

Independent Study: BMPF 7013

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Component 1: Portfolio

Introduction and Rationale.

In this study, I will investigate the role of voice classification in the modern classroom, and the benefits and disadvantages of voice classification in the modern singing classroom. There will be many areas of study in this investigation including those surrounding gender, physiology, terminology and teaching techniques. It will also investigate different types of voice classification systems used and how/if are they relevant in today's singing classroom. Thurman (1988), said that once a singer is labelled with a voice type, they can often “become” that label and because of this they may limit their potential in pitch range amongst other issues. As a teacher in a university setting, I have observed this behaviour first-hand. I teach “Singing Technique” to BA (Hons) level students on the Musical Theatre Course at Liverpool Media Academy, Merseyside, they are aged 18 years or older and by the time they get to this level of study, most have been classified as “Soprano”, “Alto” or another traditional type of voice. However, this has become an issue when they are asked to step into another role or part of an ensemble and sparked an interest for me to investigate this issue further and find ways to help expand the horizons of these young performers. I also teach young performers in a one-to-one setting as a free-lance singing teacher at various locations around the North West of the UK and I would like to implement some new terminology or systems to include a more open view of voice classification and pitch range.

Technological and medical advances and application to singing pedagogy also have an influence on voice classification (Gill and Herbst, 2022, p4). They suggest that research has discovered the human voice is unique in its anatomy to each individual person therefore there can not be “unified vocal behaviour for all singers” so classifications can not be used for all voices. Gill and Herbst (2022, p4) go on to explain that most new research remains “largely unexplored” when it comes to singing technique and voice classification. There is a gap in knowledge surrounding this area and, through observations and issues that arise in my own work, it is an area I am very interested in currently.

Furthermore, according to the Office for National Statistics (2021), people aged 16 to 24 years were more likely to say they identify as a different gender than their registered sex at birth. Currently, the most commonly utilised voice classification system, Fach, uses voice types often associated with a certain gender and as Kasahara (2021) explains, for gender non-conforming people, “to work within this system is to deny their true selves”. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to ensure all students are comfortable in my classroom with Mermaids UK (2023) saying that teachers of young people and adults should treat students with different gender identity with support and support their individual needs. Using gender-based terminology, this seems impossible and makes visible, a gap in knowledge and understanding around this subject.

The literature review will form the contents of this investigation and, in theory, bring up any areas of benefit or drawbacks in classifying voice and the methods used to do so. I will then investigate the practicality of my findings in a classroom setting and the impact they will have on my teaching style. In order to protect the welfare, rights and dignity of both students and myself,

ethics needs to be considered (World Health Organisation, 2023). When dealing with voice classification, gender and age could become an ethical issue. I will endeavour to use new practice of those over 18 until I am comfortable with the teaching methods, I will also protect the confidentiality of those who I work with who may be trans-gender or gender non-conforming. This is also protected under The Gender Recognition Act 2004 as part of the data protection law as 'outing' someone as trans-gender could leave them susceptible to hate crime or discrimination (Scottish Trans, 2023).

Through this independent study, I hope to improve my knowledge of voice classification for different genres and how to incorporate it into my practice. Doing so, I believe will create a more inviting, engaging and open classroom where students are encouraged to explore their voice in a more in-depth manner than they have been able to do before. It will also help me overcome issues that have arisen multiple times when using terminology based on gender for those who identify as a gender that differs from the one they were assigned at birth.

Planned Programme Of Study

Aims of this study

The aims of this study are:

- To broaden my knowledge of voice classification and the systems that already exist in this area.
- To understand current research surrounding the topic and any existing arguments for and against it.
- To find the most appropriate form of voice classification for my teaching and implement it in my everyday teaching.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- To identify the current systems in place for voice classification and explore the pros and cons of each.
- To thoroughly explore any arguments in current research for and against voice classification.
- To critically analyse and compare literature in an in-depth literature review.
- To explore the potential impact on the singing classroom using theories and knowledge gained from this study.

To efficiently gather information, allocate resources and complete the project on time (Gilmore, 2016), below is a Gantt chart that I will use to stay focused throughout my independent research project.

W/C	2/10	16/10	30/11	13/11	27/11	11/12	18/12
Tutorial and topic picked.							
Introduction and Rationale							
Aims and Objectives							
Approach to Literature Review							
Source, Read and Organise research.							
Critical Evaluation of learning experience.							
Draft One Submission 15/12							
Edit draft with tutor feedback applied							
Final Submission 21/12							

Literature Review Process.

A literature review is a piece of academic writing in which an author demonstrates understanding and knowledge of a specific topic in context. The purpose of a literature review is to critically evaluate and read multiple to refine a topic or research question (Institute for Academic Development, 2023). Werkmeister Rozasand and Klein (2010) further concluded that literature reviews offer a “valid and important” way of identifying patterns and gaps in subject areas that already exist. In more detail, The Institute for Academic Development (2023) say that it is good practice to “summarise and analyse previous research and theories, identify areas of controversy and contested claims and highlight any gaps that may exist in research to date.” On the other hand, it is important to note the disadvantages of conducting a literature review which Rahman (2023) concludes are that they are time-consuming, so planning and efficient data analysis are

necessary, ensuring that all the sources you use are of a high quality and ensure that critical analysis is being used and writing is not descriptive in nature. He also adds that a literature review should be bias-free and not influenced by the thoughts and ideas of the author. All of these points will be considered when conducting my literature review to ensure quality and bias-free research is conducted.

