



Meredith Colby.com

Neuro-Vocal for Popular Styles

Developing Vocal Style

You'll find the broadcast on YouTube at
Meredith Colby

[Here's the link to my YouTube page.](#)

Part 1: How To Think About Style

What's your category?

When it comes to style, voice teachers and coaches generally fall into one of two categories. (I'm saying...generally.)

- We're classically trained and don't feel confident about working with the style element of microphone genres, or
- We're microphone singers our own selves and haven't really needed to think about style. We just do it.

If you're in either of those categories, you *might not have a plan for addressing style in your students' singing*, or for helping them develop their own style. But if your student wants to explore their musical voice, both literally and figuratively, you may be the only source of safe space and guidance for that person.

Find Your Artistic Voice In Microphone-based Styles

Finding or developing your style takes certain skills and attributes. Among those attributes are:

- musical knowledge
- the ability to discern what you're hearing
- curiosity
- willingness to try uncomfortable things
- the ability to be vulnerable.



Some singers just have all those things naturally. Most do not. *Those people need your help.*

Being Aware

In the visual arts, artists are encouraged to experiment. In the visual arts, there aren't mistakes. There are simply ways to discover

what works - and works for you - and what does not. Young artists are encouraged to explore many different media, copy, and experiment as they find their artistic “voice.”

In performing arts education, the *default* training is to be *vehicles* for creative works; a work created by a composer, playwright, or choreographer.

This is a very different mindset. We, as voice teachers and coaches, have to be aware of that. Because if we aren't we might not use the right tool for the job.



What is Right

When we talk about style, it's helpful to step away from the idea that there's a “correct” way to sing. Some of the techniques we learned as being correct when we were students ourselves were aimed at being loud enough to be heard in an acoustic environment, and in a vocally healthy way. But nobody told you that. They just said: *this is the right way to sing*.

But microphone styles don't have to be loud. The microphone gives the singer many choices that they would not have in an acoustic situation. If the singer's "default" sound is healthy, they can do all kinds of things (things that you may have learned to be wrong!) to affect style in their singing. To wit:

- They can be breathy, use register breaks, or growls.
- They can scoop or fry into the beginning of a phrase.
- They can add melodic embellishments or even change sections of the melody altogether.
- They can use the accepted style for their genre and also look beyond those style "vocabularies."

Their voices need to be able to respond to their intention with an ease that (ultimately) allows them to be "inside" the song and the accompaniment.

A couple of things about style.

Most amateur singers don't really identify style, as such. They decide they like a song, they learn the lyrics and the melody, and they start singing along. **At this point, of course, they stop listening.** They don't listen to the performance of the song with a discerning ear. Though they probably love the performance of the song, they're not really aware of that. **That's where you come in.**

Acquiring vocabulary

The most common way to acquire stylistic vocabulary is to copy artists you like. But first, your student has to learn to listen. Listening and copying are powerful tools, one that every professional microphone singer - whether intentionally or not - has used to create their style. Help your students understand that the singers they love are showing them how to use a stylistic vocabulary.

For instance...

Let's say your young student wants to sing Olivia Rodrigo's song Driver's License. **They don't realize that much of what they love about that song is the performance.** Your opportunity? Teach them **how** to listen to a performance and copy it.

In just the first line of her performance of that song, where she sings "I got my driver's license last week just like we always talked about" she uses plosives, scoops, vibrato, low head register, vocal fry, and a short cut-off. All of these are common elements of vocal style for microphone singers. Spend some time with your student listening and copying one line at a time. In their future, this will make a huge difference in how they listen to, and approach performing, a song.

Learning how to listen to the elements of a performance of a song will change them forever as both singers and as music consumers.

Keep it loose

If they aren't able to replicate certain elements of what they're hearing, or any of the elements they're hearing (or if they're not sure *what* they're hearing) please just encourage them. This is new and scary. They'll need to feel safe to get the hang of it. **Help them stay out of the paradigm of things being right and wrong.**



Different genres

Once your student knows how to listen, you can introduce different artists and genres to them. This is a great way to expose them to different musical elements and values. With individual students, you can see what they like and steer them toward something new. They love Billie Eilish? Great! Introduce them to Joni Mitchell or Lana Del Rey! They love Bruno Mars? Have them learn something by Prince or Stevie

Wonder! If you don't feel competent to do that, please use the website **allmusic.com**. (Type in the artist, click the tab that says "related" and you'll see their list of artists that are similar, and artists that influenced the artist you're looking at.)

