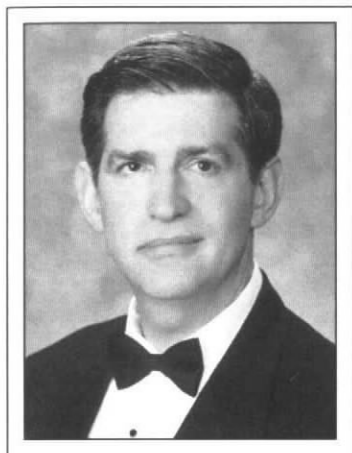


From Classical to Pop: A Case Study



Robert Edwin

Most students take voice lessons to improve their singing style of choice, whether it be early Baroque or late alternative rock. Some, however, come to the voice teacher's studio to add to their style of choice, for example, a musical theater soprano who needs to learn how to belt. Still others come to define more clearly the several styles in which they are already singing.

It was with the latter intent that Ms. LBG contacted this teacher's studio in the spring of 1999. A forty-seven-year-old, classically-trained mezzo, Ms. LBG had recently recorded a CD of original, contemporary Christian and pop-based songs and had experienced difficulty creating the nonclassical style necessary for the repertoire.

My evaluation after reviewing her CD was that Ms. LBG was guilty of the same artistic simplification that typifies the crossover efforts of many opera singers, including Kiri

Te Kanawa and Thomas Hampson, namely, that a nonclassical style can be achieved merely by singing with less vocal intensity than that used in the traditional classical style.

At our first session together, I told Ms. LBG that nonclassical singing requires not only a change in voice, but changes in vocal technique, the use of language, characterization, and the way one accesses emotions as well.

I suggested we do a comparative study: a side by side comparison of classical and nonclassical vocal and performing techniques. We began with simple triads, sung first in a classical style. Not surprisingly, Ms. LBG produced consistent, professional level sounds. However, when she attempted the triads with a more conversational and colloquial sound, both pitch and presence suffered. Significantly, she said that she had never vocalized as a nonclassical singer, and therefore hadn't established the vocal technique necessary to create as natural and spontaneous a style as was evident in her classical singing.

As we isolated and compared other factors in vocal technique, such as vibrato, mouth positions, and loudness levels, my new student was astounded at the measurable differences between classical and nonclassical vocalizations. For example, she found it difficult to delay the vibrato's arrival after onset. Her classical training had emphasized, quite correctly, that vibrato begins at the onset of phonation. When she tried to be-

gin the sound as a straight tone, she often lost the pitch center. When the vibrato finally did appear, it was of an intensity and periodicity normally reserved for classical repertoire.

Ms. LBG also experienced difficulty keeping the vowels lighter (more treble—dominant) at B above middle-C and higher. The horizontal mouth position common in many nonclassical styles quickly gave way to the vertical "long mouth" classical position as the pitches ascended. She also discovered that when she tried to crescendo in a nonclassical style, the vowel, vibrato, and loudness levels naturally migrated to a classical sound.

Throughout this initial comparative process, Ms. LBG, a microbiologist and voice teacher as well as a singer, provided incisive feedback. Her analytical mind quickly captured the concepts. Her frustration came in the execution of same. She said, "I know what the classical voice feels like. I don't know how the nonclassical voice is supposed to feel." The comparative vocalizations were enough to point out some of the reasons for the technical and stylistic problems she encountered when making her CD. She was now anxious to correct those problems.

One exercise that proved to be extremely helpful involved going from speech to singing. Ms. LBG would say a number conversationally on an unsustained pitch. She would then try to sing that same number in the same conversational tone on a sustained pitch. Initially,

she noticed a measurable change in the vocal quality when shifting from a speech tone to a singing tone. Gradually, however, she was able to bring the two vocalizations into very close proximity.

More progress came when she said, "I must give myself permission to try new sounds." She shared with me some of the criticism she had received from both the classical ("you sound too pop/Broadway") and non-classical ("you sound too classical") camps, and her reluctance to leave the "no man's land" of the middle ground in which she had found herself.

I half jokingly said, "No matter what you do, somebody will hate it." Music is not the universal language many people claim it to be. Ms. LBG had to find her voice in this nonclassical venue she chose to explore, and she had to work hard to make it spontaneous and emotionally honest.

Many more discoveries followed in subsequent lessons. She found that her pop soprano far exceeded the vocal range of her classical mezzo voice because the pop sound carried far less vocal weight into the higher notes. She also realized that her acoustically-driven mentality to project to the back of the performance space was a detriment in her pop singing since the microphone rendered projection moot. Singing conversationally into the mike helped her tell her story far more effectively and efficiently.

Another microphone-related learning involved emotions. I told Ms. LBG that most classical singers pull back on their sound when they use a mike. What these singers don't realize is that often they pull back emotionally as well. She noticed that the more emotionally involved she

became in the pop music, the more classical she sounded. It became obvious that if she wished to perform her pop music repertoire more authentically, she would have to develop a new emotional base with new communication skills that would trigger the nonclassical singing techniques. Passion, she learned, has a style as well.

Whether leading a student from Bach to rock, or from rock to Bach, the teacher must continually remind the singer that a style consists of much more than just sound. Style is informed by vocal technique, characterization, use of language, point of view, traditional expectations of the audience, and perhaps most important, the desire to tell a story honestly and entertainingly. As for Ms. LBG, our work together continues.

Robert Edwin, baritone, has sung Bach cantatas in cathedrals and rock songs in Greenwich Village coffeehouses. 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 led to an equally diverse teaching career. A leading international authority on both non-classical and child vocal pedagogy, he preaches what he practices 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. He was also a contributing editor for VocalEase magazine.

In addition to writing "The Bach to Rock Connection," he has served NATS as president of the New Jersey Chapter, and as a presenter/clinician at NATS National Conventions, Summer Workshops, 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: Edwising@aol.com

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- comments from 1999 participants