Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) is the new term for what we used to call nonclassical music. This is a generic term created to cover everything including music theater, pop, rock, gospel, R & B, soul, hip hop, rap, country, folk, experimental music, and all other styles that are not considered classical.

Some explanation about this term seems warranted. “Contemporary Music” usually refers to modern classical music, but sometimes, in Europe, it also means to any style of music that is current, so it wasn’t a good choice. “Commercial Music” has various uses as a term, but generally it has referred to music technology, such as Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) programs and music-writing software such as Sibelius and Finale. It was also not an adequate description. Therefore, the term “Contemporary Commercial Music” was coined and it has been accepted widely in the United States. Even though there are at least 60 “CCM” organizations listed on Google, including Contemporary Christian Music, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, Critical Care Magazine, and Communications in Contemporary Mathematics, we decided to add one more. Perhaps in time a better term will emerge, but for the moment, CCM seems to be doing a good job in helping to eliminate the use of the pejorative term “nonclassical.”

CCM earns millions, perhaps even billions, of dollars every year for singers all over the world. The vast majority of singers who earn money do so singing one of the CCM styles, rather than classical music. Millions of people listen to CCM through various media. Yet, in terms of science and academics, CCM has been largely ignored.

Traditionally, classical music came from the courts of royalty and aristocrats, as well as from the churches. Wealthy patrons of the upper classes supported composers and singers, and the churches demanded music for the various parts of their liturgical services. This music was formulated by trained musicians and singers and performed for approximately two centuries for elite audiences before it began to be brought to the general public.

CCM, on the other hand, is music of the people, and has always been so. American folk music goes back to the 19th century, as does country music. This music came from simple people who sang for personal reasons and created their own music, often without any kind of formal training. Many of us grew up singing “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” and “You Are My Sunshine.”

Music theater as we know it was born in the United States at the end of the 1800s. It was influenced by British Music Hall shows and blossomed into hugely successful Vaudeville. In 1928, with the production of Show Boat on Broadway, what we now call the “book” musical was born, and that is still the primary form of most shows on the “boards” today.

Jazz was born primarily in New Orleans in the teens and early twenties of the 20th century in the African-American community and gradually worked its way into the mainstream of musical life by the 1930s, when it was taken up by white musicians and played on the radio for millions of listeners. Jazz, then, is at least 85 years old and is a completely American art form that has traveled all over the world.

Rock is thought to have its beginnings in the mid-1950s. It, too, began here in the United States and is now an international art form. Gospel music began in African-American churches in the South, growing from the spirituals of transplanted slaves, and has spread throughout the country and the
Blues, rhythm and blues, and soul music, as well as rap, hip hop, and other forms were spun from our own American musical styles, and the lines between styles continue to blur as music evolves and changes.

Each CCM style needs to be taken seriously on its own terms. Comparing CCM to classical music has never made sense, as classical singing may not be useful as a viable measure of the vocal production in CCM styles. The only likely exception to this would be the sound called “legit,” as found in music theater, which is a classically derived sound similar to what one would hear in operetta.

Little research has been done on any CCM style with the exception of Broadway belting, the style that seems to have been the most fascinating to researchers, perhaps because it has so little to do with classical vocal production. Because belting is a primary vocal quality in many styles of CCM, it needs to be investigated a great deal further before a clear and undistorted picture of this kind of singing can emerge. It is exciting to think that science will now be investigating belting and other singing techniques in many more styles.

All CCM styles evolved from colloquial speech, and all of them are electronically amplified. Therefore, CCM vocal production cannot be divorced from amplification. The microphones, speakers, monitors, soundboard, and sound engineer impact what the singer hears, and consequently, what the singer does. This means that the singer’s auditory function and perception must be examined in direct relationship to vocal production. Failing to do so may produce a skewed model and invalid conclusions. The only obvious exception is music theater, as generally the singers are miked but sing as if they were not, because there are usually no monitors directly in front of them.

