

Understanding the Vocal Skill Set for Contemporary Christian Singers: Insights from Elite Singers

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ABSTRACT: The American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS), advocates that CCM singers should be taught with dedicated pedagogical approaches for each style. Recent studies, however, suggest that most contemporary Christian singers (CCS) do not receive style-appropriate vocal training. It is possible that voice teachers are not fully aware of the skill set necessary for a CCS to be successful. In this context, elite CCSs, as models of excellence, may be able to help the voice community bridge this gap and identify the ideal skill set and the best pedagogical approach for the commercial success of CCSs. For this study, we interviewed three top selling, elite CCSs with extensive experience and recognised as highly representative of their style, aiming to understand the ideal vocal skill set of commercially successful CCSs. According to the participants, ideal CCS voices should use a pop sound and not sound too classical, should sing easily, comfortably, and with freedom. The singing should be not distracting and use good diction in order to be able to communicate the message clearly. Among the most relevant findings is the suggestion that CCSs have a heavy and demanding vocal load and are at risk for vocal injury. This finding is consistent to previous studies that suggest similar issues. We hope that our findings will help the development of more appropriate private studio strategies for CCSs. Future research for this population of singers may include analysis of worship applied voice curricula.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Christian singers (CCS) are a growing category of religious music singer (Brown, 2012). Terminology related to this style of singing has been debated for several years. The term “Contemporary Christian Music singers” or “CCM singers” was used initially, however the acronym “CCM” is now strongly associated with Contemporary Commercial Music, a term coined by Jeannette LoVetri (LoVetri, 2002). To avoid confusion, we will use the terms CCS (Contemporary Christian Singer) and WL (Worship Leader) for the purpose of this study. We understand that these terms are not ideal, but in the United States these terms are commonly accepted in the singing community.

Contemporary Christian music and particularly the Praise and Worship style (P&W),

has achieved great economic success in the music industry and even surpassed more established genres such as classical and jazz (Nielsen Christian Soundscan, 2016; Ingalls, 2008; Lindenbaum, 2013). P&W is the preferred musical style used by CCSs. Within P&W style, songs are usually performed in congregational worship services and have easy-to-learn melodies, a comfortable range, and often feature repetitive choruses (Neto, 2010). Even when performed in a concert setting, songs are used for communal worship within P&W style.

CCSs in many cases fill multiple roles, acting simultaneously as worship leader, singer/songwriter, producer, and even pastor (Radionoff, 2015). Because of the similarity of roles and vocal characteristics, CCSs and Worship Leaders (WL) are sometimes grouped as a single category of singers (Neto, 2010; Dawson, 2005; Robinson, 2003). Monique Ingalls (Ingalls, 2008) likens their music and vocal production to pop-rock, and Howard suggests that of all popular music styles, rock is the strongest influence on contemporary Christian music (Howard, 1992). Some authors have logically concluded that CCSs/WLs should be classified as a sub-set of contemporary commercial music (CCM) singers (Weekly & LoVetri, 2009; Robinson, 2011).

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS) advocates that CCM singers should be taught with dedicated pedagogical approaches for each style (NATS, 2008). Dawson, however, suggests that most CCSs/WLs are not trained primarily in contemporary styles (Dawson, 2005, p. 9). In spite of the growing number of training opportunities for CCSs/WLs, it is possible that these singers are not receiving the most appropriate type of preparation and training for their specific style demands (Radionoff, 2015). Due to the scarcity of studies on this population of singers, it is possible that voice teachers are not aware of the skill set necessary for a CCS to be successful. If this dearth of knowledge is not addressed, an under-served population of singers

may have suboptimal vocal training and be at-risk of higher rates of vocal pathology.

