

# Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Survey: Who's Teaching What in Nonclassical Music

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**Summary:** Currently, there is an increasing interest in and demand for training in a wide variety of nonclassical music—contemporary commercial music (CCM)—and most particularly for music theater. A survey of singing teachers was completed to elucidate their training, education, and experience with and methods of teaching CCM. Teachers were at colleges, universities, and conservatories as well as in private studios, both nationally and in several foreign countries. A substantial percentage of those teaching CCM had neither formal education in teaching it nor professional experience. Many of the respondents indicated conflict between classical and CCM styles. Respondents were generally familiar with voice science and voice medicine as well as certain CCM terminology. Teachers expressed an interest in obtaining more information, with an emphasis on healthy vocal production. These results are discussed, as well as implications for the singing teacher who desires specific training to teach CCM.

**Key Words:** Contemporary commercial music (CCM)—Nonclassical music—Musical theater (MT)—Vocal registers: chest, chest/mix, belt/belting, head register dominant—Broadway style—Vocal pedagogy—Voice science—Voice medicine.

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## INTRODUCTION

The profession of singing has been handed down for many generations primarily from one person to

another. The traditions of singing have been transferred aurally from one person's throat to another person's ears as musical sounds. Those with experience as singers convey to younger people the wisdom of their own personal knowledge and understanding of various vocal and musical skills and abilities.

In more recent years, singing has been taught at colleges and universities through pedagogy courses at undergraduate and graduate levels. It has become possible to acquire a degree in vocal performance and in vocal pedagogy. These courses have been primarily aimed at classical vocal music, i.e., opera, oratorio, orchestral works, recitals, and chamber music, rather than at any type of contemporary commercial music (CCM), especially music theater.

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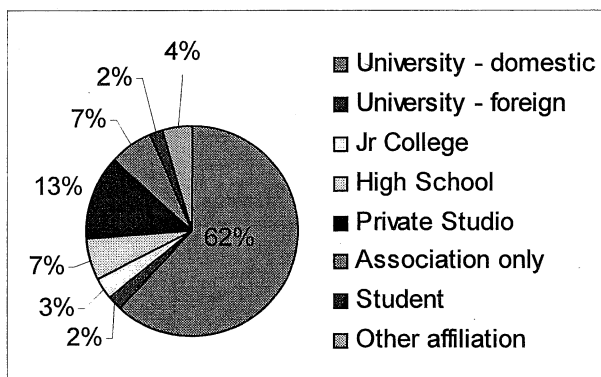


FIGURE 1. Survey respondent school or professional affiliation.

At the present time, however, the situation with many colleges and universities has changed. Schools of music and conservatories, which heretofore have had only classical vocal training, are adding commercial music departments and majors. Music theater is growing in acceptance and popularity, and students are increasingly applying to schools that have this type of vocal training. The authors were able to locate 31 schools of music and 40 schools of theater offering Bachelor's degrees and at least one Master's degree in music theater. No schools offering contemporary commercial vocal pedagogy courses or degrees were located, although there were many offering undergraduate or graduate degrees in classical vocal pedagogy or vocal music education.<sup>1</sup>

The advertisements in theatrical trade publications for music theater call for singers to have a very diversified set of vocal technique skills, many of which do not fit into the widely accepted view of classical vocal production. The following examples of audition requirements for singers are taken from the newspaper *Back Stage* published weekly in New York City as a theatrical trade publication in which auditions for Broadway, Off-Broadway, tours, and regional theaters are listed.<sup>2</sup>

"Saturday Night Fever"—*Stephanie: pop sound, strong technique, must belt to a D.*

"Harlem Song"—*male singers: prepare a 40s tune and funky R & B tune (eg James Brown), female singers be prepared to sing an Ella Fitzgerald-style swing number, Mahalia Jackson-style gospel number and a 70s R&B number.*

"Ragtime"—*Evelyn Nesbit: singer with good mix.*

"Seamen"—*Bradley: early 20s, high tenor with rock belt to C above middle C.*

This survey looked at a group of singing teachers from many states and several countries, with a wide range of experience, training, and age. It attempts to formulate a picture of these teachers, the skills they possess, the education they have had, and the difficulties they face, especially when teaching all kinds of contemporary commercial music, but most particularly music theater.

