

THE ORIGIN AND TREATMENT OF COMMON CCM VOCAL PROBLEMS

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Abstract

Singing has long been an integral part of the human experience, and audio documentation proves that style and technique are constantly evolving; a sound that early twentieth century vocal technicians might have lauded could very well seem distasteful to a modern-day singer, and vice versa. But as the study of music exits its storied ethnocentric mindset and begins to incorporate teachings and lessons from civilizations outside of the Western idiom, vocal style is likewise undergoing its own evolution. Where classical music once reigned supreme in the voice studio, other styles such as jazz, R&B, gospel, and pop have arrived on the pedagogical front and are becoming an undivorceable part of the curriculum. One of the most notable vocal styles made its first appearance on the American stage in the late 1800's and continues to be the most popular alternative to classical music. That style, Musical Theatre, accounts for a large percentage of new repertoire and an even larger percentage of the national revenue. Tallies estimate that professional musical theatre venues in New York City drew in more than \$1.8 billion dollars in revenue in 2018 alone, as opposed to the less than \$200 million garnered by city-wide professional operatic venues in the same year.^{1, 2} As attendance at Musical Theatre events continues to grow, so does pedagogical interest; students are seeking out professional and collegiate instruction worldwide and this interest creates a demand for vocal pedagogues and technicians. It stands to reason that instruction for the modern Musical Theatre (MT) singer would not deviate greatly from the instruction given to operatic singers, but one stylistic element, the belt voice, operates more actively in MT than in any other style. As Musical Theatre becomes a more present stylistic

¹ LLP, K. (2018). Consolidated Financial Statements. Retrieved 2018, from <https://www.metopera.org/globalassets/about/annual-reports/fy18-met-opera-financial-statements.pdf>

² Sanchez, D. (2019, January 07). Broadway Smashes Records With \$1.8 Billion In Annual Revenues. Retrieved from <https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2019/01/04/broadway-record-breaking-revenue/>

consideration in vocal pedagogy, more attention must be paid to the study and correction of vocal faults related to the belt voice.

The Origin and Treatment of Common CCM Vocal Problems

Musical Theatre often falls under a pedagogical and stylistic umbrella term known as “Contemporary Commercial Music,” known colloquially as “CCM.” The term “CCM” was coined to include a number of vocal styles that operate outside of classical music and often includes country, rock, pop, jazz, R&B, gospel, blues, contemporary Christian, and musical theatre styles. Degree plans at the collegiate level are beginning to reflect this title more officially, and degrees in CCM are available at institutions such as Berklee College of Music, Shenandoah University, Belmont University, and Brigham Young University.

Musical Theatre is the most widely academized of the CCM genres and as of 2019, there are more than 130 musical theatre programs operating in the United States alone.³ While there are no definitive statistics related to the housing of Musical Theatre programs, i.e., whether they operate primarily out of the Music Department, Theatre Department, or jointly between, a study by Jeanette Lovetri shows that around 85% of teachers who are primarily responsible for teaching MT at the collegiate level have no professional training or experience in how to do so.⁴ This is owed to the fact that MT is a relative newcomer in academia, with the first program only being offered in 1967 at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. Only one program in the country (UPenn) offers a degree in Musical Theatre Pedagogy, and this degree has been largely inactive for the past three years. As teachers endeavor to teach CCM at the collegiate level, they will find a wealth of knowledge in texts and journals.

CCM terminology has become widely used and is considered part of the vocal vernacular- while the aforementioned number of CCM genres all contain their own subset of stylistic rules and demands, they share in common a propensity for the “belt” voice. The “belt” voice is a thyroarytenoid-dominant sound that can be likened to “yelling” or “calling.” Musical Theatre pedagogue Mary Saunders Barton wrote in 2001 that, “Belting is a dynamic theater sound

³ “Collegiate Musical Theatre Programs.” Musical Theatre Resources, June 15, 2016. <https://musicaltheatresources.com/collegiate-musical-theatre-programs/>.

