

Abstract

This study analyses the emerging discourses present in classical and contemporary commercial music (CCM) vocal pedagogy texts. It inquires into how these discourses manifest with regards to the vocal techniques of registration, vocal colour, and vibrato. The methodology involved identifying key words and phrases, interpreting them through the devices of situated meanings and cultural models, and placing them in a larger social structure through historical and intertextual context. The emergent discourses among classical pedagogy texts reflect themes of racial and gender bias, pathologising and othering CCM techniques and singers, recommending a bodiless tone, and revering the golden age of bel canto. The emergent discourses among CCM pedagogy texts reflect themes of commercialism, anti-institutionalism, and omnivory. Overall, this suggests that the discourses driving these fields are not unrelated, but rather reflections of each other.

Classical Pedagogy Texts and Vibrato

Vibrato is a natural concomitant of beautiful and expressive tone. The almost universal presence of vibrato in all types of musical performance has been verified time after time by research; it has been not only classified as necessary for beauty of tone but also for physiological reasons. (McKinney 1994, 197)

Carl Seashore was in fact not a voice scientist by profession, but a psychologist. His interest in studying the human vibrato was born from a curiosity about the way in which vibrato expressed “tender feeling through instability”. The impetus for Seashore to study vibrato was not simply its physiological mechanism; it included uncovering the emotional drive which caused the voice to tremble, thus uncovering the “nature of beauty in the vibrato” (Seashore in Stark 2008, 144-145).

This drive to understand the ‘naturalness’ of vibrato is not unique to Seashore; it is in fact a central theme to the discussions of vibrato in all three classical texts. The ‘naturalness’ of vibrato, as expressed in these texts, can be viewed from four different angles. It can be seen as ‘natural’ in the sense that the voice automatically trembles in the tension-release cycle of neuromuscular tremor. It can be seen as ‘natural’ in that it is often cultivated without the aid of intentional teaching or learning practices. It can be seen as ‘natural’ in the sense that any attempt to control or alter it is viewed as contrived or ‘unnatural’. Lastly, it can be seen as ‘natural’ in that its essential quality contributes to the perception of artistry in certain styles of singing.

Vibrato is Essential – A Discourse of The Natural

In the physiological context, vibrato occurs spontaneously as a tension-release mechanism. The parameters of ‘normal’ vibrato – between five and eight pulsations per second with an average variation of one semitone – is stated to be the ‘natural’ rate and extent of healthy vibrato, which multiple studies have confirmed (Dejonckere, Hirano & Sundburg 1995; Horii 1989; Rothman & Arroyo 1987; Shipp, Leanderson & Sundberg 1980). It is important to note, however, that these values have been determined primarily by studying the voices of classically trained singers (LeBorgne & Rosenberg 2014, 68–69). The lack of studying singers from other genres shows that

there is in fact a wealth of uncovered knowledge about the vibrato. In this sense, although the existence of vibrato is indeed natural to the function of the voice, the rate and extent at which it might effectively serve its tension-release purpose in other musical traditions is still uncertain.

The second way in which vibrato is purported to be 'natural' is evidenced by the lack of recommended learning practices, as though proper vibrato should be instinctively acquired rather than taught. Consider the following passages:

When proper breath support has been established and some of the tension released, the vibrato will often appear on its own accord as a side effect. (McKinney 1994, 91-92)

In all probability such difficulties [the lack of vibrato] were known to resolve themselves by merely purifying the vowel qualities produced and by improving the balance and development of the registers. (Reid 1990, 134)

Vibrato cannot be regulated or controlled without injurious effect except by an indirect approach. *The vibrato must never be trained or cultivated!* (125-126)

Here we find discussion of an innate vibrato being uncovered by supporting the breath, releasing tension, purifying vowels, or balancing the registers. These passages suggest that the unencumbered voice vibrates in a way that is so 'natural' is essential to the voice itself, and that only incorrect practices could burden the mechanism enough to cause the vibrato to cease. Furthermore, any intentional cultivation of vibrato is pathologised by Reid, who claims it will cause 'injurious effect'.