Based on the basic research already undertaken whilst choosing a subject area for this project, I know that there is extensive information regarding voice classification systems and their historical context. Historical context shows familiarity with the evolution of the subject being studied as well as more ability to show the possible implications of findings and future developments (Labaree, 2023). The beginning of my literature review will do just that, provide historical context and aim to understand the origins of this subject matter and identify any contradictions in the research available. This will be the starting point for this study as this will determine why voice classification has been seen as necessary in voice pedagogy and any issues or arguments surrounding it. I will also need to undertake research on existing systems in voice classification and how the voice is classified in each.

The review will then develop into a “critical review” as described by Pare and Kitsiou (2017) as an evaluation and interpretive analysis which is used to “constructively inform other scholars about the weaknesses of prior research and strengthen knowledge development by giving focus and direction to studies for further improvement” (Kirkevold, 1997).

As the research develops, I hope to find three to four areas of study that have significance in my teaching, through observations in my own practice and theory from the historical literature review. Because of the time constraints of this project, a systematic approach is desirable as this will encourage clarity, validity and auditability (Booth et al, 2016). When conducting a literature review it is also important to define the scope of the research, this can be determined by a well-defined question (Booth et al, 2025, p 25). Booth et al (2005, p 26) recommend using the PICOC (Population, Intervention/exposure, Comparison, Outcomes and Context) refined by Petticrew and Roberts (2006). Using this method will allow for a more systematic, organised literature review that is clear, valid and reliable. Below is the PICOC for this study.

Population	Singing students in all areas of my teaching.
Intervention	How voice classification can be used effectively in musical theatre education.
Comparison	Compared to historical uses in classical or opera genres
Outcomes	Improve the experience of students and allow them to explore their voice in the healthiest and best way possible.
Context	In all of my teaching positions but primarily in my BA (Hons) musical theatre classes in LMA.

Using sources that are appropriate and reliable is important when it comes to this study. According to Knopf (2006), when using the internet to source information it is important to consider whether the material is credible and meets the minimal requirements for inclusion in an academic piece of writing. To do this he suggests looking at the author's credentials, the articles contain

sources themselves and whether the author has authority on the subject at hand. As voice teaching is an unregulated industry and no formal qualifications are required (Voice Study Centre, 2021) this will be particularly important as there will be authors who have no credentials. To combat this I will try to use only the most acceptable sources according to (Sheppard, 2021) which are:

1. "Peer-reviewed journal articles.
2. Edited academic books.
3. Articles in professional journals.
4. Statistical data from government websites.
5. Website material from professional associations".

Shappard (2021) also notes that website material should be used sparingly as credibility can be difficult to ascertain. To ensure the quality of the research is of a high standard I will endeavour to use only the top three source types for the majority and use the other two sparingly. Doing this also helps eliminate many possible errors and reduce bias as Pare et al (2017) agree with the use of credible and well-researched sources.

After reading and choosing the literature I will use the content analysis method to analyse the information gathered. This, according to Seuring and Gold (2012) will give me a systematic and objective approach which given the time constraints will make the project run smoothly and on time. To do this I will organise my sources into a table with a column dedicated to the topic discussed in the document, this will enable me to clearly see any trends, themes or concepts and also see any gaps in knowledge in the current research (Seuring and Gold, 2012).

At this moment in time having done preliminary research, I have found that there are many useful and relevant peer reviewed articles in The Journal of Voice which I have accessed through sciencedirect.com. The Journal of Voice is described as "widely regarded as the world's premiere journal for voice medicine and research." (Sciencedirect.com, 2023). This journal will be my primary source of information and the first port of call for any science-based research as well as pedagogy research information. I will also utilise Google Scholar as my main search engine as this is an efficient way of searching scholarly literature (Google Scholar, 2023). I will also use the Library and web searches however, I will thoroughly research authors' credentials and relevant industry involvement before using their research or information (Knopf, 2012).

As voice science and pedagogy research is widely accepted as relatively new fields, I expect that literature combining the two will be limited therefore I understand that I may need to search both fields individually and weigh arguments up for and against certain concepts relating both.

Overall, for this study, it is critical that I use a systematic approach to save time and valuable resources. Organisation is key to a well-written research project and although there isn't a "best" way to do it (Holmes, 2018), the methods and systems outlined above will help save time and energy when collating research for my literature review.

Critical Reflection

By doing this independent research project, the goal was to identify and begin the process of filling a gap in my knowledge with regard to a subject that comes up in my lessons quite regularly. Kitson and Strauss (2010) describe the first step in identifying a gap in knowledge as measuring the distance between the best research-based evidence and practice. They go on to say that this evidence should come from “high-quality practice guidelines or systematic reviews.” By following the system approach outlined in the Literature review process section above, I tried to use the majority of academic, peer-reviewed studies from credible authors however, I found that resources were very limited on this subject, Thomson (2015) argues this may be because I, as the researcher, may have discounted too much literature that does not line up exactly with my question. While I believe this to be true, I feel it was also the lack of standardised terminology in the voice pedagogy field that made researching difficult and time-consuming. This lack of uniformity in terminology leads to misleading and ambiguous literature and research in most subject areas in the voice pedagogy field (Coats, 2016). For future projects, a glossary of terms within my study subject will help with this in the initial investigation stages before beginning the main body of the study including colloquial terms that may be used (Sidlova, 2017).

