

# FROM THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

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## The "Pop" Singer and the Voice Teacher

In recent years, the extraordinary development of communications and the commercial manipulation of public taste by the mass media have posed new and serious problems for the singing teacher. No one will deny the cultural benefits derived from radio, recordings, television and cinema, but the power of these media to shape preferences and behavior has also had a pejorative influence. All who are directly or indirectly concerned with education in the performing arts and with the quality of aesthetic experience must take these influences into account.

This statement centers on the field of so-called "popular singing." Such singing has altered drastically in the last twenty-five years. In the 1920s highly trained classical singers were prominent among the popular artists of the day. In the 1930s the field expanded to include not only the traditional folk and classical singers, but the new radio crooners. Their repertory, although tame by today's standards, was publicly attacked by the clergy for suggestive lyrics. Their manner of singing was even questioned by organizations of voice teachers and music educators. Jazz, also derided then, is respected today and treated, quite rightly, as a significant cultural manifestation in the historical perspective of indigenous popular music. In addition, it is recognized that American popular song, emerging from Broadway, Tin Pan Alley and the cinema, relied, by

and large, on a vocal technique rooted in folk or classical tradition.

The advent of Rock, together with an admixture of such vocal antecedents as blues, gospel, soul and country-western music, in combination with electronic instruments — which amplify sound to extremely high, overpowering levels — has developed in several generations of young people life styles, vocal preferences, mannerisms and habits which are highly detrimental to normal vocal development and longevity. Otolaryngologists have recognized increasing numbers of patients whose serious vocal problems stem from two sources: in the case of school-age clients, from the emulation of inappropriate adult models, and in the case of professionals, from sustained vocal abuse in the pursuit of public acclaim and financial success. Given the decibel level found in the performance conditions characteristic of today's sound systems, and given aesthetic preferences (often related more to visual effects and noise than to pitch, timbre and interval relationships), it is not surprising that the medical community has identified not only substantial hearing loss but actual vocal damage. Excessive amplification produces such vocal deterioration by its disruption of the normal aural feedback mechanisms which would otherwise monitor the vocalist's efforts and would provide measures of both quality and safety. Present results of ongoing research attest to the seriousness of these conditions.

In interdisciplinary conferences,

seminars and symposia, otolaryngologists have publicly pleaded for the intercession and cooperation of voice teachers. Indeed, many of our profession have long been engaged in training singers whose preferences or professional goals are related solely to the demands of Broadway composers, producers and directors. Unfortunately these demands often include such styles as "belting," "graveling or rasping," glottal attacks and cut-offs, and absence of and/or excessive vibrato. These vocal "sound effects," often produced accidentally by the total *lack* of technique, result in characteristics which become stylistically acceptable and then imitated regardless of potential damage to the performer.

For many established and aspiring popular singers, the above observations may seem irrelevant, and any risk may be deemed reasonable in pursuit of the notion of authentic or individualistic vocal styles. Also, economics may be the primary factor in a decision-making process which presents no clear-cut, healthy alternatives. Opportunities for the legion of "legitimate" singers emerging from schools, colleges and studios are limited, and eclecticism may not only be the fashion of the day, but the fruit of grim necessity. This is unfortunate, since the prognosis for improvement is not good in view of the current cultural climate, the economics and politics of education, and the attendant decline in artistic and aesthetic training, particularly in the early years of schooling.

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