

## LAURE CINTI-DAMOREAU'S *MÉTHODE DE CHANT* - EXPLORING A HISTORIC VOICE TREATISE

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**SUMMARY.** The aim of the article is to establish potential uses for historical voice treatises, which are currently overlooked. The analysis of Laure Cinti-Damoreau's voice method (1853) reveals a complex system of voice exercises, which aims to train every aspect of operatic singing: from developing breath management, to mastering seamless legato as well as complex coloratura phrases. The exercises are accompanied by simple chord progressions – which singers were often presumed to be able to play themselves. While this treatise does not contain any written explanations its value lies in the intricacy of the exercises themselves. The conclusion proposes that the exploration of such exercises in the modern voice studio would complement the technical work of voice teachers.

**Keywords:** opera, voice teacher, voice-treatise, vocal technique

### Introduction: voice science versus voice treatises

We will note that this method is entirely practical, leaving to theory only the proportions of a simple introduction. It is because, when it comes to singing, it is good exercises, well composed vocalizes, and finally good music, that produce good singers. All the possible theories on the larynx, the bronchi, the glottis and epiglottis, will never be worth as much as a cavatina by Rossini.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Heugel quoted in Laure Cinti Damoreau – *Nouvelle Méthode de Chant à l'usage des jeunes personnes*. Paris: Heugel&Ce, éditeurs-libraires pour la France et l'étranger, 1853. p. 6. Translation from French AF.



Jacques-Leopold Heugel's assertion in the introduction of coloratura soprano Laure Cinti Damoreau's method of singing will read as outdated to the 21<sup>st</sup> century singer or voice pedagogue. It was at around this time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a centuries-long debate started on the relationship between voice-science and voice-pedagogy. Indeed, Heugel's statement constitutes an antithesis of his contemporary, Manuel Garcia fils' views, whose treatise on the art of singing published just a few years earlier, included detailed discussions on the physiology of phonation in relation to his recommended set of voice exercises. Garcia's method remains one of the most discussed singing treaties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the argument usually focusing on the literary text, rather than the musical text.

Fast forward to December 2021, as part of the National Association of Singing Teachers chat series on YouTube, renowned voice teachers John Nix and Kari Ragan discuss the contentious issue of registration and mixed voice with leading voice scientists Christian Herbst and Jan Svec.<sup>3</sup> The conversation unfolds in voice science jargon, debating the proportion of involvement of the TA (thyroarytenoid) in the production of M1 (also known as chest voice). Christian Herbst declares he doesn't believe that a listener, when experiencing the production mechanism of mixed voice, can differentiate between the production mechanism of mixed voice as 'a TA dominant mix' versus a 'CT dominant mix'. However, both him and Jan Svec admit the limitations of voice science in understanding this complex vocal mechanism. John Nix points out that the practical solution to this issue in the voice studio lies in the exercises "that have been used for centuries", such as *mesa di voce* and gliding on one vowel. He also adds that the newer approach of using semi-occluded vocal tract exercises can also be helpful, thus linking tradition with contemporary practical solutions.<sup>4</sup>

These two debates, separated by almost two centuries, illustrate the different approaches to the issue of voice training. A brief review of the history of voice pedagogy reveals a well-defined trajectory of this type of discussion: in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the voice treatises of Pierfrancesco Tosi and Gianbattista Mancini consisted of detailed writings on intonation, descriptions of vocal ornaments and advice on the importance of healthy voice production.<sup>5</sup> By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, vocal treatises contained complex voice exercises used in

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<sup>3</sup> Ragan, Kari; Nix, John Herbst, Christian; Svec, Jan *Registration: The Snake Pit of Voice Pedagogy* - NATS Chat December 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcFi6QvEduA> 1h 13'21"; accessed 05/02/2024

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Tosi, Francesco Pier *Observations on Florid Song, or Sentiments of the Ancient and Modern singer*, (Bologna; rev. London: ed. Michael Pilkington, trans. Johann E. Galliard, 1743).  
Mancini, Giambattista *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sul canto figurato* (Vienna: Ghelen, 1774).

