

CHALLENGING VOCAL IMPERIALISM:
THE PIONEERS OF UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULAR CHANGE

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Abstract

The undergraduate years are often a uniquely vulnerable period of transition for young singers, marked by significant vocal, psychological, and artistic change. Even as increasing numbers of North American voice teachers recognize the pedagogical value of embracing non-classical styles of singing, post-secondary academic programs in the United States and Canada have been slow to reflect this shift in their core curricular offerings. Whether through rigid degree requirements or an implied stylistic hierarchy, most undergraduate voice students are currently compelled to prematurely choose an area of stylistic specialization.

The following dissertation examines the evolving landscape of undergraduate voice education in North America through qualitative research methods. I conducted in-depth interviews with eleven pioneering academics who have been at the forefront of curricular change and analyzed the shared pedagogical philosophies and institutional challenges that have shaped their experiences. These interviews provide insight into how these educators have navigated resistance in order to successfully implement more stylistically inclusive models.

This research adds to the academic literature on formalized singing training by sharing, in their own words, the opinions and experiences of some of the most widely recognized figures currently shaping the field of voice pedagogy. It is guided by two primary questions: How can an undergraduate voice degree better reflect the broadening acceptance of stylistically diverse pedagogies to effectively meet the needs of aspiring singers? What can be learned from the experiences of educators who have been leaders of curricular change? Centering the interviews throughout, I examine and advocate for recent changes to undergraduate voice curricula that challenge the hegemony that a Western classical voice training is essential for all singers and superior to other, more stylistically diverse, pedagogies. I define this Eurocentric myth as vocal imperialism. Ultimately, I argue that degree programs grounded in an exposure to multiple

musical styles and a broad spectrum of vocal function are more effective in supporting student development during the critical undergraduate years than those still shaped by vocal imperialism.

Dedication

For my first and always teacher, Sally Carr.

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Introduction

“Approaching voice training from only a classical perspective is tantamount to studying ballet for ten years and expecting to become a better tapper.”

- Catherine Walker, research interview, December 13, 2025

In a post dated December 3, 2024, Classic FM shared an article to its Facebook page with the headline, “What is Cynthia Erivo’s Voice Type and is She Classically Trained?”¹ In the wake of the record-breaking box office numbers of the 2024 movie *Wicked*,² and the seemingly ubiquitous presence³ on global media platforms of its stars, Erivo and Ariana Grande, this post was just one of countless others about the film and its lead actor that were shared on Facebook that day. The fundamental questions, however, raised by this specific article reveal how cultural discourse supports the assumed supremacy of a voice training rooted in the Western classical tradition.

The article answers its first titular question by stating:

The majority of Erivo’s roles are the leading parts in musicals, which requires a *soprano voice* with the ability to cut through the orchestra and carry to the back of the hall. This ability to ‘belt’ is what makes Erivo so perfect as Elphaba in *Wicked*.⁴

¹ Classic FM. “We take a look at the early training of Cynthia Erivo, who delivers a showstopping performance of ‘Defying Gravity’ in *Wicked*: Part 1.” *Facebook*, December 3, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1CzSPWmP31/>.

² D’Alessandro, Anthony. “‘Wicked – Part One’: All the Box Office Records Broken.” *Deadline*, November 30, 2024. <https://deadline.com/2024/11/wicked-box-office-records-1236186470/>.

³ “Wicked: — Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo’s never-ending press tour” - *The New York Times*. Accessed November 22, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/21/movies/wicked-for-good-2-ariana-grande-cynthia-erivo.html>.

⁴ Padfield, Will. “What Is Cynthia Erivo’s Voice Type and Is She Classically Trained?” *Classic FM*, December 3, 2024. <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/cynthia-erivo-voice-type-classical-training/>.

No indication is given in the article as to how this assignment of voice type was reached by the article's author, aside from the above assertion that a soprano voice is required to be heard above an orchestra in live performance. However, the same can be said of other voice types. More importantly, the article's assertions ignore the performance practice of sound amplification that has become common practice in musical theatre since the 1960's. Erivo's work in *Wicked* (and her previous work in such Broadway shows as *The Color Purple*) uses electronic sound amplification, allowing her to be heard over a full orchestra not only in moments of powerful belting but also in those of hushed vocal intimacy. By positing that her singing requires an ability "to cut through the orchestra and carry to the back of the hall," the article's author foists upon her the performance practice required of Western classical opera performers.

Equally misinformed is the idea that Erivo's "ability to belt" is indicative of a soprano voice type. The term "belting," as used when referring to the style of singing required by a pop musical like *Wicked*, is a completely different use of the vocal apparatus than what is required of a soprano trained in the Western classical tradition.⁵ Stylistic versatility is required of today's aspiring Broadway singers, and voice classifications that pigeon-hole performers ("belter," "legit soprano" etc.) have largely fallen out of professional use. The Western classical *fach* system⁶ of categorizing voices based on their range and timbre with titles such as lyric soprano, coloratura mezzo-soprano, dramatic contralto, etc., has its roots in the opera houses of Germany, not on Broadway, so why is there any desire to assign Erivo a voice "type" at all?

⁵Steinhauer, Kimberly, Mary McDonald Klimek, and Jo Estill. *The Estill Model: Theory and Translation*. Pittsburgh: Estill Voice International, 2017.

⁶Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. 1st ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. 67.

The article never answers the question of whether Erivo was “classically trained,” and fails to define what that term even means in this context. It does, however, point to her enrollment at an elite post-secondary institution of music as an implied answer:

[Erivo] applied to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and transferred there after being offered a place. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree in acting in 2010. The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) is world-famous for its training in all facets of performance with vocal coaching as part of the program. This rigorous education laid the foundation for her vocal technique and versatility.⁷

Within hours, the Facebook post had received hundreds of shares, reactions, and vitriolic comments. One brave commentor dipped a toe into the discourse by asking, “Why is classically trained somehow the superior default for singing?” The response from the Facebook community was harsh and swift, with the following comments made on the same day that the post appeared:

- “Classical training is the default because it’s the BASICS of ALL singing. A singer would know that!”
- “Classical voice training IS the gold standard of proper technique, breath support, and vocal control.”
- “[Classical training] teaches you skills that can be used for any type of singing... posture, breath control, better vocal range, vocal health, vocal agility, tonal purity, languages, etc. and prepares one to sing ANY type of music.”
- “Of course classically trained singers are vastly superior. For one thing, they don’t need a microphone to perform.”
- “It [Classical training] means more you were trained with a proper technique in order to safely project your voice. Typically that’s easiest to do with classical style but as you become more comfortable you branch off into other genres.”
- “She doesn’t sound ‘classically trained’ to me! Switching from head to chest voice every couple of notes. Little to no continuity of breath. Pass.”

Other commentors took a different view:

- “Sadly this idea of classical is best is still very present in the modern teaching arena, when it purely is nothing more than old fashioned and out dated. Not to mention completely

⁷ Padfield, “What Is Cynthia Erivo’s Voice Type,” 2024.

alienating to individuals who are outstanding singers but didn't start out in the classical sense.”

- “I'm sick of classical = best/healthiest. My classical training actually really messed with my attractor state for contemporary singing AND teaching.”
- “I wish people would stop with the whole classical trained voice has some form of superiority. Outdated thinking.”

Perhaps the author of the article believes that simply attending an institution of formal training like RADA is a “classical training.” At The Royal Academy of Music, another elite London institution, students in the Musical Theatre program receive a separate and stylistically distinct training than those in the academy's Voice Studies program. What kind of “vocal coaching” did Erivo receive at RADA? Is the assumption that all institutions like RADA only teach a student how to sing in a Western lyric / operatic style? Were Erivo's hours in the practice room spent singing German art song in a Western classical lyric style, or was she learning to sing the way she later would onstage and in film? Perhaps most importantly, why is this important when assessing her worth as a vocalist? These questions, and others that challenge the hegemony that a Western classical voice training is superior and essential, lie at the heart of this research.

It is not only Cynthia Erivo's social media team who can attest to the persistence of the myth that a classical voice training is both essential and superior. The dusty residue of vocal imperialism can be found in the corners of nearly every undergraduate classroom and concert hall of post-secondary music education. It can be heard from a dimly lit college practice room, late at night, in the sad refrain of the diligent first-year student, dutifully intoning Schubert lieder with all the joy of a corpse. It can be found in the hushed aisles of music school libraries whose vocal music collections contain nothing but shelf upon shelf of opera scores and art song collections. It can be felt in the exasperated pounding of the piano as a voice teacher hammers

away at scale after scale, jaw clenched in prayer that someday the student trapped in the crook of the piano might not be such an embarrassment because of their failure to sing operatically.

This research centers the opinions and experiences of those who have challenged vocal imperialism, including my own. It is just one small act in answering the charge of Canadian scholars Robin Attas and Margaret Walker to “recognize, name, and expose the Eurocentric values at the heart of North American post-secondary music study.”⁸ In the following chapters, I examine and advocate for recent changes in North American undergraduate voice curricula that ground students in an exposure to many kinds of music and a broad spectrum of ways to use the singing voice.

Research Questions

This research was guided by the following questions: How can an undergraduate voice degree reflect the growing acceptance of stylistically diverse pedagogies in order to effectively meet the needs of a broader spectrum of today’s aspiring singers? In addition, what can we learn from the successes of, and the challenges faced by, teachers who have been at the forefront of post-secondary curricular change in recent decades?

It is a challenging and subjective endeavour to define what makes one undergraduate voice curriculum “better” than another. Students have different needs and interests, and while most undergraduates have only recently completed high school, some have developed a strong sense of what they hope to get out of post-secondary studies. Most of my experience as a student and professor has been in undergraduate institutions devoted to the study of Western classical

⁸ Attas, Robin, and Margaret E Walker. “Exploring Decolonization, Music, and Pedagogy 1.” *Intersections* (Toronto. 2006) 39, no. 1 (2019). 12.

music. I have known both classmates and students in these stylistically focused environments who have gone on to great success, international fame, and inspiring artistic achievement as opera singers. For these singers, a Western classical voice training seems to have been exactly the right curriculum to prepare them for their performing career.

This research will argue that these examples of achievement are rare. While voice curricula that focus primarily on classical singing may produce a handful of inspiring success stories, they shortchange the vast majority of students. Better curricular models are those that expose students to a more diverse variety of singing styles, allowing them to explore the full capabilities of their voices. They avoid premature stylistic specialization during the critical undergraduate years, a time when most singers have not yet fully developed, physiologically or artistically.

Methodology

This research explores the perspectives and shares the experiences of pedagogical innovators who have championed alternative singing pedagogies and cultivated curricular change. As qualitative research, it is a phenomenological study based in grounded theory, centering eleven interview participants who were chosen based upon their academic contributions to the diversification of voice training. They are all post-secondary educators from either the United States or Canada, and their scholarly accomplishments are reflected not only in the curricular change they have manifested at their individual academic institutions, but also in the scale and breadth of their publications.

Karen Burke, Catherine Walker, and Mary Saunders Barton were known to me before this research was conducted. Burke is on the faculty and has served as Chair of the Music

Department at York University, where I am currently enrolled as a student while conducting this research. I met Catherine Walker briefly at the Estill World Voice Symposium in Quebec City in 2017. I was first introduced to Mary Saunders Barton in 2016, when I brought a group of my Musical Theatre students from the Senzoku Gakuen College of Music in Tokyo on a “study abroad” trip to New York City. During this visit, Saunders Barton worked with the students at the Ripley-Greer Studios in vocal workshops that focused on Musical Theatre repertoire. I had not met the other interview participants prior to this research. All the participants were chosen based upon their record of contribution to the field of voice studies, with a particular focus on finding interview participants who had played a pivotal role in expanding voice curricula.

Below is a list of the interview participants, as well as a few selected credits from their online biographies that highlight why they were chosen as pioneers of diversifying voice training.

- **Karen Burke** developed the first post-secondary gospel music coursework in Canada at York University. A professor there since 2005, she was also appointed the Inaugural Fellow for the Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts.⁹
- **Dale Cox** is the author of *Exposing the Chasms in Voice Pedagogy: Playing the Field* (2024). A researcher, performer and teacher of musical theatre, Jazz, and CCM for over twenty years, she has held faculty positions at the Sharjah Performing Arts Academy in the UAE and Coastal Carolina University in the USA.¹⁰

⁹ “Karen Burke - About.” Karen Burke. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://karenburke.ca/biography>.

¹⁰ “Dale Cox.” Dale Cox - Routledge & CRC Press Author Profile. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://www.routledge.com/authors/i24225-dale-cox#bio>.

- **Matt Edwards** is currently Artistic Director of the Contemporary Commercial Music Vocal Pedagogy Institute and Associate Professor and Coordinator of Musical Theatre Voice at Shenandoah University. A frequent contributor to both books and journals, he is the author of *So You Want to Sing Rock 'N Roll* (2014).¹¹
- **Lynn Holding** is the author of *The Musician's Mind: Teaching, Learning, and Performance in the Age of Brain Science* (2020). She is the former editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Singing* and is currently a Professor of Practice in Voice and Voice Pedagogy at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music.¹²
- **Matthew Hoch** is a professor of voice at Auburn University whose articles have appeared in over a dozen professional and academic journals. He is the editor of numerous titles in the Rowman and Littlefield *So You Want to Sing...* book series, including *So You Want to Sing CCM* (2018) and *So You Want to Sing World Music* (2019).¹³
- **Victoria Holland** has held teaching positions at Northwestern University, Lawrence University, and Loyola University. A member of the Royal Conservatory of Music's College of Examiners since 2014, she is currently the lead compiler and series editor for the RCM Voice Series and Syllabus, which now include Jazz and Popular repertoire lists.¹⁴

¹¹ "Bio." poprockcoach. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://www.edwardsvoice.com/info>.

¹² "Lynn Holding," Lynn Holding - Mezzo-Soprano | Vocologist, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://lynnholding.com/>.

¹³ "Matthew Hoch," Matthew Hoch - College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://cla.auburn.edu/directory/matthew-hoch>.

¹⁴ "Victoria Holland: The Royal Conservatory of Music." The Royal Conservatory. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://www.rcmusic.com/bios/victoria-holland>.

- **Jaron M. LeGrair** currently teaches at St. Mary's College of California and serves as Visiting Assistant Professor of Music Theater Voice at Oberlin College and Conservatory. He has been a recent presenter at the conferences of The Voice Foundation, the Pan-American Vocology Association, the National Association of Teachers of Singing, and Estill Voice International, and his online voice pedagogy content currently engages more than 1.2 million followers.¹⁵
- **Mary Saunders-Barton** is Professor Emeritus at Penn State, where she served as head of voice instruction for the BFA in musical theatre and created an MFA in musical theatre voice pedagogy. She is co-author of the book *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act* (2018).¹⁶
- **Patty Thom** is Chair Emerita, Voice and Opera at the Boston Conservatory at Berklee. She joined the Conservatory in 2003 and served as chair of voice until 2022. She is now a sought-after clinician and master class practitioner across the United States.
- **Catherine Walker** is a Professor of Music and Vice-Chair of the Department of Musical Theatre at the University of Michigan. Her curricular work there has led to the creation of a Music Theory curriculum specifically for Musical Theatre majors, and she has used multiple Gilbert Whitaker Grants for the Improvement of Teaching to explore new pedagogies for CCM performance practices.¹⁷

¹⁵ "Jaron M. LeGrair: Oberlin College and Conservatory." Oberlin College & Conservatory, October 20, 2025. <https://www.oberlin.edu/jaron-legrair>.

¹⁶ "Mary Saunders-Barton." About Mary | Mary Saunders-Barton. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://belcantocanbelto.com/belcantocanbelto/about-mary>.

¹⁷ Catherine A. Walker - University of Michigan School of Music, theatre & dance. Accessed January 7, 2026. <https://smtd.umich.edu/profiles/catherine-a-walker/>.

- **Kevin Wilson** spent sixteen years as Professor of Voice and Director of Vocal Pedagogy at the Boston Conservatory. While there, he established the Master of Music degree in Vocal Pedagogy, the annual Vocal Pedagogy Professional Workshop, and the Master of Fine Arts degree in Musical Theatre Vocal Pedagogy. He currently serves as Associate Professor of Voice and Director of Vocal Pedagogy at Oklahoma City University.¹⁸

The interviews were conducted over Zoom between June 26 and December 13, 2025.

They all lasted approximately one hour. Once completed, they were transcribed to identify areas of commonality and topics that warranted deeper inquiry. Concurrent with being given their consent form to participate in these interviews, the participants were sent the following eight questions, which were again asked during the interviews:

- 1) What was your training as a singer, and what changes have you seen in formalized singing training since that time?
- 2) Do you believe that a Western classical training is essential for all singers?
- 3) Have you encountered tribalism or the guru mentality when it comes to teaching voice?
- 4) Do you believe that any differences exist between the teaching of singing and the teaching of other musical instruments?
- 5) How is repertoire chosen for your students?
- 6) What age, if any, do you believe is appropriate for a student to choose a stylistic area of musical specialization?

¹⁸ “Oklahoma City University | Kevin Wilson.” Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://www.okcu.edu/faculty/kevin-wilson>.

- 7) What do you imagine undergraduate voice training will look like in the future?
- 8) Is there anything else you'd like to share that you feel is important to contribute to this discussion?

Though some of these questions are framed as closed, “yes or no” questions, they served as a jumping off point for the interviewees to elaborate on their responses with their own context and reasoning. A large portion of each interview often occurred after the participants were asked the final question: “Is there anything else you'd like to share that you feel is important to contribute to this conversation”? At this point, the interviews tended to open into broader conversations. Often, the participants both elaborated on their previous responses and discussed other insights related to the broader topic of diversifying singing studies.

There are many scholars who have made vital contributions to the field of singing studies who were not included in these interviews. This research is just a small sample size of North American pedagogues who are offering vocal education that is not centered in Western classical music. I solicited the participation of many more scholars than those who chose to participate in the interviews, and the exclusion of any pedagogue should not be seen as indicative of anything beyond my own oversight or their disinterest in participating. The opinions shared in this research, therefore, do not represent an exhaustive data set.

This dissertation also includes research from a previous project. The interviews in Chapter 3 were conducted in 2022. At that time, I spoke with singers who received a training grounded in Western classical music and then went on to successful careers performing non-classical music. The goal of that research was to better understand how these singers evaluate the classical training they received. As I was speaking with the curricular pioneers of this dissertation, significant thematic overlap between these two sets of interviews became clear.

Thus, the 2022 interviews have been included here in Chapter 3 in conversation with the responses of this research's curricular pioneers.

Any discussion of singing that focuses solely on institutions of post-secondary education is, like these institutions themselves, exclusionary. The world is full of wonderful singers who developed their singing voices through experimentation, improvisation, mimicry, self-discovery, mentorship, and other means of non-formalized learning. However, even as more information is becoming available online to aspiring singers, a formalized music degree continues to hold enormous importance as a key to future employment, both as a performer and as a teacher.

I have chosen a relatively narrow window of time, the undergraduate years, for this research as this is a pivotal period of great change, both physical and emotional, for students of voice. This time, directly after high school, is when aspiring young singers often make the decision to seriously focus on singing as a future career path. The stylistically siloed offerings of most undergraduate programs force many students to limit themselves to an area of specialization. In Chapter 4, I explore the undergraduate years as both a time of great opportunity for musical exploration and a period of unique vulnerability.

Positionality

This dissertation was motivated by my own experiences with vocal imperialism. I have been a singer since the age of six and was first exposed to opera as a boy soprano in the Baltimore Opera Company's children's chorus. I attended the Baltimore School for the Arts as a voice major, and the Eastman School of Music as a classical singer. As a graduate student in the musical theatre program at the Royal Academy of Music in London, I was first exposed to the work of Jo Estill and the idea that non-classical singing was worthy of serious study. After

graduate school, I moved to New York City and worked professionally as a musical theatre performer, touring Europe with *Jesus Christ Superstar* and even singing on cruise ships. I returned to Eastman in 2005 for a master's degree in stage directing, and since that time I have been working primarily as a stage director and college professor. In 2013, I returned to Eastman once more, as an Associate Professor of Opera and Musical Theatre Studies, teaching and directing in the same rooms and performance halls where I had once been a student. At every step along this circuitous career path I have encountered vocal imperialism, in ways both overt and subtle.

This positionality has been advantageous in providing access to the participants. Some of them (Saunders-Barton and Walker) I met because of my experiences as a professor, while others (Burke, Holding, Edwards) were pedagogues whose work I encountered as a student. My ability to solicit participants as a former professor at Eastman may have increased the willingness of interviewees to take part in this research. During the interviews, I was able to engage in discussions of the minutiae of vocal technique and physiology, and my familiarity with these topics may have affected how much the participants felt comfortable sharing. I am also what is called, euphemistically, a “mature student,” one who is undertaking this research after having already had a career in undergraduate academia, and this may have created more of a leveled power dynamic with the participants than if I were conducting these interviews fresh from my own undergraduate years.

The second case study in Chapter 4 centers former Eastman students, all of whom were known to me because of my time there as a student and professor. Their career paths mirrored my own, in that they received a Western classical voice training at Eastman and then went on to

professional careers performing non-classical music. Because of this, I was able to engage with them in their interviews with a level of familiarity and shared knowledge.

I have done my best to check my own biases throughout this dissertation, sometimes even to the frustration of helpful advisors who have encouraged me to center myself and my own opinions. Because of my own negative experiences with vocal imperialism, I have, at times, attempted to maintain a kind of journalistic impartiality so as not to compromise the validity of this research. During the interviews, for example, I took care not to share my own opinions until after all the interview questions had been asked. At the same time, the interview questions themselves betray a bit of my own opinions. Why, for example, ask a question about the guru mentality unless one already suspects that one exists? And so, I choose to acknowledge my own biases to the reader here, at the start of this work. I will also revisit the question of bias in the conclusion of this dissertation when discussing the limitations of the research.

Definitions

Any discussion of the hegemony of classical music and classical singing in formalized voice training necessitates a working definition of the more amorphous terms of vocal pedagogy. Despite its current, casual use as common parlance, Anna Bull reminds us that defining the term “classical music” is “important – and contested – because the boundaries drawn around it work to store value in this space.”¹⁹ She hones her definition of classical music in the tradition of Christopher Small, by focusing on the *actions* of classical “musicking,”²⁰ noting that classical

¹⁹ Bull, Anna. *Class, Control, and Classical Music*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019. xvii.

²⁰ Small, Christopher. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Wesleyan University Press, 1998. *Musicking* posits that “music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do.” (p. 2) Small encourages his readers to derive musical meaning not from the “art object itself” but from what can be deduced from the “action of art... the act of creating.” (p. 4)

music “requires distinctive modes of adult-led pedagogy where pupils usually take one-on-one lessons to learn ‘musicianship’; how to interpret the composer’s intentions; staff notation; and technical skill at their instrument or voice.” In addition, she adds that “the practices of classical music, as reproduced by its Victorian institutions, are one of the ways in which its value is reproduced, and around which taste and moral boundaries are drawn in order to safeguard this value.”²¹

The implicit exclusivity and value of classical music is further teased out by Loren Kajikawa, who states that “classical music is a social fiction intended to tie disparate practices and historical contexts together into a category representing the most prestigious music in the world.”²² Small agrees, reminding us that, without further clarification “we know what kind of music is dealt with in the music departments of universities and colleges and in schools and conservatories of music, and we know what kind of music an upmarket newspaper’s music critic will be writing about.”²³ In academia in Canada and the United States classical music remains the default music implied in many of the places where the word music, by itself, can be found.

In recent years, a commonly used alternative for “classical music” has been Western Art Music (or WAM). Laudan Nooshin, however, argues that in today’s globalized society classical music can no longer claim its exclusive “western-ness” given its global reach. Despite its

²¹ Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, xvii-xviii, 48.

²² Kajikawa, Loren. "7. The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music" In *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines* edited by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 155-174. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019.156.

²³ Small, Christopher. *Musicking the Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998. 3.

ubiquity, she posits that classical music remains “ideologically loaded, since it claims exclusive ownership of a cultural space” while denying the existence of others “who are rendered invisible by the dominant discourses.”²⁴ Just as problematic as the word “western” in the WAM acronym is the inclusion of the loaded word “art.” Simon Frith points out that “art music discourse,” is a term born out of elitist academic institutions, and discussions of so-called “art music” reinforce the belief that “[only] the right people with the right training can...experience the real meaning of ‘great’ music.”²⁵

I will use the term classical music as it is currently understood colloquially in Canada and the United States, where my research is centered. There are other musics throughout the world that also claims the “classical” modifier. However, I will use it as it was meant by the authors and commenters on the Cynthia Erivo Facebook post above, inclusive of its problematic, misleading baggage. Bull does the same in her research, and defends this choice by pointing out that “mainstream, online, and specialist media use the term ‘classical music,’ further confirming that there exists in public discourse a commonly understood phenomenon by this name.”²⁶ As evidenced by the inadequacy of the term Western Art Music, I suggest that our energies are better spent getting to the heart of *why* classical music maintains its power and prevalence, rather than renaming it.

The term “classical singing,” then, is born out of this definition of classical music. Like classical music, it comes with its own connotative baggage, assumptions, and preconceptions.

²⁴ Nooshin, Laudan. “Introduction to the Special Issue: The Ethnomusicology of Western Art Music.” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20, no. 3 (2011). 294-296.

²⁵ Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996. 39.

²⁶ Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, xvii.

Much like Supreme Court Justice Stewart’s famous statement, when asked to define pornography (“I know it when I see it”) the request for a definition of classical singing might well be met with the response, “I know it when I hear it.” It carries the same hegemonic ubiquity as classical music in spaces of formalized learning. When a student at a formalized institution in North America tells a friend that they are taking voice lessons, it is safe to assume that their studies are based on a foundation of classical singing.

We can also take Christopher Small’s approach to defining classical singing by describing the *actions* of the term, or what the singer is *doing* at the level of the larynx. Small does seem to imply that the style of vocal production is a crucial identifier of classical singing when he takes a shot at “operatic divas [who] record songs from Broadway musicals, all without apparently hearing their own stylistic solecisms.”²⁷ In terms of vocal production, then, classical singing is often characterized by a low larynx, maximized pharyngeal space, and plentiful use of vibrato. Yet Small would agree that the musicking of classical singing is much more than what happens in the singer’s throat; as easily imagined as the *sound* of classical singing are *images* of classical singing (the ball-gowned soloist confined to the crook of a grand piano, Pavarotti clutching his handkerchief, a Wagnerian soprano with helmet-horns, etc.).

Classical singing has also been defined as the singing style associated with, and performed in service to, the classical music canon of repertoire. Nina Sun Eidsheim connects the strict performance practice of classical music to the aesthetic expectations of classical singing. Classical repertoire, she says, features “narrowly defined conventions of pronunciation, timbre, and stylistic range determined by a work’s historical period, geography, and composer,” as well

²⁷ Small, *Musicking*, 3.

as “fixed pitches and durations for syllables and pauses, which therefore must be produced in the same way by each singer.” Adherence to classical music’s “established aesthetic, technical, and stylistic conventions” is what defines a classical singer, and instruction in the regimented conventions of classical music “results in the characteristic vocal timbre recognized as a classical voice.”²⁸ Eidsheim also points out that classical singing reflects classical music’s “minimal indulgence of individual style,” and identifies an even higher threshold for a voice to be considered “operatic,” (an identifier considered to be the very pinnacle, the “gold standard” of a classical training, as espoused by many Facebook commenters and voice professors alike). “The aesthetic of operatic timbre rides such a narrow line,” she says, “that any voice that falls even slightly outside it would simply not be considered a legitimate operatic voice.”²⁹

As with “classical music,” I will use the term “classical singing” as it is widely accepted in today’s vernacular in the United States and Canada. I will use it as the Facebook commentators on Cynthia Erivo’s voice training understand it, saturated with all the prestige, elitism, training, and superiority that its use in common parlance bestows upon it.

I will use the word “conservatory” as it is accepted colloquially in the United States, to mean a post-secondary college or university devoted to the study of music, usually classical music. This is somewhat different than the way in which the word is used in Canada, where it can often describe a non-profit, publicly funded certification granting institution. In both countries, however, the terms “school of music,” “conservatory,” “institute of music,” “conservatoire,” “academy of music,” etc. are often used interchangeably. Their devotion to classical music is assumed, as Bruno Nettl observed, “They are clearly not devoted to the study,

²⁸ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 69.

²⁹ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 68-69.

and certainly not the advocacy, of all music. They are, it has been clear all along, schools of western European art music.”³⁰

Anna Bull refers to these “elite” conservatories as “the behemoths.” I choose to do so as well, not only because of their architecture, “(heavy, stone, imposing),” but because of the “huge influence they have on the rest of the [musical] ecology” in shaping “musical cultures for generations to come.”³¹ Many conservatories and colleges of music, even the behemoths, now include coursework in music that is considered outside the traditionally Eurocentric classical music canon. This music is often positioned somewhere under the umbrella terms “world music” or “popular music.” While these courses attract high enrollment numbers and are often touted in college brochures and promotional materials, they are rarely required courses.³² Indeed, colleges, conservatories, and universities that devote substantial curricular credit to *non*-classical music, like Berklee College of Music and Belmont University, are known primarily for being exceptions to the rule.

In *The Right to Speak*, Patsy Rodenburg coined the term “vocal imperialism” in the context of theatre pedagogy and elocution. She defines vocal imperialism as the belief “that there is one right way of sounding or speaking.”³³ This “syndrome of believing that each of our voices can strike the ‘right’ uniform sound,” is confining, she says, because “it restricts anyone’s ability to work in the right way.”³⁴ In this research, I extend Rodenburg’s idea that there is one correct

³⁰ Nettl, Bruno. *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. 82.

³¹ Bull, Anna. *Class, Control, and Classical Music*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019. 29.

³² Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment,” 155-156.

³³ Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak: Working with the Voice*. Methuen Drama, 1992. 104

way of using the voice in theatre to the same elitist notions in the formalized study of singing. One could just as easily call this simple hegemony, but Rodenburg's phrase brings with it all the haughty connotations of the word "imperialism" that better illustrate the practices of Western classical singing.

In describing the participants, I have chosen the descriptor "pioneer" to portray the trailblazing nature of their work. However, it is important to recognize the colonial connotations of the word, especially in the context of decolonizing music education. The pioneers of history books were often engaged in the kind of cultural erasure that my research seeks to denounce. It is my intention that the word function in this dissertation as it is used in the context of scientific research, to describe one who is an innovator, not a settler.

Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, I introduce the reader to the interviewees at the center of this research, defining how and why they were chosen as pioneers. I then place their academic contributions within the context of a broader review of the current state of undergraduate voice curricula in the United States and Canada. This literature review includes not only data about current degree programs and course offerings, but also a broader examination of the latest scholarly writing on diversifying voice education. I discuss the questions of repertoire selection: how repertoire is chosen, why it is chosen, and by whom. I consider the importance of continued teacher education, something that many participants identified as essential. Finally, I look at programs

³⁴ Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak*, 105

that move beyond offering just Western classical and Musical Theatre repertoire, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of premature stylistic specialization.

In Chapter 2, I explore the systemic challenges that have been identified by the interviewees as barriers to curricular progress. I position voice training within the context of the systemic racism of music education in North America and argue that an understanding of this is essential for meaningful curricular change. I also discuss the cyclical, self-perpetuating nature of vocal imperialism within academia and address the role of The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) in undergraduate program accreditation.

Chapter 3 contains two case studies that position the undergraduate years as part of the music education pipeline. The first case study is a critical analysis of the curricular requirements of Canada's Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM.) The RCM voice syllabus is one example of an institution's false claims of stylistic diversity. The second is a case study of students who all studied at the Eastman School of Music and then went on to successful careers singing non-classical repertoire. I examine how their experiences, both while in school and during their professional careers, illustrate the ramifications of premature stylistic specialization.

Chapter 4 delves into the psychological challenges identified by the interview participants as impediments to collegiality and collaboration, two essential elements of progressive voice pedagogy. I discuss the vulnerability of the undergraduate years for many students, and how this crucial period of growth can also be a time of great susceptibility to dogmatism and the guru mentality that plague undergraduate voice studies. In reviewing recent literature on cults and trauma, I show how many of the situational and emotional factors that can make a young person susceptible to cults are also shared by undergraduate students.

