

# A Tale of Two Pedagogues: A Cross-Continental Conversation on CCM

Melissa Forbes



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**R**ECENTLY, I FOUND MYSELF REFLECTING on the somewhat obvious fact that there was a time when contemporary commercial music (CCM) voice pedagogy did not exist. Like life before the Internet or microwave ovens, life before CCM singing and pedagogy is difficult to conceive for someone like me who has only sung and taught singing during the last two decades. That the discipline of CCM voice pedagogy is now so firmly entrenched within the broader tradition of singing is in no small part due to the work of the two pedagogues interviewed here. Dr. Irene Bartlett is arguably the *grande dame* of CCM voice pedagogy in Australia. Irene has mentored me and countless other CCM singing teachers in our region. When fellow CCM flag bearer Jeanie LoVetri travelled the 15,491 kms from New York City to Australia in January 2017 to deliver a CCM voice pedagogy institute at my university, it seemed like a wonderful opportunity to talk to Jeanie and Irene about their journeys as pioneering voice pedagogues. Ironically, Irene was in New Zealand at the time, so we conducted our conversation over Skype in front of an audience of 40 enthralled singing teachers from the Australasian region.

**Melissa Forbes:** How did you both start out teaching singing?

**Irene Bartlett:** I was a professional singer for some twenty-five years before I began teaching. I landed my first teaching job in the mid 1980s at the famous (at least in Australia) Johnny Young Talent School. The school was an offshoot of a high rating television show of the time which featured young singers (from six to eighteen years) and it was produced and hosted by nationally recognized pop singer Johnny Young. Despite having never taught, I was approached to teach at the school because of my reputation as a professional contemporary music singer. In 1996, I was invited to interview for a teaching position in the new bachelor's degree in Jazz Voice at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University. They wanted a teacher who had a professional profile in jazz performance. Within five days of interviewing for this role, I was appointed, began writing course outlines and began teaching university students! Some twenty-two years later, I'm still teaching at the Conservatorium, now as Coordinator of Contemporary Voice and Vocal Pedagogy, and I am a Senior Lecturer with a doctoral qualification—who would have thought this possible twenty years ago? Certainly not me!

**Jeanie LoVetri:** I grew up with parents who sang, and [I] don't remember a time I didn't sing. I gave my first performance aged seven at a Brownie meeting. I had my first professional concert performance and my first lead in a musical at sixteen. I sang in church from fifth grade until I was twenty-two. Through these various connections (but with no previous experience and little specific training), I was asked to be vocal director for an amateur but nonetheless high-budget local production of *Finian's Rainbow* at just twenty-one. Some of the cast members asked me for singing lessons and this was my start as a teacher. I moved to New York in 1975 and taught singing as a way to earn some money. In 1979, I began to teach at a small college with just three singers as students. In four years, this number quadrupled and the college had to hire another teacher.

**MF:** You were obviously onto something, Jeanie! Irene, what was it like when you first starting teaching in the academy?

**IB:** When I began teaching at the Queensland Conservatorium in 1996, classical voice was the established model and jazz voice was the new kid on the block. For the first couple of years I felt that it was very much an "us versus them" mentality, and I felt that the classical teachers existed in a very different world to mine. There seemed to be a view that anyone could sing "nonclassical" repertoire, and that if you really wanted to "learn" how to sing, classical technique was the best and only option. I felt that I was perceived as a performer/teacher who was essentially coaching students in repertoire because of a commonly held belief that there was no real technique associated with singing popular music styles. Suspicion is borne from not knowing, and once good singers with solid foundational technique began emerging from the jazz studio, attitudes began to change. A number of these singers were, and are, highly successful, nationally recognized professional singers whose voices are very versatile, free, and expressive. I believe that this helped to change perceptions.

**MF:** Jeanie, in your experience, what were the perceptions of CCM singing in the early days?

**JL:** When I attended singing conferences in the early days there was a fixed attitude about what singers did, and I would point out that when people used the term

"singers" what was actually meant was "classical singers." I joined the New York Singing Teachers Association in 1978, and worked my way up through the ranks, eventually becoming president in 1986. In 1983, the Association had its first conference at the public library in Manhattan—"Singing Broadway and Popular Music." The conference was standing room only and was a resounding success. Despite this, after the conference, half of NYSTA's Board of Directors resigned in protest because they felt our conference had denigrated the art of singing and the organization itself by presenting *that* music. I somehow managed to convince these members to return to the Association by arguing that singing in the real world had to address styles other than classical and that the time of thinking of singing only as *classical* singing was at an end. I argued that the popular singing forms were part of America's own heritage and something worthy of scholarly attention. Of course, CCM is now a large part of NYSTA's activities, but the battle to make it so back then was hard won.

