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Repercussions of Uniqueness for the 21st Century Vocalist

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Every human voice is unique. An individual's 'voiceprint' – the term used to describe 'the unique, individual character of your voice and how people hear it' (DeVore & Cookmans, 2009: 3) – is the result of an interaction between a number of phenomena, all of which are unique to that individual. As the term would suggest, this level of uniqueness rivals that afforded by attributes such as fingerprints and facial features. Both the basic anatomical structure of an individual, and the physiological (and psychological) processes that govern that structure, each have their bearing on how a particular voice will sound. As Kim and Whiteman (2002: 2) assert:

each voice possesses distinctive features independent of phonemes and words. These unique acoustic qualities are the result of a combination of innate physical factors and expressive characteristics of performance, reflecting an individual's vocal identity.

And yet, despite this level of uniqueness, when it comes to singing, some voices are, by popular reckoning, more 'unique' than others. In fact, according to LeBorgne (2010), it is 'often that "something" a little different about a particular person or voice [that] launches a performer into stardom' (2010: 6). There is however, an irony in this, for in order to maintain this unique 'something' over a long vocal career, the singer needs to incorporate some technical components. As Benninger (2008) states, 'one has to be aware not only of the important principles of anatomy, physiology and pathology of the voice, but also the critical interface between the voice, the sound production, and the unique aspect of each individual singer' (2008: 4). The lack of this awareness can result in irreversible damage to the voice, thereby significantly reducing the longevity of a vocal career.

Of course, that which is successful is inevitably imitated, and singers – like all musicians – are notorious imitators. Just as instrumentalists imitate musical giants, singers, in their efforts to find a unique vocal tone that can captivate audiences, often imitate other singers whose voices are perceived to possess that special 'something'. A

problem arises here, in that the voice being modeled upon may be untrained, and hence, technically unsound for sustained use. Singers who aim to construct a new sound based upon imitating others' uniqueness regularly have vocal health issues of some kind during their careers.

Clearly, the perception of uniqueness carries significant currency for contemporary vocalists, their audiences, and the industry that mediates the two. It follows then that uniqueness should be of equal concern to the teachers who train vocalists. Despite this, the place of uniqueness in contemporary vocal practice, training, education and the music industry is a highly under-researched area. There are serious repercussions to the pursuit of uniqueness by singers in terms of vocal longevity, vocal damage and technical limitation. This paper explores some of these repercussions by first examining the vocal health issues that arose early in the career of popular music artist Joanna Newsom. It then offers a range of strategies for contemporary vocal teachers wishing to address these repercussions.

Joanna Newsom is an artist who encompasses a great many unique characteristics. Newsom is an emotional and expressive singer, as well as a trained classical harpist and pianist. She released her debut album, *The Milk Eyed Mender* (2004), to great critical and popular acclaim. *The Milk Eyed Mender* exemplifies Newsom's initial vocal approach, characterised by many child-like qualities such as constriction, glottal attacks, squeaks, and nasal resonance, as well as an unusual approach to diction, and many unconventional, (and technically damaging) vocal sounds. Past reviews and press releases testify to the perceived uniqueness of Joanna Newsom's voice, described variously as: a 'ragged-sweet voice that defies convention' (Salisbury, 2010); 'a craggy mezzo-soprano ... somewhere between 12th-century troubadour songs, 78-rpm pop and Appalachian field recordings' (Paper Magazine, 2008); a 'childlike shriek, warbling out of her throat with fragile glee' (Yanowitz, 2010); 'a wild, sharp soprano that sometimes borders on shrill' (Smith, 2010); 'the most unique voice in the business' (Yanowitz, 2010); 'a voice that punches the lyrics expressively' (Dahlen, 2006); and, 'Newsom occupies as rarefied and unique a position in the world of music as Tom Waits or Joy Division. There is simply no one else who you could mistake her for' (Austin Music Entertainment, 2010).