One area of this project that I didn't get to research, due to time and word count restrictions, was technological advances and their effect on the classification of voice. I found that in the initial research phase, this area of voice classification was too much of an extensive field to include in this project due to time limitations and the relatively small word count for the research itself. Awareness of this and the need for a systematic approach, I decided to leave this part of the subject area out of this project and this is perhaps an area I can study at a later time when scheduling and resources are more readily available (Liu and Wang, 2011).

Starting this project was one of the most difficult parts of the research process and I found myself procrastinating with the write-up element, this is something I am usually not prone to and enjoy being organised however according to [mindtools.com](https://www.mindtools.com) (2023) 95% of people procrastinate when faced with projects like this. Bailey (2017) suggests that in order to overcome procrastination people “work within your resistance level”, “Do something- anything to get started”, and “List the costs of procrastination” amongst many other tips. To improve in future studies, I will take these suggestions on board and use them if I find myself procrastinating.

Another element of this project that I found difficult was the time restraints and juggling family life, work commitments and study in the run-up to the Christmas holidays. To combat this in future I will add my study time to the family calendar and intentionally make time to research and write future projects within this MA. Careful time management and planning will help with the life-work-study balance (Nathan, 2023).

Using Gibbs Reflective Cycle (1988), I will use this framework to examine the experiences from this study to learn for future projects and apply what did and didn't go well [Figure 4] (The University of Edinburgh, 2020).



Figure 4

Description

“Description” is the first step in this cycle and using The University of Edinburgh's (2020) recommendation of describing the situation in detail being careful not to concern feelings or conclusions as they come later. For this assessment, I had to pick an area of interest or need in my own practice and conduct a desk-based review of the topic, my findings and its impact on my teaching or practice in the future. We were given an original deadline of a draft submission on 20th November 2023 and a final submission date of 7th December however, I was granted an extension and my final deadline was 21st December. I started with an idea to study voice classification and my tutor helped me refine and talk through my ideas and theories to investigate. I then went away and did some preliminary study. I then wrote all of my portfolio to make a clear plan and time scale except for the critical reflection which I have saved until last so I can reflect accurately upon the process as a whole. Once the research was collated and gathered, the write-up did not take long and with the critical analysis element, the word count wasn't so daunting.

Feelings

“Feelings” are reflected upon next and as I mentioned above, I was quite fearful of starting this project so I procrastinated until the last minute, asking for an extension however, once I started, the project came together quite quickly and I think, if I had had some techniques to avoid procrastinating I could have made the first deadline with ease. I found it difficult to ask for help from tutors in this project through no fault of the tutors themselves, I just felt a little overwhelmed by the amount of information and workload. This is explained as “deadline anxiety” and can be avoided by asking for help (King-Newman, 2023).

Evaluation

Next in the cycle is “Evaluation”, what I think went well and what I think did not (University of Edinburgh, 2020). On the whole, I think this project ended up being very beneficial to my practice and knowledge as a teacher and a singer. This really made clear the gap in my own knowledge but also my instinct to question traditional terminology and classification of voice used in the current

singing classroom was warranted. On the other hand, had I been more organised in the earlier days of this project, I feel I would have found more in-depth information on each subject area and been able to read more as I feel I could only skim the resources available.

Analysis

“Analysis” is next and involves asking why things went the way they did (University of Edinburgh, 2020). The organisation of all parts of my life would have helped this project in the initial stages. I have a busy family life, two young children as well as work commitments that took priority when I started this project. Using more proven organisation in the future could help prioritise study and also give a clear representation of how much time I have to complete each task leading to more in-depth study (Willis, 2013). On the other hand, I believe the write-up took less time than I thought because I chose a subject that was of high interest to me and an area I have been questioning for a long time within my own practice. Taylor (2023) suggests this is true in general as people who choose subjects that they enjoy and have an interest in, tend to be more successful in their study.

Conclusion

Next is the “Conclusion” aspect of the Gibbs cycle and which requires that I summarise the outcome and what changes could improve in future studies (The University of Edinburgh, 2020). In summary, my biggest hurdle is organisational skills and fitting this project in around a busy home and work life. In the future, getting on top of my work in the early days of the project will help with deadline anxiety and procrastination. I will endeavour to choose topics of interest to keep myself motivated and on track.

Action Plan

The final section of this reflective cycle is creating an “Action Plan” that describes how I will act differently and how I will help myself act this way. Organisationally, I will create a visual timeline that is more detailed than the Gantt chart used in this project and I will include home and work commitments so I can see clearly where I have pockets of time to do little and often rather than having to do the whole project in a restricted timeline nearer the deadline. Doing this according to Morris (2011) means “less stress, more free time, greater efficiency, increased productivity, and better grade”. I will create a visual timeline with all my commitments and hang it in my workspace so I know how much time I have. Having deadlines in a clear view will also help this. More time will enable me to gather more in-depth research and search outside of the obvious creating a more interesting and thoughtful study. I will also utilise the resources given to me by The Voice Study Centre more and book more tutorials to access help when I feel anxious over certain aspects of life while completing an MA in Voice Pedagogy.

