

Functional Vocal Technique for Modern Singers

Eugene B. Eustaquio¹

Abstract

The rationale for this study is to establish a clear understanding of the importance of applying a Classical vocal technique in the training of Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) singers, which includes musical theatre, the Broadway musical, pop, jazz, R&B, and rock music. It can be traced that while the teaching of musical theatre singing is based on classical singing techniques, the technique and vocal execution in singing musical theatre and commercial music repertoire are significantly different. While classical vocal pedagogy is the main method used in most conservatories, but very few give importance and proper attention to the training of students singing CCM styles of music. Geared towards experienced voice teachers as well as professional singers in the fields of both classical and CCM, this study intends to enlighten them and broaden their knowledge and understanding of vocal pedagogy specific to CCM.

Keyword: Classical Singing; Contemporary Commercial Music; Swedish-Italian Vocal Technique.

¹Conservatory of Music, Rangsit University Master of Music

Introduction

The history of classical vocal technique can be traced all the way back to Giulio Caccini in 1550. It was followed and developed further after more than 100 years by Pier Francesco Tosi. Singers and voice teachers started to be more aware of healthy vocal technique and of achieving full vocal mastery in the *Bel Canto* era, approximately the period from 1800-1900. The late Richard Miller (1926-2009) continued to follow the in-depth analysis of vocal anatomy in relation to that taught by previous vocal pedagogues.

At present, many professional singers are also themselves teaching voice. Among these vocal pedagogues, very few are giving importance to what is commonly known as ‘pop music’. Since the early days of the conservatoire, only courses in classical voice performance are taught. Beginning in the 1970’s, however, colleges in the USA have started to offer Musical Theatre Performance as a discipline. By the year 2002, approximately 31 schools of music and 40 schools of theatre were offering bachelor degrees in Musical Theatre².

It took many years before colleges and music conservatories started offering commercial music as a discipline. The reality is that in the current music industry majority of consumers patronize pop music. Many singing competitions like The Voice, KPN Awards, X-Factor and alike prefer the commercial style of singing. The impact of its popularity on the public, and even to professionally trained singers, is that those who attempt singing commercial music with the incorrect technique are putting their vocal health in danger. Many classically-trained voice students are trying to switch to CCM styles of music and often end up with numerous cases of Vocal Cord Dysfunction (VCD)³.

Aspiring to sound like their idols, many singers thus imitate the former’s singing style. The heavy mechanism applied in their singing technique, commonly known as ‘belting’, is the cause of their vocal problems. Belting is commonly misunderstood and executed as shouting. In fact, belting is a technique that needs to be addressed in relation to body-connected singing.

²LoVetri and Weekly, 2003

³Also known as Paradoxical Vocal Fold Movement (PVFM), it is an episode (attack) of an inability to get air past the vocal folds and into the lungs. This often results in a scary event for the individual and those around them. It is often misdiagnosed as asthma, although both conditions can occur simultaneously.

www.bbivar.com/vocal_cord.php

The objective of this paper is to present a clear description and explanation of the important differences of classical and non-classical singing to all classically-trained singers. Many classically trained singers were unfortunately brought up with the mentality that *‘if one can sing classical, one can sing anything and everything’*. It is quite evident that this is NOT TRUE, because if that is the case, Luciano Pavarotti, Marilyn Horne, and other famous classical singers should be able to sing Michael Jackson songs in the same color and sound that Michael sings them. Though the aforementioned singers have attempted singing pop, the songs ended up sounding like classical songs. This classical sound is, in fact, unacceptable when performing non-classical songs, notably in places like New York which have a strong tradition in Broadway and other styles of commercial music.

Definition of Terms

Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM). A generic descriptor developed by vocal pedagogue Jeannette LoVetri to describe all types of non-classical singing. CCM styles include cabaret, country, experimental, folk, gospel, jazz, musical theatre, pop, rock, and rhythm and blues. This term was developed to encompass all CCM styles by what they are rather than what they are not—non-classical.

