UWTSD & Voice Study Centre

# RIFFING IN THE CONTEMPORARY VOICE STUDIO

Presented By Cierra Lee



# Hello!

My name is Cierra Lee from Columbus, Ohio and I am excited to introduce Module 3, which aims to answer the question, “What does riffing feel like to the adult singer? How are voice teachers currently approaching the teaching of riffing in the studio? And how might this knowledge influence and inform singers globally?”

# Overview


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# Justification



While numerous voice teachers have contributed diverse methodologies for teaching vocal riffing across pedagogical literature and media, there remains a significant gap in empirical research clarifying which instructional practices are truly effective, particularly from an anatomical and physiological perspective.

## Intended Impact

This research will initially focus on identifying common pedagogical approaches employed by voice teachers in the studio setting, with the goal of uncovering shared techniques and principles used to teach vocal riffing. Building on these insights, the next phase will involve investigating the anatomical and physiological processes that enable singers to execute riffs effectively. The ultimate objective is to translate this knowledge into evidence-based, practical exercises that support healthy, consistent riffing.

# Intended Learning Outcomes

1

## Deepen

Deepen understanding of vocal riffing by formulating informed hypotheses regarding the underlying muscular behavior involved, particularly in relation to exercises that yield consistent results.

2

## Develop

Develop proficiency in conducting research using a mixed methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

3

## Analyze

Analyze, organize, and interpret the collected data effectively to draw meaningful, evidence-based conclusions.

4

## Apply

Identify and compile effective, tangible exercises that enhance the ability of students working on vocal riffing.

# Literature Review

## Origin

Originated as “melisma” in Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian musical practices, where they held spiritual and expressive functions (Nettl, 1986). It gradually entered Western liturgical music through Gregorian chant and flourished in the operatic coloratura passages of the Baroque and Classical eras (Stark, 2008). Eventually, it made it’s way to the U.S. and became riffing/runs in blues, gospel, and R&B.

## Riffs vs Runs

“Think of a riff as something you can loop—a tight, rhythmic phrase. A run is a waterfall of notes. You can't really loop it the same way.” (Weiss, 2021)

## Agility, Pitch-Accuracy, & Ear-Training

-Though vocal mass may effect agility, anyone can improve agility with targeted pratice (Kirkpatrick, 2008).
-“Pitch perception and the ability to perform with good intonation are considered among the most important aspects of musicianship.” (Geringer et al, 2014).
-Ear-training for pitch accuracy is “not fixed but developable over time” (McPherson &Parncutt, 2002).
little is known about the precise muscular and anatomical behaviors that support high-speed vocal embellishment.

# Literature Review

## The Gap

While current literature offers valuable insights into pedagogical approaches, agility development, and pitch control, there remains a notable gap in empirical research on the physiological mechanisms involved in riffing and running. Specifically, little is known about the precise muscular and anatomical behaviors that support high-speed vocal embellishment. A deeper understanding of the laryngeal, respiratory, and articulatory coordination during riffing could enhance evidence-based voice instruction and move pedagogy beyond anecdotal methods.

This gap presents an opportunity for future research focused on anatomical analysis, including laryngeal imaging, electromyography (EMG), and airflow studies. Such investigations could provide concrete data to inform technique development, helping teachers and singers understand not only what works but why it works from a functional perspective.

# Methodology

This study is grounded in a constructionist ontological perspective, acknowledging the existence of a singular Creator—God—as the source and sustainer of all life and knowledge. From this worldview, I understand knowledge not as something newly created, but rather as something eternal and pre-existing that we uncover through inquiry and discovery (Keengwe, 2018), suggesting that understanding is co-constructed between researcher and participant (Crotty, 1998).

My methodological approach is further shaped by a pragmatic epistemology, which allows for both flexibility and open-ended inquiry. Pragmatism supports the blending of subjective and objective elements, making it well-suited for a mixed methods study that allows the researcher to use multiple data collection strategies to address complexities from multiple angles (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).



# Methods

1

## Purposive Sample

Five Professional Voice Teachers from across the U.S. were selected.

2

## Mixed Methods

5-Minute Questionnaire and 45-Minute Semi-Structured Interviews



# Methods

A mixed-methods approach.