In conclusion, the learning process for this project was enjoyable and I picked a subject I very much enjoyed investigating and I believe the results of this study will improve my approach to teaching both in a solo, one-to-one lesson setting and in an ensemble. This newly acquired knowledge will benefit students at all levels and ages across my teaching repertoire. One of the

most interesting things I've discovered is how much of my singing performer identity has been influenced by my voice being classified early on in my singing life. I hope that this new approach to classification will encourage my students to be more versatile, flexible and open to exploring more of their range in the future.

The Assignment

Voice Classification: A study on voice classification in the Musical Theatre singing studio.

Word count: 4329

Introduction

This independent study will explore, collate and critically analyse the systems used for voice classification in the singing studio and how teachers and students are affected by current practice. Since the beginning of my career as a singing teacher, more so since joining the team at Liverpool Media Academy as the BA (Hons) singing tutor, I have found myself increasingly questioning the voice classification system used and, more importantly, what the implications of this system on young singers are, if any. Terms such as “Soprano” or “alto” have long been part of my teaching and learning vocabulary however, I have little understanding of their origins or their role in the modern musical theatre industry including the more recent musical theatre world. More understanding and research into this area will be beneficial to me as both a performer and a teacher and help me use more recent, up-to-date terminology and strategies in my singing studio.

For a study such as this, it is helpful to use a reflective practice model. In this instance, I have chosen to use Rolfe et al's (2001) framework for critical reflection. Rolfe et al (2001) ask three key questions in order to organise thoughts and reflect more practically, “What? So What? Now What?”. The “What?” element will be defined as; What is the issue or problem I am encountering in my current practice? This will be explored with a brief but necessary look at the historical uses of voice classification as well as how voice is classified using the systems found through this research. I will then investigate any of the more recent research in this area and current thoughts on classifying the voice with any relation to voice pedagogy. The “So What” section will be examined by answering “What does this teach me about my experiences as a singer and singing teacher?”. This will enable me to reflect on my findings and understand their impact on my teaching style and methods and terminology used in the classroom when talking about voice classification. The “Now, what?” Section will inspect how this study will affect my future teaching and also whether further primary research in this area would be appropriate and/or needed. (University of Wollongong, 2023).

A Brief History of Voice Classification

The first step in defining the “What?” in my chosen reflective model is to understand what voice classification is defined as and how it has been used historically. throughout my own singing career and education, I have been classed as a “Soprano”, this term is part of what The Kennedy Centre (2023) calls the “standard vocal categories in Western music.” Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Contralto, Tenor, Baritone and Bass. These categories are designated to divide voices into types based not only range but timbre however, this is done using classical technique and is often

subjective and unscientific in nature (O'Connor, 2022). These terms derive from Italian meanings and are used primarily in classical music.

These terms appear in the voice classification system that historically stems from the European “Fach System” used by opera houses to cast their show and also by the singers themselves to ensure a long and vocally healthy career (McGinnis, 2010, p 1-5). McGinnis (2010, p 2) also gives the literal definition of “Fach” as the German word for “specialty or category”.

The Fach system classifies singers and their voices based on their range, weight and the colour of their voices however this is primarily used in the opera genre (Scott-Stoddard, 2023). There are many categories in which a singer can fit in the Fach system which are also split into role types serious and comedy (McGinnis, 2010, p 9-10). Within the scope and time restraints of this study, it is not realistic to explore the Fach system in depth as Hurd (2021) says it is a very complicated system with a diverse way of classifying singers.

Solo singers continue to use these terms in classical music and opera both to cast and maintain vocal health however, in choral music, voices are categorised entirely by range and are usually split into Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass (Rosine, 2023). These terms derive from the Fach system as described above (Jean, 2020).

How is voice classified?

To find your voice classification type, first, you need to find your range. Range is defined as the full spectrum of notes, from their highest pitch to their lowest, that a singer can produce (O'Connor, 2022). When singing in an ensemble, the voice is classified purely on range as illustrated in Figure 1 (Stewart, 2016).

