

# An Investigation of Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Voice Pedagogy: A Class of its Own?

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## INTRODUCTION

**W**ITHIN THE FIELDS OF SINGING VOICE pedagogy and voice science, there is wide acceptance that the sound production inherent in contemporary commercial music (CCM) singing styles differs greatly from accepted, classical vocal practice—most notably in areas of voice quality, tone, and registration, and associated style-related technical requirements, such as speech quality phonation and style-related vocal effects. Given the growing public demand for singing voice training in CCM styles, this proposition poses a dilemma for teachers and singers/students who have been trained only in the traditional classical model.<sup>1</sup> The main challenge lies in the fact that the field of CCM singing lacks clear and cohesive pedagogy that addresses the specific style-related technique and vocal health needs of CCM singers.

According to Potter, one of the most notable advantages classical singing has over contemporary commercial music (CCM) singing is a systemized field of voice pedagogy.<sup>2</sup> To date, the teaching-learning situations in CCM have traditionally been perceived as less intentional, less goal oriented, and generally less formal than in classical music. In contrast, Wilson suggests that, irrespective of genre, all professional vocalists are confronted with numerous technical and artistic demands, while forcefully asserting that CCM singers should be granted the same respect as their classical colleagues.<sup>3</sup> Wilson states also that “technical” elements of voice production for classical and CCM styles differ. There is strong support for this view. For example, in 2008 the American Academy of Teachers of Singing offered the following observations.

Unfortunately, techniques for singing genres such as folk, gospel, blues, jazz, pop, and rock, which fall under a new heading called “Contemporary Commercial Music” (CCM), have been neither clearly defined nor seriously addressed in traditional voice pedagogy texts. While it is true that all singers must breathe, phonate, resonate, and articulate, they do not necessarily approach these technical elements in the same manner.<sup>4</sup>

As experienced teachers and performers of CCM styles, the authors’ “insider” knowledge leads us to agree strongly with these opinions. However, our literature and Internet searches have revealed a hybrid, fractured collec-

tion of anecdotal and nonresearched methodologies and philosophies, with many claiming to hold “the secret to success” for aspiring CCM singers; none offered empirical data to support their claims. With seemingly opposing and contradictory information on technique and application of confusing alternate descriptors, the “methods” offered little instruction that would underpin reliable, healthy voice function for CCM singers. Many “methods” appear to have a strong style/sound oriented focus, but lack discussion of foundational pillars of technique (i.e., alignment, breath flow, abdominal support, phonation, resonance). Where technique is mentioned, the primary focus appears to rest on one or two elements of technique, while others (e.g., breath, resonance, etc.) are dismissed as unimportant. None of the method proponents offered empirical data to support their claims of successful outcomes and/or sustainable healthy vocal functioning for CCM singers.

As the number of singing voice students in private studios, performance/dance schools, and higher education institutions continues to increase, voice teachers (including classical voice specialists) are being required to teach some CCM repertoire, many without the necessary training to implement a requisite pedagogy. A frequently cited study suggests that many voice teachers have little or no experience of CCM performance and/or no training in CCM styles,<sup>5</sup> which brings into question ethical practice around the standards of current CCM teaching, especially the safe production of belt voice style-driven vocal effects (e.g., slides, slurs, grit, growls, screams, etc.). In short, the lack of any formal, systemic CCM pedagogic model has placed the onus on teachers to be self-resourceful, inquiring, and adaptive in developing appropriate and style-relevant CCM training for their CCM students with little assistance from traditional sources. A preliminary analysis of extensive data gathered from the semistructured interviews with nine leading, international CCM pedagogues suggests both commonalities and distinctions in the technical focus and approach applied by the pedagogues in interactions with their CCM students. Emergent themes have been identified and will be discussed later in this article.