Swedish/Italian Vocal Technique. The vocal method developed by David Jones and is the combination of the Swedish and Italian school of singing. In general, he described it as the ‘depth and ring of the voice’.

Register. A unified group of tones that have the same texture or quality. It is described as “a series of consecutive homogenous sounds produced by one mechanism, differing essentially from another series of sounds equally produced by another mechanism, whatever modifications of timbre and of strength they may offer.”⁴ In classical singing, the use of the head register predominates, whereas in musical theatre singing, especially for women, the use of chest register is favoured.

Chest register. The lower, louder, heavier sound, often associated with the male voice or lower voice of the female’s voice and speech, also sometimes called heavy or chesty tone. In science, it is referred to as the ‘modal’ register. It is associated with the thyro-arytenoid (shorter and thicker) part of the vocal folds, and resonates from the chest. It is commonly used in pop music, including Rock ‘n Roll.

⁴Garcia, 1982, p.8

Head register. A common term referring to the upper and lighter sound of the female voice. Some schools of singing call it ‘falsetto’, meaning *false voice*. It resonates from the face and head. It is smoother to listen to than the chest register. In science, it is called the *loft register*.

Mixed registers. Sounds that are head dominant with a mix of chest quality, or vice versa. Normally occurring in the bridge (*passagio*) of the voice, this must be a balanced and well-coordinated tone without the obvious change of the register. This is commonly used in legit Musical Theatre and Broadway Musicals. One of the best examples of this sound can be heard from Julie Andrews.

Passagio. Italian word meaning ‘passage’ or ‘bridge’. This is a common terminology for classical voice teachers to point out where the voice is starting to change gear. An obvious example of changing registers without minding the passagio can be heard from the singer who yodels.

Vocal tract. The resonator system from the larynx to the lips. “It is a flexible, non-fixed system that corresponds to the articulatory demands of speaking and singing. In its response to the vibrating larynx, it influences the timbre of the singing voice”.⁵

Volume. The level of loudness or softness measured in decibels.

Dynamics. A musical expression which has to do with intensity or perceived loudness.

Intensity. The energy of a sound wave.

Amplitude. The spatial correlative of intensity.

Range. The span of pitches that must be sounded, or phonated, in any given piece of music.

Pitch. The level of highness or lowness of sound. In western music, it is related to the number of cycles per second. This might vary depending on the instrument. In singing, a pitch can be adjusted depending on the capability of the singer’s vocal tract.

Cuperto. Old Italian word meaning “singing through a tiny mouth space with a large throat space that results in blending the registers and strengthening the thin edges of the vocal cords.”⁶

Onset. The beginning sound of a particular pitch in the singing or speaking voice. It can be labeled accordingly as hard, soft, and balanced.

⁵Miller, 2003, p.63

⁶www.voiceteacher.com

Offset is the end sound of a particular pitch in the singing or speaking voice. It has the same types like the onset. Both the onset and offset can be used as a very informative tool for the benefit of the singer and the teacher

High belt. A chest register carried up above C5.

Light belt. A chest register produced with very little pressure on the laryngeal adjustments in the throat.

Head mix. A register that is dominantly heady sounding with a mixture of chest register. Named by Jeannette LoVetri.

Chest mix is a register that is dominantly chesty sounding with a mixture of head register. Named by Jeannette LoVetri.

Vocal fry. The lowest pitch that humans can produce that produces a bubble effect on the larynx.

METHODOLOGY

Firstly, each vocal function is studied, and how the classical technique may be incorporated into the CCM singing style or vice versa is determined, and the pros and cons of each exercise are discussed.

I. Classical vocal technique for general purposes

Posture and body alignment is considered important even for CCM styles of singing. Singers must be able to support the voice using the whole body by maintaining proper posture. Singers must be able to learn to sing using proper posture, including alignment of the head and neck, position of the feet and knees up to the pelvic region, and alignment of the torso in order to be able to maintain the flow of air.

