

Working 9–5: Causal Relationships Between Singers’ “Day Jobs” and Their Performance Work, With Implications for Vocal Health

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Summary: Objectives. It is acknowledged generally that professional contemporary commercial music (CCM) singers engage in supplementary employment (“the day job”) to achieve and maintain a reliable living wage. In this paper, consideration is given to the impact of such nonperformance employment on CCM’s sustainable vocal health.

Methods. Collected data from a survey of 102 professional contemporary gig singers were analysed using descriptive statistical procedures from the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*. Although these data provided descriptions of the personal characteristics of individuals in the sample, the inclusion of open format questions encouraged participants to report details of their “lived” experience. Additionally, a meta-analysis of a range of associated literature was undertaken.

Results. Sixty-five participants (N = 102) reported that in addition to their heavy performance voice use, they were employed in “other” work (the “day job”) where their speaking voice loads were high. In responding to open-ended questions, many proffered written comments that were unprompted. The collected data from this element of the research study are reported here.

Conclusions. We propose that at least some causal factors of singers’ reported voice problems may lie in the misuse or overuse of their everyday speaking voice (as demanded by their “day job”) rather than a misuse of their singing voice. These findings have practical application to all whose concern is care for the vocal or emotional health and performance longevity of professional singers.

Key Words: occupational voice users–performers’ voice–professional contemporary vocalists–singing voice–singers’ vocal health.

INTRODUCTION

To examine causal relationships between voice use in singing performance and the quotidian labour that is required of professional singers to sustain a living wage, this paper draws on a range of peer-reviewed literature sourced through relevant online music and health academic databases relating to singing voice pedagogy, contemporary commercial music (CCM) singers, music theatre singers/actors, and occupational vocal health (across a range of employment). Specific data from a doctoral study¹ conducted with a population (N = 102) of professional contemporary gig singers (PCGS) are also reported. It is this body of research, together with related, cross-field reporting of heavy voice load occupations (eg, nursing, teaching, therapists, call centre workers, etc), that forms the basis for this report.

It has been estimated that a third of all jobs worldwide depend upon a worker using his or her voice^{2,3} as his or her primary tool of trade, and that in some professions a reliance upon a functional and effective voice is foundational to the voice user’s career longevity; this is particularly so for singers and singer/actors whose voice is their singular tool of trade. We were interested to know to what degree singers and singer/actors used their speak-

ing voice in addition to their heavy voice load, singing performance work.

A literature search confirmed our emic knowledge that the unpredictable nature of performing arts as a career forces many artists into an ancillary or “day” job to enable day-to-day financial survival. For example, in an Australian study, Bennett and Bridgstock⁴ reported that “. . . a significant proportion of performing artists settle in ‘embedded’ employment, engaging in performing arts work that is outside the arts and creative sectors entirely.” (p.264) This finding appears to reflect a global trend. While investigating the phenomenon of music clusters in the United States, Florida, Mellander, and Stolarick⁵ found that “For self-employed musicians, the location needs to offer enough venue places and performing opportunities. For those not yet able to live off their music, the location also needs to offer complementary jobs” (pp. 788–789). In a previous article, Florida and Mellander⁶ had described the type of “complementary jobs” available to musicians as “. . . lower-skill, lower intensity ‘day’ jobs in the service sector of the economy” (p. 4). This finding is an important factor in terms of measuring the impact of nonperformance-based work on singers’ overall voice loads.

General epidemiological studies and reviews

Some researchers have reviewed whole populations of workers and reported on the aetiology and incidence of occupational voice disorders within that broad community.^{7–12} In two large studies conducted in the United States¹³ and Sweden,⁷ researchers attempted to establish the relative frequency of attendance at voice clinics of various occupational voice users, comparing these groups with nonspecific voice users in the general population. Other papers

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have presented reviews of vocal risk factors relating to specific occupations.^{2,13–18} For example, Williams¹⁸ referred to an important consequence of voice problems for singers and teachers (identified as the two “most at-risk” groups), suggesting that “voice impairment can be employment threatening, as voice use is a critical component of their job” (p. 457). In his review of the literature, Williams¹⁸ combined the results from both the Titze et al¹³ and Fritzell⁷ studies and found that although singers in the United States and Sweden accounted for only 0.02% of the population of professional voice users in those countries, they accounted for 11.5% of voice clinic attendees. Although the highest incidence of occupational voice disorders is reported for teachers,^{12,17–19} it is interesting to note that singers are reported consistently as the occupational group “at greatest risk” of such disorders and that they have a proportionally high representation in samples of voice clinic attendees.