Conservatoires, such as Rossini's *Gorgheggi e Solfeggi* (1827), Luigi Lablache's *A Complete Method of Singing* (1840), Gilbert Duprez' *L'art du chant* (1845), Pauline Viardot Garcia's *One Hour of Study* (1880), and many more. Famously, the Paris Conservatoire had its own treatise, called *La Méthode de Chant du Conservatoire de Musique à Paris*, first published in 1804. The written explanations of the function of these exercises and methods of vocal production vary in their length and detail. The middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century represents an important turning point, as Manuel Garcia fils' preoccupation with the physiology of phonation led to the emergence of voice science in assisting vocal training. From here onwards a schism can be observed, between the 'historical school', which continued publishing treatises focused on music, vocalizes and exercises and a 'science-based school', which went into detailed explanations of the mechanism of voice production, as it was understood at the time. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century the latter type of writing became the norm, with the proportion of written text far outweighing the musical one. This created a valuable legacy which allowed vocal technique to develop into what it is today. The written records on vocal technique enabled the dissemination of the historical advice offered, with the result that a significant amount of the information that was considered scientifically sound a century ago, has been discarded as 'pseudoscientific' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – as the studies on the source-filter model and vocal acoustics developed by leading voice scientists such as Ingo Titze, Johann Sundberg, and Kenneth Bozeman progressed. However, while the development of voice science is undoubtedly valuable to singers' training, it is important to acknowledge that the vocalizes presented in historic voice treatises has enabled singers to perform the repertoire that has come to form the operatic canon. The NATS chat discussion above, where voice science and voice pedagogy co-exist constitutes, it seems to me, an example of good practice. The most relevant moment for the purpose of this research is Nix' contribution, as he found that the best way to tackle a complex technical issue which science is still debating, is to return to the exercises used in the past, in the treatises that I am currently exploring. The current article constitutes a contribution to the field of practical voice pedagogy, by engaging with a neglected, *musical* aspect of its history.

**Laure Cinti-Damoreau – Développement progressif de la voix –  
Nouvelle méthode de chant a l'usage des jeunes personnes  
1853**

Laure Cinti-Damoreau is mainly remembered as an outstanding coloratura soprano who performed the leading roles in Rossini's French opera adaptations. She debuted in 1816 at the Theatre-Italien, when she

performed Vincente Martin y Soler's *Una cosa rara*. She then moved to London and performed at the King's Theatre during the closure of the Theatre-Italien in Paris. Soon after her return to Paris she was hired at the Paris Opéra in 1826, where she performed Pamira in *Le siège de Corinthe* (1826), Anai in *Mosé et Pharaon* (1827), and Comtesse Adele in *Le Comte Ory* (1828). She also premiered the role of the Contessa di Folleville in Rossini's *Il Viaggio a Reims* – commissioned to celebrate the coronation of King Charles X in Reims. She was also the original performer of the role of Isabelle in Auber's Grand Opera *Robert le Diable* (1830).

In 1833 Laure Cinti-Damoreau became the first female voice teacher at the Paris Conservatoire and remained in this role until 1856. Even though the Conservatoire had its own *Méthode de Chant*, the soprano published her own method in 1849. She continued performing in concerts in St Petersburg, the United States, and Paris – her farewell concert took place in 1848. Her teaching career continued until 1856 during which time she published a second, *Nouvelle méthode de chant* (ca.1853) and composed dozens of songs.<sup>6</sup>

### **Nouvelle méthode de chant (1853)**

Damoreau's five-page preface is entitled 'Advice to young students' and in the first paragraph she lays out the prerequisites for becoming a good singer which she identifies as possessing good intonation and a good voice. She quickly moves on to draw attention to the onset, which should be precise and not harsh. She advises students to practice using the mirror, to avoid grimaces of the face and general posture. She goes on to state that it is important for students to find the correct placement of the voice, which is a very individual part of vocal technique, to be discovered together with a teacher. She offers an impressive line-up of her contemporary operatic stars such as Manuel Garcia père, Giovanni Battista Rubini, Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran and Henriette Sontag, whose training, like her own did not consist of any physiological notions of voice production. The last couple of pages briefly discuss the importance of breathing and sustaining a tone, ideally achieved through 'spun sounds' (*sons files* – sustained sounds, which move from forte to piano and the reverse). She recommends that students practice these exercises for no longer than thirty minutes, to avoid tiring the voice. She suggests singing the exercises on the vowel [a] before then practicing them on all vowels and transposing them in as many keys as possible.