## METHODS

A four-part questionnaire containing 21 questions, often multi-part and open ended, was developed by the authors. The categories covered all of Contemporary Commercial Music and included (1) Performing Experience, (2) Teaching Experience, (3) Knowledge of Voice Science and Medicine, and (4) Music Theater Teaching, including a section on Terminology. There was also an optional section on Demographics. At the end of the questionnaire, there was a section for general comments.

The questionnaire was distributed and collected from January 2001 through April 2002. A large percentage was distributed at the second National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) Winter Workshop on Belting held in New York City, the Ohio State NATS Chapter annual meeting, and the British Voice Association (BVA) in London at their annual conference, in 2001. They were also distributed through the New York Singing Teachers' Association (NYSTA) and the Mid-Atlantic Regional and Virginia State NATS annual conferences all in 2002. Additionally, questionnaires were given out at various master classes, lectures, and through personal contact with teachers. There were 139 surveys returned.

The responses to these questions, as well as information regarding the respondents' ages, sex, education, training, experience, and pedagogical preferences were entered into a database for examination.

CCM was defined as any kind of music that was not classical. The categories included the following styles of music in alphabetical order: Cabaret, Country, Experimental, Folk, Gospel, Jazz, Musical The-

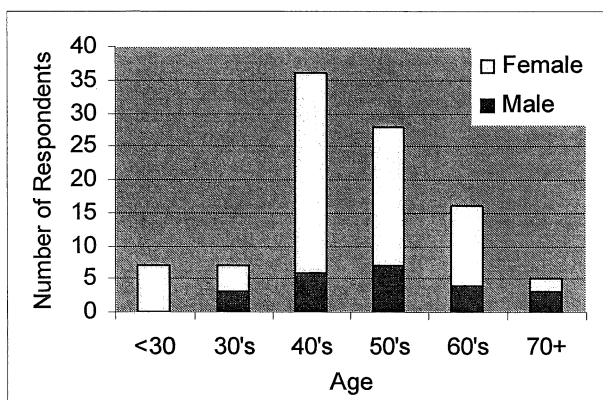


FIGURE 2. Survey respondent age.

ater (MT), Rock, and R&B (Rhythm and Blues). The term CCM was used to describe these styles of music generically.

### RESULTS

The overwhelming majority of respondents came from universities, both domestic and foreign (Figure 1). The next largest group consisted of private teachers who had their own studios, and the balance were from a variety of other schools and professional organizations. Most respondents (75%) were members of The National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), which reflects the fact that the largest number of completed surveys was obtained at the 2001 NATS Winter Workshop on Belting and at other NATS events.

Most of the respondents were female, about three times as many as were men. This is reflective of the attendance at the workshops and master classes where the questionnaire was distributed. The average age of the respondents was 48 for females and 53 for males (Figure 2).

#### Voice Science and Voice Medicine

Most respondents were familiar with voice science and voice medicine. A smaller group considered themselves to be experts, and the smallest group consisted of novices (Table 1). Voice Science included acoustic and research protocols. Voice Medicine included vocal health, hygiene, surgery, and clinical practice. No further questions were asked to

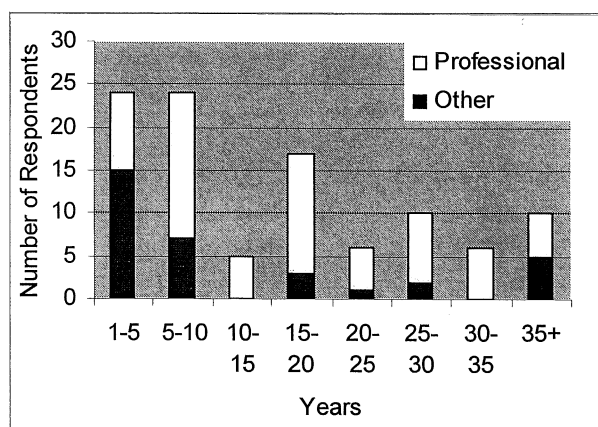


FIGURE 3. Survey respondent years experience singing CCM.

determine the accuracy of these self-assessments. In the bimonthly publication of the *Journal of Singing*, the NATS house organ, there are columns written by prominent doctors, speech pathologists, voice researchers, and others promoting professional voice care and vocal hygiene. Since many respondents were NATS members (75%), it would be reasonable to assume they were familiar with these columns and had had access to the information contained within them.