## BACKGROUND

The descriptor contemporary commercial music (CCM) was coined by pedagogue and researcher Jeanette

LoVetri,<sup>6</sup> with a proposition that popular music styles should take their rightful place “without apology alongside the great classical music of the world.”<sup>7</sup> Prior to this proposal the pejorative term “nonclassical” was the most common descriptor found in the literature of singing voice for any form of vocal music performance that did not meet the traditional Western classical aesthetic (i.e., balanced registration, evenness of tone, presence of vibrato, etc.). LoVetri proposed that the acronym CCM would better describe the family of mainstream, “popular” music styles that had evolved throughout the twenty-first century, inclusive of styles such as pop, rock, jazz, music theater, soul, cabaret, country, folk, gospel, rhythm & blues, rap, and associated substyles.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that, in attempting to encapsulate the hydralike diversity of CCM vocal sounds and accompanying electronic instrumentation/technology, commentators have been drawn to create other homogenizing descriptors such as nonclassical music, contemporary music, popular music, and popular culture music (PCM). However, the acronym CCM is now common parlance in the literature of singing voice and will therefore be used as the primary descriptor throughout this article.

## TRENDS IN MUSIC CONSUMPTION

Over the past 50 years, there has been a marked change in audience preference for modern music forms and an accompanying decline of markets for the traditional forms of classical vocal music to a comparatively small audience demand.<sup>9</sup> In comparing the industry economics of CCM and opera performances, Novak-Leonard and Brown reported that in 2008, 2.1% of Americans attended an operatic performance.<sup>10</sup> This represented a 30% decline since 1982. In 2014, Meyer and Edwards cited an online report from Opera America revealing that “the combined ticket sales for the 2010–2011 season of all U.S. and Canadian opera companies were \$246.3 million.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, in 2009 alone Pop and Rock Touring acts grossed \$4.6 billion.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of concert performances, CCM is now the dominant art form, far outstripping classical music in “live performance” revenue. According to ratings agencies such as The Nielsen Report, pop and rock “live” performance touring acts are the global leaders in generating box office takings. As a side effect of the mass

audience demand for popular music styles, it is reported that, globally, the vast majority of professional singers are now employed in the CCM industry.<sup>13</sup> In 2016, Billboard Boxscore, a tracking company for concert, comedy, and other live entertainment attendance by gate receipts and real box office performance reported a 30% global increase in both gross box office revenue and attendance figures, exceeding \$5.5 billion and nearly \$74 million, respectively. The top three touring artists were: Beyoncé (\$256 million), Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band (\$255 million), and Coldplay (\$221 million), with an estimated two million plus fans attending these concerts.<sup>14</sup>

Bartlett suggested that the unprecedented success of such touring acts is due in large part to marketing and promotion of the “star” singers stage personas, vocal individuality, and stage presentations.<sup>15</sup> Style innovation is marketed to an eager public, not through the release of recordings as occurred in the past, but via video release of highly choreographed and technologically engineered vocal performances; the public response to the video release is a major factor in determining the artist’s career success.

## THE IMPACT OF INTERNET PLATFORMS

Since the 1930s, the rapid development of audio-visual and recording technologies has fostered and supported a proliferation of electronic media platforms enabling world audiences to listen to, watch, and engage with a diverse range of music styles. According to some observers this proliferation has had a positive impact for live CCM performances. Speaking in a 2016 article for *Billboard*, Marc Geiger (leader of William Morris Endeavor’s music division) made the following observations:

“Ironically, social and digital media now look like driving forces behind ticket sales in the ongoing boom market, enhancing the way live music is experienced. Streaming music worldwide [is] fueling music consumption,” says Geiger, who has long touted digital growth’s potential to benefit the live sector, “and, in a trickle down, ticket sales.” As Light notes, streaming makes finding new artists—and, especially, rediscovering old ones—easier. “Then,” he says, “seeing them live becomes part of everyone’s communal need.”<sup>16</sup>

