
Sinful Modern Music: Science and the Contemporary Commercial Singer

Pat Wilson

“Stop singing that sinful modern-type music”
Miss Minnie (Spike Milligan), *The Goons*,
BBC Radio.

That there are many levels of career path within contemporary commercial music is hardly in contention. The widely disparate and industry-specific vocal health needs of these professional singers seem to attract little serious consideration in the medical arena, despite their statistical predominance. A recent paper (Titze, Lemke et al., 1997) considers the range of occupations of professional voice users in the United States. It cites US Bureau of Labour Statistics (1994–1995) for the population of professional singers in America as 23,000. Of these only 3000 are classical; the remaining 20,000 are listed as “Other”. I speak for that under-researched 86.96% of professional singers — the Others.

Not Better – Not Worse – Just Different

This paper considers some of the problems facing performers in the many genres of contemporary commercial music, and discusses some of the sociological, cultural, logistical and aesthetic ways in which their life and work will differ from that of the Grade A, Gold Standard performer (the classical singer). Some voice care professionals (in this term I include singing teachers, vocal coaches, speech pathologists and otolaryngologists) may not be aware of the many demands and limitations placed upon their patients by the industries within which they must work. I hope to highlight some of the areas relating to vocal health and the singing of “sinful modern music”.

A Broad Church

The label “contemporary commercial singer” is a useful one, in that it differentiates the performers under consideration in this paper from those working within classical areas (opera, art song, early music, lieder, mélodie, modern serious music, etc.). However, there are also many different genres included within the “contemporary commercial” classification — it encompasses such styles as jazz, rap, rock’n’roll, metal, hiphop, house, music theatre, country and western, pop, rhythm & blues, soul and cabaret. Singers working in professional music theatre will have to work in a number of these vocal styles; think of the difference between *The Sound of Music* and *Rent*. Lead singers of covers bands doing high-end corporate functions

are almost certainly singing three-quarters of the styles listed above at every gig they do. The bottom line is that all successful performers excel at multi-skilling (Wilson, 2001).

Money

Financial considerations form the basis for much of the decision-making in the working life of contemporary commercial singers. Managers, agents, producers, booking agents, recording executives; these are usually the people whose commercial imperatives force them to ask more than their artist can healthily give. For all but a few top performers, your contemporary commercial artist is a disposable larynx on legs. There’s plenty more where they came from.

Bands

The working lives of aspiring and practising contemporary commercial singers reflect the demands of their genre. Singers with jazz bands rely on formidable audiation skills and thus present their voices with flexibility challenges at each performance. Because jazz musicians are instant composers, any jazz singer worth their salt may have never before sung the note sequences they sing in performance tonight. And tomorrow night’s performance of the same repertoire will differ again. Singers in cover bands face the need to replicate a range of famous recording artists. Any singer in a band that’s not at the top of the commercial heap will have helped bump-in the equipment before the gig. The band may not have enough money to hire sufficient monitor speakers (aka foldbacks, wedges), so the singer/s may well be listening for their vocal line through a multi-use monitor. They rarely have the money to have a sound engineer on the desk at each performance; it’s set-and-forget sound engineering. The performance venue will be air-conditioned; it may be smoke-filled too. Rehearsals are often undertaken in acoustically-challenging and potentially damaging environments. Remember where “garage bands” come from?

Music Theatre

A music theatre performer will need to be able to act, dance and sing simultaneously. There are often physically-exciting choreographed routines through

which the singer must continue to deliver a consistent vocal quality night after night (eight shows a week is the norm; a standard week of performances is Tuesday night, Wednesday matinee and night, Thursday night, Friday night, Saturday matinee and night, Sunday late afternoon). Regular understudy calls are in addition to this. In contrast to the lead singer of a rock'n'roll band, whose physical antics are her/his own choice, the music theatre performer gets told precisely what to do by director, musical director and choreographer. It is, of necessity, a very exact science (tons of scenery may descend from the flies upon careless performers who forget their blocking). It is not uncommon for shows to tour for 2 years or more.