The term “elite” typically refers to “a group of people considered to be superior in a society or organisation” (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2008), and elite singers often represent models of excellence (as selected by the marketplace) for each music style (Hall, 2014; Hines, 2012; Brower, 1996). However, there may be a disconnect between what voice teachers and elite Christian singers see as the ideal voice for CCSs. An investigation on elite CCSs may help the voice community bridge this gap and identify the ideal skill set and the best pedagogical approach to help voice students, potential professional CCSs, achieve commercial success.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to investigate the self-identified vocal skill set of commercially successful CCSs/WLs, as perceived by top selling, elite CCSs with extensive experience and recognised as highly representative of their style. This study aimed to answer the following research questions: What vocal skill set do elite CCSs observe in singers of this style with commercial potential? What do elite CCSs perceive to be the ideal vocal characteristics of CCSs/WLs?

METHOD

We obtained data through semi-structured interviews, using a qualitative study approach, most appropriate for naturalistic inquiry (Erlandson, Skipper, Allen, & Harris, 1993; Patton, 1990). The methodology for this present study was based on a previous study with similar goals, targeting music producers specialised in contemporary Christian music (Neto & Meyer, 2016). The current study used a similar methodology because it addresses a similar research problem, albeit seeking insights from a different population (elite CCS singers). We hope that these results will help identify skills that elite CCS singers believe are necessary for success in their profession. Participants included in this study were top selling professional CCSs, Dove or Grammy award winners or nominees, with extensive experience in the market and recognised as highly representative of the style.

Participants

Due to the nature of our sampling criteria, we opted for an expert sampling method approach. Expert sampling is a purposive sampling technique that targets participants who have a distinct expertise (Zafar, Ganguly, Gummadi, & Ghosh, 2015). We quickly realised that elite CCSs represent a very small and specific population in the US, are difficult to contact and with extremely busy schedules. In that sense, expert sampling, which typically includes small sample sizes, seemed to be the most appropriate and viable option for our study (Zafar, Ganguly, Gummadi, & Ghosh, 2015; Bruce, Langley, & Tjale, 2008).

As mentioned before, we based our methodology on a previous study; in that particular study, three music producers specialised in contemporary Christian music were asked to name singers that best represent the vocal qualities necessary for successful CCS. We selected our potential participants from data collected in our previous study (Neto & Meyer, 2016). After gathering data from the cited study, we ranked the CCSs by the following criteria: 1) CCSs named by all three producers; 2) CCSs named by two producers; 3) CCSs named by only one of the producers; 4) Multiple Grammy or Dove award winners; 5) Single Dove and Grammy award winners; 6) Single Dove or Grammy award winners; 7) Grammy and Dove award nominees; 8) Grammy or Dove award nominees. Singers who were not at least nominated for a Grammy or Dove award at the time of our study, were not considered. The Dove Awards is the most prestigious award in the Christian music industry (GMA, 2022). The Grammy Awards is the main music industry award and includes a category for contemporary Christian music (Grammy Awards, 2022). We then proceeded with contacting the singers according to the rank, starting with the highest to the lowest rank. The singers were contacted via e-mail, mostly through their official webpages. The singers who did not have an official webpage were contacted via social media webpages. After proceeding with the sampling protocol, contacting CCSs according to our pre-determined ranking, we received four responses. We identified the three singers with higher rankings and discarded the fourth one. Two of the participants were interviewed by Skype and one of them by phone.

Data collection

Data for our study were collected through semi-structured interviews. Each interview took between

twenty and twenty-five minutes. The participants were interviewed via Skype or by phone and the interviews were recorded using Voice Record, a recording application for iPad, and MP3 Skype recorder software for Skype interviews. All interviews were conducted and recorded by the first author (L.N.). Only the audio of the interviews was recorded. After the transcription, the interviews were peer checked by the second author (D.M.) and member checked by the participants. Each CCS received a transcript of his/her interview and were asked to check if their ideas were accurately transcribed. The participants had a chance to delete, add, or change the transcript content. None of the participants made any corrections. The participants answered the following interview questions:

1. We all know that an ideal Christian singer should have a solid theological background and an unquestionable ministry calling; but, from a strictly vocal perspective, how would you describe the basic characteristics of successful CCS voices?
2. What do you think makes a good voice for a CCS?
3. What type of vocal training do most CCSs you know have?
4. What type of vocal training do you think CCSs should have?
5. How important is it for the voice teacher of a CCSs to have performing and training experience in contemporary Christian music styles?
6. Is there anything that you would like to add or that I might have forgotten to ask?