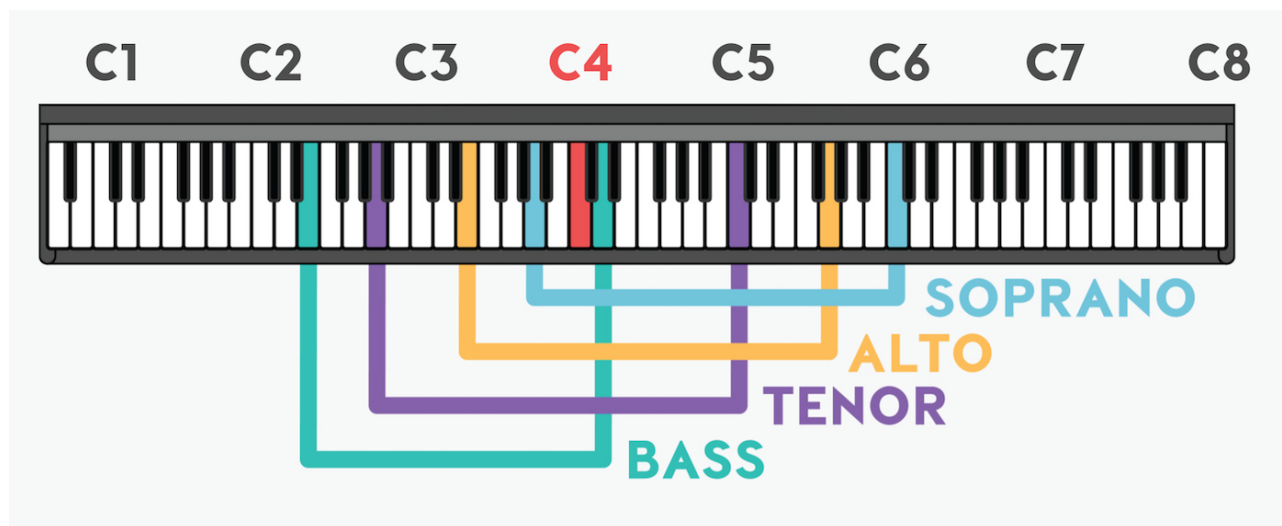


Figure 1

When traditional classification is done, it is done by categorising various other assets of vocalisation such as timbre, weight, registers, passaggio, and physical characteristics amongst many more (Tamplin, 2018). In the Fach system, for example, there are 25 voice types that can be allocated to a singer. Figure 2 shows the spectrum of voice types and what their attributes are.

	Lyric Mezzo-Soprano	<i>Lyrischer Mezzosopran</i>	Strong, flexible, lachrymose
	Dramatic Mezzo-Soprano	<i>Dramatischer Mezzosopran</i>	Rich, powerful, imposing
Contralto Voice Types	Dramatic Alto	<i>Dramatischer Alt</i>	Powerful, full, metallic
	Low Contralto	<i>Tiefer Alt</i>	Low, full, warm
Tenor Voice Types	Countertenor	<i>Contratenor</i>	High, agile, powerful
	Lyric Tenor	<i>Lyrischer Tenor</i>	Soft, warm, flexible
	Acting Tenor	<i>Spieltenor</i>	Flexible, theatrical, light
	Dramatic Tenor	<i>Heldentenor</i>	Full, low, stamina
	Character Tenor	<i>Charaktertenor</i>	Bright, powerful, theatrical
Baritone Voice Types	Lyric Baritone	<i>Lyrischer Bariton</i>	Smooth, flexible, sweet
	Cavalier Baritone	<i>Kavalierbariton</i>	Brilliant, warm, agile
	Character Baritone	<i>Charakterbariton</i>	Flexible, powerful, theatrical
	Dramatic Baritone	<i>Heldenbariton</i>	Powerful, full, imposing
Bass Voice Types	Character Bass	<i>Charakterbass</i>	Full, rich, stamina
	Acting Bass	<i>Spielbass</i>	Flexible, agile, rich
Type	English	German	Characteristics
Soprano Voice Types	Soubrette	<i>Spielsopran</i>	Young, light, bright
	Lyric Coloratura Soprano	<i>Lyrischer Koloratursopran</i>	High, bright, flexible
	Dramatic Coloratura Soprano	<i>Dramatischer Koloratursopran</i>	High, dark, flexible
	Lyric Soprano	<i>Lyrischer Sopran</i>	Warm, legato, full
	Character Soprano	<i>Charaktersopran</i>	Bright, metallic, theatrical
	Spinto / Young Dramatic Soprano	<i>Jugendlich-dramatischer Sopran</i>	Powerful, young, full
	Dramatic Soprano	<i>Dramatischer Sopran</i>	Powerful, dark, rich
Mezzo-Soprano Voice Types	Coloratura Mezzo-Soprano	<i>Coloratura Mezzo-Sopran</i>	Agile, rich, bright
	Heavy Acting Bass	<i>Schwerer Spielbass</i>	Full, rich, imposing
	Serious Bass	<i>Seriöser Bass</i>	Mature, rich, powerful

Figure 2

This is a simplified look at the traditional use of voice classification to ensure clarity in upcoming sections.

Why Use Voice Classification?