**MF:** Irene, you've pursued academic qualifications, whereas Jeanie has not. Can you both speak to that?

**JL:** I have never completed a degree. This is in large part due to the fact that when I was younger, classical voice was the only option available at the college level. (I did complete one year of classical voice at the Manhattan School of Music.) There were no music theater degrees (which would have well suited me) at that time. I did not want to be a drama major, a speech language pathologist, or a jazz vocalist. There were no degrees that met my needs, so I quit college, got an office job, and never went back. Having no formal degrees has been both a positive and a negative situation for me. While I have enjoyed the freedom of not being permanently affiliated with a particular academic institution's training, there have been times when I have experienced a lack of acceptance within those same circles because I have no letters after my name.

**IB:** I have both a Masters and a Doctor of Musical Arts. I had spent considerable time studying informally by attending singing teacher and science of the singing voice focused conferences. As I was now teaching at the Conservatorium, it made sense to complete academic qualifications to have this private work formally recognized. But most importantly, it was necessary to

be able to supervise the increasing numbers of students who wished to undertake higher research degrees in contemporary voice. It was really an essential part of my role within academia to gain these qualifications.

**MF:** Irene, when did you become aware of Jeanie's work?

**IB:** I was the only Australian in attendance at the NATS Winter Workshop belt conference in New York in 2000. The hotel ballroom was packed with around 500 singing teachers. Jeanie was a member of a panel including Neil Semer and Mary Saunders-Barton. Each panelist addressed the audience and Jeanie's message really resonated with me—I felt we were both flag bearers for CCM singing. I even stepped up as a singer in Jeanie's master class in front of the entire conference audience. Although I had been a professional singer all my life, I was incredibly nervous—my lips were quivering with fright! I sang a Gershwin tune in the original key that had been set by Jeanie as a master class repertoire piece. Being a jazz singer, I then asked if I could sing the song down a minor third where it sat comfortably in my preferred low tessitura. After I sang, Jeanie commented that I sang well, and was a natural belter. I was thrilled!

**JL:** I don't remember Irene singing for me at all. I was nervous, too!

**MF:** What challenges have you both faced in establishing CCM singing as distinct from classical singing?

**JL:** Thirteen years ago, I attended a NATS national conference. The last presentation of the week was by two women on "Women Composers on Broadway." Having a keen interest in that music, I was very interested to hear the presentation, particularly to find out if there were any obscure women composers I had not discovered. Together with a student, the presenters performed various pieces of repertoire in what was to me a classical quality without regard as to whether that quality was actually one that would have been appropriate for the music. At the end of the presentation, I raised my hand and thanked the presenters for their scholarship but pointed out that the music should be respected and sung in the manner the composers intended. This led to an unfortunate series of comments about my lack of professionalism and instructions from the moderator that I may not speak further. More or less the whole room, about 350 people, felt I was being disrespectful.

I was just saying that we need to keep the same standards regardless of whether or not the music is CCM or classical—we need to sing it the way it was intended to be sung. If I had presented "An die Musik" as a rock song just because I was a rock singer and I justified this by saying I was only presenting the material, I don't think that would have been accepted by the audience. I thought then and still think now the music should sound the way the composer intended it to sound and not be done using whatever vocal quality a presenter is capable of singing. And, since the composers were women, I thought it was particularly important that we honor their intentions as women composers since they have been rare in music theater from the beginning. It was a daunting experience and there are still people who resent me for what I said that day. I would, however, do it again in a flash if I thought it would garner more respect for the music. We must *honor the music* for its own sake without altering it to fit a classical mindset.