#### Performing Experience

Those having had performing experience in CCM were asked to indicate the length of that experience (Figure 3). The survey also asked if the performing experience was professional or amateur, as it was assumed that this was a significant measurement of a certain level of skill as a vocalist. Most of those responding to the survey had performed some type of CCM, either currently or in the past, and many had done so professionally. Those who had performed

TABLE 1. Survey Respondent Familiarity with Voice Science and Voice Medicine.

Familiarity Self-Assessment	Voice Science	Voice Medicine
Extremely	10%	15%
Quite	40%	41%
Somewhat	34%	36%
Little	16%	8%

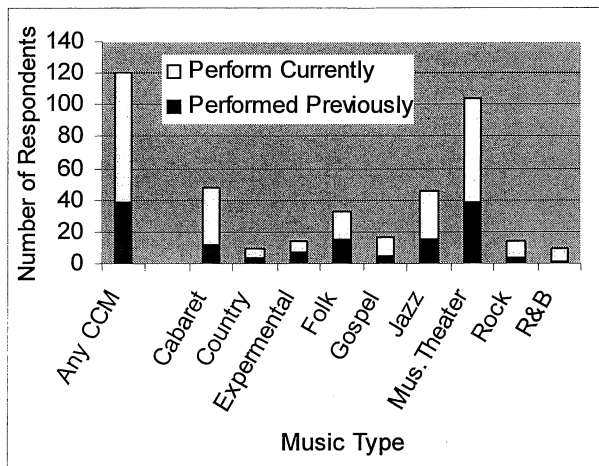


FIGURE 4. Survey respondent CCM type performed.

professionally, which was slightly more than half, had done so for an average of 20 years.

The respondents were also asked to indicate the type of experience in CCM, choosing from the previously stated list (Figure 4). The largest majority of performing experience was in music theater, followed by cabaret, jazz, and folk, with the other areas of CCM further behind.

### Teaching Experience and Activities

Ninety-one percent of the 139 survey respondents teach CCM (Figure 5). Of these respondents, 91% primarily teach music theater, 17% cabaret, and 14% jazz. Many of the respondents were in their 40s and 50s, so it is not unusual that the average length of teaching was 20 years (Figure 6). It was also inferred from the above data that most respondents had begun teaching before 30 years of age. CCM teachers also did audition preparation (91%), accompanying (57%), joint sessions with other professionals (54%), and administrative work (50%), including career counseling.

### Music Theater Instruction

The second half of the questionnaire was directed specifically at those who were teaching music theater. Eighty-nine percent (124) of the 139 respondents were teaching this style of CCM, for an average of 11 hours per week. As stated above, the survey examined further the areas of education,

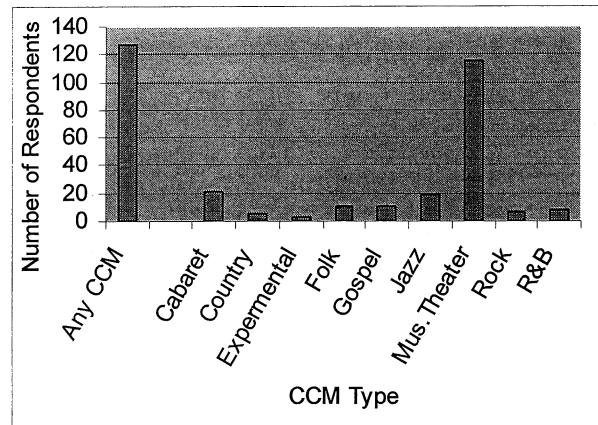


FIGURE 5. Survey respondent CCM type taught most.

training, and use of terminology for music theater. Of those teaching this style of CCM, 96% were also teaching classical, for an average of 13 hours per week, primarily to the same students.

### Training of Teachers

Only 56 (45%) of the 124 respondents who teach MT had any training to teach music theater (Figure 7). Only 12 individuals out of this 56, or 21%, received their training at undergraduate or graduate levels. The vast majority of respondents indicated they had received their training on their own, privately, through attending workshops, seminars, non-credit courses, or private lessons. The vast majority of the respondents who teach music theater acquired their knowledge from a variety of other sources. Most have experimented on themselves, observed other singers or teachers, read books and articles, and talked to colleagues.

Four significant categories were also gleaned from this same area of the data. They were as follows: those teaching CCM with (1) both training and experience (2) with experience only (no training), (3) with training only (no experience), and (4) with neither experience nor training. The data were broken down further to include those with professional experience as opposed to nonprofessional, or amateur, experience only.