Simultaneously, the easy, open access to music via the Internet has changed the manner in which general

public audiences acquire and listen to music. Streaming, music sharing and downloading of recordings and live performances have replaced the traditional “albums” of music (vinyl, tape, CD), with single song releases and downloads now the norm. Today’s music consumer has access to favorite artists and new music through “on demand” music stream platforms (including audio and video data) from sites including Spotify, YouTube, iTunes, Apple music, Google Play, Amazon, and Soundcloud, to mention a few. Interestingly, while all genres and styles of music can be accessed via the Internet at anytime from anywhere, the CCM industry has been the main beneficiary of this technology phenomenon. Evidence for this is found in publications such as the annual Nielsen Music Year End Report. Providing conclusive statistics for the music industry in the U.S.A., the 2016 edition reports that music consumption was at an “all-time high” for that period, suggesting that this increase was fueled by a 76% surge in on demand audio streams. At 38% of total audio consumption, streaming holds the largest share of the music market, surpassing total digital sales for the first time in history.<sup>17</sup>

## STARS IN THEIR EYES

While Internet-based technologies have served to significantly increase the exposure, popularity, and diversity of contemporary music styles,<sup>18</sup> researchers such as Meyer and Edwards have noted also the extraordinary impact of locality-based television talent shows that expose millions of viewers worldwide to amateur and semiprofessional CCM singing performances.<sup>19</sup> Audience size for these TV shows is staggering. Meyer and Edwards reported figures of 21.9 million viewers for *American Idol* for the 2012 season premiere, and 17.9 million for the 2013 premiere.<sup>20</sup> Most recently, The Nielsen Report documented that the premieres of a similar singing talent show, *The Voice*, had an average of ten million viewers per episode for each of the last four seasons.<sup>21</sup> The televised promotion and success of primarily amateur singers has emboldened those with basic technology skills and access to a computer, tablet, or smart phone to record and upload covers of popular songs and/or their own original music to platforms such as YouTube, iTunes, Sound Cloud, Audiomack, Spotify, and Vimeo, to name just a few. These self-directed, self-promoted,

self-uploaded images of singers on Internet platforms are serving to fuel an ever expanding range of CCM substyles.

### THE CHALLENGE FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS OF CCM

Researchers and pedagogues support the view that there are many differences in classical and CCM singing voice production techniques and aesthetic evaluation; that is, vocal tone, registration, and sound qualities inherent in CCM styles differ greatly from accepted, Western classical music standards.<sup>22</sup> Ongoing studies in the field of voice science describe a distinctive CCM vocal production that is identifiably different from that of classically trained singers.<sup>23</sup> Research findings indicate that the speech-based, forward, bright voice quality that typifies CCM singing is very different from the vocal production of classical singers in terms of coordination of the laryngeal musculature, acoustic set up, breath management, and, most importantly, registration. This is especially so for female CCM singers, where speech quality needs to be maintained typically in a range of F<sub>3</sub>–C<sub>5</sub> and up to E<sub>5</sub>.<sup>24</sup> Schutte and Miller identified major elements of vocal production inherent in classical and nonclassical styles, finding the most obvious difference to be in the production of vocal tone.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Estill reported her observations of a range of differences including those of breath support and onset of phonation.<sup>26</sup> The literature of voice science describes “style” as a method of voice production that has actual defining acoustic, physiologic, and perceptual features.<sup>27</sup> In the past, exponents of a “one size fits all” classical aesthetic have failed to recognize the differences in physiological adjustments needed to achieve the many style-driven elements of CCM vocal production, where singers are expected to use the vocal instrument in a unique manner closely related to high intensity speech. The American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS), in encouraging their membership to adopt “an expansion into a systematic practical approach to teaching genres included in CCM and other non-classical singing,”<sup>28</sup> recognized that the prevailing “one size fits all” classical training approach to singing technique was no longer a viable or appropriate model.