Pop

Pop singers have strictures placed upon their style by the current aesthetic of voice: a singer must sound "today". In pop, vocal fashions change as frequently and radically as do clothing fashions. Recording is a necessary adjunct for pop singers, and the recording studio can be a chamber of horrors for younger, less prepared singers. Because recording equipment needs to be maintained in a stable atmosphere, every decent recording studio is not only air-conditioned but also cool to cold. Add to this the pop music industry philosophy which seems to regard young unknowns as disposable capital in an over-capitalised industrial arena, and the perils become obvious. "You sing it that way or you're out" from a band manager or an A&R heavy is enough to make the ambitious young singer shrink from saying the sensible thing, "I won't, because it's hurting me" (Baxter, 1989).

The Sins of Style

Stylistic devices that would have "classical" singers running for cover are contemporary commercial singers' bread-and-butter. We can either pronounce their work as "all of the devil" or provide technical, physiological and emotional support to those learning and working within these areas. Is constriction a sin? (Yanagisawa, Estill et al., 1989). If Elaine Strich's singing teacher had cured her of constriction, where would that Broadway legend be now? She's over 70, currently performing a sell-out one-woman show on Broadway, and belting safely and brilliantly. Should we send Tom Waits along to have a few drop-in lessons at the Conservatorium to get rid of that awful vocal fry of his? Isn't breathy onset a vile vocal fault? It hasn't hurt George Benson's career much. Or the late and great Peggy Lee. What if a zealous vocal coach fixed Dolly Parton's hypernasality? Why didn't young Johnny Farnham's singing teacher tell him years ago to stop flipping into falsetto? It gets you nowhere if you want to use your voice professionally. Can't Kylie Minogue get rid of that white sound in her voice? A bit of decent vibrato would improve her, wouldn't it?

A Cultural Chasm

Some of the difficulties that have historically caused a great gulf between voice science and singers of sinful modern music are entirely socio-logical/cultural. Your patient is 20. You're 47. Together, you sit in a quiet, clean, neatly furnished room. They may well find the quiet very disturbing. (The culture of continuous background sound is firmly entrenched throughout Australia.) You speak very nicely indeed. Even if your client has a master's degree in media studies, they'll rarely speak like you. It's not because they can't; they'd never aspire to. In their world, it's not an admired speech style — and style is all. As a professional, you wear tasteful business clothes — Country Road, Hugo Boss or Lisa Ho. Your patient wears an artful blend of Mook and Op-shop. They've had to travel to see you: they're on your territory, not theirs. They know your bill will be seriously expensive. They're often hoping their parents can help them with the cost. Perhaps those same parents want them to work in a bank or become a vet. Strange machinery surrounds them. More often than not, they are afraid that their voice is in danger. Your patient went out last night and saw Regurgitator. You saw Swan Lake.

So what can an otolaryngologist or speech pathologist do? Don't change your wardrobe, your consulting room or your well-modulated voice. The faintest whiff of patronising will be readily detected. Simply by understanding the world within which these fine performers must work, your assessments and advice will reflect a realistic view of their profession. For instance, it is unrealistic for a voice care professional to tell a rock'n'roll band's lead singer with the beginnings of nodules to place his voice in a nice legit. area. He walks out of your office and does his Cold Chisel bracket tonight at the Newmarket Pub, whatever you say. Why? Because he has to. The other six band members depend on him to be there to earn their money, make their commercial presence felt, and reassure the venue owners that they are a reliable band. The band has a manager who is also reliant on the earnings of that band. In an entertainment industry with too few venues and too many bands, the return gigs go to the dependable bands. Strategies allowing the singer to continue his work while rehabilitating his vocal deficits and building stamina suitable for his genre are most likely to meet with patient compliance and successful outcomes.

Help! There's an Alien in my Consulting Room!

As a result of this cultural chasm, it is likely that, when you ask patients to sing, you may not hear how they usually use their voices. They are often asked to make sound sequences utterly unrelated to their usual singing. Not a lot of rockers practise 1-3-5 arpeggios on /a/. Patients are likely to sing in a tone unrelated to their performance style. Why? When in an unfamiliar environment, fear is a common response; the attempt to "fit in" is hardly

surprising. Your patient is probably thinking, “What kind of sound would these alien beings prefer to hear from me, in order to treat me with the greatest respect, and thus guarantee that I’ll get the most effective vocal health care?” Fear, unfamiliarity and a range of cultural signals will make them choose to go ahhh instead of yeahhh. The practitioner then wonders “What’s the problem here?” Added to which, the patient has probably got a plastic tube stuck up their nose (Lim, Oates et al., 1998). I strongly advise asking performers to bring along video and/or audio recordings of their performances to their first consultation.