1

## Questionnaire

This brief questionnaire was designed to gather general information about participants' experiences and evaluate their self-efficacy regarding comfort in improvising and teaching the skill.

2

## Semi-Structured Interviews

Each voice teacher had a 1-on-1 virtual interview with me. The interviews followed a predetermined list of questions, allowing for additional inquiries to be made for clarification as necessary.

# Timeline

## Preparation

To ensure a streamlined process, I carefully developed the interview protocol, crafting targeted semi-structured questions aligned with the research aims. Additionally, I designed a comprehensive Google Form incorporating essential study information, informed consent documentation, and the quantitative questionnaire. Consolidating these elements into a single accessible link simplified participation and enhanced the overall user experience.

## Recruitment

Participant recruitment was conducted primarily through Instagram direct messaging. Given the substantial followings and busy schedules of the selected voice teachers, some delays in communication were encountered. Nonetheless, I successfully coordinated interview times with all participants and provided them the Google Form to complete at their convenience.

## Execution

Interviews were carried out over a period of approximately ten days. While the initial project proposal allocated 90 minutes per interview, actual sessions lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, reflecting a more efficient and respectful approach to the time constraints of these professional educators.

# Ethics

1

## Informed Consent

All participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's purpose, scope, and timeline. Written informed consent was obtained prior to granting access to the questionnaire and interview materials, ensuring voluntary and informed participation.

2

## Participant Confidentiality

All personally identifiable information was removed. Both written and verbal assurances of confidentiality were communicated to all participants. Data was securely stored in password-protected locations to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of the research.

3

## Voluntary Participation

Participants were reminded, through the information sheet, consent form, and at the outset of each interview, of their right to decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequence.

4

## Risk Mitigation

Given the non-invasive nature of the study, no sensitive or potentially distressing topics were included. Participants were encouraged to respond only to questions with which they felt comfortable and were allowed adequate time for thoughtful reflection.

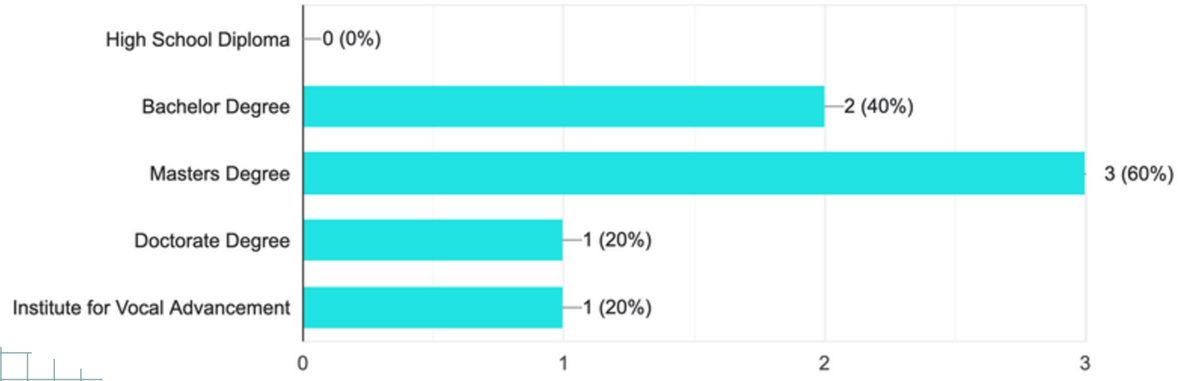
5

## Insider Research

As a researcher with a strong personal interest in the topic, I recognized the potential for bias. Efforts were made to maintain objectivity by prioritizing participant perspectives and data-driven conclusions over personal hypotheses, thereby ensuring the integrity and credibility of the findings.

