From Classical to Pop: A Case Study

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 begin 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. Grad-
ually, 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 re-
ceived 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 nonclas-
sical venue she chose to explore, and
she had to work hard to make it sponta-
nous 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 pro-
ject to the back of the performance
space was a detriment in her pop
singing since the microphone ren-
dered projection moot. Singing con-
versationally 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 ob-
vious that if she wished to perform
her pop music repertoire more au-
thenically, she would have to devel-
up a new emotional base with new
communication skills that would
trigger the nonclassical singing tech-
niques. 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, charac-
terization, use of language, point of
view, traditional expectations of the
audience, and perhaps most impor-
tant, the desire to tell a story honest-
ly 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 lead-
ing 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 adjunc-
tive voice faculties of Burlington and
Camden County Colleges, and on the fac-
ulty 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
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extremely useful in any form of vocal
music.”

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of information from clinicians and choral
conductors, but much of that seems to
have been only half true. I wish all
choral directors and adjudicators would
attend and use this information.”

“An excellent tool for all singers and
teachers... life changing for me. I
highly recommend it for anyone who
teaches or studies voice.”

- comments from 1999 participants

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