It is important to know what is happening in each CCM style, and we can hope that research will help us clarify their similarities and differences with each other and with classical singing technique. Much is misunderstood about CCM because it has been ignored or neglected. Some classical artists cannot distinguish between musical style and vocal production, because in classical singing they are often regarded as virtually the same. These artists incorrectly assume that singing CCM is simply a style change. Listeners, however, can tell when an opera singer performs a CCM song using an operatic sound, often even when the singer is not trying to sound operatic—it just doesn’t sound idiomatic. The same is true for the few CCM artists who have dared to record classical material. None can be said to have been successful, either critically or in terms of sales. They just don’t sound the way our ears expect them to.

The standards of a style and the vocal characteristics it requires are established and maintained by those who have a successful professional career in that style, and by their audiences. They are neither set by stars who venture into a style from another unrelated one nor by academics. The standards do change gradually over time, as they are affected by artists’ creative exploration and by the shifting popular tastes of fans in the marketplace.

It has been argued for years that classical vocal training is sufficient to meet every vocal need, regardless of style. This attitude has forced many singers who might have sought vocal training to avoid it, and that has fostered the notion that CCM singers are less serious about being professional vocalists because they do not want to study singing. This is simply not true. Furthermore, those CCM singers who have chosen to take singing lessons have been, and still are, on their own in trying to figure out how to make practical use of what they are taught, as the vast majority of vocal training is still strictly classically based. If the woman performing Mimi in “Rent” on Broadway works with a classical teacher, she usually still has to figure out on her own what works and what does not in singing the show’s rock music eight times a week. Is that practical or useful vocal training?

If expert singing training were available that was aimed at helping jazz singers sound like better jazz singers, or rock singers sound like better rock singers, or folk singers sound like better folk singers, maybe all of these singers would feel enthusiastic about singing training, instead of wary. Doesn’t it make sense for singers to devote time to sounding the way they would ideally choose to sound, in a manner that is comfortable, healthy, and will last over the course of a career?

In this year of 2007, a young singer who wants to study to become an “American Idol”-style pop star...
cannot do so as part of a college education. Why should this be the case? Is it because all CCM styles have been universally regarded as unimportant and therefore unworthy of serious scientific or scholarly study? Is it because we have been told for so long that this music is damaging, bad, and dangerous that we are afraid of it, even though it is our American heritage? Perhaps it is a self-fulfilling tradition that has resulted in a virtual absence of trained teachers with the knowledge and skill to fill the educational gap. Research\(^1\) has shown that the vast majority (approximately 85\%) of those who are teaching CCM music theater have no professional training or experience to do so. Many of these same teachers have also expressed a strong desire for reliable training in CCM styles, understanding that new approaches to teaching are needed.

As we open the doors to invite CCM singers, producers, composers, and arrangers into the scientific, clinical, and academic communities, we begin to break down old barriers between classical and the once named “nonclassical” styles. We take a fresh look at the artists in these styles. As doctors, scientists, and speech-language pathologists learn more about what CCM singers in each style do, we make it easier for artists to trust that these experts really are interested in who they are and what they do in a respectful and supportive way.

We began our interface at the Voice Foundation Symposium in June 2006 with experts from music theater and jazz, the two styles of CCM that are taught most in universities and conservatories. Multidisciplinary interchange has been a part of the Voice Foundation since its inception, and with that panel we all entered into an exciting and emerging fellowship, one which should foster new explorations and new opportunities, similar to those that have led to our current understanding of vocal health and the classical singing voice.

We are organizing a database of interested CCM artists who would like to collaborate in voice research, and scientists and researchers who are looking for CCM artists to work with on research projects. Dr. Anita Kozan (e-mail: anitakozan@visi.com) has kindly agreed to coordinate the database, and interested people may contact her directly at the Voice Foundation’s 36th Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice, to be held in Philadelphia from May 29th through June 3rd, 2007. We look forward to yet another exciting interdisciplinary decade or more of learning together.

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REFERENCE
