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CCM versus Music Theater: A Comparison

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At the turn of the twenty-first century, music theater pedagogy was often considered synonymous with CCM pedagogy. It was clear that the vocal requirements of many of the newer Broadway shows were "nonclassical" in nature, and that classical voice lessons alone were insufficient to prepare aspiring music theater performers. However, as time moves forward, it is becoming increasingly clear that the nonclassical nature of music theater is perhaps one of the *only* things that the genre has in common with other CCM genres. As we near the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, separate pedagogies are emerging that distinguish important differences between the training of commercial singers and that of music theater performers.

CCM: THE TERM AND ITS ORIGINS

The term contemporary commercial music (CCM) first appeared in print in a 2003 research paper by Jeanette LoVetri and Edrie Means-Weekly.[1] LoVetri clarified questions surrounding the term in a 2008 article in the *Journal of Voice*, where she wrote: "Contemporary commercial music (CCM) is the new term for what we used to call non-classical music. This is a generic term created to cover everything including music theater, pop, rock, gospel, R&B, soul, hip hop, rap, country, folk, experimental music, and all other styles that are not considered classical."[2]

The term is widely accepted in the voice pedagogy community, yet it has not caught on outside our industry. For example, in music education, terms such as "commercial" and "popular" are more widely used. At the university level one will find performance, practical, and musicology degrees that include such diverse offerings as songwriting, hip hop studies, jazz, professional music, artist development, creative music performance, contemporary music, and urban music, but only one degree with CCM in the title.[3] In the recording industry, genres are called by their exact name, and there are many obscure subgenres with titles such as glitch pop, future garage, chillstep, dirty South, and psychedelic soul, among others.[4] In music theater, nontraditional genres are either identified by their exact category—country, gospel, disco, etc.—or generically called "pop/rock."

Part of the barrier to widespread acceptance of the acronym beyond our profession is that CCM has other associations. For example, it also refers to "contemporary Christian music" and is used by over 150 other organizations, most notably Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and Canada Cycle &

Motor (the famous hockey equipment manufacturer).[5] LoVetri acknowledged this difficulty in her article, stating "Perhaps in time a better term will emerge, but for the moment, CCM seems to be doing a good job in helping to eliminate the use of the pejorative term 'non-classical'."[6] To that we full-heartedly agree, as does the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS), New York Singing Teachers Association (NYSTA), and the Voice Foundation (TVF). Before we had the term CCM, all of the styles above typically were called "nonclassical." While accurate, it is rarely acceptable in other parts of society to call something by what it is not. As LoVetri frequently states, we don't call cats "non-dogs." So, while there are barriers toward widespread acceptance of the acronym, for pedagogic purposes it has been a great benefit to have a word that describes what we teach instead of what we do not teach.

CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING THE WORD "COMMERCIAL"

Some pedagogues object to the word "commercial" being part of the acronym and have written letters to the editor of the *Journal of Singing* detailing why it is offensive. However, "commercial" is an important part of the term and warrants further discussion. Let's begin with a few definitions according to Merriam-Webster:

1) occupied with or engaged in commerce or work intended for commerce;
2) viewed with regard to profit;
3) designed for a large market.[7]

To clarify, "commerce" is defined as "the exchange or buying and selling of commodities on a large scale."[8] In our context, commercial denotes consumer spending patterns as they relate to vocal music. The word commercial does not deny that one is an artist, it simply delineates the way the art is funded. For corporate labels such as Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group, artists are funded by record sales to the general public. In 2016, those sales totaled $7.7 billion with another $7.3 billion in revenue coming from live concerts.[9] With so much money at stake, profitability is a key factor in decisions related to artist development. A hit song can cost upward of one million dollars to write, record, and release.[10] If record labels do not believe they can recoup their money, they are not going to support the artist and their songs.

For classical musicians in the United States, funding comes primarily through wealthy donors and grant organizations. For instance, Opera America reports that only 27% of the industry's $1.1 billion income comes from box office sales; the other $803 million of their operating expenses are funded by donations, grants, and returns on investments.[11] The performances produced by these companies are not being sustained by individual audience demand, but rather through benefactors who believe in the art form and are willing to donate money to keep it alive. In comparison, Broadway shows earned $1.37 billion in box office sales during the 2016–2017 season.[12] Like the music recording industry, Broadway shows are for-profit ventures. Without box office income from the general public, Broadway shows go out of business. While, it is true that Broadway shows are funded by investors, those individuals, in fact, are seeking a return on their investment.[13] If investors do not see potential at least to break even, they will not provide funding to get a project off the ground.