This pathologising discourse likewise occurs when any form vibrato that stands outside of the accepted rate and extent is mentioned. This includes the tremolo, the wobble, and especially the straight tone. According to these pedagogues, any vocal tremulousness that falls outside of this preferred range is in fact *not* natural, and is considered a vocal problem. Observe the way in which Reid discusses the potential causes of the tremolo or the wobble:

The tremolo usually denotes the presence of throatiness, while the wobbly and unsteady tone shows that the instrument is being unduly strained and overburdened by forcing for volume. Persistent indulgence in either the tremolo or the wobble inevitably lead to a complete loss of voice. (1990, 127)

Presence of the tremolo and wobble is the direct result of [present day] teaching procedures wholly at variance with the principles of Bel Canto. (134)

In these two passages we can detect a few of the discourses previously identified. We can observe

the discourse of bodilessness when Reid suggests the tremolo is the consequence of 'throatiness'. We can see the golden age discourse as he waxes poetic about the teachers of today, 'wholly at variance with the principles of Bel Canto'. Finally, the discourse of pathologising is present in the warning that engaging in the tremolo or wobble will 'inevitably lead to a complete loss of voice'. Once again, these overlapping discourses, together, suggest that:

1. It was better back in the golden age;
2. The teachers and musics of today, which encourage the undesirable influence of the body, are debasing the great art of bel canto; and
3. Engaging in these practices will cause injury to the voice.

These overlapping discourses are also present in each classical pedagogue's writings on the use of the straight tone – a timbre that is considered a staple of CCM singing. Consider the following passages:

Not even a poorly used voice will find this [straight tone] such an easy thing to do, while voices of really good quality will find it almost impossible. ... the process is an unnatural one and subjects the throat to constant strain and excessive effort... The voice quality itself is suddenly transformed ... to a tired, worn quality, and the entire apparatus becomes unmanageable and unresponsive... the voice not only suffers in quality but also fatigues with extreme rapidity. (Reid 1990, 131)

A common symptom ... is a limited or absent vibrato—the so-called 'straight tone' ... The easy rhythmic excursions of the vocal cords in normal, healthy voice production can be heard in the normal vibrato... This is not heard in breathy, strained, or harsh voices and is therefore of diagnostic significance both giving physical and psychological cause. (McKinney 1994, 88)

The influence of today's rock, pop, and discotheque music has taken its toll of [*sic*] the vibrato. Many of these groups adhere to a singing style that resembles yelling or shouting... This kind of singing ... puts an enormous strain on the vocal apparatus. The strain is obvious when one sees the sheer physical effort needed to produce the sound (evidenced by the large number of neck muscles that are visible when these people sing). (Bunch 1997, 75)

In these passages, we can immediately identify the pathologising discourse in phrasing like straight tone being 'a common symptom' of tight phonation, the 'strain' of which is 'obvious when one sees the sheer physical effort needed to produce the sound'; that it is a technique which causes 'the entire apparatus' to become 'unmanageable and unresponsive'; and especially in the notion that the straight tone is 'of diagnostic significance both giving physical and psychological cause'. The discourse of bodilessness is evidenced by the idea of straight tone 'subjecting the throat to constant strain and excessive effort', producing a sound which requires 'sheer physical effort', proven by 'the large number of neck muscles' visible when one employs this sound. The given

examples of genres which encourage straight tone singing, specifically ‘today’s rock, pop, and discotheque’ are historically Black or Black-influenced genres whose practitioners, according to Bunch, ‘adhere to a singing style that resembles yelling or shouting’, once again invoking the historical association of Black music-making with shouting. We can also see a blatant othering of CCM singers in Bunch’s description of the ‘neck muscles that are visible *when these people sing*’. Note both the visual description of the undesirable body – the prominent neck muscles – as well as the plural, impersonal determiner in the phrase ‘these people’. It is as though the singers who partake in such practices are distanced, separated from the acceptable in-group. It specifically denotes a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’, not to mention the historical practice of using phrases like ‘those people’ to indicate specific othered groups, usually People of Colour or lower class standing.