Human Ethics Approval

All interviews were conducted in full compliance with Shenandoah University IRB policies and procedures. The participants freely consented to their participation and to the publication of these results through a signed consent form.

Analysis

We applied a qualitative content analysis approach to our data (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). Two levels of codes were created: “parent” codes, broader, easier to apply, defining major concepts that apply to the research questions, and “children” codes, which were more detailed, nuanced and harder to apply in reliable ways, but helped to enrich the content (Gough & Scott, 2000) (See Figure 1 for a complete list of codes). These codes were based on the methodology used in the previous study (Neto & Meyer, 2016). The interviews were transcribed and then coded thematically, using the qualitative research software Dedoose 7.0.23®. Parent codes were applied first and then children codes. This process was applied twice in each interview by the primary researcher and checked for accuracy by the secondary researcher. After coding the interviews, we selected parent codes with occurrences in all three participants and identified key words or themes that could summarise each coded statement. We then proceeded to locate keywords with similar meaning across these occurrences. After that, we applied the same protocol to children codes. Keywords or themes relevant to the research questions and with occurrence in more than one participant were considered significant. We did this process until we reached saturation and the same keywords started to appear constantly in co-occurrences.

Voice Characteristics	Vocal Technique	Artistry and Expression	Training	Musicianship	Vocal Health	Personality
Intonation	Breath support	Repertoire selection	Classical Training			
Range	Diction	Stage presence	Improvisation			
Resonance	Registration	Style	Recording experience			
Stamina	Speech	Versatility				
Tone						
Voice type						

Figure 1. Parent and children codes

RESULTS

The largest occurrences of parent codes were: Training (59), Voice Characteristics (44), Artistry and Expression (29), Vocal Technique (22), and Vocal Health (17). The largest occurrences of children codes were: Style (18), Classical Training (16), Range (13), Tone (11), and Repertoire selection (9). (See Figure 2 for a complete list of code application). The largest co-occurrences were: Artistry and Expression x Style (21), Training x Classical Training (18), Voice Characteristics x Tone (17), Voice Characteristics x Range (14), and Voice Characteristics x Voice type (11).

Parent codes with occurrences across all three participants were: Voice Characteristics, Vocal Technique, Artistry and Expression, Training, Vocal Health, and Personality. Children codes with occurrences in all three participants were: Tone, Range, Voice Type, Registration, Repertoire selection, Style, and Classical training.

For the purposes of reporting results, the participants will be represented as follows: Singer 1 (S1), Singer 2 (S2), and Singer 3 (S3). All quotations and excerpts extracted from the interviews will be represented in italics.

Parent codes

Under the parent code *Training*, the participants seem to suggest that CCSs should seek for some type of vocal training; this can be verified in keywords and expressions such as *Hone your craft* (S1), *Practice* (S3), *Preparation* (S3), and *Mentor* (S3). S3 used the expression *skilled and trained*, as a religious command to encourage CCSs to seek constant training. The participants were not specific in terms of what is the ideal type of training for CCSs, but keywords such as *Belmont* (S1), *American Idol* (S1), *Speech level singing* (S2), *Easy singing* (S2), and *Blaylock* (S2) may suggest a commercial (CCM) approach. At the same time, the participants in general think that classical singing is beneficial for the training of CCSs, as they applied terms such as *Appropriate singing* (S1), *Good technique* (S2), *Singing properly* (S1), and *Open throat* (S2), when asked about classical training for CCSs. The participants also employed terms that suggest that knowledge and experience with sound reinforcement technology is important for the training of CCSs: *Recorded material* (S2), *Sound systems* (S2), *Ear monitors* (S2), *Mic technique* (S2). When asked about what type of training most CCSs they know have, the participants said that

most have *No training* (S2), *Some training* (S3), *Basic vocal technique* (S2), or *Singing in church* (S1).