It was Newsom's unique vocal sound that first captured the ears of both fans and

recording companies. Ironically, however, Newsom's uniqueness was in part related to her lack of vocal training, a deficit that had repercussions in terms of her vocal health, and at one point threatened her longevity as a performer. Indeed, Newsom's early vocal history provides a salutary example of how, without training in some foundational techniques, longevity is at best greatly reduced, and at worst, significant vocal damage can occur. After a successful start to her career, Newsom's highly unique vocal approach later resulted in vocal damage in the form of nodules, which required surgery. Newsom's singing prior to 2009 incorporated most components of unhealthy vocal practice: a nasal resonance with constricted tone attacks, high larynx and tight tongue and jaw, a likeness to 'baby' speech quality accompanied by unusual diction. In a 2008 interview Newsom talks about her voice and how her unique untrained vocal approach has impacted on her career and journey as a musician:

My voice was absolutely unhinged at this point [when she required surgery]. I'd sing and jump an interval and go for a note and I'd be scrambling for it before I would latch onto it. I was so unfamiliar with how my voice worked. (in Swerdloff, 2008: online)

Newsom's initial vocal uniqueness, based as it was on an untrained, raw and fragile (and ultimately unsustainable) vocal approach, was undoubtedly attractive to listeners. The apparent hunger in music consumers for vocal sounds that are 'fresh' and 'new' may explain a reluctance among many vocalists to undertake vocal training. In my teaching practice I have often noted a perception among young vocalists that undergoing training of any kind will somehow 'dilute' one's uniqueness. In attempting to establish a professional career the singer will endeavor to maintain their natural, unique voice with what might be unhealthy vocal use, in order to keep delivering the same unique product. The reasoning behind such sentiments are clarified by O'Connor's (2010) observation that while 'every singer has a natural, unique sound ... some singers have unmistakable qualities in their voices ... that make them instantly recognizable to the listener' (2010: 3).

As part of her vocal recovery and to be able to sing safely again, Joanna Newsom worked with a speech therapist and a vocal teacher. The result of this work can be heard on her latest CD, *Have One On Me* (2010). Newsom's voice now subtly demonstrates a different vocal sound, with qualities that are richer in her lower register, less constricted in her upper register and restrained, with less overall twang quality or

affectation.

The Joanna Newsom example is particularly valuable on two counts: first, it underlines the potential pitfalls of an untrained vocal approach, pitfalls that are rendered more dangerous when that approach combines – like Newsom’s – a popularly attractive uniqueness with poor technique. Second, it illustrates how appropriate awareness of healthy vocal technique can, through training, ameliorate damage and increase vocal longevity, as Newsom’s reflections attest to:

I was trying to reconcile something I’d spent years classically studying — the harp — with my singing, around which I had no technical or formal experience. I took three or four vocal lessons to try to curb the singing habits that had hurt me, and I think that really helped me to become conscious of the architecture of my own voice. You learn how to sing in a way that doesn’t cause harm to your body, and you learn to map and navigate the places in your skull and chest where the voice resonates (in Swerdloff, 2010: online).

The dangers of vocal damage and the importance of healthy vocal technique, together with an understanding of the high premium placed upon uniqueness by music consumers – and, therefore, by singers – are issues of primary concern for teachers of vocal students. The remainder of this paper examines these concerns and offers a variety of strategies for contemporary vocal teachers who wish to provide singers with safe and engaging explorations of new techniques and experiences.

Contemporary Vocal Teaching

Equating ‘unique’ with untrained

Vocal teachers need to maintain awareness, respect and sensitivity to the affixation of singers to their unique sounds. It is incumbent on teachers to clearly and accurately identify the areas targeted for practice and to support the development of accurate self feedback to develop vocal technique slowly and safely. Contemporary vocal teachers have an ongoing challenge as new styles of music and artistic expression are constantly developing. From the teacher’s perspective, the value of dismantling young singers’ tendencies to equate ‘unique’ with ‘untrained’ cannot be overstated.¹

¹ Indeed, fans and critics alike might be surprised to know that another highly unique vocalist, Björk, seeks out professional assistance to maintain her voice with a specialist vocal teacher.

