Due to the rising number of collegiate musical theater and contemporary commercial music (CCM) programs, there is increasing demand for teachers of singing to provide diverse and versatile training beyond the classical aesthetic. When the vocal techniques of classical and CCM singing are identified in terms of function, there is much in common. It is only in the application of vocal technique to musical repertoire that significant differences occur, according to genre. Rather than running independent tracks of vocal study in classical, music theater and commercial/popular singing, many elements of voice training can be consolidated for improved efficiency and camaraderie. Some elements of vocal technique that may be trained independently of musical style include vibrato, posture and alignment, onsets, agility and registration. This article will argue in favor of shifting to functional voice training as core technical training to effectively serve classical, musical theater and contemporary commercial voice students within one studio.

Musical theater singing includes a multitude of musical sub-genres, from legit musical theater to contemporary hard rock. A study by Kathryn Green et al. surveyed job postings for entry-level musical theater singers and found that market demand was almost evenly divided between legit/traditional singing (45 percent) and contemporary/pop/rock (55 percent). In today’s musical theater industry, versatility is employability. In addition to the nearly 140 university-level musical theater programs established since 1968, there are approximately 30 U.S. universities offering a degree in commercial or popular music with a singing emphasis or concentration. Popular music programs also include a diverse number of singing styles including folk, rock, pop, heavy metal, R&B and many more. These programs need voice teachers who can provide functional vocal technique so students can safely and consistently produce the broad spectrum of sounds required in many different styles of music.

Vocal Technique

In 1975, Cornelius Reid encouraged voice pedagogues to distinguish between “art” and “function,” where art is “the use of skill and imagination in the production of things of beauty,” and function is “the natural action characteristic of a mechanical or organic system.” A functional voice will have a broad range of expression and can therefore serve the music (art). The technical skills required within a given musical genre are determined by the aesthetic context of the target repertoire. Therefore, some aspects of functional training may be universal. For example, vibrato is commonly used in jazz, opera, legit musical theater, country music and many other genres. Singers strive to achieve an aesthetically pleasing vibrato, which they apply as much or as little as is called for in their chosen musical genre. Eventually, a singer applying vibrato
to an opera aria may choose to use vibrato more frequently than a singer applying vibrato to a jazz standard. However, the functional training to produce and control the vibrato is not inherently linked to any style of music. Other skills, such as body work, onsets, agility and registration may be trained in the same fashion.

For a singer, the body is the instrument. Consistent posture, alignment, strength and endurance are important for rock singers, musical theater singers and classical singers alike. An increased sense of kinesthetic awareness of the body allows a singer to monitor the efficiency of the entire instrument. Supplemental study in Alexander Technique, The Feldenkrais Method, body mapping, yoga and dance could be simultaneously taught to many different kinds of singers and performing artists. Excellent cardiovascular fitness would be beneficial to all singers because of the physical endurance necessary to engage the instrument (the body) for extended periods of time in performance. Some rock singers must train for endurance to meet the high physical demands of a concert, which may be longer than 3 hours and include choreography, guitar thrashing or crowd-surfing. Musical theater singers must be able to execute a 4-minute dance break and then return to sing the big finish without sounding out of breath. Classical singers must be strong enough to move gracefully across a raked stage, perhaps while wearing heavy period costumes and a wig. The trend of the “fit opera star” appears fully dressed in an opera production than when he sings shirtless. ” Often in performance, the body is under extreme conditions, such as hot temperatures due to stage lights, heavy costumes and limited opportunities for hydration. It takes training to deliver an optimal performance under such conditions. All singers benefit from body work. Just as pianists keep their pianos tuned, singers must maintain the condition of their instruments too.

