Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

# Belt Is Legit

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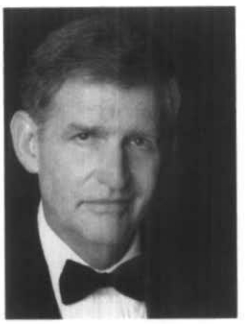

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THOSE OF YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE BROADWAY TERMS "BELT" and "legit" know that they are at opposite ends of the vocal style spectrum. Legit (shorthand for "legitimate") is aligned most closely with classical singing and had its origin in early music theater. It was considered "high brow" and the only singing acceptable in civilized and proper society. Belt, on the other hand, was looked on as "low brow," commercial, and somewhat the bastard child of authentic singing. It inhabited minstrel and riverboat shows, burlesque, vaudeville, dance halls, and other popular venues. Although this high class versus low class perception still exists, especially in academia, belt slowly is gaining credibility as a viable and legitimate vocal art form worthy of medical and scientific study, pedagogic support, and critical artistic review.

Within the past few years, several important events have occurred on belt's journey toward becoming a legitimate member of the family of singing styles. Perhaps one of the most significant events was when my colleague and friend Jeannette LoVetri rescued all forms of popular vocal music, including belt, from their long-held "non" status. By creating the term "Contemporary Commercial Music" (CCM), she gave nonclassical singing a "legit" name; no longer would it have to be called, "that music other than classical."

Another milepost occurred in June 2006, when The Voice Foundation's 35th Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice held its first-ever Contemporary Commercial Music Panel Discussion. Moderated by Ms. LoVetri, the panel, consisting of Dominique Eade, Robert Edwin, Douglas Hicks, Johan Sundberg, and Robert T. Sataloff, brought significant medical, scientific, pedagogic, and artistic attention to this now hot topic.

As with the Voice Foundation panel, it is always notable when belt is addressed positively by someone outside the CCM community. Such was the case with Dr. Scott McCoy's first article as Associate Editor for Voice Pedagogy in the May/June 2007 *Journal of Singing* entitled, "A Classical Pedagogue Explores Belting." Dr. McCoy perhaps spoke for many NATS members with regard to negative presumptions about the belt voice. His findings and analyses will further inform the ever-growing body of research being done on CCM styles of singing.

More recently, Dr. Donald G. Miller and VoceVista held a groundbreaking Conference in June of 2007 at SUNY–Fredonia (NY) where, during a CCM master class, real-time EGG (electroglottography) closed quotient (CQ) readings and acoustic spectrum analyses were projected on a screen behind the

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singers. Art, pedagogy, and science all came together simultaneously at one very exciting event.

Although belting has been going on for thousands of years, it's only within relatively recent years that research has revealed what is actually happening with regard to muscle activity during phonation and resonation when these sounds are produced. The old Italian model of registers (chest, middle, and head in women; chest, head, and falsetto in men) proves problematic when trying to discuss the physiologic reality of the muscles controlling vocal fold activity. The two register model now advocated by many voice scientists and pedagogues allows for clearer discussion of phonation by alleviating confusion and removing gender and cultural bias.

Research has revealed that two primary muscles are responsible for vocal fold activity: the thyroarytenoid muscles (TA) and the cricothyroid muscles (CT). The TA is responsible for shortening and thickening the vocal folds, thus producing sound that is commonly associated with chest voice in both men and women. The CT muscle is responsible for stretching and thinning the vocal folds, thus producing the sound that is commonly associated with head voice in women and falsetto in men. Also playing a part in phonation are the adducting and abducting muscles called the interarytenoids and cricoarytenoids.

Vocal fold activity is a continuously changing dynamic of stretching and thickening based upon pitch, loudness, resonance, and register demands. Belting in both men and women is produced by TA-dominant vocal fold activity. The CT muscle, however, must remain active to keep the vocal folds from overthickening and producing a heavily weighted vocal fold posture which could cause excessive tension and strain, particularly in higher pitch ranges.

*Fach* issues are as critical in belting as they are in classical singing. Healthy, efficient belting is a result of keeping the TA-CT muscle interaction properly balanced in each individual voice. Therefore, a *lyric* soprano has to be a *lyric* belter with thinner TA activity than a mezzo soprano/belter might use. In the same vein, a bass will be able to thicken his voice much more than a tenor.

Research also has indicated that during belting there can be an increase in the closed quotient (the time the vocal folds are closed during one cycle of vibration), thus producing higher frequencies. Belting—especially high, loud belting—can have both a high CQ and frequencies as high as 10 kHz, while classical sounds do not normally exceed 4 kHz.

It's important to note that voice pedagogues trying to teach "healthy belting" with a CT-dominant (head voice) vocal fold source as opposed to the TA-dominant (chest voice) vocal fold source may not be preparing their students for the real world of CCM singing. The industry term for a CT-dominant belt is "faux belt" (fake belt), in as much as the sound does not have the power or presence of TA-dominant belt. Faux belt is always an option for singers, especially if the high notes exceed their normal belt range. However, if the songs or characters demand a TA-dominant belt sound, those singers may need to defer to other belters with a higher *Fach* or ones with better command of their lower register.