Often, vocal approaches that are considered by students to be unique or to produce a more desirable vocal timbre do not lead to the production of a good singing tone (McKinney, 1994). Manifold (2008) supports this view, asserting that ‘singers who sing “naturally” without any self-awareness, any scientific knowledge, any breath management or muscle management, often end up with tones that can easily be breathy as they tend to sing from the throat, without using any musculature whatsoever’ (2008: 10). Whereas conversational speech evolves in a more organic, intuitive manner, when it comes to singing, ‘these natural or intuitive impulses must be abandoned in favour of learned vocal behaviour’ (Stark, 2003: 4). Mitchell (1994: 170) concurs, stating, ‘untrained vocalists are less aware of their limitations and more likely to have poor respiratory support and vocal technique’. Increased performance and touring demands also increase dysfunction, constriction and the limitations of range.

However, although vocal training is highly desirable, it is generally agreed that it must be grounded in the distinctive natural tone that is the birthright of every singer; it is from this that the singing voice may ‘be explored, discovered and developed’ (Ware, 1998: 19). An important skill for singing teachers is the ability to encourage students to first discover what *is* essentially their own natural voice, and then develop this through good vocal technique for a more safe and ‘secure sound’ (Monks, 2003: 3). This idea is echoed by Arriella Vaccarino, creator of *Voice Lessons To Go*, who writes: ‘singing is not about impersonating a sound that you like, rather freeing your own unique sound’ (Vaccarino, 2010, online). Waterman (2006) agrees, asserting that ‘working singers can suffer problems simply by using an unnatural voice not using your natural singing or speaking voice’ (2006: 159). Thus, while we may agree with contemporary vocal educators DeVore & Cookman (2009: 3), who stress the importance of ‘express[ing] your own natural sound in any way you wish’, my own experience has impressed upon me the significance of the role of the teaching practitioner in facilitating this expression in a way that is both safe and sustainable for the student.

As a teacher of vocal studies in the Contemporary Music Program at Southern Cross University, I teach across a spectrum of genres that includes world music, funk, jazz, music theatre, soul, fusion, country, pop, folk, rock and hip hop. Original songwriting and improvisation are incorporated into the teaching of these genres and these prove to be most useful and effective tools for empowering students. The improvisational aspect

of my teaching, especially in those genres using non-western scalar systems, has taken many years of research and experimentation to design specifically for vocalists. Due to the range of genres, students need to learn a broad selection of vocal techniques in order to align with professional music industry requirements. Initially, the focus is on enhancing students' vocal confidence, encouraging overall creativity, especially songwriting, giving honest but compassionate feedback and maintaining a respectful and enjoyable learning environment. Of course, exposure to such a broad range of genres presents students with an abundance of successful singers upon whom to model their vocal approaches. This practice, although understandable – and to a degree, desirable – is nonetheless fraught with danger for the untrained singer.

Repercussions of Imitation

Imitation is an important and integral part of being a better singer. If a singer is able to alter and create sounds it also implies that they have established a foundation for good sounds, arrived at in many cases by listening to other artists. However, imitation may be completely wrong for the untrained singer. There are very few singers who can immediately imitate or perform another singer's characteristics safely. By emulating and imitating the sound of other unique artists while striving for uniqueness, students risk their vocal health. Attempts to copy another vocalist's flexibility, range, agility and personal idiosyncrasies, regardless of their experience, age and years of training or professional expertise, not only lead to vocal issues, but are often identified and perceived by listeners as 'unnatural' or 'artificial'. Trying to completely duplicate another's tonal qualities, singing with the same ornamentation and agility and often forcing vocal qualities, regardless of the individual's abilities or training, are examples of this.

However, once an awareness of the pitfalls of imitation has been successfully built, it can then become a teaching tool: 'part of the teacher's effective arsenal' (Miller, 2004: 188). As part of their development training, students are exposed to a variety of influential historical and contemporary artists and encouraged to imitate them. In this way, singers learn about various vocal techniques and how to experiment and engage in 'active listening' analysis, learning to listen in a very vocally focused way. This aids learning on a multi-sensory level and encourages and exposes students to vocalists outside their genre. It also enhances students' aural abilities and skills for recognising vocal qualities and assists in students' analyses of other singers with similar vocal

faults or issues. Listening and imitation then serve as tools for learning and means for the student to experiment with their own sound. Through adaptive approaches such as altering phrasing and remodeling accents, the student will be better equipped to identify characteristics that are damaging and trial alternative vocal qualities and techniques that create a moderated version of other singers' vocal sounds.

