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Repertoire Considerations for Singing Popular Music

Adam Koopmans

Appleby College and Metalworks Institute, Ontario, Canada

INTRODUCTION

One does not have to look far to see there has been a large shift in topics over the last few decades in voice education offerings. No longer exclusively the domain of classical singing, workshops, courses, and writings on other styles of music are now nothing out of the ordinary. While there has been a gradual move to include other styles—and this has very much been the case in regard to conversations about things like technique—there are still aspects of singing voice pedagogy and practice that appear to retain a more traditional or classically-influenced approach. One such area is the consideration of repertoire in CCM (Contemporary Commercial Music) styles (also referred to as "Popular Music" in some parts of academia). This article looks at a few of the primary differences in approaching repertoire between traditional singing contexts, such as opera, choral, and "legit" singing (in some musical theatre), and more modern styles such as pop, rock, jazz, and country.

INDIVIDUALITY AND EXPRESSION

What draws listeners to many popular music styles, is a vocalist's individuality, creativeness, and uniqueness. More technical and trained singers may find themselves wondering why a CCM singer, who is limited technically in one area or another, may well be a regular working professional vocalist. To many of these vocalists' credit, they often humbly do not consider themselves making "beautiful" music or even be "great" singers (Loudwire, 2019). Grunge rocker Chris Cornell, known for his aggressive vocal stylings, once said, "I just want to make some sounds people might not hear the rest of the day" (Gwenwhyfer, 2008). Yet, these singers captivate audiences. This is because the forementioned vocalist traits are more important to the music than the technical goals or skills required for unamplified styles (Lewis, 1999). Yes, it is generally preferable for pitches to be accurate (in the studio this is typically dealt with by a lot of takes, comping, and/or pitch correcting), or to have an impressive range, dynamic capabilities, and other technical prowess, but depending on an artist's chosen genre and tastes, these may be further down the list of priorities, or even unwanted.

Many popular singers get voice instruction later in their careers, not at the beginning. They may start as an instrumentalist or songwriter (Rys, 2022). In such cases, these singers already have a vision for their music and voice, and may already be gigging and recording before taking any formal voice lessons (Seekins, 2022). A knowledgeable voice teacher can help direct their limited time and energy in the most meaningful ways. These kinds of musicians may not be the best candidates for taking on operatic arias, or legit golden age musical theatre repertoire. This is not to say cross-training may not be useful in a perfect world, but for many, they probably *don't have time.* Additionally, for many, trying to improve in one style is enough work already. We do not see classical programs suggesting aspiring opera singers to front a jazz trio, and even a heavy music focused pedagogue like Melissa Cross will tell classical focused students *not* to sing metal (Cross, n.d.).

The best thing a vocal teacher can do with a student of different stylistic background is to work functionally, which is letting the student choose what they are going to do with their voice artistically and supporting these choices. This offers more autonomy towards achieving their goals rather than trying to place a student in the confines and constraints of a repertoire system of a style they are not working towards.

LEARNING METHODS

A common issue with learning popular music styles is the chosen methods and mediums. Classical

music's traditional use of music scores is commonly far less useful for modern songs and styles. A score written by a composer and a transcription are not the same, and often conflated. A score is like a movie script. The creator has given all the relevant information to the interpreter who will read and perform it, and the rest is left open to their interpretation. A transcription is a musician's notated interpretation of a performance. Using a transcription as if it were a score, is akin to someone imitating Robin Williams' Genie character by reading the Aladdin script without seeing the movie. The approaches are not interchangeable as you need to *hear* what you are trying to copy—which is not to say exact imitation is possible or necessary, but there are crucial details that can only be learned through listening. And yet, often, popular music book transcriptions, or arrangements (often still involving transcribing) are treated as scores, and the results are often less than convincing. (There are some artists and educators who are involved in the transcriptions of their work, and in these cases, they can act like a composer.)

The issue is magnified when we see how many errors there are in published popular music. Many songs have multiple versions, and the transcribers/arrangers cannot agree what the pitches are when notated. One reason is the number of bends, slides, and small pitch inflections singers use in these styles. While it is possible to notate a lot of this in western notation, it quickly becomes evident it is not what the system was designed for. The more you notate, the messier it gets, becoming cumbersome or merely academic; certainly not optimal to study and play music from. For rhythm section musicians, this is why the Nashville Number system is used to play through tunes during a gig, as opposed to something like Hal Leonard piano/vocal/guitar books.

Even for students who are exceptional readers, transcribed vocal melodies are still not the best method for learning the nuances in these styles. In fact, it may even be *more* important for strong readers not to rely on this skill, especially if their ears are not at the same level as their reading. Similar to learning a language, grammar books are wonderful, but developing a convincing accent will take a lot of listening and immersion (TED-Ed, 2012).

TECHNIQUE AND VOICE TYPE

Mary Saunders Barton has said "sound technology makes vocal Fach unnecessary." (Hoch, 2018, p. 227) and this is evidently clear in the way different voice types cover each other in CCM settings. If there is a range issue, the key is transposed, usually between 1-3 semitones (not generally noticeable to the audience). Vocalist Haley Reinhart covers some naturally heavier voice women on her *What's That Sound* record, transposing keys slightly to best suit her natural range. When Tim Owens stepped in to replace singer Rob Halford in the well-known metal band Judas Priest—a heavy baritone voice replacing a tenor—he requested the band to tune down a whole step and went on to sing the entire catalogue this way while on tour for years. In other cases, keys are kept the same, with heavier voice types choosing to belt into ranges more natural to lighter voice types. Tom Jones did this frequently in his youth, singing CCR (ODIUPICKU'S CLONE-1, 1970) and The Beatles in original keys (Arizonas9, 1970). Thanks to microphones and compression, a different vocal registration can also be used that is still easily audible to the audience despite its actual acoustic volume output. A great example is Jamie Cullum covering Jeff Buckley's "Lover You Should Have Come Over," where the key is kept the same, yet he finds the notes in a different vocal co-ordination covering a naturally much lighter voiced singer. Because of the flexibility in which keys can be navigated in popular music, the idea of not covering a song from a different voice type is not part of the conversation, like is common in opera and musical theatres genres.

A related concern is the observation of frequent questions in voice communities about, "what's a good baritone country song?," or "soprano rock song for my student?" Only in a choir or a set performance where the key cannot be moved and there is a prominent note that *must* be sung in a technical co-ordination one is incapable of, should song selection be based on an associated range or voice type. In addition to the assistance of technology, a singer can stylistically choose to sing brighter and lighter in many CCM genres, easing vocal production (Saunders-Barton, 2018). Overall, if the audience accepts it, then it is acceptable.

IN SUMMARY

These practices are not original to this article, nor to any one pedagogue, or method. They are simply observations about CCM styles in operation. The second letter in CCM is "commercial" which suggests the requirement that an audience supports the work financially (even if it is referred to as popular music, the point remains). These observations are taken from working singers and

performers and their professional needs; not from the opinions of critics or educators who may have their own thoughts on how these styles *should* be sung or performed. The aim of this article is to bring an awareness to what appears to be a frequent discordance in education traditions and the needs of many working CCM singers.

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BIOGRAPHY

Adam Koopmans is a touring vocalist/guitarist, producer, and educator from Ontario, Canada. A voice teacher at Appleby College and Metalworks Institute, he is a graduate of Berklee College of Music with a masters from Western University. He has worked with musicians from notable Canadian acts including Avril Lavigne, The Arkells, and Big Wreck. Adam focuses on synthesizing voice education literature and research with the practical performing and recording realities of popular music styles. He continues to sing, teach, and write with great interest in the progression of voice education.