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<sup>6</sup> White, Kimberly. *Female Singers on the French Stage, 1830-1848*. India: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

## Exploring breath control

The first exercise that Damoreau recommends is the *messa di voce*, which she constructs on a specific tonal architecture: tonic, dominant, tonic, subdominant, dominant, tonic. It is interesting that Cinti-Damoreau chose this exercise as the first one in her progressive method – if anything, it goes against the ethos that she outlined in the introduction. *Messa di voce* involves fine coordination between vocal fold approximation and of the management of the breath and support mechanism, as the singer gradually increases and decreases the dynamic of one sustained note. Achieving this finesse requires years of work, starting with other sustaining exercises first. Tenor Gilbert Duprez, one of Damoreau's contemporary and stage partner, encourages students to start sustaining sounds at a comfortable loud dynamic, and once this is achieved, to progress onto adding dynamics.<sup>7</sup> Manuel Garcia *fils* warns that starting training using sustained sounds will only tire the student without teaching them anything, due to the complex management of the breath in relation to “the action of the larynx and that of the pharynx”.<sup>8</sup> He recommends that sustained sounds should only be practiced as a result of achieving general progress in other types of exercises. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century renowned voice teacher Richard Miller encapsulates the views of his predecessors as follows: “constancy of airflow within shifting dynamic levels can be accomplished only when airflow and subglottic pressure precisely coordinate pitch, vowel, and dynamic intensity. *Messa di voce* is a device for achieving such precision. It is for singers who already have attained a good level of technical proficiency”.<sup>9</sup>

So why would Damoreau start her progressive method for young singers with an exercise which is clearly the staple of already acquired technical skill? I suggest this might be Damoreau's effort to fit into the pedagogical narrative established institutionally by the Paris Conservatoire in their *Méthode de Chant*. This ‘official’ singing method introduces the *messa di voce* as its first and most important exercise on page 10. It is called the ‘exercice de la gamme’ and the accompanying text recognizes that “it is the most difficult exercise, yet the most necessary”, to enable students with “intonation and to learn the art of breathing”.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the reasoning for

<sup>7</sup> Duprez, Gilbert *L'art du chant* Paris: Heugel et Cie., 1845, p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Garcia Manuel (Fils) *École de Garcia: Traité complet de l'art du chant en deux parties* (Paris: Chez L'auteur, Rue Chabanis 1847, p.19.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, Richard. *Solutions for Singers: Tools for Performers and Teachers*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2004. p.233.

<sup>10</sup> Mengozzi, Bernardo (or Alberti, Domenico) *Méthode de Chant du Conservatoire de musique*. Paris: Imprimerie du Conservatoire de Musique, an XII, 1804. p.10.

starting with the *messa di voce*, the ensuing exercises are indeed aligned to the goals set out in Damoreau's introduction: they take the form of a set of ten exercises in which the melody is varied, thematically based on the chord progression described above. The rhythm divides from minims to crotchets, then to quavers, triplets, and ultimately to semiquavers. This type of rearrangement of the same melodic material enables the voice to explore its flexibility within the range of a sixth. These exercises work on breath management, as the phrases gradually increase in length. The rest of the treatise addresses breath management through developing long phrases on notes of various time values. For example, exercise number 20 marked *Moderato*, requires the singer to sustain four bars of *coloratura* at a moderately paced speed. The succession of this type of writing, coupled with the variation of the melodic material makes this exercise quite challenging from a breath management point of view. This lies in complete contrast to exercise number 8 on page 15, where the four bar phrases extend across even crotchets marked as 'well connected'. The different types of articulation enable singers to address the issue of breath management in a flexible manner and in conjunction with other technical challenges, such as connecting slow note-values one to another or experimenting with agility passages.

### Exploring legato

Achieving a seamless legato between notes of various intervals and rhythms constitutes an essential element of a secure vocal technique. In 1884 Francesco Lamperti made the famous statement: "chi non lega, non canta" loosely translated as 'there is no singing without legato'.<sup>11</sup> As the voice changes pitch the vocal folds elongate (when ascending) or shorten (when descending), while glottal closure should maintain its firmness. A common vocal fault is that of glottal articulation - sometimes referred to as aspiration - which involves the rapid open and closure of the arytenoid cartilages. Introducing an [h] consonant in between the two sung pitches audibly interrupts the vocal line through a short parting of the vocal folds, which is detrimental to the steadiness of the legato. The fault of aspiration is common particularly in ornaments, where notes occur in quick succession and its aural effect can be onomatopoeic. Mancini described the trills and mordents of some singers as 'the bleating of a goat' or 'the neighing of a horse'.<sup>12</sup> In the

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<sup>11</sup> Lamperti, Francesco *The art of singing*. United States: G. Schirmer, 1884. p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Mancini, Giambattista. *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sul canto figurato* Vienna: Ghelen 1774 p.137.

21<sup>st</sup> century, illustrious voice teacher Richard Miller posits that some singers use the [h] to manage subglottic pressure which mounted too quickly but dismisses it as a useful technical tool.<sup>13</sup> This century-old problem is addressed in Damoreau's treatise through the numerous exercises that explore legato singing on various intervals and different rhythms.