Under *Voice Characteristics*, we identified the keywords *Common voice* (S2), *Normal* (S2), *Not beautiful* (S2), *Not Great singer* (S1), and *Vulnerable voice* (S1), suggesting that CCS voices have conversational vocal textures. The participants seem to encourage vocal features such as *Rasp* (S1), *Rough sound* (S2), *Cut through the noise* (S2), and *Sing hard* (S1), but at the same time suggest that CCS voices should be *Not too strained* (S1), have a *Clear sound* (S1), *Clarity* (S2), and *Little vibrato* (S3).

In terms of *Artistry and Expression*, the participants suggested that CCS singing should be *straightforward* (S2), *Not flowery* (S2), *Not distracting* (S2), *Intimate* (S3), *Comfortable* (S1), with *Freedom* (S1), and *Simplicity* (S2). The participants also seem to place some emphasis on singing with *Passion* (S1) and *Intent* (S3), in order to deliver the *Message* (S3) appropriately.

Under *Vocal Technique*, we identified keywords like *Proper* (S1), *Fuller sound* (S2), *Support* (S2), *Posture* (S1), *Chest voice* (S1), *Flip* (S1), *Head voice* (S3), and *Placement* (S3). Also under this parent code, the participants seem to place particular importance on diction, using keywords such as *Enunciate* (S1), *Understand* (S1), *Pure vowels* (S2), and *Proper vowels* (S2).

The participants demonstrated some concerns about CCSs' *Vocal health*, particularly due to their constant *Tours* (S1) and *Concerts* (S2), employing terms such as *Hard singing* (S1), *Strained* (S1), *Phlegm* (S2), *Fatigue* (S2), *Forced singing* (S2), *Injure yourself* (S2), *Trouble* (S2), *Hoarse* (S3), and *Tired* (S3). The participants suggested that *Rest and water* (S2), *Warm up* (S2) and knowledge about *Physiology* (S3), are important measures to maintain good vocal health and promote *Longevity* (S2).

In terms of *Personality*, the participants suggested that CCSs should be *Available* (S1), *Love people* (S1), have a *Heart* (S2) for the ministry and be willing to *Serve* (S3).

Children codes

Under the children code *Style*, the participants seem to suggest that CCSs should have a *Pop sound* (S1), *Not classically* (S2). The participants also emphasized *Simplicity* (S2), *Not a ton of licks* (S2), *Not distracting* (S2), *Not too much stuff* (S3) when discussing P&W style. In the same sense, the participants seem to denote the congregational nature of P&W style when using terms like *Crowd*

(S2), *Audience* (S3), *Broad* (S2), and *Christian Radio* (S2).

Under *Range*, the participants also reiterated the communal characteristic of P&W style with terms such as *Sing along* (S1) and *Congregation* (S2). The participants described CCS voices in terms of range, as *Close range* (S1), *D to F* (S1), *Limited scope* (S2), and *Tender place* (S3).

The participants seem to suggest that *Repertoire Selection* is an important skill for CCSs. Under this children code, we identified terms such as *All about the song* (S1), *Original artist* (S3), *Not too hard* (S1), *Appropriate* (S3), *Intimate* (S3), and *Personal* (S3).