The final part of the “What?” conundrum is why the voice is classified. Waltmann (2022) says that if an actor hopes to perform in Musical Theatre or Opera then they need to know their vocal range and vocal type. While this may be true for casting opera and legit musical theatre when voice type is heavily used to inform the character and casting of the show, contemporary musical theatre may differ. Taylor (2016, p 12) explains that there is such a diverse variety of genres within musical theatre, even sub-genres, that musical theatre performers must have diverse skills and

ranges to work in this industry. Woodruff (2016) argues that the theory that classical vocal training and methods are good for all singing then why don't opera singers get hired to sing in contemporary musical theatre productions, they also go on to say that using the same systems for contemporary musical theatre genres as classical and opera causes issues in genres such as pop, rock, soul and jazz singing because they all require different timbres. Woodruff (2016) also brings up the point that "There is currently no authoritative system of voice classification in non-classical music." and that popular music singers use these terms without being very familiar with their meaning which can cause issues in auditions for students later down the line if they are asked to sing in various styles and ranges. This calls to question whether using classical terms as blanket terminology for all styles and genres is beneficial for singers and even casting directors trying to employ singers for contemporary musical theatre productions. Kob et al (2020) discuss the latest (at the time of publishing) research in voice production and how there is now ongoing, interesting research in multiple aspects of voice such as acoustics, musicology and education with new discoveries about vocal technique happening with each study. However, research fails to discover any attempt at new terminology for teachers with students studying contemporary singing styles. This is not a new issue surrounding voice pedagogy as voice teachers and users alike have called for consistent terminology in the field due to perceptions of inconsistent definitions of vocal imagery and expressions (Coats, 2016). Tutoli (1950) further proves that this is not a new problem when he states that while there is vocabulary and terminology connected to vocalisation, the definitions are "subject to considerable variance." If there is new research, shouldn't there be new, updated terminology involved in the interpretation of this research?

Some research suggests that voice classification can be detrimental to a singer. Nguyen (2015) explains that there is some ambiguity on how and when singers should be classified and argues that singers should be trained with awareness of their own natural voice, avoiding manipulation to fit into a certain voice type to avoid potential damage through misuse. Nguyen (2015) also notes that most singers start their career at a young age and in a choral setting where they are given a part to sing based solely on their range resulting in a "strong sense of identity" in that part. Sweet et al (2018) discuss the classification of the female voice and warn against doing so too early as it is common for young people, females and males, to go through a voice change making it difficult for them to remain in one voice category. They also point out that one's voice type becomes part of their overall personal identity, in fact, one of the themes explored in Sweet et al's (2018) study was that female singers felt their voice classification as a "permanent facet" of their identity and it was set at a young age. However, a small number of participants reported that they were encouraged to experiment with their voices which led to a more versatile vocal identity. Thurman (1988) agrees with this hypothesis when he says that once a singer is "labelled" it becomes their identity and goes even further saying it limits their potential as a performer as "pitch range limitations" are placed on students when they are given a certain voice type at a young age. Thurman (1988) poses the question are vocalists "held back by the labels we choral conductors, music educators and voice teachers use?" If this is the case, by the time students get to university-level study, their musical identity is already set. This goes against the pre-conceived notion that Musical Theatre

performers must be versatile and master skills in a range of techniques in singing, dancing and acting (Kaplan, 2019).

Uses in Choral Singing.

Festeu (2018) argues that voice classification in a choral setting has everything to do with creating order which has always been “part of our social progress because of its measurable functionality” and goes on to say that we should think more creatively about voice classification and give those that perhaps do not fit into one category more chances to be seen and heard. It is clear from the research undertaken that it is very important for the students to be aware of the difference between voice classification for soloists and choral singing. While choral singers are classed depending on their range, for soloists their range is defined based on “tessitura”, this is where their voice feels most comfortable and has the best tone for the majority of the vocalisation (Sing Wise, 2023). In a choral setting then, it can be suggested that the range boundaries are different, this could lead to the mis-categorisation of solo singers, especially those who categorise themselves based on limited knowledge or awareness of the system they are using. Choral singing requires teachers or conductors to create a balanced sound with equal sections based on vocal range which can rush the need to classify voices, especially when working with young singers (Dillon, 2009). When considering that Ware (2006) says that absolute vocal maturity doesn’t occur until a persons mid-twenties, even classification in a university setting can be argued to be too soon. As Gebhardt (2016) agrees, adolescence is a time when vocal habits are formed and the unique voice of the individual is established.

Festeu (2018) argues that voice classification in a choral setting is all to do with creating order which has always been “part of our social progress because of its measurable functionality”.

Gender Issues Within Voice Classification.

Another issue that arises in this field surrounds the subject of gender. Voice classification is often defined not only by range, timbre and tessitura as mentioned above, but it is also categorised by gender with female voices classed as Soprano or Alto, amongst many others and male voices being classed as Tenor and Bass. The first issue arises when considering the ratio of males to females studying Musical Theatre at university level. Almost 70% of undergraduate applicants for drama schools and university-level study for performing arts identified as female in 2020 with similar ratios in 2019 (Clifford, 2021). This is surprising when you consider that in the actual theatre industry, there is a “persistent 2:1 male-to-female ratio in theatre roles” (Bakare, 2020). Looking critically at these two statistics together, it could be assumed that female-identifying singers would have to step into traditionally male vocal parts when singing both solo and coral pieces. If this is the case and their identity is informed by their vocal part, they are walking into an industry where the skills they have acquired in training become unnecessary having always played male roles or voice parts. This gender imbalance, ore females than males in a classroom, could stem from the fact that choral directors have always struggled to create a balanced ensemble with equal numbers

of males and females especially in adolescence when gender stereotypes are prevalent and voice changes are at their most obvious for males (Nanen, 2017). Welch et al (2011) also reported that females tend to be more accomplished singers by an earlier age when compared to male singers. Therefore it could be assumed that the male-to-female ratio at university level is due to this gap in progress at the time of applying for university study.