In my teaching I focus on a variety of areas that are fundamental to the building of healthy, effective vocal technique across a broad range of genres. This multi-tiered approach is also used in teaching individual vocal classes with a focus on the suitability of each technique for each student's best learning. Some of these areas of focus are:

- Occupational Health and Safety related to vocal and hearing health;
- Vocal anatomy and physiology, and more importantly, vocal function;
- Relaxation techniques and concentration/meditation techniques;
- Awareness of the importance of the joy in singing;
- Awareness of the importance of key signature in relation to the student's vocal register;
- Rib-cage breathing technique (deep relaxed breathing technique that releases breath freely when singing)
- Posture and alignment of entire body including face, mouth and jaw;
- Vocal acoustics (resonance), retraction and deconstriction techniques;
- Awareness of the physicality of singing and support or anchoring techniques;
- Repertoire selection focusing on the lyrical content for optimum expression;
- Pitch accuracy (many students either use too much air with the pitch going sharp or flat, or inconsistent pitching from register fluctuations);
- Harmonic analysis (understanding chord progressions as they relate to the melodic movement);
- Designing individual practice routines.

I promote positive practice methods and encourage students to delve deeper into their own vocal practice to explore on all levels: musical, physical, mental and emotional. At the beginning of each semester, Performance Major vocal students are requested to email a list of ten vocalists and/or groups to which they are each currently listening. These songs are analysed to identify and detect any possible vocal uses that are unhealthy or unsafe and to transcribe melodies, harmony parts, chord progressions and/or entire songs. This information is then reported back in a one-hour lecture/workshop class. Examples are sung and played, with explanations of why some vocalists' techniques are unsafe. The students are reminded that in most cases, healthy vocal technique is the forerunner to mastering specific styles. Students wishing to emulate a particular singer are given alternative approaches to achieving a similar sound/tone with techniques best suited to modifying the original tone in a safe manner; they are also encouraged to continue to develop and strengthen their own 'unique' sound.

The establishment of a rapport with the student and an understanding of the student's individual style of learning allows the teacher to give support and guidance with repertoire selection, problem solving and self-directed learning, as well as encourage originality. All of these methods and techniques are introduced at the beginning of a student's studies, then incrementally developed to higher degrees of difficulty, taking into consideration the student's current ability, their age and past training.

In terms of teaching strategies and vocal longevity for the professional contemporary vocalist, it is important for the singer to learn in a way that promotes and includes constructive information about vocal function, health and hygiene, and which also links the emotional and mental experience with the physical body. In my own practice there is much evidence that supporting longevity and continued attention to a methodical technical practice are effective when combined. In order to obtain genuine long lasting and positive results, effective teaching encompasses a holistic approach that is fundamental to becoming a professional singer. Therman & Welch (2000) embody this approach in the three volumes of their edited collection, *Bodymind & Voice, Vol I-III*. With its broader focus on the healing arts it aims to assist in a research towards a deeper understanding of voice, because 'teachers of expressive voice skills are in a key position to play an important role in the recovery of optimum voice function ...' (2000: 525).

Teaching Established Contemporary Singers

It is often the case that professional vocalists become extremely incapacitated and highly stressed by a dysfunctional voice. Such a singer will invariably display a number of impediments to a clear, efficient vocal tone, including: a highly breathy vocal sound (where audible air escapes during voice production), inconsistent pitch, poor posture and little technical awareness. She or he might have been performing for many years, albeit with limitations, such as constriction in the upper register, fatigue and minimal agility. To restore the optimal vocal health that is necessary to maintain consistently high performance standards, the rehabilitation of such a vocal approach requires a number of steps.