Clearly there is a massive difference in consumer spending among these diverse groups.[14] If opera had to live by the same financial structure as for-profit businesses without donors to underwrite production costs, it would likely cease to exist. As indicated earlier, the term commercial does not define the quality of the music; it simply denotes how the art is funded. Classical music in the United States is donor funded, whereas nonclassical music is audience funded; thus, we call it "commercial."

THE NEED FOR INDIVIDUALIZED ATTENTION

In her article, LoVetri was clear that "each CCM style needs to be taken seriously on its own terms."[15] However, anecdotal evidence suggests many voice teachers and researchers were still clumping all nonclassical styles together under the blanket term "contemporary commercial music" without delineating the different qualities that make each style unique. In the early years of establishing the new term, this was understandable as research was sparse and only a few published texts and workshops were available to offer continuing education. However, times have changed. We now have an

ever-expanding body of research, numerous doctoral dissertations, and a growing number of continuing education workshops available for the various styles under this umbrella. Lumping all CCM styles together as a singular group is now beginning to hold us back from taking our training of these artists to the next level. We will look at some of the differences that need to be considered when teaching commercial and music theater performers and why we should consider them two separate but equal groups.

THE INTRICACIES OF MUSIC THEATER

Music theater spans more than 150 years, from *The Black Crook* (1866) to the present day.[16] While there are not as many subgenres of music theater as there are in contemporary commercial music, performers still encounter significant differences when navigating traditional (musical drama and musical comedy), contemporary (concept and book musicals), and pop/rock musicals (jukebox and original works written for the stage by commercial artists). These subgenres require in-depth study to attain mastery, study that goes beyond the technical distinctions between legit, belt, and mix.

Traditional shows often contain multiple styles. "Legit" songs developed out of the operetta tradition and require the singer to integrate elements of classical technique. Think of show stoppers such as "Soliloquy" from *Carousel*, "Glitter and Be Gay" from *Candide*, and "Tonight" from *West Side Story*. These songs require seamless transition between registers, a clean legato line, and tasteful use of vibrato. In the case of shows such as *Guys and Dolls*, much of the music resembles Tin Pan Alley era genres, which were musically influenced by ragtime and jazz. The speech-like, rhythmic delivery needed for a song like "I Cain't Say No" from *Oklahoma* is quite different than the long legato lines needed for "Vanilla Ice Cream" from *She Loves Me*. Similarly, a duet such as "If I Loved You" from *Carousel* requires performers to navigate sections of dialogue as well as speech-like and legit singing all within the same piece of music. To successfully perform in a traditional musical, students must not only have the functional knowledge to navigate the technical challenges, but they must also understand how to bring out the intricacies of each musical style within the show.

Contemporary musicals, on the other hand, are driven more by story than their traditional predecessors. Acting was, of course, important in traditional-era music dramas, but beautiful singing would often take precedence. In contemporary shows, acting is often considered to be of greater importance than singing, sometimes resulting in casting choices that place a great actor who sings on the stage over a great singer who acts. Contemporary shows require many different technical abilities than their traditional counterparts, and in many cases the singer must be able to sustain belt or mix through long, high phrases. Whereas the highest belt notes in traditional musicals were usually B_4 and C_5 (with an occasional D_5), contemporary musicals often push the belt voice to $F^{\#}_5$ and higher. Examples include "Defying Gravity" from *Wicked*, "Once upon a Time" from *BKLYN*, and "I'm Here" from *The Color Purple*.

Contemporary shows take advantage of the intimacy that can be conveyed with the use of microphones. Songs such as "Still Hurting" from *The Last Five Years* and "With You" from *Ghost* would be impossible to present on stage in the premicrophone era. Many composers of contemporary pop shows take the use of audio technology to the next level by exploiting the power of recording studio technology in the creative process. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was released as a concept album in 1970 and made its Broadway debut a year later in 1971. However, in previous decades the cast recordings were usually not recorded until after the show had opened. This shift in the distribution of recordings had a huge impact on audience expectations. When the audience has the opportunity to listen to the recording before seeing a show on stage, it changes their expectations of the live performance. Modern audiences want to hear a consistent performance; they expect that the singing on Broadway, the West End, or on tour will closely resemble what they have been listening to on their devices. In essence, musicals became franchises, especially those that were part of the "British Invasion" that included *Cats, The Phantom of the Opera, Les Misérables,* and *Miss Saigon.*[17]

The success of *Jesus Christ Superstar* not only influenced what audiences expected to hear in the theater, but it also helped fuel the contemporary pop movement in music theater. In this style, theater composers began copying popular music idioms and combining them with

music theater traditions and conventions. Beginning in the 1970s, a series of revues created around the music of commercial artists—including *The Night that Made America Famous, Beatlemania,* and *Ain't Misbehavin'*—led to an explosion of shows called "jukebox musicals."