Analysis of the data indicates that only 20% of the 124 music theater teachers have both training and professional experience. Additionally, 19% have neither training nor professional experience,

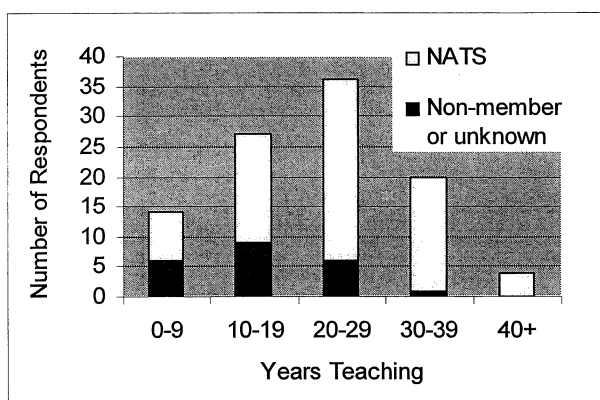


FIGURE 6. Survey respondent years teaching.

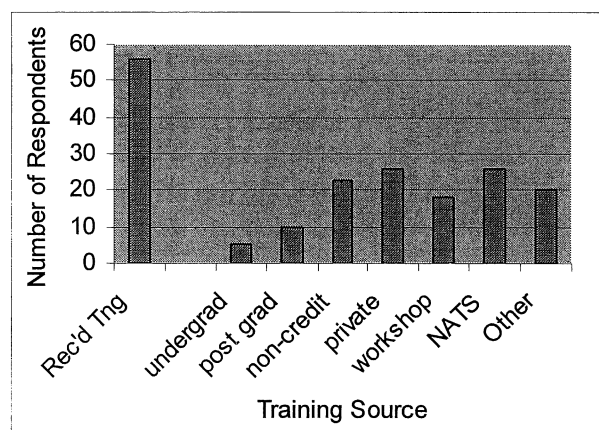


FIGURE 7. Music theater teacher training.

specifically for MT (Figure 8). The largest group (61%) has either training or professional experience.

When reviewing responses of the 55 college and university-affiliated music theater teachers, the percentage having neither training nor professional experience drops to 13%. However, 34% of the university faculty respondents teaching MT have neither professional experience nor university training (graduate, undergraduate, or noncredit). Only 18% of this group have university training. This would reflect the minor role of formal institutional training for music theater singing teachers.

**Terminology**

In spite of the fact that the words “belt” (a noun) and “belting” (a verb) have been used in the professional theater and on Broadway since the 1920s, these words have yet to be clarified in a definitive manner.<sup>3,4</sup> One of the topics up for discussion at the NATS workshops on belting was defining the meaning of the word and describing the sound it represents and the process of vocal production causing that sound. The word “belt” is used to mean various things and various vocal behaviors and has been a source of controversy among singing teachers for decades; however, it has never been used in describing traditional classical vocal music. More recently new terms have been used in music theater and other styles of CCM, and they are quite common in advertising for casting of Broadway shows. The newer words are “mix” and “chest/mix.” The survey sought to ascertain whether these words were used

by the respondents and, if so, in what manner. Respondents were also asked to supply other related words, but none were submitted.

Respondents were asked to state whether or not they used the three terms above: “belt/belting,” “mix,” or “chest/mix.” Those who used these terms were also asked to define them, but a significant number (33%) did not. Some teachers use the terms descriptively, but they do not teach the sounds related to the terms. Twenty respondents (24%), out of the 82 who use the term belt/belting, do not teach it.

For those who did choose to define these terms, there was general consensus regarding their meaning. Definitions of these terms are summarized from all responses as follows:

- Belt/belting: high, loud, chest dominant, brighter
- Mix: Blend of chest and head register sounds
- Chest/mix: chest-dominant, or, same as mix

Of the 94% who responded that they use at least one of the three terms, no one stated that they are descriptive of classical singing. There were a small number of respondents who also described the belt sound pejoratively, in that additional comments were added to the definitions such as “yelling, loud sound...ugly.”

