MUSICAL THEATER IN THE CLASSICAL VOICE STUDIO:
FINDING A UNIFIED PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH THROUGH A DISCUSSION
OF THE RESEARCH ON AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF BELTING

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PHYSIOLOGY REVIEW

- Cartilage
  - Cricoid cartilage: sits on top of the upper most ring of the trachea
  - Thyroid cartilage: two plates fused together to form a V (apex is Adam’s apple). Lower end is attached to the cricoid, allowing a rocking motion back-and-forth.
  - Arytenoid cartilage: triangular pyramids mounted on upper edge of back of cricoid cartilage
- Muscles move the cartilage
  - Intrinsic muscles: both muscle attachments within larynx
  - Thyro-arytenoid: origin in thyroid, inserts in arytenoid (“Vocalis” – forms main mass of the vocal folds)
  - Crico-thyroid: fan-shaped muscle acts as vocal fold stretcher; helps elongate the folds by increasing the distance between the arytenoid and thyroid cartilages.

WHY AND HOW DID IT DEVELOP?

- Early theater styles (Viennese operetta, opera buffe, Vaudeville)
  - Lighter style - more classical, lighter orchestration
  - Less dramatic music (more like a modern review than a plot-oriented play)
- African-American folk music
  - Relationship between singing and speech – singers go back and forth between the two, making it hard to tell, at times, when doing one or the other
  - Performances often take place outdoors → projection demands of “shout” quality, especially in middle & lower voices
  - “Shout” quality furthered by later popular genres (blues, R&B, rock & roll)
  - Electronics used for instruments further the demands on the singers
- Musical theater becomes more dramatic in the 1940s
  - Music advances plot
  - More vocal & dramatic demands on the singer
  - Orchestrations influenced by jazz, includes more brass & woodwinds

DEFINITIONS

- “While there are differences in approach to teaching classical voice, most agree on the fundamental concepts and the physiological aspects; however, this is not the case with non-classical styles.” (Ragsdale, 5)
- Many different definitions exist.
  - LoVetri (2003): “Belting is just a label given to a certain aspect of chest register function. This definition is supported by decades of use in the theatrical community to characterize a specific type of singing and singer who could be heard at the back of a house long
Studies

- Popeil (1999): “Belting might be: vocal production that proceeds out of the speaking range, with the prosody of speech, and that promotes a sense of spontaneity and aggressiveness.”

- Edwin (1998): “One of the major problems in defining belting covers an enormous amount of vocal territory, far more than its counter term legitimate, or ‘legit’ in Broadway shorthand.”

- Susan Boardman: “It (belting) is definitely not chest voice pulled up, but it is indeed another whole mode of using the voice.”

- Ragsdale synthesizes common belt descriptors among classical and non-classical voice teachers:
  - “lots of ring,” “brassiness,” “twangy,” “loud,” “bright”
  - Belting does not seem to function differently than chest voice.
  - David Alt uses “light mechanism” and “heavy mechanism” instead of “head voice” and “chest voice.”
  - Ragsdale: “Perhaps these latter terms need to be abandoned because they are associated with their use in classical singing which seems to be a different function than from belting.”

- Bright sound is created via “a tuning of the resonator to support maximum brightness.” (David Alt)
  - Small vocal tract promotes a brighter sound
  - Tongue tends to be higher in the mouth

Studies - What is Physically Going On?

- Boardman (1987): Sees more differences than similarities between chest & belting voice
  - Chest - low larynx; Belting – high larynx (closer to speech)
  - More air used in chest voice
  - In low range, chest voice has richness & warmth; belt voice gets weak
  - Vocalis (thyroarytenoid) muscle highly engaged when belting, but not in lower chest voice.

- Bevan (1989): Determines that the two placements are perceptually and acoustically different
  - Examines differences between chest & belting voice, and how the two sound to listeners
  - Conflicts with those who argue belting is simply chest voice singing in a higher range

- Schutte & Miller (1993): Belting is loud singing characterized by consistent use of chest register; high larynx position

- Edwin (1998): Series of articles specifically on belting
  - Part of the difficulty of defining is its “chest voice” dominant quality
  - Belting “is not chest voice singing; rather it is the coordinated activity of the thyroarytenoid and cricothyroid vocal fold activity that, although thyroarytenoid dominant, is influenced by increased cricothyroid activity, especially as the scale ascends.”
    - Higher larynx → narrower pharyngeal space than classical singing