The first set of ten exercises explores creating a seamless legato line on longer note values such as minims and crotchets. The longer note values allow the singer time to think and focus on the way in which they transition between notes. The second exercise also focuses on legato, this time while singing quavers, and while introducing repeated notes, therefore exploring rearticulation at vocal fold level within this legato line. In exercise 3 the legato line takes place on quaver patterns, while the melody is formed of arpeggio-like phrases, therefore the focus is on achieving this legato line across the constant leaping intervals, at a moderate pace. The fourth exercise introduces triplets within a melodic line which combines a chromatic pattern that moves in thirds. Exercise five continues the triplet rhythm but the melodic pattern changes to a scale with repeated notes. Exercises six to ten are based on a rhythmic pattern of four semiquavers, with different approaches to onsets. This first set of ten exercises covers a very wide array of vocal skills, within a modest range.

On page 12 she writes 25 exercises achieving legato on a variety of musical designs. The first three exercises explore singing the same melodic material, formed of leaps of fifths and sixths, in a major key and in a minor key. This aspect of singing the same melodic line on harmonic patterns which shift between relative keys, emphasizes the importance of the precision of intonation at the time. This aspect is addressed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century voice treatises of Tosi and Mancini, who discussed singers' intonation while accompanied by tempered versus untempered instruments. Tosi in particular advised singers to be aware of the 'almost imperceptible intervals which are called Commas' which form major and minor semitones.<sup>14</sup> We can assume that Damoreau's variation of tonality, while maintaining the same vocal line aimed to draw attention to the subtle variation of vocal inflection that harmonic progressions have on the voice.

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, Richard. *Solutions for Singers: Tools for Performers and Teachers*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2004. p.165.

<sup>14</sup> Tosi, Francesco Pier, ed. Michael Pilkington, trans. Johann E. Galliard. *Observations on Florid Song, or Sentiments of the Ancient and Modern singer*, Bologna; rev. London: J. Wilcox 1743. p.20.

Exercise number 4 explores achieving a legato line in leaps of fifths, thirds and octaves from different directions, on a repeating rhythmic pattern, where the first note is a minim, connected by a portamento to a super-staccato quaver. The key to achieving a seamless connection between larger intervals lies in the use of portamento – in which the voice glides between two pitches through all the intervening intervals. The use of portamento to achieve legato is described by Mancini in 1774 and was echoed by other noteworthy voice teachers such as Lamperti in 1884. The latter made a direct connection between legato and appoggio, by stating that as the voice glides upward and downward, “the appoggio remains unmoved”. Lamperti established the concept of appoggio in voice pedagogy, and he defines it as follows: “by singing appoggiata, is meant that all notes from the lowest to the highest, are produced by a column of air over which the singer has perfect command, by holding back the breath, and not permitting more air than absolutely necessary for the formation of the note, to escape the lungs”.<sup>15</sup> Lamperti discussed this notion of holding back the breath as particularly important when singing portamenti. While Damoreau’s treatise does not address any of these issues in her written text, it is likely that this is the reason why exercise number 4 ends each pair of notes through a super staccato – to perform the super staccato in this context, singers need balanced breath management on the portamento; any signs of hyperfunction of the breath would render the super-staccato imprecise.

### **Exploring flexibility and agility**

Given Damoreau’s reputation as a phenomenal coloratura soprano, it is not surprising that her treatise contains numerous exercises to help singers develop flexibility and agility. The way in which each exercise is written illustrates that Damoreau understood the difference between flexibility and agility and made sure her exercises addressed both aspects. For example, exercise 5 on page 14 contains numerous repeated notes within a scale pattern, combined with sustained minims and a portamento towards the ends of phrases. This combination of moving and sustaining vocal elements enable the singer to combine different types of articulation in one phrase, often in one breath. Exercise 10 on page 17 introduces arpeggios that constantly change direction and focus – the rhythmic patterns also change, thereby creating a constant sense of movement. By avoiding any rhythmical or melodic pattern, this type of exercise trains the voice to be flexible within the range of a tenth, in the middle register.

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<sup>15</sup> Lamperti, Francesco *The art of singing*. United States: G. Schirmer, 1884. p. 22.