⁴ Lovetri, Jeannette. “Contemporary Commercial Music.” *Journal of Voice* 22, no. 3 (2008): 260–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2006.11.002>.

produced from a mixed speaking voice. What we think of as the ‘belt sound’ is the apex of a spoken crescendo. Singing in a belt style, however, includes all the colors and mobility of a well-trained speaking voice. There is only high belting above the primary *passaggio*. There is no belting in head voice.”⁵ This style is considered an “acoustic phenomenon” by many pedagogues, including Professor Saunders Barton and Professor Kenneth Bozeman. Bozeman states that some of the same characteristics present when a person “yells” must be present when a singer belts, including a raised larynx, a shortened pharynx, and a widened mouth.⁶ While singing has historically called upon the open [a] vowel to instruct singers in *gola aperta*, MT is more likely to call upon the American [a] vowel; this sound calls upon a divergent vocal tract, as opposed to the convergent tract necessary to accommodate [a].⁷

When explaining the divergent vocal tract to a student, the metaphor of a “megaphone,” small at the end where the sound is produced and large at the end where the sound exits, can be a helpful image. When explaining the convergent vocal tract, using one’s hand to create the letter “c” can illustrate that there must be space in the back of the mouth (i.e., a raise soft palette and relaxed tongue) with a natural opening at the lips. The convergent vocal tract can be paired with narrowing of the aryepiglottic sphincter to create a sound often described as a “twang;” this sound is highly efficient, stemming from total cord closure and minimized air flow.⁸ Belt is not the only component of musical theatre singing and should be paired with a forward mix, a sound that is not unlike classical head voice; the mechanics of head voice remain, though the mix in “legit” is slightly nasalized for increased legibility.

Young MT singers often present with variations on the same few problems; this might be owed to the fact that MT has until this point been more of an oral tradition than an academic study. The first musical theatre singers on record were predominantly self-taught, the great Ethel Merman being foremost. In a famous exchange with George Gershwin, the composer asked her, “Ethel, do you know what you’re doing?” When she replied, “No,” he said, “Well, never go near

⁵ Spivey, Norman, Mary Saunders-Barton, and Mark Uhre. *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: a Balancing Act*. San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing, Inc., 2018.

⁶ Bozeman, Kenneth W. *Practical Vocal Acoustics: Pedagogic Applications for Teachers and Singers*. Gahanna, OH: Pendragon Press, 2014.

⁷ Spivey, 47.

⁸ Bozeman, 70.

a singing teacher.”⁹ Humorous though this story may be, Merman is an anomaly in the industry and her unorthodox methods might be considered dangerous by many modern-day pedagogues. While Merman retained her famously strong belt voice well into old age, many famous musical theatre vocalists have not been so fortunate and vocal damage is common in MT circles. The reasons for this are numerous, but one of the most likely culprits in the case of vocal damage may lie with unsupervised mimicry. Broadway appeals to a young demographic and many singers report an interest beginning as early as age eight; because of the scarce nature of musical theatre pedagogues, it is not unusual to think that young singers might content themselves with listening to soundtracks and attempting to replicate these sounds in their bedrooms at home. While listening to accomplished singers is key to learning the nuances of any style, the nature of belting is such that an uninformed singer might equate it mechanically with screaming. The ear recognizes belting as a high-pressure sound, one that catches the attention and creates a thrilling product. Volume is often erroneously assumed to be an important factor in the belt voice, when acoustic science tells us that belt creates an inherently quieter sound than classical singing; opera singers remain largely un-mic’ed the world over while CCM is, by its own definition, meant to be performed into a microphone. When a voice is used incorrectly over a long period of time, vocal health issues follow soon after. It has been mistakenly decided in many pedagogical circles that belting is dangerous, likely due to the number of vocal injuries suffered in pursuit of it; this assumption is understandable, but it is more likely that vocal injuries sustained while belting are due to a lack of knowledge and supervision than an inherent danger in the actual act. Classical singing is a well-documented art form with a long, storied history of pedagogy beginning as early as Ancient Greece. Should a classical singer decide to study the mechanics of their instrument, they can seek out a wealth of books and articles to aid in their journey. An MT singer seeking the same information might feel stymied when faced with only three or four credible sources that address belt and belt technique. The industry is undergoing a zeitgeist shift and the number of sources is sure to multiply in coming years, with scores of pedagogy books reportedly slated to join the existing core texts in the year 2020.¹⁰