While it is true that all singers must breathe, phonate, resonate, and articulate, they do not necessarily

approach these technical elements in the same manner. Recent acoustic, physiologic, and pedagogic research challenges the widely held belief that classically based voice techniques alone can serve the world’s diversity of singing styles.<sup>29</sup>

This was indeed a benchmark statement, as in a much earlier report they had taken a very different stance, recommending that voice teachers make their students aware of the vocal damage inherent in pop/rock style singing.<sup>30</sup>

Recent reports in the literature indicate a growing consensus that voice teachers must be educated about and proficient in the specific style elements and techniques of CCM singing.<sup>31</sup> The authors of these reports recognize that, as with traditional classical singing, performance longevity for CCM singers is reliant on flexibility in voice function and an established style-relevant technique, and they agree that a generic “one size fits all” voice training approach is unhelpful, inappropriate, and inefficient in terms of style integrity and sustainable vocal health for singers wishing to perform CCM styles.<sup>32</sup> For example, Hanlon suggested that whilst the basic principles of singing seem to be universal regardless of style or genre, there is great variance in voice production for classical and CCM.

While a solid understanding of basic technique applies to all styles of music, it is clear there are many differences in the tone production, diction, vibrato and phrasing when comparing commercial styles and traditional styles of singing. Extreme vocal styles including screaming and belting are not typically addressed in traditional teaching guides. A vocalist’s ability to perform with stylistically appropriate tone, ornamentation and enunciation are the necessary elements of an authentic performance.<sup>33</sup>

Experts in the field, therefore, agree that CCM voice production is necessarily different from that needed for classical styles. Any systematic pedagogic approach for CCM singing needs to recognize and address these differences.

### THE PEDAGOGUES’ VOICES IN THE CURRENT RESEARCH STUDY

In the current doctoral research project, nine leading international pedagogues who self-identified as teachers

of CCM were invited to engage in a set of semistructured interviews preformulated around a set of themes. All participants self-identified as teachers of CCM. Bresler and Stake proposed that researchers interested in the uniqueness of a particular teaching or learning environment would find value in the qualitative approach as it “allows, or demands extra attention to physical, temporal, historical, social, political, economic and aesthetic contexts.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, O’Farrell and Meban wrote, “The strength of the methodology [qualitative] is its capacity to convey personal interaction, mood and aesthetic effect in a direct and vivid way.”<sup>35</sup> Following this line of thought, the qualitative research method of individual interviews was considered most appropriate for the design and collection of data in the current study.

The use of semistructured interviews provided opportunity to collect demographic and background experience data while also permitting participant self-reports around specific areas of pedagogic beliefs and how these had informed the development of their individual teaching approaches. Additionally, participants were asked to reflect on the impact of their own practice, their own training (singing voice and pedagogy), and their own singing performance backgrounds on the development of their teaching of CCM styles. Questions were designed also to investigate differences and similarities in teaching approach of foundational and style-based technique. Responses were analyzed using inductive thematic data analysis, a methodology that has strong support from researchers in the literature. For example, Attride-Stirling describe the thematic networks technique as “a robust and highly sensitive tool for the systematization and presentation of qualitative analyses.”<sup>36</sup>

What follows is a report of preliminary findings from the doctoral research project. Results to date indicate both commonalities and distinctions within the threads of collected information around pedagogic approaches of the participants to the training of singers of CCM styles.

### **Commonalities and Distinctions in Pedagogic Practice**

All participants suggested that they were self-trained in CCM, given the lack of any structured CCM training available to them across the duration of their own vocal studies. Without recourse to specific CCM training, this

group of teachers reported that their individual pedagogic approaches were guided by personal performance experiences, observations of successful CCM performers/recording artists, and an ongoing investigation of past and current voice science research. All said that they came to teach CCM styles somewhat serendipitously—typically in response to student demand. All claimed to have developed their CCM pedagogic model based primarily on individual student needs. All said that they had had to rely on their own innate musicality, knowledge of the repertoire, and a trial and error approach in the development of their CCM teaching skills. All reported having to develop critical listening skills to identify specific CCM style elements and to obtain a feel for the style characteristics and the demands of the repertoire, including voice production nuances, vocal embellishments, and the style related vocal effects. These style elements necessitated a particular level of technical proficiency on the part of the singer, which in turn demanded an appropriate pedagogic response from the teacher. They were unanimous in their discussions of the need for:

- voice production authenticity across the broad range of CCM styles.
- students retaining a uniqueness of sound and individual artistic expression.
- vocal freedom—that is a healthy, flexible voice while expressing specific style effects.