The following exercises 11-14 continue exploring flexible approaches to vocalization through the introduction of triplets – Damoreau establishes this rhythm as a pattern, which she chains musically through diatonic scale patterns. In later exercises she varies the melodic pattern to include complex chromatic scales within the line of triplets – for example see exercise 12 below. Each line is marked as legato and while the exercise starts in a piano dynamic, she marks a crescendo in the third bar, perhaps to urge students to maintain breath energy all the way through to the end of the four-bar phrase. In later exercises she also introduces interplays between major and minor keys as well as repeated notes within the line of triplets. These variations contribute to the student developing a very wholistic understanding of their vocal capabilities and inevitably – their weaknesses.

Exercises, 15 – 25 explore patterns of four and six semiquavers. The initial exercises contain repeated patterns of ascending tones, and end on quavers, followed by a quaver rest. This type of writing enables singers to explore the management of subglottic pressure and vocal fold approximation during rapid change of pitch. The diligent legato line connecting each pattern of five notes can be interpreted as Damoreau insisting on legato as the preferred approach to articulation.

The following exercises increase in complexity through the introduction of various rhythms, dynamics, and chromatic elements, as well as through exploring different tempos: exercise 17 for example has a section marked 'sans presser', and 'un peu plus lent', while exercise 18 is marked 'allegretto'. The performance of semiquavers at various speeds requires quite an advanced control of the voice. These exercises illustrate ways in which the singer can eventually control the tempo of the coloratura. The next section of the treatise is formed of longer vocalises, which Damoreau calls "Gammes, Exercices et Études". These vocalises constitute a review of all the technical elements explored in the previous sections. From page 42 onwards, she dedicates a section to chromatic exercises, which start in quaver patterns within the interval of a third. These exercises get progressively more difficult, to include various leaps, coloratura passages and sustained notes.

On page 46 there is a chromatic study which reviews all the elements introduced in the earlier pages. The writing of this exercise illustrates Damoreau's pedagogical sense – each bar starts on a particular pitch, followed by a chromatic scale down a third, varied in rhythm (first on quavers and the second time on semiquavers), to end on the same pitch as the starting note of the bar. This ensures not only great attention to intonation, but also enables the singer to refine vowel modification as they gradually descend through the semitones and then return to the initial pitch.

The following five pages are dedicated to the trill. Damoreau offers numerous ways to train this challenging technical element, through experimenting with the length of the trill as well as through approaching it from different directions. More importantly perhaps, Cinti-Damoreau's trill is never rhythmically free – it's written in semiquaver or demi-semiquaver note values and the piano accompaniment is always present, therefore 'confining' the singer to rhythmical precision.

The final pages consist of further études and variation themes, which review the technical elements explored up until then. Each aria is about two to three pages long. From a vocal point of view each aria focuses on a particular technical aspect and acts as a transition between the shorter previous exercises and the famous arias of the operatic canon.

## **Conclusion**

This treatise represents a practical type of voice pedagogy, in which Damoreau expresses her flair as a voice teacher. The progressive nature of these exercises is indeed clearly established at every level, as Damoreau usually starts from a simple melody, which she then varies, according to the technical elements that she is focused on developing. This approach of beginning with one-line long exercises, reduced in range, lies in complete contrast to modern, 20<sup>th</sup> century voice exercises, most of which are short and cyclic, meant to be repeated on ascending and then descending semitones. The main benefit of this approach lies in enabling students to focus on these short exercises, such as scales of fifths or ninths, gradually and repetitively. In contrast, Damoreau's method offers a more varied approach to the understanding of vocal technique. Through beginning with one-line long exercises, she establishes the need for a vocal context in which the singer can focus on a particular aspect of technique. Her operatic experience comes across in the writing of each exercise – the vocal line is conceived to support each technical element that she was looking to explore. She prepares the more complex exercises in these introductory vocalises, and therefore the arias emerge at the intersection between a technical exercise and an actual operatic aria. The author suggests that Damoreau's method would be very useful for young singers in the early years of their training, as it offers a wide range of approaches to technical development.

Heugel's initial quote can be seen to address another claim that is commonly circulated orally in the singing profession: that 'you can't learn to sing from a book'. This axiomatic statement has the role of reinforcing the value of the master-apprentice model which has dominated the training of

musicians for centuries. While the value of this system continues to be recognized, my own experience has taught me that the practical information disseminated in voice pedagogy literature can also play a crucial role in singers' development, which goes beyond the mental, theoretical reinforcement of the principles of good singing, explored with a voice teacher. Undoubtedly the progresses in voice science and voice pedagogy have an enormous benefit to singers. This author suggests that voice treatises such as Laure Cinti-Damoreau deserve renewed attention, particularly through exploration on a practical level, in the voice studio.

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