



# SINGING A NEW SONG

Contemporary commercial music leads the way at Oberlin's first vocal symposium.

BY FERRIS ALLEN '04 | PHOTOS BY YEVGEN GULENKO

**W**HEN THE RECORDED CHORUS RANG OUT, FEET TAPPED in time and heads bobbed to Bob Dylan, whose refrain seemed to summarize the vibe of the first Oberlin Symposium for Voice Performance and Pedagogy.

*The times, they are a-changin'.*

This was not the first time teachers, voice scientists, and performers have gathered at Oberlin to discuss new developments in vocal pedagogy. It was, however, the first time a premier American music school has hosted a conference on singing contemporary commercial music, commonly known as CCM.

And it was quite probably Dylan's Kulas Hall debut. ►

In a master class in Kulas Recital Hall, Melissa Brobeck of Athens, Ohio, sang "Gimme Gimme" from *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

Yes, most of the lectures, master classes, and performances at the winter 2014 symposium centered around popular music.

In addition to the usual suspects—panelists and presenters included laryngologists and speech pathologists who regularly work with opera singers, and vocal pedagogues widely published in peer-reviewed journals—the conference focused on the work of a particular teacher whose voice belts above the crowd.

Jeannette LoVetri maintains a New York studio of Grammy and Tony Award-winning singers and serves as a consultant to several New York City hospitals. She is a lecturer at the Drexel University College of Medicine, and she crisscrosses the country to speak at universities from east to west. The National Association of Teachers of Singing has honored LoVetri with its Van Lawrence Fellowship, and she serves on the advisory board of the Voice Foundation.

And when LoVetri first took the stage in Kulas, she didn't mince words.

"My thoughts are my own," she cautioned. "And some of them are pretty outrageous."

Some, but not all. As LoVetri cued up a jazzified version of Schubert's "An die Musik" and an operatic take on the Beatles' "Yesterday," nervous giggling confirmed the room's agreement that stylistically inappropriate singing can be offensive in any genre.

"Any style can be sung healthfully or harmfully," said LoVetri, who coined the term "contemporary commercial music" in response to the ubiquity of modern musical genres. She challenged those who might categorically dismiss CCM singing as physically damaging, and she argued that "classical" and CCM singing differ not solely in style but in function.

And that is where the controversy lies.

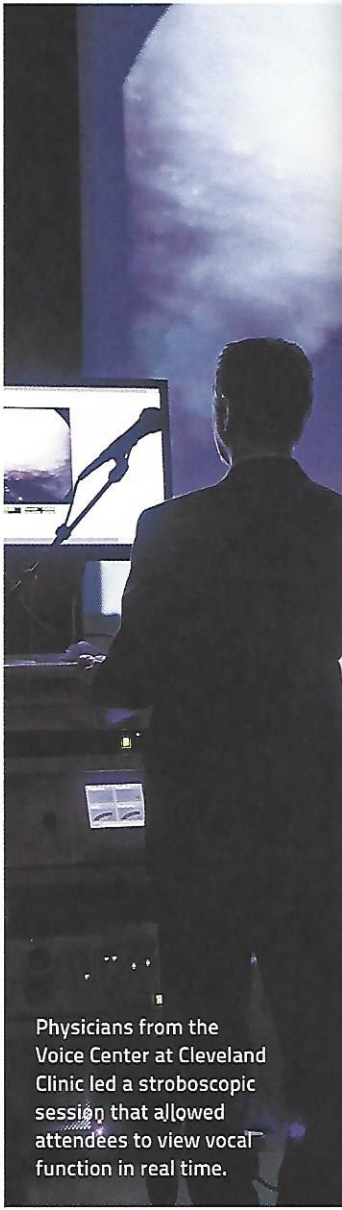
**"There's this other place"**

No one disagrees that CCM occupies ever-growing acreage on the American musical landscape. Dr. Claudio Milstein, director of the Voice Center at the Head and Neck Institute of Cleveland Clinic, made the point when he observed that Broadway productions alone eclipse all professional American opera in terms of revenue.

And many will admit, readily or reluctantly, that vocal function does differ in CCM singing. After all, a cursory perusal of writings in vocal pedagogy will reveal varying technical approaches to performing classical repertoire; it should come as no surprise that there is a similar



Michelle Ellison '14 was among those who sang in Jeannette LoVetri's master class.



Physicians from the Voice Center at Cleveland Clinic led a stroboscopic session that allowed attendees to view vocal function in real time.

diversity of approaches to CCM singing.

But if function should differ, that could mean classical vocal training does not necessarily prepare students for non-classical singing, and that the traditionally educated voice teacher—and vocal pedagogy in general—might benefit from a better understanding of those functional differences.

