

Classical and Contemporary Commercial Music: A Comparison

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The diversity of popular styles of music continues to expand, particularly in the United States, but internationally as well. From simple roots, these styles have emerged to be the dominant force in the musical world and the ones that most music enthusiasts appreciate. Classical music is no longer the only genre of music deserving of serious scholarly and academic study. Our popular styles, now called contemporary commercial music, grouped together as a genre, are taking their place as being different from, but equal to, classical styles, and deserving of the same study, respect, and investigation by everyone who has an interest in them.

For approximately sixty years, classical music was the only style of music taught in undergraduate and graduate degree programs in colleges and universities. In the 1980s, the first music theatre bachelor's degrees began to emerge, and the number of programs continues to expand throughout the United States. There is a high demand on institutions of higher learning to offer programs that train students to become accomplished in music theatre and other styles.

Training for instrumental musicians is offered in both classical and jazz degree programs, and the stylistic and philosophical differences of each genre are taught differently for both. For vocalists, however, the differences are more pronounced, and they can be significant enough to cause confusion that might interfere with overall success.

The need for a new term became increasingly apparent during the last half of the twentieth century, due to the use of the word *nonclassical* to describe any style that was, in fact, not classically based. The implication of this term was that classical music was somehow the baseline by which all music should be evaluated. It placed any style that was not classical against a preconceived assumption that what was not classical was somehow of lesser value or lacking in worth. The prefix "non" is defined by the World English Dictionary¹ as follows:

non—prefix, from Latin non—not

1. indicating negation
2. indicating refusal or failure: noncooperation
3. indicating exclusion from a specified class of persons or things: nonfiction
4. indicating lack or absence, especially of a quality associated with what is specified: nonobjective; nonevent

It presupposes that classical music, which also has many styles, sets the standard, but this flies in the face of the statistics about the music marketplace, which has long established that other styles are far more popular than classical styles, that they generate a great deal more money, and that they are highly complex and diverse in both skill and execution in their own right. The disparity served no useful purpose and demanded that a new term be found.

In 2000, the term *contemporary commercial music*, abbreviated CCM, was announced at the Science and the Singing Teacher in the New Millennium conference, sponsored by the New York Singing Teachers' Association (NYSTA) and Mount Sinai Medical Center, in New York City. This term, meant to collect all the styles previously called "nonclassical" under one umbrella, was also designed to stop the practice of defining these styles by what they were not. The term has subsequently been used in articles, research papers, and presentations, and at conferences and congresses throughout the United States and in several foreign countries. It has awakened the academic community, in particular, to the validity of these styles and allowed them to be seen as being united by their common roots. While the term does not yet extend to the category of music called "world music," it may someday include these styles as well.

The New York City Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center, considered by many to be among the premier musical libraries in the world, has its CD collection divided along similar lines. The groupings it uses for its CD collection are as follows:

Pop
 Music theater
 Gospel
 Jazz
 R&B/soul
 U.S. folk
 Blues
 Country
 Hip-hop
 Metal
 Rock
 Electronic

World
 Latin/pop
 Raggaec/raggaeton
 Salsa

Opera
 Nonoperatic vocal music
 Vocal music

CCM encompasses all the styles on the top part of this list. The National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) now has two divisions for its competition, classical, and music theatre. These organizations' separations of musical categories further advance the notion that the styles are distinct from classical music styles, but equal to them. Such a position demands, then, that a good, neutral term be used to cover them all, and CCM is the answer to that need. This is a correlate with classical, a term that encompasses the styles of opera, operetta, art song/recital, orchestral music with vocal solos, chamber music, early music, oratorio, and contemporary or experimental styles. The many styles of CCM born in the United States have flourished and subsequently traveled the world during the last one hundred years. We have reached a junction where these styles deserve formal recognition by the academic, musical, and performing communities.

WHY CALL THEM CONTEMPORARY COMMERCIAL MUSIC?

In the United States, the term *contemporary*, when used alone, is often associated with works written by living classical composers, but it can sometimes also mean any work from the twentieth century to the present. The word *commercial* can mean music written for a TV or radio commercial, or it can refer to the part of the music business that deals with various aspects of music making, including electronic music and music marketing. Used together, however, these two words, *contemporary commercial*, did not have any previous meanings.