What’s more, the dichotomies that have surfaced from these discourses – high-class versus low-class, bodiless versus embodied, etc. – are further solidified by Reid’s dichotomy of a ‘poorly used voice’ versus ‘voices of really good quality’. Amplified by its association with specific CCM genres, this seems to be the most straight-forward evidence of classical pedagogues tacitly stating that classical singing is ‘good’ and CCM singing is ‘bad’.

Vibrato is Artistic – A Discourse of Othering (Part II)

The final way in which the naturalness of vibrato is championed is through its cultural association with artistry. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the classical pedagogues associate the concept of naturalness with artistry, so much so that ‘natural’ often becomes synonymous with ‘artistic’. Consider the ways in which these texts connect the presence of vibrato with artistry:

Vibrato is a natural concomitant of beautiful and expressive tone. The almost universal presence of vibrato in all types of musical performance has been verified time after time by research; it has been not only classified as necessary for beauty of tone but also for physiological reasons. (McKinney 1994, 197)

The artistic quality of singing is frequently judged by the presence of vibrato in the sound... Ideally, vibrato occurs in practically all tones of artistic singing. (Bunch 1997, 75)

It is solely the perfection of the vibrato movement in the voices of the great Bel Canto artists that was directly accountable for the extreme feats of agility for which they were so

justly famed. (Reid 1990, 125)

Furthermore, Seashore's often-quoted vibrato definition, "a pulsation of pitch ... of such extent and rate as to give a pleasing flexibility, tenderness and richness of tone", is situated in descriptive language that implies a factual reality to artistry, as though what one should find 'pleasing' or 'rich in tone' is objective, not an aesthetic preference heavily influenced by one's cultural environment. Seashore's research concluded that "vibrato was present in the voices of *all great artists* in about 95% of their phonated time" and further claimed that the naturalness and artistry of vibrato is proven by the fact that "vibrato was also present in the voices of adult voice students, children, *and even in primitive peoples*" (Seashore in Stark 2008, 146 – italics added).

The sentiment that the artistry of vibrato is proven by its presence 'even in primitive peoples' is perhaps the most convincing evidence thus far of othering of non-western classical singers, elevated in this case by exemplifying *what is not art*. The simple use of the word primitive itself, a concept firmly rooted in the previously discussed scientific racism of the nineteenth century, is enough to tip the scales toward the perception of a discourse of both racism and othering. More importantly, however, is the fact that Seashore chose to study the voices of 'primitive peoples' as a counterpart to studying the voices of 'great artists'. The binary that is essential for separating the 'other' from the accepted in-group is present in the very design of the study.

Using the existence of vibrato in 'primitive' voices as evidence of the artistry of the western-European classically trained voice is yet another example of the selective thinking we identified in both the registration and vocal colour chapters. Just as using falsetto does not make the CCM singer's voice artistic, and just as 'loud singing' is pathologised in CCM genres despite its elevation due to the 'singer's formant' in classical singing, vibrato does not make the voices of 'primitive peoples' more artistic. Instead, its presence in these voices proves the western-European classical singer to be more artistic.

Through this analysis, it is apparent that naturalness is the core tenet of the classical discourse surrounding vibrato. This varies greatly from the discourses that drive registration, where it is common to deny the natural break between the registers, and vocal colour, where the expectation of a 'natural' *chiaroscuro* sound forms an incredibly difficult task for the singer. When the naturalness of vibrato development is seen as a requisite for artistry, the lack of vibrato becomes synonymous with inability. This assumption leads to the further pathologising and othering, which we have witnessed within each vocal technique analysed thus far. With this, one can

identify a discursive pattern emerging among these classical texts; that the accepted in-group – upper-class, western-European classical singers – are touted as being artistically superior. These texts employ multiple devices to support this idea, including the pathologising of ‘non-classical’ vocal techniques, the discouragement of ‘inartistic’ or ‘un-serious’ sounds produced in other genres, and the insistence that the proper tone must be elevated and bodiless in order to connect to the lineage of the golden age of bel canto.