The questionnaire asked if music theater was treated differently than classical singing by the teachers. The respondents were asked to evaluate the level of similarity and difference, ranging from completely different, somewhat different, somewhat

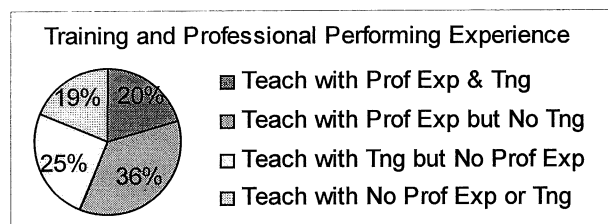


FIGURE 8. Music theater teacher qualifications.

related, very similar, to no difference (Figure 9). The later two categories, approximately one quarter of those responding, felt that there was little or no difference between music theater and classical singing. Approximately one third of the university-affiliated music theater teachers indicated that there was little or no difference between music theater and classical singing.

The teachers who responded that music theater was treated differently than classical singing were also asked to choose the five most important differences (Figure 10). University faculty teaching MT were very similar to all MT teachers in their responses.

Seventy-three percent (73%) of those who responded felt the most significant difference was in the music. The other characteristics in descending order are as follows: vowel (64%), language (53%), tone production (52%), and drama (33%). Continuing with other qualities after the five most significant were pitch (26%), personality (21%), terminology (18%), and breathing (18%). There were only seven answers to "other," and they included the following: low larynx position, more lift in soft palate, for classical and delayed onset of vibrato for CCM.

Although those who answered questions regarding the five most important differences could respond by simply checking off an item on the list, respondents were also asked to write definitions alongside their choices, and some did that. Definitions of each term have been grouped into categories. The ideas of the majority are paraphrased first, followed by opinions of fewer individuals (Table 2).

Finally, there was a section of general written comments at the end of the questionnaire. All responses have been grouped into general categories. They are listed in descending order, with the largest category (most responses) first, as follows:

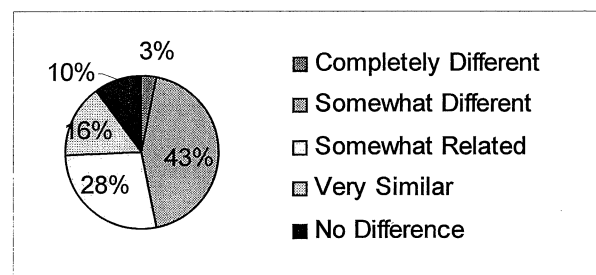


FIGURE 9. Music theater teacher similarity in approach to teaching MT and classical singing.

1. Personal information on individual respondent and his/her interests in CCM. [18 responses]
2. Conflicts between CCM and classical teaching and singing. [14 responses]
3. Requests for more training in CCM, musical theater in particular. [9 responses]
4. Others who are interested in researching this topic and are doing so or about to begin. [5 responses]

## DISCUSSION

In the field of singing, life experience is often considered training for teaching. There has been a general acceptance of these criteria for classical singing from the earliest times. The expectation is that performing automatically gives an individual enough information to have expertise. Performers who have had successful internationally recognized careers of long duration in the world of opera are highly regarded and often enter university faculties to teach at only graduate or postdoctoral levels. Therefore, the necessity of obtaining a degree at any level is less stringent in singing than it would be in other fields. Currently, this situation is in transition, as more and more schools are only hiring individuals with higher degrees as singing teachers. The questionnaire sought to separate formal musical education at a recognized institution of higher learning, informal adult education, and life experience in respondents. It was not within the scope of the survey to equate them.