**IB:** My road has been much smoother because ANATS, the Australian National Association of Teachers of Singing, has been very supportive of CCM style teaching. In 1998, Professor Janet Delpratt, President of ANATS at that time, invited me to present on the topic "Teaching Rock/Pop Repertoire" at a joint ANATS/NEWZATS national conference (the scheduled presenter had had to cancel two weeks before the conference). I was very surprised to be asked. Unwittingly, I had agreed to present in the main auditorium in front of an audience of primarily classical teachers. Very nervous and stuck for words, I started singing! This really helped to break the ice and, thankfully, the presentation was very well received. This opportunity led to my receiving the honor of being one of only two ANATS master teachers to date—me for popular singing styles and the other teacher for classical/opera. I am very grateful to both ANATS and NEWZATS for their support of my work in promoting CCM singing throughout Australasia. I think that as Australia and New Zealand together have comparatively small populations, the singing teacher community has a very collegial attitude. Also, perhaps Australia's isolation works in its favor in this respect—perhaps our small voice teacher community felt it was better to work together rather than become factionalized? Today, lectures in the postgraduate vocal

pedagogy program at the Queensland Conservatorium are non style-specific, integrating both CCM and classical voice students. I currently have three doctoral and four masters (research) students who are investigating CCM singing in some way.

**MF:** It seems to me that Australia is leading the way in postgraduate studies in CCM vocal pedagogy. I myself have two PhD students in this area. What are your thoughts, Jeanie?

**JL:** Over several visits to Australia in 1994, 1996, 2008, and on this visit in 2017, it's been my impression that Australia is very inclusive and accepting of CCM styles. While things have shifted in this regard in the U.S., I felt from the first trip here that acceptance of CCM was stronger in Australia. Perhaps that's due to Irene's influence. To me, Australia is a shining example of how colleagues can work together in a collegial way to further the cause of voice pedagogy generally, without descending into opposing camps of classical and "other."

**MF:** What factors have been influential in your careers as pedagogues?

**JL:** Aside from decades of private study in a wide range of disciplines—vocal, musical, and professional—The Voice Foundation has had the biggest influence on my work. I have been attending since 1978. Next year will be my 40th year, not having missed any of the meetings. I have learned so much there and met so many wonderful people who have contributed to my life both professionally and personally, it's hard to say in words what it has meant to me over the decades. It is a very important organization to all voice professionals. I support the work done there as fully as possible, sharing about The Voice Foundation and the Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice wherever I go, and encouraging people to attend and submit presentations. At the Symposium, we share important information between the voice disciplines, make wonderful friendships, and, for those of us who are old timers, we guide young participants to carry the work into a new generation.

One remarkable night happened at the Symposium in 1999. That was the first time I presented research. I had conducted a study with laryngologist, Dr. Peak Woo. This made me eligible to request a slot to sing at the Gala Fundraiser. Dr. Sataloff approved, so I performed "Ach,

ich fühl's" from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. The Gala guest of honor that year was the great opera diva Licia Albanese. As the last note of my aria was dying away, Madame Albanese said in a very loud voice, "B-ra-va!" I could hardly believe my own ears! Then, I took off my formal beaded vest, donned my baseball cap and leather jacket and burst into "I took my troubles down to Madame Ruth"—the first lyrics of "Love Potion No. 9." It seemed as if the entire room was shocked. No one had ever sung anything other than classical music at the Gala until that moment. I was worried that it would not be well received, but I got a very nice round of applause. I will always remember that night as it changed my life. What I didn't know at the time was that I was not alone.

In 2010, I was presenting at a workshop in São Paulo. In the audience was Dr. Mara Belau, one of the leading speech pathologists in Brazil, and recognized worldwide. Mara gave a spontaneous speech saying that I had changed her life that night at the Symposium. She had been taught that popular music was always harmful to the voice, and that you can't sing classically and remain a good singer if you also sing popular styles. Mara said that when she heard me do exactly that at the Gala in 1999, her mindset was completely changed and she never felt that way again. I was not aware of the impact I had had on Mara that night in 1999 until 2010. It was humbling to know about her reaction.

I have always hoped that the crossover performances I did at the Gala in years past helped to open some minds and hearts and made it easier for young people to investigate CCM materials with greater acceptance, support, and freedom in the scientific, academic, and pedagogical disciplines.