Asking the Right Questions

Edward Hodnett, author of *Studies in the Illustration of English Literature*, says “If you don’t ask the right question, you don’t get the right answers. A question asked in the right way often points to its own answer. Asking questions is the ABC of diagnosis.” I like Robert Sataloff’s example of a Patient History form for singers, listed as Appendix IIa in *Professional Voice* (Sataloff, 1997). Sataloff asks his patients to fill in this form before he consults with them, claiming that it aids the taking of their history, and helps him “cut to the chase” in the consultation. Comparing it with its earlier version (Sataloff 1984), he has expanded it in directions which address many of the areas of greatest importance to contemporary commercial singers.

A Case Study

To illustrate the perils of singing contemporary commercial music, I offer a hypothetical character sketch. She could well be one of my students ... and one of your clients:

- Female, 20 years old
- On the Pill
- Lead singer, rock’n’roll covers band: average (over a year) is 2 gigs a week
- Has a tongue piercing
- Smokes average 18 cigarettes a day
- Drinks vodka, often before gigs, because of performance anxiety
- Does cannabis, ditto
- Drinks and parties (occasional Ecstasy or small amounts of cocaine) with the rest of the band members at the end of each gig
- Does shift work in a call centre to supplement her income
- Rehearses in a friend’s dad’s big galvanized-iron shed, where he does woodwork
- The band has no roadies, so they lump all equipment themselves
- They never rehearse with monitor speakers
- For poorly-paid performances they don’t have enough money to hire wedges so she can hear herself through a discrete speaker. She has to

work by hearing what’s coming out of the lead guitarist’s speaker which is usually set behind her. He’s sitting on it, so he isn’t in line with the sound output, and doesn’t realise how loud it is. He’s also short-tempered, on illegal substances, and convinced that the band would be nothing without him.

Could anything else be wrong? My concern is that all of these troubling aspects should be systematically uncovered and supportively considered within her consultation.

So who Cares?

Can one refer voice health professionals to the body of literature relating to this field? As a straw poll indicating the level and range of interest amongst voice science practitioners, I gathered together the papers I had in my filing system which gave scientific consideration to the needs of performers working within non-classical singing styles (see Table 1). It is certainly not an exhaustive list, but a fair indicator of the level of active concern. All are articles undertaking aspects of scientific research into non-classical voice styles; 10 of them also reference classical singing as well. As a rule, scientific papers follow an interest in pathology rather than health, hence problems, dangers and ailments seem to be the approach of choice of the literature. Working healthily within the requirements of a singer’s stylistic needs appears to be of secondary interest to practitioners. I wonder whether we can change this?

Not included in this table are such scientific curiosities as the fascinating case of a young male rock singer whose attempts to improve his voice included the regular administration of helium (Tretjak, Gorjup et al., 2002).

What I read from this imprecise survey of over 30 years’ worth of scientific research into the singing voice is that the area in which the greatest amount of money is at stake, with the youngest performers who have the fewest advocates, mentors and professional advisers to assist them in career decisions, is the very area receiving the least amount of scientific attention.

What Do we Need Now?

Scientific investigation into the myriad aspects of singing can bring direct benefits to all who practice the art/craft. Names that stand out in the field include Johann Sundberg, Ingo Titze, Robert Thayer Sataloff, Minoru Hirano, Harm Schutte and Donald Miller. The findings of these researchers have, however, been received and interpreted by pedagogues whose interests tend to lie in the so-called “classical” fields. Meribeth Bunch, Richard Miller, Kenneth Phillips and Janice Chapman are some of today’s leading exponents in singing pedagogy. These people build bridges of understanding between research and singing praxis by relating scientific findings to those specific goals and practical considerations which must be faced in the

TABLE 1

Articles Undertaking Aspects of Scientific Research into Non-classical Voice Styles