The training of glottal, coordinated and aspirated onsets is common to both classical and CCM voice training. One must learn to adduct the vocal folds and phonate using maximum efficiency without constriction. In classical music, the preferred default onset is coordinated, but all types of onset are used in avant-garde music, such as Luciano Berio’s Sequenza III or Arnold Schönberg’s Pierrot Lunaire. In both English and German classical singing dictions, glottal onsets are commonly used for emphasis. In CCM, there is no default onset. Onsets are varied according to the musical style and expressive choices of the artist. Singer/songwriters often use the aspirate onset to express vulnerability, but glottal and coordinated onsets are just as common. In Regina Spektor’s “Us,” she uses the glottal onset as a playful musical motive in the chorus (1:15, 2:18, 3:42): “It’s contagious, it’s contraai-ou-ou-ou-ou-our.” The development of onset technique is the same in all genres, but the frequency of application varies according to musical style.

Vocal agility and precise articulation are hallmarks of good technique, in any style of music. Scales, turns, trills and staccato exercises are included in standard classical training to prepare for baroque runs and operatic cadenzas. Example 1 shows a cadenza sung by Joan Sutherland in measure 38 of “Prendi per me, sei libero” (L’Elisir d’Amore), built from the F-major scale.

Example 1: Joan Sutherland’s Cadenza from “Prendi per me, sei libero” (L’Elisir d’Amore) by Gaetano Donizetti.

The CCM equivalent to an operatic cadenza is “riffing.” In contrast to classical music, CCM riffs are often built from modal scales, blues scale, major and minor pentatonic scales and the minor hexatonic scale, which was found to be used most frequently in pop music after the natural minor and major scales. The “Pretty Young Thing” contains a cadenza-length riff, built from the D-flat-minor hexatonic scale: 1 – 2 – flat-3 – 4 – 5 – flat-7.

Example 2: Tori Kelly’s Riff (from her cover of Michael Jackson’s “Pretty Young Thing”) by James Ingram and Quincy Jones.

Both artists demonstrate the skill of vocal agility at its finest, singing rapid pitches clearly and consistently, from the top to the bottom of the range. The genre of music determines the standard tonality within which each singer builds her showcase of vocal agility. The technique of moving the voice quickly and cleanly can be trained within any tonality.

Many approaches to voice training encourage the development of two registers in the singing voice. These have several names: chest/head, modal/loft, or TA-dominant/CT-dominant. If both registers are “equally balanced in strength and coordination,” then singers can mix them to yield an infinite number of sounds. The resulting sound could be belting, floating, wailing and anything in between. Classical music calls for coordination between the registers so a change from one register to the other is inaudible. CCM singers may preserve the ability to deliberately not coordinate the registers, for yodel or break effects, which may be desirable in certain musical styles or colors of emotional expression. The late-lead singer of The Cranberries,
Dolores O’Riordan, uses a yodel effect throughout the song “Zombie,” which requires extra vowels to be added to the lyric: “Zombie-e-e-oh” (1:55, 3:27).11

In training baritone, bass-baritone and bass voices to sing classical repertoire, Richard Miller advocates for exercises that focus on the transition between “falsetto and full voice.” Miller acknowledges that falsetto is not often used by the low-male voice types in (classical) public performance, yet he maintains that regular training of the transition between registers will “bring about ease of production,” particularly at the top of the range.12 In CCM music, male singers often showcase falsetto in public performance. The use of both registers is required and valuable in both CCM and classical genres, and therefore, the approach to training could be the same. Karen Hall identifies the use of register-dominance as the “defining difference between female music theater and classical singing,” explaining “in the simplest terms,” that female musical theater repertoire calls for more chest register, and classical repertoire calls for more head register.4 A training regimen that targets the understanding, development and coordination of registers will provide access to the entire range in a broad palette of dramatic colors. The repertoire itself determines which sounds are most appropriate.

Supplemental Training For Singers

In addition to the elements of vocal technique described above, courses in acting and voice pedagogy are often a part of a singer’s curriculum. These subjects would benefit from collaborative-teaching teams from varied stylistic specializations.