# Findings

## Quantitative Results






Average # of Years Teaching Voice

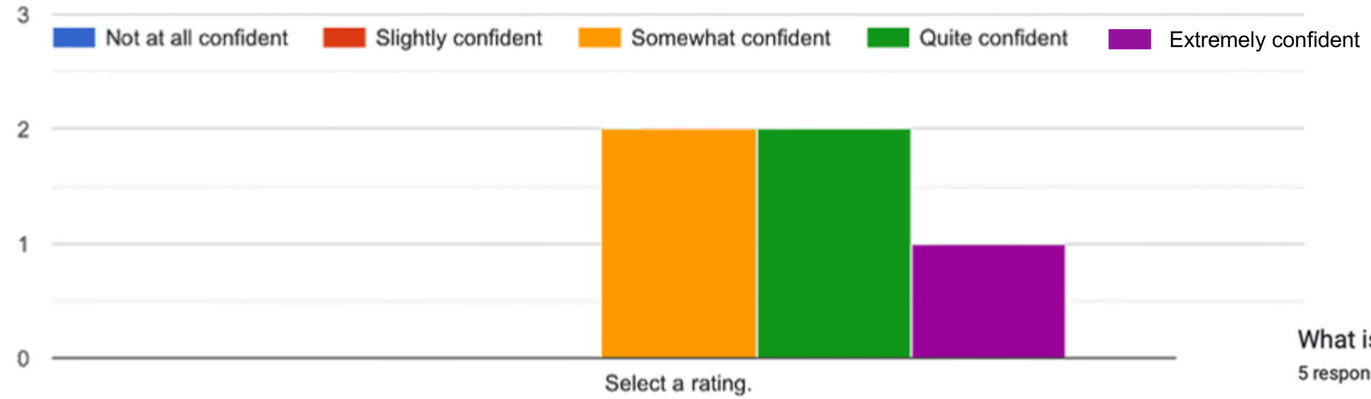
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Average # of Years Teaching Riffing

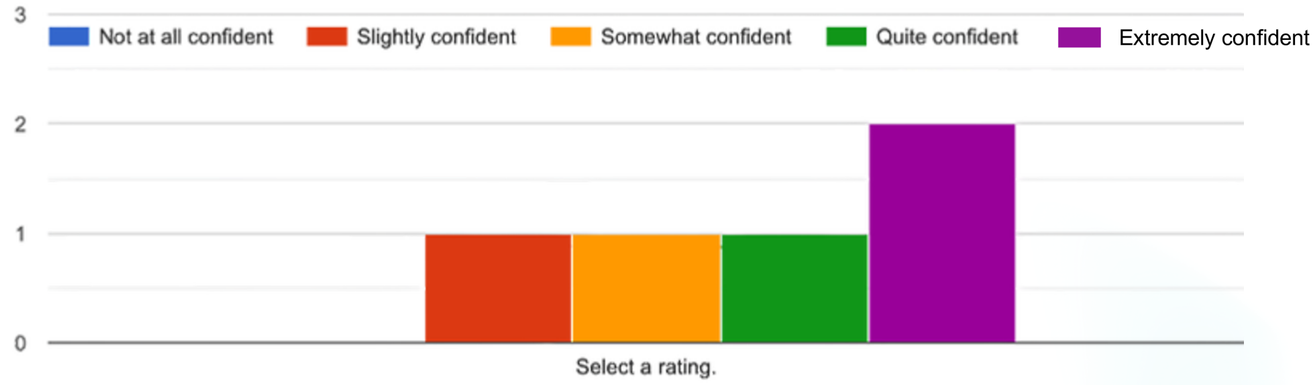
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# Quantitative Results (cont.)

How comfortable are you with teaching the topic of riffing?

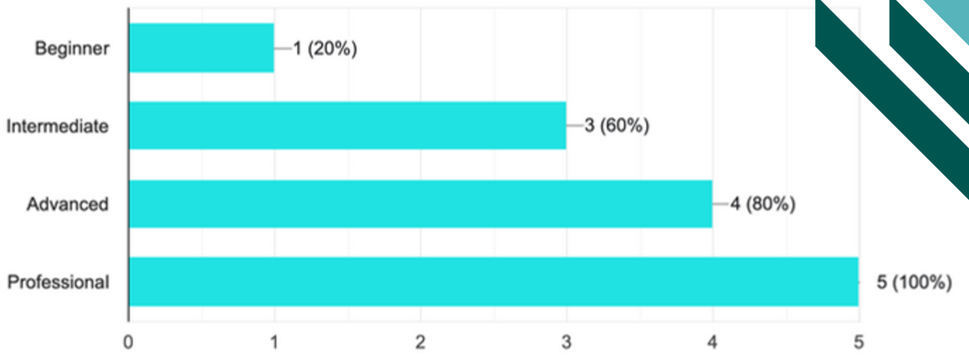



How comfortable are you riffing in your own singing?



