

THE APPLICATION OF SPEECH LEVEL SINGING TRAINING SYSTEM IN CHINESE POP SINGING

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Abstract

The application of the Speech Level Singing (SLS) training system in Chinese pop singing reflects the broader cultural shift towards integrating Western vocal techniques with Chinese musical traditions, promoting versatility and innovation in contemporary Chinese music. While this system is primarily technique-focused, its influence can subtly intersect with cultural beliefs and values, emphasizing self-expression and artistic freedom, but it is less directly connected to religious or spiritual contexts. The Speech Level Singing (SLS) training system, a method developed to optimize vocal performance by maintaining a consistent and relaxed vocal position, has been increasingly applied in Chinese pop singing. This article explores the integration of SLS in Chinese pop music, examining how its techniques enhance vocal control, range, and stylistic versatility for singers in China. By aligning vocal practice with the demands of modern pop performance, the SLS method supports singers in achieving a more balanced and effortless vocal production, contributing to the development of contemporary Chinese music. Additionally, this study highlights the potential benefits of incorporating Western vocal training systems into Chinese pop music education. This article presented (1) the application of speech level singing training system in Chinese pop singing, (2) SLS singing training system and its characteristics, and (3) core methods.

Keywords: Application; Speech Level Singing; Training System; Pop Singing

Introduction

Popular music is a popular form of music that is very popular today, and has become an important part of music education in colleges and universities. Although pop singing is very simple in terms of getting started, in order to fundamentally improve singing skills, it is necessary to conduct comprehensive training for students' singing skills. The generation and development time of pop music is relatively short, and the starting time in China is even shorter, so for the teaching of pop singing, it is also necessary to summarize experience in daily practice, constantly improve the teaching methods of pop singing, and promote the comprehensive development of students' singing skills and music literacy. The improving of teaching popular music had the benefit as follow.

Instruct Students to Master Pop Singing Skills

In order to improve the popular music singing skills of college students, it is first necessary for students to accumulate and master rich singing skills, and to effectively combine and apply the skills in specific singing links. There are four main aspects of pop music singing skills. First, breathing techniques. Scientific breathing methods and appropriate breathing skills can help students get twice the result with half the effort when singing pop music works, and when training students in breathing skills, teachers need to combine professional theoretical explanations and demonstration and practical demonstrations to help students understand and master the principles and specific application strategies of the combined chest and abdomen breathing method, so as to reduce the difficulty of learning. When instructing the use of breath skills, teachers should adhere to the principle of simple understanding, so that students can use the least force to make the maximum sound when singing pop to ensure the expressiveness of singing. Second, vocal skills. In the training of vocal skills, teachers should focus on teaching students how to use true and false voices/mixed voices to sing to avoid confusing the concepts of true and false voices and mixed voices in singing. In the early stage, the teacher can let the students adapt to the real voice singing by reciting the lyrics, and then through the systematic comprehensive training of different vocal areas, let the students achieve the conversion of true and false voices/mixed voices. Third, the skills of articulation and pronunciation. In terms of articulation and pronunciation,

students need to pronounce words clearly, master the language and rhyme, and form an independent personal style.

Cultivate Students' Individual Singing Style

From the perspective of the characteristics of pop singing, it is precisely because of this characteristic that pop music and pop singing are popular with the public. Compared with other forms of music, pop music singing has the characteristics of multiple styles, varied voices, and rich performances, which are not available in many forms of singing. In order to give pop singing a unique charm, it is necessary to express these personality traits and encourage students to develop a personalized singing style. The teaching of popular singing in colleges and universities needs to find the breakthrough and entry point of music education, and take the cultivation of students' singing personality as a crucial teaching task. The formation of singing personality must go through a long period of time, and it also requires repeated teaching practice, as well as the active efforts of individual students. In this regard, teachers should adhere to the principle of gradual progress, first let students realize the necessity and importance of forming a singing style, start from the teacher's personalized demonstration, and the teacher will demonstrate the use of personalized voice performance for the students, so that the students can be brought into the corresponding singing situation, so that the students can be influenced and infected, and take the teacher as a model for their own learning to follow. After that, teachers should pay attention to providing students with a platform for performance, encourage students to summarize their own personalized singing methods and skills, and at the same time summarize their experience in practice, so as to continuously improve the individualization and maturity of their personal singing style (Wei, 2016).

