Good rock singing, like good classical singing, is natural (organic), stylistically and emotionally integrated (authentic), and transformative (artistic). To learn rock stylization, classical and traditional music theater students must set aside their genre-of-origin filters to appreciate and imitate rock singing. To emulate the rock aesthetic: employ a more natural, conversational vocal production; deemphasize classical virtuosity and formality in matters of pitch, vibrato, structure, and rhythm; be available to respond to the impulse to move; stylize, using ornamentations (e.g., neighbor notes, appoggiaturas, acciaccaturas, inverted rhythms, inverted pitches, and ladders) in a manner consistent with rock; add, delete, or alter lyrics as needed; and experiment with intriguing and compelling breathing patterns. With patience and consistent effort, these skills can be developed by open minded and willing students and utilized in their rock performances.

Yet, while a performance grounded in these techniques will yield a generic “rock” styling, training more sophisticated techniques greatly increases both the performer’s artistic and vocal capacities for delivering rock songs; and, most importantly, allows the audience to experience an undeniably authentic performance. The ability to make nuanced artistic choices is the technical and artistic bedrock for the successful, authentic rocker. Though these advanced skills may be resistant to training, they are transformative once acquired. To produce authentically rocking performances, students should master the artistry of organic delivery, theatrical pitch nuances, and “with it” ornaments.

**ORGANIC DELIVERY**

Nine ingredients, essential for rock credibility, contribute to a spontaneously authentic delivery (organic delivery). By counteracting expected structural mechanisms, and planning rehearsed emotional interpretations, the singer can present a genuine, in-the-moment character while being true to the rock aesthetic.

1) **Allocate an unstressed syllable on the beat to emphasize the lyrics and deemphasize the beat.** This is not syncopation, which highlights the beat by stressing the off-beat, but a tactic to obscure the beat by removing the expected stress pattern. Have the student clap a standard beat and sing the well known opening phrase of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” with the
“er” of “over” on the beat. The initial training can be frustrating, but the student should be able to see just how effective disguising the beat can be and how it can inform the audience’s attachment to conversational, organic delivery of a lyric. With concentration and practice the student can acquire this skill. This tactic is ubiquitous in popular music, including Vanessa Williams’s version of “Colors of the Wind” (“or ask the grinning bobcat why he grinned”) and Diana Krall’s “Baby, Baby All the Time” (“kind of curly hair”). It is not confined to popular music; it resides in hybridized rock vocals (e.g., folk-rock and jazz-rock), and examples in contemporary music theater include Brian Lowdermilk’s “The Girl Who Drove Away” (“how the miles keep on flying by”) and Scott Alan’s “Watch Me Soar” (“I’m dreaming big so watch me soar”).

2) Layer your emotive lyrics with “the growl” to establish psychological pressure. Applying the growl should be approached as an emotional contextualization rather than a musical effect: this technique does not add vocal dirt for a “cool” sound; rather, it depicts struggle. The growl is part warning and part disclosure, like a threatened dog’s growl, and it should vent when the character does not want to speak honestly but is overpowered by a psychological need to communicate. The growl can also emphasize pointed communication (without a stressful context), as if to say to the audience, “I don’t care about my singing—I care that you connect with [“get”] what I’m saying.” To train the growl, have the student execute a period of glottal fry. Then have him/her coordinate sustained glottal fry with pitch in a three-note scale (e.g., do, re, mi, re, do). Lastly, have the student master the “creaky door,” an exercise used extensively in classical pedagogy to broaden the timbres the student master the “creaky door,” an exercise used extensively in classical pedagogy to broaden the timbres.

3) Emulate conversational nonchalance by tossing off the final words of a straightforward sentence. These words are often taken for granted in real conversation, as the speaker has delivered the gist and thinks ahead to the next statement, and the listener understands the gist and thinks ahead to the reply. If vocalists encounter four sixteenth notes at the end of a phrase (usually just before beat one), they should consider accelerating the delivery to throw the words away. Have students sing Scott Alan’s “Fly Away” (“Captain Hook and all of his men”) or Billy Joel’s “Piano Man” (“I’m not really sure how it goes”) to appreciate the effect of the toss-off.