In Chapter 5, I explore some of the topics of vocal pedagogy that remain debated, including among the interviewees themselves. I look at the question of de-centering repertoire by examining the work of Jo Estill. Having interviewed Mary Saunders-Barton, author of *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio*³⁵, I explore the debate surrounding the efficacy of practice. I also examine the varied responses from the interviewees as to when, or if, an undergraduate voice student should choose an area of musical specialization. I argue that, as curricula continue to progress and expand, musical diversity means more than simply adding a sprinkle of Musical Theatre repertoire to what already exists. Finally, I identify the character attributes and values shared by the curricular pioneers that seem to have been most essential to their successes.

³⁵ Spivey, Norman and Mary Saunders Barton. *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act*. San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2018

Chapter 1, The Current Landscape

“There have been seismic shifts in how singing is taught.”

- Matthew Hoch, research interview, June 26, 2025

The following chapter introduces the reader to the interview subjects of this research and defines how and why they were chosen as curricular pioneers. I share their observations about the current state of formalized voice training in North America and look at the ways that post-secondary voice curricula have changed in the past twenty-five years. The interview responses and scholarly work of the participants is examined within the context of a literature review of recent undergraduate voice pedagogy scholarship. I investigate the ways in which the vocabulary of voice pedagogy has evolved, and I consider recent scholarly questions of how, why, and by whom voice repertoire is selected. I advocate for continued voice teacher education, something that the interview participants identified as essential to curricular change. Lastly, explore the ramifications of what some scholars consider to be an unfortunate stylistic binary that has taken hold of voice studies in recent years: Western classical versus Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM).

The Interviewees

Karen Burke is a pioneer of gospel music in Canada, having developed the first undergraduate gospel music curriculum in Canada at York University. Her teaching has taken her to the United States, Poland, and Russia, and she is a co-founder of the Toronto Mass Choir, a

Juno-award winning gospel choir that has recorded fourteen albums and toured in ten different countries.³⁶ She is humble when asked about her curricular successes:

In Canada, gospel music is still considered kind of “mystical,” and so therefore, worthy of study. Whereas in the United States, it's like studying white bread, like, why do we need to study gospel music? So, my American colleagues [in Gospel music] are uber-gifted, so uber-talented. And they have three or four degrees, because they have to have it in order to prove that they belong to be there.³⁷

Dale Cox is currently based in Australia, where she was also born and raised. Cox, however, spent a large portion of her career teaching stylistically diverse methodologies at Coastal Carolina University in the US. In her interview, she described some of the methodology of her more recent research:

I went to six schools in the States where they taught musical theater, and I was embedded in the school for two weeks at a time to look at how they incorporated commercial singing into the music theater program. I observed 193 lessons to see what was actually happening in the lessons, what they were doing, what they were teaching, and then I interviewed them. Most of my teachers had had classical training to master's or doctoral level, but when they got this role as a musical theater teacher, they had to go and retrain, because they didn't know how to teach musical theater, or there wasn't any musical theater training around when they were doing their thing.³⁸

More of Cox’s excellent research and pedagogical insights can be found in her recently published book, *Exposing the Chasms in Voice Pedagogy: Playing the Field*.³⁹

As a leader of the Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Vocal Pedagogy Institute, an annual nine-day symposium that attracts teachers of voice from around the world to Shenandoah University, **Matt Edwards** is one of the most widely recognized pedagogues of CCM singing in

³⁶ “Karen Burke - About.” Karen Burke. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://karenburke.ca/biography>.

³⁷ Karen Burke, research interview, August 12, 2025.

³⁸ Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025.

³⁹ Cox, D. (2024). *Exposing the Chasms in Voice Pedagogy: Playing the Field* (1st ed.). Routledge.

North America. In his interview, Edwards told me that he spent high school singing in a rock band, but it was in college that he discovered his interest in voice pedagogy:

I didn't think that I was going to like it, but then I get in there and I start learning how the voice actually works... All of a sudden, I realized that science could tell me how something works, [something] that I was passionate about. I started trying to figure out what people were doing to help rock singers and musical theater singers, because that's what I was into, even though I loved opera, and opera was going really well for me. With these new ideas, and at first, my teaching assistant supervisor was not happy. I'll never forget the day I taught a studio class, it was successful, the students all did really well, and he just sat and stared at me, and he said, "I don't know what to say. You don't teach like anybody else I've ever seen."...A lot of voice teaching trajectories in this country, people end up teaching from what worked for them. A lot of stuff didn't work for me, so I wasn't going to go teach what didn't work to other people. My wife⁴⁰ and I were going to find out what *did* work for other people who were very different than us. And that's how we've lived our entire life as educators.⁴¹

Lynn Holding has been a pioneer of voice science for many years, with a particular scholarly focus on the relationship between music and the mind.⁴² Though an eloquent advocate for science-informed teaching, she speaks with great reverence for the long classical tradition that has come before her:

There is a school of thought, hundreds of years old, and there have been thousands of great minds and voices that have contributed to that school of thought, and that needs to be respected...It's not that classical is best, but it *was* first. So, you have to respect something that's lasted that long and has had so many great minds and great voices come through.⁴³

In some ways, Holding seems to feel that the pendulum of voice teaching has swung too far away from its classical roots. When asked if she feels that a classical training is essential for all singers, she responded:

⁴⁰ Jacquelyn Zito-Edwards is an auxiliary adjunct assistant professor of voice in the musical theatre program and Shenandoah Conservatory. In addition to extensive performance and teaching credits, she also teaches at Shenandoah's annual CCM Institute.

⁴¹ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

⁴² "Lynn Holding," Lynn Holding - Mezzo-Soprano | Vocologist, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://lynnholding.com/>.

⁴³ Lynn Holding, research interview, Sept 15, 2025.

I mean... no, but I say that from a science perspective not a philosophical one. I think it's really important as a human. But if you just want to learn to sing, no, I don't think so... The assumption that everybody's teaching classical and classical is best, I don't think that's as true anymore... and there are many, many cultural forces that have made that flip possible. It started with a real push among teachers who were saying, "We have to figure out how to teach this, because our kiddos are coming up from high school wanting to learn how to sing this way, and we don't know how. We've been told it wrecks voices. Is that true? Is it not?" I've always argued that voice science made that possible, because scientists are objective. They didn't have a political or philosophical bone to pick, and they simply looked at the evidence and said, by all the evidence there are a complex number of things that can cause vocal injury. You can't just point to one. You certainly can't point to one kind of singing.⁴⁴

Helding is highlighting a shift in North American voice training in recent decades away from a simply dismissing non-classical singing as "unhealthy."

Matthew Hoch believes that "Those who are predicting the eradication of classical music will ultimately be proven wrong."⁴⁵ In large part, he says, this is due to the popularity of classical repertoire in choral music, where he and many of his fellow interviewees spent their own foundational years:

If people who love classical music are worried about the death of their art form, I think they can be reassured that choral singing will always be sustained, and therefore people seeking certification for public school teaching will always desire some kind of classical basis for teaching choral music.⁴⁶

As the editor of many recent titles for the publisher Rowman and Littlefield, including *So You Want to Sing World Music* (2019) and *So You Want to Sing CCM* (2018), Hoch's interview reflected his keen awareness of the latest discourse pertaining to the expansion of voice studies beyond the Western classical tradition. Hoch's post-secondary training as a voice pedagogue eventually led him to a master's degree from the Hartt School in vocal performance and music

⁴⁴ Lynn Helding, research interview, Sept 15, 2025.

⁴⁵ Matthew Hoch, research interview, June 26, 2025.

⁴⁶ Matthew Hoch, research interview, June 26, 2025.

history and then a DMA from the New England Conservatory in vocal performance and music education. Hoch recalls:

During that era, [before 2000] all of my teachers had classical singing degrees. The pedagogy courses that I took, honestly, weren't that wonderful. I don't think there *were* many wonderful pedagogy courses back then. They were still using the Vennard⁴⁷ from 1967. Great book for 1967, but it was kind of unconscionable to still be using it in 2003. So I think in the past 20 years or so, there have been seismic shifts in how singing is taught, as older teachers retire and the younger generation moves in.

In her interview, **Victoria Holland** shared Hoch's optimism about recent advances in voice training and about the future of vocal pedagogy. At Canada's Royal Conservatory of Music, Holland has played a key role in the recent expansion of the institution's curriculum to include jazz and popular music repertoire. "I feel like we're coming together as a cohort,"⁴⁸ she told me when asked what recent changes she has observed in the field of formalized voice training. She continued:

We're using more similar language. I finished my undergrad degree around the time when Richard Miller⁴⁹ was gaining traction in NATS [National Association of Teachers of Singing], and I was being trained more in an old-school way that didn't feel as effective. And then there was this moment of everyone knowing about the science, and everyone talking about the science, and then you're kind of wrapping your head around, as a singer, do I think about the science when I'm practicing? How do I apply this? And now I feel like we've come full circle, where yes, you need to know how the voice works, but you're not going to talk about that in a lesson.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Vennard, William. 1967. *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technic*. 4th ed. New York: Carl Fischer.

⁴⁸ Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025.

⁴⁹ Richard Miller was a professor at Oberlin College and Conservatory from 1964-2006. He wrote eight books, including *The Structure of Singing*, *Training Tenor Voices*, and *On the Art of Singing* that became widely used in voice pedagogy curricula, and was considered "arguably one of the most influential voice pedagogues in history." ("About Richard Miller: Oberlin College and Conservatory." Oberlin College & Conservatory, December 13, 2023. <https://www.oberlin.edu/conservatory/divisions/vocal-studies/richard-miller-classical-voice-competition/about-richard-miller>.)

⁵⁰ Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025.

Holland brings up an important question here, one with which many voice teachers wrestle: how much of the physiology and function of voice science should be shared with voice students, and when? I will explore this question in the context of the undergraduate years in Chapter 5.

At St. Mary's College in California, **Jaron M. LeGrair** teaches in a BA Voice program that allows student to “explore music beyond Western traditions with courses in global, contemporary, and underrepresented musical genres.”⁵¹ LeGrair is also currently teaching voice as part of Oberlin College Conservatory's newly formed Music Theater program. His commitment to expanding voice studies beyond the classical canon is evidenced by his extremely popular online voice pedagogy content, which currently engages more than 1.2 million followers, worldwide.⁵² Of his social media presence, LeGrair told me:

I'll be honest with you. I have used my social media leverage to get every job in the last five years of my life. That's just a thing now. It wasn't a thing five or six years ago, but now it is. Now, mind you, I also have a master's degree. But if you have a big [social media] following and people listen to you, that is a big factor in drawing people to your program.

As a co-author of *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act*, **Mary Saunders Barton** has become one of the most widely recognized proponents of cross-training, a practice of simultaneously training voice students in both classical and contemporary singing. In an interview with *Classical Singer Magazine*, Saunders Barton describes the book as, “an invitation to look at voice training more inclusively in terms of stylistic flexibility.”⁵³ She goes on:

⁵¹ “Music, BA.” Music, BA | Saint Mary's College. Accessed January 9, 2026. <https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/academics/liberal-arts/performing-arts/music-ba>.

⁵² “Jaron M. Legrain: Oberlin College and Conservatory.” Oberlin College & Conservatory, October 20, 2025. <https://www.oberlin.edu/jaron-legrain>.

⁵³ “Bel Canto Can Belto: Talking Technique with Mary Saunders-Barton.” Mary Saunders Barton. Accessed January 9, 2026. <https://belcantocanbelto.com/2014/03/01/talking-technique-classical-singer-magazine/>.

We are in the process of moving away from an “us and them” mentality with regard to classical and contemporary vocal styles. Classical teachers who have felt afraid to address vernacular techniques in their studios are breathing a collective sigh of relief.⁵⁴

In addition to their important contributions to written scholarship, Saunders Barton and her colleague Norman Spivey pioneered a first-of-its-kind musical theatre voice pedagogy degree program at Penn State.⁵⁵

Like Saunders Barton, **Patty Thom**’s years in academia have led her to embrace a stylistically diverse approach to teaching voice. In her interview, she eschewed the notion that any one style of singing is essential, saying, “You know what I think is essential for all singers? To teach them how to sing *good*.” During her years as a teacher at Boston Conservatory, she centered voice pedagogy at the heart of the program’s curriculum and, like many of her fellow interviewees, found that a focus on the individual student was essential:

I like to focus on the language that the student grew up speaking. And, I think, for any style, finding that ease of diction, and that ease of singing in a comfortable range. You can use a lot of different kinds of repertoire for that, and you can help that student find what it is they really do love...Teach them how to sing so that they can make choices of their own.⁵⁶

Recognizing that the stylistic needs of her students were different than those of classical voice students, pioneer **Catherine Walker** achieved the monumental task of fully separating the voice training of musical theatre students at the University of Michigan from the voice training of classical students. She feels that her efforts are not singular, and that there have been other signs of positive movement away from the classical-fits-all mentality in academia in recent years. Still, she observes:

⁵⁴ “Bel Canto Can Belto,” Saunders Barton, Accessed January 9, 2026.

⁵⁵ “Mary Saunders-Barton.” About Mary | Mary Saunders-Barton. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://belcantocanbelto.com/belcantocanbelto/about-mary>.

⁵⁶ Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025.

I find that many, not all, but many classical singers are frozen in one way of singing, and the moment they have to shift, it is completely foreign to them.... But does anyone ever tell us, as people living our day-to-day lives, that we have to choose what vocal quality we're going to use? Because that's the only one you get to work in for the rest of your life? No. I can cheer at a game. I can speak softly to a child. I can whisper in a library. I can do all of those things. I don't have to choose. But when we sing, we think we have to choose. Why? I don't understand it.⁵⁷

Kevin Wilson recently joined the faculty at Oklahoma City University after serving for sixteen years as Director of Vocal Pedagogy and Professor of Voice at the Boston Conservatory. At Oklahoma City University, his voice students are all trained in both musical theatre and classical singing simultaneously. He shares his fellow pioneers' perspectives when asked to assess the current state of voice training:

I've seen more cross-training, collaborative ideas being created in voice teaching...The definition of what a pedagogy program is today is wildly different than what it was when I was in school. I mean, I basically had someone read one book to me, and then they gave me a degree.⁵⁸

While this is only a small sampling of the many voice teachers in the United States and Canada who have made progressive curricular change to undergraduate voice programs, the pioneers selected for this research include some of the most widely recognized pedagogues in their field. They have each played a major role in shaping the current landscape of formalized voice training, as their role in the following literature review will demonstrate.

Literature Review

The following review of recent scholarship on the topic of undergraduate voice pedagogy reveals both a major shift in the overall acceptance of non-classical singing among American and Canadian voice teachers and far less change in terms of the academic offerings of undergraduate

⁵⁷ Catherine Walker, research interview, December 13, 2025.

⁵⁸ Kevin Wilson, research interview, July 2, 2025.

curricula. As Patty Thom said in her interview when asked what changes she has seen in formalized voice training since her own time as a young student, “Pedagogically, we’ve advanced a lot. I don’t know that the whole educational industry has kept up.”⁵⁹ In addition to a literature review, this chapter includes similar observations from the research interviewees in order to further illuminate their place in the current state of undergraduate voice degree programs.

Changes in Post-Secondary Voice Studies, 2001-2025

All interviewees acknowledged a major evolution in recent decades in the mentality among voice teachers as to what kinds of singing are considered worthy of serious pedagogical inquiry. Interviewees pointed to a National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) conference that took place in January of 2001 as a significant moment in the advancement of voice training beyond the “classical only” mentality. Mary Saunders-Barton was one of the presenters:

The first big NATS conference was 2001 and it was called “Music Theater and the Belt Voice,” and we had people like Jo Estill, and Neil Semer and Jeannette LoVetri...and the point of the workshops was to get the classical teachers on their feet trying out belting...It was great fun, playing with those classical teachers and having them experiment with the sounds that they hadn’t made, necessarily, before...After that conference, I got so many invitations. I would go places, and people would get up and leave sometimes, just...the whole *idea* of it, the whole notion that [belting] would be considered something *musical*.⁶⁰

NATS, founded in 1944 and the largest professional association of teachers of singing in the world,⁶¹ was not a regular host of such genre-inclusive workshops in 2001. Lynn Holding recalled in her interview:

⁵⁹ Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025.

⁶⁰ Mary Saunders-Barton, research interview, July 17, 2025.

That [conference] was one of the first of its kind, and it was very controversial...my teacher from Indiana University, Dale Moore, had been a former president of NATS, and he and a bunch of other members threatened to resign from NATS if NATS was going to take this “other” kind of singing seriously.⁶²

LoVetri used the 2001 NATS conference as one of many sites to collect survey data from teachers of singing about their familiarity with what she called “contemporary commercial music” (CCM). With her co-author, Edrie Means Weekly, LoVetri published her findings in the *Journal of Voice* in 2003. The authors found that, of 31 schools of music and 40 schools of theatre that offered degrees in music theatre at that time, none offered CCM pedagogy courses. Weekly and LoVetri went on to identify major deficits in the skills of teachers who lacked CCM-specific training to properly prepare their students for careers in contemporary musical theatre. Among the teachers who were attempting to teach CCM, “96% were also teaching classical, for an average of 13 hours per week, primarily to the same students.”⁶³

Over twenty years later, researcher Dale Cox noted in her interview that:

Going to NATS last year I discovered that it was the first year they had a CCM voice competition, and I'm like, commercial music has been around for... how long now? It's still like classical, classical, classical. I just find it unbelievable.⁶⁴

Cox’s most recent research took her inside 193 individual voice lessons to observe, first-hand, what was really being taught in musical theatre degree programs throughout the United States. She concluded that:

Despite the predominance of CCM singing styles in professional musical theatre productions and the industry-driven need to teach these styles in musical theatre

⁶¹ “Search Nats.” National Association of Teachers of Singing. Accessed November 10, 2025. <https://www.nats.org/who-is-nats.html>.

⁶² Lynn Holding, research interview, September 15, 2025.

⁶³ Weekly, Edrie Means and Jeannette L. LoVetri. "Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Survey: Who's Teaching what in Nonclassical Music." *Journal of Voice* 17, no. 2 (06, 2003): 207-215.

⁶⁴ Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025.

university programs, the field of classical singing voice pedagogy continues to exert “undue influence” on musical theatre singing voice pedagogy.⁶⁵

Cox reveals that, in the decades since LoVetri’s research, classical singing technique still informs much of what is taught in individual voice lessons, even for students of musical theatre. She found that bias against CCM and musical theatre singing can also be found outside the voice studio. Her participants reported “being continually slighted by classical colleagues within workplaces and at voice pedagogy conferences,” as well as “the cancellation or lack of departmental support for various professional opportunities outside their institutions *because* they were musical theatre voice teachers and not classical voice teachers,” and “feeling ignored and treated as having lower professional standing within the field of voice pedagogy by members of the classical voice community.”⁶⁶ In her interview, Cox shared her own, similar experience:

I recently went for a job at a high-level conservatorium for a music theatre position. I didn't get it. The person who got it has a classical background, and when I asked for feedback I actually had the dean of that conservatorium say to me, “Well, we don't want people screaming their heads off and damaging their voices,” about musical theater. And then I listened to a conference where the teacher who got that position talked about belt as being difficult and dangerous. And I was really shocked at that, because I have been belting since I was fifteen, and I have had a scope of my vocal folds, and they are pristine. So... there is still a really strong mindset where you really are expected to have classical training before they will take you seriously.⁶⁷

The interviewees disagreed substantially about how much actual change has taken place at the undergraduate curricular level. How can we account for the dissonance between the perception that there has been “seismic change”⁶⁸ and the reality reflected in Cox’s research?

⁶⁵ Cox, Dale and Forbes, Melissa. 2022. “Introducing multi-sited focused ethnography for researching one-to-one (singing voice) pedagogy in higher education.” *Music Education Research*. 24 (5), pp. 625-637. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2022.2138842>

⁶⁶ Cox, Dale. 2020. “In the Room Where it Happens: Teaching Musical Theatre and Contemporary and Commercial Music (CCM) Singing.” PhD Thesis. University of Southern Queensland. 285-286.

⁶⁷ Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025.

One potential explanation is that, in the context of a centuries-long timeline of the history of Western voice training, the past twenty-five years are a relatively small window of time. The mere notion of giving serious pedagogical thought to singing outside of the Western classical canon has only taken root in academic literature in the past few decades, and such a shift in perception feels seismic when seen in the context of such a long history of Eurocentric classical dominance. Within one generation, prominent voices in academia have gone from dismissing the vocal demands of CCM music as unhealthy and unsustainable⁶⁹ to advocating for its inclusion.

Current Degree Requirements

Another reason for disagreement as to how much has changed could be because of a lack of data-driven research into the question. One exception is the recent work of Zipporah Peddle and Paul Patinka, who in 2025 undertook a broad examination of the vocal performance curricular requirements of undergraduate bachelor of music degree programs in the United States.⁷⁰ As the authors noted, this can be difficult information to assimilate, as institutional websites do not always disclose curricular specifics and can be challenging to navigate. Peddle and Patinka began with the College Music Society's 2023 list of every known secondary education institution in the United States with a music program, and eventually narrowed their representative research sample to include 272 institutions from across the United States that offer a Bachelor of Music in Voice Performance (BMVP). They used their findings to examine what

⁶⁸ Matt Hoch, research interview, June 26, 2025.

⁶⁹ Edwin, R. (2007). What Richard Miller Hath Wrought. *Journal of Singing*, 63(3), 325-327.

⁷⁰ Peddle, Z., & Patinka, P. M. (in press). Vocal performance curricular requirements and bulletin course descriptions in US Bachelor of Music degrees. *College Music Symposium*.

skills these voice-specific programs cultivated, and whether the training they provided aligned with current “industry demands.”⁷¹

Patinka and Peddle found an “apparent homogeneity” among BMVP programs, with a course load distribution clearly weighted towards classical singing. Their research demonstrated that, in addition to individual voice lessons, a current undergraduate voice degree often includes a choral or chamber ensemble requirement. Voice literature coursework, which they describe as “content related to musical selection, such as art song literature or opera literature” was also a common curricular requirement. Diction and language course requirements in Italian, French, and German - the languages of Western classical music - accounted for 20.6% of the amalgamated credit load according to Patinka and Peddle, more than even individual voice lessons. These courses, they assert, might be necessary for students who wish to pursue Western classical opera. However, “for the growing number of students whose careers will not center on opera, dedicating one-fifth of their voice related coursework to this specialized skill may be excessive.”⁷² Acting and movement related coursework accounted for only 2.9% of degree requirements and Musical Theatre coursework was represented the least, with only 1.6% of coursework. The authors concluded, “Although not explicitly labelled as such, these programs appear oriented towards training WC [Western classical] operatic singers.”⁷³

It's important to note that Patinka and Peddle’s study focused solely on degrees that called themselves Bachelor of Music in Voice Performance. Higher percentages of Musical Theatre coursework might be expected in another degree, such as Bachelor of Fine Arts in

⁷¹ Patinka and Peddle, “Vocal Performance.” 2.

⁷² Patinka and Peddle, “Vocal Performance.” 15.

⁷³ Patinka and Peddle, “Vocal Performance.” 14.

Musical Theatre Performance degree. However, given the stylistically non-descript categorization of “voice performance,” Patinka and Peddle’s study shows the grip that Western classical music still has on undergraduate voice training in 2025.⁷⁴

Post-secondary music education, as a capitalist enterprise, may in fact not be the best place to measure meaningful cultural change. As Matt Edwards said, “The educational system was set up to teach people to appreciate ‘good’ music... Academia is not going to create degrees for the poor to sing the music of the poor.” Many conservatories point to their jazz programs as proof of their inclusive offerings that are diverse in musical styles. Jazz currently represents between 1.1% and 1.4% of the market share of the North American music industry.⁷⁵ Given that recent estimates of classical music’s market share hover around 1%,⁷⁶ it seems that, by the time a music is deemed worthy of curricular study at institutions of higher learning, it is no longer music that is widely purchased for listening. Despite this, most of the interviewees for this research seemed optimistic that movement towards more stylistically diverse curricula will continue.

Evolving Vocabulary

Since LoVetri first coined the term Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) in 2000, teachers and scholars have struggled to define a common pedagogical approach to teaching it. Like so much terminology born out of a positionality of “other” than the accepted hegemony,

⁷⁴ The authors point to the influence that the accreditation requirements of the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) currently hold over undergraduate voice offerings. I explore this in greater depth in Chapter 2, as NASM was also brought up frequently by the interviewees.

⁷⁵ “Music Album Consumption in the U.S. by Genre 2018.” Statista, May 29, 2024.

⁷⁶ Apu. “Popular Classical Music: How Popular Is Classical Music? (Part II).” Medium, February 10, 2021.

CCM has come to serve as an inadequately broad linguistic umbrella for all non-classical singing. In a 2020 article in the *Journal of Singing*, Irene Bartlett and Marisa Lee Naismith acknowledged that LoVetri's term was "inclusive of styles such as pop, rock, jazz, music theatre, soul, cabaret, country, folk, gospel, rhythm & blues, and rap," and that the term attempts "to encapsulate the hydra-like diversity" of CCM vocal sounds. Bartlett and Naismith pointed to both the "growing public demand" for training in CCM, and the lack of a "clear and cohesive pedagogy that addresses the specific style-related technique and vocal health needs of CCM singers."⁷⁷ Is it any wonder that such a non-specific term should not neatly lend itself to one common pedagogical approach? After all, does a student of gospel singing require the same skills and training as a thrash metal vocalist?

This lack of a unified pedagogy could partially explain why we have not seen more of a growth in pedagogical offerings in post-secondary institutions. Matt Edwards explains:

When we [Shenandoah Conservatory] started, we were the first master's degree in commercial voice pedagogy in the United States. We are still the only doctorate [program] in the United States where you can audition with any type of music. So, we will literally take a death metal screamer, a hip-hop artist, a gospel singer, a country artist, a musical theater performer, or an opera singer. We are completely open. That is not normal across the board, but I hope that eventually it is.⁷⁸

At the same time, Edwards emphasizes that the only way this kind of genre-inclusive program works is if teachers are willing to continue learning and adapt to meet the needs of all kinds of vocalizing that falls under the CCM umbrella: "It's always figuring out, what are the requirements for *your* genre, for whatever you do, and then starting to try to understand the

⁷⁷ Bartlett, Irene, and Marisa Lee Naismith. "An Investigation of Contemporary Commercial Music Voice Pedagogy: A Class of Its Own?" *Journal of Singing* 76, no. 3 (2020): 273.

⁷⁸ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

mechanics of what's happening.”⁷⁹ This false binary⁸⁰ wrongly implies that CCM and classical music are equal in scale and scope.

Naismith joined her colleagues Trineice Robinson-Martin and Elizabeth Ann Benson in urging the voice community to refrain from using the term CCM altogether. They argue that categorizing vocal music as either classical or CCM is “akin to dividing all the world’s languages into ‘English’ and ‘everything else.’”⁸¹ The term “classical music,” as it is currently used in common parlance, “Represents the cultures of Western Europe circa 1400–2000. By contrast, CCM represents all of the other cultures, corresponding to hundreds of thousands of musical genres.”⁸² Though they do not offer an alternative term to replace CCM, they point out that “outside of academia, most teachers use specific style descriptors, such as folk, heavy metal, or K-Pop.” Doing so prevents both the erasure of cultural identity and the sense of musical “otherness” connoted by the label CCM.⁸³

The struggle to define the relatively new terminology of CCM is a positive reflection of the increased academic interest in non-Western classical music and singing styles. As more students take an interest in raising CCM music and pedagogy to a place worthy of serious academic study, the desire to find accurate and inclusive terminology to describe the many kinds of singing that have historically been deemed unworthy of study in higher education should be heartening for those who advocate for stylistically diverse curricula.

⁷⁹ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

⁸⁰ See p. 14 for a more comprehensive exploration of this vocal binary.

⁸¹ Ann Benson, Elizabeth, Trineice Robinson-Martin, and Marisa Lee Naismith. “Practicing Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging in the Singing Voice Studio.” *Voice & Speech Review* 16, no. 2 (2022): 175.

⁸² Ann Benson, Robinson-Martin, and Naismith. “Practicing Equity” 175.

⁸³ Ann Benson, Robinson-Martin, and Naismith. “Practicing Equity” 176.

Repertoire Selection

A key indicator in shifting attitudes in voice pedagogy is the topic of repertoire, or more specifically, what repertoire is being assigned to undergraduate students. In 2025, scholars Patinka and Peddle published “Musical Selection in Western Classical Academic Voice Studies: A Discussion of Composer-Singer Identity Alignment,” advocating for the application of Geneva Gay’s “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy” to voice repertoire selection.⁸⁴ Gay defines Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (or CRP) as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.”⁸⁵ In other words, instead of choosing repertoire based on a Eurocentric, classical tradition to satisfy jury or recital requirements, teachers should be guided by what the authors call “composer-singer identity alignment.” Centering each student’s unique cultural identity in the selection of repertoire “may inspire them in ways we cannot anticipate, allowing for a feeling of acceptance and the sense that they belong to the musical community, and that they have a voice that is respected there.”⁸⁶ The interviewees of this research largely agreed that there is great value in considering the individual cultural identity of each student when considering repertoire.

⁸⁴ Peddle, Zipporah, and Paul M Patinka. “Musical Selection in Western Classical Academic Voice Studies: A Discussion of Composer-Singer Identity Alignment.” *Journal of Singing* 81, no. 4 (2025): 389.

⁸⁵ Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), 29.

⁸⁶ Peddle & Patinka. “Musical Selection,” 389.

Helding, whose research and writing have advocated for the inclusion of cognitive science as the “third pillar of voice training,”⁸⁷ also highlighted the ways in which student-centered repertoire selection is grounded in learning theory. Learning theory is a theoretical framework that attempts to “describe how knowledge is received and processed during the learning experience.”⁸⁸ Helding explained:

I could sit here and give you the answer that everybody loves these days: that we [the student and I] are partners in learning, and I help them, they choose...there is some aspect of that, but not for the reasons one might think. It's because I've researched learning theory for so long, and I now know that this is just how people learn *best*. They have to have some skin in the game. One of the most important requirements of any kind of learning is volition. High volition. So how do you get somebody to want to learn? Well, they have to be invested in it.⁸⁹

Helding encourages buy-in from her students in the repertoire selection process by encouraging them to do a lot of listening to new repertoire options and by asking what other kinds of singing they are doing outside of lessons (at weddings or church gigs, for example). She also asks her students to fill out surveys of what music they like and what they are listening to in their free time. Just as important, she says, is her responsibility to expose her students to new music and to “open new worlds” to them: “We can’t just keep feeding the children the foods they want,” she says. On the other hand, she continues:

My students are adults. I have a journal assignment, and part of that assignment is they have to make their own lesson plan. Is that because I'm derelict in my duty? No. Is it because I'm smashing the master / apprentice model? No, because I don't care about that. What I care about is how learning works best, and it really is a partnership. The sooner they figure that out, the better they're going to do in this world where you have to stand on your own two feet.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ “Lynn Helding.” USC Thornton School of Music, February 21, 2025. <https://music.usc.edu/lynn-helding/>.

⁸⁸ “Learning Theory Overview.” home. Accessed January 11, 2026. <https://www.instructionaldesigncentral.com/learning-theory>.

