

Voice Habits and Behaviors: Voice Care Among Flamenco Singers

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Summary: Purpose. The purpose of this study is to analyze the vocal behavior of flamenco singers, as compared with classical music singers, to establish a differential vocal profile of voice habits and behaviors in flamenco music.

Method. Bibliographic review was conducted, and the Singer's Vocal Habits Questionnaire, an experimental tool designed by the authors to gather data regarding hygiene behavior, drinking and smoking habits, type of practice, voice care, and symptomatology perceived in both the singing and the speaking voice, was administered. We interviewed 94 singers, divided into two groups: the flamenco experimental group (FEG, $n = 48$) and the classical control group (CCG, $n = 46$). Frequency analysis, a Likert scale, and discriminant and exploratory factor analysis were used to obtain a differential profile for each group.

Results. The FEG scored higher than the CCG in speaking voice symptomatology. The FEG scored significantly higher than the CCG in use of "inadequate vocal technique" when singing. Regarding voice habits, the FEG scored higher in "lack of practice and warm-up" and "environmental habits." A total of 92.6% of the subjects classified themselves correctly in each group.

Conclusions. The Singer's Vocal Habits Questionnaire has proven effective in differentiating flamenco and classical singers. Flamenco singers are exposed to numerous vocal risk factors that make them more prone to vocal fatigue, mucosa dehydration, phonotrauma, and muscle stiffness than classical singers. Further research is needed in voice training in flamenco music, as a means to strengthen the voice and enable it to meet the requirements of this musical genre.

Key Words: Flamenco singer–Voice–Risk factors–Vocal fatigue–Abusive behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Being a singer is much like being an athlete. Singing mechanisms work over the threshold of normal speaking voice functioning. Therefore, a singer's voice must be more than healthy to fulfill the vocal requirements of professional performance.

Flamenco as a cultural phenomenon has been the object of research for many years and was declared Intangible Cultural Heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2010. However, *cante flamenco*, flamenco singing, has not been studied from the standpoint of vocal health, even though it has become professionalized in recent decades. The resources used in flamenco singing are extremely demanding at a technical level. To name just a few, flamenco uses unstable and sliding tone; microtonality; portamentos typical of flamenco, called "*melismas*"; accentuated mordentes, similar to hiccoughs, called "*jipíos*"; enharmonic scales; laments with a forced voice, called "*quejíos*"; and inflexions on a single note, called "*queibros*."^{1–3} These resources contrast with those found in the classical genre, in which exact tune and rhythm are very important, and where timbre is characterized by its stability and the absence of the breathy voice quality so often heard in flamenco.⁴ As mentioned above, flamenco singers face numerous risks to

their vocal health, but is it flamenco singing that endangers the voice of the *cantaor*?

Risk factors among flamenco singers

The vocal health of singers is affected by a range of complex factors.⁵ Voice disorders among singers have been caused by certain behaviors or types of voice use^{6–12} yet the variability of voice use makes it difficult to generalize results. To a certain extent, this variability depends on the genre of music sung,^{13–16} among other factors.

The etiology of a voice disorder may not only be singing but also speaking performance. The study by Sataloff and colleagues found that in singers with voice problems there is often a dissociation between the vocal techniques used when speaking and the vocal techniques used when singing.⁶ Speaking and singing voice abuse is the most common etiology among singers with vocal nodules.⁸

Imitating how others sing and even singing outside one's own register can cause vocal overload and musical resonance imbalance.¹² Singing training may precipitate vocal imbalances. Incorrect singing techniques used at the beginning of a singer's career have also been surveyed.¹⁷ For instance, a *cantaor* learns a specific melody by hearing it, whereas a classical singer learns from written works. This different approach is in itself a risk factor because the *cantaor* might be tempted to imitate. Frequency and weekly practice are also important factors to analyze to detect vocal abuse habits. "Voice abuse or lack of voice rest may cause phonotrauma due to forces of vibratory shock upon the production of sound."^{12(p165)}

Respiration function is of course critical for a singer, but all the body's systems can affect voice health.⁶ Medical disorders such as hormonal imbalance⁹ or muscular-skeletal problems can ultimately affect voice health as well as the intake of medicines or certain substances such as caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco.⁷

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Many singers adopt prevention measures that are not entirely effective. Braun-Janzen and Zeine studied perceived knowledge and real knowledge regarding vocal hygiene habits among 129 singers and found a great discrepancy between the two.¹⁰

Assessment on risk factors among singers

The vocal health needed for singing has already been studied, especially among singers of classical music, who are often considered model singers within the singing population.^{16,18–21} For this reason, this study uses a control group of classical singers.