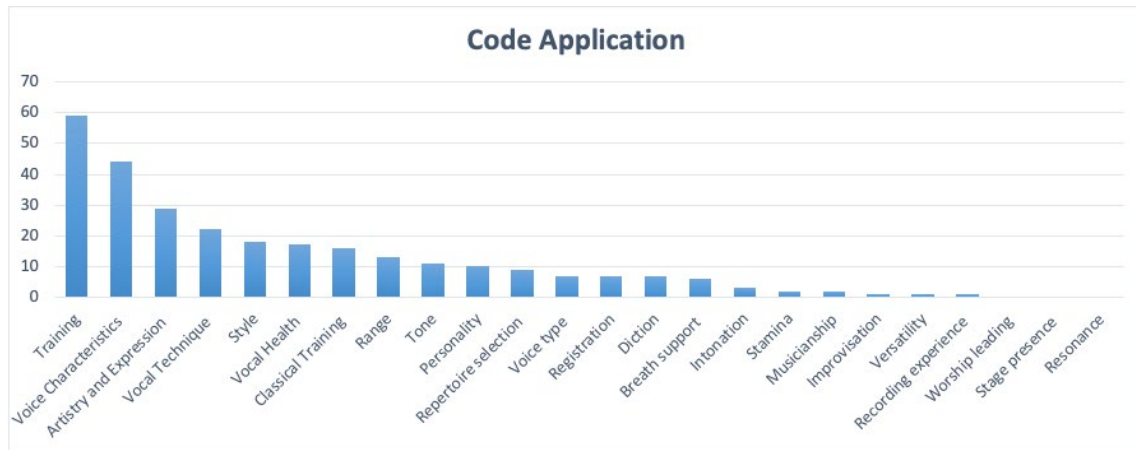


Figure 2. Code application

DISCUSSION

In general, the participants seem to suggest that CCSs are singers with common, normal voices. S2 mentioned about CCSs voices: *a voice that is not distracting, a voice that sort of blends in, almost a voice that kind of represents the normal*. The reason for this assessment may be related to the characteristics of P&W style: *P&W songs are written within a limited scope of range and in a key in which, you know, the common man or women can easily sing it, even the ones who do not consider themselves singers* (S2). The simplicity of P&W repertoire is also reflected in the participants' description of the range of CCSs as *closed* and *limited*. S1 explains: *if you are wanting people to sing along, it definitely needs to be in that kind of range that kind of everyone can kind of sing with*. In this sense, middle voices and not extreme voices, would probably fit better the style: *you are looking for a little bit more normal than you are the extreme* (S2).

At the same time, the participants suggested that although CCS voices are ordinary and common, some kind of uniqueness is valued. S1 mentioned: *I still think there's something to their voice that is... it draws you in*. S2 states about ideal CCS voices: *a voice that kind of cuts through the*

noise. It is difficult to make a conclusion about what the participants intended to say, because these expressions are vague and subjective. However, it is possible to identify more specific examples of how this uniqueness can be expressed in CCS voices. S1 states: *she has this unique little rasp to her voice, you know, that makes it hers*, while S2 mentions a successful CCS with a *rough* sound. This is particularly surprising, considering that the participants were all in agreement about *clarity, clear sound* and *straightforward* as ideal characteristics of CCS voices.

The way the participants described CCS voices as *pop sound* and *Christian radio* sound, is consistent with previous studies that emphasised the commercial, pop-rock nature of contemporary Christian music. The participants suggested that classical voice training may be beneficial to CCSs, but they were clear in stating that ideal CCS voices should not sound as if they're singing an *opera aria*, because it *doesn't fit the genre* (S2). These statements are relevant in terms of identifying what pedagogical approach is more appropriate for the training of CCSs and corroborate the AATS statement (NATS visits AATS, 2008) that advocates for a specific, commercial training for CCM styles.

Participants' concerns about CCSs vocal health were particularly relevant to this study. S1

describes what they consider to be a good and healthy CCS: *I can't imagine he hasn't had some training to help him not kill his voice every night.* S1 adds that *You can't tour and take care of your voice and all of that without singing properly.* S2 seems to agree and adds that *I think all Christian singers should learn basic vocal technique. Because if you're gonna be doing concerts, you know, and you stand there for hour and a half, two hours, you're gonna need to be on developing some longevity to that voice, or you'll injure yourself.* All three participants seem to see some connection between vocal health and vocal training. In our study we identified eight instances when there was a co-occurrence of these two codes (Vocal Health x Training). S2 demonstrated concern when stated that most CCSs he knows, do not have any type of vocal training: *a lot of them get in trouble because of that.* S2 also states that *a lot of Christian musicians need to learn how to warm up properly.* S3 even suggested that physiological knowledge about vocal functions is a key component for CCSs to promote vocal health.