There are also numerous original shows written by pop/rock artists for the stage, such as *Promises, Promises, Spring Awakening*, *American Idiot*, and *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*. Both jukebox and original pop/rock musicals require performers to journey beyond the vocal and physical skills that are commonly taught in university music theater training programs. These shows require rhythmic singing, vocal fry, growls, riffing, and a wide range of other stylistic tools that must be adapted for the storytelling needs of music theater. Because of all these differences, today's music theater voice teachers need an in-depth knowledge of music theater history and style—including pop/rock and classical—to help their students succeed in the business.

AMPLIFIED VERSUS UNAMPLIFIED SINGING

Commercial artists often view the microphone as an extension of their instrument. The advent of the electric microphone around 1925 made it possible for artists to convey a more intimate and conversational tone than was possible in the earlier days of acoustic recordings. While acoustic power had been a vital component of success in previous centuries, the microphone could amplify every little nuance of the voice, thus eliminating the need for a singer's formant. Radio and jazz band singers quickly adopted the new technology and exploited the possibilities. By using microphones, they were able to create an artificial sense of intimacy with their audiences on the other side of the radio and allowed listeners to feel as if they were in the same room as the performer.[18] In the early days of microphone use, this breathy style of singing was called "crooning" and was received harshly by critics. Al Bowlly, for example, wrote, "Let us pause for a moment to examine this word 'crooning.' It is a horrible expression . . . associated with all the unpleasant, smeary, wobbling vocalisms that one ever heard . . . Their efforts vary between 'a low moaning sound, as of animals in pain' to 'the soft singing of a mother to her child'."[19]

However, female audience members were much more receptive: "Dear Rudy—you saved the day! The long tedious day—you whose heart was bared that we all might be uplifted . . . There is a haunting tenderness of touch in your voice so like your music—it is astounding how closely allied your voice is to your music—it thrills and soothes" (from a fan letter to Rudy Vallee, Manhasset, Long Island, 1928).[20]

As author Paula Lockheart states, the microphone gave the voice "sex."[21] Vocal qualities that were usually reserved for lovers in intimate moments were now being streamed over the airwaves into wooden boxes sitting in the owner's living room and providing a new and provocative experience for listeners. The controversy no doubt influenced voice teachers' opinions of the techniques necessary to sing this way, a bias that continues to exist today in some circles, although probably for different reasons than those expressed by Lockheart.

Audio technology considerations are more complex in music theater. While all modern Broadway shows are heavily amplified, it was not always that way; from *The Black Crook* to the late 1930s, microphones were not used at all. Shows such as *Porgy and Bess*, *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma*, and *Carousel* had operatic qualities that required singers to project acoustically with a strong singer's formant in order to be heard over the orchestra. In Tin Pan Alley-style shows, the singing was speech-like but required a trumpet-like timbre to carry to the back of the theater.

Around 1939, producers sporadically began using floor microphones to boost the voices of performers on stage.[22] By the 1960s, hanging, shotgun, and wireless microphones were being utilized. It was not until *Hair* in 1968 that microphones were purposely used to create a rock concert atmosphere that pushed sound pressure levels beyond what singers could create acoustically.[23] In 1981, *Cats* became the first musical in which every cast member was wearing a wireless microphone.[24]

In sum, there is approximately a 100-year period, 1866 until the late 1960s, during which musicals were written to be performed without amplification. Productions since 1981 have been written with amplification in mind. That leaves a hole in the middle—from 1968 to 1981—when the industry was in transition. Yet all musicals since *The Black Crook* technically fall under

the umbrella term "contemporary commercial music," at least as the term is currently being used.

If you take all of the above into consideration, the argument could be made that what we are really discussing when comparing traditional music theater, contemporary music theater, commercial music, and classical music is a difference between amplified and unamplified singing. Renowned voice scientist Ingo Titze has suggested that perhaps we would be better categorizing singing styles as acoustic and amplified rather than classical and CCM when it comes to voice science and functional training.[25] This argument has considerable merit.