⁸⁹ Lynn Helding, research interview, September 15, 2025

⁹⁰ Lynn Helding, research interview, September 15, 2025

Similarly, Kevin Wilson tasks his older students with choosing their own repertoire, but within established parameters designed to achieve a technical goal.⁹¹ Matt Edwards uses repertoire choice as an opportunity for introspection on the part of his students: “I encourage them to start by thinking about who they are as an artist... Stop trying to be what you think other people want you to be [and] stick to who you are. That’s where you’ll find success...Start with the ‘why’ for the song, not just the sound of the song.”⁹²

Matthew Rotjan echoes Edwards’s thoughts in a 2021 article for the *Music Educators Journal* titled, “Deciding For or Deciding With: Student Involvement in Repertoire Selection.” Including the student as an active participant in repertoire selection “opens the doors to honoring the richness of their identities, including a multitude of factors like culture, gender, sexuality, race, religion, socioeconomic status, nationality, and location.”⁹³ He also agrees with Holding’s observation that a tension may exist between what a student wants to sing and what a teacher may include in a crafted curriculum. In such cases, Rotjan refers to the work of education philosopher, John Dewey who believed that teachers should “embrace this tension by a sense of balance, resisting the ephemeral nature of changing interests, but finding salient and meaningful aspects of student interest in which to build a curriculum.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Kevin Wilson, research interview, July 2, 2025

⁹² Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

⁹³ Rotjan, Matthew. “Deciding For or Deciding With: Student Involvement in Repertoire Selection.” *Music Educators Journal* 107, no. 4 (2021): 29.

⁹⁴ Rotjan, “Deciding For or Deciding With,” 29.

Continued Teacher Education

Openness to student volition in repertoire selection requires adaptability from the voice teacher, the same trait that Edwards cited as essential if degree programs are going to embrace stylistic diversity. A willingness to continue learning is still more of an exception than a rule among teachers of voice, according to Thom: “People cling to the way they did it, the way they were taught, the repertoire that they know... I went to school in the 70’s... I look at some [voice] programs today and they still look pretty similar.”⁹⁵ One way that Thom and Kevin Wilson, her colleague at the Boston Conservatory, fought this kind of stagnation was by placing voice pedagogy at the center of all voice degree programs offered at the Boston Conservatory. This encouraged continued faculty learning.

We made a big deal about the fact that we had this pedagogy program at the center of our curriculum, and that it served *both* musical theater voice teachers and classical teachers. It encouraged the faculty to challenge themselves... They heard from lots of people [and] there was a lot of new information coming to the faculty in a very present way.⁹⁶

By embedding continued training in the culture of their programs, Thom and Wilson were able to foster an environment where teachers could freely admit to gaps in their own knowledge. The importance of this kind of self-awareness and vulnerability is echoed by Benson, Robinson-Martin, and Naismith: “Teachers should continue to be aware of and articulate what is beyond the scope of our expertise.”⁹⁷ While it is impractical to expect voice teachers to become experts in all styles of singing, teachers should start expanding our knowledge of the music of our own culture. Knowing more about the music we grew up with (which is often different than the music

⁹⁵ Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025

⁹⁶ Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025

⁹⁷ Benson, Robinson-Martin, and Naismith. “Practicing Equity,” 174.

we were taught to value) will foster more of a sense of belonging in the voice studio, as teachers model an appreciation for the same culture in which students live. Benson, Robinson-Martin, and Naismith encourage teachers to demonstrate academic curiosity through “careful study of history, culture, and vocal aesthetics.”⁹⁸

Mary Saunders-Barton, who advocates for vocal cross-training⁹⁹ in her research and writing, highlights how teachers can be a valuable resource for each other. Not only should teachers feel free to share students among themselves, “Go *with* them if you want to learn from what the other teacher has to offer.”¹⁰⁰

Beyond the Vocal Binary

In her article “Crossing Style Borders: New Inroads in Training Teachers of Singing,”¹⁰¹ Irene Bartlett laments the division between approaches to Western classical and CCM training, despite acknowledging that the vocal requirements are different. She poses three questions to the reader:

- What if teachers were trained to consider genre differences as complementary rather than oppositional, drawing on the strengths of existing classical and contemporary training models to build voices without borders?
- What if this training was geared toward an understanding of the differences in style related vocal tract configuration, breath flow parameters, and support demands?
- What if teachers were trained to assist singers to develop the whole voice first, thereby facilitating the freedom to sing healthily in many styles?¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Benson, Robinson-Martin, and Naismith. “Practicing Equity,” 174.

⁹⁹ Cross-Training is explored in greater depth in Chapter 4.

¹⁰⁰ Mary Saunders-Barton, research interview, July 17, 2025

¹⁰¹ Bartlett, Irene. “Crossing Style Borders: New Inroads in Training Teachers of Singing.” *Voice & Speech Review* 14, no. 2 (2020): 187.

The first question seems to implicitly advocate for an approach to voice teaching that simultaneously trains the singer in both classical and CCM styles. Saunders-Barton describes this practice of cross-training as telling the student, “This is the essence of your voice. Here’s the center of your range. Let’s see how we can build both ways.”¹⁰³

The undergraduate curriculum at Oklahoma City University (OCU) was one of the first programs to integrate cross-training into their voice instruction. Kevin Wilson, who now teaches there, said:

Cross-training is just in our DNA here. It takes a little time to get used to, because the students all come in either as musical theatre or classical voice majors, but all the classical voice majors have to sing MT [musical theatre].¹⁰⁴

While the students at OCU are trained with cross-training, they still choose a curricular “major.” This reflects a practical reality that many of the interviewees mentioned: there is a finite number of curricular credit hours to play with in creating an undergraduate degree. If a student wants a degree in classical singing, some of those hours will need to be spent acquiring Western classical-specific skills, like the language diction courses that Patinka and Peddle showed dominate most voice programs.

However, Bartlett’s third question challenges us to think beyond a stylistically goal-oriented undergraduate training. What would it look like for a voice degree to develop the whole voice first? The faculty at St. Mary’s College in California, where Jaron M. LeGrain teaches, might provide one example. In the context of its “dynamic and inclusive curriculum that

¹⁰² Bartlett, “Crossing Style Borders,” 187.

¹⁰³ Mary Saunders-Barton, research interview, July 17, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Kevin Wilson, research interview, July 2, 2025.

broadens students' understanding of music across diverse traditions,"¹⁰⁵ undergraduate students enrolled at St Mary's are not required to choose an area of vocal specialization. One of a handful of Estill Educational Affiliate¹⁰⁶ institutions in the United States, the pedagogical foundation of St. Mary's program is based on the groundbreaking work of Jo Estill,¹⁰⁷ a presenter at the 2001 NATS conference mentioned by Saunders-Barton.

The St. Mary's curriculum is described as a "non-genre biased instructional model where students are exposed to as many genres of music as possible in their training. Our graduates," the program description continues, "perform and teach in styles as varied as classical, jazz, R&B, pop, rock, and folk." All of the voice faculty at St. Mary's are certified Estill Master Trainers, which means an entire voice faculty who are uniquely like-minded, pedagogically. In his interview, LeGrair told me a bit more about what this curriculum looks like, in practice:

Each teacher can teach how they want to. [In the first year] the students take a group class called Voice Pedagogy where they learn all about what their voices are capable of. They don't take private voice lessons until the second year.¹⁰⁸

When asked how the students responded to this kind of curriculum, LeGrair said, "I think the students are okay with not choosing a specialization. They never expressed a desire to choose a focus. They've always [told me] 'I want to do a little bit of this, a little bit of that.'"¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ "Music, BA." Music, BA | Saint Mary's College. Accessed November 18, 2025. <https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/academics/liberal-arts/performing-arts/music-ba>.

¹⁰⁶ According to the Estill International website, the designation of Estill Educational Affiliate is reserved for "academic institutions and businesses that recognize the value of Estill Voice Training® instruction and identify Estill Voice Training® as an official component of their curriculum and practice."

¹⁰⁷ The research and teaching of Jo Estill is explored in greater detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁰⁸ Jaron LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025.

¹⁰⁹ Jaron LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025.

It's important to note that the program at St. Mary's is a Bachelor of Arts degree, not a Bachelor of Music, and as such it is afforded more curricular freedom and fewer requirements. This kind of curriculum may appeal to students who wish to obtain a well-rounded degree, as opposed to one that is defined by stylistic specialization. LeGrair also noted that "St. Mary's is a little more loose, more liberal"¹¹⁰ than the behemoths, like Juilliard, Curtis, or Eastman. Programs like this one, which do not force a premature stylistic specialization on a young singer, might be an indicator of the future direction of voice pedagogy. When asked at what age, if any, a young singer should be asked to choose an area of stylistic specialization, most of the interviewees agreed with the response of Patty Thom: "You shouldn't have to choose."¹¹¹

While students often begin the process of choosing an undergraduate school around the age of seventeen, even the earliest estimates as to when the singing voice fully matures are in a singer's early twenties.¹¹² If they want to study voice as an undergraduate they are usually asked to commit to a specialization, not only before they know their own musical tastes and artistic passions, but physiologically before their voices can demonstrate their full capabilities. Matt Edwards believes this may help explain why vocal imperialism's "if you can sing classical, you can sing anything" mentality has endured. When most BMVP degrees are rooted in classical singing, Edwards asks, "are we [teachers] being ethically responsible by giving our students only *these* tools that just fit this one style?"¹¹³ Cox agrees:

I like the word "unethical"... One of the participants in my research was at a highly regarded school, learning classical. And he just wasn't a classical singer. But he's a

¹¹⁰ Jaron LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025.

¹¹¹ Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025.

¹¹² Sataloff, R.T., D. Caputo Rosen, M. Hawkshaw, and J.R. Spiegel. "The Aging Adult Voice." *Journal of Voice* 11, no. 2 (June 1, 1997): 156–60.

¹¹³ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

fantastic musical theater performer. But he was told, you know, you'll never make it. He was told that at university, and yet they kept teaching him. *That* is unethical.¹¹⁴

LeGrair points out that, not only does the singing voice change over the course of many years, so too can an artist's interests, tastes, and goals. An undergraduate training in voice should provide a foundation for a singer to live a full life of artistic exploration. LeGrair points to Beyoncé as an example: "Her transformation from *Renaissance* into *Cowboy Carter*... she made it a very obvious choice, and she wanted people to know she was pushing genres and doing what *she* wanted to do."¹¹⁵

Forced stylistic choice also limits a student's future career options, both as a singer and a teacher. Vocal versatility only expands the performance opportunities available to a recent graduate. Scholars Allen Henderson, David Sisco, and Jennifer and Mark McQuade argue that, as opera companies specifically have begun to include musical theatre titles in their season programming, singers must be able to meet the changing vocal demands. In addition, voice teachers, training programs, and degree offering institutions "need to diversify their offerings / curricula and skills to help meet the evolving demands of the industry."¹¹⁶ They point to a recent online survey that was distributed by NATS that asked professional singers who had received post-secondary degrees whether they felt their education had sufficiently prepared them for the realities of a career in singing. Almost 60% of the respondents said no, with two-thirds reporting

¹¹⁴ Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025.

¹¹⁵ Jaron LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025.

¹¹⁶ McQuade, Mark, Jennifer McQuade, Allen Henderson, and David Sisco. "Cinderella Meets Cendrillon: Music Theater and Opera Living Under the Same Roof." *Journal of Singing* 75, no. 2 (2018): 128.

that they had received “no specific training regarding differences between opera and music theatre.”¹¹⁷

The siloed, stylistically segregated training of singers doesn’t only negatively impact future performers, according to the interviewees, but also future teachers. “I worry about the students that I mentor for teaching,” shared Holding. “They’re being trained in our opera program, they’re classical singers and some of them have little to no experience in anything else. And yet, they’re being called to these interviews and asked to teach non-classical styles.”¹¹⁸ Hoch observes, “The jobs that are advertised now for academia...more and more frequently I’m seeing, ‘experience in all styles,’ ‘experience in popular music.’”¹¹⁹ Without fluency in both Western classical and CCM, both future performers and future teachers are increasingly limiting their potential employment opportunities.

Conclusion

As academic pioneers themselves, the opinions and observations of the interviewees situate them squarely at the heart of a current literature review on the topic of diversifying undergraduate voice training. The majority of the interviewees were resistant to stylistic specialization. They embraced individualized, student-centered repertoire selection, and advocated for continued teacher training. Given that all the interview subjects were selected based on their work diversifying curricula, this homogeneity of opinion is unsurprising. What is

¹¹⁷ McQuade, McQuade, Henderson, and Sisco. “Cinderella Meets Cendrillon.” 128.

¹¹⁸ Lynn Holding, research interview, September 15, 2025.

¹¹⁹ Matthew Hoch, research interview, June 26, 2025.

noteworthy is the dissonance between the opinion of many interviewees that much has changed and the reality of how little has changed at the curricular level.

Within the context of hundreds of years of voice study, the past twenty-five years represent a brief period of time. However, the advances in voice science that have taken place during this small window are remarkable. During this period, the vocabulary of voice pedagogy has evolved quickly, sometimes (as was the case with contemporary commercial music, or CCM) before a coherent pedagogical approach could be articulated. In the next two chapters, I will explore some of the most important challenges identified by the interviewees as barriers to broader, swifter, and more substantial curricular change.

Chapter 2, Identifying and Overcoming Systemic Challenges

“We will not abide by these rules anymore.”

- Lynn Holding, research interview, September 15, 2025.

As a high school student at the Baltimore School for the Arts, most of my fellow voice majors were motivated to study singing by our love of musical theatre, pop, gospel, R&B, and other forms of Contemporary Commercial Music. Upon arrival at school, however, we were all handed the *Twenty-Four Italian Songs and Arias*,¹²⁰ along with the implicit message that, if we wanted to be *real* musicians, this was the music we were going to have to learn. I watched my classmates riff their way through Tommaso Giordani’s “Caro Mio Ben” and belt Antonio Caldara’s “Sebben, Crudele” (much to the consternation of their voice teachers) as they desperately tried to turn the music of seventeenth-century Italian men into something to which they could relate. By graduation, very few of us went on to pursue further education in singing.

I, however, whole-heartedly bought into the promise of vocal imperialism, believing what I was told: that a classical voice training meant that I would eventually be able to sing anything. I was lucky enough to afford a trip to Rochester, New York to audition for the prestigious Eastman School of Music, and to my amazement and deep honour, I was accepted. Within days of arriving, it became clear to me that, despite my acceptance into the school, I was very much *not* in possession of the voice required for the training I was receiving. I could hear the handful of genuinely operatic voices among my classmates, and mine was not one of them. The culture and coursework, even the casual conversations I had with my classmates, all seemed to be pointing towards one goal: a career singing Western classical opera.

¹²⁰ Schirmer, G., ed. *Twenty-Four Italian Songs and Arias of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Medium-Low Voice ed. New York: G. Schirmer, 1948.

While the focus of this research is on post-secondary training, the undergraduate years of study take place within the larger context of a singer's lifetime of learning. As my own high school experience illustrates, vocal imperialism can manifest itself throughout the entire education and career of a singer. The curricular pioneers I spoke to for this research also recognized the continued dominance of Western classical music at all levels of music education. They made it clear that, in order to fully appreciate the challenge of creating meaningful curricular change, it is important to address vocal imperialism as a systemic issue, one that can inform a singer's experience long before, and long after, the undergraduate years. This chapter examines the roots and resonances of vocal imperialism and includes a case study of one of Canada's oldest institutions of music education as it attempts to reckon with the changing landscape of voice education.

The Long Shadow and Deep Roots of Vocal Imperialism

All interviewees were asked if they believed that a Western classical voice training was essential for all singers. Given that they were asked to participate in this research as a result of their work in pushing voice pedagogy beyond the classical paradigm, it is perhaps unsurprising that most of the interviewees answered that a classical training was *not* essential. Two of them, however, Karen Burke and Victoria Holland, answered positively. Holland's response was somewhat nuanced:

It depends what the person wants to do. I think most people would say, if they want to sing with an extended range, with a variety of patterns and styles, then approaching it with this idea of kind of a seamed voice, like the bel canto style can be helpful to smooth out those transition points... It'd be easy for me to say no to this question, because I'm sure there's times when it's not neces- well, actually, I haven't come across one where it's not, so I guess I should say yes to this question.¹²¹

¹²¹ Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025

In explaining her response, Burke highlighted one of the factors that has so deeply entrenched vocal imperialism in the system of higher education: the requirement of a postgraduate degree: “That’s just the way it is in hiring. They look for that first. No master’s degree? Gone. You don’t even get to see the interview room unless you have a classical music degree.”¹²² If undergraduate institutions require postgraduate degrees in order to teach, and if those postgraduate degrees offer only training in classical music, how will educators ever be able to break the cycle of vocal imperialism?

One answer to this problem is to create postgraduate programs that train teachers beyond the classical paradigm. Such programs are few and far between, but they do exist. The Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts programs in voice pedagogy at Shenandoah Conservatory, where Matt Edwards teaches, are examples. Says Edwards:

The problem is, is that we’ve created an educational system that requires indoctrination in order to enter it. In order to teach at a university nowadays, you have to have a doctorate... And Shenandoah is the only doctoral degree in the country where you do not have to come into this program with classical degrees.¹²³

However, for Edwards, replacing just one link in the systemic chain of vocal imperialism has been a challenge:

The tricky thing that we have discovered along the way is that we have a lot of people who got a bachelor’s degree in classical voice because they had no other option, or they were told that classical singing is the root of all singing styles. Then they realized that’s not true. Then they want to get a degree to go teach others the music that they like, but they themselves have very little experience in that music.¹²⁴

¹²² Karen Burke, research interview, August 12, 2025.

¹²³ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

¹²⁴ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

Music colleges and conservatories that perpetuate vocal imperialism continue to “play a pivotal role in deciding which individuals gain access”¹²⁵ to careers in music. This is not only because the behemoths require postgraduate degrees to teach, but because they also provide students with vital networking and inter-personal connections within the insular world of classical music. Gaining entrance to this world is increasingly difficult. In a society where public elementary and high school music education has been slashed, acquiring the necessary skills and resources to even audition for a music college or conservatory can be prohibitively costly. Thus, access to post-secondary music education is, in many ways, determined long before a student is of college age.

Why do so many espouse vocal imperialism? Edwards answered this question by framing the issue in its historical context, where he believes it is best understood:

The truth is, it is an idea that came out of the Gilded Age in Victorian England, when they were talking about voice pedagogy as voice *culture* [and] how to make people seem more cultured. The educational system was set up to teach people to appreciate “good” music. They wanted to make people sound less poor, less ignorant to the upper class. And you have to remember, your American popular music in this country came from two pathways: the Black American pathway and the Appalachian pathway. In both pathways, you're dealing with poorer people... So we created this idea that if you learn “good” music and classical technique, it'll prepare you to do anything.¹²⁶

In framing vocal imperialism as a product of colonial biases, Edwards is adding his voice to much of the recent academic discourse on decolonizing music education. Decolonization, as used in the context of today's ethnomusicology, interrogates and dismantles Eurocentrism in music. Imperialism and colonialism are closely related, but some important distinctions exist between them. Edward Said, whose pioneering work examines decolonization as it relates to

¹²⁵ Bull and Scharff, “Introduction,” 31.

¹²⁶ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

culture, famously devoted an entire chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) to Verdi's *Aida* as a prime example of "The Empire at work," appropriating "an Orientalized Egypt" much to the delight of European audiences.¹²⁷ In distinguishing between imperialism and colonialism, Said asserts that "'Imperialism' means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre," whereas, "'Colonialism', which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory."¹²⁸ In other words, imperialism, as a theory or attitude, can be a *mindset*. Or, as Rodenburg stated in the context of vocal imperialism, a *belief* that there is one "right" way of sounding. Colonization, on the other hand, is an action, a consequence of imperialism and carries with it topographical connotations of literal geographic occupation. "In our time," Said says, "direct colonialism has largely ended; Imperialism," however, "lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices."¹²⁹

Vocal imperialism, as Edwards described it in his interview, is inherently elitist and exclusionary. What can sometimes make positioning vocal imperialism in the context of decolonization scholarship a tricky endeavour is the fact that the term "classical" has proven, historically, to be a moving rhetorical target. Throughout the colonial history of the United States and Canada, the definition of what music we music consider to be "classical" has changed and continues to change. If classical music is "prestige music," as Loren Kajikawa defined it for us earlier, culture is constantly redefining the boundaries around that prestige. Lawrence W. Levine

¹²⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 92.

¹²⁸ Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994. 8.

¹²⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 9.

writes in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, “precisely the same forms of culture can perform markedly distinct functions in different periods or among different groups.”¹³⁰ This becomes clear when we look at how the perception of operatic singing in the United States has changed since the 1800’s.

Italian opera - now considered by many to be the very pinnacle of Western classical vocal music – was not important at all in the United States until the beginning of the nineteenth century, according to Levine. Before this time, most American operas were English. Consequently, “opera was an art form that was *simultaneously* popular and elite.”¹³¹ It was attended by large audiences comprised of both economic elites and members of the working-class, who experienced opera, and its repertoire, as part of normal, everyday culture. It was not uncommon for operas to be performed alongside bawdy comedic plays, and opera singers were free to add their own embellishments or to insert popular songs into their performances to supplement or replace arias.¹³²

It was not until later in the nineteenth century, as Italian opera became more prevalent in the United States, that “a dichotomy widened between opera given in English translation and opera performed in the original tongue.... opera in Italian came to signify old world pretensions and effete snobberies.”¹³³ Increasingly, the word *opera* came to mean opera performed in foreign languages, attended by the “better class, the most intelligent and refined of our citizens.”¹³⁴ It

¹³⁰ Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. 1st Harvard University Press pbk. ed. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990. 85.

¹³¹ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 86.

¹³² Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 90.

¹³³ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 93-94.

¹³⁴ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 101-102.

was performed in gilded opera houses owned and operated by wealthy patrons. Though Levine makes it clear that “American culture, from the very outset, was a divided one, replete with ethnic, class, and regional distinctions,” vocal imperialism as we currently know it did not become a prime example of the hierarchical nature of American culture until the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

It is here that Christopher Small’s “musicking” can help us to identify the hierarchical actions of vocal imperialism and classical music making, writ large. Many of the conventions of classical music performance are falsely assumed, by current students of classical singing, to have always been common practice. Beginning in Baltimore and Boston, the practice of lowering the lights in performance spaces in order to quiet audiences and focus attention on performers became routine.¹³⁵ Reviewers of opera began to comment on the unsophisticated behaviour of audiences, prompting the board of directors of the Metropolitan Opera to post a notice in every seat requesting that the audience refrain from talking during performances.¹³⁶ While conducting at the Metropolitan Opera, Arturo Toscanini stopped a performance of the opera *Euryanthe* to angrily thwack his baton against the podium until the audience was appropriately silent, and he refused to allow latecomers to be seated until after the prelude of *Tristan und Isolde*.¹³⁷ As opera increasingly came to be treated as venerable, its consumption also became the privilege of the elite. Classical music has remained a kind of cultural currency in the United States ever since this period in American history.

¹³⁵ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 190.

¹³⁶ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 182.

¹³⁷ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 188.

At the same time, the end of the 19th century, “Public life became everywhere more fragmented, [and] the concept of culture took on hierarchical connotations.”¹³⁸ The adjectives that came to be used to describe culture during this period (“legitimate,” “high,” “low,” “popular,” “true,” “beautiful,” “natural,”) implied a vertical classification system that remains with us. To this day, singers identify a classical singing style as “legitimate” (or, “legit”) implying that all non-classical singing is somehow illegitimate. By the mid-nineteenth century, the very meaning of the word *culture* had changed in Webster’s dictionary. Whereas before, the word had been defined in agricultural terms, a new definition of culture was added, as “the state of being cultivated... refinement of mind or manners.”¹³⁹

Levine demonstrates that the way in which the human voice is used for singing has been caught up in the politics of social, cultural, and economic power for centuries. Popular art becomes esoteric art, according to Levine, “precisely when it becomes or is rendered inaccessible to the types of people who appreciated it earlier.” He connects the location of classical music in exclusive, expensive performance venues to its adoption by institutions of “higher” musical learning, as a “means of social, intellectual, and aesthetic separation and selection.”¹⁴⁰ Loren Kajikawa concurs:

University music schools were never intended to teach anything other than classical music. They were in fact built on a culture of exclusion. Most US music departments were founded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and they reflected the standards and tastes of the white, Anglo-Saxon elites.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 223.

¹³⁹ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 224.

¹⁴⁰ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 229.

¹⁴¹ Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment,” 158.

Not only were North American institutions of music education (Bull's "behemoths") built upon a foundation of mid-nineteenth century elitism, but they also "have been formative in shaping and reproducing [classical music's] social and aesthetic conventions."¹⁴² Bull says that "classical music's value is upheld through a quintessentially middle-class practice: closing off spaces where it is stored."¹⁴³ Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of American post-secondary studies, where yearly attendance at an elite music college or conservatory can cost around \$70,000 USD. Matthew Hoch spoke to this reality, as well, in his interview:

Whenever you enroll in a voice performance degree, even if that degree has made efforts to be more inclusive, you're still working within a traditional Western classical framework... Anyone who enrolls in a degree has to confront that bias.¹⁴⁴

Canadian scholars Robin Attas and Margaret Walker argue that music coursework at North American universities not only privileges European repertoire and notation practices, but also reinforces a distinctly European "conception of music as a sound object composed of discrete elements that can be pulled apart, even dissected, in order to 'understand' it."¹⁴⁵ They point out that this standardization of curriculum dates from a period of time when nearly 70 per cent of the globe saw European imperial occupation. Over time, the nineteenth-century beliefs and practices that are enshrined in music conservatories have "taken on the appearance of being natural, inevitable, and right; a particular value system is stored and preserved in these

¹⁴² Bull, Anna and Christina Scharff. "Introduction" In *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 14.

¹⁴³ Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, 175.

¹⁴⁴ Matthew Hoch, research interview, June 26, 2025

¹⁴⁵ Attas, Robin, and Margaret E Walker. "Exploring Decolonization, Music, and Pedagogy 1." *Intersections (Toronto. 2006)* 39, no. 1 (2019). 10.

institutions through the kinds of musical ability that are recognized and valued, as well as the kinds that are not recognized or valued.”¹⁴⁶

In his interview, Matt Edwards articulated in greater detail the way that a Eurocentric, Western classical ideal can manifest itself in undergraduate voice training:

If you take a student through learning how to sing classically, you are trying to teach them to project their voice acoustically over an instrument without a microphone. That requires a certain resonance strategy. That resonance strategy requires pure vowels. Those pure vowels need to have certain formant characteristics in order for the voice to project. And if you're doing your job well as a classical teacher, you're getting that student to get into the automatic stage, where [an operatic sound] is where they automatically go. But if you program somebody's body to get [the Italian aria] “Caro Mio Ben”, and then you take them over to try to sing “Take It Easy,” they're saying, ‘Wait... I know that's not right.’ It is right in their automatic stage of vocal production that they've paid a lot of money to learn. But it's an upper-class usage of language in a working-class people's art form.¹⁴⁷

A major challenge to the work of decolonizing classical music and dismantling vocal imperialism is the widely held belief that music exists on a higher plane, in a separate realm from any social concerns, untouchable and unblemished. How often we have heard the platitude that music is the “universal language?” On the contrary, research has revealed that sociological differences such as class and race can “define and shape both affiliation and disaffiliation to particular music genres.”¹⁴⁸ Bull argues classical music’s most fervent disciples continue to preach that the music of the great European “masters” is all-embracing, and that “inequality within classical music is purely an access issue; It is simply that some people have not had a chance to learn to love it yet.”¹⁴⁹ If classical music is the most valuable music, its value can be seen as equally imperative for all children. This view, she argues, can be a motivating factor

¹⁴⁶ Attas and Walker, “Exploring Decolonization, Music, and Pedagogy,” 10

¹⁴⁷ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Haynes, Jo. *Music, Difference, and the Residue of Race*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2013. 31.

¹⁴⁹ Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, xxi.

behind “outreach” programs designed to spread the gospel of classical music to the darkest corners of the earth, like El Sistema, “an intensive orchestral program that claims to rescue disadvantaged children from a life of drugs and crime through learning classical music.”¹⁵⁰

Classical music’s ability to simultaneously perpetuate inequality and appear to transcend it makes it the perfect place to culturally safeguard privilege: “It both upholds class boundaries and also relies on the fantasy of community.”¹⁵¹ As merely an aesthetic practice, the boundaries that exist around classical music can be denied: “The idea that this music exists in a separate realm from any social concerns allows issues of inequality to be sidelined in favor of prioritizing the music itself.”¹⁵²

Vocal imperialism reflects the exalted status of classical music in the way singers and teachers of voice often speak about classical singing. Though operatic singing is, in fact, one of the most cultivated, manipulated, and challenging means of vocal production, it is often described as “natural” and “healthy,” and classical voice teachers will pride themselves on helping a student “find their true voice.” Yet the singing voice can be used in many ways, and just as there is no one “true” music, there is no one “true” voice. As Eidsheim puts it, “Attitudes around the voice as essential, innate, and unmediated are deeply engrained,” and yet the way we choose to sing is “as encultured as is self-expression through fashion.”¹⁵³ In other words,

¹⁵⁰ Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, xxii. On the relative success of El Sistema, Bull states that “rather than finding an inspiring model of social change through music, [El Sistema] describes predominantly middle-class children being yelled at by untrained and poorly paid teachers and a pedagogic model that would seem dated to the Victorians.”

¹⁵¹ Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, 26.

¹⁵² Bull, *Class, Control, and Classical Music*, xiii.

¹⁵³ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 27, 41.

classical singing is no more inherent or “natural” than is classical music. The way that we sing tells us what we’ve been taught to value.

Vocal Imperialism and Race

Many of the interviewees pointed out that expanding undergraduate voice training beyond the Western classical repertoire is important anti-racist work. Critical race scholar Ibram X Kendi defines racism thus:

A racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way... A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups.¹⁵⁴

Kendi’s definition makes it clear that racism exists, empirically, regardless of internal prejudice. His definition has effectively torn up what has been a kind of moral “get out of jail free” card for many whites: “If I bear no ill will in my heart towards a racialized group, how can I possibly be racist?” Kendi’s definition solidly identifies vocal imperialism and the Eurocentric curricula of most North American voice programs as racist.

Recent discourse on critical race studies in music has followed Kendi’s model. Milton Reynolds specifies, “Understanding that malice is not required,” in order for music teachers to create or sustain racist outcomes, “helps educators to recognize that good intentions alone are not sufficient to create equitable and inclusive learning environments.”¹⁵⁵ Voice teachers who base their instruction on the ideals of vocal imperialism may tell themselves that their pedagogy is not racist because, after all, they bear no *personal* racism in their hearts. Furthermore, they are

¹⁵⁴ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. First Edition. New York: One World, 2019. 18-19.

¹⁵⁵ Reynolds, Milton. “Shifting Frames: Pedagogical Interventions in Colorblind Teaching Practice.” In *Seeing Race Again*, 1st ed., 352–74. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. 364.

simply trying to help their students find their “true voice,” right? But what repertoire are they assigning, and why? Is it true, as so many voice teachers still believe, that the only way to help a student discover a legato vocal line is with the music of 17th century white men? And if, as I suggested above, the way we sing tells us what we value, whose values are being reflected in the singing? Is it the values of the teacher or the student? Perhaps it is those of bel canto pedagogues who lived centuries ago? What racist outcomes are being propagated by these choices, whether intentionally or not?

In his interview, Matthew Hoch addressed the history of racism in formalized voice training:

The United States has confronted a lot of things with our colonial history and structural racism... But, whenever you enroll in a voice performance degree, even if that degree has made efforts to be more inclusive, you're still working within a traditional Western classical framework.¹⁵⁶

With this observation, Hoch is echoing the recent scholarship of Loren Kajikawa who writes, “To be gainfully employed in most, if not all, schools and departments of music means coming to terms with systemic racial inequality.”¹⁵⁷ Many of the behemoths, which Hoch refers to as “preservation societies,” exist to preserve and perpetuate “elite” music. The very word “highbrow,” a commonly used terms to describe classical music and its elevated status, is itself born of out of racist eugenics to describe “the superior cranial shape of northern Europeans.”¹⁵⁸

Like Levine, Kajikawa pinpoints the rise of music colleges and conservatories as beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, but Kajikawa focuses primarily on the racism of this

¹⁵⁶ Matthew Hoch, research interview, June 26, 2025.

¹⁵⁷ Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment,” 156.

