

From Ritmico Journal No 88 March 2011

IRMT Conference 2011, Dunedin – *Southern Gold*

## **Bel Canto on the Piano**

Professor Michael Endres

Reviewed by Dianne James



**Michael Endres**

**From Bach's Inventions to the Romantic piano repertoire, the idea of 'singing' on the piano has been of greatest importance to many composers. During the Golden Age of piano playing this was the predominant aesthetic practice. This lecture highlighted some of the aspects of bel canto style and its implications for pianists.**

Michael Endres's lecture was a fascinating introduction to the pianism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which in style had much in common with the Bel Canto school of singing that flourished in the mid-late 19th century.

Although it's impossible to define the term 'bel canto' exactly, its characteristics when applied to singing and the voice include the following: very precise intonation, minimal vibrato, beauty of sound, and immaculate technique. All of these were clearly evident in the first of Endres' carefully selected examples, a 1917 recording of Amelita Galli-Curci (1882-1963) singing Rossini's aria 'Una voce poco fa', a clear illustration of the particular qualities of this style.



**Amelita Galli-Curci ca 1919**  
*Wikipedia Commons*

Before outlining how the bel canto tradition manifested itself in piano-playing, Endres reminded us that J.S. Bach, Mozart, Schubert, and Schumann each had a great interest in the human voice with a significant percentage of each composer's oeuvre devoted to opera, sacred vocal music or Lieder. Moreover, Bach's preface to his volume of Two- and Three-part Inventions suggests that achieving "a cantabile style in playing" was potentially the most important thing that students would learn from playing these pieces.

Endres discussed the three disadvantages of the piano that good pianists must overcome: it is by design a percussion instrument since its sound results from hammers striking strings; its sound is ready-made, i.e. all the notes are laid out before the musician, and unlike string players or singers, wide, leaping intervals require no extra effort; and thirdly, the length of sound produced by each key on the piano gradually decreases – as a result of the ever-shortening string length the higher one ascends into the treble.

Moriz Rosenthal (1862-1946) lived when the singers of the bel canto tradition were flourishing, and Endres views him as "a perfect example of a pianist who overcame all these deficiencies". Endres supported this contention with a 1928 recording of Rosenthal playing Chopin's Nocturne Op.27/2, a type of pianism he described as "truly singing on the piano".

Ignaz Friedmann was also mentioned in this connection. These recordings derive from a period often referred to nowadays as 'The

Golden Age of Piano Playing', and together they show clearly how performance styles have changed, and not necessarily for the better.

The issue of the length of sound is one that Endres feels strongly about, and he believes that one of the main issues that students must understand and appreciate is how to connect notes of a melody on the piano without creating a series of accents. He singled out the opening of Schubert's Sonata in A, D.664 *Allegro moderato*, for our consideration.

Another pertinent example is Schumann's famous 'Träumerei' where the wide-ranging intervals must be smoothly connected and integrated within the overall arch of the melody.

Not surprisingly, Endres advocates that pianists work regularly with singers to be reminded how one must sustain and connect melodic intervals of all sizes.

Endres then addressed the issue of how composers indicated their intentions for melodic shaping in their music. Two examples by Schubert, from the Sonata in D, D.850, showed he used a bewildering variety of accent and articulation markings to suggest which notes might be highlighted. To interpret these literally will not work; they suggest rather that particular notes or chords must be emphasised either agogically or through subtle dynamic changes.

During the remainder of his very stimulating address, Endres compared and contrasted older and more recent recordings to illustrate the vast differences in performing styles.

First up were two versions of Bach's Prelude in C sharp major from Book 1 of The Well-Tempered Clavier – Wilhelm Kempff (1928) and Friedrich Gulda (1972). As Endres explained, Gulda takes the work at 'face-value' playing in a very matter-of-fact way whereas Kempff responds to harmonic events, shaping the music beautifully around such moments.