COMMERCIAL GENRES ON RADIO VERSUS COMMERCIAL GENRES IN MUSICALS

While music theater is increasingly integrating commercial genres, the resulting performances are still uniquely theatrical. *Hamilton* brought rap to mainstream culture through Broadway, but the style of Lin-Manuel's writing is quite different than that of Kanye, Snoop Dogg, Jay-Z, or any of the other platinum selling hip-hop artists that account for 18.2% of the music listened to by Americans.[26] Shows such as *Spring Awakening, Waitress*, and *Diner* are written by famous commercial artists, but the final product resembles "music theater" more than Top 40. It is hard to imagine "Mama Who Bore Me" from *Spring Awakening* playing alongside "Bad Day" by Daniel Powter on Top 40 radio, even though both songs are written by chart topping artists. Yet it is also startling for some to hear "Pinball Wizard" juxtaposed with "If I Loved You" or even a contemporary piece such as "Here I Am" from *The Drowsy Chaperone*. While all the songs listed above come from musicals, they could not be more different.

Because performers in pop/rock musicals must also act and dance, most come from formal training programs and therefore carry over traditional vocal qualities—including "ring" and vibrato. While some commercial artists also have these traits, they are less common than what you will hear on the Broadway stage. For example, listen to the original recording of Green Day's *American Idiot* and then listen to the Broadway cast recording, or compare the cast recording of *Rock of Ages* to the recordings of the original artists. While pop/rock musicals have proliferated on Broadway in the last decade, these shows live in their own category; they are neither traditional music theater nor mainstream commercial music. They require a unique skill set that merges elements of both CCM and music theater styles and technique.

TECHNIQUE CONSIDERATIONS

What are the implications for singing teachers when training music theater as opposed to commercial performers? The following discussion outlines several technical categories for consideration.

Tonal Goals

Many tonal goal considerations come to mind when discussing the differences among CCM styles. Tonal goals for music theater are clear, thanks to decades of cast recordings that have archived the aesthetics of various creative teams. As one listens to cast recordings, one finds that it is standard for Adelaide from *Guys and Dolls* to sing with nasality and Eponine from *Les Misérables* to possess a strong chest-mix belt. If a performer enters an audition room and sings "Adelaide's Lament" with Italianate vowels or "On My Own" in head-mix, she has no chance of booking the show. Casting directors do want to hear unique takes on decades old songs, but within limits. For instance, they do not want to hear "Maria" from *West Side Story* performed with vocal fry and riffing. They do, however, want to hear a nice legato line with appropriate registration, timbre, and judicious use of vibrato that will appeal to modern taste. When casting directors say they want a performer to "make a song his or her own," they are talking about a unique take on the character and acting choices that convey that unique point of view.

In pop/rock musicals, it is sometimes desirable to hire a singer that can mimic another performer. Think, for instance, of productions such as *Beautiful, Million Dollar Quartet,* and *Jersey Boys*. All of these shows need performers who can imitate the vocal quality of the original artists. To do so usually requires some form of vocal tract manipulation. While manipulation of the vocal tract is frequently looked upon with disdain by functional pedagogues, it is often necessary when working on jukebox and biographic productions.

In contrast, outside of cover bands, karaoke contestants, and Elvis impersonators, we rarely encounter professional solo artists in commercial styles who want to imitate someone else. The voice teachers who work with solo artists must focus on the tastes and desires of the performer in front of them. They must find functional pathways to protecting vocal health while maintaining the artist's unique timbre, all while making sure any adjustments are acceptable to the creative team. With solo artists, there are no limits—creating new and unusual sounds can often be the ticket to success.

Storytelling

Even though both music theater and commercial artists are in the business of telling stories, there are vast differences in the tools they use to craft a performance. When working with a commercial artist, the teacher can help bring the words and notes of the composer, who is often also the artist, to life. Most solo artists are part of the songwriting process to some extent and are either singing directly about their own life experience or relating it to something that is deeply personal to them.

Music theater performers are rarely part of the creative process and must therefore develop techniques that enable them to personalize the life experiences they are conveying. In most instances, music theater performers try to see the piece through the eyes of the character they are portraying and use that lens to bring the work to life. They spend years studying the acting techniques of teachers such as Stanislavsky, Chekhov, Meisner, Hagen, Adler, Strasberg, and others to give them the tools necessary to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances.

Voice teachers working with these diverse groups must understand these differences and develop their toolboxes to help their clients be successful in each situation. Not every voice teacher will function as an acting/performance coach for his or her clients; however, they must at least understand the industry expectations to make sure that what they are asking for vocally will complement performance practice and not inhibit the singer's ability to communicate effectively.