Voice professionals have a high proprioception of their phonation organs; they are aware of any slight internal change that might occur and be linked to disorders or damage in the vocal tract.²²

To date, most questionnaires have not been very useful in obtaining data on continuous exposure factors among singers. However, some self-report methods have been developed: Singing Voice Handicap Index²³ and Evaluation of the Ability to Sing Easily²⁴; these self-report methods are indicators of a singer's self-perception of the impact of a voice disorder. Voice-Related Quality of Life⁸ and the Voice Symptoms Scale (VoiSS)²⁵ are tools associated with dysphonia in patients but not necessarily in singers.

This study focuses on flamenco singers and their vocal reality, using the self-report method. Because of the shortage of resources in obtaining significant data on risk factors among singers, the authors designed the experimental self-report Questionnaire for Singers on Voice Habits (*Q-SinVocHab*), based on an in-depth study of existing bibliography. The aim of this research is to study flamenco singers in relation to all the various factors addressed in the questionnaire.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

There were a total of 94 participants divided into two groups: (1) the flamenco experimental group (FEG), made up of 48 flamenco singers from the Cristina Heeren Foundation for Flamenco Music and Dance in Seville, and from the El Garrotín Flamenco School and the Municipal Flamenco School, both in Granada; (2) the classical control group (CCG), made up of 46 classical singers from the conservatories Victoria Eugenia and Angel Barrios in Granada, the Conservatory Cristóbal de Morales of Seville, and the Conservatory of Music in Málaga. Both groups were well adjusted in terms of gender, age, and years singing, as well as level of professionalism (Figure 1).

Experimental design and procedure

After obtaining the consent of the participants and informing the participants about the use of personal data, the *Q-SinVocHab* survey was conducted, with a researcher physically present. A maximum time of 15 minutes was established for the completion of the questionnaire. The *Q-SinVocHab* is a 65-item questionnaire divided into the following.

Symptomatology and habits variables

The questionnaire items are presented in tables (one for the singing voice, one for the speaking voice, and one for voice habits), and there are five possible responses (never, rarely, sometimes, rather often, and very often).

- *Spoken and singing symptomatology perceived:* The symptomatology perceived by singers regarding their speaking

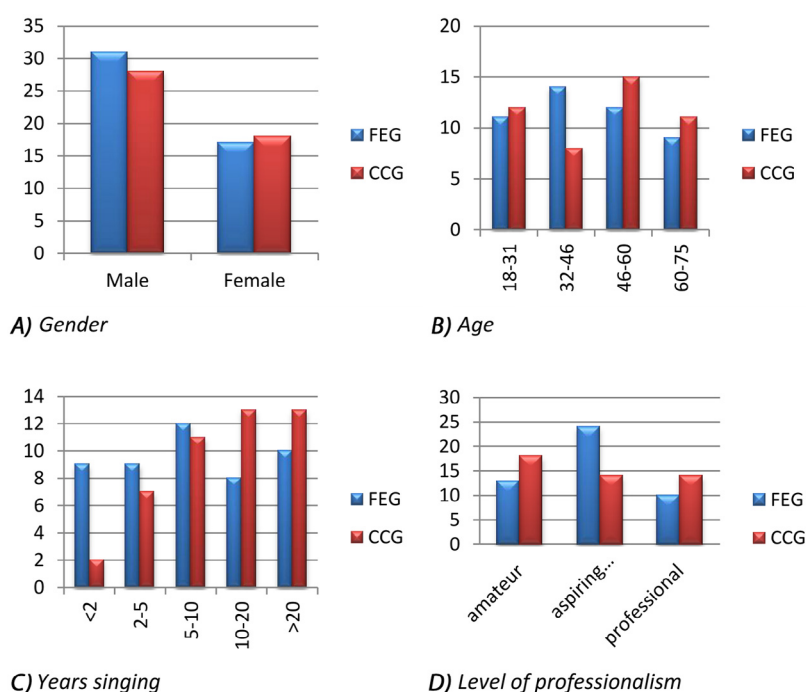


FIGURE 1. Sample distribution of the flamenco experimental group (FEG) and the classical control group (CCG) according to gender, age, years singing, and level of professionalism.

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