Author/s	Classical	Pop	Jazz	Rock	M/T	Folk	C&W	Belt
(Bartlett 1999)		✓		✓	✓			✓
(Batza 1971)				✓				
(Bestebreurtje Schutte, 2000)								✓
(Bunch Chapman, 2000)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
(Burns, 1986)	✓						✓	
(Cleveland, Stone et al., 1997)							✓	
(Cleveland, Stone et al., 1999)							✓	
(Cleveland, Stone et al., 2001)							✓	
(Doskov, Ivanov et al., 1995)	✓	✓				✓		
(Evans, Evans et al., 1996)					✓			
(Hoit, Jenks et al., 1996)							✓	
(Koufman, Radomski et al., 1996)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
(Lovetri, 2002)			✓	✓	✓			✓
(Miles Hollien, 1990)								✓
(Osborne, 1979)					✓			
(Phyland, Oates et al., 1999)	✓	✓	✓		✓			
(Schutte Miller, 1993)	✓	✓						✓
(Stone, Cleveland et al., 2002)	✓				✓			
(Sullivan, 1989)		✓						✓
(Sundberg, Cleveland et al., 1999)							✓	
(Sundberg, Gramming et al., 1993)	✓				✓			✓
(Thalen Sundberg, 2001)	✓	✓	✓					
(Yanagisawa, Estill et al., 1989)	✓							✓
Totals	10	8	5	5	9	2	8	8

singing studio. For this reason (among many) their work is profoundly valuable. Their bias is largely classical. An outstanding exception is the regular column written by Robert Edwin in the *Journal of Singing*. It used to be called “The Bach to Rock Connection”, but is now headed “Popular Song and Music Theater”. Here, all pedagogic aspects of contemporary and commercial singing are treated with equal seriousness and thoroughness.

As discussed above, aesthetic demands and commercial criteria conspire to present teachers of contemporary and commercial singing styles with goals which may differ from those of the classical singing teacher. I wish that this growing cohort of teachers had more scientists keen to investigate the unique demands of their genres, and more singing pedagogues ready to translate science’s latest findings into clear and practical teaching processes, thereby promoting standards of excellence in contemporary singing training.

Summary

High culture music is viewed by some as of greater cultural value than contemporary commercial music. Vocal performers who work in the world of contemporary music are no less beset by stringent requirements than their classical cousins. When singers perform, whatever their genre, they all face the same neuromuscular and artistic tasks. Empty-

handed, they stand before their audience, juggling respiration, vocal fold vibration and resonance within an invisible instrument which is subject to daily changes. We can only help and support these brave artists if we have the grace to become fluent in the language of their art.

Author Note

This is an updated and expanded version of a paper I gave at the Australian Voice Association’s 6th Voice Symposium of Australia, Voice: The Cutting Edge, held in Adelaide, 2002.

References

- Bartlett, I. (1999). Unique problems and challenges of contemporary voice: What do teachers think? *Australian Voice*, 5, 45–49.
- Batza, E.M. (1971). Vocal abuse in rock and roll singers: Report of five representative cases. *Cleveland Clinic Quarterly*, 38, 35–38.
- Baxter, M. (1989). *The rock-and-roll singer’s survival manual*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Publ.
- Bestebreurtje, M., & Schutte, H.K. (2000). Resonance strategies for the belting style: Results of a single female subject study. *Journal of Voice*, 14, 194–204.
- Bunch, M., & Chapman, J. (2000). Taxonomy of singers used as subjects in scientific research. *Journal of Voice*, 14(3), 363–369.