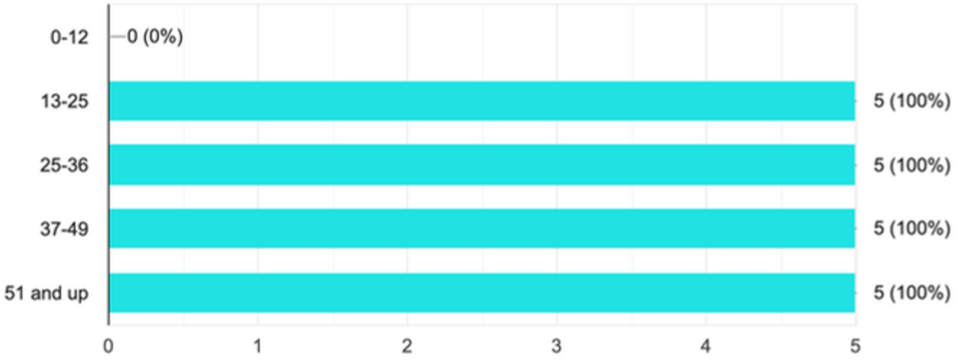

What is the singing level of the students you teach? Check all that apply.

5 responses




What is the age range of the students you teach? Check all that apply.

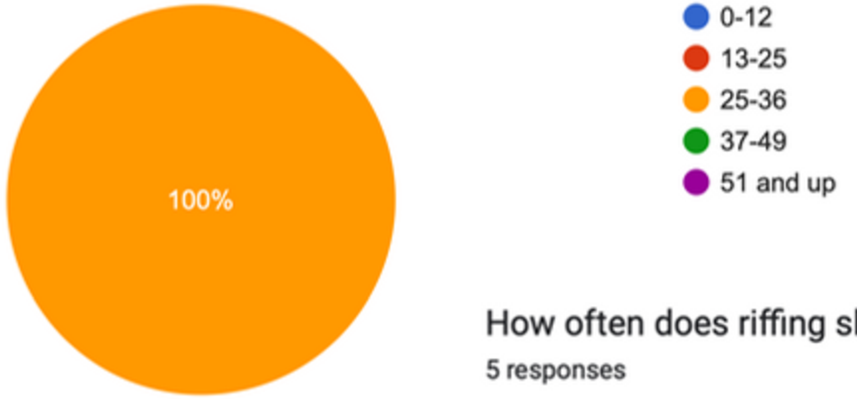
5 responses



# Quantitative Results (cont.)

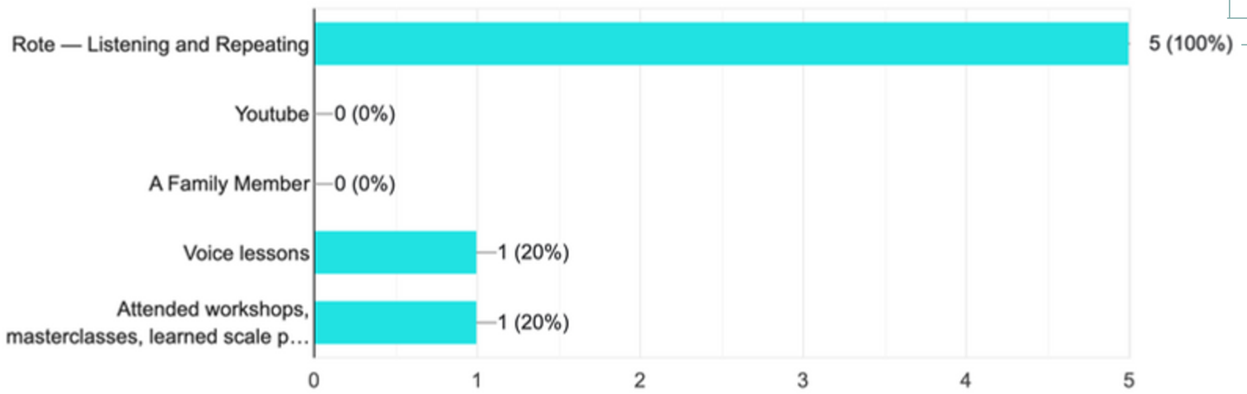
Which age range is working on riffing the most in your studio? Select one.