Performance Demands

Performance demands also have an impact on how we train CCM and music theater singers. The Broadway performer who must perform eight shows a week has a different set of challenges than the praise and worship leader who primarily performs on Sundays. The Billboard chart-topping solo artist who travels to ten states in the course of a single month has different challenges than the studio singer in Los Angeles. Those with day jobs who perform locally in the evenings have still another set of challenges. Gigging singers need to learn how to work with sound equipment, talk to sound board operators, conserve their voices at the merchandise table, and stay vocally healthy while travelling across country. If a client is playing multi-hour sets, he must learn to craft a playlist that will help him avoid fatigue.

Music theater performers must learn how to sing pop/rock, traditional, and contemporary pop shows back-to-back in the course of an eight-week summer stock season without getting fatigued. They must also learn how to sing with good technique while dancing, which is no small challenge. The pedagogue who works with these diverse populations must be able to help the performers develop coping strategies. Although performers in both scenarios are performing CCM styles, the skill set needed to overcome the specific challenges encountered in each situation is unique.

BEYOND THE STAGE AND RECORDING STUDIO

If we look beyond music theater performers and solo artists, we quickly find a plethora of other groups in desperate need of our help that are often lacking professional training by specialized pedagogues. Music therapists are being asked to perform a wider range of styles than ever before, most of which are commercial. However, in most university programs they are not being trained to sing anything other than classical, a style they will likely never sing in a clinical setting. There are also *a cappella* pop groups at nearly every university that require performers to use a different technical approach than they are usually learning in their degree programs. Middle and high school show choirs are using commercial styles in their performances as well as music theater repertoire. Most directors of these groups have graduated from the traditional (classical) university structure and lack pedagogic tools to help their students unless they have spent their own time and money on continuing education. Until commercial and music theater pedagogy

courses are offered in higher education as part of the curriculum, we cannot expect that this status quo situation will improve.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The acceptance of the term contemporary commercial music was a major step toward breaking through non-classical singing barriers that had existed for decades. However, as the dust continues to settle, it becomes increasingly clearer that we cannot think of CCM styles as requiring only one singular skill set. Fact-based pedagogy, which is quickly becoming the gold standard in our profession, enables teachers to dissect technical issues and provide appropriate corrections. As discussed in the previous pages, however, we have a lot of work to do in becoming proficient at understanding and addressing all of the intricacies of individual CCM genres.

The increasing complexities in the ever expanding worlds of CCM and music theater have important implications for voice pedagogues, and specialists are emerging for each respective genre. While many singing teachers still have "a foot in each pond," it is becoming increasingly common for teachers to specialize in one or the other. In 2013, the International Congress of Voice Teachers (ICVT) in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, acknowledged the distinction between music theater and CCM when they established three conference "tracks" and a keynote speaker for each: Håkan Hagegård (classical), Mary Saunders-Barton (music theater), and Daniel Zangger Borch (CCM). The establishment of the Musical Theater Educators Alliance (MTEA) in 1999 and Association for Popular Music Education (APME) in 2010 also highlights the distinct and emerging needs of each community.

While the term contemporary commercial music has been crucial to the advancement of our profession, we must take into account that it was created as an umbrella term. One CCM voice pedagogy workshop is not enough to make a teacher of singing an expert in all of these styles; it is only a starting place on a personal voyage. It is time we turn our focus to illuminating the internal differences among CCM styles rather than dwelling on the external differences (i.e., classical versus CCM). If we do this, we can have an even greater impact on generations of singers to come.

NOTES

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He has presented at the National Association of Teachers of Singing National Conference, Voice Foundation Annual Symposium, Acoustical Society of America, Southeastern Theatre Conference, Musical Theatre Educators Alliance, Pan-American Vocology Association, and at numerous universities and NATS chapters throughout the United States and Canada. In 2017, he was awarded the Van L. Lawrence Fellowship from the Voice Foundation and NATS. In 2018, he served as a master teacher for the NATS Intern Program. Online at CCMInstitute.com, EdwardsVoice.com, AuditioningForCollege.com, and EdwardsVoice.Wordpress.com.

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Lay me on an anvil, O god.
Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar.
Let me pry loose old walls.
Let me lift and loosen old foundations.

Lay me on an anvil, O God.
Beat me and hammer me into a steel spike.
Drive me into the girders that hold a
skyscraper together.
Take red-hot rivets and fasten me into
the central girders.
Let me be the great nail holding a skyscraper
through blue nights into white stars.

Carl Sandburg, "Prayers of Steel"