One explanation for this anomaly has been that performance artists have a heightened perception of changes in their singing voice.²⁰ The researchers suggested that although singers might be expected to have fewer voice problems because of their vocal training, many do not apply their good singing techniques to speaking. They concluded that a combination of vocally abusive speech habits in addition to hours of strenuous singing could actually make a singer more *at risk* of vocal attrition than the nonsinger.²⁰ Similarly, Aronson and Bless²¹ offered the following observation: “Many voice problems in singers are the result of non-musical activities” (p. 273). He further suggested that to assess vocal health risk for singers, it was important to address “overall” voice use behaviours. To this end, recent work by Gaskill, Cowgill, Tinter, and Many,^{22,23} using vocal dosimetry technology, has produced results that support anecdotal concerns relating to the diverse range of stressors incurring high vocal loads for performers outside their vocal performance area.

The opinions reported here coalesce with our emic view that any review of singers’ vocal health issues should address both speaking and singing voice loads, especially where high voice quality is demanded in both performance and ancillary work; that is, speech-oriented “day jobs” and associated nonperformance work-based environments should be recognized and considered in terms of the impact on sustainable vocal health and performance longevity for the group.

In reviewing work-related risk factors for professional voice users, Södersten and Lindhe¹⁶ created a practical classification for fields of voice-oriented employment as follows:

- (1) Instructors and teachers: including preschool and kindergarten teachers, school teachers, aerobics instructors, and dance teachers
- (2) Performers: including singers, actors, voiceover artists, radio and TV journalists, and interpreters
- (3) Persuasive voice users: including clergy (ministers, priests, pastors, rabbis, mullahs), lawyers, politicians, salespeople (including telemarketers in call centres), and auctioneers
- (4) Service voice users: including customer service assistants, psychologists, counsellors, and telephonists (including switchboard operators)

- (5) Emergency: including air traffic controllers, police, fire department, emergency medical technicians, and ambulance officers

Although all the listed professions¹⁶ are voice-based, the intensity of work-related voice demand varies enormously, and voice load and voice quality requirements differ widely.² For example, classroom teachers may not need superb voice quality, but, their voice load is very high. For radio and TV journalists, vocal excellence is paramount; however, their overall voice workloads may not be as high. Performance-based voice loads for singers and singer/actors are especially intense as practitioners are expected to move seamlessly from spoken voice to singing voice, balancing the demands of style excellence while incorporating a wide range of timbral colours and relevant style-driven vocal effects. To further add to this burden, recent research suggests that in addition to the voice excellence demands of performance, singers and singer/actors are engaged commonly in a range of voice-oriented, heavy speech load “day jobs” as components of their *portfolio* careers.

Musicians’ portfolio careers

The *Cambridge Business English Dictionary*²⁴ offers two definitions for *portfolio career*:

- the fact of having several part-time jobs at once, rather than one full-time job
- the fact of having a series of jobs, each for a short time, rather than one job for a long time

In discussions of musicians’ work patterns, researchers^{25,26} have reported that such “portfolio careers” are the norm for graduates of music study programmes. Importantly for this paper, they propose that approximately half of the jobs within a musician’s portfolio are embedded outside the music sector entirely—“in jobs like music production and dissemination utilising the online realm (cf Draper 2008²⁷), music education (cf Mills 2004²⁸), or social work in the not-for-profit sector (cf Bartleet 2008²⁹).” These findings coalesce with our emic knowledge of the field where professional CCM singers commonly supplement their performance income through “day jobs” with many gravitating towards speech-oriented work (eg, teaching, hospitality, retail).³⁰

Professional singer/actors

We have included reports of singer/actors in this discussion as many “modern book” music theatre scores incorporate a broad range of CCM vocal styles (eg, pop, rock, gospel) and style effects (melismatic runs, slides, slurs, growls, shrieks, screams, and assorted noises) that inform and define the CCM repertoire (LoVetri and Weekly³¹, Edwin³², and Wilson³³).

In terms of the literature of singing voice, music theatre singer/actors (“triple threats”) have been the focus of substantial research, yet a recent study³⁴ pointed to a lack of empirical data with regard to music theatre singers’ risk of voice disorders:

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