5 responses



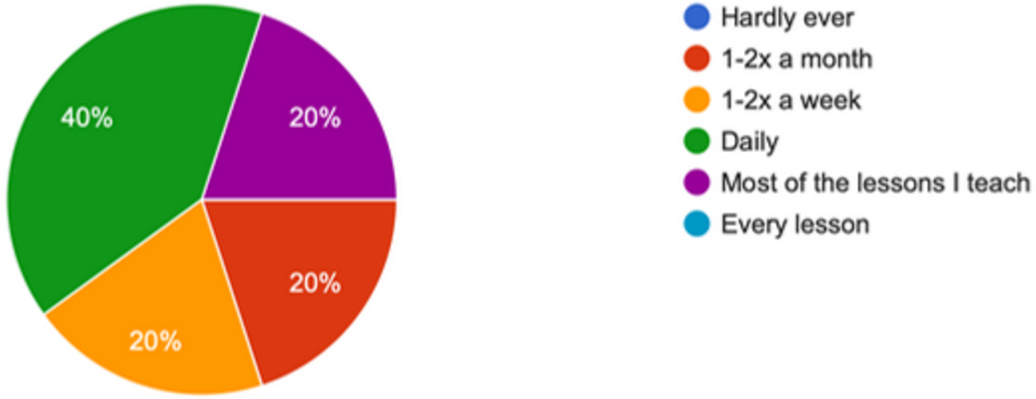

How did you personally learn to riff? Check all that apply.

5 responses




How often does riffing show up in your studio? Select one.

5 responses



# Findings

## Qualitative Results

Thematic Analysis was used to sort and draw conclusions from the data. Seven main themes emerged.

**Theme 1:** Variability and Nuance in the Definitions of “Riff” and “Run”

**Theme 2:** Foundational Skills and Prerequisites for Successful Riffing

**Theme 3:** The Sensory Experience and Kinesthetic Awareness of Riffing

**Theme 4:** Distinguishing Riffing from Melisma: Stylistic and Physiological Considerations

**Theme 5:** Directionality in Riffing: Ascending vs. Descending Patterns

**Theme 6:** Vowel Selection and Its Impact on Riffing Clarity and Ease

**Theme 7:** The Influence of Age and Physical Condition on Riffing Ability

## Speculative Anatomical Insights

- **Intrinsic Muscle Engagement: CT, TA, and Arytenoid Involvement**
- **Extrinsic Musculature: Divergent Views on Jaw and Tongue Engagement**
- **Laryngeal Posture: Neutrality as a Desired Baseline**
- **Abdominal Engagement: Stability Without Rigidity**
- **Velum Position: Aesthetic Choice vs. Functional Necessity**
- **Breath Management: The Elusive Element**

## Limitations

Areas such as extrinsic muscle coordination, velum positioning, and breath flow regulation remain more ambiguous and subject to individual interpretation. These inconsistencies reflect a broader lack of consensus within pedagogical communities regarding the biomechanical requirements of complex vocal ornamentation such as riffing and runs.

# Conclusion

This research set out to explore how riffing is currently being taught in the vocal studio, what the technique feels like to experienced teachers, and what anatomical mechanisms might be involved during its execution. Through a qualitative, interview-based methodology, paired with targeted quantitative data, this study successfully initiated a deeper conversation around a vocal skill that is frequently used in contemporary music but often underdefined and inconsistently taught.

By engaging skilled, knowledgeable, and diverse voice teachers from across the United States, this project gathered a range of perspectives that shed light on both pedagogical approaches and speculative physiological insights. The themes that emerged—from foundational prerequisites and vowel strategies to physical sensations and common technical hurdles—offer voice teachers practical tools and pedagogical considerations they can experiment with in the studio. These findings provide a valuable contribution to the evolving conversation around riffing, offering clarity in an area that often relies on intuition or imitation.

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