

Classical and Popular Singing Styles: differences, myths, and misunderstandings.



Observations and experiences of a voice teacher.

Holly Boaz
boazhm@plu.edu

Here's where I'm coming from:

- Classical training in violin, piano and voice (very minor MT background)
 - BM and MM Degrees in classical voice
- Extensive performing experience in classical genres
- Teaching privately for 25 yrs, at PLU for 15, and at TCC for 3.
- More and more students interested in MT and/or pop/rock/songwriter styles
 - Between my college and private studios, about 70% are now primarily MT or CCM singers.
- 10 yrs ago, I started to retrain and have been learning ever since
 - Dr. Matt Edwards Symposium
 - NATS PD opportunities (local chapters, regional and national conferences)
 - CCM Institute at Shenandoah University
 - Books!!
 - *Listening!!*
 - *Doing!!*
 - Audio tech... (this is admittedly my weak spot)

WHAT IS CCM / CM / Popular Music ???

We have imperfect terminology in the voice world...

CCM = Contemporary Commercial Music

CM = Commercial Music

Other terms we sometimes use in the voice world:

- Microphone styles
- Popular music
- pop/rock styles

For today's purposes, I will include all non-classical genres when I use the terms *CCM* or *Popular Music*:

pop/rock/indie/hip-hop/r&b/metal/singer-songwriter/soul/funk/jazz/punk/blues/etc.

Classical singing vs CCM singing: what are the differences?

- ROOTS & TRADITION
 - Who/where did these musics come from? How do we teach them?
- AESTHETICS
 - How do these musics sound different?
- STYLE & STORYTELLING
 - Who's in charge here? Whose story are we telling?
- VENUE
 - Where and under what conditions are we performing?
- VOCAL TECHNIQUE
 - How do we use our instrument differently?

ROOTS & TRADITION

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Roots in Western European Church and Royalty

Eurocentric, mostly old white guys

Privileged access only - church, royalty, academy...Intended for entertaining paying audiences, nobility, or in liturgical settings.

Taught in very prescribed ways, with lengthy specific training required

POPULAR MUSICS

Roots in cultural storytelling

Multiple cultures mixing together

Part of everyday life - regular people doing regular things in regular places & singing! Music for work, play, celebration, mourning, worship, transfer of cultural knowledge, and community bonding.

Passed on orally/aurally, or absorbed from hearing/experiencing/doing

AESTHETICS

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Generally, we aim for a specific tonal quality:
chiaroscuro.

Voices are expected to blend registers and sing
seamlessly throughout range.

Melody is usually the driving force behind the
music.

Music is usually performed exactly the same each
time, with prescribed instructions.

POPULAR MUSICS

The more unique the voice, the better. Brighter,
speech-like tone more common.

Register shifts are used as emotional tools, and
often highlighted (yodel, crack, fry, whistle, belt).

Rhythm is usually more integral driving force
behind the music.

Performances are improvisatory, and may be
different each time.

STYLE AND STORYTELLING

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Vowels are all-important, we sing in a connected style, maximizing vowels and crisping consonants.

We avoid diphthongs.

We avoid breathing in the middle of a word, usually aiming for phrasing according to music.

Pitch is only as indicated on the written music

Usually telling the story of a specific character.

Who's in charge? THE COMPOSER who published the music!

POPULAR MUSICS

Often, consonants are lingered on and given greater importance. Diphthongs may be emphasized.

Phrasing is according to emotion being conveyed.
Ok to breathe wherever artist chooses.

Pitch can be bent, scooped, fallen-off, etc.

Story being told is often that of the artist performing

Who's in charge? The ARTIST(S) who is/are performing!!

VENUES

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Churches, Concert Halls, Theatres, designed for acoustic projection (usually)

There is a certain expectation of formality of dress and behavior in a classical music venue. Not participatory for the audience.

Often, classical singers are given a day or more off between performances, or only a few performances are required for a given production/concert series, with several days or weeks between concerts/shows.

POPULAR MUSIC

Coffee shops, bars, theatres, arenas, places of worship. Almost always electronic amplification.

Usually, audiences of popular musics performances are dressed informally and sing along. (Regular people doing regular things)

CCM singers often sing shows every day for many days at a time, with travel, meet-and-greets, soundchecks, and post-show gatherings also taking up energy and vocal capital.

MT singers are often required to sing 6-8 shows per week!

VOCAL TECHNIQUE

CLASSICAL MUSIC

ACOUSTIC PROJECTION

This has implications for both breath management, laryngeal function, AND vocal tract shaping.

Taller, rounder mouth shapes

More pharyngeal space*

Onsets and releases are usually coordinated, occasionally glottal.

POPULAR MUSICS

ELECTRONIC AMPLIFICATION

And often other electronic enhancements are used like autotune, layering, EQ, or reverb.

Neutral or wide mouth shapes

Pharyngeal space is usually neutral or even minimized.

Onsets and releases can be absolutely any style: glottal, fry, cry, growl, aspirate, fall off, scoop...

VOCAL TECHNIQUE, continued

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Low larynx

Thinner folds, especially for treble voices. Most classical singing is CT-dominant for alto/mezzo/soprano voices.

Classical singers sing in many languages and special articulation & projection skills are developed around lyric diction for each language. Clarity is important!

POPULAR MUSICS

Neutral or high larynx

Thicker folds are often used, but thin folds are also used. More often, registration is TA-dominant for alto/mezzo/soprano voices.

Amplification helps with diction clarity, and sometimes, “messy” diction is deliberate if it serves the emotion!

What does a lesson look like for a CCM singer?

- Warmups / Exercises / Etudes
 - Sometimes minor/pentatonic/dom 7th/blues
 - Some in specific styles
 - Chest-up, rather than head-down
 - More work on lower range (esp for sop/alto/mezzo voices), for easy speech-like vocal production
 - More varied sounds used than in classical! Not always “pretty”.
- Repertoire
 - ALWAYS student-led
 - Find individual voice - encourage uniqueness
 - Get at the story
 - On & off microphone
 - Consider instrument (guitar/piano)
- Cool downs
 - Basic vocalises, straw/lip trills, fry

Some pervasive ideas that are important to recognize...

- Is any particular kind of music inherently (or morally) superior to other musics?
Is one or another art form “higher” than others?
- Do we need to know how to read music to be “good” musicians?
- Are some vocal sounds inherently “bad”? Or “wrong”?

MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

- No, it is NOT necessary to first learn classical technique before all others.
- No, classical technique is not the “healthiest” technique.
- No, learning a classical technique will NOT prepare you appropriately for most CCM styles.
- No, belting/chest voice/rock music/rap/metal (yes, even metal) is in fact, NOT inherently bad for your voice.
- No, CCM or MT singers who belt on the regular do NOT have more vocal injury than classical/opera singers.
- Sustaining vocal injury does NOT necessarily mean that your technique is “bad”.
- Can voices sing in multiple styles effectively? (Cross-training) Yes, BUT...
- Can voices learn to sing in one style after primarily training in another - YES!

Where to learn more:

Singing in Popular Musics (founded & edited by Jessica Baldwin)

Dr. Matt Edwards' Voice Blog & YouTube Channel

Dr. Trineice Robinson-Martin

Melissa Cross: The Zen of Screaming

Melissa Foster

Somatic Voicework™ (Jeanie LoVetri)

Meredith Colby (Neurovocal Method)

The Vocal Athlete by Le Borgne and Rosenberg

NATS "So You Want to Sing" book series

Cross-Training in the Voice Studio by Spivey and Saunders Barton

Dr. Dan's Voice Essentials YouTube channel