- Burns, P. (1986). Acoustical analysis of the underlying voice differences between two groups of professional singers: Opera and country and western. *Laryngoscope*, 96, 549–554.
- Cleveland, T.F.J., Stone, R.E., et al. (1999). Formant frequencies in country singers' speech and singing. *Journal of Voice*, 13(2), 161–167.
- Cleveland, T.F.J., Stone, R.E., et al. (2001). Long-term average spectrum characteristics of country singers during speaking and singing. *Journal of Voice*, 15(1), 54–60.
- Cleveland, T.F.J., Stone, R.E., et al. (1997). Estimated subglottal pressure in six professional country singers. *Journal of Voice*, 11(4), 403–409.
- Doskov, D., Ivanov, T., et al. (1995). Comparative analysis of singer's high formant in different type of singing voices. *Folia Phoniatr. ica et Logopaedia*, 47, 291–295.
- Evans, R.W., Evans, R.I., et al. (1996). A survey of injuries among Broadway performers. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 11(1), 15–19.
- Hoit, J., Jenks, C., et al. (1996). Respiratory function during speech and singing in professional country singers. *Journal of Voice*, 10(1), 39–49.
- Koufman, J.A., Radomski, T.A., et al. (1996). Laryngeal biomechanics of the singing voice. *Otolaryngology — Head & Neck Surgery*, 115(6), 527–37.
- Lim, V.P., Oates, J.M., et al. (1998). Effects of laryngeal endoscopy on the vocal performance of young adult females with normal voices. *Journal of Voice*, 12(1), 68–77.
- Lovetri, J. (2002). Contemporary commercial music: More than one way to use the vocal tract. *Journal of Singing*, 58(3), 249–252.
- Miles, B., & Hollien, H. (1990). Whither belting? *Journal of Voice*, 4(1), 64–70.
- Osborne, C.L. (1979). The Broadway voice: Part 1. Just singin' in the pain. *High Fidelity Magazine*, 29, 57–65.
- Osborne, C.L. (1979). The Broadway voice: Part 2. Just singin' in the pain. *High Fidelity Magazine*, 29, 53–56.
- Peckham, A. (2003). Vocalise patterns for the contemporary singer. *Journal of Singing*, 59(3), 215–220.
- Phyland, D.J., Oates, J., et al. (1999). Self-reported voice problems among three groups of professional singers. *Journal of Voice*, 13(4), 602–11.
- Sataloff, R.T. (1984). Efficient history taking in professional singers. *Laryngoscope* 94, 1111–1114.
- Sataloff, R.T. (1997). *Professional voice: The science and art of clinical care*. San Diego, CA: Singular Publishing Group, Inc.
- Schutte, H.K., & Miller, D.G. (1993). Belting and pop, nonclassical approaches to the female middle voice: some preliminary considerations. *Journal of Voice*, 7(2), 142–50.
- Stone, R.E., Cleveland, T.F., et al. (2002). Aerodynamic and acoustical measures of speech, operatic and Broadway vocal styles in a professional female singer. *TMH-QPSR (Speech, Music and Hearing: Quarterly Progress and Status Report)*, 43, 17–29.
- Sullivan, J. (1989). How to teach the belt/pop voice. *Journal of Research in Singing*, 13, 41–58.
- Sundberg, J., Cleveland, T., et al. (1999). Voice source characteristics in six premier country singers. *Journal of Voice*, 13, 168–183.
- Sundberg, J., Gramming, P., et al. (1993). Comparisons of pharynx, source, formant, and pressure characteristics in operatic and musical theatre singing. *Journal of Voice*, 7(4), 301–310.
- Thalen, M., & Sundberg J. (2001). Describing different styles of singing: A comparison of a female singer's voice source in "Classical", "Pop", "Jazz" and "Blues". *Logopedics Phoniatrics Vocology*, 26, 82–93.
- Titze, I.R., Lemke, J., et al. (1997). Populations in the U.S. workforce who rely on voice as a primary tool of trade: A preliminary report. *Journal of Voice*, 11(3), 254–259.
- Tretjak, M., Gorjup, V., et al. (2002). Cerebral and coronary gas embolism from the inhalation of pressurized helium. *Critical Care Medicine*, 30(5), 1156–7.
- Wilson, P. (2001). *The singing voice: An owner's manual* (rev. ed.). Sydney, London: Currency Press, Nick Hern Books.
- Yanagisawa, E.J., Estill et al. (1989). The contribution of aryepiglottic constriction to "ringing" voice quality: A videolaryngoscopic study with acoustic analysis. *Journal of Voice*, 3(4), 342–350.

Pat Wilson is a singing teacher who specialises in music theatre genres, teaching actors to sing and singers to act. She also works as a performer, composer, lyricist and musical director, and gives workshops and masterclasses in tertiary performance training institutions. Her initial training was in classical singing and piano, she has a Graduate Certificate in Singing Pedagogy, and is currently investigating ways in which aspects of singing training may be assisted by using real-time visual feedback of acoustic characteristics of a singer's voice, as a Master of Applied Science (Communication Sciences and Disorders) candidate in the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney. Her book, *The Singing Voice: An Owner's Manual* is published in Australia by Currency Press and in the UK by Nick Hern Books.