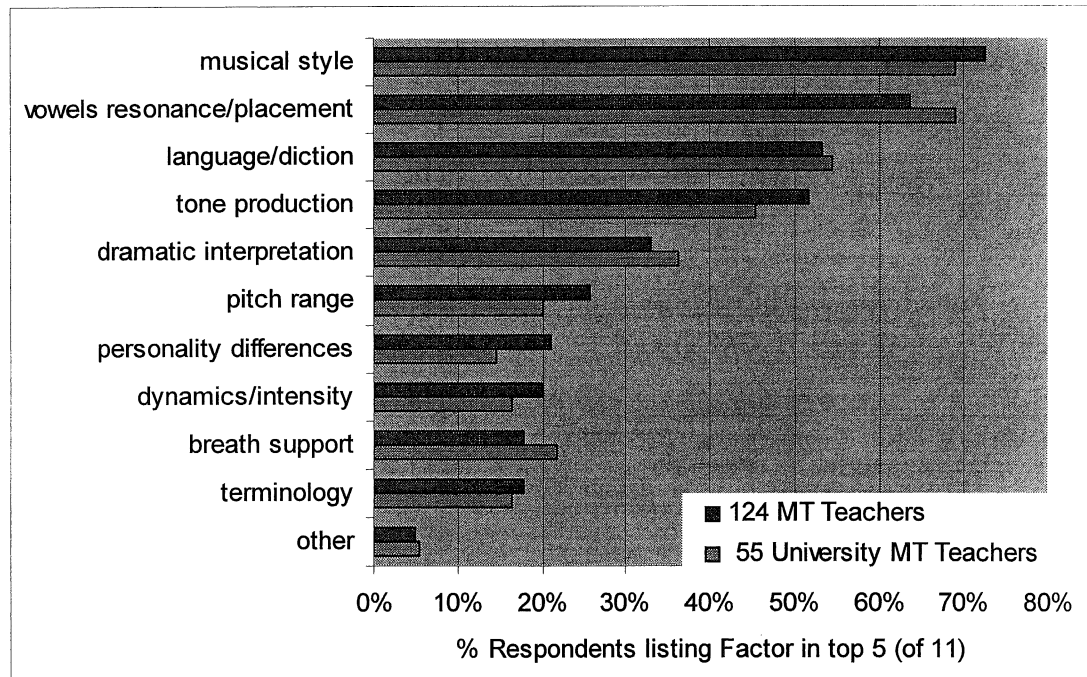


FIGURE 10. Survey respondent evaluation of factors differentiating MT and classical singing.

The authors are not aware of any formal MT vocal pedagogy programs, although it is not an impossibility that such a course exists. There are a number of schools and universities offering music theater either as a major focus of study or as a degree program. There are a few schools offering various programs in jazz, in which voice is a component, but jazz vocal pedagogy is not yet a recognized specialty at the college level. Generally, MT programs are aimed at performers rather than at teachers. In contrast, vocal pedagogy for classical singing is available at both undergraduate and graduate levels at many schools.

Due to the design of the survey, someone who had taken one seminar of only a few hours duration, or attended one master class, was still in the category designated “trained.” The category regarding experience qualified the respondents a little more by asking what type of CCM experience they had, professional or nonprofessional, but it did not ask where it took place. Again, someone with only a minimum of experience in a relatively unknown venue might still be designated “experienced.”

In order to have a fuller picture of who is teaching what in Contemporary Commercial Music, possible

follow-up research might include getting in contact with conservatories, universities, and colleges that hire CCM teachers to see if there are any specific requirements for candidates. This might include the following:

1. Does the teacher have any training to teach CCM, and if so, what kind; that is, with whom, for how long and with what particular philosophy?
2. Does the potential teacher have teaching and performing experience in CCM?
3. Is the performing experience professional or amateur?

Based on the data in this survey, the following information can be stated: The overwhelming majority of people teaching CCM/MT are at universities and colleges, and another large group is teaching privately in voice studios. They are in their 40s and 50s with approximately 20 years of experience teaching in some related field and 20 years training, most probably, classical, but perhaps with other types of training added. They belong to at least one professional teaching organization (NATS).

**TABLE 2.** *Survey Respondent Definitions of Terms*

Term (# of Responses)	Respondent Definitions
Vowel Sound	brighter
Resonance/Placement (24)	more forward register/resonance differences
Language/Diction (24)	More speech-like and natural
Musical Style (21)	more variable in all ways less formal less restricted tone
Production (16)	more spoken brighter less round
Drama (13)	more freedom in use of text and body more honest and direct
Pitch (12)	different pitch range usually lower less range in general
Dynamics (8)	louder in general more variable
Personality (2)	more versatile

The most interesting data of this research are that there are a significant number (19%) of people teaching CCM/MT who have no professional experience and no training at all related to it. This is most likely because the current interest in MT has caused an unprecedented demand for teachers with expertise in both classical and music theater styles. It would seem reasonable to assume, based on the data from the survey, that the largest body of candidates are those with expertise in a related field, such as opera.

Many of the respondents have obtained training through various types of informal adult education. The methods included attending master classes, workshops, and seminars of lengths varying from a few hours to several days. (Some seminars are sponsored by accredited universities; others are not.) Some of the respondents have taken classes from private individuals offering certification in a specific methodology of CCM, and some have talked to colleagues. Some have experimented with their own singing and with the voices of their students. Some have done all of these.