**MF:** Irene, what progress are we making in terms of establishing CCM vocal pedagogy as a discipline in its own right?

**IB:** We now have several decades of CCM performance behind us and we've come a long way. I still do not believe that we have a CCM pedagogy as such but, there are certainly some recognizable models in CCM—more than ever before. There is a strong global interest in CCM styles, including interest from the classical singing community. Over a short period of a few decades, CCM vocal pedagogy has emerged as a research discipline area in its own right. Even ten years ago, studies were still focused on

classical singers who claimed to sing CCM styles. Thanks to pioneer researchers like Jeanie we are seeing articles where CCM singers are the participants and authors. For instance, recently I co-authored an article in the *Journal of Voice* on CCM singers and their “day jobs,” where we discussed how extensive speaking and poor work environments can impact on CCM singers’ vocal performance.

**JL:** I think that there is still a long way to go in the U.S., particularly in the field of higher degrees. All the doctoral pedagogy degrees in the U.S. are still classical singing degrees, with just one exception. Hopefully, this will change soon, but we need more doctoral graduates who go on to set up departments that welcome CCM scholarship at the highest levels.

We also do not yet have any firm, objective standards or guidelines regarding the profession of teaching singing, established by an outside, objective organization. Standards are traditional, interpreted by individuals, or set by universities, college conservatories, or private institutions, and can be very unrelated to each other. Even science has not yet established which methods or approaches of teaching singing are based on accepted vocal health and appropriate vocal function and which are not. Without those things in place, it is difficult now to see things moving in a cohesive direction. I hope that as we go forward, vocal health and vocal function will be prominent in whatever develops for all styles, whether CCM or classical.

Many of my colleagues worldwide, who are working with CCM singers and have made valuable contributions of their own, see that together we have started something new that was necessary. I am honored to think that I may have had a small part in moving us towards greater recognition of CCM styles in research, performance, and pedagogy. I know that all of us who teach CCM, wherever we are, have helped awaken our colleagues to the joys of this repertoire. I know the next generation will go far in expanding the doors that have been cracked open by my colleagues in the USA, in Europe, and especially in other places like Australia. Irene’s work continues to be vital and her ground breaking contribution very important all over the world.

**IB:** As I said earlier, I have three doctoral students whose research is focused on contemporary voice. I believe that it is really important for CCM teachers and researchers

to publish and attend conferences to disseminate work on CCM and to raise the profile and the legitimacy of the work. Collegial sharing of knowledge is vital; I have always been very inspired and grateful for the pioneering work of voice scientists such as Titze, Sundberg, Sataloff, and Benninger, to name only a few, and of course influential pedagogues such as Jeanie. We also owe much to Robert Edwin for championing CCM in the *Journal of Singing*.

**MF:** Agreed, Robert Edwin has been a highly influential figure in CCM vocal pedagogy. His columns are legendary! What do you think the future holds for CCM singing and pedagogy?

**IB:** Whilst we seem to have moved on from “belt” as being the primary focus for CCM pedagogy and research, the new buzzword is “mix.” My view is that all healthy phonation is a mix (the TA/CT muscle balance which changes for the production of specific style, vocal range, or register as needed by the speaker/singer). To progress, we have to move beyond belt-centric or mix-centric approaches, guiding singers to find their



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own pathway to healthy voice function based on their unique vocal sound, personal music style choice, and artistic preference. Teachers and students need to understand that “good singing is good singing,” and that style should be overlaid on a foundation of genre-appropriate technique, because “bad singing is bad singing” in any style! CCM pedagogues around the world need to come together and speak with one voice. Voice science has great potential to help us in this respect.

**JL:** I’ve had several extended conversations with prominent voice scientists about the need for research on amplified singing (most research has focused on non-amplified singing). We need research that examines the effects of electronic and technological aspects of CCM singing. We need research on how what we hear affects what we sing. We need to know more about professional

singers with long-term careers rather than inexperienced college singers or college faculty. So far, these ideas have not caught the imaginations of the research communities I have encountered. I keep my fingers crossed.

**MF:** What is exciting to me about both your tales is that I see a genealogy of CCM vocal pedagogy emerging. You are both creating a legacy. Thank you for your work and for sharing your experiences!

**Melissa Forbes** is a senior lecturer in music at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Her PhD research examined the use of collaborative learning for first year tertiary music practice courses. Current research interests include contemporary commercial music voice pedagogy, vocal improvisation and alternative pathways to and through tertiary music education. Melissa maintains a performance career as a jazz vocalist, and in a former life, was a corporate lawyer of little renown.

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