In the new term, the word *contemporary* was taken to be anything originating from approximately the turn of the twentieth century onward, but that could also have roots going back even further, which folk and gospel music definitely do. The word *commercial* was taken to mean "for profit," as opposed to "not-for-profit," which is a legal definition. Commercial theatre is any theatre that is produced through money raised from investors who seek to have a return on their investments. Not-for-profit theatre funds are raised primarily through grants and donations. Commercial music is any kind of music that is in the music marketplace driven by consumers; however, from an artistic point of view, the level of quality of the product of both commercial and not-for-profit arts organizations can be exactly the same.

CLASSICAL STYLES: DIFFERENT ORIGINS, DIFFERENT HERITAGE

Western classical music has its original roots in Europe, in the church and in the commissions of aristocracy and royalty, going back to the late Middle Ages, being more firmly established at the end of the sixteenth century. Classical music did not become accessible to the general populace until the mid-1800s, although exposure to various composers' works through religious services was ongoing.

Composers of classical music can now be found worldwide, and classical music has also broadened in its scope and form. Classical music of twentieth- and twenty-first-century composers continues to be created successfully, and all forms, including opera, have expanded the breadth of sounds that enthusiasts can enjoy, although it also maintains many of its older conventions. Some of the music written has changed quite a bit in terms of style, but the singers, trained in the traditional manner, continue to be heard in ways that remain close to the vocal production originally captured in the earliest recordings.

Classical music is taught in most of the programs for vocalists through undergraduate and graduate training, regardless of whether the music sung is classical or some other style.² The first formal training for singing at a university conservatory was a bachelor's in voice at Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio, in 1934, and that was followed in 1938 by a similar degree at the Juilliard School in New York City. These first degrees codified training into a cohesive whole for a college curriculum. Prior to that, singing training was strictly a situation of one teacher working with one student at a time, but not in a school setting. This singing training was aimed at classical repertoire, primarily art song literature and perhaps also opera.

THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY COMMERCIAL MUSIC: MUSIC OF THE COMMON PERSON

To further appreciate the criteria and parameters of the main styles of CCM, those that have had a significant impact on the social and cultural fabric of society, we need to briefly investigate their beginnings. The other styles are certainly important, but these examples will suffice to illustrate how the individual styles have come to their current points of development. While being a cursory overview, the following information will indicate the validity of these styles and the reasons why they deserve to be taken seriously on their own terms.

Jazz Is Born

At the beginning of the 20th century, jazz was emerging in the Deep South. The great artists of that era, most of whom were from New Orleans, and who can still be heard today through recordings, launched a unique style of music that would grow and develop throughout the rest of the century, spawning several, then dozens, of offshoot styles. The “Roaring Twenties,” sometimes called the “Jazz Age,” was associated with a severe break in many social and cultural standards. It was a time when young people took up jazz in large numbers, sometimes to the consternation of their parents. In the 1920s,

What many young people wanted to do was dance: the Charleston, the cakewalk, the black bottom, and the flea hop. Jazz bands played at dance halls like the Savoy in New York City and the Aragon in Chicago; radio stations and phonograph records (100 million of which were sold in 1927 alone) carried their tunes to listeners across the nation. Some older people objected to jazz music’s “vulgarity” and “depravity” (and the “moral disasters” it supposedly inspired), but many in the younger generation loved the freedom they felt on the dance floor.³

By the end of the 1920s, jazz vocalists were beginning to sing with big bands broadcasting through the airwaves into people’s living rooms, where the large speakers on the family’s radio made it seem like the songsters were right there, singing to them. At the same time, recordings became widely available, and you could purchase any kind of music to play at home on your phonograph, as many times as you wished. For the first time, the average person had a chance to determine who was successful by purchasing records or movie tickets. “Popular music” became a big business and has remained so ever since.

Early training for jazz musicians was primarily through imitation and personal experience, but the demand for training by young enthusiasts eventually produced organized courses and led to the first college degree, offered by the

University of North Texas. The bachelor’s degree was in jazz studies, with a major in “dance band” or dance music.⁴

The Two Worlds Are Separate but Not Equal

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the two forms of music—classical and jazz—were separate in every way. This was perhaps because the music was originally born in New Orleans of African Americans, or because it was taken up by young people who were perceived by their elders as being “rowdy” and “vulgar,” or maybe for other reasons only to be speculated about, jazz carried a slightly tainted reputation in sophisticated society until it was integrated into the big bands and taken up by Caucasian vocalists who became celebrities. And because jazz was learned through informal apprenticeships by younger musicians and singers who were mentored by older, more experienced players for quite some time, jazz did not develop an organized written form until the big bands began to require arrangements. Some of these arrangements were written after they had been inspired by “jam sessions,” or improvisational rounds of music making, which was and still is a hallmark of jazz expression. Other composers, particularly George Gershwin and Cole Porter, were strongly influenced by jazz’s syncopated rhythms, and many vocalists copied the great Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Ethel Waters, alongside such vaudeville singers as Sophie Tucker and Al Jolson. Jazz had “arrived,” and its influences had spread throughout the country and across the oceans by the 1930s.