⁹ Rothstein, E. (1982, May 09). 'I guess I'm blessed with good lungs'. Retrieved December 10, 2019, from <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/09/arts/i-guess-i-m-blessed-with-good-lungs.html>

¹⁰ New Publication Catalog 2019-2020. (2019). Retrieved December 10, 2019, from https://www.pluralpublishing.com/application/files/7715/7314/5035/New_Publica

One of the most prevalent vocal issues in musical theatre pedagogy lies with vibrato and whether or not a student is allowing vocal freedom. When a student's voice does not present with vibrato, a number of factors could be at fault. Firstly, because belting is, as mentioned previously, a highly pressurized sound, students can sometimes wrongly assume that restricting the singing mechanism will present more typically satisfying or strong sounds. Secondly, students who have listened exclusively to certain kinds of music might not be familiar with vibrato as an element of singing and could have refrained from allowing freedom based on a lack of both knowledge and technical foundation. Thirdly, some students might argue that musical theatre does not demand vibrato as a stylistic preference; the soundtracks available to us would argue that vibrato is used frequently in MT, but that straight-tone singing is often used for the front half of a note and vibrato for the latter half. Vocal technicians have jokingly given this technique the name of "stick and wiggle," but some student assume because of the initial lack of vibrato on certain notes that they should forgo the discussion altogether.

Laryngeal compression is the factor most likely at fault for a lack of vibrato in musical theatre and can be caused by a number of culprits. Students could possibly be holding at the tongue root, which can be alleviated through gentle massage at the root itself, or by singing with the tongue moving continuously in a lateral loop as an alleviative exercise. Students could also be holding from the sternocleidomastoid muscles, sometimes colloquially referred to as the "cords of the neck." This problem is rife with young male singers and can often be a sign that support is lacking lower in the body; the cords of the neck will often be visibly tensed and bulging if holding is occurring. Explaining to students that engaging their intercostal muscles, feeling a sense of "fullness" or "suspension," or using their "pee muscles," can increase support while instructing a student to allow their head to lilt gently back and forth from the A-O joint can be a calming exercise for overtaxed sternocleidomastoids.¹¹ Lastly, holding of the digastric muscle can also contribute to a lack of or unevenness of vibrato. The digastric is one of the muscles responsible for opening the jaw and can be described to a student as a rubber band that they should access from the back of their skull; the sensation of activating the digastric can feel akin to loading and preparing to fire a slingshot. One effective method for easing digastric tension is telling students to

“sing like they were drunk,” or to feel vaguely like a bullfrog. When they have overcorrected their problem to the opposite extreme, ask them to find a more central resting place for their technique as a means of compromising.

Many young beltters suffer from a strained sound or appearance when they endeavor to belt; this issue shares many symptoms with a lack of vibrato, a fact owed to their shared commonalities of tension and holding. A strained sound can often be due to throat tension, which can be directly related to both jaw and tongue tension. Teachers should address jaw, tongue, and lip independence early in voice lessons to insure that students are not tensing their jaws or throats as they attempt to make their diction legible; the jaw, tongue, and lips move independently of one another and should be able to function as such in technically accurate singing.¹² A strained sound can also be due to a high larynx; it should be noted that the larynx is elevated in belting in a way that it should not be in classically singing, and this censure refers to a singer who is raising their larynx more than is stylistically appropriate.¹³ A stable laryngeal position is paramount to the technically fulfilled singer and teachers can instruct singers to feel the sensation of yawning or gagging when they sing to keep the larynx low. If the belt sound is then lost, vocalize the student on ascending and descending triads from their middle voice into their higher register to allow them the opportunity to carry a stable sensation into an unstable area. Lastly, students may be suffering from a lack of physical engagement that is contributing to their throat tension. If a student is swaying from side to side, dancing from foot to foot, or moving their hands nervously while singing, instructors should take special care to compliment the urge to move. Language such as “stand still” can prevent students from allowing natural movement and can hinder the introduction of positive physical engagement in the future. Instead, teachers can use language such as, “I see that you’re moving from side to side. The urge to move is good! It shows that you’re seeking physical engagement. Let’s make sure that this engagement comes from the right area.” The teacher can then begin a conversation about engaging the lower abdominals, pelvic floor, and intercostals. Students are also prone to locking their knees or isolating the top and bottom halves of their body. Remind the student that their legs are meant to have the weight of the body

¹² Shakespeare. (1921). *The art of singing: Based on the principles of the old Italian singing-masters, and dealing with Breath-control and production of the Voice, together with EXERCISES, entirely re-written.* Boston, MA: O. Ditson.