Improve Students' Ability to Show their Stage Charm

Pop singing teaching is a comprehensive teaching activity, so it is necessary to pay attention to the cultivation of students' comprehensive stage expression while paying attention to the improvement of students' singing skills. In addition to singing on the stage, excellent singers must also integrate and express emotions, showing unique stage charm and appeal. The stronger the singer's stage performance, the stronger the appeal to the audience, and the corresponding musical image that can be perceived by the audience is more

vivid. In the actual teaching, the popular singing teachers in colleges and universities should start from improving the teaching strategy, promote the development of students' comprehensive stage expression, and provide guidance for students to form a mature stage performance style and show the charm of popular singing. First of all, body language is an important breakthrough to assist singing and emotional expression, in addition to rendering emotions and atmosphere, it can also allow the singer to have a more moving body shape. Therefore, when teaching, teachers should guide students' ability to use gestures and movements, enhance the coordination of students' body movements, and at the same time avoid excessive artificiality and monotony of movements, and ensure that the use of body movements is consistent with the performance of songs. Secondly, the eyes are what pop singers need to use flexibly in stage performances, and they are also a window to express their inner emotions. Teachers require students to have a deep understanding of musical works, especially to express their unique opinions with their eyes, and to interact with the audience in their hearts. Finally, a variety of stage expressions are also indispensable, such as combining singing and dancing, singing and instrumental playing, etc., which can enhance the expressiveness of performances.

Increase the Training of Popular Singing in the Practice Link

In order to allow students to further enrich and improve their singing skills in singing practice, students should not be bound to the learning of classroom theoretical knowledge, but should increase the proportion of practical links on the basis of a solid theoretical foundation of students, so that students can show their style and charm on the comprehensive practice platform. The practical activities of popular singing mainly include practical activities in the teaching classroom and social singing practice. In the teaching classroom, teachers should give students a platform to practice performance, so that students can master the rules and characteristics of singing, flexibly use singing skills, and express the connotation of musical works. After completing the training, teachers can organize classroom performance activities so that students can observe the performances of others in the process of classroom performance, identify their shortcomings, and find ways to improve. In addition, teachers should also encourage students to take the initiative to participate in off-campus professional practice performance activities, encourage students to participate in social welfare performances and pop music singing competitions, so that

students can sublimate their learning results and improve their comprehensive singing skills on a larger practice stage.

All in all, pop music singing teaching is a solid carrier to guide students to master pop music singing skills, strengthen pop music cognition, and improve comprehensive music literacy. Although the difficulty of popular singing in terms of skills and practice is relatively small, if the teaching strategies and singing skills training methods selected are not scientific enough, it will not only affect the singing effect of students, but also bring great obstacles to the professional development of music education in colleges and universities. In order to effectively change this situation, college teachers should grasp the key points of popular singing teaching, pay attention to the diversified training of students' singing skills, and promote students to form personalized singing styles, so as to comprehensively improve their stage performance and singing practice ability (Zhang, 2018).

The Application of Speech Level Singing Training System in Chinese Pop Singing

The SLS (Speech Level Singing) singing training system was developed and continuously improved by American vocal educator Seth Riggs (1930–) during the 1980s and 1990s. This systematic method aims to provide pop singers with effective technical means to establish their unique vocal style. As a pop vocal teacher, Seth Riggs introduced a revolutionary vocal technique that allows singers to master their voice freely, singing in a manner similar to speaking or giving a speech. He published "Singing in a Speech Position" and "How to Become a Star," teaching the application of his self-created SLS singing training system in performances and singing. Speech Level Singing is often referred to in the music industry as "singing like speaking" or "speech-level singing." The American pop music industry widely recognizes that it was through the SLS training system that Riggs trained superstars such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, Ricky Martin, and Adam Lambert. Mandarin pop singers like Coco Lee, Leehom Wang, JJ Lin, and Jason Zhang have also sought Riggs' tutelage, learning pop singing from him. Now, due to the successful experiences of these singers, the SLS singing training system has gained significant attention in the Chinese pop vocal community.

The following section will first review the theoretical discussions on the SLS singing training system, explaining its definition and characteristics. Then, combining the author's singing practice and teaching experience, the paper will analyze the singing techniques in Mandarin pop songs and explore the application of the SLS singing training system in Mandarin pop singing (Liu & Dong, 2020).

SLS Singing Training System and Its Characteristics

Although a non-music professional might understand the literal meaning of "singing like speaking," this does not explain the characteristics of the SLS singing training system. Some novice singers overly focus on "speaking" and neglect vocal techniques. Conversely, in the pop vocal community, some attribute the advanced singing techniques of certain singers to the use of the SLS method, treating it as a "singing style." In open discussions on internet platforms like Zhihu, experienced singers often strongly disagree with this view, asserting that SLS is merely a vocal technique, not a singing style. Similarly, in a review of 10 related research papers in China, five articles categorized SLS as a "singing style," while the other five referred to it as a "vocal teaching method" or "vocal training method."

