

The Bach to Rock Connection

Country Pedagogy

The lines of demarcation between existent styles of music continue to blur. Opera and musical theatre keep digging into each other's repertoire and populating each other's pieces. Pop borrows from rock, which has already borrowed from blues and folk. All this activity creates lots of adjective-dominated, hyphenated musical descriptions, such as new wave-rock opera, or classical Jazz-fusion.



Robert Edwin

Country music has not been left out of this synthesizing process. Country (formerly known as country and western or C & W) falls into two basic categories: traditional and modern. Traditional or "Grand Ole Opry" country is the structurally and emotionally simple music produced on unamplified instruments and associated with singers such as Hank Williams, Sr., and Patsy Cline. Modern country has been strongly influenced by pop and rock rhythms and instrumentations and is created by performers such as Barbara Mandrell and Kenny Rogers. Modern country also includes the New Traditionalists, a group of young artists, such as established stars Randy Travis and Reba McEntire, and newcomers Garth Brooks and Clint Black, who seek a renewal of country music's more plaintive roots.

Whether it be modern, traditional, or new traditional, there is no denying that country is a major musical force. It is the music of choice in many areas of this country, and surprisingly, challenges rock and pop in a significant number of urban and suburban markets.

What is country music? A thumbnail sketch of its major characteristics might read: a personal narrative told in colloquial language, using a guitar-based format and a basic I-IV-V chord musical framework. With titles such as "Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses," "Hard Rock Bottom of Your Heart," and "These Lips Don't Know How to Say Goodbye," and lyrics such as "Who's gonna take the garbage out when I pack my bags and leave?" and "If I die before I wake, feed Jake; he's been a good dog, my best friend," it's apparent that country music tells about the lives of the common folk.

The stories in the songs can be sappy or poignant, patriotic or anti-authority. They can exude deep religious fervor or violate any number of the Ten Commandments. It is passionate music that is compelling and earthy, and the stories ring true in millions of American ears and hearts.

Almost anyone who hears country singing quickly

recognizes its signature "twang"—a southern-accented nasality that helps create a "down home" informal style and sound. Like their pop and rock counterparts, country singers assume a high laryngeal position and use treble-dominated tonality to extend their lower register ("chest" voice) and "mix" it with upper register ("head" voice) vocal fold activity in order to create country's version of "belting." However, they do not as a rule, try to create the kind of noises in their voices (buzzes, rasps, growls, barks, et al.) that rock singers often employ.

Since country music is not as driven or intense as rock, the country vocalist is less likely to push the voice to the limits of physical endurance. In fact, the desire for a free and clear sound often makes country singers more willing to accept classical vocal technique as a foundation for their craft than their rock and pop counterparts.

The singing teacher, however, must respect the country singer's desire and need to retain the signature "twang," at least in repertoire and, at best, in some vocalises and exercises. For example, if the country sound is the product of excessive laryngeal tension, the teacher can work to free the throat and larynx while simultaneously lightening and brightening the vowel color and emphasizing naso-pharyngeal resonance. Using standard triads and short scales and working through all the vowel sounds, the end result can be a vocally efficient "twang."

Vocal classification is also important for the country singer to understand. Like rock and pop singers, they too, are often the victims of other people's tessituras and keys. They must learn that voices, like people, come in different sizes and the size dictates the range of the voice. The repertoire they're struggling with at present may simply need a key change (up or down) to solve the problem.

With all the emphasis on rock and pop music, it's easy to overlook both the important contribution country music has made to American music and the need for the proper training of its vocalists. If NATS members can utilize classical vocal technique as a means to aid an end, rather than an end unto itself, then they should find country singers very willing and cooperative students of voice—ya'll.

san francisco
**OPERA
CENTER**

AUDITIONS

for the 1992 programs of the
SAN FRANCISCO OPERA CENTER

including
**MEROLA OPERA PROGRAM
WESTERN OPERA THEATER
ADLER FELLOWSHIPS**

Regional auditions will be held in:
San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Denver,
Seattle, Salt Lake City and Phoenix in October, November and December.

For further information or to request an application please call
(415) 565-6491, ext. 620 or write to: San Francisco Opera Center
Auditions, War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, CA 94102-4509.