¹³ Bozeman, 70.

equally distributed and that singers should try to keep the physical processes of the body as natural and honest as possible. While singing is not necessarily the most natural pursuit for the human body or voice, it is a healthy one; to ensure that the body does not start trying to help itself in ways that are not conducive to good singing, the bodily functions should be kept as normal as possible.

Finally, musical theatre students often comment that they are displeased with their transition into their mix voice. Many musical theatre singers sing only in the Broadway style and may have learned about singing in a context that dispensed with talk of the mix or head voice. This sort of training leads to singers who sing in their chest voice almost exclusively, a pursuit that can cause unpleasant sounds, straining at the top, and diminished vocal ranges. Students who sing predominantly in their chest voice may have learned from recording mimicry or may have attempted to sing in their head voice and been displeased with the “weakness” of the sound in comparison with the brassy, bold chest voice. If a student is struggling to sing in their mix, the teacher must first address the psychological factors at play. Singing can be a very vulnerable experience for both performers and audience members, likely because the singing voice is not an attachment, such as a flute, but is native to the body. Criticism of the singing voice can, therefore, be mistakenly perceived as criticism of the self and should be given both thoughtfully and constructively to young singers. When addressing a student who struggles to sing in their mix, teachers might try asking what the student thinks of their mix voice. If they respond that they’re not sure about having one altogether, the teacher can ask for “hooty” or “light ooh” sounds that can then be demonstrated and repeated on a siren. Vocalizing a student from the top down in this instance is more efficient, as it can demonstrate how far the mix extends before the chest voice takes over. Explaining the mix voice in relation to the voice the student is already familiar with can establish a more permanent connection between them. If the student replied, when asked about their mix, that they find their existing mix to be “weaker or less pleasing than their belt,” a teacher might reply that while the student may not have used their mix voice as much as their belt voice, the engagement of the mix can be integral to improving the belt. While many listeners may assume that a Broadway star is belting all the way up to an F5 or G5, it is highly unlikely that this is the case; many accomplished starlets are actually giving way to a forward belt-mix around C5 or D5 and have learned to conceal this passaggio. Teachers might use singers such as Sutton Foster or Annaleigh Ashford as examples, as both have enjoyed fruitful careers and are masterful mixers. When

addressing the technical errors at play with mix transition, teachers should address whether or not the sound and vowel production is occurring too far back in the mouth; telling students that they should imagine making vowels with the front of their tongue but creating space with the back of their tongue can be a gateway for mix transition. Hyper-nasality is another common culprit and can be addressed with “comfortable shouting”; while comfortable shouting is often used in classical music to aid the young male singer, it can also be used to aid both the male and female belter in the musical theatre idiom. Shouting in the different registers on “ho” can preclude involvement of nasal resonance. Lastly, as with most vocal faults, a lack of support should always be investigated. As mentioned above, telling a student to “engage their pee muscles” is a simple way to address singers at any age; relating an unknown sensation to that of a known sensation creates a connection that promises longevity of knowledge, especially when the known sensation is one that is germane to the physical body.

While these are some of the more common vocal faults for CCM MT singers, an increase in optics and documentation will likely reveal a new set of problems for the next generation of beltters. As the field continues to grow, it is important that pedagogues take note of the acoustical challenges presented by comparing classical and musical theatre singing, and that each voice is taught for the voice that is today and not the voice that it will possibly someday be. Belt is not just a pursuit for Broadway performers and can even aid the classical performer as they endeavor to find new colors and textures in their own voice. If progress continues, the musical theatre vernacular is sure to reach the same academic heights as classical singing and will soon be a fixture at voice conferences worldwide.

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