The management and support of the breath that is so rigorously instilled in classical singing are just as important in CCM style singing, especially in jazz singing. Many breathing exercises that are used in training classical singers are also very useful when applied in training other types of singers. The following are commonly used by voice teachers:

- Inhalation through the nose and mouth. Referred by David Jones as ‘two cups of breath’, this technique is very beneficial for opening the nasal and oral cavities in order to create a well-balanced resonance.
- Inhalation and exhalation while counting is a very good exercise that trains the singer to mentally budget the air, which eventually will aid the singer in maintaining long phrases in any particular song.

- Exhalation through the mouth while producing a hissing sound is one of the most effective ways of monitoring the flow of air aurally.

- Chest breathing exercises, diaphragmatic breathing exercises, and abdominal breathing exercises can help the singers find their best way to control the air that is coming out through their vocal tract. In classical singing, chest breathing is generally somewhat unacceptable for most teachers. But more recently, some teachers including the author are incorporating chest breathing, but making certain that the students do not raise their shoulders in the process, especially for some male singers who have difficulty in maintaining enough breath pressure to support the tone.

The notion of **register balance** and the training to achieve it started during the *Bel Canto* era, which in Italian literally means ‘beautiful singing’. In classical singing, it is very important to maintain an even tone while performing the entire song. A few of the best exercises that the author currently uses are described below:

- Executing a descending five-tone scale from C5 for female and C4 for male singers helps and aids the singer in extending their head register downwards to the lower register of their voice.

- Singing an octave from the bottom to the top using ‘ah’ at the bottom and ‘oo’ at the top note, then descending to ‘oo’ helps the singers find a heady sound and extends it downwards to the lower register of their voice.

- Singing the vowels A, O, U and the word ‘*Alleluia*’ in arpeggio keep the throat open on the top notes and is a very useful technique to aid against squeezing at the top as singers move up their range, without too much explanation. Most beginners tend to squeeze their throat while singing toward their top note. This is very beneficial for pop singers who tend to squeeze their throats while hitting their high notes.

Cuperto is Italian, meaning “singing through a tiny mouth space while maintaining a large throat space.”⁷ A technique by maestro David Jones as mentioned in the book by William Vennard, this exercise is very useful in creating and finding the space in the throat area that is needed to create a balanced sound. The author uses ‘oo’ with a 9-tone scale pattern, ascending and descending, without moving the jaw on the ascending scale.

⁷www.voiceteacher.com

This is very useful for singers whose registers are unbalanced. The author also uses this exercise to aid singers who are switching from pop to classical singing.

Sliding from major second to octaves with a very slow tempo, ascending and descending, is one the effective exercises employed to smoothen the registers. In addition, the author implements this exercise using ‘NG’ and ‘twang’ (wide ah), to assist the singer in bringing their chest register up. Similarly, this technique can be used to help male singers find their high register.

II. Problems in vocal function among the different styles with corresponding solutions

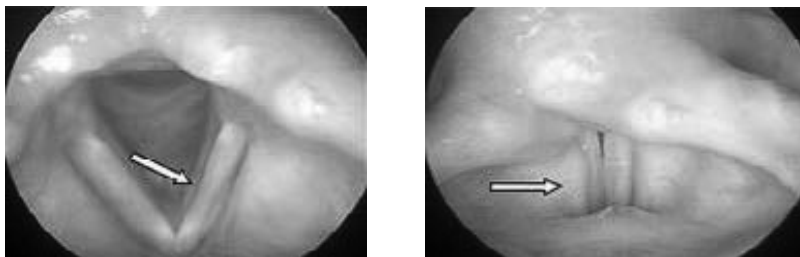
It is very typical and quite common for every singer to have voice problems because of aging, as well as due to their chosen style of singing. The following is a compilation of common voice problems, followed by solutions that are based on the science of singing that can also be found in most vocal pedagogy books (*see reference*).