Vocal fold activity does not function in isolation; resonation is inextricably connected to phonation. Vocal folds are the sound source and resonators (throat, mouth, and nose) are the sound filters or amplifiers. Since belting is speech-like in quality, it follows that the preferred resonance coupling to a TA-dominant vocal fold source would be bright or highly *chiaro*. A narrowed pharynx and a more horizontal mouth position for vowels and consonants (a spreading of the mouth "east and west" as opposed to the "north and south" position for tall, round classical vowels) help make this resonance choice possible. This bright resonance posture is a major factor in most variations of belting, real or faux, and for both female and male belters.

Research in voice physiology tells us that specific muscles are responsible for certain sounds (TA-dominant: chest, belt, mix; CT-dominant: head, falsetto). Acoustic research reveals that classical and belt sounds create different frequencies, formants, and harmonics. It follows then that different voice techniques are required to activate the muscles and produce the sounds necessary for a variety of singing styles.

Classical technique that enables the singer to sing a self-amplified sound with tall, round vowels, a vibrato initiated at onset and continued to offset, and a CT-dominant vocal source, is of little use to a belter. Classical technique serves only classical and traditional Broadway legit singing.

In order to create a healthy, efficient, and artistically credible belt, a voice technique measurably different

than that used in classical singing is needed. Since the production of belt singing for men can be dramatically different than it is for women, it is necessary to address male and female belt pedagogy separately.

All male singers, with the exception of pop and classical countertenors, sing with a TA-dominant vocal fold source. Therefore, in order to belt, men are not required to change vocal registers. Using bright, speech-like sounds, a noncontinuous vibrato, and a more text-driven approach to the repertoire puts a male singer on the right track to develop his belt voice.

Female singers in order to belt also must have a TA-dominant vocal source; bright, speech-like sounds; noncontinuous vibrato; and a text-driven approach. As with a male singer, a female singer who sings with a TA-dominant vocal fold source will find it fairly easy to produce a belt sound. However, for a female singer whose primary vocal fold source is CT-dominant, the register shift could be quite daunting. For the classical female singer, the shift to belt may be even more difficult since it not only involves a register shift, but also a shift from tall, round vowels and formal language to the production of bright, narrow vowels and speech-based language. Carrying TA-dominant sounds up the scale with tall, round vowels is stylistically inappropriate for belt as well as overly taxing and potentially damaging to the instrument.

All vocal training, whether classical or CCM, should include the development of the entire vocal mechanism from the lowest TA-dominant sound to the highest CT-dominant sound, as well as the multitude of resonance options, so that the entire musculature gains strength, flexibility, coordination, and endurance. Since there are no belt exercises, but rather exercises done with a belt voice, triads, scales, and arpeggios serve both the voice teacher and singing student in developing voice technique in support of belt. However, in light of the research, developing only one vocal fold source or limiting resonance options is simply bad voice pedagogy.

In the past few decades, CCM music, which in many cases utilizes belt, has evolved into a highly sophisticated and technically demanding art form which has excited the curiosity of researchers, created a need for its own pedagogy, and, in response to popular demand, has led to the development of music theater and CCM departments throughout academia, as well as a clamoring for CCM training in private voice studios. Although belt singing predates classical singing by perhaps thousands of years, it is only in recent years that it has become a major topic of discussion throughout the voice teaching community. Thanks and kudos to all those pioneers whose efforts have led us to this moment in time when we can say, "Belt is legit!"

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**Robert Edwin** has gained international recognition as a singer, composer, teacher, and writer. He has sung Bach cantatas in church cathedrals and rock songs in Greenwich Village, performed in New York coffeehouses, recorded for Avant Garde and Fortress Records, and toured extensively throughout the United States and abroad.

His diverse performing career is matched by an equally diverse teaching career. A leading authority on Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) and child voice pedagogy, Robert Edwin preaches what he practices at his large private studio in Cinnaminson, New Jersey, where classical singers interact with music theater performers; rock, pop, and jazz vocalists; child singers; and pageant contestants.

Robert Edwin has served on the adjunct voice faculties of the University of Michigan, the New Jersey School of the Arts, Burlington County College (NJ), and continues to serve on the Applied Music Staff of Camden County College (NJ). He is a frequent faculty member of The Voice Foundation's Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice. A member of the distinguished American Academy of Teachers of Singing, he has led master classes and workshops in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Mr. Edwin is an Associate Editor of the NATS *Journal of Singing* and the past NATS national Secretary/Treasurer. His column, "The Bach to Rock Connection" (1985–2002), was the first regular feature in the *Journal* dedicated to nonclassical voice pedagogy. In 2005, he was honored to be the first Master Teacher in the NATS Intern Program to represent the private studio sector. www.robertedwinstudio.com