¹⁵⁸ Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment,” 158.

period. The behemoths are, after all, what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva would call HWCUs: historically white colleges and universities.¹⁵⁹

The founding of music schools on college campuses coincided with a period of mass immigration and internal migration that threatened to remake the cultural landscape of US metropolitan areas. As cultural elites worried openly about the racial integrity of the United States, classical music was swept into a process of cultural gerrymandering that sought to maintain Anglo-Saxon hegemony.¹⁶⁰

Kajikawa highlights the enormous economic investment that has gone into the multi-generational veneration of classical music at the behemoths since their founding. For decades, music schools have invested in expensive instruments, textbooks, performance halls, buildings, and other resources specifically for use in classical music-making, not to mention the salaries of long-term faculty who specialize in individual and ensemble instruction in classical music. This economic investment allows administrators to continue to resist demands for instruction in non-classical music.¹⁶¹

Ironically, it is coursework in non-classical music that is helping many of the behemoths fund their heavy financial investment in classical music, according to Kajikawa. Large lecture courses on hip hop, rock’n’roll, and the Blues routinely see capacity enrollment and bring in tuition money that in turn goes to pay for individual instruction in classical music. In this way, these classes simultaneously “appear to redress past exclusions,” and yet, “find themselves co-opted to preserve the status quo.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. “More than Prejudice: Restatement, Reflections, and New Directions in Critical Race Theory.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.) 1, no. 1 (2015). 80.

¹⁶⁰ Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment,” 158.

¹⁶¹ Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment,” 165.

¹⁶² Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment,” 166.

A similar phenomenon is true of vocal music at the behemoths. Voice studio instruction can be a weekly exercise in vocal imperialism, as the previously cited research of Patinka, Peddle, and Cox demonstrated. If we look at the private voice lesson through Christopher Small's musicking lens, each voice lesson is a performance of evaluation and criticism. This results in a high-pressure environment, and students often seek out other, more enjoyable opportunities to sing. I have had students confess to me, in hushed tones, that they are "cheating" on their voice teachers by secretly participating in acapella groups, jazz ensembles, or local musical theatre productions. In the name of vocal imperialism, students are forbidden by their private voice teachers to dip their toes into any repertoire or performance opportunity that is outside the complete control of the voice teacher. Kajikawa recounts a similar experience:

I have heard from both students and colleagues about teachers, past and present, who warn their students about the dangers of popular music and the damage that might occur to their bodies or instruments by performing the wrong way. As bastions of high culture that depend on drawing a line between classical music and other modes of musical expression, music departments practice a thinly veiled form of segregation.¹⁶³

Most of the interviewees believe voice curricula that embrace a wide variety of musical singing styles challenge this long history of segregation. Matt Edwards clarifies:

That's why I am very resistant to this idea of classical singing being the foundation of everything. I know that it has racist roots. I know that it has classist roots. I'm not anti-classical by any means. I still sing the stuff myself, and I would still go do many operas if I had the opportunity to. I am just pro teaching students with techniques appropriate to their genre to help them maintain as much of *their* cultural identity as possible, so that they can communicate the human experience through song in a way that resonates most with them.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Kajikawa, "The Possessive Investment," 160.

¹⁶⁴ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

Karen Burke highlighted in her interview the additional academic hurdles over which Black musicians who specialize in traditionally Black music must jump:

If you see a Black professor in a music program teaching jazz or gospel, they will have had a classical [training], and they will have had to prove a strong classical background to get that job. And so, they're actually a better musician, because, they're not going to be teaching in a university without that classical degree. So, my colleagues who are teaching gospel music around the world...They can do it all! They're actually overqualified, and yet they also feel, unfortunately, that if they don't have that [classical] background, they are very much marginalized by their colleagues and made to feel less than.¹⁶⁵

Much of the ethnomusicological scholarship of the past decade warns against the pitfalls and shortcomings of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives motivated by Liberalism. Liberalism, in this context, is a desire to equalize representation as a means of “enforce[ing] formal equality in the treatment of all citizens.”¹⁶⁶ Music administrators motivated by the values of Liberalism seek to combat racism by increasing the numbers of racialized people represented in student enrollment, on concert programs, and within music faculties. Philip Ewell cautions that “DEI can be useful, but it can also be a smokescreen,” one that distracts from the fact that “the academic study of music, writ large, is fundamentally unjust” and “based on the lie of a western civilization going back to the ancient Greeks but not a day further.”¹⁶⁷ According to Ewell, America’s history of music in academia is one where “virtually all voices that were not both white and male have been ignored.” The work of addressing this deeply engrained problem, he says, must demonstrate “respect for all the rich musical traditions of our planet.” After all, “we cannot love what we don’t respect.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Karen Burke, research interview, August 12, 2025.

¹⁶⁶ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 179.

¹⁶⁷ Ewell, Philip. *On Music Theory: And Making Music More Welcoming for Everyone*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2023. 2.

¹⁶⁸ Ewell, *On Music Theory*, 279-280.

Anamik Saha echoes Ewell's skepticism of DEI's efficacy, stating that "increasing the numbers of minorities in the cultural industries by itself" will solve nothing. In fact, by "transforming race and racial identity into a commodity," diversity efforts actually "reproduce whiteness... While race is marked by its supposedly recognizable difference, whiteness is unmarked; Its ability to stay in power precisely draws from its ability to remain invisible and beyond reproach." For Saha, recent initiatives within vocal music departments to attract a more racially diverse pool of teachers and students are nothing more than "a method of including minorities but simultaneously distancing them."¹⁶⁹

Music administrators may feel that their anti-racist work is done once they have increased the diversity numbers of their demographics. Attas and Walker remind us that the work of combatting systems of inequity is "a process, not a product." They urge us not only to call out manifestations of exclusionary elitism, but to develop "pedagogies that have the potential to do decolonizing work through their application" over time.¹⁷⁰ To avoid the false sense of complacency afforded by DEI initiatives, Kimberlé Crenshaw echoes Attas and Walker in suggesting that we shift the frame of critical race theory "towards a dynamic rather than a static reference"¹⁷¹ in order to address the "series of dynamic engagements situated within specific institutions over the terms by which their racial logics" are engaged. "Something more than the

¹⁶⁹ Saha, Anamik. *Race and the Cultural Industries*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2018. 90-92.

¹⁷⁰ Attas, Robin, and Margaret E Walker. "Exploring Decolonization, Music, and Pedagogy 1." *Intersections (Toronto)*. 2006) 39, no. 1. 2019.

¹⁷¹ Crenshaw, K. W. "Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking back to Move Forward", *Connecticut Law Review*, 43(5). 2011. 8-9.

post-racial agnosticism” is required, she says. “What is needed is a crisp exchange of ideas, tools, histories and contemporary understandings from critical thinkers.”¹⁷²

Kajikawa answers Crenshaw’s call in *Seeing Race Again*, a collection edited by Crenshaw herself. Here, Kajikawa, too, points out that DEI efforts “have largely left untouched the institutional structures that privilege the music of white European American males.” Inside the behemoths, it is the aesthetic expectations and performance practice of classical music itself that are a major part of the problem. Kajikawa says, “The fetishization of classical performance standards impedes an institution’s ability to recognize the full humanity and artistry of the world beyond its doors.”¹⁷³

While the curricular pioneers interviewed for this research have managed to make change within academia, other scholars have suggested in recent years that their efforts may be Sisyphean. They caution that recent attempts to challenge or disrupt the systems at play in post-secondary music education from within, no matter how well-intentioned, amount to nothing more than putting lipstick on the proverbial pig. Marianna Ritchey, for example, explains why she believes DEI initiatives are ineffective by highlighting the intersectionality of the issue. “The problem with classical music isn’t just that it’s White supremacist and patriarchal; The problem is also that it is *elitist*, and its elitism is entwined with its other bigotries.”¹⁷⁴ Ritchey takes aim at the “liberal politics of representation,” in music education, describing them as the erroneous belief that “inequality will be resolved by more diverse representation within the existing

¹⁷² Crenshaw, “Twenty Years,” 1349-1351.

¹⁷³ Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment,” 156-157.

¹⁷⁴ Marianna Ritchey. “A Critical Perspective on Diversity and Inclusion in US Classical Music Discourse” In *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 93-94

institutions.” Such attempts make the mistake of framing music institutions themselves “as eternal and essentially benevolent.” Thus, DEI efforts in classical music have accomplished nothing more than “simply changing the face of power”¹⁷⁵ within a fatally flawed, inherently elitist system. For Ritchey, populating the ivory tower with a diversity of inhabitants isn’t sufficient – better to raze the entire structure to the ground.

Nina Sun Eidsheim ties the singing voice to critical race studies by describing voice as, “one of the last areas still viewed as an essential trait.” This is a dangerous misconception, she says, because “when voice is mistaken for essence, other aspects of the vocalizer that are believed to be essential are conflated with voice and are forced into a causal relationship,” This leads to “the erroneous logic that a black body gives rise to an essential black voice.”¹⁷⁶ In doing so, she illuminates another reason for the persistence of vocal imperialism. As other, more overt rationales for racism, like eugenics, have fallen out of favour, voice is still one area where society can perpetuate racism and reinforce stereotypes without being overt in its racism.

Eidsheim also lays waste to vocal imperialism’s notion that a classical training can help a voice student find their one “true” voice. “Singing is always made-up of entrainment, style, and technique but is generally mistaken for essence.”¹⁷⁷ Despite this misconception, she says, “Voice is not innate, and timbre is also formed as a result of vocalization patterns that are repeated hourly and daily and are favored (or not) depending on their result.”¹⁷⁸ In other words, far from helping a student find their “true voice,” many teachers of classical voice are engaging in a kind

¹⁷⁵ Ritchey, “A Critical Perspective,” 94.

¹⁷⁶ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 25, 34.

¹⁷⁷ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 34.

¹⁷⁸ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 41.

of “pedagogical collective”¹⁷⁹ that engrains their own preferences and prejudices in their students’ singing. Eidsheim calls this *timbral enculturation*.¹⁸⁰ “One of the many paradoxes related to timbre,” she says, is that “while vocal timbre is understood as essential, classical vocal pedagogy is built upon the very notion that it is possible to construct timbre.”¹⁸¹

Skeptics of vocal imperialism’s prevalence might point to famous Black classical singers of the past, like Marian Anderson, Leontyne Price, or George Shirley, as evidence that vocal imperialism does not exist. These singers serve, for some, as proof that we live in a post-racial world, in much the same way that the presidency of Barack Obama served as a confirmation that racism no longer exists in the politics of the United States. The success of these singers, however, is not evidence of a broad unprejudiced acceptance. In fact, their stories prove to be excruciating slogs against the headwinds of vocal imperialism.

Black opera singers have a long, disturbing history of being uniquely caught up in the racism of their times, as Kira Thurman documents in *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms*. Like Levine and Kajikawa, Thurman begins her analysis of today’s classical music studies in the mid-nineteenth century, focusing specifically on the experiences of African American singers during this time. Previously, in the era of antebellum slavery, Black music was seen “not to be music in the common form, but a direct outgrowth of an inferior species, a property.”¹⁸² By the mid nineteenth century, a classical music education promised “to cultivate new generations of politically minded, culturally sophisticated,

¹⁷⁹ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 54.

¹⁸⁰ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 44.

¹⁸¹ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 52.

¹⁸² Radano, Ronald. “The Sound of Racial Feeling.” *Daedalus (Cambridge, Mass.)* 142, no. 4 (2013): 129.

and socially aware black citizens” in a country that still refused to fully recognize them. For this reason, many African Americans eagerly sought out a classical music training, believing that if “they were to advance in society, they would do so through performing and listening to the ‘right’ kind of music.” Music offerings at the first HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) did not include Black popular music. Classical music was valued “as a way to challenge white American racist constructions of blackness that were often tied to minstrelsy.” Thus, “If music was going to launch a new generation of African Americans into an era of racial equality, the music best suited to accomplish this difficult feat was that of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms.”¹⁸³

Black American elites sought out individual instruction at home or traveled overseas. Because of the small number of Black students admitted to the first conservatories,¹⁸⁴ Europe, and particularly Germany, became a beacon for aspiring Black American musicians as they “internalised German romantic ideals of musical universalism and used them to articulate their politics of racial uplift and social advancement in the 19th and 20th centuries.” As a result, many of the first successful Black opera singers, including Anderson, Price, and Shirley, began their professional lives in Europe long before they found success in the United States.

These European careers, however, were hardly lives rooted in unbiased egalitarianism, as the high-minded ideals of classical music might have suggested. Where Black singers found success in Europe, they were praised for possessing a “white soul”¹⁸⁵ or for “overcoming the

¹⁸³ Thurman, Kira. *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms*. Cornell University Press, 2021. 23.

¹⁸⁴ According to Thurman, “The number of black students admitted at the New England Conservatory of music, the Curtis institute of music, and other schools was never high. Moreover, some institutions such as the Peabody Institute and the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music refused to accept black students well into the mid 20th century - Peabody did not admit black students until 1949.” 30.

limitations of their race.”¹⁸⁶ Critics either encouraged audiences to ignore the singers’ Blackness¹⁸⁷ or praised the singer for miraculously “becoming” white onstage.¹⁸⁸ Well-received performances were routinely compared in stark contrast to the more “primitive” music of Black jazz musicians in order to elevate the singer to the status of a white European. When criticism was levelled against these singers, it was explained by “theories of cultural and biological racism” that attributed any performance imperfections “to an insurmountable cultural and intellectual gulf that no amount of effort or training could bridge.”¹⁸⁹ No matter how flawlessly they performed Italian opera or German art song, “Black classical musicians only made sense to white listeners when they sang African American spirituals.”¹⁹⁰ Matilda Sissieretta Jones, who performed in Europe under the name “Black Patti,”¹⁹¹ was widely applauded for her interpretations of operatic arias from *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, and more. Nevertheless, audiences demanded that she also sing “a ‘stammering’ song, ‘Wait Till the Clouds Roll By,’ and an early ‘coon song,’” Paul Allen’s 1883 hit, “A New Coon in Town.”¹⁹²

As time went on, Black opera singers remained entwined in the racism of classical music and vocal imperialism. After World War II, Black opera singers were used as political

¹⁸⁵ Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 151.

¹⁸⁶ Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 149.

¹⁸⁷ Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 150.

¹⁸⁸ Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 151.

¹⁸⁹ Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 153.

¹⁹⁰ Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 224-225.

¹⁹¹ According to Eidsheim, Jones was dubbed “Black Patti,” as a play on the name of a contemporary white Italian diva, Adelina Patti. 70.

¹⁹² Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 70-73.

propaganda tools in Germany, where they “became a symbol by which cultural institutions could demonstrate their readiness and eagerness to break from their Nazi past.” In the 1960’s, opera directors in the United States “sought to transform, if not to destroy outright, opera houses and their legacies of bourgeois comfort,”¹⁹³ by shocking white audiences with the casting of Black singers in leading roles. Still, only certain kinds of “exotic” roles (witches, geishas, priestesses) or explicitly Black roles, like *Aida* and *Bess*, were deemed acceptable. In these roles, Black opera singers found approval from white audiences, but when Black singers performed so-called white roles, their reception was quite different. They were accused of destroying the illusion of race in opera or taking jobs away from white singers, and many critics complained that they could “hear” the singers’ Blackness.¹⁹⁴

Eidsheim examines the notion that race can be heard in *The Race of Sound*. “Timbre,” she says, “is often bound up with the assessment of value and identity.”¹⁹⁵ She also connects language that is often used today in voice lessons to the more overt racism documented by Thurman: “What is today cloaked in concepts of health, authenticity, and self-expression was, only half a century ago, unhesitatingly described as race and racial qualities.”¹⁹⁶

Like Thurman, Eidsheim notes that white audiences dealt with the shock of seeing Black classical singers onstage by relegating them to stereotypical Black roles. At the same time, however, Eidsheim says that it was impossible for white audiences to assess the performances of

¹⁹³ Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 217-218.

¹⁹⁴ Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 235-237.

¹⁹⁵ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 50.

¹⁹⁶ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 47.

Black singers independently of “visual and other contextual information. Visual blackness was projected onto auditory timbre, resulting in the perception of Sonic Blackness.”¹⁹⁷ She continues:

When listeners connect a singer with a particular community, their listening is filtered through assumptions about that community and the music and vocal genres with which its people are most commonly associated. For example, when an African American singer, such as Marian Anderson, is connected more with a community of minstrelsy and spirituals than with opera, she is heard, and expectations about her are formed, through that filter.¹⁹⁸

Eidsheim concludes that listening with the question *who is this?* in mind “will never tell you who the singer is. [It] tells you only who is listening: who you are. Indeed, who *we are*.”¹⁹⁹

While the work of Eidsheim shows us the pitfalls of linking race and voice, other scholars of critical race studies in music caution against going too far in the other direction and practicing *colorblindness*. Colorblindness, like DEI, is another excrescence of Liberalism, and it is the belief that, in the pursuit of equality, the best way to address racism is to behave as though race and ethnicity do not exist. Proponents of colorblindness point to its admirable applications, as when a landlord refuses to take race into account in housing. Critics of colorblindness argue that it is merely an excuse to bury our heads in the sand and deny injustices and inequalities that exist in reality, as when a Supreme Court Justice overturns fifty years of affirmative action legal precedence by declaring, “The way to stop discriminating on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.”²⁰⁰ Colorblindness implies that we live in a post-racial society, and yet the reality of life in the behemoths demonstrates otherwise.

¹⁹⁷ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 75.

¹⁹⁸ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 23.

¹⁹⁹ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 24.

²⁰⁰ *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 551 U.S. 701, 748 (2007).

“Silence shrouds many histories of western art music institutions and their participation in maintaining racial segregation,”²⁰¹ according to Kira Thurman. “The few institutional histories of American Music schools that mention race,” tend to highlight isolated examples of Black “success stories” and praise themselves as post-racial utopias. “Such praise often espouses the kind of colorblind mythology that frees classical music from any social responsibility for racism.”²⁰² Classical music *itself*, according to Kajikawa, uses colorblind language and thus, “like whiteness, [classical music] manages to avoid becoming an object of scrutiny. Its privileged status is built into the very foundation of the school.”²⁰³

The National Association of Schools of Music

Over the course of conducting these interviews, The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) was repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees. This American organization, founded in 1924, describes itself as, “an organization of schools, conservatories, colleges, and universities with approximately 605 accredited institutional members.” Its mission is to establish “national standards for undergraduate and graduate degrees and other credentials for music and music-related disciplines and provides assistance to institutions and individuals engaged in artistic, scholarly, educational, and other music-related endeavors.”²⁰⁴ According to many interviewees, the power that NASM holds - over what is taught, and how, in undergraduate voice

²⁰¹ Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 30.

²⁰² Thurman, *Singing Like Germans*, 30.

²⁰³ Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment,” 158.

²⁰⁴ “Home.” National Association of Schools of Music, February 9, 2026. <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/>.

programs in the United States - can be prohibitive when it comes to curricular change. According to Matthew Hoch, undergraduate programs are:

Still under the thumb of the National Association of Schools of Music that's accrediting your institution, which is still requiring things that have their origin in classical music... The processes that universities have to go through to change their curriculum alone can be daunting. If you want to add a new course, you need at least a year, maybe a year and a half till it gets through all the committees and it gets sent back, and you have to get it approved by the state higher education society, and approved by your individual accreditation, which is NASM.²⁰⁵

Almost 87% of the institutions identified by Peddle and Patinka as offering Bachelor of Music in Voice Performance degrees are NASM accredited.²⁰⁶ This means that these schools have met NASM's curricular requirements and program standards. Certification as a NASM-accredited institution not only provides an undergraduate program public legitimacy, it can also determine eligibility for federal financial aid.²⁰⁷ Jennifer Barczykowski's 2018 research weighed both the benefits and costs of NASM membership. She found that while NASM accreditation creates a national, uniform standard of educational expectations that may be beneficiary, such standardization "causes constriction rather than creativity" when it comes to curricular change. "It remains unclear," she said, "if the established standards in the accreditation process are fair and consistent for all parties concerned."²⁰⁸

As Hoch pointed out, despite having general guidelines for Jazz and Musical Theatre curricula, the vocal requirements for NASM certification are based in the Western classical

²⁰⁵ Matthew Hoch, research interview, June 26, 2025.

²⁰⁶ Patinka, Paul M and Peddle, Zipporah. "Vocal Performance Curricular Requirements and Bulletin Course Descriptions in US Bachelor of Music Degrees." unpublished manuscript, 2025.

²⁰⁷ "Accreditation." National Association of Schools of Music, June 15, 2016. <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/accreditation/>.

²⁰⁸ Barczykowski, Jennifer L. 2018. "The Goals of Specialized Accreditation: A Study of Perceived Benefits and Costs of Membership with the National Association of Schools of Music." Order No. 11017237, University of Southern California. 95.

tradition. In fact, as Matt Edwards told me, “There are still no NASM guidelines or requirements for commercial and popular music integration.”²⁰⁹ He continued by elaborating on how this hindered his ability to create curricular change at Shenandoah Conservatory:

NASM was always thrown in my face as the reason we couldn't do stuff. So, NASM is the problem. There was a speech given at the NASM conference where they talked about folk music (that was the term that they started using instead of popular music, was “folk” music to describe Appalachian and Black American music) and that folk music was the music of people of lesser development. So it's the idea that these are unintelligent, undeveloped human beings, and we shouldn't be teaching their music. NASM's held onto that for a long time.²¹⁰

Eventually, Shenandoah decided to drop their NASM accreditation altogether in 2019, thus allowing for the creation of their postgraduate degrees in CCM vocal pedagogy. Edwards credits one of his students with helping to open his eyes to the racist repercussions of requirements that center Western classical music:

One of our Black students, a gospel student, said to me, “You know, it's kind of racist that I have to sit here and learn about counterpoint when I'm singing gospel music, and that's all I plan on doing.” And I was like, “Yep, I do not disagree.”... I went to the head of my department, and we pushed and pushed and pushed the administration until they finally said, “Well, I guess this is just what you're gonna insist on,” and we were like, “We are.” Sometimes you have to do that, because the old guard is scared.²¹¹

At the University of Southern California, Lynn Holding has had a similar experience with NASM, an organization that she says, “has had a strong influence on why things haven't changed.” Like Shenandoah Conservatory, USC has dissociated itself from NASM. She sees the constricting guidelines of NASM in their historical, colonial context:

If you look back at the history of NASM, and then you go even further back to post-World War II, you see that schools of music were designed, in part, to furnish music teachers for the schools, right? And in order to do that, they had to have certain standards,

²⁰⁹ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

²¹⁰ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

²¹¹ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

and I think that's how NASM was born, to make sure that people were getting a standard, classical curriculum... I don't see that a lot has changed.²¹²

I asked Holding what it means for schools to leave NASM. Essentially, she said, it means that these programs are now free to make their own rules. "It's not that they got kicked out," she clarified, "it's that a consortium of them decided NASM accreditation is no longer viable in the 21st century."

There can be other ramifications, though, according to Patty Thom. NASM has hosted an annual meeting for over a century, an opportunity for member institutions to network, attend workshops, and meet NASM evaluators and administrators. For smaller or newer voice programs, NASM's guidelines can provide helpful guidance for curricular creation, and students who transfer from one NASM accredited institution to another can transfer course credits between NASM affiliated schools. In addition, Thom added,

I think NASM can be very useful for schools who need departmental funding for things. If you can say to your administration, "We cannot maintain our NASM accreditation unless you provide us with a piano lab." That's where I think it's really useful. But schools that are dedicated to training musicians are already putting their resources there. So for us [at Boston Conservatory] it sort of felt... a little pedantic, and very time-consuming...²¹³

Like USC and Shenandoah Conservatory, Boston Conservatory left NASM in order to diversify its curricular offerings. But as Thom pointed out, the voice programs that have eschewed NASM certification are relatively large programs within larger music schools. Many of the schools who can afford to leave NASM, such as Juilliard and Curtis, are already behemoths. These schools have voice programs large enough to not need to make a case to administration why they need funding. It is unfortunate that smaller programs are forced to

²¹² Lynn Holding, research interview, September 15, 2025

²¹³ Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025.

choose either membership in a powerful gatekeeping organization like NASM or the freedom to control their own curricula.

Chapter 3, The Vocal Imperialism Pipeline

“We can change, but it's going to take a huge paradigm shift. You do not gain entry without a classical background. That means, you teach what you know. And so, it is reproduced. It is a reproductive cycle.”

- Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025

Case Study: The Royal Conservatory of Music

In the heart of downtown Toronto, between the Royal Ontario Museum and the University of Toronto, stands an architectural metaphor. The building, home to The Royal Conservatory of Music (often referred to as the RCM), was originally constructed in 1880, and it is a marvel of High Victorian architecture – imposing stone masonry, massive chimneys and dormers, and intricately fashioned brickwork. Over the years, the structure has been meticulously maintained, most recently as part of a massive expansion and renovation project begun in 2009, estimated to have cost between \$120 million and \$143.5 million CAD.²¹⁴ The new construction, however, is careful not to interfere, structurally or visually with the original building, and to passersby on Bloor Street the renovations appear to encase the original building in glass.

Visitors who enter the conservatory may choose to check-in at the welcome desk, where they will find themselves surrounded by large, imposing oil paintings on the walls. From the thick, golden frames of these large portraits stare white bearded men, including former RCM directors Augustus Stephen Vogt and Edward Fisher, who in 1899 expanded the testing and

²¹⁴ Adams, James. “Royal Conservatory of Music Negotiates Deal with Ontario to Reduce Debt Payment.” The Globe and Mail, September 10, 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/royal-conservatory-of-music-negotiates-deal-with-ontario-to-reduce-debt-payment/article31815262/#:~:text=The%20new%20deal%2C%20in%20effect,years%20to%20extinguish%20the%20loan.>

certification offered by the conservatory beyond Toronto for the first time.²¹⁵ Continue down the first-floor hallway, and guests to the conservatory will find equally large black-and-white photographs of more recent RCM students lining the walls. These artists, including k. d. lang, Diana Krall, and Oscar Peterson, seem to hint at an evolution in musical style at the conservatory since the 1800's. However, much in the same way the modern changes to the physical structure of the Royal Conservatory of Music are built in reverent homage its original structure, this case study argues that recent changes to its voice curriculum are superficial gestures at inclusivity, at best.

Since its nationwide expansion, initiated under the leadership of Fisher in the late 1800's, Canada's Royal Conservatory of Music has been the country's most widely recognized authority on music education and its primary resource for young students of music.²¹⁶ This case study briefly examines the colonial history of the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) and its system of adjudication and certification. As a powerful educational gatekeeper and a major valve in the music education pipeline in Canada, I examine the role it plays in the propagation and entrenchment of vocal imperialism. I critically examine the ways in which the most recent RCM voice syllabi have expanded the institution's guidelines for voice students interested in non-classical singing and argue that further revision to the RCM voice series - and more transparency in how it is curated - is necessary.

²¹⁵ "Fisher, Edward." Dictionary of Canadian Biography. Accessed November 30, 2025. https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/fisher_edward_14E.html.

²¹⁶ Schabas, Ezra. *There's Music in These Walls a History of the Royal Conservatory of Music*. Dundurn Group, 2005.

The System

As a newcomer to Canada, one of the most frequently uttered phrases I heard from my new Canadian musician friends was mention of the RCM system. The Royal Conservatory of Music and its nationwide RCM Certificate Program are a formidable presence for Canadian musicians. One is hard pressed to find a Canadian musician whose training has not in some way been touched by the recommendations and requirements of the RCM. As of 2018, more than 100,000 Canadian students of music were participating in the RCM Certification Program, and over 30,000 teachers were using the RCM curriculum to teach an estimated 500,000 students.²¹⁷ Though the RCM curriculum is increasingly available to students across North America, nothing quite like the RCM (or “the system”, as it is often casually called) exists in the United States, both in terms of its reach and its influence. The curriculum is available for purchase to any Canadian parent whose child shows an interest in music, and the popularity of the program is not surprising given the relative affordability of its series of textbooks, the availability of its online digital learning tools, and the nationwide physical presence of its certified examiners. One cannot help but marvel at the RCM’s miraculous ability to deliver music education to thousands of aspiring young musical artists. The first class of high schoolers I taught in Canada introduced themselves to me and to their new classmates not by sharing where they were from or what instrument they played, but rather by sharing two essentials: their name and their RCM grade level.

An example of the gatekeeping power that the RCM syllabus holds over Canadian voice training can be found on the websites of many of Canada’s top-rated²¹⁸ undergraduate music

²¹⁷Voitovitch-Camilleri, Tatiana. 2019. “A History of the Royal (Toronto) Conservatory of Music Piano Examinations, 1887-2015: Their Impact and Influence”, n.d.

voice programs. These post-secondary programs, the primary focus of this research, recommend that applicants to their programs be at a specific RCM level before applying to study music in college. The University of Toronto’s advice, for example, to applicants is that their audition repertoire should “reflect your best level of vocal experience and promise. Performing repertoire at RCM Level 8 or higher will be considered more competitive.”²¹⁹ McGill’s Schulich School of Music recommends a Level 9 or 10,²²⁰ as do the University of British Columbia²²¹ and the University of Calgary²²². The RCM system is so embedded in the musical culture of Canada that undergraduate institutions across the country use it as a commonly understood rubric to determine a student’s readiness for post-secondary study.

With such omnipresence, however, comes the great power of determining what music finds its way into the hearts and minds of so many of Canada’s young musicians. Like other behemoths, the Royal Conservatory of Music does not specify what *kind* of music it is, in fact, teaching. One is hard pressed to find the word “classical” anywhere on the RCM website. Rather, the site promises “a clear levelled path for well-rounded musical training” and “the gold

²¹⁸ EduRank. “Best Singing and Vocal Performance Universities in Canada [Rankings].” EduRank.org - Discover university rankings by location, March 2, 2025. https://edurank.org/art-design/singing/ca/#google_vignette.

²¹⁹ “Apply to Degree Programs Audition & Interview.” Apply to Degree Programs Audition & Interview | U of T Music. Accessed December 1, 2025. <https://music.utoronto.ca/admissions/undergraduate/audition-interview>.

²²⁰ “Undergraduate Admission Requirements.” Music, October 17, 2025. <https://www.mcgill.ca/music/admissions/undergraduate/prepare>.

²²¹ “Undergraduate Admissions: School of Music: University of British Columbia.” School of Music, November 25, 2025. <https://music.ubc.ca/undergraduate/admissions/>.

²²² “SCPA Future Students Music Undergraduate Admissions and Auditions.” Faculty of Arts, January 22, 2024. <https://arts.ucalgary.ca/creative-performing-arts/future-students/undergraduate-music/how-apply/bmus-entrance-audition>.

standard” in “developing human potential”.²²³ Vocal imperialism, however, is evident in the RCM’s voice certification criteria, as this case study will demonstrate. To better understand the musical values of the RCM system, it is helpful to first trace the institution’s colonial history.

The mission statement of the RCM states, in part, that, “Entrenched in the minds and hearts of Canadians, The Royal Conservatory has united generations of citizens...”²²⁴ Since its inception in 1886, the RCM has modelled itself on the European conservatories that came before it, namely the Conservatoire de Musique in Paris (founded in 1795 by Napoleon), the Royal Academy of Music in London (founded in 1822), and similar music institutions in Moscow (1866), St. Petersburg (1862), Leipzig (1843), and Frankfurt (1878).²²⁵ These institutions approach the study of music primarily through individual instruction of an instrument with a “master teacher,” supplemented by additional skills-based (theory, sight reading) coursework, a model the RCM still uses today.

Early on, the Royal Conservatory found itself in competition with the music programs of the University of Trinity College (founded 1880) and the University of Toronto (founded 1890). The RCM responded in 1898 with the ambitious project of expanding nationally beyond its brick-and mortar location in Toronto. With the help of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the conservatory dispatched certified examiners at various points throughout the calendar year to remote testing centers throughout Canada.²²⁶ Even as it expanded, however, the institution

²²³ “Home: The Royal Conservatory of Music,” The Royal Conservatory, 2022, <https://www.rcmusic.com/>. (accessed June 17, 2022).

²²⁴ “Our Mission: The Royal Conservatory of Music,” The Royal Conservatory, 2022, <https://www.rcmusic.com/about-us/our-mission>.

²²⁵ Voitovitch-Camilleri, *A History of the Royal (Toronto) Conservatory of Music*, 25-26.

