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# The Flemingo Stance: Is Operatic Voice Production a Style or an Acoustic Requirement?

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**T**EACHERS OF SINGING are often the first to introduce operatic vocal production to a young singer. Most young adults grow up listening to popular, contemporary vocal sounds before beginning formal vocal training. These contemporary vocal sounds are closer to the normal speaking voice, often amplified and electronically enhanced. Students are generally unfamiliar with the sound of a voice trained for maximum unassisted acoustic output. Although contemporary vocal artists can exhibit wide pitch ranges and virtuosic singing, the principal distinction between these genres and live operatic singing—in a performance hall—is sound power delivered directly by mouth rather than by loudspeakers. This sound power and sound delivery difference, however, is rarely appreciated in early exposure to opera and other classical singing. The first exposure is generally not in a performance hall for most people. It comes from listening to the radio or a recording, both of which are electronically mastered and then received at a short distance. Hence, the difference in production is perceived as a style, not an acoustic necessity of unamplified performance. The use of multiple foreign languages may also contribute to the perception of an unfamiliar characteristic.

The operatic sound is an artistic version of “calling.” It is intended to fill a relatively large space with sound, enough to stir deep emotions in a listener at a considerable distance and, in the case of opera, over the competing sounds of an orchestra and chorus. The full range of human emotion has to be conveyed at distances half the length of a football field, not only with pitch and a dynamic spectrum, but also with tone quality, artistry, and ornamentation. The tone includes elements of vibrato, ring, and register. Ornamentation includes trills, *messa di voce*, coloratura, and other melisma. Vibrato can convey excitement and vitality, vocal ring can convey heroism and brilliance, and registration can convey warmth, purity, or strength. Techniques have been developed over centuries to teach singers how to maximize volume without wear and tear on the instrument.

When explaining the difference between an opera singer and a singer of other genres, the chief distinction to make is the absence of amplification for opera singers. The acoustic demands of opera are a primary reason that

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the college degree accrediting agency, the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), considers a baccalaureate degree in voice performance, or classical voice, only a pre-opera degree. The operatically trained instrument needs more time to mature, with perhaps the exception of the lightest soprano voice categories. In contrast, NASM considers a baccalaureate degree in music theater sufficient to develop an entry-level music theater performer. At the undergraduate level, it is often not yet evident whether a student's voice will develop enough to have a career in opera.

Rather than explaining operatic sound production as a musical and vocal style to beginning vocalists, we can discuss it as a vocal fitness and versatility requirement for unamplified singing. Over time, some of the fitness and versatility features have carried over into modern vocalization. The rise of popular music in the twentieth century permeated world culture, not only in the United States. The runs and riffs of popular singers, including the thrill of a high note, often mirror the virtuosity of a classically trained singer, all in the service of maximum vocal expression and demonstration of skill. Similarly, vocal improvisation in jazz and contemporary styles has precedent in Baroque and bel canto repertoire. In sports, any specific game (football, baseball, volleyball) is often secondary to a viewer's appreciation of the physical feats and prowess displayed by the athletes themselves. Fans of opera are equally passionate about vocal prowess, with bravos and boos analogous to the cheers and jeers of sports fans. We applaud someone for a record-breaking sprint or gymnastic routine, but not for walking across a room; likewise, an accomplished rendition of an aria has the power to dazzle us in a way that ordinary speech does not. In the animal world, power, rank, and dominance are often associated with vocal power; the loudest and most passionate call is heeded. Often, physical contest with injury is avoided with demonstration of vocal prowess.

It can be helpful to explain to young listeners that classical vocal "calling" is not affected or unnatural, but in many ways closer to nature than the low-level speech we hear all day. Scientists are increasingly looking at animal vocalization to discover how and when in evolution humans developed the ability to communicate. Neanderthals, for example, had a fully developed larynx as we know it today, and the questions regarding how

humans may have used vocalization to imitate sounds in nature and to communicate over distance and between tribes may never be fully answered, but the questions are fascinating to ponder.

In teaching singing today, the different approaches to diction in opera and contemporary styles, respectively, should be addressed. In ordinary speech, we use ranges of pitch and volume that make text consistently understandable. In unamplified singing, pitch and volume are geared toward acoustic advantages. Typically, classically trained sopranos struggle the most with diction. The higher the pitch, the poorer the vowel clarity. This is scientifically undisputed and completely explainable on the basis of wide-spread harmonics that do not adequately energize the formants. Also, the oropharyngeal stretch (open throat) is an acoustic requirement for maximum sound output that impairs vowel clarity. In master classes and introductory lectures about opera, audience members can be asked to try speaking while yawning to get a sense of the dilemma.