When discussing gender and voice classification, it is appropriate also to discuss gender non-conforming students. Gender non-conforming is defined as “denoting or relating to a person whose behaviour or appearance does not conform to prevailing cultural and social expectations about what is appropriate to their gender.” (Oxford Languages, 2023). In the UK 2021 Census, people aged 16 to 21 were more likely to say that their gender was different from the sex they were assigned at birth with more than 250,000 people identifying as transgender (Bancrft, 2023). Again this is an emerging area of interest in the singing research community with Cayari (2018) stating that music educators’ attitudes to working with transgender singers are positive, but many do not know how to approach certain areas. Cayari (2018) also explains that voice classification was a prevalent theme when voice professionals were asked what areas of interest related to transgender voice teaching. Menehan (2016) wrote that many singers who identify as transgender do not feel that the traditional voice types used, Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass, are inclusive and that they do not fit into any of these categories. This is important as Aguirre (2018) says that research suggests that eventually all music educators will encounter a gender non-conforming student in their classroom and finding ways to be inclusive is important. Some suggestions from Aguirre (2018) are to split parts into “High, middle and Low” or to split gender from voice type altogether and say that Sopranos and Altos do not have to be female and Tenor and Bass do not have to be Male. While taking the gender aspect away from voice classification seems like a quick fix, this, again does not prepare students for the industry in which they will work as Musical theatre institutions such as Broadway are still behind when it comes to the representation of sexuality and gender (Lewis, 2021).

Impact

After researching the information above, it is now time to answer the “So What?” Element of Rolfe et al’s reflective framework by answering “What does this teach me about my experiences as a singer and singing teacher?”.

The impact of this research on my own teaching will be mainly that I have a clearer understanding of the subject and the benefits and drawbacks of using voice classification in a one-to-one and group class setting. One theme that was prevalent throughout the research above was when it is appropriate to classify the voice. Blades (2017, p 102) recommends viewing a student as just a voice when they start training and then finding out where they fit later on. When discussing female adolescent voice classification Huff-Gackle (1985) argues that all female adolescent singers should be classified as Sopranos. She explains that there are only two reasons 11-15-year-old girls would be placed in an Alto category, first because it is beneficial to the ensemble balance and second because she is going through a natural voice change and at this stage it “hurts” to sing

high and more power comes from the lower registers of her voice. Huff-Gackle (1985) goes on to say that vocalisation at the top of the voice is to be encouraged in this case to aid the developing voice through difficult vocalisation periods. Adolescent male voices, according to Cooksey (1992), male adolescent voices have five classifications as they move through their maturing voice stages; “Midvoice I (beginning of change), Midvoice II (middle of change), Midvoice IIA (climax of change), New Baritone (tapering period), Settling Baritone (expansion/development). Groom (1994) undertook further study using Cooksey’s original theories and found that these classifications were the most appropriate in the classroom setting and age is not a true indicator of vocal development as all voices are individual and mature at their own rate. More recently, Cooksey and Welch (2008) argue that the traditional notion that male voices “break” should be replaced by words with more positive connotations such as “transformation or change”. Using this new terminology may encourage more male participation leading to more even male-to-female ratios at undergraduate level. This would also encourage more exploration of voice classifications and encourage them to explore their range without the negative feeling of the word “break”.

At undergraduate level, typically ages 18-21, singers’ voices are still developing and with heightened social and performance demands, teachers should be careful not to put their voices at risk (Schloneger and Hunter, 2017). At this stage, most students who have had previous training will have been given or self-identified as a certain voice type but as Festeu (2018) argues singing voices are unique going as far as to say that voices are the “musical equivalent of fingerprints” so not all can be categorised. However, he also goes on to say that identifying your voice type as a singer, alongside good vocal technique will give you freedom and comfort as a performer (Festeu, 2018). As a teacher, it is clear that the terminology used has an impact on a singer’s identity and future potential. Sweet and Parker (2018) found that some singers who were classified early on in their voice training became fearful of other parts of their voice and expressed negative opinions of their ability in certain vocal ranges so they avoided using them altogether. Again, when Musical Theatre students strive for versatility to work in an ever-changing industry of genres, classification, especially when it becomes their musical identity, can become restrictive and detrimental to their career and development.

When it comes to gender, I understand more clearly how to include those who are gender non-conforming however, I see a need to research more terminology that is not heavily gender involved. Festeu’s (2018) approach to classification is the closest to my own philosophical outlook on voice classification in that he sees every voice as unique and makes the argument that some voices fit neatly into categories but we should make more room for those that are done. Transgender voices are unique in this way, whether through hormone therapy or other issues relating to gender. Stapleton (2022) identifies that there is an issue that historical, gendered voice type no longer fit in modern society and encourages voice professionals to “be intentional about using non-gendered language in your rehearsal” and that our job is not to be a “gatekeeper” for the choral or singing experience and make it an experience for all to enjoy. While I agree with this argument, I also see a need for a whole new system for classifying voices that is not based on gender, especially for keeping choral singing organised and easy to follow for all involved.