²²⁶ Voitovitch-Camilleri, *A History of the Royal (Toronto) Conservatory of Music*, 30-35.

remained committed to preserving the rigor of its standards, and continued to assert the superiority of its curriculum, as can be read in the forward to its 1902-03 calendar:

Unfortunately, the musical profession embraces more or less incompetent teachers, no one being debarred entering it, whether properly qualified or not. It, therefore, rests with each individual, when seeking the services of a private teacher, to form his judgment as best he can on that person's fitness of his vocation.²²⁷

In 1916, the Conservatory published its first piano examination book with Frederick Harris Music, a company that would become the Conservatory's exclusive publisher in 1944. Today, the RCM publishes textbooks, exercise manuals, and repertoire selections for nearly 23 different musical disciplines. (For an historical timeline of the RCM, see Figure 1, below.)



Figure 1: Screenshot: Key Dates in the Royal Conservatory of Music's History²²⁸

²²⁷ University of Toronto Archives and Records Management Services, A1975-0014/004, Toronto Conservatory of Music Calendar, 1902-3, 14.

²²⁸ "Historical Timeline: The Royal Conservatory of Music," The Royal Conservatory, 2022, <https://www.rcmusic.com/about-us/historical-timeline>.

The RCM Certificate Program offers a three-pronged curriculum (repertoire, musicianship skills, and assessment) to any Canadian or American student who wishes to study music and can afford the program. Examination fees, as of 2025, can range from \$68 for the preparatory level examinations to \$999 for the highest level piano and violin certificates. Additional music theory training fees can range from \$139 to \$963. The RCM teacher certification fee is \$249 and is valid for two years.²²⁹

Students work their way through the system by completing progressively difficult level-by-level requirements, beginning with the Elementary Certificates (Levels 1-4), followed by the Intermediate Certificates (Levels 5-8), and culminating with the Advanced Certificates (Levels 9, 10 and Associate Diplomas). Certificates of completion are conferred by RCM-certified teachers nationwide at various times throughout the year. To achieve certification for a given level, students must demonstrate, to a certified RCM examiner, proficiency in the repertoire and skills requirements outlined in the RCM syllabus for their chosen instrument of study. These syllabi are updated by the RCM every seven years.

The roots of voice training at the RCM - and its emphasis on classical, *bel canto* singing - can be traced back to its first opera productions, produced in conjunction with the University of Toronto in 1928.²³⁰ By 1946, Arnold Walter (who was at that time the director of the RCM Senior School, a two-year professional performance program) was charged with heading the conservatory's new Opera School. Opera flourished at RCM under Walter's leadership. The Conservatory Opera School eventually gave birth to an annual Opera Festival and, in 1959, the

²²⁹ "Examination and Other Service Fees - Canada: The Royal Conservatory of Music," The Royal Conservatory, 2022, <https://www.rcmusic.com/examfeesca>.

²³⁰ Schabas, Ezra, *There's Music in These Walls: A History of the Royal Conservatory of Music*, (Dundurn Press, 2005), 96.

formation of the Canadian Opera Company. The RCM received its “royal” designation from King George VI in 1947 on the occasion of its 60th anniversary. Though the RCM underwent changes to its instrumental curricula during the 1970’s, 80’s and 90’s,²³¹ it wasn’t until the publication of its 2012 syllabus that its voice curriculum included non-classical vocal repertoire selections.

Expanding Voice Repertoire Offerings

The RCM Voice Syllabus is revised every seven years (when music publication rights acquired by the RCM to use repertoire in their Voice Series books expire) so we currently have only three voice syllabi (2012, 2019, and 2025) to refer to when examining how non-classical voice repertoire has been assimilated into the RCM system. The repertoire included in the RCM Voice Syllabus is divided into lists, based on musical style (see Table 1). The syllabus offers each Level a complete list of acceptable repertoire for each stylistic list, and from this larger list selections are chosen by RCM to be printed in the Voice Series of books, available for purchase. Beginning in 2012, “Popular Music” lists (lists C/D) were added to the syllabus, and for Grades 1-8 selections from these lists were also included in the RCM Voice Series publications.²³²

Along with this new repertoire, RCM offered the following guidance:

This is an *optional* list for all grades except the Teacher’s ARCT. The list includes genres such as musical theatre, operetta, folk rock, jazz standards, and parlour songs. Some vowel modification to suit the style is acceptable, but candidates are advised to use good

²³¹ Green, J. Paul, Patricia Wardrop, and Jennifer Higgs. "Royal Conservatory of Music." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Article published December 09, 2012; Last Edited April 16, 2014.

²³² It is important to note that this list does *not* represent the full list of “popular music” recommendations in the RCM syllabi, only those selections that were chosen by the RCM for publication in their Voice Series. As a representative sample, however, it is an accurate reflection of the style of songs that the RCM categorizes as “popular music”

vocal technique as well as balanced registration in the upper grades. Candidates performing repertoire from this list may not bring props or costumes to the examination.²³³

For the 2019 and 2025 Syllabi, the guidance language changed to the following:

(Popular Repertoire, Musical Theater, and Operetta): [These lists] are optional. These lists include genres such as musical theater, operetta, jazz standards, and popular songs from a variety of eras. Students are encouraged to use vocal technique that suits the style of each selection. Students performing repertoire from these lists may not bring props or costumes to the examination. For these lists, students may use editions other than those listed in the Syllabus, provided that the arrangements are the same as those cited in the Syllabus.²³⁴

In the years since 2012, a few positive wording changes are worth noting. First, the fact that “parlour songs” are no longer classified as popular music is an improvement. The 2019 and 2025 syllabi encourage singers to use a “vocal technique that suits the style of each selection”, a much more enlightened request than the amorphous 2012 instruction to “use good vocal technique as well as balanced registration”. Although it is not defined in the syllabus, use of “balanced registration” can be read in Western classical parlance to mean adherence to a classical, or *bel canto*, vocal production (maximized pharyngeal space, “pure” vowel, classical negotiation of the *passaggi*, etc.) What music, then, does the RCM consider to be “popular” music? The table below offers a side-by-side comparison of the “popular music” selections published by the RCM in their Voice Series for Levels 1-8.

²³³ RCM *Voice Syllabus* 2012. 13.

https://files.rcmusic.com/sites/default/files/files/S35_Voice_Syllabus_2016_online_SECURED.pdf. 13.

²³⁴ RCM *Voice Syllabus* 2019. 8. https://rcmusic-kentico-cdn.s3.amazonaws.com/rcm/media/main/documents/examinations/syllabi/s48_voice-syllabus-2019_online_f_r.pdf.

RCM Voice Series “Popular Music”, Level 1-8, 2019 / 2025

<u>2019 Voice Series</u>	<u>2025 Voice Series</u>
Level 1 (Popular Music): <i>This Land is Your Land</i> by Woodie Guthrie <i>I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles</i> by John Killete <i>Sing a Rainbow</i> from <i>Pete Kelly’s Blues</i> by Arthur Hamilton	Level 1 (Popular Music): <i>Sing a Rainbow</i> from <i>Pete Kelly’s Blues</i> by Arthur Hamilton <i>Where is Love?</i> from <i>Oliver!</i> by Lionel Bart
Level 2 (Popular Music): <i>We’re Off to See the Wizard</i> from <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> by Harold Arlen <i>Spread a Little Happiness</i> from <i>Mister Cinders</i> by Vivian Ellis	Level 2 (Popular Music): <i>We’re Pals</i> from <i>Dere Mabel</i> by George Gershwin <i>Summer</i> from <i>Anne of Green Gables</i> by Norman Campbell and Donald Harron
Level 3 (Popular Music): <i>If I Only Had a Brain</i> from <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> by Harold Arlen <i>Pussy Willows, Cat-tails</i> by Gordon Lightfoot <i>Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream</i> by Ed McCurdy	Level 3 (Popular Music): <i>Consider Yourself</i> from <i>Oliver!</i> by Lionel Bart <i>Pussy Willows, Cat-tails</i> by Gordon Lightfoot <i>Gee I’m Glad I’m No One Else But Me</i> from <i>Anne of Green Gables</i> by Norman Campbell and Donald Harron
Level 4 (Popular Music) <i>Singin’ in the Rain</i> from <i>Singin’ in the Rain</i> by Nacio Herb Brown <i>Song for the Mira</i> by Allister MacGillivray <i>Different</i> from <i>Honk!</i> By George Stiles	Level 4 (Popular Music) <i>Learn Everything</i> from <i>Anne of Green Gables</i> by Norman Campbell and Donald Harron <i>Song for the Mira</i> by Allister MacGillivray <i>Beautiful Dreamer</i> by Stephen Foster
Level 5 (Popular Music): <i>Stairway to Paradise</i> from <i>An American in Paris</i> by George and Ira Gershwin <i>The Circle Game</i> by Joni Mitchell <i>Someone Handed Me the Moon Today</i> from <i>Anne & Gilbert A&G</i> by Nancy White	Level 5 (Popular Music): <i>Stairway to Paradise</i> from <i>An American in Paris</i> by George and Ira Gershwin <i>Joy</i> by Janis Ian <i>The Summer Queen’s Song</i> from <i>The Snow Queen</i> by Robert Urran <i>Someone Handed Me the Moon Today</i> from <i>Anne & Gilbert A&G</i> by Nancy White
Level 6 (Popular Music): <i>Over the Rainbow</i> from <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> by Harold Arlen	Grade 6 (Popular Music): <i>Sparrow</i> by Susan Crowe and Raylene Rankin

<i>I Want to Fly</i> from <i>Flight of the Lawnchair Man</i> by Robert Lindsey-Nassif <i>Corner of the Sky</i> from <i>Pippin</i> by Stephen Schwartz	<i>Sleeping Under the Stars</i> by Nancy White and Suzy Wilde <i>Mysterious Moon</i> by Andrea Carlson <i>Tiny</i> from <i>Flight of the Lawnchair Man</i> by Robert Lindsey-Nassif
Level 7 (Popular Music): <i>Starlight</i> from <i>On a Summer's Night</i> by Jim Betts <i>Non ti scordar di me</i> by Ernesto de Cutris <i>I'll Be Fine</i> from <i>Vicious Circle</i> URS by Robert Ursan	Level 7 (Popular Music): <i>If I were a Bird</i> by Phyllis Sinclair <i>¿Por qué me dejaste?</i> By Ernestina Lecuona y Casado <i>I'll Be Fine</i> from <i>Vicious Circle</i> URS by Robert Ursan
Level 8 (Popular Music): <i>Northern River</i> from <i>Colours in the Storm</i> by Jim Betts <i>I Got Rhythm</i> by George and Ira Gershwin <i>Anything Goes</i> from <i>Anything Goes</i> by Cole Porter <i>The Lonesome Dove</i> from <i>Down in the Valley</i> by Kurt Weill	Level 8 (Popular Music): <i>I Eat Children</i> from <i>Hansel and Gretel</i> by Leslie Arden <i>I Got Rhythm</i> by George and Ira Gershwin <i>The Tale of the Oyster</i> from <i>Fifty Million Frenchmen</i> by Cole Porter

Table 1: Royal Conservatory of Music 2019 and 2025 Voice Series “Popular Music”²³⁵

How are these titles chosen? If a student aspires to become a singer of today’s popular music, is this the repertoire that will provide them the technical skills to sing it or encourage their artistic passion for pop music? Given that “Folk Songs” have their own categorical listing (List A) in the syllabus, what distinguishes the above titles as “Popular”? If they are considered “optional” in terms of the RCM testing requirements, why are they included in the syllabus at all? And perhaps most critically, who are the people charged with the monumental task of making these decisions and curating this syllabus that so profoundly shapes voice training across Canada?

To answer these questions and to better understand the system, I reached out to Victoria Holland who, as the lead compiler of the past two RCM voice syllabi, was tasked with

²³⁵ RCM Voice Syllabus 2012, 2019.

pioneering the conservatory's foray into popular music. In fact, Holland is the compiler for all the RCM's voice syllabus repertoire. Given the impact of the RCM voice syllabus on voice studies in Canada, I had wrongly assumed that every seven years a very large team would be tasked with rewriting and revising the RCM's recommendations and repertoire. According to Holland, the actual process is far more insular:

It's a two-year process. They [RCM] approached me in 2017, and they said, "Last time we had two co-compilers, but this year we want you to do it all."... This time around, 2025, we put together teams of compilers for the elementary levels, intermediate, and advanced, and then I oversaw the whole thing.²³⁶

For the 2025 syllabus, Holland's team²³⁷ of compilers sent her suggestions for repertoire to include, and after Holland finished compiling the repertoire, she told me, she had, what she called "reviewers."²³⁸ For the Elementary Level repertoire selections, she described her reviewer as someone who has "submitted students to RCM exams for decades." For the Intermediate Level, "I brought in a colleague from Chicago," and for the Advanced Level, "I worked with someone who was at the Conservatory."²³⁹

Holland laments the fact that more people are not involved in the process. "I'd love to have more people involved," she says. In fact, she would like to see a scenario where every RCM voice examiner has a say in the repertoire selection process. "There have only been certain people that are cherry-picked," she acknowledges, but she would like to see a future where every

²³⁶ Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025.

²³⁷ Holland did not specify how many people submitted repertoire suggestions to her, assuming that this was what she meant when she used the word "team." It was unclear in her interview how many people constituted this team, or how she chose them.

²³⁸ Holland also did not specify how many reviewers were involved, though based upon her responses quoted in this paragraph, it sounds as though she had one reviewer for each RCM Level.

²³⁹ Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025.

voice examiner not only participates in the compiling of RCM Voice Series selections, but they are also compensated for it: “I might push for that in the future.”²⁴⁰

The repertoire chosen also needs to be legally sellable in order for the RCM to include their repertoire selections in their Voice Series (the complete series is currently for sale on the RCM website for \$599 CAD).

The publishing arm [of RCM] checks into that and gives us a sense of what to do...If there's a song that we think has pedagogical merit for the level that we're going for, but maybe there's something too difficult about the arrangements that we could license, we just create our own. And then we own it. I'm not sure how that works exactly, but they [RCM] take care of that.²⁴¹

This may also explain why there are so few songs in the Voice Series by artists identifiable as pop artists. Contemporary music can be more difficult to acquire printing rights. Looking at the 2019 and 2025 lists above, Janis Ian and Joni Mitchell seem to be the only two living pop artists whose work is represented.

I wanted to know specifically how the non-classical repertoire was chosen. Holland explained that, as with other repertoire, the choice of these songs depends in part on what is available for publication. In 2019, for example, *The Wizard of Oz* songbook became available, so Holland included three selections as “popular” songs. She pointed out that there are popular songs at all levels, but she was sure to reiterate that those songs are optional. Though these songs are labeled “popular,” she conceded that CCM singing is not addressed:

That contemporary stuff? We do not go there. Because pedagogically, it's just such in a different world. You're using the mechanism differently. I mean, obviously, the coordination is pretty similar, but just everything is just different, and I think... Hey, I think it's great. I like my students to do everything... But no, we purposely don't go in

²⁴⁰ Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025.

²⁴¹ Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025.

that direction. And it's not, out of any disdain for it, it's just... that's just not what we're about.²⁴²

Holland views the inclusion of popular repertoire as a way to spark a student's passion for singing and then encourage them to explore other repertoire:

Because then you can say, "Hey, this is your element. But let's also, you know, we have to pick a Baroque piece, we have to pick a Classical piece, we have to pick something Romantic and something from 21st century... There's a reason there's all these specific requirements for a certain number of songs in certain lists, because we are rooted in the European art song tradition."²⁴³

The RCM website asserts that, "Teachers may choose their own pedagogical approaches and methodologies for their students."²⁴⁴ If a student would like to sing a song for examination *other* than what is recommended by the RCM, there is an option to perform what is called a "teacher's choice." However, doing so means risking the disapproval of the RCM examiner and potentially failing the exam. Holland recounted an anecdote of her own adjudication of a "teacher's choice" selection:

A high schooler was singing, an Adele song. So in my mind, I'm just like, "Okay. Um, I'm not going to deal with the substitution, um, appropriateness yet. I'm just going to listen."... And I thought she did a great job! She understood the style, the voice worked, there's obviously room for improvement, but very good. But I wrote, "Due to the range and vocal demands and the storytelling... this 'teacher's choice' would be appropriate for a higher level." If that happened now, I'd probably flag it for the [RCM] academic office and they might send the teacher a note. Because, again, we just want to share that we don't really move into that, that realm of music. But we don't want to punish the student. But it's tricky. It's tricky... There used to be [a vetting process for "teacher's choice"]. It used to be you could substitute, but you had to get prior approval, and I used to do those,

²⁴² Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025.

²⁴³ Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025.

²⁴⁴ "Program Overview: The Royal Conservatory of Music." The Royal Conservatory. Accessed December 2, 2025. <https://www.rcmusic.com/learning/about-the-royal-conservatory-certificate-program/program-overview#BenefitsofTheRoyalConservatoryCertificatePro-5>.

and they charged a little fee, like a \$25 fee... We've moved towards trusting the teachers.²⁴⁵

Such examples are, as Holland said, tricky indeed, and expose the shortcomings of the RCM's recent curricular changes. While a teacher who specializes in CCM singing may agree with the assessment that an Adele song is inappropriately advanced for a high schooler in terms of storytelling, an RCM teacher who does not have experience with CCM pedagogy is not properly informed to pass such a judgment when it comes to the song's vocal demands. Students who wish to sing popular music on an exam will most likely be confused, at best, by the popular music repertoire suggestions made by the RCM. They cannot be faulted for choosing repertoire by a living pop singer like Adele when the closest thing to a pop song that the RCM Voice Syllabus can suggest is a selection by Kurt Weill or Cole Porter. Rather than offer repertoire that can be reasonably considered popular in 2025, the RCM curriculum has condensed a vast, rich catalogue of musical theatre, operetta, and jazz repertoire into a list and then dubbed it "Popular Music." Then, in one mass sweep of musical ghettoization, it has singled out this list as a kind of "icing-on-the-cake-if-you-have-time," optional repertoire, not necessary for certification.

The vocal imperialism of the RCM curriculum is found not only in the repertoire suggestions of the RCM syllabi, but also in the skills exercises that students are required to demonstrate at examinations. None of these exercises are designed to help developing singers produce any sounds beyond those required of *bel canto* singing. The instructions in the 2025 RCM Syllabus specifically say that "Students should focus on *bel canto* production of tone," and that "pure vowel sound" is expected.²⁴⁶ There are no exercises that would help a student sing

²⁴⁵ Victoria Holland, research interview, August 14, 2025.

²⁴⁶ Syllabus / 2025 Edition practical examinations. Accessed December 2, 2025. https://rcmusic-kentico-cdn.s3.amazonaws.com/rcm/media/main/documents/examinations/syllabi/practicalexaminationssyllabus_2023.pdf.

pop, jazz, musical theatre, etc. using the belt voice or other CCM pedagogies. The fact that only a *bel canto* vocal technique is being taught in a curriculum that includes CCM repertoire simply reinforces the “if you can sing classical, you can sing anything” myth.

At the same time, some of the RCM recommendations, especially in the higher levels, do require CCM techniques in order to be performed with stylistic integrity. One example is the Stephen Schwartz power-ballad “Meadowlark” from *The Baker’s Wife*, a belting showcase that was made famous by singers like Patti LuPone and Betty Buckley, some of the most famous belters in the history of the style. An RCM student who has dutifully followed the RCM curriculum and demonstrated proper *bel canto* technique over the course of their training is going to hit a vocal technique brick wall should they choose to pick up this RCM recommendation and try to sing it after years of training in using their voice classically.

On its website, the Royal Conservatory of Music states that its certificate program “builds self-confidence and helps students develop a sense of pride” with its “well-rounded music training.”²⁴⁷ However, for singers whose voice and/or artistic inclinations are not predisposed to classical singing, the RCM system as it currently exists is more likely to harm self-confidence. Many widely espoused techniques of classical singing - such as low abdominal breathing, low laryngeal positioning, purity of vowel, and maximized pharyngeal space – are considered to be *counterproductive* to efficient, stylistically accurate singing in a CCM style. Matt Edwards articulated this in greater detail in his interview:

In fact, I think a classical training is *detrimental* in a lot of instances...I see a lot of people who tell me about how their classical training took *away* their ability to sing the

²⁴⁷ “The Benefits of Examinations: The Royal Conservatory of Music.” The Royal Conservatory. Accessed December 8, 2025. <https://www.rcmusic.com/learning/examinations/the-benefits-of-examinations#:~:text=Students%20who%20participate%20in%20Royal,by%20individual%20boards%20and%20schools.>

music that they like, and I've helped people through tears. Many, many, many, many times. People with doctorates who cannot sing the music that they want to sing. So if it was universally true that classical training prepared you to sing all styles, then I would not be meeting anybody with those stories.²⁴⁸

In other words, once a singer has become accustomed to the physical sensation of singing with a classical, *bel canto* technique like the one required by the RCM curriculum, they are *less* likely to feel comfortable venturing outside of classical singing. This is especially true if they have been told that a classical technique is superior or healthier than other techniques or, as the RCM website states, that a “classical training provides the strongest possible foundation upon which to continue a student’s musical journey.”²⁴⁹ Still, what choice does a young singer have except to jump through the hoops of the RCM curriculum if they need RCM high school credit or RCM certification to study music in college?

Conclusion

The Royal Conservatory of Music is an extraordinarily influential institution in Canadian music whose curriculum helps shape the musical training of an entire nation. Given its reach, it plays a substantial role in deciding what music Canada deems worthy of study. For students of voice, recent changes to the RCM syllabi offer some encouraging signs that the institution recognizes the legitimacy of (or at least the need to include) non-classical repertoire. The inclusion of popular music in the Voice Syllabus recommendations of the RCM was a monumental change for such an impactful and historied institution. And yet, if popular music is going to be included in the repertoire recommendations of the RCM with pedagogical credibility,

²⁴⁸ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025

²⁴⁹ “Program Overview: The Royal Conservatory of Music.” The Royal Conservatory. Accessed December 2, 2025. <https://www.rcmusic.com/learning/about-the-royal-conservatory-certificate-program/program-overview#TheCurriculum1-5>.

the institution can no longer afford to offer a curriculum that neither trains its students to sing, nor its teachers to teach, this music with stylistic integrity.

The photos of famous CCM musicians that adorn the RCM's walls and brochures demonstrate that the conservatory recognizes the musical contributions of these artists, or at least recognizes their marketing and recruitment value. And yet, given the requirements of the RCM examination criteria and their emphasis on *bel canto* singing, it is fair to wonder if these singers would pass a current RCM voice exam (Krall, Lang, and other singers touted by the RCM as famous alumni studied piano, not voice, as their RCM instrument). These big-name alumni may lure voice students to the program, but once these students begin their studies, they will find themselves immersed in a system of vocal imperialism. More curricular revision is necessary if the RCM voice program hopes to have a future that mirrors the astounding ambition of its past.

This case study illustrates a common factor identified by the curricular pioneers in their interviews as a challenge to curricular reform: the undergraduate years exist as but a portion of a singer's musical lifelong journey of learning, and at every step of the way that learning is informed by vocal imperialism. The Royal Conservatory of Music and its training of young singers during their formative younger years are an example of the indoctrination into vocal imperialism that often occurs before undergraduate studies. In the next section, I will use another case study to look at the lasting repercussions for graduates of a post-secondary training grounded in vocal imperialism.

Case Study 2: The Repercussions of Vocal Imperialism

"I bit my tongue for those four years and did what I had to do to get my degree."

- Jaron M. LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025

This is a case study of six graduates from the voice program of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. It focuses on the years after post-secondary education and examines how six singers – all of whom received a Western classical voice training and then went on to successful careers in other styles of singing – understand and evaluate the role of their classical voice training in their subsequent experience as CCM performers. It provides student testimonials that offer context to the observations of the academic pioneers featured in this dissertation. I place the responses of these six participants in dialogue with the curricular pioneers in order to identify potential causes for the persistence of vocal imperialism.

In their book *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act*, Mary Saunders Barton and her co-author Norman Spivey predict that, “Looking forward, only the rare voice studio will be genre specific.”²⁵⁰ At many behemoths like Eastman, however, vocal imperialism maintains a strong foothold. As of the fall of 2024, Eastman offered an undergraduate degree in Jazz Voice within its Jazz and Contemporary Media Department, a program that was not available to the interviewees of this case study. However, the curriculum, ensembles, and performance opportunities for students enrolled in this new program do not, for the most part, overlap with those of Eastman’s voice students.

Methodology

The participants for this study were chosen based on their common training at the same institution, and their subsequent performance experience as CCM singers. All six participants

²⁵⁰ Spivey, Norman and Mary Saunders Barton. *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act*. San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2018.

graduated from Eastman and then built careers singing music different from the Western classical art music that was the curricular focus of their studies at Eastman. This schooling and career trajectory are like my own, and this case study also contains autoethnographic observations based on my time as a student and professor at Eastman. I attended Eastman as an undergraduate voice major and went on to pursue graduate work and employment in musical theatre elsewhere. Eventually, I began stage directing and teaching at the post-secondary level, serving as an Associate Professor at Eastman from 2013-2021 where I directed mainstage productions and taught undergraduate and graduate acting courses. Thus, another objective of this case study was to gather data beyond my own experiences and observations and to identify patterns and commonalities that might explain the persistence of vocal imperialism.

The Participants

- **Participant 1's** performance credits include *Fiddler on the Roof* (Broadway), *Les Misérables* (North American Tour), *Mack and Mabel* and *Road Show* (Encores!). Graduated from Eastman in 2014.
- **Participant 2's** performance credits include *Hook Up* (Theatre Passe Muraille/Tapestry Opera), *West Side Story* (Brott Music Festival), *The Roaring Twenties* (Victoria Playhouse Petrolia), *Backstage at Carnegie Hall* (Black Theatre Workshop). Currently featured on VisionTV's *Your All Time Classic Hit Parade*. Graduated from Eastman in 2015.
- **Participant 3's** performance credits include *Hamilton* (Broadway), *Love Never Dies* (US Tour), and *Show Boat* (Lincoln Center). Graduated from Eastman in 2011.

- **Participant 4's** performance credits include US tours of *Wicked*, *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, *Warhorse*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Cabaret*. Graduated from Eastman in 1999.
- **Participant 5's** performance credits include Chicago-area productions of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Sweeney Todd*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Hairspray*, *Oklahoma!*, *Les Misérables*, *The Who's Tommy*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Godspell*. San Diego: *Rent*. Graduated from Eastman in 2008.
- **Participant 6** has appeared on Broadway in *The King and I*, *School of Rock*, *Hello! Dolly*, and *On the Twentieth Century*, as well as US tours of *The Sound of Music* and *Annie*. Graduated from Eastman in 2007.

Interview Questions

The six participants were asked the same ten questions:

- 1) How would you describe yourself as a singer when you first began your studies at the Eastman School of Music? What made you decide to study there?
- 2) How would you describe your confidence in your singing abilities when you arrived at Eastman? Did your level of confidence change over your time there? When, how, and why?
- 3) What kind of repertoire did you sing at Eastman, how was it chosen, and what role did it play in your future as a professional?
- 4) How did the cost of tuition affect your experience as a student?
- 5) What essential skills that you developed at Eastman proved helpful to you as a professional?

- 6) What essential skills do you feel were missing from your training?
- 7) How would you describe your relationship with your voice teacher at Eastman and with your classmates who studied with the same teacher?
- 8) How would you describe your relationship with the other voice faculty members, and with your classmates who studied with other voice teachers?
- 9) How would you describe yourself as a singing artist when you graduated from Eastman?
- 10) Is there anything else you'd like to share that you feel is important to contribute to this discussion?

Findings

All six of the participants pointed to their belief that they needed Western classical music training as a major factor in their decision to attend Eastman. When asked about her motivations for choosing a classical voice training, Participant 6 shared an anecdote:

I will never forget my high school voice teacher saying to me, “You cannot study musical theater in college. They will *ruin* your voice. You have to study classically because then you’ll be able to do anything.”²⁵¹

Similar advice from teachers and mentors colored the school choice of most of her fellow interviewees. According to Participant 2, a Canadian, this is not unique to the United States:

People believe that classical music is the foundation of all things... In the pre-college program here [Canada], there’s a weird, brainwashed thinking, like “Yes, you may love musical theater or other styles of singing, but in order to do them well, you first need to be good at *this* [classical operatic singing].”²⁵²

²⁵¹ Participant 6, research interview, March 21, 2022.

²⁵² Participant 2, research interview, March 23, 2022.

According to the interviewees of this case study, the primary reason for the stubborn intractability of vocal imperialism is that voice teachers tend to pass along whatever wisdom was bestowed upon them by *their* voice teacher. Thus, aesthetic predilections are as likely to be generationally perpetuated as is technical advice. This was echoed by professor Karen Burke, who said:

It [Western classical hegemony] is still very much of a thing. People are very closed to doing things outside of the canon and outside of the traditional... They're just so tied to what they did 50 years ago that they will not listen.²⁵³

The Eastman interviewees also emphasized that vocal imperialism continues to lead young singers, fresh out of high school, to pursue careers in classical singing at an age when very few voices are identifiable as operatic instruments. Participant 3 observed:

Undergrads especially are so young. They don't know what their voice is going to do. If you're eighteen years old joining a program, and your voice isn't going to be in its prime until you're thirty-three, who knows what you're going to be great at.²⁵⁴

Participant 5 elaborated further on the mistake of asking teenagers to choose an area of stylistic specialization:

What senior in high school is singing arias from these big operas? Maybe a very small percentage, but the rest of us aren't. Should we be pushed into that repertoire when it's beyond our capacity? No.²⁵⁵

The assumed inferiority of non-classical singing not only drove students to classical conservatory training, it also led participants to actively hide their talents for other styles of music while at Eastman. Participant 4 told me:

²⁵³ Karen Burke, research interview, August 12, 2025.

²⁵⁴ Participant 3, research interview, March 21, 2022.

²⁵⁵ Participant 5, research interview, March 6, 2022.

I was into other music, like I played fiddle and I danced, and I did all these other creative things that I kept in a closet compared to who I thought I needed to be at Eastman... And what's hilarious is that I've actually built a career doing all those things I was trying to hide.²⁵⁶

Participant 5, who has gone on to great success performing musical theatre repertoire, recounted:

“We were singing musical theater on Saturday nights up on the ninth floor so no one could hear us, because singing musical theater with your friends was forbidden.”²⁵⁷ For Participant 2, it was a love of jazz repertoire that required hiding:

The environment that we were in wasn't open to people that didn't follow the one-track path to success that was expected of you... If you did other things it was seen as a bad thing... I would go home and sing a jazz concert with my sisters, but I wouldn't tell anyone where I was going.²⁵⁸

One participant (who asked that this anecdote not be attributed to them out of continued fear of career repercussions) recounted a story that painfully illustrates why Eastman students felt it necessary to engage in this kind of secrecy. Their story is an example of how CCM repertoire was not a part of their undergraduate training and was in fact, actively discouraged:

At the time I was singing at Eastman, I was also singing with a band with friends I had made in the jazz department. I had a gig with them within a few weeks of my degree recital, and there was an argument when people found out that I was doing a non-classical performance, not a day before, not the night before, but *weeks* before my Eastman recital. I already had the contract signed, and it was a big gig for me at that time. Ultimately, I was told “OK, if you want to do that you can do that. But we will have to cancel your recital. You can come back next year to finish your degree and your recital if that's what you want to do.” I'm spending tens of thousands of dollars per semester... I can't come back for another semester. So, I had to cancel the gig... it's stuff like that that raises the question, how do we value other forms of singing?²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Participant 4, research interview, March 21, 2022.

²⁵⁷ Participant 5, research interview, March 6, 2022.

²⁵⁸ Participant 2, research interview, March 23, 2022.

²⁵⁹ Participant 3, research interview, March 21, 2022.

