

# Teatro Nuovo: A promising new home for Bel Canto in America



When it was announced that Will Crutchfield was launching Teatro Nuovo as a place for all things Bel Canto in the US, people who were familiar with his work at Caramoor were delighted. Some who have not been to Caramoor are familiar with his work in, among other places, the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, as well as his many contributions as a music critic for the *New York Times*.

We were delighted that Maestro Crutchfield agreed to take the time to answer a few questions.

Pictured below is Crutchfield seated between Philip Gossett and Andrew Porter. For more about Teatro Nuovo please be sure to visit the website: [teatronuovo.org](http://teatronuovo.org).



Q. You speak of how old recordings help throw light on singing in the past. Does the type of vocal writing give useful insight into what singers were able to do? Is there a difference between say the vocal writing of Haydn, for example, and Rossini that lets us know about how voices developed?

WC: Yes – in every way but the sound itself, which is sometimes the most important thing. Vocal writing tells us about what singers were able to do in basically three ways: the pitch-range covered, the differences (if any) in the way different portions of the range were treated, and the figures and phrases the voice could be called upon to execute.

One thing to remember, though. Arias were usually written with a particular singer in mind, and then adjusted – within the prevailing musical language, but often with quite radical changes of range and figuration – if another singer took them over. So really when we study vocal writing we are studying what one singer could do. If we know enough different pieces, we can build a picture of what characteristics were more common and what more rare. So to take your example of Haydn and Rossini – we can look at their music and see that tenors using the highest head-register notes had become more prominent. They existed before – Haydn wrote a diary entry comparing two tenors going far beyond high C, and observing how one handled the head-chest transition well and the other badly – but he didn't compose a lot for tenors comfortable in that zone, whereas Rossini did.

And then if we study enough adapted pieces, we can build a sense of how much each singer's characteristics mattered. One thing I'd say we do too much nowadays is try to stretch individual voices to encompass notes that might be achievable, but might not have the most beautiful sound. Or to sustain a tessitura that might become manageable with enough effort, but only at the cost of sounding like hard work. It's clear that in Rossini's time – and before, and for a long while after – they cared more about a note being *good* than about it being high or low. Rewriting was constant. Transposition was constant. I think we are still too reluctant to use those tools. It takes some study to use them well, but all the info we need is available.

Here's another Rossini example, if you have room for it. Thanks to the critical edition, we have the adjustments Rossini made to his own music for the first Arsace in *Semiramide*. Now, Arsace is a low part and almost 100% of current singers add high notes to it – because they've mastered those high notes for use elsewhere, and maybe developed their voices with more strength towards the top and less in the middle. Nothing wrong with that if it sounds good. But what did Rossini do? All the way through, he made the part lower. He obviously felt his singer sounded better, or performed with greater comfort, in the area of Eb, E, F at the top of the staff than in the area F#, G, G#, and so that's how he retouched it. There's something to learn from that.

Q. You make an enthusiastic argument about the “collective decision” that this tradition is valuable. What can be done to guide the public to a true appreciation of the tradition?

WC: The broad tradition I think we've made a “collective decision” about is Italian opera itself. We've decided by falling in love with it, buying tickets, studying, donating to opera companies, writing and reading books about it, etc. etc. There are enough people doing those things every day to put it beyond debate that this stuff has societal

worth and should be fostered. But then when you get to particulars of “style and technique,” you can have plenty of arguments among people who are already united in loving opera, but disagree about what serves it best. And that’s not unhealthy.

Q. One argument one often hears from young singers is that it is not worth it to pursue bel canto (particularly Rossini) because the chances for getting work are so limited. This seems to be even more acute in the US than in Europe. Teatro Nuovo is certainly giving opportunities; how do we make more?

WC: Let me divide this into two questions – first, US vs. Europe – we all have to recognize that opera is more at home in Europe than in the Americas. Yes, many of us here have European ancestors – but they are the people who moved away from their roots. When we are drawn to opera, we’re being drawn to something that is not exactly ours culturally – and as the opportunity spreads, Asian nations are being drawn to it too, even though they have very few European-descended citizens. That’s because it has universal appeal. But we can’t get upset if it has still more appeal in the part of the world where it grew. Tastes and repertory in the US are always going to be a little more limited than those in Europe. It’s not a disaster. It’s just something you work to improve over time. And it is improving. Last season, Donizetti was the second-most-performed composer in the Met season – ahead of Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner. If somebody had offered odds on that twenty years ago they would have been 99 to 1 and a Donizetti optimist could have made a fortune. Serious bel canto operas are popping up at Glimmerglass, Santa Fe, Chicago, Houston – and not just the top five or six titles. Again, unthinkable a generation ago. So there’s every reason to keep this ball rolling.

