
Semi-Structured Interviews with Two Seasoned Teaching Artists on the Impact of Microphones:

Vocal Pedagogy and Technique in Teaching and Performance Settings

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Background and Purpose

Many vocalists who sing genres such as pop, jazz, musical theatre and world music use microphones for various reasons (performances, gigs, recordings). Often, singers are in control of their own bodies and therefore their voices, but microphones have become a more popular extension of our instrument, especially with these contemporary styles. Microphones directly alter acoustical properties and therefore could have an impact in the way a vocalist may sing. For instance, it may change the way we stand (posture, alignment), it may help with how loud or soft we sing, and how and how far our sound travels too. Regardless of how intertwined microphones are in our contemporary practices, in vocal pedagogy learning about microphone technique is neglected, and most singers aren't familiar with different kinds of microphones, their acoustical properties and they learn by "winging it". Therefore, this study explores if microphones have a direct impact on our singing technique, how and why. It also looks into whether or not microphones could be beneficial in rehearsals.

Research Questions

- 1. Do microphones alter your singing technique (posture, vowels, timbre, etc)?**
- 2. Is integrating microphones beneficial in our private and choral teaching settings?**
- 3. Is it important/beneficial to understand different types of mics, and their acoustical characteristics?**

Methodology

● Qualitative Method

- Semi-Structured Interviews with two Teaching Artists (1-1.5 hours each)
 - Both participants between the ages of 25-30.
 - One male and one female.
 - Both involved with teaching and performing various genres such as Musical Theatre, Pop, Rock, Jazz, Folk and more.
- Question Examples: (answered as teachers, and as performers)
 - Personal : Background information (how many years of teaching and performing experience, current jobs, preferred genres, etc)
 - Do you feel different singing with and without a microphone? What are some pros and cons?
 - Do you change your technique when you sing into a microphone?
 - Does it affect your posture? Do you modify vowels?
 - Are you familiar about different kinds of microphones? Is this beneficial?
 - Do you use microphones in your private studios, or when teaching groups?
 - Do you address mic. technique with your students? Pros and cons? (...continues)

Results (Question 1)

1. Microphones do not necessarily alter your base/fundamental vocal technique, especially not in contemporary Musical Theatre. It does, however, alter performance circumstances, which then in return could require adjustments in things such as posture/alignment and stretching of the larynx, volume, etc. The significance of these adjustments will depend on the genre ,and types of microphones being used (headset - which was most preferred vs stands which was least preferred, for instance).
 - a. Microphones help with volume/amplification, and may be helpful in preventing overuse or over compensation of the voice. It may help one carry the sound with less effort, and take off some pressure.
 - b. Vocal effects available may lead to more technique manipulation. When technique is dependent on the microphone, it is often only a stylistic choice. (Different genres play around with different effects- pop: lots of reverb and swells, rock: distortion, edm: autotune, and more). It could be used as a great tool for creativity and playfulness, after building a strong foundation.
 - c. Most substantial difference in technique is seen when singers are in a “bad audio” situation. If the sound system isn’t working for them, they end up having to modify their own singing, instead of fixing the issue.

Results Continued (Questions 2,3 combined)

2. It is important to practice with a microphone when the performance involves a microphone. However:

- The gap between performance and practice will still arise if sound systems aren't exactly replicated. It may not hurt, but also it may not be significantly helpful unless rehearsed in the exact same space with the same equipment. The benefits may be more psychological rather than acoustical. (It may help reduce performance anxiety by allowing the student/performer to decide what to do with the microphone when performing. How far to stay from it, if they want to pick it up, leave it on the stand, etc. It will get rid of the "unknown a little more")
- It is important and beneficial to understand different types of microphones :
 - to be able to use it as a part of the repertoire and get creative with it.
 - To be able to pinpoint something when we have a problem/ when we are unhappy with the sound
 - To be able to communicate with the sound technicians.

Discussion and Implication

- Considering a more **holistic approach to singing**. Singers shouldn't just be expected to sing well. Microphone technique, science and sound systems should also be a part of our education.
 - More informed singers: singers as beginner level sound technicians so we can communicate! We must start building closer relationships with sound engineers.
- Sound checks are often rushed and last minute for formal performances. For informal open-mics, there is barely any. Whenever we can, we must think about doing it more in advance, so the singer could be aware of acoustical properties and work accordingly.
- Further research could investigate if and when singers change the way they sing, is it because of acoustical properties and the microphone or the added layers we must deal with/psychological (getting anxious dealing with stands, cords, and using it as a prop too)
- Further research could look into resilience, performance anxiety and how singers deal with "bad audio" vs "good audio" situations.
- A following study could explore the difference on vocal performance technique/ performance anxiety when given soundboard and microphone technique lessons vs when not given lessons. A similarly conducted study could determine whether singers who see spaces a month in advance and tries it out does better during actual performance compared to singers who have to do it last minute.
- Further research could also dive deeper into microphone and vocal technique use in different genres. The contemporary styles have been put in a bubble together (classical vs everything else), however, each has grown since and made their ways to our lessons. We must start doing individual work.

Abstract

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the impact of microphones in teaching and performance settings. Any possible advantages and benefits of using microphones in practices, as well as how microphones might alter or modify our vocal technique was specifically questioned. With a qualitative-methods approach, one male and one female experienced teaching artists were interviewed for about an hour and a half each. Results showed that practicing with microphones is helpful, but only under certain circumstances. Results also showed that microphone positioning could affect posture and laryngeal positioning, but beyond that, singers fundamental technique doesn't and shouldn't depend on the microphone: If it did, it was used as an option/an extension, stylistical modifications, especially with vocal effects that may make vowels more brighter or darker. Main discussion and implications revolved around suggesting building better relationships with the soundboard and the sound technicians (aiming for better and more often communication) and re-consideration of singing curriculums as it is crucial for vocalists to understand microphones and sound boards better. The correlation between psychological factors in performance and using a microphone was also looked into during the study.