The next clutch of examples challenged the oft-expressed opinion that today's young pianists are better than ever. Indeed, Endres believes that the great players of the past are superior to nearly all of those active today. To illustrate this point we listened to three different performances of Chopin's Étude Op.10, No.2 – the first by Maurizio Pollini, which current music critics often select as the

benchmark recording for most subsequent performances; the second, a 1928 recording played by Wilhelm Backhaus; and the third a 1932 recording by Ignaz Friedmann.

Both Backhaus' and Friedmann's tempi were noticeably faster than Pollini's, and Pollini's version seemed rather straight and staid when compared alongside the earlier two, both of whom impressed with the ease the much faster tempo was executed and maintained.

Endres sees Pollini's more clinical approach to performance and interpretation as part of the German aesthetic movement, 'Neue Sachlichkeit' – a new rationality – which developed in the 1960s as a reaction against a style of pianism which was viewed as too romantic. But this new rationality has meant that the cantabile content of, for example, Chopin's Études, is gradually being lost.

Endres developed his thesis with some discussion of the tempi chosen by previous generations versus younger generations of pianists. He believes it's a myth that today's pianists play faster than earlier ones; in fact he maintains that the opposite is true, and his point was supported by a brief comparison of composers' metronome markings with the actual speeds many contemporary pianists select. Chopin's Étude Op. 10, No.3, for example, is usually played at a very steady, measured sort of a speed, but the MM marking is actually 108, which suggests that Chopin (who generally marked his scores with great precision) perceived the work at a much faster, more flowing tempo.

Endres demonstrated his perception of how such an interpretation might work, and while it was certainly different to what we usually hear, the way the overall cantabile sweep of Chopin's gorgeous opening melody was sustained in the one phrase, rather than broken up into several sub-phrases, was entirely convincing. Schumann's 'Träumerei' from the Op.15 Kinderszenen provided further evidence of how a seemingly impossible MM marking (in this case crotchets = 100) actually facilitates the line and overall shape of the phrase. The opening theme is one phrase, not two, or three, and this extended melodic line is as impossible to hold together as one in the slow tempo that is traditionally chosen for this piece. Like the Chopin example, the melodic line is based on singing, and Endres demonstrated the way he tries to realise Schumann's suggested speed marking by

allowing the tempo to fluctuate quite considerably from one bar to the next.

As before, the interpretation he offered us deviated significantly from the traditional view of the piece, and helped reinforce his belief that slow speeds do not necessarily result in more expressive performances. As Endres said, phrasing must be the prime concern, and choice of tempo can have a huge bearing on how the music breathes.

To conclude his address, Endres shared with us a series of recordings, which together encapsulated the various features of bel canto style on the piano. The first of these was a 1908 recording of Josef Hofmann playing Liszt's 'Tarantella' (Venezia e Napoli). Endres described Hofmann as a "super-virtuoso", and many critics consider him to be perhaps the greatest pianist ever. Hofmann's effortless technique was immediately apparent, and although this particular recording was re-mastered from a wax cylinder, the unforced and beautiful tone for which Hofmann was renowned is clearly apparent. Friedmann's effortless performance of the Mendelssohn Étude Op.104/1 created what Endres termed "an illusion of easiness", while Shura Cherkassky's performance of Godowsky's transcription of Saint-Saëns' The Swan created the 'illusion' of a perfect sound with the line of the melody perfectly integrated despite the numerous textural layers.

Bel canto style used to be a huge component of piano playing, which is not surprising given the close relationship between the core piano literature and the human voice. To ignore this vital aspect – and Endres implied that many contemporary pianists are guilty of this – goes against the grain of music.

Endres's address was a timely reminder of two of the most important aspects of pianism: beauty of sound, and the projection of long cantabile lines. It also provided us with a sense of just how much we can all learn from the great pianists of the past.

***Dianne James is an IRMTNZ Council member and an Auckland Branch Committee member. She has an interest in 18th-century music, especially Haydn, and has presented seminars on teaching Haydn to both Auckland and Wellington Branches. She contributes regularly to Radio New Zealand's 'Pressing On' and 'Composer of the Week'.***