- Lesh, LoVetri, Woo (1999): Study of seven professional Broadway singers
  - Found that larynx was unchanged or lower, pharyngeal walls wider when they belted
  - Hypothesize because singers have learned to adapt after singing 8 shows per week

- Popeil (1999):
  - Larynx unchanged or lowered when belting
  - Less space between tongue and pharyngeal wall
Head tilts back slightly → any narrowing of pharyngeal cavity
- Bestebreurtje & Schutte (2000):
  - Loud and bright qualities in belting accomplished by raising formants (articulators) → higher harmonics
  - Does not explain any changes in vocal folds to accomplish this sound

WHO BELTS?
- Some believe that belting for men and women is the same, but considerable disagreements continue about whether or not men belt.
  - David Alt: men do belt but it’s a “non-issue” because it so closely resembles “normal” singing.
  - Vowel modification theory:
    - General descriptors: less depth, shallower, more forward, more spread
    - Neil Semer: “A lot of men singing in that style will keep a wider positioning of the vowels and call that belting. I would simply call that spread vowels.”
  - Speech-like theory:
    - Edwin: “My experience has been that if you take a classical singer, usually with a belt sound they can sing approximately a minor third higher. So, for example, if you have a baritone that goes to G with their classical voice, they often san sing an A or even a B♭ with that pop sound quality because it’s so much less weight on the vocal folds because they’re producing a much more narrow sound, a much more speech-like sound.”
    - Soft palate is high with speech level larynx
  - Issue of registers:
    - Ragsdale: “Women have to access the head voice, creating a mix, earlier than men since men sing in a more natural speaking or chest register for a greater distance of their range.”
    - Some believe an “open” or “spread” production is not healthy in the male voice through the passaggio and above.

VOCAL HEALTH
A difference of opinion continues on whether one can or cannot belt healthily.
- CANNOT:
  - “If you are belting, you are not singing safely; if you are singing safely, you are not belting.” (Elizabeth Howell)
    - Creates “pressed phonation”
    - Taking the chest voice up too high
    - Too much subglottal pressure
    - Improper support
    - Tension in extrinsic muscles
    - Tension in the tongue
  - Abusive rehearsal and performance schedules for belters creates an inability to stay vocally healthy, especially singing in such an athletic manner.
- CAN:
  - Studies suggest that those who belt and have healthy voices have more similarities to classical singing with regard to technique.
  - “…just like classical singing, which can be done unhealthily, perhaps belting can also be done unhealthily.” (Ragsdale, 10)
Singers need to be aware of the difference between pressed phonation and “flow” phonation – musculature needs to be relaxed rather than tensed (Joan Lader)

Hygiene:
- Mark during rehearsals
- Stay hydrated

Training:
- Connection to breath
- Vary repertoire (balance)
- Modify vowels on upper end of register

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Do not uniformly discourage singers from pursuing this form of production.
  - Popular style in today’s musical world
  - Gets people singing
  - Choral perspective: can bring new members to your ensembles

- Use classical training to teach the style of production
- Stay informed of the latest research
  - Many constantly changing opinions
  - More researchers interested in this topic
- Communication between singer and teacher is critical.
  - How does it feel?
  - Where is the placement?
  - What do you hear?
- Programming ideas
  - Many ethnic music styles are produced through belting-like production
    - Remember: not originally intended to be sung by trained musicians
  - Consider singing lighter music early in program.
    - Harder to sing lightly after full-throated singing
    - Pitch intonation issues are more likely if not enough head register is incorporated into the sound
  - Recognize that any physical movement will likely affect the vocal production.
  - Understand intonation will likely fluctuate in beginners.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- “In 2004 the demand for contemporary commercial music singers in North America outweigh[ed] that of traditional classical singers.” (Ragsdale, 1)
- “The current interest in musical theater has caused an unprecedented demand for teachers with expertise in both classical and musical theater styles.” (LoVetri &Weekly)
- “To the teacher who must deal with belters now and cannot wait for future research studies, take comfort...the singer can be separated from a particular style in order to explore technical matters, and these new insights can then be integrated into a given style to the degree that the style permits. It is not suggested that teachers abdicate their ethical responsibilities to advocate a healthy vocal technique. It is suggested that our profession has a responsibility to all singers, not just to those whose aesthetic preference we agree with.” (Doscher)

Bibliography