From a vocal technique perspective, the core of a singing method lies in the differences in vocal techniques, resulting in classifications such as bel canto, folk singing, and pop singing. When a singer blends these methods in their performance, it is often termed "crossover." However, the term "singing method" also carries rich cultural connotations, as different methods are formed within specific cultural contexts, pointing to distinct singing styles. A singing method refers to a coherent set of vocal techniques and patterns used to achieve a specific singing style. If SLS were to be categorized as a "singing method," it would imply a connection to a particular singing style. However, "singing like speaking" lacks regional and ethnic specificity; it is purely a vocal technique. Thus, while the literal meaning of "singing method" is "a way of singing," categorizing SLS as a "singing method" is clearly incorrect.

However, I do not agree with considering SLS merely as a technical "singing training method." Discussions about SLS are only found in the context of pop singing, and Riggs developed SLS based on his experience in pop vocal teaching. Therefore, it is reasonable to place SLS under the conceptual framework of pop singing as a sub-concept. I refer to it as a singing training system because SLS is not a method within pop singing but a set of techniques for adjusting and enhancing pop singing. Additionally, I do not support viewing SLS as an entirely new singing technique distinct from traditional pop singing techniques. Essentially, SLS is a training system designed to improve pop singing techniques to meet higher performance standards, driven by the content of the works, audience aesthetic needs, and singers' desire to establish their unique styles. From the singer's perspective, the techniques of pop singing are the foundation upon which SLS is realized (Li, 2021).

Currently, whether in discussions on many online platforms in China or in academic expressions, SLS is regarded as a specialized pop vocal singing technique. It primarily involves technical terms such as vocal cord closure, edge vibration, head voice, chest and head voice mix, larynx position, tone color, and lip and tongue trills. Additionally, it includes training methods for articulation in English, such as vowel narrowing and using English words for larynx position training. Breathing, resonance, and phonation are the three basic components of vocal technique, which constitute the universal elements of singing methods and form the basis for classifying the three main singing methods. The systemic nature of SLS is reflected in its ability to comprehensively enhance pop singing techniques in terms of breathing, resonance, and phonation.

1. Breathing: Compared to bel canto and folk singing, pop singing does not overly emphasize the importance of chest-abdominal breathing. Instead, it highlights the correct use of different breathing methods in specific musical contexts. In this regard, SLS does not introduce new technical innovations but parallels the breathing techniques that change with emotional expression in singing to the natural and balanced breathing used in speaking (Li, 2021).

2. Resonance: With the coordination of chest-abdominal breathing, the mask technique, which focuses on head and nasal resonance, has been a characteristic of bel canto resonance. In comparison, folk singing also emphasizes head, nasal, and throat resonance, but due to different articulation

mechanisms, the resonating cavities are smaller. Unlike the previous two methods, the use of resonance cavities in pop singing is added as needed rather than being continuously present. This is because the former two are mixed voice methods, while the latter is based on chest voice, with appropriate use of head and nasal resonance in high notes. SLS emphasizes the importance of head resonance (head voice) and combines it with specific vocal mechanisms to highlight the natural principles of chest and head voice transitions. The inherent technical concept remains the balance of resonance.

3. Phonation: Pop singing emphasizes the authenticity of the vocal tone, with chest voice singing as its foundation. Breath voice, shouting, and soft singing techniques supplement and embellish chest voice singing in different applications. SLS emphasizes five key technical points: vocal cord closure, edge vibration, larynx position, tone color, and lip and tongue trills.

The SLS (Speech Level Singing) system addresses the core components of breathing, resonance, and phonation in pop singing. It advocates for natural and balanced breathing akin to speaking, emphasizes the strategic use of resonance cavities, particularly head resonance, and highlights the natural transitions between chest and head voice. In phonation, it focuses on maintaining the authenticity of the vocal tone, supplemented by various techniques, and emphasizes key technical aspects to enhance vocal performance.

The narrow vocalization method refers to the precise expression of specific pitches using particular breathing and resonance techniques, which is the first aspect of vocalization in singing. The second aspect involves integrating diction and articulation into singing, recognizing that the differences in the acoustic structures of different language systems are essentially differences in phonation mechanisms, also involving breathing, resonance, and phonation. Combining these two aspects creates a unique singing method. From this perspective, except for folk singing, both bel canto and pop singing must address the "localization" of language elements in vocal techniques, with the technical key lying in pronunciation and articulation.

It is important to note that the diverse styles of pop music, each with different singing approaches and technical challenges, require consideration. The SLS singing system emphasizes balanced, stable, natural, and smooth vocal production, making it more suitable for lyrical works. It cannot be applied to songs with unique aesthetic styles or non-traditional singing methods (e.g., shouting in rock music). This indicates that the technical essence of the SLS singing system is geared towards achieving a perfect lyrical aesthetic effect. Below, I will analyze the application of the SLS singing training system with relevant examples (Luo, 2018).