Overall, the “So, What?” section of this study has uncovered a gap in knowledge with regard to when voice classification should happen. Through this research it has become clear that, although research and technology have developed more in recent years, the terminology used is still not scientific in nature and classification in particular is still using historical terminology that is outdated and does not fit our society in the modern day.

The “What Now?”

The “What Now?” aspect of Rolfe et al’s (2011) relates to the impact of these research findings on my future teaching and any future research that may come of it.

The first way this research will change my teaching style is that I understand voice classification in more depth than before therefore I can explain meanings and historical context to students in a more effective manner. For one-to-one teaching, for younger students, I will encourage them to explore their whole voice and resist putting labels on their voices too early as improper classification can lead to the singer being more prone to strain and other vocal pathologies, especially if they are classified as higher than comfortable (Benninger and Murry, 2008, p73). One way I will classify voices in a one-to-one lesson setting from now on is John Henny’s (2019, p 63) “vocal tendencies”, he proposes four voice types; Weak,/No Chest, Pulled Chest, Flipping and Mix [Figure 3].

1. Weak/No Chest - This is a weak/breathy voice, particularly in the lower register. It is more common in younger females. Vocal fold closure is usually lacking, and sometimes the student will try and bring their Head voice down to the lower register. This can sometimes be found in females who have trained in classical music but who now want to sing contemporary.
2. Pulled Chest - This is the singer who has a stronger Chest voice or lower register but has trouble getting out of it. They will tend to begin shouting in the transition areas. Probably the most common vocal category.
3. Flipping - The second most common category. Usually a singer with a stronger Chest voice, but rather than staying locked up in Chest and beginning to shout in the transition, they “flip” into a weak Head voice. This creates a noticeable break or flip in the voice.
4. Mix - This is the category we want to get singers into. Singers in this category have their Chest and Head voice registers working at an acceptable level and have the ability to blend between the two. Though they may not yet be perfect, if the basics are there we can use this category as our starting point to enhance these skills. You can then introduce more refined exercises to strengthen what’s already working in their voice.

Figure 3

These categories then become the basis of his recommended teaching tool kit with exercises based on the individual's need. These categories are specifically for voice teachers to use instead of Soprano, Alto etc and, as part of my teaching vocabulary, I feel this will engage students more and be less restrictive of repertoire material and range exercises as the young students' voice develops. This would also be beneficial to older students who have reached vocal maturity in broadening their vocal identity if they have been limited to one vocal category in the past. This method is also not reliant on gender and treats each voice as an individual, even giving gender-free terminology. Inclusive teaching is important to me and is beneficial to all students as Unlu (2017) explains teaching with inclusivity in mind creates a more understanding and tolerance in the classroom as well as in wider society. This is a sentiment James (2019) agrees with when she says "Singing is for everyone and an important part of our role as teachers and singing leaders is to take steps to remove barriers to music making and singing."

As a teacher of Musical Theatre, however, it is still important to teach traditional voice classification as, when talking about opera and legit styles, vocalists are still cast in this manner and your voice reflects the roles you will be hired to play (Stewart, 2023).

In a choral or ensemble class, the issue lies with identifying different parts for vocal ranges and organising them accordingly. In my own practice when initial research was done, I found the article where Aguirre (2018) used the terms "high, middle and low" to describe parts so I decided to start using them to describe parts to my BA (Hons) degree students in their ensemble singing classes. This worked quite well at first and I observed some students, through encouragement, explore more of their voice than they had previously. However, this practice soon became too complicated as the material split into more than three-part harmony. For example, *You Will Be Found* has four parts in some sections and there was no terminology I could think of to clearly define the parts so I soon reverted to Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass for clarity and to be more efficient with the limited class time we have in various modules. This therefore would be a gap in knowledge and of high interest for me to further investigate with primary research, could a whole new system of voice classification for ensemble singing in contemporary music be beneficial to singers and teachers alike and be more fitting to today's society? This is certainly something I would consider for future work on this Master in Voice Pedagogy.

Going forward, it seems like it would be useful to dedicate a class in the early days of Musical Theatre student's education to voice classification, and its history and encourage them to think outside of their own identity when it comes to the labels they have been given. As David (2008) suggests, voice classification can be helpful in the classroom but only if it allows for discussion around a singer's well-being. An open discussion around voice classification could be beneficial to all and be beneficial to students of musical theatre who will need to meet demands across genres and styles in their careers (Glindermann, 2021). This is a strategy called "Student Led Classroom" and can be a great way of opening up students' minds, supporting their growing confidence and taking more responsibility for their learning (Structural Learning, 2022).

Overall, the research undertaken in this study suggests that a deeper discussion surrounding voice classification in musical theatre is needed, especially when contemporary genres are involved. It is clear that voice classification has its place in the classroom and that in some cases it

is necessary for a singer's development to discover their voice type to train and seek employment in the right sector of the musical theatre industry. However, the terminology is an issue when it comes to gender inclusion, vocal identity and mislabelling of voice type. Age is also a vital component in classifying voice and all too often this is done too young before the adolescent voice is mature enough to understand its strengths and limitations which could lead to poor vocal health. This study has informed my own teaching and understanding of the subject, changing how and, more importantly when I approach voice classification both in a one-to-one setting and a choral or ensemble setting.

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