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Health and Aesthetics in Singing: A brief Examination of Classical and Musical Theatre Vocal Technique

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HNR 499

Advisor: Dale Schriemer

Health and Aesthetics in Singing: A brief Examination of Classical and Musical Theatre Vocal Technique

In both classical music and musical theatre, many teachers, students, and fans alike assert that the two schools of thought are like oil and water. The long tradition of performance and pedagogy of classical singing looks down on the relative youth and easily-won popularity of musical theatre; and the organic, bombastic approach to stagecraft of musical theatre rejects the “stiffness” and rigorous adherence to form of the classical world. After studying both for years in performance and analysis, it is my opinion that these two schools actually share more than is widely accepted.

This is by no means an original concept, many experts and amateurs have been exploring the question since it was first raised. Scott McCoy, a classical voice teacher, took it upon himself to learn more about belting, and so conducted a study with a local belting coach and examined his students with special focus on the relationship between glottal activity and access to register, laryngeal elevation, and the measurable acoustic differences between belting and classical singing.¹

Traditionally, when speaking about the acoustic sound of each technique, “the timbre of belting is often described as bright, twangy, and brassy with horizontal vowel sounds modeled

¹ McCoy, Scott. "A Classical Pedagogue Explores Belting." *Journal of Singing* 63.5 (2007): 1. Print.

after speech (as opposed to the tall, round vowels preferred in the classical model).² One misconception about belting specifically is that, not only is there only one way to achieve this “twangy, brassy, horizontal sound,” but also that said technique is unhealthy. This is significantly grounded on the assumption, based simply on auditory observation, that the way belters achieve such power in their upper registers with such bright, unwavering sound is that they “force” their chest voice up into the higher range, causing strain. On the contrary, McCoy found that the acoustic tonal ideal for both classical and musical theatre singing was the same. He writes,

“I heard one singer after another produce a scale that was light and slender on the bottom, increasing in energy and becoming more speech-like through the middle, and ending in a clear, strong, open top. The voices displayed uniform timbre with no apparent vocal seams or register changes.”³

That is not to say that there are not fundamental differences between the classical and musical theatre approach. By studying laryngeal elevation with an electroglottograph, (a very precise tool), McCoy found that belting is entirely possible without raising one’s larynx.⁴ This is directly contradictory to the classical tactic, in which a raised soft palate and open resonating chamber in the throat is a prerequisite for technically excellent singing. Furthermore, belters are aided by the fact that they almost always have electronic voice amplification as part of their performance. This allows them to sing much more lightly than perhaps classical singers, who are expected to project their sound over a full orchestra. This also helps keep belting as tension-free as possible—an essential rule in vocal work of any kind.

² McCoy, Scott. "A Classical Pedagogue Explores Belting." *Journal of Singing* 63.5 (2007): 2. Print.

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid*

It is my opinion that the differences between the two schools should be examined and synthesized rather than avoided and alienated. It is easy to see from whence many of these differences arise, musical theatre was born much later than was opera and so catered to a different audience; but that does not mean that they do not each have many valuable teachings to learn from one another. While the technical side of musical theatre arose from what was popular among the current audience, and was therefore more susceptible to vocal misuse, classical technique was built by examining the natural voice in its ideal state and working within that environment to form its rules and practices. While the storytelling aspect of opera was written by the composer and woven throughout the show to highlight mastery in musical composition and performance, musical theatre storytelling is often done in *collaboration* with the composer, rather than simply as another part of his or her job. This allows the storytelling to be its own agent in the presentation of the piece as a whole, and gains value from its ability to take the audience on the journey alongside the characters, while the music of the show is its *own* separate piece. This makes live theatre more accessible to the general public.

Though very different in appearance, both classical and musical theatre singing are based in the same concepts. In any school of thought pertaining to vocal music, the absence of tension and the efficient, connected application of breath are paramount. The discrepancies that arise and cause such drama in academia are between more surface-level methods, and, once we realize that, then I am sure both outlooks will benefit from the other's discoveries.

Link to recital:

https://docs.google.com/file/d/0Bwr5m_F0ojMHeWRBTet3bFRMeHM/edit?usp=drive_web