

Corporate Singing

The term "music industry" represents a problem. Well, many problems, actually, but let's discuss the vocal markers of some styles and the related technical demands on the singer. In many genres, we have standard markers that say "this is an operatic sound" or "this is country" or "this is rap". Some of these make sense, and some don't. In our zeal to categorize, we can put arbitrary limits on a singer.

Adding unnatural nasality to make a "more country" sound, imitating auto-tune acoustically to sound like a pop recording, or forcing the larynx down low in the throat for "classical" singing are examples of common techniques that handicap singers. Recordings and performances tell us that there are ways we "should sound" to be categorized correctly.

In the world of voice training, there are branded methods that have signature traits and sounds. Most of them claim to be teaching for the "music industry", but really, some of the sounds and techniques that are being taught are in a vacuum isolated from what real working singers need to do. They run the risk of thwarting originality by using formulas to sound a certain way for a specific style.

The internet has provided opportunities to hear performances from the dawn of recorded sound onward. In the opera genre, the further back you go, the more individual the singers seem to sound. Can we know for sure that uniqueness was more normal? Could it be that only the best recordings have survived and that many sound-alikes were never recorded? Perhaps, but I still think there is a big problem with people having prejudices, shaped by popular taste, about how they "should" sound, at the expense of artistic freedom and uniqueness.

In my vocal neck of the woods, classical, there is a desire for a certain kind of resonance that occurs from a low-ish larynx. Now, a low-ish larynx is generally good for maximizing acoustic energy in an unamplified voice, but it's **how** the larynx descends that is the problem. There is a large percentage of classical singers getting their "classical sound" by stiffening the base of their tongue down against the larynx, pushing it lower, rather than letting it go there in an easy suspension. Some of the so-called "child opera stars" and talent show "discoveries" have a lot of vocal problems from forcing the larynx into an unnaturally low position. Unfortunately these are examples to the largest number of people of what a "classical singer" sounds like.

I have judged auditions where college and conservatory singers are

trying to sound like opera singers rather than learning how to maximize their *own* sound while keeping vocal flexibility and vowel intelligibility. It makes them sound alike in a sad way. It hobbles their spontaneity, agility, and expression and makes them sound old before their time. No young singer should ever sound old. Mature, professional, resonant, big – wonderful! But old – never! The beginnings of wobble are rampant among young classical singers, because they are locking their throats chasing "a sound" rather than finding their freedom. This makes me mad and sad because it is completely unnecessary and counterproductive to any long-term career goals.

In all genres from opera to soul to rock to musical theatre, young singers need to remember that their idols sounded very individual (i.e., in their prime, they did not imitate anybody). Trying to imitate anyone exactly for more than a short period of time can cause vocal trouble. Although audiences *expect* people to sound like each other when they sing the same music, they are also ready to be won over by a *new* interpretation, delivered by an artist singing with their own honest voice.

As of the time of this writing, there are legions of young people trying to imitate the chokes, chirps, alien diphthongs, and vocal fries of certain pop divas, the alluring darkness of some opera singers in their 40s who are teetering on the brink of vocal ruin, and the earnest bright-hyper-boyishness of the favorite young men of musical theatre.

You must be willing to be you. It seems easy, doesn't it? But people are led astray somehow, and they get caught up with capturing a sound that is not theirs. And then so many end up sounding the same.