At the Voice Center, where singers of all musical stripes receive treatment, CCM clients often report difficulty finding teachers who understand what they want or need, Milstein said.

Lorraine Manz, associate professor of singing at Oberlin and the driving force behind the symposium, acknowledged as much in her opening comments. She recalled feeling unequipped to help a talented CCM performer in a style she did not teach. Out of that experience came the impulse to learn more, and with that came an introduction to LoVetri by the late Richard Miller, professor emeritus of singing, and the Voice Center's Dr. Douglas Hicks. It marked the start of an intellectual exchange that led to the

vocal symposium.

The entire weekend seemed to embrace Miller's willingness—at times, controversially—to bridge what Manz called "entrenched boundaries" in the teaching of singing.

Although the vocal instrument is the same, with CCM singing, "you have to have the lexicon, and the technical primers are different," LoVetri said. "When you switch gears, you have to tell your throat, 'There's this other place.'"

In several master classes and lectures, LoVetri unveiled some of this different vocabulary.

When Davin Youngs '03 sang "Feeling Good," LoVetri was quick to correct him—not for singing with operatic posture, but because he was "still stuck in a musical theater sound." Through a series of progressive vocal exercises, LoVetri was able to adjust Youngs' sound, comfort—and laryngeal posture.

In other presentations, singers with differing levels of training in both classical and CCM styles performed while attendees viewed their vocal function in real time, guided by medical staff



"My thoughts are my own," Jeannette LoVetri (left) cautioned the audience at the outset. "And some of them are pretty outrageous."

Below: LoVetri and Lorraine Manz were joined by the medical faculty of the Voice Center: Tom Abelson, Douglas Hicks, Paul Bryson, Claudio Milstein (from left) and Michael Benninger (far right).

from Cleveland Clinic who conducted on-site stroboscopy. On the projection screen in Kulas, tonsils were the size of watermelons.

Though the presentation did not aim to serve as a scientifically significant study, the dramatic and obvious changes in the shape of the vocal mechanism were unmistakable, as singer after singer alternated between classical and CCM styles.

Milstein observed that in CCM singing, most of the changes involve parts of the vocal mechanism above the glottis moving inward, creating an internal resonating chamber directly above the vocal folds.

A comparison of images of the vocal mechanism captured from multiple singers' performances of differing styles of music revealed repeated changes in laryngeal shape and posture.

### "It was Oberlin"

LoVetri's work with Youngs and other performers was exactly the kind of high-level CCM teaching attendees had hoped to see.

"I sometimes feel at a loss to help the development of some of these singers who are singing Broadway music or even more pop-style songs," said Riva Capellari, a classically trained voice teacher who maintains a private studio in Kansas City, Missouri. "It was heartening to know that what I'm doing is on the right track."

Hicks, head of speech-language pathology at the Clinic's Voice Center, reflected on the forward-looking nature of the weekend and wondered if it heralded larger changes to come in the field of vocal pedagogy.

"Several years from now, this conference will be seen as an historic event," he said. "The landscape is changing, and there really is going to be a choice. You either seize the opportunity as a school, as a teacher, as a pedagogue, or you'll stick to your guns. But slowly, over time, you will marginalize yourself."

Hicks, who met Miller at the Voice Foundation in the late 1970s, recalled their early work together and noted parallels with CCM's current treatment by voice teachers and

pedagogues. "We began to get to know each other, to get to know each other's vocabulary, to know each other's work," he said. "That led to research."

Eventually, that collaboration led to the creation of the Otto B. Schoepfle Vocal Arts Center, a research lab supported by both Oberlin and Cleveland Clinic that became the home of Miller's groundbreaking work and cemented Oberlin's position in the world of vocal pedagogy.

"I think Mr. Miller would have been quietly pleased," said Youngs, who studied with Miller while a student at Oberlin. "He was a problem solver and a scientist. He loved understanding how things worked, and this symposium would have been right in line with his interests as a teacher and person."

Hicks agreed that Oberlin maintains its place at the vanguard of vocal pedagogy—something Miller would have appreciated.

"Oberlin was willing to stick out its neck. Richard was exposed to the emergence of [CCM] at every annual Voice Foundation meeting. While his roots were in—and while his love was in—the classical music world, he got it.

"To actually have out front one of those recognized bastions of operatic performance—Oberlin—that's remarkable," said Hicks. "It will change the way pedagogy is viewed."

LoVetri was more succinct: "It could have been Juilliard, or Eastman, or [Cincinnati Conservatory of Music], but it wasn't. It was Oberlin. This place is the Mount Everest." ■

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