song. This, of course, I do believe. And, I suppose that this kind of dialogue and use of philosophy as a source of inspiration could be particularly successful and useful for singers with self-esteem and technical skills, but who are sometimes in need of inspiration and improved emotional and conceptual content for their performance. Philosophical perspectivism could hence be a tool for expanding the set of adequate interpretations of a song, allowing for a wider set of interpretations to be considered as authentic than what is common in classical singing, where authenticity doesn't necessarily have to do with the singer's identity but most often refers to singing something in accordance with the historically correct style or in accordance with the composer's intention. I wish to support a wider and more dynamic view in regards to authenticity.

Another way to make a singer perceive him or herself as well as the music in a new way can be through conversations which challenge and provoke. Last year I was a guest at a session with Oscar Brenifier, who is a philosophical practitioner that I find does exactly this. Hypothetically, someone using his style could possibly get the singer out of his or her comfort zone, challenge the singer's empirical ego, and perhaps make them sing in new ways. Or as Brenifier's style is explained by Morten Fastvold:

The typical question of the Oslo school counselors, "Can you tell me more about this?," is an absolute no-no in Oscar's way of counseling. According to Oscar, you should instead lead the subject up to the realm of the transcendental self, namely the realm of reason, which is interpersonal, and thus without a subject.

Unlike the realm of the empirical self, where the subject is very much at home, and can hide in well-established trenches, familiar to herself but strange ground to the counselor, the realm of the transcendental self is unfamiliar to the subject, and awfully transparent. When you are up there, in the realm of pure conceptual thinking, you are not allowed to hide behind your words, but are instead confronted with these very words. Here—just like Socrates—the philosophical counselor should feel at home, and exercise his craft.(Fastvold, 2006)

So, a consultation of this style is not necessarily pleasant but could, perhaps due to this, offer new perspectives.

The next type of singer, according to Eken, sings to free themselves from their personalities. They are often nervous and have a need to be heard and to express feelings otherwise suppressed. This is singing as therapy. It is in this group that Eken believes most singers can be found, and they are the sensitive, artistic types. Characteristically, there is a struggle between their personalities and the singing. Often this struggle makes them fail to achieve full vocal freedom due to tensions in the body. Eken also warns that working on these tensions may break down the students' defence system and could result in anxiety. Anxiety is something one regularly needs to deal with as a voice pedagogue, and this is related both to training and performance situations. What I find to be an interesting question concerns the role a philosophical counselor might have in such cases: Could philosophical reflection help the singer to deal with anxiety? I believe in many cases the answer to this question is yes. One reason is due to philosophical counselling being well

suited for talking about identity related issues. Furthermore, the wisdom concerning the topics of anxiety and freedom from existentialistic literature has a lot to offer.

According to Eken, the third type of singer also has anxiety as their challenge. But it is different from the previous type due to emerging from answering the question “Why do you want to sing?” differently. This type would typically answer this question referring to the need to satisfy other people’s expectations. They seek success in order to feel valued. Often these singers have tension in their bodies, perhaps due to being afraid of not being good enough. I suppose these kinds of singers often have performance anxiety. This is a kind of anxiety for which I believe philosophical counselling could be helpful. Asking questions concerning issues like identity, priorities, choices and values in order to make the singer reflect and become more aware of his or her own reactions and the background for them, might help the singer to deal with his or her anxiety in a better way. But again, this may violate the idea of philosophical practice, at least as taught in Oslo, as primarily dealing with open ended questions aiming at reflection and wisdom and not in curing anything. So, is solving a problem or having a therapeutic effect something which is supposed to happen by accident or luck according to this view?

I believe the arguments I have offered so far to some extent answer my initial question of whether or not philosophical counselling is well suited for dealing with issues concerning the human voice. However, I suppose one could provide similar arguments supporting psychotherapy as being well suited, too. So, is philosophical counselling in some respect better suited than other forms of conversational based therapies when dealing with questions concerning the human voice?

As difficult as it is to determine what the *Bel Canto* ideal might be, I have found it difficult to answer my question of whether or not “philosophical counselling is particularly well suited for dealing with issues concerning the human voice.” The reason why this is so hard to do I believe is because it requires an answer to the question “what is the essence of philosophical practice, what distinguishes it from other fields?”. Ran Lahav brings this question up in the article “Philosophical Practice: Have we gone far enough?”. I believe this is a very interesting question because of the question what is the unique contribution of philosophical counselling compared to other disciplines? Ran Lahav chooses to reflect over in what way philosophical practice could and should diverge from academic or traditional philosophy. To him, philosophical practice not only aims at theoretical knowledge of the world; it also aims at gaining wisdom due to personal transformation. “I must philosophise as a whole person, as an engaged individual.” (Lahav, 2008) I believe this approach to philosophical counselling would fit in very well with Eken’s way of teaching, which involves the whole person, including one’s eyes, ears, knowledge and emotions. So, following these ideas philosophical counselling could very well include work on the voice, work that appreciates the intimate connection between voice and identity. According to Eken’s method I understand dialogue as being primarily aimed at diagnosing a student and the cure comes about by working on the physique. So, as a supplement, I believe that philosophical counselling could work the other way around. Inspired by the *Bel Canto* ideal of the free and flexible voice, I suggest that philosophical practice used for vocal training could be employed in this spirit. Philosophical counselling, which may bring a person to a state of mind positively affecting that person’s physique, could help him or her to sing or speak more freely and with ease. Perhaps this is a way of working in which philosophical practice is ahead of other methods—a way of being a philosophical practitioner more in accordance with principles of art than in accordance with therapeutic practices and where the philosopher’s task could be to facilitate a conversation in an authentic space, unfolding the aesthetic aspects of thinking?



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# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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### Aims and Scope

*Philosophical Practice* is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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