

Who's Minding the Store?



Jeannette LoVetri

Can you imagine a singing teacher who has never sung an aria or art song, or who has never been to an opera or a recital effectively teaching a young singer to produce the sounds necessary to make this music come alive? Can you picture that teacher judging a classical voice competition? One would hope not.

Yet at NATS chapter and regional competitions across the country, teachers who have little if any training and experience in nonclassical music theater singing styles and repertoire are adjudicating the music theater category. Applying classical standards of voice and repertoire to singing and literature that does not fall within classical criteria, these well-intentioned but nonetheless unprepared adjudicators are failing to effectively serve the student singers and their teachers. At best, their critiques are

misguided; at worst, they are misleading and destructive.

Why do we assume that someone who has sung and taught only classical music automatically knows how to teach and evaluate other styles of singing? Such an assumption can have disastrous consequences. For example, a colleague and friend of mine attending a recent NATS competition was approached by a teacher who said, "Could you give me a few pointers about musical theater? I don't know anything about it, and I have to go in there and be a judge." My friend, a skilled teacher of music theater, was justifiably horrified.

At that same competition, another colleague had entered students who were singing songs from contemporary Broadway shows that are rock music based. When the judges' comments came back, the students were told they were "ruining their voices" and needed to "correct their vocal technique." It is important to note that those critiqued students were studying with a teacher who had a very good working knowledge of the sounds of nonclassical singing, could personally produce those sounds, and based her work on healthy vocal function. Her young singers, however, were frightened and upset by the judges' comments. Understandably, it undermined their confidence in themselves and in their teacher. It took the pedagogue quite some time to administer damage control after the competition.

What is this music that sounds so different from classical and so often provokes the ire of classically trained

teachers of singing? It is contemporary commercial music (CCM), a new generic term for nonclassical music styles. Although it is mostly a product of the twentieth century, contemporary commercial music has its roots in the ballads of the old English music halls, the black minstrel shows, ethnic folk songs, and the Afro-Carib songs of the slaves.

Today, contemporary commercial music has become a multibillion dollar business and is well on its way to becoming the dominant musical force on Broadway. CCM in all its forms is, unquestionably, the most popular music in the world.

Ironically, however, there are few places where one can go to learn to sing, teach, and adjudicate CCM. Even though the vast majority of people who make money from singing do so in some style of contemporary commercial music, the pedagogy of singing remains steadfastly rooted in classical voice technique. There is no formal course of study on contemporary commercial music voice pedagogy and its interface with classical music available at any institution of higher learning. In other words, if one wants to learn to teach CCM and subsequently judge it, one cannot learn it at most colleges.

In addition, although there are over sixty colleges and universities offering majors and degrees in music theater, and several offering programs in jazz, few have teachers who understand or are able to teach CCM vocal technique. If one wants to learn to sing rock and roll, pop, gospel, rhythm and blues, or alternative styles without

hurting the voice, one cannot learn to do it at most colleges and universities.

Music theater today encompasses all of the aforementioned styles. Still, we know that many voice teachers do not know anything about these styles, and often do not care to listen to them. In fact, some teachers still are laboring under the impression that any music that isn't classical is ugly and vocally harmful. They seem to believe that classical voice technique is "one size fits all" vocal training. However, knowing how to sing Mimi's aria, "Mi chiamano Mimi," in the opera *La Bohème* will not help a young woman sing Mimi's song, "Out Tonight," from the Broadway musical *Rent*. Singers who want to study voice but don't want to learn classical art songs and arias are forced to do so anyway because no other kind of vocal training is available at most institutions of higher learning.

The lack of teachers knowledgeable and experienced in CCM creates problems for students not only in the studio but also in competitions. If, at NATS competitions, the music theater category is limited to those shows written primarily in the first half of the twentieth century, where a classically trained voice was often what the composer expected, then there will be little conflict. If, however, shows from the last fifty years are included in the repertoire requirements, and especially those from the last twenty-five years, where there is a much wider range of vocal styles to be considered and different standards to be applied, major conflict may result.

Knowledge of contemporary commercial music for any style, including music theater, cannot come from one seminar or a few articles and books, and it cannot come from obser-

vation alone. It requires a context, just as classical music does. Therefore, it should be unacceptable for a teacher with no experience, no exposure, no training, and perhaps no interest in CCM music, to judge it.

Also, it seems only fair to assume that those who judge our competitions are individuals who have a clear knowledge of correct contemporary commercial music vocal production and style. It would be reassuring, at the least, to know that they have made in their own throats some of the vocal sounds this music requires, and that they understand how to produce these sounds properly in a healthy and commercially viable manner. In addition, it should be expected that adjudicators have educated themselves in the history and background of famous contemporary commercial composers, works, and influences in musicals and other styles, and that they judge singers based upon this knowledge.

Standards of what is correct in CCM need to be established based upon the history of this music, vocal health, and what is necessary to attain success in the marketplace. We need to look to colleges, universities, and private studios that produce successful, healthy, multistyled contemporary commercial music singers to inform and model, so that CCM teaching and adjudication standards can attain a degree of uniformity. If we

cannot guarantee that the judges for the NATS music theater category are qualified to judge and know the standards by which they are judging, perhaps NATS needs to reconsider this category for its competitions.

Jeannette LoVetri has been teaching singing since 1972. She has had students in all walks of musical life from rock and roll to opera. Her students have appeared in leading roles on Broadway, in shows ranging from 42nd Street to Rent, on network TV, in film, and in national tours, as well as in leading concert houses, including Carnegie Hall. She was on the voice faculty of New York University in both the drama department of Tisch School of the Arts and the School of Education.

Jeannette works with retraining injured singers and is a consultant at Mt. Sinai Hospital's Grabscheid Voice Center in New York City. She has participated in voice research and is the author or coauthor of several papers published in the Journal of Voice. In 1999 she received the Van Lawrence Fellowship, given by NATS and the Voice Foundation.

She has offered lectures, seminars, workshops, and master classes on healthy commercial singing throughout the United States as well as in Europe and Australia. She is a Past President of The New York Singing Teachers' Association and a member of The American Academy of Teachers of Singing.

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