But second – bel canto vs. opera in general – here there is a lot of misunderstanding. There is no reason for a singer expert in bel canto to find fewer chances of getting work, because bel canto – properly understood – improves the quality of singing in every kind of opera, Wagner and Janacek included. If singers find that working on Rossini makes their Puccini sound less good, then something is wrong with the way they’re understanding bel canto. Rossini needs all the good qualities Puccini needs, plus runs and trills. And we’d get better Puccini too, if our Puccini singers had better control of attack and dynamics, which Rossini just might help them get.

Q. You are responsible for the critical edition of *Aureliano in Palmyra* which had some lovely performances at the Rossini Opera Festival. It must have been quite a challenge fitting the puzzle pieces together to produce this score! How, then, do you make your peace with “deconstructing” *Tancredi* into what you are calling *Tancredi rifatto*?? It is wonderful to get the chance to hear the alternate arias, but what are the arguments for mounting a performance of the opera with them rather than presenting a concert of just the alternate arias?

WC: Those alternate arias were written to be heard as part of an opera, as part of the through-line of a character’s life. Presenting them in concert can be fun too, but it is much more “deconstructive” than presenting them in context. Here’s a detail that we’re leaving out of the general publicity, because it gets too complicated, but for a Rossinian audience it will be interesting: Almost nobody has heard the original *Tancredi* – maybe nobody, I’m not completely sure – because almost all performances already use the later alternate aria for *Tancredi* in Act Two. The one we know, “Perché turbar la calma” with the cabaletta “Non sa comprendere,” is from the Ferrara

revisions. The original score has a completely different scene, an aria with horn obbligato, and it's great too, but almost completely unknown. So we are going to do the complete original *Tancredias* premiered in Venice, with the un-familiar Gran Scena, and then in *Tancredi rifatto* we will do the Ferrara aria (and the death scene that follows it) – along with all the other alternative pieces written for various occasions.

Q. Finally, a question about style. There is a tradition in classical ballet going back to the Danish choreographer, August Bournonville ( who was actually invited by Rossini to become a singer when they were in Paris!) The tradition has endured to this day although dancers' bodies have changed and the original ballets were not danced "on point." Given that singers are trained and expected to sing differently than they did in the past, is part of the challenge of preserving/respecting tradition taking this into account?

WC: This is a complicated question and a rich field. What is "tradition" anyway? It's not a way of keeping things unchanged – it's a way of keeping them connected while they change. You master what your teachers' generation was doing, then you add your own innovations, then you teach your own pupils both what you've preserved and what you've added, then they in turn make their innovations, and so on.

But in all the arts, the forward move sometimes involves going back over history and seeing whether you find something that fell by the wayside – something that seems useful for revival and re-integration. The particular parts of the tradition I'm interested in reviving are basically three. One is the musical creativity of the soloist as a kind of co-composer of the solo line. That's the whole tradition of ornamentation, but it went a good deal farther than what we call ornamentation. I think we need that because later traditions have subordinated the singer too much to the other elements of opera, and singers' artistic personalities don't get the fullest range of development I think they might. The second is that we need to pause in the midst of our amplified, miked age and look again at what it was like for singers who had never heard amplification and couldn't imagine any such thing. The easiest example to explain: nowadays we have a tendency to sing as though we have a mike when we want to sing softly, and then wherever that doesn't work, we just go ahead and sing loud. An acoustically viable soft note is something very different, and we'd gain a lot by getting it back. And that's just one item in a long list.

The third is where Teatro Nuovo is going to get quite radical. Over time, music developed fantastic complexity of orchestration, and fantastic techniques of modern conducting to coordinate it. This can lead to some astonishing music-making – but it can also be abused. One abuse in opera is this: bring in the orchestra for a few rushed rehearsals, and count on the skill of the conductor to put it together whether or not the players really know what is going on. It's not satisfying for the orchestra, and it puts a lid on the expressive potential of the individual players. In Rossini's and Mayr's time, Italian theaters didn't have stand-up conductors. They did have leaders, sure – a concertmaster and a keyboard player – but leading and controlling are two different things. Under the older system, both singers and players had to listen to each other and grasp each other's parts. I'm convinced there's a level of orchestral energy and expression to be unleashed here in the operas written for that system. And I think it's good for the singers too – they will have to step up and lead their arias. There is no more reason "Di tanti palpiti" should be conducted than a string quartet or "Die Forelle" should be conducted.