Plan for a microphone recital

To have fun introducing your students to a genre (as well as becoming something of an expert yourself) theme a recital around a specific genre. Motown, for instance. Or songs by singer-songwriters, contemporary country, or '70's R&B.

Doing this:

- Provides a great learning opportunity for everyone
- Makes your job a little easier
- Gives you things to communicate about with them via social media and email
- Lets you encourage the use of stories about the history, artists, or songs in the presentation
- You can help your student become aware of what are the values in this type of music, what we focus on when learning this genre.

If this is interesting, or if you recognize this way of approaching style as something that will benefit your singers, feel free to work with the study guide below! And...have some fun!

Part 2: Tools For Developing Style

Exploring Style in Different Genres

Different genres have different musical values. Different artists place emphasis on different components of the music.

Help your student (and yourself) increase your understanding and appreciation of different musical styles. By listening in this way you'll also influence your own ability to use style in your singing.

Things you can listen for + discuss:

- **How loud** or quiet are certain instruments?
- How loud/quiet are they **compared to** the lead vocals?
- **How rhythmic** is the singing? Does the singer use the way they sing to dig into the rhythms, or to provide contrast?
- Diction is one way that singers emphasize the rhythmic elements of their melody. **Where is the singer using diction** to emphasize the rhythms?

- How important are the **lyrics** to the singer? Is the singer making sure you understand the lyrics, or not?
- What kind of **melody** is representative of this genre? Is the singer using a big range, or is the melody more narrative or speech-like?
- How important is **the emotional content** of the song(s)? Is the artist speaking to your emotions or your intellect?
- What is the **instrumentation**, and how is it used? For instance...
 - Is the **rhythmic information** crucial to the song or the genre?
 - Does the rhythm guitar make you want to get up and dance?
 - Do the drums drive the lyrical message home? Does the piano make you want to relax in an easy chair?

These are guidelines and/or suggestions. There is no one right answer for any song or genre. These questions are meant only as a guide or teaching tool.

What's Important to...

Using the discussion suggestions, what can you hear in the music of different artists? Here are some suggestions:

- John Mayor (blues/rock)

- Rhianna (hiphop)
- Justin Timberlake (dance/pop)
- Billie Eilish (singer/songwriter)
- Kaycee Musgraves (country)
- Diana Krall (jazz)
- OK Go (pop/rock)
- Pink (edgy rock)
- Alicia Keys (pop ballads)
- Chance the Rapper (rap/hiphop)

Get next to rhythm

Ideas:

Sing the melody without lyrics; either a single sound like "da," nonsense, or scat. Pay attention to the rhythm of the melody.

- Is the melody syncopated?
- Do important words land squarely on beats?
- What else can you notice?

Practice physically tapping out the beat while:

- **Level 1:** Sing a simple melody - either nonsense syllables or the actual lyrics.
- **Level 2:** Sing something more difficult. Uptown Funk can be used for this exercise. You can start on the outro to get the hang of it, and/or use the spoken section.

Tiny Bits of Copying

Select 2-8 measures of a particular performance of a song and **learn to copy it as closely as you can**. This will take a while. It's like putting the singer under a microscope.

Take the time to learn the things that do not come naturally to you.

Listen for every little thing:

- How does the artist *start* each phrase?
- What registration are they using (low head register is really breathy)?
- Where are the scoops?
- Where is there straight tone and where is there vibrato?
- Melodic embellishments? Break them down and then loop them until they're easy (something between 10 and 200 times).
- Are there slides or fall-offs?
- Where is the singer loud and where are they quiet?
- Is the diction crisp, sloppy, or both?

If there are things you just can't get your voice to do for now, that's ok. Get as much as you can, then apply your skills to another phrase.

The Most Important Thing

All these suggestions can be treated as musical play. There's no need to get wound up about being "right" or "wrong."

For both yourself and your students keep things easy. You did this, you got that result. Ok. Did we like it? Did we *not* like it? Are we not sure?

It's all good. And it can all be fun!