Core Methods: Stable Laryngeal Position, Vocal Fold Closure, and Head Resonance

Pop singing primarily uses chest breathing and resonance in the mouth (oral and pharyngeal), nasal cavities, similar to the physiological mechanism of daily speech. In climactic and lyrical sections, chest-abdominal breathing is usually adopted to deepen the breath. This aligns with the typical two-part structure of pop songs (verse and chorus) and distinguishes pop singing from other styles. The SLS (Speech Level Singing) technique, created by Seth Riggs, emphasizes achieving a stable and natural vocal sound, based on maintaining a stable laryngeal position. This requires higher standards from the singer.

Riggs' concept of "stable laryngeal position" does not mean that the position of the larynx remains unchanged during singing. Instead, it refers to the natural movement of the larynx according to the dynamics of the vocal sound (such as intensity, volume, and tempo). Achieving a "natural" sound results in a pure tone, accurate pitch, clear articulation, and a unified timbre. "Consistency" ensures that the emotional expression in the music is smooth and cohesive.

From a structural perspective, the verse of a lyrical pop song often serves a narrative function, typically presented in a calm tone within a middle to low pitch range. This can be effectively delivered through chest breathing and oral resonance, akin to speaking. At this time, the larynx remains in a relatively low, relaxed position. However, excessively lowering the larynx can lead to a rough tone and unclear articulation.

Even singers unfamiliar with the SLS technique can achieve this to some extent. The SLS technique goes further by requiring singers to pay attention to the relationship between the emotional expressions of the verse and chorus, maintaining a natural, relaxed state with a lower laryngeal position, and focusing on the lyrical content and musical progression to ensure even breathing and full resonance, thereby accumulating emotional power for the chorus.

For example, when the Mandarin pop singer JJ Lin performs "If I Lose You" and "Back to Back Embrace," the former often uses thirty-second notes with a one-syllable-one-note relationship and predominantly stepwise and small interval melodies. The latter primarily features eighth notes with a slower tempo and elongated pauses at the end of phrases, emphasizing the octave leaps at the beginning of phrases followed by stepwise descents. To achieve a natural and relaxed singing state, the singer must maintain rapid articulation and melodic accuracy for the former song, and for the latter, ensure the stability of the vocal muscles to prevent breathiness while using decorative techniques to create emotional accumulation through pauses and extensions (Luo, 2019).

New Knowledges Remark

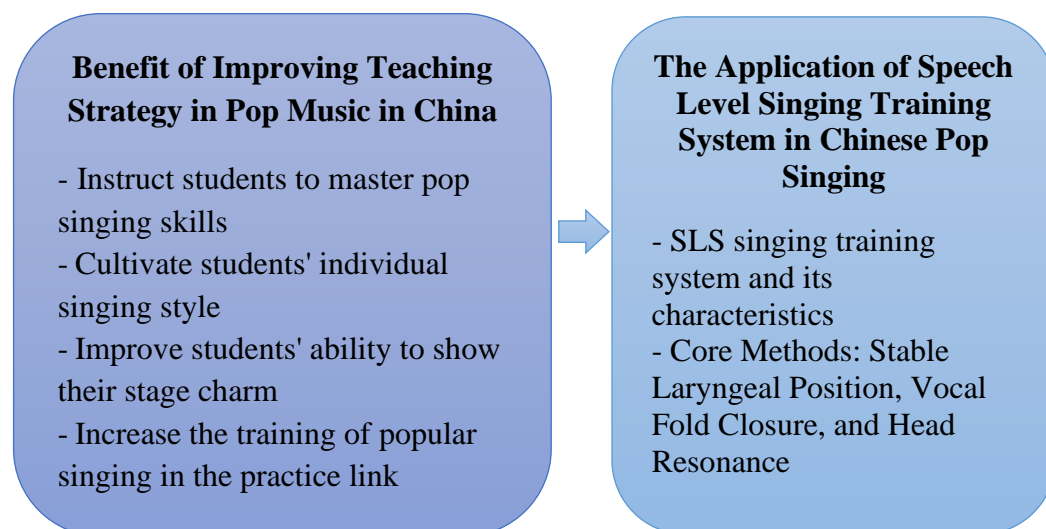


Figure 1: Diagram Show the Benefit of Improving Teaching Strategy in Pop Music in China.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Speech Level Singing (SLS) training system, developed by Seth Riggs, has significantly impacted both Western and Chinese pop vocal techniques, with its core principles focusing on natural, balanced, and effortless vocal production. While SLS is often misunderstood as a distinct "singing style," it is better categorized as a technical system aimed at refining existing pop singing methods, particularly in areas of breathing, resonance, and phonation. Its success lies in helping singers achieve vocal mastery and versatility without straining their voices, making it highly suitable for lyrical pop music. However, its application may be limited in genres requiring more extreme vocal expressions, such as rock or non-traditional singing styles. Through its adoption by renowned pop singers across cultures, SLS has garnered attention in the Chinese music community, proving its adaptability in enhancing vocal performance in Mandarin pop singing.

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