The ramifications of vocal imperialism are both technical and emotional. The testimonials of the students interviewed for this case study reinforced the observation of many curricular pioneers interviewed for this dissertation: a singer is *less* likely to feel comfortable venturing outside of classical singing once they have grown accustomed to the physical sensation of singing with a classical technique. In her interview, Dale Cox echoed Matt Edwards's earlier assertion that a classical technique can, in fact, be detrimental to other kinds of singing: "When you try to take a classical training and just stick it on CCM it's actually counterproductive. That's when you end up with problems."²⁶⁰ Catherine Walker addresses the issue by drawing parallels to the dance training her students at Michigan receive:

Studying voice from a solely classical standpoint in the hopes of becoming a better CCM singer is tantamount to studying ballet for ten years in the hopes of becoming a better tap dancer... When we teach dance, we don't say, you have to choose. No, we teach them ballet, we teach them styles, we teach them hip-hop, we teach them tap...It's just another group of muscles. It's just organization.²⁶¹

For students in a voice program like Eastman's, training that is rooted in vocal imperialism can result in confusion, frustration, and even despair. These emotions were reflected by many of the Eastman interviewees when they were asked to describe themselves as singing artists upon graduating from Eastman. Participant 1 shared:

I was no longer able to navigate musical theatre repertoire like I could prior to school. All of a sudden, I was thinking about "placing" songs when the primary objective should be entertainment. And these were songs I had sung in high school that I was now no longer able to sing. For me, that was crushing. How was I able to do this at eighteen years old, and now at twenty-two, when I am about to need to monetize this, how has the ability to do this been stripped from me?... Even when I got my first job on Broadway, I was secretly, frantically getting voice lessons. I felt I had tricked the casting director because I knew how weak my voice was.²⁶²

²⁶⁰ Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025.

²⁶¹ Catherine Walker, research interview, December 13, 2025

²⁶² Participant 1, research interview, March 23, 2022.

Participant 4 was even more blunt in her assessment of how her classical training had failed to prepare her for life as a performer after undergraduate schooling. Not only was she unprepared for the technical demands of the singing career she wanted, she found that she had also lost her artistic passion, and even some part of her sense of self:

I came out of Eastman, and I had no idea how to sing anymore. It took me years to fall in love with singing again, and to learn how to do it again. I'm still not sure I know what *my* voice sounds like.²⁶³

In describing how the inadequacy of how his classical training manifested itself after graduation, Participant 5 recounted:

You make your way into the real world, and you realize you're not going to be an opera singer because your voice isn't big enough or isn't that type of voice, or maybe your heart doesn't lie in that genre. And simultaneously you realize that you have no training that is appropriate for musical theater, which is the field you really would, and could, excel in.²⁶⁴

Like many young singers, these case study participants discovered they had a gift for singing before college, and singing was itself a source of great joy in their young lives. For some of them, however, their experiences at a behemoth of vocal imperialism began to erode that happiness. Participant 5 described what it was like to arrive at Eastman as a wide-eyed, eager student:

Early on, I felt very confident, but very quickly I realized what a small fish I was in a very big pond... My confidence changed the minute I started hearing other people open their mouths and seeing them get opportunities that I wasn't even in the running for. That was when I went, "Wow. Am I any good anymore?" So, not only did my confidence dwindle, but I think, also, my passion for singing.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Participant 4, research interview, March 21, 2022.

²⁶⁴ Participant 5, research interview, March 6, 2022.

²⁶⁵ Participant 5, research interview, March 6, 2022.

Participant 1 also had an undergraduate experience that was a gradual erosion of both spirit and skill:

Naturally my confidence diminished because I no longer knew my voice. I could no longer chart the waters. I didn't know my own weaknesses. I couldn't count on my voice to behave in a way that I wanted it to. I couldn't seize on repertoire with eagerness. I was no longer seeing the joy in performance. There was a real severance between the way I was singing and why I was singing in the first place.²⁶⁶

Participant 4's experience was one of a slower erosion of confidence, and it highlights another problem of programs that are stylistically limited: Undergraduate programs that embrace a narrowly focused repertoire can, in their adherence to vocal imperialism, limit the performance opportunities for students. It was specifically this lack of performance experience that damaged Participant 4's confidence:

I feel like my confidence got whittled away at slowly while I was there. The competition among the students and never getting a role in anything until my last year, auditioning for and not getting asked to do any of the 'shinier' things, like the solos or the opera theater. Also, just having an unbelievable amount of self-deprecation and insecurity that I felt like the program was slowly revealing to me.²⁶⁷

In addition to the twin demons of competition and comparison, the participants acknowledged other reasons for feelings of isolation and dwindling confidence. Many of these related to specific, traumatic performance experiences. Voice programs rooted in vocal imperialism often include high-pressure competitions and masterclasses, with visiting luminaries of classical music in attendance. Participant 3 recalled:

Professionals would come in from outside the school and judge you, and some of them were not so nice, and honestly, they broke me down. The first time I cried in a public

²⁶⁶ Participant 1, research interview, March 23, 2022.

²⁶⁷ Participant 4, research interview, March 21, 2022.

place was a master class experience, which was awful and damaging... I still tell that story, like, this is why I'm not doing opera anymore.²⁶⁸

When then, did these former students encounter *positive* changes in their confidence?

Their confidence grew when they were fortunate enough to have experiences - sometimes serendipitous – outside the boundaries of vocal imperialism. On those rare occasions when they were allowed to explore non-classical repertoire, they often shone. Participant 5 recalled one example:

I want to talk about my degree recital, because I had all these classical boxes to tick, but my teacher went outside the boxes and said, “This is your Senior recital. You have to make this program your own...” So I sang a Vivaldi set, and a set of three French songs, and a couple German songs. But my final two sets were three Irish folk songs that I loved, and then four musical theater songs... It was the most validated I ever felt by my peers. I got so many comments after, like, “This was the best recital I’ve ever been to” and, “You were so *yourself*” and, “You showed your full range.” And it was the musical theater set especially. Like, “Wow! That was so *brave*!”... to do it at my degree recital and have it so well received... I’ll never forget it. I realized that this is what makes me tick. This genre is where I come alive. This is the music that I connect to. And what’s hilarious is, listening back to the recital, my vocal technique was all wrong for the style. There’s so much vibrato. It’s very heavy, because I had just done four years of training at an opera school, where that’s what I was hearing so that’s what I was trying to emulate.²⁶⁹

Participant 4 found confidence by looking for similarities, wherever she could, between the music she loved and the music that was deemed worthy of study at Eastman:

I found early on that I had a proclivity for early [Western classical] music. I enjoyed singing straight tone and it was easy for me... In my current position in *Wicked* I sing the soprano and soprano II parts, and they frequently are asking for less vibrato, more straight tone. And that doesn’t hurt me like I was warned it would if I sang classical music that way. It’s easy to do... I never thought that singing Purcell would help me sing Steven Schwartz, but I guess it did.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Participant 3, research interview, March 21, 2022.

²⁶⁹ Participant 5, research interview, March 6, 2022.

²⁷⁰ Participant 4, research interview, March 21, 2022.

As a teacher, I was always awestruck when I opened the repertoire requirements of in-class exercises to include musical theatre. There was always at least one painfully shy student in the class who, when given the freedom to choose their own repertoire, would suddenly demonstrate a new sound, and with it, a newfound confidence. These moments of self-discovery and success are cathartic and beautiful for students. They are also the artistic and emotional breakthroughs we live for as teachers. They need not be rare. It is difficult to find something upon which every voice teacher I know would most likely agree, but this truism is one: confidence blossoms and performance flourishes when students are permitted to sing the repertoire at which they excel, which often (and not coincidentally) happens to be the repertoire they *love*.

The cost of an undergraduate degree is often crushing, and not just financial. Most of the case study interviewees brought up the cost of their education, and the fact that they believed they had not gotten their money's worth from a curriculum that was stylistically limited by vocal imperialism. How much did it cost them to attend Eastman, and how much does a student pay for each 50-minute voice lesson?

Eastman Price Tag (2022-23)

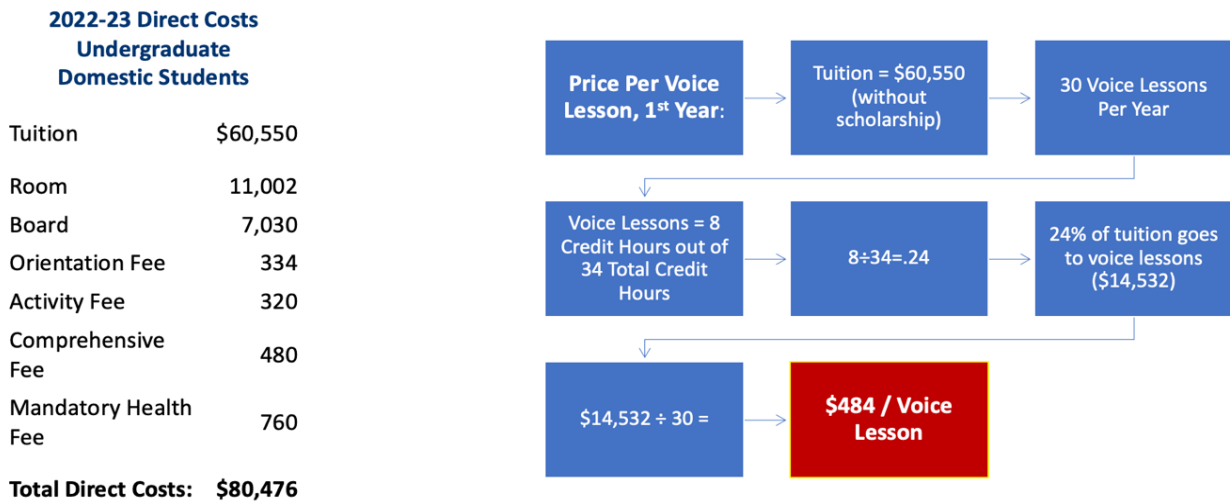


Figure 2: Eastman Tuition and Cost Per Voice Lesson^{271 272}

These calculations are based upon figures before financial aid, and all Eastman students receive some form of financial aid, ranging from modest bookstore scholarships to full tuition coverage. Most of the case study participants stated that the cost of their studies did *not* have an impact on their experiences with singing while they were students. In retrospect, however, they had strong feelings about how much they had paid for their education, and whether their education had been worth the loans and long-term debt incurred. Said Participant 6: “I was very fortunate to have the scholarships that I did, but I’m thirty-seven and I still have a student loan I’m working on.”²⁷³ Participant 5 highlighted the ethical questions of such a high tuition cost, given the narrow focus of the program in terms of future performance career opportunities:

²⁷¹ “Financing the cost of an Eastman Undergraduate Education”, Financial Aid at Eastman, Accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.esm.rochester.edu/financialaid/cost-of-attendance-undergraduate/>

²⁷² The prices reflected here were calculated in 2022, at the time of the original case study interviews, and have only increased since.

Most of these students are not going to be opera singers, but we are taking their money and putting them in this program that tells them we are going to make them into an opera singer. I was paying to be trained to be something that I never would become.²⁷⁴

Sometimes, it was not until well after graduation - when singers often turn to *teaching* voice - that they realized the shortcomings of the training for which they paid. Participant 2 observed:

There are certain skills that you learn at a classical conservatory that are good to have, but... It was when I started teaching other people that I said to myself, “Wait, what I’m teaching here isn’t true. What I’ve been taught isn’t true!”²⁷⁵

In a voice program that requires tuition dollars to sustain itself, there are moral and ethical questions inextricably tied to the question of cost as well. At best, students at the undergraduate level are admitted based on vocal potential and asked to take on tremendous debt while essentially rolling the dice on a future career in performance. More disturbingly, students who can afford to pay full tuition may be admitted into classical voice programs when there is little chance of the student ever having a financially successful performance career. Participant 1 recalled:

I came back to visit Eastman after having toured the country on national tours and singing on Broadway and was told by a teacher, “Look at you. You were the bottom of the barrel while you were here, and now you’re our pride. Fancy that.” I wasn’t offended because he had just confirmed what I knew. I *was* the bottom of their barrel, and I was made to feel like that. And I think that’s the crookery of it all, that a school would take the money of someone you would call the bottom of the barrel. That you would actively handicap them financially while whispering behind their back that they are not going to make anything of themselves.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Participant 6, research interview, March 21, 2022.

²⁷⁴ Participant 5, research interview, March 6, 2022.

²⁷⁵ Participant 2, research interview, March 23, 2022.

²⁷⁶ Participant 1, research interview, March 23, 2022.

This last point weighed heavily on me as a teacher at Eastman, and it was mentioned by many of the curricular pioneers as well. Since so few voices at the age of seventeen or eighteen can truly demonstrate an ability to sing Western classical opera, students are accepted to undergraduate programs largely based upon a subjective, nebulous quality that teachers like to call “potential.” If we teachers are honest with ourselves, we might admit that many of the students admitted to our programs - perhaps the majority of them - do not possess the required combination of instrument, temperament, and artistic inclination required for a career in opera.

The ethics, or lack thereof, of this reality was echoed by the curricular pioneers. Kevin Wilson said:

The Boston Conservatory goes to school for twelve weeks [per term], so you get six hours of [half hour] voice lessons a term. That’s twelve hours a year times four years, or forty-eight hours of voice lessons for a professional voice degree. And then put the tuition cost into that, and what the students are paying, and what you're making per hour... It is insanity.²⁷⁷

Matt Edwards agreed, recalling some of the pushback he faced when he attempted to strip the choir requirement out of Shenandoah’s degree program:

The old guard is scared because of their enrollment numbers. I wanted to strip choir out of the musical theater degree, because our [musical theatre] students were getting hurt in choir. They were singing stuff they didn't know how to sing with voices that weren't theirs. It was not going well. I got so much pushback. I had to collect letters from all kinds of speech-language pathologists to support that these kids need to get out of choir... What was revealing was when a colleague came up to me and said, “You're decimating our choirs. You provide 24 students every year to help fill our choirs, and without them, we're going to have to cut a choir.” In other words you’re keeping your choirs alive by forcing kids who don't want to sing in choir to sing in it... We should not be taking tuition-paying students who don't want to sing this kind of music, and forcing them to do it so people can keep their choirs, keep their tuition dollars, and keep their jobs. We should be building programs and setting requirements based on what students *do* want to do instead of doing fear-based curriculum decision-making.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Kevin Wilson, research interview, August 23, 2025.

²⁷⁸ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

These “fear-based” curricular choices, as well as the programming and repertoire choices of many undergraduate classical voice degrees, continue to perpetuate vocal imperialism and elevate opera as the “gold standard,” only to then bury young singers in debt in the pursuit of a dream that faculty, and the students themselves know full well is not within reach for most of them.

The renowned operatic soprano Renée Fleming recently sent shockwaves through the classical music world when a video of her making this point went viral online.²⁷⁹ “I think there are far too many universities and colleges that are taking money from young people who shouldn’t be,” she said, calling it “criminal.” She went on:

These kids will all have debt. They’ll all have terrible debt when they get out of school...I hear people that really have no business even majoring in voice, but the schools take them. I asked somebody at a major conservatory, “How do you sleep at night?”²⁸⁰

An oft-heard response to this criticism is that undergraduate degrees in voice build other skills, in addition to singing itself, that are applicable to other jobs. Teachers will argue that discipline, organization, time management and other important skills are strengthened in the study of singing. Fleming goes on to address the argument that an undergraduate voice degree can be used for other disciplines. In response to her question of “How do you sleep at night?” she recalls the answer she was given: “He said, ‘Well, you know, a lot of people use that [voice] degree to go on and then major in something else.’ And I thought, ‘Wow. Given what secondary education costs, that’s a bit rich.’”²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ The Voice Foundation, “2025 G. Paul Moore Lecture: Renée Fleming – Music and Mind” YouTube Video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqTs17Zi23Q. Accessed 12 Dec. 2025.

²⁸⁰ The Voice Foundation, “2025 G. Paul Moore Lecture”

In her interview, Patty Thom mentioned the video of Fleming. “I wanted to reach into my computer and slap her!”²⁸² she said, laughing. She explained:

Because I really do believe that we teach *specifically* undergrads. It's a bachelor's degree! And most bachelor's degrees don't take you directly into a job. They just don't. So, we need to be mindful about the way that we frame this for students coming into the program... I think the old vision of undergraduate education was that lots of people came in, and the opportunities narrowed, and just a few came out, and just a few were successful. That was basically what Renée was saying. But I always thought that once you got into the program, then your opportunities can open up. But as faculty, we have to let young people know that, otherwise, they'll feel like failures. And be mad. And be bitter.²⁸³

Thom doesn't seem to be directly contradicting Fleming's comments but rather suggesting that the expectations of undergraduate students should be framed more realistically. Programs must be honest in selling the undergraduate years as a place to explore opportunities, rather than what many students currently expect: a clear career path.

As Thom predicted, unrealistic expectations lead many of this case study's interviewees to feel anger, bitterness, and disappointment. This was Participant 4's experience:

I thought I knew what the trajectory was going to look like. I thought I was going to go to undergrad, then to grad school, then an apprenticeship program, and then the Met[ropolitan Opera].²⁸⁴

Participant 6, though she herself reflects on her time at Eastman largely as a positive experience, recounted the disillusionment of her classmates: “We had a Zoom class reunion, and I was shocked that, I'd say 90% of those who attended had a negative experience and said that school had decimated their self-esteem.”²⁸⁵

²⁸¹ Just in: Renee Fleming Lashes out at “criminal” US voice programs - slippedisc. Accessed December 14, 2025. <https://slippedisc.com/2025/08/just-in-renee-fleming-lashes-out-at-criminal-us-voice-programs/>.

²⁸² Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025.

²⁸³ Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025.

²⁸⁴ Participant 4, research interview, March 21, 2022.

Given the high price of undergraduate education, however, what impact would a “reframing” of the kind Thom advocates for have on enrollment. Should a student be willing to spend the price of tuition at a behemoth without assurance of a career after graduation? We will explore this question in greater detail in Chapter 5.

This case study also illustrates that collegiality is critical. In *A Balancing Act*, Saunders Barton’s co-author, Norman Spivey, recounts the early days of their collaboration:

I began to realize that my classical training, stage experience, and study of traditional pedagogy were not the complete set of tools I needed to work effectively with musical theater students... From the beginning, we understood that continuing to learn is not about giving something up, but rather it is an opportunity to add something to the strengths you already have... We isolate ourselves at our peril.²⁸⁶

The responses of this case study’s six participants, however, paint the picture of a very different atmosphere among the faculty at Eastman during their undergraduate years. Said Participant 2:

When you can sense a competitiveness among the faculty, it’s hard for that not to trickle down to the students. And there’s a pressure to do well for your studio, because you’re not just singing for you, you are representing your studio...I remember that another voice teacher walked in during one of my voice lessons and made a negative comment about my singing to my teacher and questioned her teaching method in front of me.²⁸⁷

Though he studied with a different voice teacher, Participant 1 had a similar experience:

I don’t know who perpetuates it, but by the time you graduate you know how terrible all the other teachers are. Of course, it’s all hearsay, because you haven’t studied with any of the other teachers, so you don’t actually know that. But the rumor mill is strong, and everyone is sort of advocating for their own teacher... It was clearly competitive. And the objects of competition were our voices and our ability to perform. I got the sense that my teacher had a bone to pick with other teachers on the faculty, and therefore would only exhibit me in certain capacities for fear of pushback.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ Participant 6, research interview, March 21, 2022.

²⁸⁶ Spivey and Saunders Barton, *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act*, 2,10.

²⁸⁷ Participant 2, research interview, March 23, 2022.

²⁸⁸ Participant 1, research interview, March 23, 2022.

This climate of rivalry, gossip, and mistrust is, according to Eustis, not unique to Eastman:

The profession is rife with accounts of unhealthy voice departments and factions among voice teachers that have been competing against each other for years... We are all terribly vulnerable as singers, and as teachers we can be even more vulnerable because we have even less control over how we are perceived... Many voice teachers transfer the competitive edge that served them well as professional singers into the teaching arena, choosing to become aggressively competitive with other voice teachers.²⁸⁹

She goes on to add, “The unique vulnerability that a singer feels in their lessons often leads to a semi-dependent relationship with the teacher.”²⁹⁰ This was reflected in the responses of several of the participants. One of them, who asked that this anecdote not be referenced directly to their participant number, recounted:

There was a very maternal vibe. There was a very protective energy. I got the sense that there was something about my voice or my delivery, or *me* that needed protecting from other voice teachers. That was almost said explicitly. So, it was very insular. There was a sense that whatever happens in here [in the studio] is safe. But out there, people are mean and cruel... Eventually my teacher would try to pry into my personal life and try to identify reasons for my vocal failings within the studio, whether that was my relationship with my parents or my peers, or with my sexuality. This came up a lot... It would almost turn into a psychiatry office. But it would pop up anytime the technical work was not going well.²⁹¹

During my time as a professor, I found that the dependent, parental nature of the voice teacher / voice student relationship sometimes eclipsed the trust and respect between faculty members. Students who learned to complain to their voice teacher the way a child does to a parent were confident that their voice teacher would defend them in all instances. Teachers were

²⁸⁹ Eustis. *The Teacher's Ego: When Singers Become Voice Teachers*. 66-67.

²⁹⁰ Eustis, *The Teacher's Ego*, 67.

²⁹¹ Anonymous participant, research interview, March 2022.

quick to reassure the student that it was the other faculty member who was at fault in a given situation, sometimes before speaking about the issue with their colleague. Whatever the complaint or whoever the target, the priority of some teachers was to maintain the love and affection of the student, in part because of the paralyzing fear many voice teachers feel about losing students to another teacher. Participant 3 remembered:

I did consider going to another studio, but there was someone who switched studios during my time there and it was a huge scandal. It was so terrible, the toxicity that happened from that event... I realized that I didn't have time for the drama or the politics afterwards... It was scary, and it's unfortunate that it's not more open.²⁹²

Participant 2 also described an atmosphere of voice studio rivalry:

I felt that there were a lot of 'studio poaching' attempts, too. Teachers would make offhand comments like "Oh, you wouldn't find that in *my* studio" ... things that felt like little digs, either at me or my studio or my teacher.²⁹³

Given the profound feelings of insecurity described earlier by the participants, it is no wonder that they turn to their voice teacher to find the safety, protection, and validation of a surrogate parent. However, the situation can devolve when the teacher's desire to be loved compromises professionalism, when they begin to deal in gossip with students, or undercut their voice colleagues in order to recruit new students.

This factious, unhealthy environment of competition between voice teachers and among their students is all too common according to the participants of this case study, the interviewees of this dissertation, and the scholarship of researchers like Eustis. In the next section, I will explore some of the reasons for the dogmatism and insularity that exists within undergraduate

²⁹² Participant 3, research interview, March 21, 2022.

²⁹³ Participant 2, research interview, March 23, 2022.

voice programs and the role it played in the experiences of the curricular pioneers as they pursued curricular change.

Conclusion

This case study centered the experiences of participants whose voice training at the Eastman School of Music was grounded in Western classical vocal technique. The notion that Western classical singing was both superior and essential was reflected in nearly every aspect of their undergraduate experience, from the repertoire they were assigned to the requirements of their coursework, juries, and recitals. They felt that they had to hide their affinity for other kinds of singing, fearing repercussions and judgment from both their peers and their professors.

The participants were chosen for this study because they went on to success singing other styles of music, even after receiving a classical undergraduate training. This seems to suggest that their undergraduate experience gave them the tools they needed for this success. What their interviews revealed, however, was that most of them went on to careers performing other styles of music, not because of their undergraduate training, but despite it. Most of the participants needed additional training after their four years of undergraduate study in order to gain the skills required to perform musical theatre. This additional training consisted, not only of dance and acting training, but also extensive voice work, some of which was focused on un-learning the classical sound they had worked for years to cultivate. Despite the enormous price tag of their education, they graduated without the skills they needed to sing the music they wanted to pursue professionally. By focusing on graduates who went on to have success as performers, this case study excludes the countless others who, upon graduation, did not find success performing, or

simply gave up on music altogether because they lacked the skills to sing anything other than Western classical music.

Chapter 4, Rattling the Cage of the Closed Mind

“There is still a strong mindset of, ‘My team, my secrets.’”

- Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025

The Voice Cult

In the spring of 1998, I broke up with my voice teacher. Decades later, I still vividly remember the sheer terror of this studio switch experience. After many difficult conversations with friends, family, and school administration, the final and most painful step in the process fell to me - to obtain the signature of the teacher I was leaving. For moral support, my closest childhood friend had driven hours to be there with me, waiting outside the school in my car. I had planned the conversation to coincide with my last day on campus so that she and I could quickly escape town for the summer as soon as the meeting finished.

It was all over in a couple of minutes. “Okay then,” my teacher said brusquely, taking the paper from my hand. He quickly signed it, and without looking at me added, “Good luck!”

It would be the last time we ever spoke.

Two years earlier, as a wide-eyed first-year student, I had been given my first taste of the factious hierarchy that existed among the voice studios at my college. A sophomore voice student (who studied with the same teacher as I) put his arm around my shoulder at a new student orientation and gave me the lowdown:

Professor A is the worst - all her students suck. Professor B makes all her students sing with a pencil in their mouth, so they sound like, really bright and they all sound the same. Professor C is really strict, but all her students worship her and it’s really hard to get into her studio. Professor D is just really old. But our professor, E, is the best and everyone knows it, so don’t worry. He even has us over to his house for Thanksgiving.

Twenty-five years later, this us-versus-them mentality still abides at many undergraduate institutions. To switch voice studios is often considered treasonous. The student risks losing friends, the security of the studio “family,” and the support of a powerful mentor who can often make or break a career. The anxiety is shared by voice teachers, too, who live in fear of losing the trust and admiration of their students when one member of their flock chooses to leave the fold. Might this one student’s departure spark a mass-exodus?

The pioneers interviewed for this dissertation found ways to overcome the disfunction of studio insularity, or to navigate around it. When asked if she has encountered dogmatism among voice teachers, Patty Thom recounted the same experience as the students interviewed in the previous case study:

Yes. Still! I literally heard a teacher say, “I don't want to tell you my secrets.”...I think for students, it's kind of a normal thing to do, because students at that age are always trying to figure out how to belong, and trying to assess and figure out where they line up in all of this. But it's the faculty that I don't really get. I've seen teacher change processes at multiple schools, and they are fraught. Fraught! Students are afraid to do it, and teachers get angry about it, and that's where I think it's not only prevalent, but a little, in a way, dangerous. Dangerous is a big word, but it's not good for the well-being of students to feel that they are stuck in a situation where they just don't like their teacher, or feel like they're treated badly, and they can't talk about it, and they don't have anybody to talk about it *to*. And it's a risk to talk to the chair [of the department] unless the chair has really got their ducks in a row on this topic. Or they have to talk to somebody, like a dean, who doesn't know anything. It's so hard, and it just shouldn't be.²⁹⁴

As a first step in combatting such antagonistic environments, many of the pioneers sought to better understand what lies at the root of this mistrust among teachers. Mary Saunders Barton said:

I understand that point of view. But I feel strongly – and I think those teachers could relax in the security of this knowledge – that a student feels more secure watching the teachers in a program interact freely. Knowing they trust each other. That's very different, and they feel safe in their environment. Nobody has to know everything. That's insane. How could you? That's going to make you a tense teacher. You're going to be worried and anxious

²⁹⁴ Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025

that you don't know things. I refer students out [to other teachers] all the time... Ultimately, just we need to encourage each other. It takes a village.”²⁹⁵

Matt Edwards had an equally empathetic opinion as to why some voice teachers choose to isolate themselves and their students. When asked the same question, he responded:

Oh, absolutely. That’s a huge part of it. And there's an understandable reason why people get that way... There starts to be this mentality of, “I need to protect. I need to save. I need to help.” But then that becomes (which is what I've seen in our profession) saying, “Well, that method is wrong. My method is the only one that's right.”... I see this guru mentality all the time. It exists. I think it has protectionist roots that come from truly trying to help people.²⁹⁶

Perhaps it is the ability to empathize and to offer the grace of assumed best intentions that has allowed Saunders Barton and Edwards to rise above the protectionist instincts of their colleagues. Edwards went on to echo Saunders Barton’s call for a pedagogy rooted in open-mindedness and continued learning:

We need to realize that it's in our human instinct to be protectionist, to gossip, to try to hold on. But we also need to look at our greater understanding of the world that we now live in with seven billion people and realize that we all have different cultural backgrounds, different ways that we learn, different ways that we communicate, and we need to drop the tribalism. We need to drop the cult-like atmosphere if we're actually going to further this profession and help all of the people who need help.²⁹⁷

Edwards’s description of some voice studios as a “cult-like atmosphere” is an apt one.

Those who sing and teach voice sometimes speak of vocal technique with the hushed-tone reverence or righteous bravado usually reserved for religious dogma. *Only my teacher knows vocal technique* is a truism as near and dear to many a singer’s heart as *My God is the one true God* is to the heart of a religious zealot. What is it about the study of voice that seems to make it

²⁹⁵ Mary Saunders Barton, research interview, July 17, 2025.

²⁹⁶ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

²⁹⁷ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

uniquely susceptible to paranoia and insecurity, and how can voice teachers avoid this pedagogical trap?

Combatting Trauma, Dogma, and Insularity in Voice Studies

In her book *The Teacher's Ego: When Singers Become Voice Teachers*, Lynn Eustis writes, "There is something particularly naked about being your own instrument."²⁹⁸ She identifies several potential factors that make the study of the singing voice a uniquely challenging pedagogy. To begin with - as an internal function of the larynx - the voice comes from *inside* us and is not easily observed in the way that other musical instruments are.

Our identities are closely intertwined with our voices, often in ways that have nothing to do with music. Over time we come to believe that our most authentic self-worth is founded on our vocal talents... My voice equals me; therefore, if my voice doesn't live up to others' standards, neither do I as a person.²⁹⁹

Singers rely heavily upon others, especially our teachers, to tell us what they hear and what we sound like. At the same time, the study of voice is also unique in terms of the vast disagreement among teachers when it comes to vocal technique. A student is likely to get widely varying technical advice from teacher to teacher. Yet, every student (especially those paying exorbitant prices for lessons and tuition) wants to believe that *their* teacher has the "secret sauce" for vocal success.

The larynx is an internal musical instrument and there are no visible keys to push or hand positions to adjust when teaching voice. Catherine Walker describes the challenge this was for her when she first began teaching voice:

²⁹⁸ Eustis, Lynn. *The Singer's Ego: Finding Balance Between Music and Life*. Chicago, 2005. 4.

²⁹⁹ Eustis, Lynn. *The Teacher's Ego: When Singers Become Voice Teachers*. Chicago, 2013. 2-3.

When you play piano, I would talk about the bones of the hand, and the alignment, and the bridge, and where does my elbow go, and where's the weight, and there was a technical lens that artistry was put through. I had a technical foundation, and now you're going to be an artist with good technique... Whereas voice was nebulous, metaphoric, lots of, "I just want you to think of a blue sky," and although some of those imageries work, they don't work for everybody. They're too mystical and unspecific and not flexible, because you can't really play with knowledge that isn't specific. So it'll get you singing one way, and you're like, "Okay, I guess I'll just think of a blue sky over here. But when do I use that again, and what did it really do?"³⁰⁰

Dale Cox highlights the highly individualized nature of teaching voice as a factor that makes singing pedagogy unique:

My instrument is not the same as yours. Good singing pedagogy is highly individualized and curated by the teacher to meet each singer exactly where they are to assist them to progress. I'm not saying that teaching singers is harder than teaching instrumentalists. But I do believe we are building the instrument at the same time that we are learning to play it.³⁰¹

When asked what differences exist between teaching voice and teaching other musical instruments, Matthew Hoch went into greater detail as to how each voice is different. He also pointed out how relatively new voice science is in the long historical context of voice pedagogy:

If you're a voice teacher and you have twenty students, you're dealing with twenty different instruments... The vocal tract is squishy. It's amorphous, you can change it. You can't change the body of a trumpet or saxophone or clarinet. Also, the voice is *inside* of you, it's not visible. And singing was a mystery for so long. Just 50 years ago people still didn't really understand how the voice works. So, every instrument is unique, and we're still untangling the mysteries of the voice.³⁰²

Our understanding of the singing voice may, in fact, be progressing at a rate that feels threatening to an incurious voice teacher. Staying informed about the latest voice science requires the humility to admit that there is still more to be learned, and the motivation to attend conferences and other educational opportunities where the latest voice science is being discussed. Most of the

³⁰⁰ Catherine Walker, research interview, December 13, 2025.