Generally one would inquire about the student's vocal health and history, discuss hydration and address relaxation and postural alignment. One would then explain to the student the function of the voice, discussing the optimal balance that is required for the muscular involvement needed to achieve a healthy, clear, efficient voice. Aspects related to airflow management and the stability related to the resistance provided by the expansion of the intercostal muscles and rib cage would be introduced. The focus would be on the student's development of a good onset of sound or attack at the very start of a sung phrase. Aspects of vowel modification might also need to be addressed. Vocal exercises that can be effective include: singing gently on glottal onsets (stroke of the glottis), singing in the upper middle and upper range notes in staccato, then in twang and sob siren (a whining sound). These teaching methods would take many weeks, depending on the student's health and vocal practice; there would be an incremental increase in interval and agility exercises when foundations were clearly established. These skills are mapped onto criteria rubrics, which are used for assessing the student's progress.

A teacher needs to be as clear as possible when establishing and designing a student's practice routine by defining any technical terms and giving an explanation of the purpose and the vocal function of all exercises. Similarly, when teaching styles of singing, the overall aim is to enable the student to represent the music and lyrics effectively and authentically and communicate this with an audience. Over-emphasis of technical components in teaching without including elements of artistry, expression

and spontaneity, leads to performances that are highly technical but rather lacking in emotion and authenticity.

Contemporary vocal teachers in all genres are encouraged to be aware of the latest research and developments in vocal science. There is an extensive body of research and a plethora of vocal texts available to vocal teachers today that outline all aspects of healthy vocal practice; examples include: Benninger (2008), Estill et al. (1990), LoVetri (2002), McKinney (1995), Sundberg (1987), Titze (1999), Vennard (1968), as well as the aforementioned volumes by Therman & Welch (2000). It is recommended that teachers encourage one another to collaborate with other vocal specialists, speech therapists, voice centres and continue to document their findings to add to this area of research (Sataloff, 2005 & LeBorgne, 2010). As well as updating their technical knowledge and remaining abreast of all aspects related to working effectively with public address systems and microphones, it is also highly desirable that teachers be in tune with emerging trends in music and its associated industry. Maintaining this knowledge requires constant research, but the benefits are invaluable. Students can be directed to new stylistic forms while remaining informed of the both the threats these may present to vocal health, and current best-practice methods of ameliorating these threats.

Conclusion

In many ways, a renewed pedagogical approach to contemporary singing is well underway in the twenty first century. This article has sought to add to the current discourse by centering on an issue that has thus far been under-researched: the concept of vocal uniqueness and its ramifications for both singers and educators. Both contemporary singers and their audiences place a high premium on having a unique sound. If a singer is fortunate she/he will be born with a voice quality that is unmistakably unique. This will often be the result of abnormalities in vocal approach; anomalies that, as in the case of Joanna Newsom, may ‘contribute to the vocal “uniqueness” of a sought-after performer’ (LeBorgne, 2010: 5). Unfortunately, such abnormalities often threaten the vocal health and career longevity of the performer – as they did Newsom’s. Finding a way to balance vocal uniqueness with healthy practice is imperative for both singers and their teachers. This balance can be achieved with a constructive selection of techniques, supporting the singer during the integration of these techniques.

Developing early detection criteria and methods that identify high-risk singers before the student begins rigorous vocal practice is a fundamental of good teaching.

Contemporary teachers must patiently apply strategies that allow the singer to continue performing and studying in their genre(s) of choice whilst rehabilitating vocal weakness or faults. In doing so they are helping to rebuild a stronger foundation, one that can support the weighty demands of live performance and touring (Wilson 2004). This was aptly demonstrated by Joanna Newsom, who with the knowledge gleaned from a small amount of vocal training, can now continue towards a long, prosperous and vocally healthy career.

My experiences as both a singer and a singing teacher – together with years of engagement with relevant scholarly literature – have convinced me that it is essential for contemporary vocal practitioners to encompass the development of a concrete and comprehensive approach to vocal pedagogy and vocal technique. This should include taking the time to understand a singer's viewpoint along a number of dimensions: musical, mental, physical and emotional. It should also include an understanding of the importance of vocal uniqueness. As Harrison (2006) reminds us: 'by daring to be yourself, you encourage others to be themselves, by sharing the solitude of your uniqueness' (2006: 211). The uniqueness that a singer brings into the world is both a potential source of popular and critical appeal and the foundation upon which an enduring, rewarding, and sometimes inspiring, career may be built. In the contemporary music industry, vocal uniqueness sells.

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