Table 1: *Problems and corresponding solutions*

Problem	Anatomical location	Solution
No head register	Vocal folds	• Vowels–ee and oo • Tone quality – light, high, baby-like sweetness, delicate, cooing • Volume – soft to medium • Range – medium high • Pattern – staccato and short scales
No chest register	Vocal folds	• Vowels– ah and oh • Tone quality – dark, low, heavy, thick, down • Volume – moderate to loud without forcing • Range – lowest comfortable range • Pattern – single notes, two notes sliding to the third
Big breaks	Larynx	• Vowels– ae, eh, ee • Tone quality – chipmunks, Santa, foghorn • Volume – soft to medium • Range – slides with small intervals • Pattern – all kind of slides

Table 1: *Problems and corresponding solutions* (continued)

Problem	Anatomical location	Solution
Poor vowels	Vocal tract including pharynx and tongue	• Vowels– all • Tone quality – moderate • Volume – varies • Range – comfortable to upper • Patterns – vary
Excessive nasality	Vocal tract including pharynx and tongue	• Vowels – oh, oo and aw • Tone quality – yawn, sigh, Santa, lullaby, cooing • Volume – soft to medium • Range – midrange to lowest
No volume	Vocal folds, vocal tract including pharynx and tongue	• Vowels – ee and ae • Tone quality – nasty, squeaky, full, and laugh-like and deep • Volume – as loud as comfortable • Range – upper middle to high then low to middle
No flexibility	Vocal folds, vocal tract including pharynx and tongue	• Vowels – all • Tone quality – as light as possible • Volume – soft to medium • Range – comfortable middle to high • Pattern – scales, and arpeggio as fast as comfortable
Limited range	Vocal folds, vocal tract including pharynx and tongue	• Vowels – all • Tone quality – as clear as possible • Volume – moderate to comfortably loud • Range – within comfortable zone • Pattern – any

Figure 1. *Healthy vocal fold closure*Source: www.voicedoctorla.comFigure 2. *Breathy sound is produced due to paralyzed left vocal fold not fully closed*Source: www.voicedoctorla.com

III. Vocal Solutions: Benefits and Issues

One must bear in mind that while carrying out these vocal exercises, possible issues may arise and that keeping a careful watch on our students, and even on ourselves as one performs, is an absolute necessity in order to achieve and maintain that well-balanced sound.

Listed below are the benefits that may be gained by doing each exercise, and the corresponding problems that might surface from time to time.

Table 2: *Exercises, benefits, and possible problems that may arise*

Vocal Exercise	Benefits	Possible problems that may arise
singing loud	promotes strength and stamina	may cause strain because of forcing, and too much weight in the voice
singing soft	promotes relaxation, lightness of tone, flexibility, and beauty of tone	may cause the throat to collapse, tension, and breathiness

Table 2: *Exercises, benefits, and possible problems that may arise* (continued)

Vocal Exercise	Benefits	Possible problems that may arise
singing fast	promotes flexibility, lighter production, and articulation	may cause difficulty to access the chest register and might limit the full resonance
singing slow	promotes relaxation, a beauty of tone, and open vowels	may produce heaviness of the tone, and can be vocally fatiguing.
singing high pitches	increases the range upward, and promote head register	may cause vocal strain and can cause the lower pitches to disappear
singing low pitches	increases the range downward, and promote chest register	may cause vocal strain and can cause the higher pitches to disappear
singing bright vowels like ee and eh	stabilizes the sound and eliminate breathiness	may cause ‘edginess’, constriction, and might restrict flexibility
singing dark vowels	promotes warm and depth of the tone, and lower the larynx	may cause too dark sound, and going flat
singing staccato	helps reduce breathiness, improve pitch accuracy, and flexibility	may cause difficulty producing it in the chest register, and can be hard to control
singing legato	helps maintain a steady flow of breath, promote an even vibrato, and fluidity in the sound	may cause straight tone singing, and lack of mobility

Recommendations and Conclusion

Teaching voice is an unending process of careful study. Therefore teachers should not be trapped with a ‘formula’, as in reality, no one particular exercise will fit all voice types. For teachers who seriously intend to develop their teaching skills, activities such as reading books, watching videos, and attending seminars will never be enough. Apart from the above endeavors, it is essential that one must maintain an active teaching schedule,

do a lot of research, and most of all use their eyes and ears as their greatest and most valuable tools in evaluating each singer. It is recommended that one reads at least one article a day, watches two to three video clips daily, and studies various research papers, particularly those on vocal science.