³⁰¹ Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025.

³⁰² Matthew Hoch, research interview, June 26, 2025.

curricular pioneers interviewed shared a common desire to continue expanding their own knowledge.

According to Kevin Wilson, another important factor that makes singers feel uniquely exposed is an emotional one. Unlike most instrumentalists, we face our audiences directly in performance and look them in the eye while engaging with text:

Singing is such a vulnerable thing because what we're doing as singers is communicating stories. We have words. So, there are two things that are happening: One is, am I able to convey the story honestly as a human? And then there's also the acceptance of the *person* telling the story. So, we are *so* vulnerable because it's an acceptance of ourselves, but also an acceptance of our ability to communicate effectively.³⁰³

Lynn Eustis echoes this opinion in *The Teacher's Ego*:

Having text allows us to delve deeper into the music but it also requires that we invest ourselves in direct emotional ways... singers must overcome their personal inhibitions and express their most intimate feelings in front of their audiences. For many singers, this is the most intimidating aspect of vocal performance.³⁰⁴

In *The Right to Speak*, Patsy Rodenburg highlights vocal imperialism's role in creating a sense of insecurity for young singers: "As soon as we open our mouths and speak, we are judged."³⁰⁵ Voice work can be "enormously potent... It is penetrating work, both intimate and revealing," and can leave a young singer feeling "suddenly vulnerable, tender, and unguarded, rather like a snail without a shell."³⁰⁶ For young singers engaged in the pursuit of an ideal classical sound, a profound psychological shift can occur during the undergraduate years, when singing, what was once a source of immense joy, becomes a measure of self-worth and success in pursuit of the ideal vocal sound implied by vocal imperialism.

³⁰³ Kevin Wilson, research interview, July 2, 2025.

³⁰⁴ Eustis, Lynn. *The Teacher's Ego: When Singers Become Voice Teachers*. Chicago, 2013. 4-5.

³⁰⁵ Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak*, 4.

³⁰⁶ Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak*, 17.

Rodenburg warns that teachers, too, are subject to bad behaviour when their teaching is informed by vocal imperialism. When a student is in pursuit of one “right” sound, it is easier to believe that there is only one “right” teacher. For an insecure, vulnerable student, a kind of teacher-worship can develop, a phenomenon that provides a sense of comfort in its insular devotion. The widespread notion that a voice teacher is “there to tap it [the ‘right’ uniform sound] in us or fix what we naturally already have,”³⁰⁷ can lead to what Rodenburg calls “Voice Gurus.”³⁰⁸ These are teachers “who believe they, not the work itself, are the real sources of power.” Such teachers “dangerously probe psyches, in some cases violating privacy and dignity... they approach voice work psychologically and not just physiologically.”³⁰⁹ Rodenburg warns both students and teachers of voice not to fall into this particular trap of vocal imperialism:

We are not out to make converts or acolytes... There is no such thing as one ‘method’, no definitive vocal exercise has ever been devised to suit everyone’s needs, there is no single way of attaining vocal release, no mumbo-jumbo to imbue strength and power, no ‘mantras’ and, because voice work is so personal, no one teacher. There is simply no aura involved. Nobody working on their voice can learn to do so through fear, intimidation or charismatic pronouncements.³¹⁰

Vocal imperialism, as reflected in responses of those interviewed for the previous case study, also forces young singers enrolled in a classical undergraduate program to commit to an area of vocal specialization by their late teens.³¹¹ For Rodenburg, this is far too early. She suggests that, for men, it is usually not until around the age of twenty-five that “the voice is

³⁰⁷ Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak*, 104.

³⁰⁸ Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak*, 17.

³⁰⁹ Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak*, 17-18.

³¹⁰ Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak*, 18.

³¹¹ Greschner 2019, LeBorgne and Rosenberg, 2014.

ready to develop its full potential.” For women, this can happen sooner, but Rodenburg asserts that, for all post-pubescent singers, “the settling down process may take some years (as many as eight to ten) before the full vocal mechanism is coordinated.”³¹² In other words, most undergraduate singers are not yet aware of what their voices will someday be capable of singing. They will not know this until long after they have graduated. And yet, vocal imperialism has already set them on a narrow path of classical singing, with a career singing opera at the end, considered the ultimate prize.

Though Rodenburg’s work is based in theatre pedagogy, she has also articulated many of the problems that plague the formalized training of young singers: the guru mentality, the snap-judgments that permeate voice work, premature stylistic specialization, psychological manipulation in the guise of mentorship, and the exploitation of emotional vulnerability through fear and intimidation. She shows us how dogma begets dogma; one “right” way to sing leads to one “right” school where one “right” teacher helps a student sing one “right” kind of music.

Eustis also points out, this environment can lead to all sorts of ethically dubious behaviour, and voice students may find themselves the unwitting pawns in a battle fueled by their teachers’ egos:

The profession is rife with accounts of unhealthy voice departments and factions among voice teachers that have been competing against each other for years... We are all terribly vulnerable as singers, and as teachers, we can be even more vulnerable because we have even less control over how we are perceived... Competition with other voice teachers leads to all sorts of bad decisions, from assigning repertoire that will make you look good but may be inappropriate for the student, to taking inferior students just because you would be taking them away from another teacher, to voting acceptance or denial on a student for political reasons.... At jury examinations, for example it is tempting to begin a debate of sorts in the written comments, essentially addressing the other teacher rather than the student, or worse, attempting to proselytize another teacher’s student by pointing out all of the things that teacher appears to have missed.³¹³

³¹² Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak*, 46.

³¹³ Eustis, Lynn. *The Teacher’s Ego: When Singers Become Voice Teachers*. Chicago, 2013. 66-67.

Whatever tension a student may sense between teachers is, however, just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the emotional distress of undergraduate voice study.

In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk writes, “Trauma robs you of the feeling that you are in charge of yourself.”³¹⁴ Most of us, when we hear the word *trauma*, imagine what one might refer to as “capital-T” trauma: a car accident, battlefield combat, an assault. The traumas experienced by undergraduate voice students may sound insignificant when compared with such capital-T traumas, but their impact on the body can also be lasting.³¹⁵ The word trauma itself comes from the Greek for “wound,” and it is helpful in the context of this discussion to remember the metaphor that while some wounds are fatal, it is also possible for one to die from a thousand small cuts.

Young singers discover their musical gifts at different ages and under different circumstances. For many, a discovered gift for singing provides an important creative outlet, an escape from the worries of everyday life, and a vital means of garnering praise, attention, and love. Indeed, singing can be, for a young person, one of life’s greatest joys. When a young singer makes the choice to seriously study voice, however, the very talent for singing that was once their greatest joy becomes a kind of barometer by which they measure their self-worth in comparison to other singers. It is easy to underestimate just how profoundly traumatic this can be.

³¹⁴ van der Kolk, B. A.. *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, 2014. 205.

³¹⁵ Porges, S. W.. *The pocket guide to the polyvagal theory: The transformative power of feeling safe*. New York, 2017. 99.

The undergraduate years also often coincide with the trauma of moving away from home for the first time and being forced to live without the care and safety of family. Safety, or the lack thereof, is vital when assessing the body's response to - and ability to recover from - trauma. Van der Kolk writes:

Safe states are a prerequisite not only for social behavior but also for accessing the higher brain structures that enable humans to be creative and generative.... to connect and co-regulate with others is our biological imperative. We experience this imperative as an inherent quest for safety.³¹⁶

In addition to these larger, more existential traumas related to independence and self-sufficiency, voice students also face the daily traumas of performance anxiety, difficult voice lessons, and unsuccessful auditions.

During these moments of trauma, the singer can enter a state of fight-or-flight, during which both brain³¹⁷ and body³¹⁸ are compromised. While the body is flooded with stress hormones, the amygdala takes over brain function, cutting off the brain's ability to access higher functions, such as creativity and artistry (the very brain functions we would *like* to access during performance.) If the traumatized individual can neither flee nor fight (imagine, for example, a singer trapped onstage in performance in the crook of a piano) a third phenomenon often occurs: freeze. In *Terror, Love, and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*, Alexandra Stein describes the state of dissociation that can then follow:

If the struggle to escape the fear is unsuccessful - then eventually the body shuts down in order to conserve resources. Thus if neither fight nor flight is effective, the only option is to freeze.... the second phase of a trauma response is dissociation: "detachment from an unbearable situation". As previously described, in this state both physiological states of hyperarousal and association are activated: internal energy consuming resources are

³¹⁶ van der Kolk, B. A.. *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, 2014. 56.

³¹⁷ Porges, S. W.. *The pocket guide to the polyvagal theory: The transformative power of feeling safe*. 47,51.

³¹⁸ "Understanding the Stress Response." Harvard Health, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>. July 6, 2020

simultaneously on full alert at the same time as the person is dissociating to try to shut down and conserve these resources... Eventually, dissociation - freezing and giving up the failed effort to escape - comes to dominate.³¹⁹

To return briefly to my own undergraduate experience, by the time I switched voice studios in my Junior year of undergraduate study, I was a tenor who could not sing above an E natural without a profound registral shift to what my teacher then called “falsetto.” My new voice teacher was determined to improve my “legitimate” upper register and assigned me an Italian art song that just touched the high notes out of my reach. I was made to sing this piece every week in our studio class, in front of friends and colleagues. Every week, I cracked on the high note, and every week my teacher would smile and say, “We’ll hear it again next week.” Clearly, my professor felt this was an important obstacle for me to overcome, both technically and mentally. What I learned, however, was to dissociate from the experience of performing in order to numb the sting of humiliation when, every week, my voice cracked. Over time, this state of dissociation became my default performance setting.

Depersonalization is common during traumatic experiences. Traumatized people feel separated from their bodies.³²⁰ As a teacher and stage director, I help singers give compelling, dramatically engaged performances. I ask them, in performance, to move beyond their hours of technical practice in order to bring characters to life. And yet, I am often met by students with the same dead-eyed, dissociated stare I myself exhibited in studio class. When performing itself becomes an act of trauma, we cannot expect our students to make creative, artistic choices while their brains are literally incapable of doing so.³²¹ And if the brain, like a muscle, physically

³¹⁹ Stein, Alexandra. *Terror, Love, and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. New York, 2021. 45.

³²⁰ van der Kolk, B. A.. *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, 2014. 102.

³²¹ Porges, S. W.. *The pocket guide to the polyvagal theory: The transformative power of feeling safe*. 47.

changes with repetition - as current research into neuroplasticity tells us³²² - what are the long-term implications for students whose “training” might more accurately be described as long-term trauma exposure?

Van der Kolk begins to answer this question when he writes, “The most natural way for human beings to calm themselves when they are upset is by clinging to another person.”³²³ Like *trauma*, the word *cult* is heavy with hyperbolic connotations. A first reaction to hearing the word is likely to envision scenes of mass suicide in the jungle or polygamist compounds in the mountains. But like trauma, we should be wary of defining the word by its most extreme manifestations.

The English word cult, derived from the French *culte* and the Latin *coltus*, was first used in the early 17th century and referred to religious worship in general and homage to a divine being. An Oxford English Dictionary entry referring to 1613 usage speaks of “adoration... for a divine cult and worship.”³²⁴ But over time, the word “cult” came to represent worship or veneration “directed towards a specific figure or object.”³²⁵

As Robert Jay Lifton describes in *Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry*, young people are particularly susceptible to cults:

³²² Holding, Lynn. *The musician's mind: teaching, learning, and performance in the age of brain science*. 2020, London. 90-91

³²³ van der Kolk, B. A.. *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, 2014. 103.

³²⁴ Cult, N. meanings, etymology and more | oxford english dictionary. Accessed January 29, 2026. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/cult_n.

³²⁵ Lifton, Robert Jay. *Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry*. New York, 2019. 95.

Cults can provide substitute structures that have intensity and meaning for many young people.... they also provide a communal initiation right in the transition to early adult life, the stage of the life cycle of many cult recruits.”³²⁶

While many cult members are young, it is a misconception to believe that there is a personality “type” most likely to fall victim to a cult. Rather, vulnerability to cults is much more a question of circumstance, and the experience that makes us especially vulnerable to falling victim to cults is trauma. Stein writes:

A cult is a group of people led and generally exploited by a charismatic and authoritarian leader... This is a relationship that is rooted in the creation of, and experience of, trauma... The followers love, worship, and idealize the leader, endowing the leader with charisma... At the same time, the leader’s authoritarian nature leads to actions that generate feelings of fear, terror, or threat. Attachment researchers call this type of relationship one of ‘disorganized attachment’... a leader who induces feelings of both love and fear. Threat can be introduced in myriad ways, for example through threatening to end the relationship, or by inducing fear of the outside world.³²⁷

This state of “disorganized attachment” seems to be the default relationship for many voice students, who both adore and fear their teachers.

Cult researchers Michael Langone (psychologist) and Janja Lalich (sociologist) created a list of “social-structural, social-psychological, and interpersonal behavioral patterns commonly found in cultic environments.” For those of us who work with young singers, many characteristics on this list might just as well describe voice studios:

1. The group displays excessively zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader.
2. Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.
3. The leadership dictates, sometimes in great detail, how members should think, act, and feel.
4. The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leaders and members.
5. The group has a polarized us-versus-them mentality.

³²⁶ Lifton, Robert Jay. *Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry*. New York, 2019. 101.

³²⁷ Stein, Alexandra. *Terror, Love, and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. New York, 2021. 14.

6. The leadership induces feelings of shame and/or guilt in order to influence and/or control members.
7. The most loyal members believe there is no other way to be, and often fear reprisals to themselves or others if they leave (or even consider leaving) the group.³²⁸

The dissociated state described earlier - the sense of removal from oneself when both fight and flight have been denied - is another indication of cultist thinking:

Dissociation separates thinking from feeling. It dis-integrates the left, logical, verbal, thinking side of the brain from the right, emotional, nonverbal side of the brain. The dissociated person's ability to think clearly about the relationship is impaired and so they are now in a position to accept the group's views - its ideology. This ideology is in place to further bolster the elements of isolation, terror, and "love" and to explain away the feelings of fear induced in the follower. Emotionally the dissociated person tends to draw closer to the group as it is now their only remaining "safe haven."³²⁹

The ideology mentioned above – a unifying philosophy or belief system – is an essential adhesive within cults. In the context of voice studies, this is vocal technique. Students pay hundreds of dollars for a single fifty-minute lesson with a voice teacher and speak of the experience as if they had visited a mountain-dwelling guru. There is a widespread belief among students that only *their* teacher really knows what they are talking about.

Robert Jay Lifton, when writing about Chinese Communist thought reform and brainwashing, refers to this dogmatic way of thinking as "ideological totalism." It is seductive in its clarity and conviction. After all, for a traumatized student who feels insecure about their singing, what could be more appealing than the certitude projected by many voice teachers about vocal technique? Yet, the result of totalist thinking in voice studios is as destructive for voice students as it is in other cults:

They exhibit a low tolerance of ambiguity and often express a relentlessly judgmental attitude. Cult members frequently developed something like the 'jeweler's eye,' a

³²⁸ Ross, Rick Alan. *Cults Inside Out*. North Charleston, 2014. 129.

³²⁹ Stein, Alexandra. *Terror, Love, and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. New York, 2021. 47.

constricted, selective vision that searches out and finds the tiniest flaws and imperfections in anything or anyone outside the group. When viewing the group, however, the cult members' vision changes to a soft focus, which obscures almost anything negative. Correspondingly cult members often see almost everything in polarized oppositional terms, what can be seen as an 'us' versus 'them' world. The members' group, or 'us,' is cast as the ultimate good, and those outside the group, or 'them,' are frequently characterized as negative or even threatening.³³⁰

Students who have been through conservatory training are often hyper-critical of their peers. They listen to each other, not for pleasure, but to find fault. The joy they once felt when singing is replaced by insecurity and self-loathing. They no longer feel proud of their artistry, but ashamed by their shortcomings. All of us, teacher and student alike, can agree that this is not the world we want for the study of voice. What, then, did the pioneers do to break this cycle of trauma and factionalism?

Conclusion

Van der Kolk asserts that, "At the core of recovery is self-awareness."³³¹ It is important to stress that the vast majority of voice teachers have no intention of casting ourselves as any kind of cult leader. We want deeply for our students' success, both as singing artists and as citizens of the world. Whatever pleasure we may feel from the love and admiration of our students, it is not the intention of most of us to manipulate this adulation in a destructive manner. We do not premeditatedly create the circumstances that make our students vulnerable to guru-worship; the mere act of leaving home to become a conservatory student does that already.

We do, however, fill the void, and it is important that we recognize our students' susceptibility to cultic thinking. If we want our students to be able to access the creative, artistic

³³⁰ Ross, Rick Alan. *Cults Inside Out*. North Charleston, 2014. 216.

³³¹ Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 210.

higher brain function we so often ask for, we must do our best to get them out of the debilitating state of trauma and dissociation that too often paralyzes them. According to the pioneers interviewed for this research, if we want our students to be good colleagues and perpetual learners, we need to model that behaviour. Matt Edwards said:

What we should be doing as pedagogues is trying to expose ourselves to as many approaches as possible, so that when we have a student standing in front of us [we can address] what *this* particular singer needs.³³²

In her interview, Lynn Holding acknowledged that, while she herself has no interest in it, the flattering lure of student worship can intoxicate other voice teachers:

I resist it. I *could* do that. I'll just be very honest with you, especially when I sense a certain kind of personality in my studio, a student who almost *wants* that from me. I just won't go there because I just... I despise that whole mentality. I really do. Our school [USC] is pretty well known for [the fact that] our faculty get along really well. We're very different. And we've had very different backgrounds, but we all get along really well. And we hear that from our students every year, that that's very meaningful to them, that they *don't* sense that tribalism... My style of teaching is very specific and particular, and if a student doesn't want that, I don't want *them*.

Cox's response reflected her belief in both continuing her own education and in knowing her own limits as a teacher:

I believe that you need more tools in your toolbox than one methodology. I also believe I'm not the right teacher for every student, having experienced having the wrong teacher myself... I say to my students, you should always be loyal to you and your voice. If you're not learning, or it's not working for you, or you feel in any way worse, when you walk out of the room than when you walked in, I am not the teacher for you. I am very careful about that, because... One, they're paying me a lot of money to learn. Not for me to tell them I'm so smart I can do everything, and I can teach you, and I'm the *only* person who can teach you, I don't believe that.³³³

She also admitted to something that many voice teachers feel but few are humble and self-aware enough to admit:

³³² Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

³³³ Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025.

I never have been one to go in thinking I know everything. I found that to be a negative in American academia. People took my reticence to mean I didn't know what I was doing. I would never assume that I was the expert, or I was the only person in the room who really knew how to do something. I was always really interested in, how do you teach this, or what do you do with this, and sometimes my colleagues took that as a lack of confidence, I discovered. Now, I don't lack confidence in my ability to teach singing. I've been doing it for a long time. But I had to sort of put on the face, put on the show. I had to really be the *expert* in the room. That was unnatural to me.³³⁴

Cox is articulating something here that many singing teachers feel but do not say out loud. For myriad reasons – to maintain the adoration of their students, to prevent studio departures, to justify the cost of voice lessons – voice teachers may feel they must maintain a façade of all-knowingness. This kind of pretense, however, is directly at odds with a common characteristic shared by all the curricular pioneers: humility.

Catherine Walker is hopeful that the dissemination of voice science will combat some of the insular dogmatism of voice training:

I think that it comes from the mystical approach of not explaining things. It makes you think you can't do anything on your own if that teacher's not standing right there, giving you the magic... You should be able to really understand your instrument through a scientific lens. You should know your anatomy. I want my students to be independent. I want them to explain to *me* why something works...I don't think anybody's got all the magic. So, I'm going to keep looking for it.³³⁵

While many undergraduate singers are particularly susceptible to the cult-like atmosphere that plagues post-secondary voice studios, the interviews with the curricular pioneers of this research provide insight into how they managed to avoid this. All of them share a common approach to teaching that includes a commitment to continuing their own education and a pedagogy based in humility, curiosity, and collegiality. This echoes what Saunders Barton and

³³⁴ Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025.

³³⁵ Catherine Walker, research interview, Dec. 13, 2025.

Spivey assert in their writing, that open-minded cooperation and collaboration are essential for any functional voice faculty:

No voice teacher is an island, although we sometimes feel that way. We cannot do it all and we shouldn't try... Some faculties may seem unwilling to budge to make room for new information or techniques. In our experience these reactions almost always come from a place of insecurity... Collegiality is a skill that demands constant vigilance. Taking the time to be sure that we know each other and respect each other's work, that everyone feels heard and honored is a shared commitment.³³⁶

Insecurity comes from a place of fear, and the interviewees also recognized that students are not the only ones often paralyzed by fear: "As a teacher, I am at my worst when fear takes the lead in me, whether that means teaching in fear of my students or manipulating their fears of me."³³⁷

Like their students, it is fear that keeps many voice teachers from reaching out to colleagues for help, from admitting that they don't have all the answers. It is insecurity that leads them to manipulate the adoration of vulnerable students and to assume a parental role in their lives. The pioneers make it clear that voice teachers must no longer fear their colleagues but humble themselves to accept their help. As Eustis puts it:

It would be an ideal world if we could share the responsibility for educating all of the students in our program... We must do everything possible to maintain healthy, open communication with the other professionals in our students' lives. This does not mean we will never have differences of opinion, or that we will approach students in the same way. It simply means that we acknowledge that our responsibility to the students must carry more weight than our pride.³³⁸

³³⁶ Spivey and Saunders Barton. *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act*. 112-114.

³³⁷ Palmer, Parker J., *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco, 1998. 8.

³³⁸ Eustis, Lynn. *The Teacher's Ego: When Singers Become Voice Teachers*. Chicago, 2013. 72,84.

Though undergraduate voice programs are an ideal location for cult-like guru worship and insularity, the safety and success of both voice student and voice teacher lie not in isolation but in fostering connection with others.

Chapter 5, What is Essential?

“You need more tools in your toolbox than one methodology.”

- Dale Cox, research interview, August 4, 2025

As established in the previous chapters, the four years of an undergraduate degree are both the blink of an eye in terms of the maturation of the singing voice³³⁹ and an eternity in terms of the shifting tastes, interests, and goals of the student. Too often, choices of repertoire, musical taste, and career trajectory are determined by the predilections and prejudices of the voice teacher, based upon the teacher’s own career experience, musical tastes, and knowledge (or lack thereof) of a particular musical style. While most of the interviewees for this research generally agreed that students should not be forced into choosing a musical specialization by the curricular offerings of their undergraduate program, there was some disagreement about how a student’s time should be used over the course of the four years of their undergraduate studies. The following chapter looks at some of the topics of vocal pedagogy that arose as areas of debate in the interviews. These debates may inform undergraduate curricula in the future.

The Estill Model: Decentering Repertoire

Estill Voice Training™ is a system of studying the function of the vocal instrument from a structural-functional perspective, removed from musical judgements or stylistic preferences. Rather than a “repertoire out” approach to voice pedagogy – one that centers a specific kind of

³³⁹ Melanie Alexander, “Post Author: Wonderofvoice,” Wonder Of Voice, 2018, <https://wonderofvoice.com/how-our-voices-change-with-age/>.

repertoire like the *Twenty-Four Italian Songs and Arias* as the foundation of building vocal technique – Estill training centers the physiology, essentially telling singers: this is your larynx, these are its component muscles and tissues, and this is how to use those structural elements in order to create a wide variety of sounds in a healthy and efficient manner. Given that many of the interviewees mentioned Estill’s research and teaching as an important influence on their work, a thorough understanding of her contributions is essential to this discussion of pedagogical values.

Jo Estill (1921-2010) was an American singer and voice pedagogue who is perhaps best-known today for her groundbreaking pedagogical study of the “belt” style of singing. Estill was an accomplished performer herself. She sang extensively as a soloist throughout Europe and for the CBS Radio Hour in Hollywood. She went on to become one of the first voice pedagogues to use advanced technologies including video stroboscopy, electroglottography, voice signal analysis, laryngeal endoscopy, X-rays, and voice signal analysis to study previously “untouchable” styles of vocal production.³⁴⁰ In doing so, she dispelled centuries of myths and misconceptions about the function of the human voice and shattered elitist notions of what styles of vocal music could be deemed worthy of serious academic inquiry.

Estill’s initial desire to find her own answers was fueled by one fundamental question: “How am I doing this?” She found that her training, one rooted in vocal imperialism, was not providing adequate answers. This is beautifully expressed in a quote from Estill herself:

During those years when I was a singing student, I remember I could feel that there were a number of ways I could make a tone, but only one was “right” – only one voice quality was reinforced. Why were these other ways bad? I was one of those “natural” singers. When I would do something particularly “right,” the teacher would become excited and say, “That’s it! Do you understand?” And I would nod my head up and down and say,

³⁴⁰ Justin Stoney, “Jo Estill,” Vocal Pedagogy, June 26, 2021, <https://vocalpedagogy.com/vocal-pedagogue/jo-estill/>.

“Yes.” And I didn’t have a clue. Neither of what I had done nor how I had done it, whatever “it” was.³⁴¹

Equally problematic for Estill (and for those studying and teaching voice today) was a lack of consistency and clarity among teachers of voice about even the most basic principles of vocal production. Amorphous terms and phrases like “support,” “connection,” “on the breath,” and “hooked up,” are tossed about in voice lessons like mutually understood nuggets of wisdom. If pressed to explain these terms in depth, however, a student is likely to encounter as many different definitions as voice teachers asked. Estill found this widespread lack of clarity to be a huge source of frustration when she began to teach voice:

I began teaching voice for the same reasons most voice teachers begin – I needed the money. And like many beginning voice teachers I knew nothing about teaching voice, so I collected many books and thought I would learn. All I learned was (a) I didn’t understand the books any more than I had my voice teachers, (b) there was little agreement among them, either in their language or in their concepts, and (c) that what I read was not what I thought I was doing when I sang... I decided to ignore the books, to analyze what I was doing.³⁴²

Her search for answers led Estill to return to school in 1969, at the age of forty-eight, at the Speech and Hearing Department at Case Western University, before joining a research team at the State University of New York at Syracuse that included otolaryngologist David Brewer, voice scientist Raymond Colton, and speech pathologist Gerald McCall. Their goal was to find concrete answers to age old voice mysteries:

Singing is a mystery. It has been that way for centuries, because the voice was inside and not visible. No one could see it. It has only been since 1855, when Garcia invented a mirror to look down at the voice from the back of the mouth, that the voice became visible. Today, with more sophisticated instruments, every throat doctor can look at your voice. Even with these modern instruments, voice teaching still relies on imagery from

³⁴¹ Kimberly Steinhauer, Mary McDonald Klimek, and Jo Estill, *The Estill Model: Theory and Translation*, Pittsburgh: Estill Voice International, 2017, 2.

³⁴² Steinhauer, Klimek, and Estill, *The Estill Model*, 2.

hundreds of years ago. Singers congregating in rehearsals or backstage or in rooms waiting to audition will exchange their various convictions about what they are doing, but in the vaguest of terms. There is very little agreement across their favorite “methods” of singing – and very little of what they say is related to the real physiology of singing.³⁴³

The research team at the State University of New York (SUNY) Syracuse worked together from 1972-1979, focusing their inquiries on discovering what was happening at the level of the larynx when certain “voice qualities” were being produced. They narrowed their focus to study the acoustical properties of four voice qualities: *speech*, *sob*, *twang*, and *opera* but Estill was careful to avoid bias in her listening subjects by labelling these qualities “Mode 1,” “Mode 2,” “Mode 3,” and “Mode 4.”³⁴⁴ Eventually, these primary voice qualities were expanded to six to include *false* *setto*, and *belting*.

The exploration and control of these six voice qualities form the foundation of Estill Voice Training. Through a series of exercises, which Estill called Figures™, a voice student learns how to create, combine, and control these voice qualities as Figures are organized into “Power” (lungs/breath), “Source” (larynx), and “Filter” (pharynx).

In a true structural-functional approach, a student learns to (a) isolate, strengthen, and control specific structures (muscles, cartilage, etc.) using Figures and (b) control and combine these Figures to create a broad palate of sounds. For example, a student wishing to belt will practice the Figures that will teach them to control glottal onset of the true vocal folds, retraction of the false vocal folds, thick body cover phonation, a vertical positioning of the thyroid cartilage, a forward tilt of the cricoid cartilage, a narrow aryepiglottic sphincter, a high larynx, tongue, and velum, a mid-positioned jaw and lips, and an anchored head, neck, and torso. Similar

³⁴³ Steinhauer, Klimek, and Estill, *The Estill Model*, 3.

³⁴⁴ Steinhauer, Klimek, and Estill, *The Estill Model*, 10.

combinations of Figures can be applied to create the sounds necessary for opera, pop, and other styles of singing.

Unless one is a trained otolaryngologist or speech pathologist, such a torrent of physiological terminology can be overwhelming. A voice teacher must use their discretion as to exactly when and how to impart all this knowledge to the student so as not to overwhelm, but one of the ingenious characteristics of the Figures is that they can be taught and practiced without confusing or distracting terminology. For example, a student can practice the “silent laugh” Figure in order to feel and control false vocal fold retraction, or siren in order to find freedom of laryngeal height, all without the teacher going into the details of the physiology at play.³⁴⁵ There are myriad muscles, cartilages, and other structures involved in vocal production, and an understandable reaction to being introduced to all of this jargon is to ask the very legitimate question: is all of this really *necessary* to be a good singer? What about musicianship and artistry?

These questions were not lost on Estill. Part of the reason she chose the term “figures” to describe the exercises she developed was because she saw these exercises as akin to those practiced by figure skaters.³⁴⁶ Just as a figure skater might practice compulsory figures, so might a singer practice false vocal fold retraction, cricoid tilt, or torso anchoring. None of these individual elements, however, add up to artistry, and so Estill separated the domains of voice study into craft, artistry, and performance magic:³⁴⁷

Compulsory Figures do for the singer what they do for the skater as they demonstrate expert control of the apparatus. As in the training of athletes, the training of the

³⁴⁵ Esther Benack Spadaro and Kimberly McInnis, *The Estill Adventure: Figures for Beginners*, Estill Voice International, 2018, 9.

³⁴⁶ Steinhauer, Klimek, and Estill, *The Estill Model*, 24.

³⁴⁷ Steinhauer, Klimek, and Estill, *The Estill Model*, 27.

professional who uses the voice can be divided into three areas of proficiency: mechanical expertise, artistic insight, and performance skill – each with its own criteria for excellence... Performance magic is metaphysical in nature. The objective for the performer is to get out of the way of the “heavenly fire” – to place the physiology and the mind at the service of the muse – to be satisfied to be but one terminal in a three terminal circuit composed of the artwork (composer/ poet), the medium (the performer), and the audience (the receiver) and to allow this electrical charge to occur.³⁴⁸

It is not necessary to know all this physiological information in order to be a good singer.

The world is full of examples of performers whose innate abilities and artistic gifts have sustained them through successful careers. For Estill, however, craft is foundational for vocal longevity, and for rehabilitation in times of vocal distress.

Of course, Estill’s initial research was limited in the scope due to her focus on all the different kinds of sounds required for Western singing. However, in the years since her death Estill Voice Training has spread internationally, with workshops and classes offered all over the globe. When I asked Catherine Walker, also a certified Estill Master Trainer, about this she said:

Keep in mind that Estill has been taught all over the world. I think you can make a case for the fact that, while maybe that's not your area of expertise, but I think if you sat and unpacked, say, a Chinese opera, it's a totally different vocal sound. But I think if you wanted to unpack that style of singing, I think you could use Estill terminology to get there.³⁴⁹

The pedagogy of Estill is remarkable for empowering a singer with the knowledge of what their voice is capable of *before* decisions about repertoire or judgments about style are made. This eschewing of aesthetic prejudice is a value shared by all the pioneers.

³⁴⁸ Steinhauer, Klimek, and Estill, *The Estill Model*, 28.

