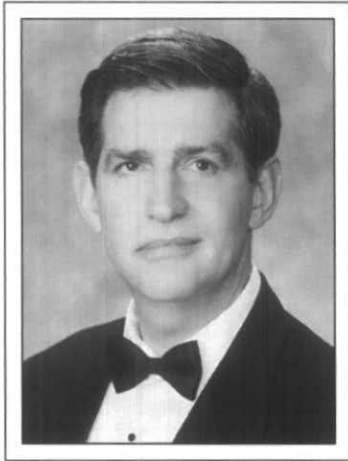


Working With "Mike"



Robert Edwin

Besides the requisite piano, tape recorder, mirror, music stand, and bookshelves stacked with music, my studio also includes a complete sound system with five microphones. Two are Shure BG40 condenser mikes that are used exclusively for recording various combinations of voice, piano, and guitar; the other three are Shure PE54D dynamic mikes (sturdy thirty-year-old war horses left over from my touring days) devoted to amplifying the aforementioned instruments.

Why mikes, amps, and speakers in a voice studio? Because sound amplification, or "miking" as it is commonly called, is used in all contemporary commercial singing, from alternative to zydeco, from *Annie* to *Zorba*. Those who teach vocal technique and repertoire to singers working with this music need to prepare them to perform with a microphone, be it in their hand, on their body, or in their hair. They must learn how to use the mikes, how they sound when

miked, and how their vocal technique can be affected by miking.

The increase in amplified singing can be traced directly to the evolution of contemporary vocal styles. Pre-microphone performances required singers to produce enough acoustic energy to fill a venue, whether an amphitheater, church, concert hall, or opera house. As speech-level singing styles such as "crooning," pop, folk, and jazz developed, the introduction of the microphone allowed singers to use an intimate, conversational vocal quality and still be heard, especially in larger performing spaces. The amplification of accompanying instruments and the introduction of rock and roll in the 1950s gave singers little choice but to electronically supplement their voices.

With sound amplification came new challenges for the singer—for example, how to hold a microphone. Watch enough performers and you'll see everything from the two-handed death grip to the one-handed, delicately-held-in-the-fingertips technique. The same can be said for the microphone's proximity to the mouth. Many band singers like to hold the mike, literally, on their lower lip, increasing their sound input while decreasing the possibility of picking up extraneous sounds from other singers or players. Other vocalists, however, prefer to hold the mike at least six to eight inches away from and below the mouth. Since there is no "right" way to hold it other than somewhere in front of the mouth, it is left to the singer to find a personal-

ly comfortable position that also expresses a style.

Some singers, such as Madonna and Garth Brooks, have opted out of the hand-held mike and embraced the headset mike. It frees them to move and dance while keeping the mike's proximity at a constant distance from the mouth. Broadway, on the other hand, uses tiny mikes taped to the hairline to try to create the illusion that there are no mikes.

Whatever the microphone arrangement, the end result is an amplified sound rather than a natural sound. A miked singer, therefore, is going to hear far more external, amplified sound than internal, natural sound during the performance, and may have to rely more heavily on kinesthetic feedback rather than sound to gauge vocal output. If monitor speakers are absent, of poor quality, or poorly set up, then the singer needs to be really secure in the "feel" of his or her vocal production to avoid trying to alter it based on faulty auditory feedback. For example, if the singer is hearing a very tinny, treble sound from the speakers, there may be a temptation to overdarken or press the vocal output to compensate.

Many miking situations can be simulated and addressed in the studio under controlled conditions if one has the technology (a simple, low-priced Karaoke machine will do). Putting students through various favorable and unfavorable miking scenarios gives them practice in dealing with problems such as treble and bass variances, feedback, and settings that are too loud or too soft.

Robert Edwin

Amplification concerns may seem foreign to the classically-trained vocalist who has worked diligently to develop the singer's formant, the 2800 to 3200 hertz "ring" in the voice that provides carrying power in unamplified performing spaces. To these singers, miking is, for all intents and purposes, a non-issue, save for the recording challenges their big voices often present.

In my studio, however, opera singers often come seeking a more speech-level style so they can perform in musical theater. They may have been told at an audition that they sound like opera singers (not a compliment in that setting), and may have been asked to diminish vibrato, loudness, and vowel spectrum. Since there is usually no miking at musical theater auditions, it's not surprising that such singers try to fill the room with vocal sound.

Working in the studio, they learn that just cutting back on their sound does not adequately create the conversational quality Broadway wants. It is in this context that the microphone can be a wonderful pedagogical aid as students are asked to vocalize speech-level phrases such as "here I am," "how are you?," and "I have a secret to tell you," on triads and scales into a highly amplified mike. The amplified sound makes it easier for them to delineate informal, conversational, "narrow-vowel" singing from formal, "tall-vowel" vocalization.

These classical singers also have learned that the fuller their voices sound, the older in age they are perceived to be both by musical theater casting directors and audiences. A case in point was one youthful-looking, new student in her mid-twenties

who was continually told at auditions that she sounded more like the forty- to fifty-year-old "Mother Abbess" than the twenty-something "Maria" in the *Sound of Music*. The microphone was of inestimable value as she developed a lighter, brighter vocal sound, and redefined her acting skills to include speech-level communication. She also found, to her great delight, that she could easily switch back to her classical technique and communication style when needed or desired.

Judging by the negative feedback heard from NATS colleagues regarding the deterioration of singing supposedly caused by the microphone and nonclassical styles, this teacher's position about amplifying both vocalises and repertoire work may be a minority view. Common sense, however, suggests that the closer a teacher can approximate the performing demands of his students, the better they can be prepared in vocal technique, style, and repertoire to handle those demands.

Robert Edwin, baritone, has sung Bach cantatas in cathedrals and rock songs in Greenwich Village coffeeshouses. He has performed in New York City's Carnegie Hall and Town Hall, toured throughout the U.S.A. and abroad, recorded for Avant Garde and Fortress Records, and published as an ASCAP lyricist and composer.

His diverse performing career has been paralleled by an equally diverse teaching career. A leading authority on nonclassical and child vocal pedagogy, he practices what he preaches at his private studio in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. Mr. Edwin has served on the voice faculty of the New Jersey School of the Arts, the adjunct voice faculties of Burlington and Camden

County Colleges, and on the faculty of the the Voice Foundation's Annual Symposium on Care of the Professional Voice. From 1996 to 1999, he was a contributing editor for VocalEase magazine. Recently elected to the American Academy of Teachers of Singing, he has led master classes and workshops throughout the United States, as well as in Canada and Australia.

In addition to writing "The Bach to Rock Connection" column, he has served NATS as president of the New Jersey Chapter, and as a presenter/clinician at NATS National Conventions, Summer Workshops, and regional and chapter events. He can be contacted at 1509 Glenview Drive, Cinnaminson, NJ 08077-2156. Phone: (856) 829-0770. Fax: 856-829-4829. e-mail: edwinsing@aol.com

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