Keeping a proper and continuous record of the development and progress of a student or a group is a big help in motivating them to learn. This will also serve as their own tool in order for them to correct their own mistakes. Having a personal or regular '*bible of vocal exercises*' and/or a summary table of vocal solutions is also another big help to any voice teacher and choir mentor who wish to maximize their time in correcting vocal faults. In this way, both the student and the teacher will benefit from learning through the process. The author recommends visiting the website of Mr. David Jones (www.voiceteacher.com) and Jeanette LoVetri as these teachers continuously share their own teaching experiences, with evidence and support based on scientific methods. As for books, the author recommends that one gets hold of these two books: '*How to Train Singers*' by Larra Browning Henderson, and '*Solutions for Singers*' by Richard Miller.

In any field of teaching, the use of simple and consistent terminology is essential in the learning and developmental process of any student. As singing involves body coordination, aural awareness, and mental work, it is very important that teachers use easy-to-understand terminologies, so the student will not be mentally overloaded. Employing terms that are vague or too technical may create either confusion or pose as a burden to the student.

Choosing an appropriate song is also a part of vocal development. Whether it is classical or contemporary commercial music, the teacher needs to know exactly if the song is appropriate to the age of the student. One must never take advantage of any student who seems capable of doing difficult pieces of music. Possessing adequate knowledge of the development of the set of muscles necessary for singing, and being constantly mindful of it as it applies to individual students, is essential and beneficial to any voice teacher who is truly sincere, and who genuinely cares for their students.

With regards to vocal technique, one should bear in mind that for every exercise that one prescribes, there will be a counter action/reaction. Some exercises might not seem realistic, but there is no harm in trying, although one must proceed with caution. The key to achieving healthy singing, and that which every teacher and a vocal student must bear in mind, is that '*if there is a pain, there is no gain!*' Each student/singer should also understand that when one applies new techniques to one's vocal mechanism, there might be some

slight discomfort or new sensation that one has not felt before. The result from performing a good vocal exercise might be obvious within a short period of time, while some others might take longer.

Most of all, having a healthy and professional ATTITUDE is always a key factor if one sincerely intends to be an effective teacher. This will not only improve one's teaching skills but also one's relationship with students. The study, and teaching, of singing is an unending journey!

References

- American Academy of Teachers of Singing. (1969). *Terminology in the Field of Singing*. New York: G. Schirmer.
- Bivar. (2013). *Vocal Cord Dysfunction*. Retrieved from http://www.bbivar.com/vocal_cord.php.
- Brunner, Richard Dean. (1998). *Vocal Pedagogy: A Historical Overview*. N.p.: n.p.,
- Cooper, M. (1996). *Stop Committing Voice Suicide*. Los Angeles, CA: Voice & Speech of America.
- Henderson, L.B. (1991). *How to Train Singers: With Illustrated "Natural" Techniques & Taped Exercises*. West Nyack, NY: Parker Pub.
- Jones, D. (2013). *History of the Swedish/Italian School of Singing*. Retrieved from <http://www.voiceteacher.com>
- . (2013). The Role of Cuperto in the Italian School. Retrieved from <http://www.voiceteacher.com>
- Joslin, A. (2001). *A Pedagogical and Functional Comparison of Contemporary Commercial Music and the Classical Vocal Technique*. Diss.

References

- LoVetri, J. (2002). "Contemporary Commercial Music: More than One Way to Use the Vocal Tract." *Journal of Singing*
- . (2013). *A Short History of Musical Theatre*. Somatic Voice Workshop. Shenandoah University, Virginia.
- . (2006). "Somatic Voice Workshop."
- Miller, R. (2004). *Solutions for Singers*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Peckham, A. (2000). *The Contemporary Singer: Elements of Vocal Technique*. Boston, MA: Berklee.
- Sundberg, J. (1987). *The Science of the Singing Voice*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois UP.
- Vennard, W. (1968). *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technique*. New York: Fischer.