All agreed that CCM pedagogy is dictated mostly by the specific style demands of the repertoire, therefore the teacher’s role is not only to develop students’ secure technical foundation elements, but most importantly to guide and shape the student to become an effective and genuine communicator of the story (lyric) rather than a strict interpreter of the music. The pedagogues were unanimous in their discussions about the need for vocal authenticity across the broad range of CCM styles, and, as with reports in the existing literature, they pointed to the specific demand for a uniqueness of sound, individual artistic expression and vocal freedom.<sup>37</sup> In a book chapter titled “Teaching Popular Music Styles,” CCM singer, performer, and pedagogue Kim Chandler outlined the characteristics of a broad range of CCM styles (Table 1). This is an excellent resource for CCM teachers and is recreated here with the author’s permission.<sup>38</sup>

**TABLE 1.** Characteristics of various CCM styles.

Style	Characteristics
FUNK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is more punctuated, energetic, rhythmically percussive, less embellished</li> <li>• Melody lines are often like horn (brass) parts</li> <li>• Rhythmic phrasing pushed</li> </ul>
R&B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is characterized by a relatively light vocal delivery with heavy use of embellishment, melisma, and fast vibrato</li> <li>• More recent pop R&amp;B often fuses with hip hop and rap</li> </ul>
ROCK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong direct vocal style delivered with high intensity</li> <li>• Can be heard using clean tone</li> <li>• Vocal grit and distortion are more usual</li> <li>• Favors vocal power and size over embellishment and flourish</li> </ul>
HEAVY METAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roots from heavy rock</li> <li>• Is the most extreme vocal style requiring the highest intensity levels</li> <li>• Features highly expressive, aggressive vocal sounds not heard much in other genres</li> <li>• Is physically demanding</li> </ul>
SOUL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roots from the Black gospel church</li> <li>• Favors emotionality delivered via dynamic range</li> <li>• Legato phrases</li> <li>• Some melodic embellishment</li> </ul>
POP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evolved from mid-1950s rock'n'roll evolution</li> <li>• Ever changing music styles which have “popular” appeal</li> <li>• Musical characteristics being catchy hooks, written in basic format, with melodic tunes and repeated choruses</li> <li>• Use a combination of rhythms that are dance orientated and energetic</li> </ul>
COUNTRY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Twangy vocal style is delivered in a strong “Southern” accent</li> <li>• Often features stylistic flips (similar to yodeling) and little “cries”</li> <li>• Mostly at a medium intensity</li> <li>• Can feature some melodic embellishment</li> </ul>
REGGAE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Given its Jamaican roots, the accent that reggae is sung in is highly distinctive</li> <li>• Generally sung at a medium level of intensity</li> <li>• Features minimal vibrato</li> <li>• Often back phrased</li> </ul>
INDIE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A pop/rock fusion vocally</li> <li>• Generally characterized by a rawness and edginess in the vocal delivery and by minimal use of vibrato</li> <li>• An element of quirkiness in the vocals is embraced in this genre</li> </ul>
FOLK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires the lightest vocal delivery because of the acoustic instruments used in the accompaniment.</li> <li>• Lyrics and the story telling elements of the song are paramount</li> <li>• Singing in regional accents is also embraced</li> </ul>
JAZZ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversational phrasing</li> <li>• Smooth vocal delivery</li> <li>• Speech quality</li> <li>• Free improvisation over harmonic structure</li> <li>• Timing—accented beats over pulse</li> </ul>

All pedagogues in the current study professed to have developed an eclectic teaching tool kit constructed from a variety of sources, including their personal interac-

tions with other singing teachers, a continuous review of the literature of voice science, and regular attendance at conferences, symposia, and workshops where