Simultaneously, in various locations throughout the United States, local people were playing music for their own enjoyment and in religious services. These styles were locked within geographic areas of the country, only to be heard live by local people until electronic amplification intervened and brought them to a national audience. With the invention of the microphone at the end of the 1920s, and the emergence of radio as a national form, music that had previously only been heard in a specific locale, one performance at a time, was suddenly available to anyone who had a radio or phonograph, or anyone who could attend a Hollywood movie at their local theatre. Music emerging in other parts of the country was also being seen in films and heard on the radio. Country music out of the southeast and “cowboy” music from Texas showed up on radio and in films in the early and mid-1930s. There was also growing influence from Chicago, New York, and Hollywood, as artists were intrigued and inspired by the variances of style that continued to spin into new forms, decade by decade.

With the growth of media and the more complex electronic forms that emerged as equipment got more sophisticated, popular styles continued to diversify and expand. Recording equipment improved in quality, allowing the sounds to be captured more vividly and authentically. Record quality and playback was also better, giving the listener

a richer aural experience. Films had gone from silent to “talkies” and then from black-and-white to color, ultimately bringing musical spectacles from Hollywood to millions of fans. They became acquainted with the performers who had been seen in vaudeville or heard on the radio by watching them on the silver screen. It was only a short journey then, for many of these same entertainers would move to television when it became widely available in the early 1950s.

Music Theatre: Changing Every Decade

Music theatre in the United States slowly grew out of various traveling shows, early theatrical productions with music, and early vaudeville or variety shows. It was also influenced by English music hall productions. In 1927, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II created the first “book” musical, *Show Boat*, which is a play that contains songs that are part of the plot. The subsequent decades saw the rise of this form as the predominant one on Broadway, and it became the pattern for hundreds of shows that followed. Music written for Broadway became a familiar part of life for millions by exposure through recordings and movies. The style of music found on Broadway changed with every decade to reflect the tastes of the public at large. In the late 1960s, rock and roll arrived on Broadway, and its influence has grown strongly ever since.

Music theatre has several unique characteristics that are found on Broadway and in the West End in London—and in no other part of the music industry. Singers are expected to sing in specific vocal qualities and with designated vocal characteristics, frequently in precise pitch ranges. These quantifiers are not found elsewhere, although classical music, particularly opera and oratorio, do have designations called “*fachs*,” which are categories that suit certain types of singers and voices. It is a vast and complex field that now flourishes throughout the world, but the strongholds are still in New York and London, where most shows are created.

A Sound Explosion in the 1950s Still Being Heard around the World

There is controversy about the origins of rock and roll. Many believe it emerged in Memphis or another city in the southeast, while others favor Chicago. Its arrival heralded a shift in musical tastes that has lingered for more than sixty years and is likely to continue for decades to come. Rock, as it became, is a derivative of jazz, but it was likely influenced by other styles, including Southern blues, bluegrass, or even ragtime. The early rock singers combined a new rhythmic beat, energetic sound, and simple lyrics to capture the hearts of the youth of the mid-twentieth century and, with some significant help from such network television shows as Ed Sullivan’s, took the country by storm. Popular music became the official domain of the young, much to the chagrin of their parents, who had perhaps been chastised for doing something quite similar decades earlier. Rock is also a

large field, with many famous star singers and influences. It is always changing, but many of the groups from the 1950s and 1960s, rock’s early days, are still touring or performing in “revival shows” to audiences full of fans.