³⁴⁹ Catherine Walker, research interview, December 13, 2025.

The Lure of Specialization

Jaron M. LeGrair teaches at St. Mary's College in California, one of the few undergraduate programs in the US identified as an Estill Educational Affiliate. At St. Mary's, voice students do not take individual voice lessons until the second year of their studies. This allows for a full first year of group instruction that introduces singers to the anatomy and physiology of singing as they learn the Estill figures and voice qualities. As students move into their individual lessons in their second year, they have a deeper knowledge of how their voices work, and a broad palette of vocal colors to bring to whatever kind of music they want to explore with their teachers. LeGrair says:

I've taught Yebba, but I've also taught classical singing to some of them over the years. Some of them want to study opera, some of them already want to sing Beatles music... it just depends on the student.³⁵⁰

Matt Edwards also believes that empowering students with the technical knowledge to sing many kinds of repertoire is important:

I think there's benefits to exposing them to as many things as possible, and then the specialization will start to reveal itself, where the student will start going, 'Hey, I love being exposed to all this stuff, but at the end of the day, the only thing that brings me joy is, blank.' And then you [the teacher] start going, 'Okay, well, what are the demands for this field that you want to go into?'... We need to be paying attention to who they are as a human being. People have reasons why they identify with music, and it's personal connection, it's memories, it's emotional release, it's social connections. And if you start pulling students away from the reasons that they create, then they start losing the *passion* to create. And then, as they start losing that, they're not going to want to keep training their voice. They're going to grow frustrated with voice lessons, and then they will drop out of them.³⁵¹

Yet if undergraduate programs move away from stylistically specialized curricula and towards a more all-encompassing singing education, will students still pay the high price of

³⁵⁰ Jaron M. LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025.

³⁵¹ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

tuition? Will a degree from a behemoth lose its value without the shimmering patina of vocal imperialism's perceived prestige? Enrollment numbers at post-secondary schools in the coming years may give us an answer. According to research data³⁵², North American undergraduate programs are headed towards an "enrollment cliff," one that will leave music programs competing for fewer and fewer students to fill their programs. Will these students choose to attend programs that expose them to a full spectrum of ways to use their voice, or will the high price tag drive them towards specialization? According to Kevin Wilson:

You're starting to see is a lot of classical music programs fail. We're seeing low record enrollment in classical music programs, and especially in opera programs. So we're seeing people starting to create musical theater programs.³⁵³

However, in much the same way that many classical voice degrees pack their students' schedules with classes in languages and diction, musical theatre degrees also require many hours of non-voice coursework in subjects like dance and acting. As Catherine Walker told me:

There are only so many hours in the day, and there's just literally no room in the curriculum to expand it. But it would be very interesting if there was such a beast where people were coming in as a... hybrid voice bachelor's degree? Because even the music ed students don't learn enough about the voice. They're coming to us, saying, I don't know how to music direct students in a [musical theatre] show, because they only know how to do a classical style.

While Lynn Holding sees the undergraduate years as an important window for artistic exploration, she adds:

I think we have to be sensitive to finances, and I don't think we talk about that enough either. It's all well and good to say, you should spend years exploring. But I think a sensible approach would be, by the time you reach the end of your undergrad you should have a pretty good sense of which direction you're going. Even if it's just to say, "I'm still

³⁵² Ashbrook, Jodi. "The Enrollment Cliff Is Here and Now What? ." EducationDynamics, October 22, 2025. <https://www.educationdynamics.com/enrollment-cliff-here-now-what/#:~:text=The%20Enrollment%20Cliff%20stems%20from,all%20contributed%20to%20this%20shift>.

³⁵³ Kevin Wilson, research interview, July 2, 2025

not sure, so I'm going to go do a master's degree in classical, because that's still what's speaking to me.”³⁵⁴

Jaron LeGrair believes that it is both possible and advantageous for undergraduate curricula to continue to move away from stylistic specialization:

I do believe that can and should happen. I think it's beneficial, because you get a more *refined* study. A student might get a degree in voice, and be able to say, “I've covered *all* these genres. I know how to use the voice, the anatomy, physiology, and how to approach [singing] without the implicit classical connotation.”³⁵⁵

Karen Burke is of the opinion that stylistically diverse undergraduate programs will increasingly appeal to students in the future:

Most students, especially today, are flipping through songs on their phones like it's a roulette wheel. Loyal to one genre? I don't think so. So, we should be giving them the skills so they can move deftly through whatever music they need to... We should be talking to students about *not* narrowing their focus, but keeping their options open. It's not going to be so much about genre in the future, I think. It's going to be about what expresses their best self, and that's probably not going to be just in one genre.³⁵⁶

To Cross-Train or not to Cross-Train?

In their book *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio: A Balancing Act*, interviewee Mary Saunders Barton and her co-author Norman Spivey describe their unique collaboration as pedagogues with disparate areas of stylistic specialization who combined their wisdom and skills to develop a practice of “cross-training” for their students. Cross-training, as they describe it, “builds balanced, flexible, and resilient vocalism through concurrent work in classical and musical theater styles.”³⁵⁷ This approach is becoming broadly accepted among teachers of

³⁵⁴ Lynn Holding, research interview, September 15, 2025.

³⁵⁵ Jaron M. LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025.

³⁵⁶ Karen Burke, research interview, August 12, 2025.

³⁵⁷ Spivey and Saunders-Barton. *Cross-Training in the Voice Studio*, 2.

musical theatre as a pragmatic means of preparing students for the varied vocal demands of modern musical theatre. After all, an aspiring performer who can audition for *Rock of Ages* on Monday, *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess* on Wednesday, and *Wicked* on Friday has a greater chance of employment if she is able to manage the wide-ranging vocal demands of these recent Broadway productions. Kevin Wilson, an advocate of cross-training in his program, said in his interview:

All of the students at Oklahoma City University are cross-trained, period... All the musical theater students have to give a junior half-classical recital. Then we have a lot of our students here who double major and get two bachelor's degrees in voice performance and musical theater voice.³⁵⁸

In her interview, Saunders Barton explained that cross-training is not only important because it prepares students for the wide variety of vocal styles currently being performed on Broadway, it also “stretches” a singer’s vocal technique:

Is a classical training necessary for foundational reasons? No, but what I would say is you have to have *foundational* training. So, if you're going to have a musical theater career, in my opinion, you *would* need that... It doesn't mean that [classical singing] has to be your career, but are you going to do *Phantom*? How are you going to do those if you haven't really stretched?³⁵⁹

Saunders Barton didn’t define what she meant by “stretched” in the context of this interview, but a singer who is singing both CCM and classical repertoire concurrently is expanding the use of their voice, not just stylistically, but physiologically, as well. Robert Edwin described the physiological components of this “stretching” in an article on cross-training in the *Journal of Singing*:

Since we know that classically trained singers, in order to produce a strong, full, self-amplified tone, tend to lower the larynx, widen the pharynx (the "open throat"), open the mouth, and lift the soft palate when they sing, cross training here would mean slightly

³⁵⁸ Kevin Wilson, research interview, July 2, 2025.

³⁵⁹ Saunders Barton, research interview, July 17, 2025

raising the larynx, narrowing the pharynx and mouth opening, and allowing access to the nasopharynx by lowering the soft palate. The resultant sound would be more CCM-like in nature – a stronger *chiaro* than *oscuro*, twangy, and possessing a wide range of harmonics. On the other hand, CCMers would cross train by producing more classical-like resonance.³⁶⁰

Though one could disagree with some of the technical specifics of Edwin’s description above, his larger point – that the muscles and structures of the voice are being used in different ways during cross-training – illustrates what proponents of cross-training mean by “stretching” the voice.

The confluence of advances in voice science, stylistically broad-minded scholarship like that of Saunders Barton, and an employment market that has demanded increasingly versatile singers has made cross-training a major topic of discussion in the voice community since the publication of Spivey and Saunders Barton’s book in 2018. While most of the interviewees I spoke with are strong advocates of the practice, some of them expressed skepticism. Patty Thom said:

Those teachers [of cross-training] that they're sending out in the world, are saying that *all* their musical theater students need to sing classical music. And I don't think they do. I see those young teachers, and they're all giving the *Twenty-Four [Italian Songs and Arias]* to their music theater students, and some of them are fine with it. But what's the point? Is it just to be able to do both, or is there actually a pedagogical reason for it? I'm not convinced it's necessary for musical theater students, or for classical students. It's not always the way in. For some kids it can be really discouraging and off-putting. And also, it starts to look like a dog trick after a while: “Oh, look, my student can sing this, *and* she can sing this.” It’s like, yeah, but...should she?³⁶¹

In explaining why he believes that classical singing can be detrimental to learning other styles, Matt Edwards indirectly expressed his skepticism of cross-training, saying:

³⁶⁰ Edwin, Robert. “Cross Training for the Voice.” *The Journal of Singing* vol. 65, no. 1, (September/October 2008): 73-76.

³⁶¹ Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025.

There are people who are out there who are really good, like Mary Saunders Barton... at using some of these classical techniques, and their students aren't entangled, and they are able to sing other styles. So I acknowledge it's out there... But I have people come to me who tell me about how their classical training took away their ability to sing the music that they like. So, while there are other pedagogues out there who would say, well, it doesn't get in the way, I've had hundreds of people tell me that it has, and I've helped people through tears.³⁶²

Saunders Barton concluded our discussion of cross-training by saying:

My argument is: How could it [cross-training] hurt?... Free your voice up to make these other sounds, so that when you actually go back to your “normal” singing, or what you think of as your “home base” singing, you're even stronger, because you know what it feels like to sustain that voice quality without feeling like you have to protect yourself from something else.³⁶³

Cross-training has become a common practice in many musical theatre voice programs, given the stylistic versatility required by musical theatre repertoire. However, debate exists as to whether it is the right pedagogical model for other undergraduate voice curricula.

More than Musical Theatre

Patty Thom's mention of the *Twenty-Four Italian Songs and Arias* in discussing cross-training illuminates the fact that, while cross-training has been an important step in moving voice studies away from vocal imperialism, it has only been a small step. Even when engaged in cross-training, students are still learning Western repertoire, whether classical or musical theatre. Singing styles from other parts of the world are not, for the most part, included in discussions of undergraduate voice pedagogy in North America. In an increasingly transglobal and transcultural world, this seems short-sighted. One obvious explanation may be the argument that there is simply not a market for other styles of singing in North America. At the same time, in an

³⁶² Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

³⁶³ Saunders Barton, research interview, July 17, 2025

increasingly transglobal and transcultural world, the need for programs to expand beyond the Western paradigm seems pressing. Is there a market for opera, the enduring hegemony of the behemoths, if it only accounts for a small fraction of music sales and employment opportunities after graduation? As illustrated previously in this research, the argument that most undergraduate voice programs are designed to prepare students for the market that exists falls apart upon even the most cursory examination of the data.

There are a few examples of undergraduate programs that currently offer singing instruction in non-Western styles of singing. At Berklee College of Music, students can take lessons with a teacher who specializes in Indian classical singing. The website for the BFA in VoiceArts program at the California Institute of the Arts tells students:

Your focus will be on developing a post-classical vocal technique, which grows out of the Western classical foundations of voice and tone production, and moves beyond it to embrace a more extensive skill and style palette—including extended vocal techniques, improvisation, non-Western vocal styles, sound art, and the use of electronics.³⁶⁴

Unfortunately, I was unable to secure an interview with any of the faculty of these two programs. The mere fact of their existence is a positive sign, but it is unclear from the websites of these programs exactly how the study of non-Western singing fits into their curricular requirements. At other institutions where non-Western singing is discussed, it is more often found as a topic that is covered as one of many under the “world music” umbrella, an elective credit, or in the context of ethnomusicology coursework.

Since 2000, the incorporation of CCM Musical Theatre repertoire in undergraduate voice programs has itself been a big paradigm shift in North America. However, if we are to heed Matt

³⁶⁴ “BFA: Voicearts.” CalArts. Accessed January 5, 2026. <https://calarts.edu/academics/programs-and-degrees/bfa-voicearts>.

Edwards's call to "help singers maintain as much of their cultural identity as possible,"³⁶⁵ we must recognize that exposure to musical theatre repertoire only goes a fraction of the way towards exposing students of voice to a truly decolonized, culturally diverse voice training.

Identifying Success

Undergraduate voice curricula that embrace recent voice science empower young students to discover the full potential of their singing voices. They empower their students with many ways to use their voices in healthy, sustainable, expressive ways. Matt Edwards said: "I hope that in the coming years, we see more undergraduate degrees where students are free to explore the full range of their voice."³⁶⁶

Among the pioneers interviewed, a few common character traits and shared values proved essential to their success in creating curricular change. The first of these is openness. A collegial faculty grounded in openness and mutual respect is a vital asset for meaningful curricular change. Holding observes, "it takes a faculty who get along, who want to go on a retreat together, who want to not just embrace, but confront the future."³⁶⁷ Receptiveness to new ideas is an essential characteristic and recurring theme that permeated the interviews, whether it was demonstrated by students, administrators, or the pioneers themselves.

Teachers often need look no further than to their colleagues to expand their own knowledge beyond their areas of expertise. Wilson says that at Oklahoma City University, they "step in on each other's masterclasses all the time and invite people in."³⁶⁸ This leads to an

³⁶⁵ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

³⁶⁶ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

³⁶⁷ Lynn Holding, research interview, September 15, 2025

environment of “less territorialism and a lot more group teaching.” Jaron LeGrair offered another curricular example:

We have what we call a “round robin” in our department where two or three times a semester, the students go to a different voice studio class, to a different teacher. And that's an expectation: you're going to share students. I think that's part of our success.³⁶⁹

This established expectation of a collaborative and trusting work environment on the part of school administration is helpful, according to LeGrair, not just in fostering openness and continued learning, but also when it comes time to discuss changes to curricula. Karen Burke summed up this shared value well: “We can't afford to be so rigid. We need great pedagogues – people who are *themselves* students of openness, continual learners.”³⁷⁰ Such openness and perpetual intellectual curiosity is not only essential to curricular change, Burke says, it is also an example for students who are looking to their teachers to model what kind of colleagues they will one day become.

Mary Saunders-Barton credits the open-mindedness of the faculty and administration at Penn State with creating space to challenge the cycle of vocal imperialism:

I was hired as an assistant voice professor... There was only classical training, which is why I was asked to come in, because they said, “Wait, what are we doing?” So, they had the foresight to know what they needed. They knew it! And they said, we want somebody to teach *us*.³⁷¹

In the opinion of Jaron M. LeGrair, it is the sense of safety and trust that comes from an open-minded administration that can make all the difference:

A department head, or chair, or administrator who doesn't micromanage, who lets faculty be themselves in their own studio. I think that is one of the keys to success because then

³⁶⁸ Kevin Wilson, research interview, July 2, 2025

³⁶⁹ Jaron LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025

³⁷⁰ Karen Burke, research interview, August 12, 2025

³⁷¹ Mary Saunders Barton, research interview, July 17, 2025.

people feel comfortable in their own skin. If I can teach the way I normally know how to teach – and I’ll still check the box that you want me to check for the sake of accreditation, but I do it in a way that I want to do it – that, to me, is essential.³⁷²

In recounting her experience starting the Gospel program at York University, Karen Burke credits the broad-mindedness of administration, colleagues, and students for the program’s success:

The chair of the Music Department at the time was walking the halls with a colleague and they heard gospel singing. He said, “What’s that?” and his colleague said, “That’s a gospel choir.” [The chair] said, “Do students like that kind of thing?” and he said, “Oh yeah, they love it.” And [the chair] said, “Do you think if we offered some courses in it that people would take it?” and his colleague responded, “Sure they would.” Now, I didn’t have a master’s, so that was one of the reasons that I was hesitant [to apply]. But I applied, and they offered me an interview... The problem was that *nobody* in that field [Gospel music] had a post-secondary degree, because there was no such thing in this area as post-secondary study. So, it took a while, and I kept wondering why they’re not getting back to me... The reason why it took so long is because they had to go and lobby the Faculty Senate to hire me, because I didn’t have a master’s degree. And they fought, and they pleaded, and they petitioned, and to this day, I am very, very, very pleased that they did that. They saw something in me, and they saw something in the popularity of what this program could be... I ended up with twenty students that first year, who decided to take the jump with me... They were so good, and you know, excellence breeds excellence. So, if you’re doing good things, people want to be part of it, right? It just grew from there.³⁷³

Curiosity is another fundamental trait that the pioneers demonstrated in their continued dedication to curricular improvement. This fundamental curiosity manifested itself most obviously in their continued dedication to their own ongoing education and in their deep interest in voice science. Kevin Wilson struck a very optimistic note when talking about how voice science is driving curricular change:

I think right now we’re kind of in a renaissance of vocal pedagogy. Now, with the unification of vocology and pedagogy and people understanding how those things work together, we are more science-informed. The new generation of teachers are all people

³⁷² Jaron M. LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025.

³⁷³ Karen Burke, research interview, August 12, 2025.

who are getting hungry (or getting bullied into being hungry) about providing real information to their students.³⁷⁴

Other interviewees lamented the lack of curiosity that seems to hold other faculties back. Lynn

Helding observed:

People aren't retiring. I have colleagues in their 80s. I have a colleague who, I think he retired at ninety-one. So, I think that's another problem. The geriatric mentality, that's actually well known, that in geriatric psychology (and that is a field) people around age 80 start to lose any taste for change. They just want everything to stay the same. And I think that has to be a big piece of this story of why things are not changing.³⁷⁵

Though the pace of change may be frustratingly slow, Catherine Walker's excitement was

evident in her animated response when I asked about voice science:

If you think about it, we're young in this voice science area. You figure it's only, what, forty years old? That's it. That's young! So, just like sports training has changed a lot, because they've done so much work on scanning bodies and really understanding the biomechanics, a lot of myths have been put to bed over time. Now you can sing in the MRI, you can get scanned and scoped and do all these things, and voice science is going to leak into the education. I don't care what field you're in, as the old guard begins to retire and that whole generation who learned differently will be out of the game, people who are *curious* and really studying are going to impact the field by creating versatility. I don't think we're going to go backwards. We can't unlearn the science...I think we're done with metaphor. We should be, anyway.³⁷⁶

A number of the interviewees also expressed the importance of cultivating a sense of curiosity in their students, as well. Helding told me:

I find that students these days need to learn about learning as much as they need to learn about singing. They need to learn how to be good learners. They need to learn how to take feedback. You can't learn anything without feedback.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁴ Kevin Wilson, research interview, July 2, 2025.

³⁷⁵ Lynn Helding, research interview, September 15, 2025.

³⁷⁶ Catherine Walker, research interview, December 13, 2025.

³⁷⁷ Lynn Helding, research interview, September 15, 2025.

Helding feels that students must be humble enough to accept and assimilate constructive criticism. I found that sense of humility to be another common character trait shared among the curricular pioneers, despite their impressive résumés and inspiring academic accomplishments.

From the very first lesson he has with a new student, LeGrair tells his students:

I am not the be-all end-all. I am a guide. Everybody's voice is different. What I say to you may not resonate or stick with you. I am just a person who tries to help people use their voice better.³⁷⁸

In a more candid moment, Kevin Wilson confided during his interview:

I mean, the problem with this master-apprentice model is, who is a master anyway, really? There are so many self-proclaimed masters and, you know, I hate the word master because I don't feel like I'm ever going to know anything enough to be a master... Like, at least twice a week I come home with my husband, and I'm like, "[Expletive]! I have no idea what I'm doing!" But people say, "Oh my god, it's so nice to hear you say that," because I just think people aren't honest.

Tenacity also proved essential for the pioneers. A simple, if not always easy, refusal to give up in their pursuit of curricular change united the interviewees. As Matt Edwards described it to me when recounting his early perseverance through the skepticism of some of his teachers, "I just kept chugging along."³⁷⁹ One of the best illustrations of the tenacity required in order to create meaningful progress can be found in the experiences of Catherine Walker who, over many years, managed to completely separate the voice training of her musical theatre students from the voice training of the classical voice students at the University of Michigan. I asked her how she did it:

It was hard. It was a struggle. Because of that mentality of, this [classical training] is essential. I mean, the former teachers really believed that, so they were really acting in what they thought was the best interest of the students. But what we were continually seeing, especially the more pop/rock came into it and belting, the training they'd been getting became less and less effective. So, what's been really nice for us is that we can

³⁷⁸ Jaron. M. LeGrair, research interview, November 4, 2025.

³⁷⁹ Matt Edwards, research interview, August 1, 2025.

now have in-house conversations about that. I use Estill to teach them the anatomy. I use it as a vocal model, and onsets, offsets, and there's complete openness to that with the current voice faculty. So, we don't have any faculty meetings that are focused on, what do we do? The voice area now is taken care of and it's really nice. There is no overlap [with the classical singing department]. They are in our department.

Getting her students a voice training that served their needs as musical theatre students was neither a fast nor an easy process for Walker. It took many years, retirements, and turnover in higher administration:

We were appealing to make this change for years, and we'd been turned down by the previous dean. Then we got a new dean who initially said no, and then out of the blue - we don't know why - he took our proposal and then flipped it and decided to give us two teaching lines, which is huge. We're not exactly sure how that happened. We knew going in we would not have enough voice teachers. I mean, we can't do it with two voice teachers, but we had two new people, and then we left other students in the studios they were in until they graduated. Then, one other teacher came over to us from the classical area into ours, and then it was sort of magical. Because if we had asked for two more lines, they would have told us no, but we had two existing people from the classical department that joined our faculty, so that when one of them retired, we could then just replace them. The teaching line was already attached to us. It was a confluence of events after ten years of struggling...I was very determined. I was patient and played the long game, and I was stubborn. I really... I would not let up.

Walker's determination paid off, but only after a decade of fighting for her students, and she kept fighting on their behalf, even after successfully cultivating a cohort of the kind of open-minded voice teachers her students needed:

I engaged with the vocal health clinic, and we came up with an eight-year research protocol where the students would be scoped three times throughout their undergraduate career. We scoped the first-year, sophomore, and junior students, to prove the efficacy of how we were teaching and how it was safe. And so, there was enough data to support what we were doing. there were a lot of ways that I kept persisting.

Even after manifesting the curricular changes that she championed for years, Walker followed up by accumulating the data to prove the efficacy of her decisions. Knowing that the skepticism of vocal imperialism persists, she continues to amass research that proves that, in fact, classical singing is *not* the only healthy, sustainable style of singing. Today, according to its

website, the University of Michigan's Department of Musical Theatre is "the number one ranked musical theatre program in the country, with alums working in every field of the entertainment industry."³⁸⁰

³⁸⁰ Department of Musical Theatre - University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance. Accessed January 10, 2026. <https://smt.d.umich.edu/departments/musical-theatre/>.

Conclusion

“It’s about respect. Exposure and respect.”

- Patty Thom, research interview, September 19, 2025.

Patty Thom’s words above serve as an excellent summation of this research’s findings. In assimilating and analyzing these research interviews, shared character attributes and pedagogical practices among the participants became evident: openness, curiosity, humility, and tenacity. At the heart of these, however, is respect: respect for colleagues, respect for students, respect for the knowledge of others in the field, and perhaps most importantly, respect for all kinds of music. While they all acknowledge that no one teacher can be an expert in all styles of singing, these pioneers demonstrated a respect for, rather than a dismissal of, the music with which they were unfamiliar. They avoided the temptation to dismiss that which they did not understand as unhealthy, unsustainable, or unworthy of study, and in doing so they struck a blow against vocal imperialism.

Challenging vocal imperialism is not easy or simple. There is a dogmatic, quasi-religious ethos that can sometimes cloud discussions of vocal technique. Questioning the accepted hegemony can mean alienating colleagues, losing students, or angering the very teachers and mentors that can make or break one’s career. The challenges of the deep, systemic entrenchment of vocal imperialism can be found at all levels of formalized music education. The administrative politics and economic constraints of post-secondary education, combined with an increasing scarcity of full-time teaching positions, make it far more tempting for voice teachers to simply keep their heads down and accept the status quo, rather than to challenge or question curricula.

These pioneers persisted, despite these headwinds, and in sharing their experiences in this research they have provided valuable insight for future teachers and students of voice.

Contributions and Overview of Key Issues

This research is grounded in interviews conducted with eleven voice pedagogues at the forefront of curricular change, and it explores the shared challenges they faced and philosophies they espouse. As the first research to include individual interviews with some of the most widely recognized North American voice pedagogues, this dissertation adds to the current literature by documenting the experiences and opinions of these academic pioneers in their own words. In comprehensively exploring some of the challenges to their curricular success, this research empowers other pedagogues to face these obstacles in their own work as they continue to diversify undergraduate voice curricula.

After introducing the reader to the academic accomplishments of the interviewees, I examined their pedagogical contributions in the context of a broader literature review of voice pedagogy from the last twenty-five years to illuminate the current landscape of undergraduate voice training. Chapter 2 focused on vocal imperialism – the idea that there is one “right” way to sing – as evidence of a persistent Eurocentric, Western classical hegemony in undergraduate voice studies. The manifestations and repercussions of this hegemony were demonstrated in Chapter 3 by two case studies: a critical analysis of the vocal music requirements of Canada’s Royal Conservatory of Music and a qualitative analysis of interviews with recent graduates of the Eastman School of Music who, having completed their classical training, went on to pursue careers in CCM singing. These two case studies bookend the undergraduate years in context, situating post-secondary studies as just one valve in the long pipeline of formalized vocal

education, a pipeline that remains narrowed by vocal imperialism. In Chapter 4, trauma and dogma were examined in the context of undergraduate voice studio factionalism, a problem identified by the interviewees as a major obstacle to curricular advancement. In questioning what a stylistically diverse undergraduate training should contain, Chapter 5 provided a basic introduction to the research of Jo Estill as an example of voice pedagogy that decenters repertoire. I also explored the role of vocal cross-training, the lure of programs that offer stylistic specialization, and the misconception that musical theatre repertoire alone is sufficient in diversifying voice studies. In the final chapter, I articulated the attributes and values shared by the pioneers that contributed to their success.

Limitations and Areas for Further Inquiry

Over the course of conducting this research, the limitations of undergraduate voice training became clear. There are a limited number of credit hours in any curriculum. Admission to undergraduate programs is limited to those who can afford it. Teachers are limited in their areas of expertise. Yet, while it is true that our students will not be able to study every kind of music or learn every kind of vocal style in the four years of their undergraduate degree, it is here that we can find comfort in following Thom's other advice: increasing exposure. An undergraduate education that exposes students to a wide variety of music, one where all music is treated with respect, empowers our students and expands their possibilities. We need to view the undergraduate years as the time to build a strong, but also a wide, foundation.

This research focused on Western genres of music, primarily because these genres are the current hegemony of undergraduate voice programs in the United States and Canada. Many students who receive undergraduate voice degrees will have only studied this music.

Opportunities to sing non-Western singing styles, such as Indian or Balkan choral music, can be found in a few undergraduate programs. These course offerings are usually offered as electives, not required to complete a degree in vocal performance. Further inquiry into the integration of non-Western musical genres and pedagogical models could provide valuable insight as the work of decolonizing undergraduate voice training continues. This research advocated for de-centering the importance of repertoire, but voice teachers may find that expanding their students' repertoire to include non-Western music may unlock new vocal sounds, sounds that have a home across genres and cultures. For example, a voice student who is seeking to find what Estill called "twang" may discover that Bulgarian choral singing is the repertoire that best unlocks this voice quality. A focus on sound, combined with exposure to both Western and non-Western repertoire, may create interesting areas of genre overlap.

While conducting this research, I did not interview anyone who held a "devil's advocate" view that championed vocal imperialism. How do professors who espouse a strictly Western classical training defend this practice? Are there certain essential skills that they believe can only be discovered with Western classical repertoire? What disadvantages exist in an undergraduate program that exposes students to a broad spectrum of styles and repertoire?

Another logical extension of this research would be to examine, via larger focus groups than the case study in Chapter 3, how students view vocal imperialism. What kinds of undergraduate curricula appeal to most prospective undergraduate students when they are choosing between programs? Are they more likely to enroll in undergraduate degrees that are stylistically siloed or would they prefer a broader approach to singing training? After graduating, how do they evaluate their undergraduate voice training five, ten, or twenty years later?

A perennial consideration in discussions of vocal pedagogy is the ongoing quest to define “success.” This question occupied many hours of my experience on curricular committees. Is success defined as a lucrative performing career? As the cost of an undergraduate degree continues to rise, the pressure to point to some tangible metric of accomplishment only grows. This research suggests that success for an undergraduate means graduating with a broad knowledge of stylistically diverse vocal music, as well as strong foundational knowledge of how these sounds are produced. Still, the metrics that populate undergraduate jury examination forms, such as intonation, legato, and foreign language diction, remain firmly rooted in Western classical singing.

It remains to be seen if, and how, undergraduate programs will integrate post-imperial voice curricula. As a hopeful indication of progress, job advertisements for teaching positions are asking that applicants be fluent in teaching all kinds of singing, even at institutions where the current curricular requirements remain grounded in vocal imperialism. Undergraduate institutions are asking their teachers to fill a stylistic void while simultaneously not training teachers how to do so. It is a tension that is at a breaking point, but undergraduate voice programs that consider the questions raised in this dissertation will be well positioned for the future.

Closing Remarks

As I have been conducting this research, I have also been teaching a course at the University of Toronto called Piano-Vocal Master Class in Music Theatre, Jazz, and Contemporary Commercial Music. The course is for third and fourth year undergraduate students, and we meet every Friday. It is an elective course, one that purports to cover jazz,

music theatre, and CCM singing, even though it only meets once a week for fifty minutes. Still, the mere existence of the class is a positive sign of an expanding voice curriculum. After a long week of required coursework in music theory, history, and classical performance, I can feel a palpable sense of freedom, a kind of cathartic exhalation from the students when they enter the classroom every Friday afternoon. It is the highlight of my week.

The students experience musical breakthroughs, small and large, in nearly every class. One tenor – a young man who has struggled to sing above an F4 – has found that he can easily sail well above this note when he’s not worrying about his classical *passaggio*. The soprano who declared during our first class, “I have never belted in my life!” has discovered that she can, and quite well. She’s not alone. After each in-class performance, I ask the students who are observing, “What did you *like*?” (They already hear plenty about what they are doing wrong.) The comments from their peers are often, “I had no idea you could sing like that!” or, “I’ve never heard this part of your voice. It’s so good!” There are sometimes tears, but always tears of joy or relief or of being moved by a performance. Laughter is far more frequent. They stay after class to show me a video of a singer they like who’s demonstrating something we have discussed, or to tell me about an upcoming performance they have, or to ask my opinion of a newly released album. Their enthusiasm is not about my teaching. It is about the joy they feel when liberated from the judgments of vocal imperialism. They are excited, empowered, confident, brave – everything we want our voice students to be – when given permission to sing this repertoire.

The central lie of vocal imperialism is that a classical voice training inevitably empowers a voice student to sing a wide variety of repertoire. My experience with my own teaching, and having conducted this research, is that perhaps the inverse is closer to the truth. The freedom to be vulnerable and take risks, the immediate connection to text, the urgency of storytelling that

are found when singing non-classical repertoire are essential tools of communication that strengthen the performance of Western classical technique. All voice performance programs, even those focused solely on Western classical music, can benefit from coursework in non-classical singing.

Embracing stylistically diverse curricula will require those of us who teach young singers to demonstrate the same openness we ask of our students. We must be humble enough to admit that none of us have all the answers when it comes to the human voice, a risky kind of vulnerability in a world where some feel pressured to maintain the respect and admiration of our students and colleagues by exuding a carefully cultivated ethos of all-knowingness. We no longer need to continue the cruel work of vocal imperialism, futile and frustrating and disheartening for student and teacher alike. We no longer need to force the beautifully round pegs of our students' voices into the square (and increasingly, very narrow) hole of an operatic career. In an environment of respect, one where students are exposed to all kinds of music and where the full, breathtaking potential of the singing voice is embraced, we may hope to send our students out into the world as lifelong learners, equipped to face the uncertainty of a life in singing with the same openness, curiosity, humility, and tenacity as the pioneers who came before them.

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