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I Want To Sing Like Madonna - How Come I Have To Sing Vaccai?

By Jan Shapiro

During a private voice lesson, my student Julie seemed puzzled by the music I assigned. She said, "I want to sing like Madonna — how come I have to sing Vaccai?" The assignment my student was referring to, Vaccai, is a collection of vocalises that gradually become increasingly more difficult with each page of exercises.¹ Private voice students have said to me, "I can't relate to classical music, I don't like opera singers," or, "I want to sing like Bruce Springsteen — why should I sing scales?" Listening to popular music makes it easy to understand the dilemma of vocal students. Presently, vocal students are deluged with many vocal forms and styles: classical to country, jazz to 'rap' music. Depending on the era, the media tends to glorify particular styles of music; and radio and MTV formats usually play whatever current trend is being popularized by the recording industry. While such trends are being popularized to general audiences, vocal music in America's music schools and colleges primarily consists of classical repertoire. This traditional classical approach in training the voice has been the accepted practice. But, is classical training necessary for the aspiring pop vocalist?

According to interviews conducted by Jerome Hines, noted classical artists differ greatly in their personal approach to voice.² The opinions of popular and jazz artists are equally diverse. Is vocal coaching enough for aspiring popular singers? Is the study of popular styles and repertoire the better way to prepare today's young singer? Should strict classical training be omitted? Many colleges have left these questions unanswered by simply offering one option for vocal students — classical training. Left unresolved, a classically

trained singer may face a problem in making the transition from classical to jazz or to popular and rock styles. On the other hand, because of rock vocal style demands, the singer with no fundamental vocal technique may risk the possibility of vocal damage.

THE CLASSICAL APPROACHES

There are several schools of thought in regard to classical vocal training. One of the popular and well accepted forms of classical voice training is that of Bel Canto singing. Bel Canto singing originated in Italy in the 17th century. In brief, Bel Canto vocal teachers emphasize the pedagogical aspects of singing vocalises and scales as a means to develop optimum tone production, agility and vocal control. The main objective of Bel Canto singing is to achieve a beautiful tone, free of stress.

In the 19th century, some vocal instructors and vocalists became interested in, and in some cases, enthralled with a more scientific approach to singing. Within the realm of classical training the scientific approach concerned itself with the actual physiology of the vocal mechanism, including the use of some medical terminology such as pharynx, larynx, glottis, etc. From these two basic concepts of voice instruction, Bel Canto and The Scientific Approach, evolved several variations and views of training the voice.

Methods that are used in voice training include relaxation exercises. Though some vocal instructors believe

Jan Shapiro is a full-time faculty member at Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA teaching voice. Ms. Shapiro is also a full-time entertainer as a songwriter, studio vocalist and night club performer for over a decade in Chicago, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., etc. She has a four octave voice range. She sang at the 1987 Boston Globe Jazz Festival and has recordings being 'aired' on local Boston jazz radio programs.

relaxation to be a concern in vocal training, they prefer to use imagery as a teaching tool in achieving the same results.

There are various methods, styles and interpretations that voice teachers and vocal coaches use to teach a student "breath support." The most effective method is "diaphragmatic breathing." When taking a deep breath from the diaphragm, the rib cage is supported and lifted, enabling the lungs to fill with air to full capacity.³ The basic concepts of classical training teach the singer how to breathe properly in conjunction with how to produce a good tone. In summary, classical training develops the human voice by use of graduated scales, passages, vocalises (like *Vacciai*) and selected classical repertoire to help build and strengthen the voice. A student who is classically trained learns how to use his or her voice without strain, lessening the danger of vocal damage. Which method or methods are applicable to the voice student who aspires to sing in the style of the latest rock star? Should this student study with a voice teacher or a coach?

VOCAL COACHING

A vocal coach may or may not rely on traditional classical technique in his or her interaction with a voice student. A vocal coach will usually focus on song materials and interpretation and polish to the singer. He or she can help improve the musicianship of the voice student, assist the student in becoming familiar with introductions of songs, song endings, expression, and dynamics and locating a key that is comfortable for the singer. The vocal coach may also concentrate on more specific song styles, stage presence and microphone techniques.