More Styles Born in the United States: Country, Gospel, and Homegrown Folk

During this time, Nashville continued to flourish in its own right, and it, too, became a recognizable national force in the music marketplace. Stars from the Grand Ole Opry sang on the radio and later appeared in films and on television. A few, like “Tennessee” Ernie Ford and Gene Autry, emerged to become stars of their own TV shows in the 1950s. Gospel singing, which many believe has its roots in the songs of the slaves of the South or perhaps also with the camp meetings, open to all races, was concurrently being heard on the radio and in recordings. In the 1950s, gospel singing made it to mainstream TV through Mahalia Jackson’s program. Hearing her rich, powerful voice singing the words with deep devotion was a moving experience for many who were unfamiliar with this style.

With the coming of each decade, new popular styles were born, and during the last fifty years of the twentieth century, a plethora of styles was easily available through the newly minted outlet of the Internet, as well as the tried and true media forms of TV and radio, film and live performance.

In the 1960s and 1970s, folk music became popular, and although each country has its own version of folk music, in the United States, that tradition has variations in all geographic locations and probably goes back farther in history than any other style. It became a form universally embraced by young people during the turbulent Vietnam War era and emerged as another producer of names that continue to be recognized in the twenty-first century.

VOICE SCIENCE INTERVENES

With the invention of new tools in voice-science research in the early and middle twentieth century, it was possible for the first time to take a real-time look at the larynx of a vocalist during singing without causing injury. Acoustic measurements of singers’ voices also became more accurate. In 1977, *Scientific American* published a definitive article by Johan Sundberg, PhD, on vocal acoustics.⁵ It has been discovered that classical singers’ voices exhibit a certain amount of consistency in terms of both physiologic response and acoustic parameters. These hallmark characteristics are some of the ingredients classical singers need to acquire, either through training or by natural tendency, or both, if they are to succeed at the highest levels.

Later in the century, voice scientists began to examine other kinds of singers, particularly those who sang using the vocal quality called “belting,” a type of sound quite different

than that made by a classical vocalist, less refined but perhaps more closely related to speech. Belting is a kind of intense vocal production that allows the voice to carry easily but does not have the characteristics of a classical sound. It can be found in many styles of world music and has its early roots in American music in many of the aforementioned styles. It was later found on vaudeville stages in the singing of many performers and made its way to the Broadway stage as well. The research produced a body of work that indicates that the responses of belters' throats are quite different than those of classical singers, and that these differences have an impact on both the mode of vocal production and the output of the vocal acoustics.

WHY SINGING IN EACH GENRE IS DIFFERENT

A brief synopsis of what is currently known in voice science about both qualities (classical and belting) is that they require different amounts of breath pressure and produce a different type of closure in the vocal folds themselves. In addition, the configuration of the throat and mouth (coupled together as a tube) differs in shape with each. While this is a large generalization, the point is that the two genres are not only different musically, they are different because of the way the vocalists in each mode produce sound.

There is also a third kind of sound, one that is neither belting nor classical. This genre is frequently referred to as "mix." This sound has attributes of both classical and belting and is the quality used in most vocal music that is not obviously classical or belting.

In academia, primarily in the United States, training for vocalists continued to be exclusively classical, but a few universities added music theatre degrees in the 1980s. In these programs, young vocalists were allowed to participate in music theatre productions done at their schools. Shortly thereafter, outside of academia, the first training programs for vocalists who were seeking information about how to approach other styles emerged. These programs, which are still being offered, bring new information to singers and teachers of singing about performing each style optimally.

CONCLUSION

CCM and classical music are two broad categories defining genres of music, with many divisions within each category. They are two terms with positive connotations that allow each genre to be considered equally, but separately. They also help to clarify the continuous blurring of the lines between styles. The term *contemporary commercial music*, perhaps one day to transform into something else, does the job it was intended to do, which is give each style in the formerly labeled "non-classical" category a way to be respected through its own

criteria and parameters without apology or explanation, and it links them all through their common heritage of arising from average people for their own expression. It allows us to move forward into the twenty-first century, with both genres, classical and CCM, being seen as having value and worth.

NOTES

1. "Non-," *World English Dictionary*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/non-> (accessed 25 November 2013).
2. E. M. Weekly and J. LoVetri, "Follow-Up Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Survey: Who's Teaching What in Non-classical Music," *Journal of Voice* 23, no. 3 (2009): 367–75.
3. "The Roaring Twenties," *History.com*, www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties (accessed 25 November 2013).
4. "Timeline of Jazz Education," *Wikipedia.org*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_jazz_education (accessed 25 November 2013).
5. J. Sundberg, "The Acoustics of the Singing Voice," *Scientific American* 236, no. 3 (2007): 82–91.

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