**TABLE 2.** Participant responses to questions regarding alignment, breath management, and breath flow and support.

Theme	Participant's Responses								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>ALIGNMENT</b>									
Balanced alignment	x		x	x	x		x	x	
Tension free alignment	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Alignment directly impacts on breath flow, abdominal support, and vocal production	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Unconscious and natural/neutral alignment	x	x	x		x	x			
Alignment is addressed on a case by case basis	x	x			x	x	x		x
Alignment needs to be addressed prior to phonation	x	x	x		x				
<b>BREATH MANAGEMENT</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Breath management relates to how the breath is used to phonate		x	x		x	x	x		
Breath should support the vocal task at hand	x	x		x	x				
Breath should be efficient to meet repertoire/style demands	x	x		x	x				
Breath is predicated on the need to communicate	x			x	x				
Adopt a natural style of breathing	x	x			x	x			
<b>BREATH FLOW AND SUPPORT</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Breath support is defined in terms of balanced use of breath	x	x		x	x				
Breath flow and support is addressed on a case by case basis			x		x	x	x		
Breath flow and support are determined by repertoire/style demands			x	x		x	x	x	x

CCM singing styles were discussed. Seven pedagogues stressed that they did not follow a particular teaching method. They were in agreement that, unlike classical vocal performance, CCM performance is not restricted to the musical notation or the strict communication of the music score. They stressed that as CCM singers are not classified by a *Fach* system there are *no repertoire restrictions* and *no requirements for consistency in vocal characteristics* such as tone, color, or quality. Also, unlike classical vocal styles where traditional parameters require the stabilization of a lowered larynx (to assist a consistency of tone and registration), voice production parameters for CCM singers change organically according to style and emotional expression; the only requisite consideration being the presence of speech quality.

All participants claimed that their teaching approaches are open, adaptive, and accommodating of the individual student's needs on a case by case basis. All agreed that efficient vocal instruction must be geared to function and style and, commonly, all participants spoke to the inefficiencies of imposing a "one size fits all" classical

pedagogic model on singers of CCM styles. Each pedagogue emphasized that the needs of the student on that day, at that particular moment in time is the primary driver for their teaching approach, as are the individual style demands of the repertoire being performed. Furthermore, the participants agreed unanimously that what works for one student may not work for another, especially with respect to the specific demands of repertoire. There was an underlying agreement that they consciously monitored the impact of emotional expression, text interpretation and storytelling on vocal production and sustainable vocal health for their students.

Table 2 reports the preliminary analysis of themes in the collected data from participants responses to semi-structured interview questions regarding alignment, breath management, and breath flow and support. It outlines a variety of approaches employed by the pedagogues in their interactions with students of CCM styles. Commonalities emerged with distinctions appearing in relation to emphasis and application. Participants have been de-identified according to institutional ethical

requirements. They are represented by the numbers 1 to 9 in the order the interviews were conducted.

As the table illustrates, there are differences of emphasis across the participant group. However, there appears to be an underlying, if unconscious, agreement in consideration of the necessity for training in these areas of technique. Other areas of pedagogic commonalities are apparent, especially in participant responses around individual student need and style elements of CCM repertoire. We can report also that ongoing analysis of responses from all nine pedagogues is suggesting a high focus on sustainable vocal health for singers, regardless of style. Overall, the emerging collective philosophy appears to be a nonjudgmental, nonaesthetic appraisal of style choice with a common aim to promote an efficient and healthy vocal production through the establishment of a strong technical foundation across the full range of CCM styles.

## CONCLUSION

While the term “classical singing” evokes a clear schemer for the listener in terms of expectation of a recognizable set of voice production parameters, the same cannot be said for “contemporary singing” and the myriad vocal styles that influence the repertoire within the CCM genre. Thus, experts in the field agree that a viable alternative to the existing traditional classical model is needed to assist both teachers and students of CCM singing styles to develop and inform best practice pedagogy and performance.<sup>39</sup> While the information presented here is only a snapshot of preliminary results from an ongoing research study, analysis of the full set of collected data continues to uncover commonalities and differences in the pedagogic approach of the nine international singing voice pedagogue participants. Once concluded, it is anticipated that the study will reveal a cohesive body of practice that might assist in the description and development of a distinct, foundational outline for a structured, focused pedagogy for singers of CCM styles.

## NOTES

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