Both voice teacher and vocal coach may use chordal studies (singing chord changes), singing instrumental solos, or singing transcribed improvisations to improve the singer's musicianship as well as comprehension of chords. Rhythmic drills or studies like those used by drummers and modal studies can also enhance the ear and help develop a good rhythmic sense. These vocal studies view the voice more as another instrument rather than simply a voice. Both voice teacher and voice coach may assist the student with stage presence; both may work with the young singer's musicianship and interpretation. However, the voice



teacher is first concerned with teaching a student how to sing correctly. The voice coach assumes that the voice student has developed or at least has a beginning concept of voice fundamentals.

CLASSICAL TRAINING – IS IT NECESSARY FOR POP/ROCK SINGERS?

Eileen Farrell, well known vocalist, formerly of the Metropolitan Opera, voice teacher, and blues/jazz singer, recently shared her thoughts on voice training for pop/rock singers. "Classical lessons are useful in teaching students how to breathe, how to project tones and how to articulate words. For pop singers, classical training does not have to be as intense, or all-inclusive. Still, it will only benefit the student to study good fundamental techniques."⁴

Dr. Relford Patterson, Chairman of Music at Howard University, Washington, D.C., voice teacher and choral director, states, "Early on, technique is the same for a classical singer or pop singer. The student still has to learn how to produce a good head tone."⁵

Carol Sloane, noted jazz singer, feels that "It's important to know your natural voice and how to place the notes correctly and keep in tune. The students need to go back to the basics. If a singer is going to school to study voice, then he or she should really learn about the voice." Her advice is "Don't think you can start at the top. The singers who are at the top worked a long time to get there."⁶

CONCLUSION

The aspiring pop, rock, or jazz singer must carefully seek out the teacher who will teach the student how to preserve the voice regardless of musical style. Finding the teacher who has an excellent concept of classical vocal technique combined with knowledge and experience in singing popular and jazz styles may be difficult. Ideally the voice teacher should be able to guide the student by being able to actually "do" what he or she is teaching. Again, the performer-teacher described above is indeed rare.

Traditional classical training has its value in teaching the student how to use the voice correctly. Voice students study *Vacciai* or similar vocal exercises to improve and develop vocal control,

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C. Latin The left hand is usually needed to execute the desired Latin beat.



TEMPO

Tempo has an effect on what the left hand can play (execute). For example, on an up-tempo chart the left hand must be less-active or sparser. Also, crosstick becomes a valuable tool when playing fast tempos. Conversely, on a slow shuffle, the left hand needs to fill up the space by playing a busier left hand that is more active.

*The following text will provide a better understanding of big band chart reading and interpretation. "Studio and Big Band Drumming" by Steve Houghton, published by C. L. Barnhouse.

Steve Houghton has performed with Woody Herman, Toshiko Akiyoshi, Gary Burton, Freddie Hubbard and more recently, solo symphonic performances with concert bands and orchestras. Since 1977, he has served as staff clinician for Yamaha. Steve is serving as an important innovator in the world of symphonic percussion. He has commissioned four new pieces for solo percussion, making a valuable contribution to developing this newly emerging field. In addition, he keeps a very busy studio schedule in Hollywood recording records, television shows and movies.

VOCAL TECHNIQUE

(Continued from page 16)

good vocal technique can help to preserve the voice. It is only with developed vocal control, and effortless singing that vocal coaching can be truly effective.

FOOTNOTES

1. Nicola Vaccai, ed. John Glenn Paton, *Italian Method of Singing* vol. 1910 New York: Schirmer, 1975.
2. Jerome Hines, *Great Singers on Great Singing* New York: Doubleday, 1982.
3. Consult Diana Kimber, C. Gray, C. Stackpole, L. Leavell, M. Miller and F. Chapin *Anatomy and Physiology* 1st ed. New York: Macmillan, 1966, 528 & 529.
4. Eileen Farrell. Personal interview.
5. Dr. Relford Patterson. Personal interview.
6. Carol Sloane. Personal interview.

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Jan Shapiro



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