In contemporary singing, extreme range, complex melisma, improvisation, and variable vocal sound qualities are frequent. However, when it comes to the acoustic challenges of singing unamplified, as in opera, can all of these extremes and complexities prevail with the demands of getting enough sound to the listener? Some voice teachers working with music theater and contemporary vocalists are currently employing early cross-training of their students. This is not with the intention and expectation that their clients will pursue a combined career in opera, music theater, and popular music, but rather to build a strong, versatile, and balanced voice. Other voice teachers come from a strong classical training and performance background and approach their work with music theater clients from a deeper root in classical unamplified training. There are teachers who refuse to train voices from the perspective that amplification is part of the instrument, believing that voice training should not be specifically tailored for amplified performance. However, the professional demands of contemporary genres, such as sustaining an eight show-a-week performance schedule, call for a training regimen that considers the load reduction with amplification as part of the training.

In summary, appreciation of the full spectrum of vocal production expands with an understanding of the acous-

tic demand of being heard and understood by listeners in different venues. We admire athletes who can run, jump, or swim without any technological assistance, but we also admire those who perform on bicycles, motorcycles, skis, snowboards, or toe shoes. Similarly, there are differing physiological demands for operatic, music theater, and contemporary vocal production, respectively. Informed listeners and teachers with a knowledge of these differences can raise their level of appreciation, or their teaching skills, without undue judgments of right and wrong, or styles that come and go.

**Dr. Rachelle Fleming** specializes in the training and vocal health of the contemporary vocal artist. Dr. Fleming holds a doctorate in Vocal Pedagogy and Performance from the University of Miami, a research Masters in Music Education from Eastman School of Music, a Bachelors of Music in Voice Performance. She has completed a voice science course under Dr. Ingo Titze at the Summer Vocology Institute, and pedagogic coursework in two of the leading commercial vocal music training programs. Currently, Dr. Fleming is a full-time member of the music theater faculty of The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and continues to teach privately. Her students include those who perform on Broadway, in National Tours, at Madison Square Garden, Signature Theater, The Metropolitan Opera, and regionally. Dr. Fleming has previously taught at The Actors Studio MFA program at The New School in NYC, The Eastman School of Music Community Division in Rochester, NY, and at the University of Miami, Frost School of Music. She is in demand for master classes and as a visiting teaching artist. A versatile performer, Rachelle has performed in plays, musicals, solo concerts, orchestral pops concerts, televised performances, and recordings.

Dr. Fleming acted as Production Adviser for American Voices, a three-day festival on American singing hosted by Renée Fleming at The Kennedy Center, and as a panelist for the symposium session "Voice Training Today." An edited taping of this event later aired on PBS as a part of their *Great Performances* series. Dr. Fleming is a charter member of the Pan American Vocology Association (PAVA), and a member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS). Research she has coauthored has recently been presented at conferences held by PAVA, NATS, and the Voice Foundation. Her work in teaching and research is also supported by professional experience in personal artist administration, stage direction, performance, television, and recording.

**Renée Fleming** is one of the most acclaimed singers of our time. In 2013, President Obama awarded her America's highest honor for an artist, the National Medal of Arts. In 2014, she became the first classical artist ever to sing the National Anthem at the Super Bowl. Winner of four Grammy® awards, Renée has sung for momentous occasions from the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony to the Diamond Jubilee Concert for Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace.

Renée earned a Tony Award nomination for her performance in the 2018 Broadway production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*. Her recent tour schedule has included concerts in New York, London, Vienna, Paris, Madrid, Tokyo, and Beijing. She is heard on the soundtracks of the Best Picture Oscar winner *The Shape of Water* and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, and she will soon be heard as the voice of Roxane, played by Julianne Moore, in the film *Bel Canto*.

As Artistic Advisor to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Renée spearheads a collaboration with the National Institutes of Health focused on music, health, and neuroscience. Since 2010, she has been the Creative Consultant at Lyric Opera of Chicago. She is currently a member of the Board of Trustees of Carnegie Hall, the Artistic Advisory Board of the Polyphony Foundation, and the Board of Sing for Hope. Among her awards are the Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Medal, Germany's Cross of the Order of Merit, Sweden's Polar Music Prize, and France's Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. [www.reneefleming.com](http://www.reneefleming.com).

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
.....  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

Robert Frost, from "Mending Wall"