In terms of training, the participants were not specific about what technique or pedagogical approach is most appropriate for CCSs. Although most of the participants spoke positively about traditional classical training, they also emphasised that the ideal vocal sound of CCSs should be commercial, contemporary and not classical. S2 mentioned speech level singing and Blaylock technique. Further research could potentially clarify if these methods have appropriate elements for training CCSs. The participants mentioned that a good technique for CCSs should help them sing *easily, comfortably, and with freedom.*

The two technical aspects with the largest occurrence were breathing and diction. S2 mentioned that *singing is 95% breathing anyway,* while S3 mentioned that *If I could go and work with a worship team and suggest one thing to them, it would be, learn to breathe. I think when you learn to breathe properly, I think everything else begins to fall in place.* Diction seems to be extremely important due to the confessional, religious nature of P&W style. Clearly communicating the text of the music is primary. S2 explains: *in Christian music, the overriding element that's most important, is the message. So, I think it's important that Christian singers use good diction.* In that sense, S2 even suggests that Italian diction could be beneficial for CCSs: *if you can learn to sing pure vowels, and then just wrap those consonants around it, it will help the diction of your singing, will help you create a much rounder, fuller sound, and will create the message, make it much more*

powerful 'cause people can understand you. Style appears to be another performance aspect for CCSs that needs to be serving the main purpose of delivering the message. The participants mentioned terms such as *simplicity, not a ton of licks, not distracting, not flowery, and straightforward* when describing CCS voices. The participants seem to suggest that a CCS's performance style should be clean, with few embellishments and conveying the message of the primary. Also emphasising the importance of delivering the message for CCS performances and the congregational nature of P&W style, S2 stated the importance of good intonation: *he just needs to be in tune, so he doesn't become a distraction to the worshippers.* CCSs are a sub-set of CCM singers, therefore it was not surprising that the participants suggested that CCSs should feel comfortable with using microphones and other types of sound reinforcement. The fact that the participants identified CCS sound as *pop,* may be enough to suggest some type of microphone technique, since pop-rock sound by its own nature is an electronically reinforced sound.

CONCLUSION

While the data presented in this study provide a useful insight into the skill set of successful CCSs/WLs, the small sample size does not support broader generalisations. The specificity and high profile of our participants proved to be a challenge. Singers at this level have busy schedules with limited time for interviews. Their level of expertise, however, was invaluable to our research. We hypothesised that insights from CCS elite singers would be valuable for singing voice pedagogues. The participants of our study are extremely representative of CCSs style and have enjoyed careers with great success.

Among the most relevant findings is the suggestion that CCSs have a heavy and demanding vocal load, and may face elevated risk of vocal injury. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Dawson, 2005; Robinson, 2011). It is also noteworthy that our elite CCS participants themselves have little to no formal vocal training in Western classical singing styles. While style-specific training is warranted, current CCS training is largely based on Western classical singing (Robinson, 2011). The authors hope that training standards for CCSs may increasingly reflect the musical demands these singers will experience.

We hope that these findings may encourage the development of style-appropriate applied voice curricula for worship degrees that optimally prepare

CCSs to meet their specific technical and stylistic needs. We further hope that these findings may aid in the development of appropriate private studio strategies for CCSs. Future research for this population of singers, may include analysis of worship applied voice curricula, investigation of microphone techniques, and P&W repertoire analysis.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. David Meyer. A leading voice pedagogue and scientist, Dr. David Meyer is an active performer, teacher, and vocologist. He is Director of the Janette Ogg Voice Research Center and serves

as Associate Professor of Voice and Voice Pedagogy at Shenandoah Conservatory. Meyer is a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Voice Foundation and co-chairs the NATS Voice Science Advisory Committee. In 2010 he received the Van L. Lawrence Fellowship, a prestigious national award in recognition of his contributions to the field of teaching singing and the use of voice science. Dr. Meyer's students have won numerous awards and have sung in major venues worldwide.

Dr. Leon Neto is a multi-instrumentalist Christian artist, educator, and researcher. He has worked in numerous capacities in the music industry, including producer, musician, singer, and arranger in almost a hundred different albums. Dr. Neto was the first researcher accepted for publication on topics related to contemporary Christian music in the *Journal of Singing* and the *Journal of Voice*, two prestigious academic journals in voice science. He presents regularly at conferences and travels overseas frequently for concerts, lectures, and missionary work. Dr. Neto is an associate professor of voice, guitar, and ethnomusicology at Liberty University School of Music.