A number of teachers are conflicted about the two disciplines (classical and CCM) in various ways. Interestingly, most of the respondents teach classical music and CCM to the same students. Perhaps the teachers are conflicted because a variety of opinions

have been presented at various workshops and seminars by a range of experts who do not agree on basic vocal functions for CCM. Perhaps it is because this kind of music is still less than 100 years old, with the greatest changes taking place in MT in the last 30 years, as compared to the several hundred years that classical singing has been in existence, and few pedagogues have been involved with it long enough to know its consequences over time. Perhaps it is because there is no one at a national or international level of success who is singing in both styles simultaneously, to use as a role model. In other words, in spite of the new and vigorous hope that everyone can learn to sing everything, perhaps there are very specific limitations, both physical and musical, that complicate this issue. It would take further research to examine these topics.

In examining the data, the term “belt/belting” was analyzed separately from “mix” and “chest/mix.” This was due to the previously mentioned controversy that this sound quality has generated among singing teachers. Sixty-six percent (66%) of the 124 respondents who teach MT use the term “belt/belting,” but only 50% teach it. The question that comes to mind would be “why only 50%?” With the other half, is the decision not to teach “belting” deliberate? Is this because there is still a fear that “belting” is dangerous, or is it due to aesthetic values,<sup>5</sup> or is it because teachers do not have appropriate techniques to use? Further research would also be useful here.

Respondents were also asked to define these terms, and 64% did. There was a high percentage of agreement on the definitions. A significant number of respondents were at that time attending one of several NATS workshops in which CCM was being presented, and CCM terms were used and described, which could account for this consensus on their meanings.

The singing teachers in the survey thought the biggest difference between classical music and CCM is the music, although there is ample scientific evidence that the biggest difference is technical (i.e. vocal production). There are mechanical, physiological differences and vocal acoustic changes that have no effect on the music at all.<sup>6,7</sup> In fact, some shows can be done in either an operatic or music theater style. (*Porgy and Bess*, for example, has in fact been performed professionally both ways, as an opera with classical singers, and on film with CCM singers.



*West Side Story* was done with CCM performers in several versions but was recorded by Leonard Bernstein, toward the end of his life, with opera singers.) Also, only 18% of respondents thought that the breathing was different. It has been relatively well established in various scientific studies over the past 15 years that the subglottic pressure and airflow for CCM are different than for classical.<sup>8</sup> The survey results imply that this may be an area of confusion on the part of the respondents. Perhaps there is a lack of understanding of how the correct sounds are produced, i.e. which exact physiologic correlates are involved in various CCM styles, or perhaps there is a disregard for these components.

As stated previously, the questionnaire did not ask the respondents who had had professional experience, when it occurred, and what it specifically had been. Because the largest majority of respondents who were music theater professionals had been teaching for 20 or more years, and were in their 40s and 50s, it is possible that these individuals had performed in older musicals (those prior to 1970), which were much more operatic in vocal production than are today's current shows.<sup>9</sup> Particularly for women, there is a significant difference in the use of a more "head register dominant" sound for older material as opposed to the "speaking/chest voice" (chest/mix) sound now used for most contemporary Broadway shows. Older performers might reasonably feel that the biggest difference between CCM/MT and classical style is the music, as their vocal production would have been relatively the same in both. Those with current, more contemporary MT experience, especially women, might be expected to experience a distinct difference between the music and the demands it makes on vocal production and breathing. The vocal demands of shows such as *Porgy and Bess* (c. 1930s) and *West Side Story* (c. 1950s) are very different than are the demands of contemporary Broadway shows such as *Rent* or *Footloose* (c. 1990s).

### CONCLUSION

It would seem reasonable to surmise from the data analysis of the survey that most singing teachers

want to be more skilled in teaching CCM, especially MT. They seem to be indicating strong interest in the following:

1. Availability of clearly organized and consistent vocal production information for CCM, which can be easily learned by a wide variety of singers of all backgrounds and ages, as well as courses, seminars, workshops, books, and articles on CCM conducted or written by reputable experts who have been acknowledged in the academic and performing communities.
2. Increased knowledge of voice science and voice medicine, which has been incorporated into practical vocal use for singing CCM, all styles.
3. Efficacy of methodology proved through observation of successful professional singers of CCM and classical styles, who remain free of technical and medical problems, for a number of years.

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