All singers are dramatic vocal artists, linked by the presence of text and the drive to share compelling stories with an audience. The accrediting body for most music programs and many musical theater programs is the National Association for Schools of Music (NASM). NASM lists separate essential competencies, experiences and opportunities for musical theater degrees and a degree in voice with an opera emphasis. In musical theater programs, they require “thorough”15 skills in acting, whereas opera programs only require “basic”16 skills in acting. In 1990, musicologist Joseph P. Swain dared us to define opera in such a way that it includes The Magic Flute, yet somehow excludes West Side Story.17 Why should there be two different standards for acting when the sub-genres are nearly impossible to distinguish from one another? According to the artistic director of the Manhattan School of Music Opera Theatre, Donna D. Vaughan, acting training often is marginalized in classical music conservatories and completely absent in young-artist programs.4 Training both musical theater and opera singers (together) in a rigorous program of acting methods would be more efficient than running parallel courses in separate programs while maintaining two different standards in the same subject. Commercial singers are also engaging storytellers. Adele’s Live 2016 concert tour featured a set list of 15 rock ballads, many about her own experiences with heartbreak. This could have been very depressing. However, between songs, she interacted with the audience, improvising banter, telling stories and cracking jokes to carefully regulate the mood of the audience.18 A reviewer for the Evening Standard explained, “She shifted constantly from being a lightning rod for emotion to a light entertainer.”19 Without question, this was acting. Many universities already offer acting classes to theater and musical theater majors; opening those courses to include classical vocal performance and CCM majors would be ideal. When students from a variety of programs are mixed together in an ensemble, they build trust, and that trust allows for greater inclusion and diversity.

A course in voice pedagogy is often included in an undergraduate classical voice curriculum to provide knowledge of vocal anatomy and physiology, as well as pedagogical techniques. Some institutions have the resources to offer parallel voice pedagogy courses that also include pedagogical skills required for music theater and CCM musical repertoires, but most do not. Offering private lessons is an attractive job for an emerging professional performer due to the flexibility of being self-employed. However, outside of a large city, an emerging teacher is not likely to find voice students who are exclusively interested in classical music. It would be more beneficial for classical undergraduates to learn how to provide functional training to apply in a variety of musical styles. Classical pedagogue Scott McCoy states that the ability to teach “both classical and CCM genres and techniques” is necessary to meet the “expectations of the real world.”20 If voice pedagogy courses were open to all types of singing students and elements of functional technique were applied to a variety of styles within the course, we could yield an entire generation of teachers who think of the voice in unified functional terms.

Conclusion

The future of collegiate music training is a more inclusive environment, one that ensures all styles of music are equally worthy of study and performance. In 2012, the National Endowment for the Arts reported that 44 percent of adults who attended a live music show, chose to attend a live pop or rock music show. Only 5 percent chose to attend an opera.21 In spite of a clear consumer preference for CCM, the genre still struggles to be treated equally within academia. The Association for Popular Music Education (APME) was founded in 2010 to advocate for the popular music discipline because “it stands as a vital part of our modern
lives." Popular music both reflects and responds to American culture. In *The Crisis of Classical Music in America*, Robert Freeman states that it is "important" to understand that "many Americans see classical music as European..." The musical styles that were born in the United States and continue to evolve here are integral to American identity, and should be represented as such within academia.

Rather than continuing to divide schools of training by labeling them as "classical" or "CCM" or "musical theater," singers of all genres of music can train "functionally." If stylistic specialization is affiliated with repertoire, rather than with the voice itself, there may be a shift toward inclusivity among voice pedagogues and voice programs. Supplemental courses can be redesigned to meet the needs of both CCM and classical singers simultaneously, in one ensemble, which would eliminate course redundancies and improve camaraderie. In the concluding chapter of *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, the editors "encourage orthodoxy, welcome diversity and embrace openness to create the cultural and structural conditions to kindle (or re-kindle) learning." We can envision a time to come in which the formal study of "music" is redefined to embrace American-born musics alongside their historical European roots. This monumental task will take time to manifest, but it can start with functional voice training.

**Notes**


7. Dictated from Joan Sutherland (Adina), "Prendi, per me sei libero" from *L'Elisir d'Amore*, conducted by Richard Bonynge, recorded in 1970, Decca B0015T51NY, 2006, 2 compact discs, originally released on January 1, 1971.


13. Ibid., 113.