4) Place a pickup note (or anacrusis) on the beat to confuse the audience’s perception of beat one and avoid sounding preplanned. Since an expected delivery places the pickup note before the beat, placing the pickup on the beat will sound authentically spontaneous. Have the student sing the opening of “Colors of the Wind” (“You think you own whatever land you land on”) with “you” as the pickup note and with “think” on the beat. Then have the student sing the lyric in the same manner but place “you,” the pickup note, on the beat. The audience—and often the student—will temporarily lose track of the beat. Celine Dion uses the ornament extensively in “My Heart Will Go On” (“. . . I know you go on”).

5) Deliver lyrical thoughts in one phrasing and your performance will authentically portray the cadence and purpose of “true to life” speech. Unlike the journey of theatrical beats in traditional music theater and Shakespeare, everyday communication has one impulse per sentence: a speaker packages one thought per sentence in order to achieve one communication goal per sentence. To present as an “everyday” character confronting spontaneous motivations to communicate, the performer should deliver the lyric as though presently creating the thought for conversation. Have the student say the opening lyric of “Colors of the Wind” in a conversational scenario: “You think you own whatever land you land on.” Then have the student sing the line as notated in the sheet music: “You think you own whatever land you land on.” Ask the student to describe why the sung notation creates a stilted performance and how the lyric could be sung conversationally to create a
natural performance. Lastly, have the student sing the line conversationally (and be sure to include the pickup-note trick). Other examples include Damien Rice’s “Cannonball” (“There’s still a little bit of your taste in my mouth”), Evanescence’s “Bring Me to Life” (“Only you are the life among the dead”), and U2’s “With or Without You.” (Note that in this title lyric there is no attempt to divide the lyric “with or without you” into two opposing theatrical beats: this elaboration is provided by Bono’s “true to life” delivery.)

6) Explore the breadth of the chew rate spectrum by singing shorter vowel sounds. The three phonetic elements in a word are vowels, consonants, and diphthongs, and “chew rate” describes the relative duration of vowel sounds to nonvowel sounds in vocal delivery. Long held vowels, once the standard of well trained musicianship, now present as eloquently indulgent, self-important, and even “preachy.” Though most students trained in traditional choir or music theater (where shortening the main vowel is considered a mortal sin) are accustomed to classical aesthetic standards, students of the rock aesthetic should dabble in the breadth of chew rate stylization and customize their delivery for each song. To appreciate cultural changes in the chew rate, compare Roberta Flack’s “Killing Me Softly” from 1973 with Lauryn Hill’s cover from 1996. In older recordings, the emphasis on melody via lengthy main vowels sounds dated; in contemporary recordings, vowels are reduced in duration and emphasis to yield a casual, “true to life” chew rate. Because chewing the vowel has been highly discouraged, employing the breadth of the chew rate spectrum is a matter of encouragement and verification. Have your students record their experimentation with the chew rate of a song. Students must set aside their genre-of-origin biases as they listen to, evaluate, and (one hopes) validate their execution of a chew rate choice.

7) Perform three note riffs with the second note on the beat in order to obscure the placement of the entire riff over the beat. If the performer places the first or third note of the riff on the beat, the delivery will sound planned with respect to the beat and the performance will sound hackneyed; if the performer places the second note of the riff on the beat, the delivery will sound spontaneously freed from the beat and the performance will sound natural. Since three note riffs are a common occurrence (especially at the end of phrases), this technique is an essential tool for transforming sung notation into a rock performance. Have the student perform the three note melisma at the climatic end of Stephanie D’Abruzzo’s “There’s a Fine, Fine Line.” Other examples include Whitney Houston’s “I Don’t Want to Cry” (“don’t wanna cry”) and Bryan Adams’s “Heaven” (“I’ve been waiting for so long . . .”).

8) Apply the four eighth notes rule to avoid the disingenuous sound of transcribed phrasing. Choose instead to interpret rhythms with theatrical courage. Especially in the precomputer era, composers would often replace complex rhythms (time-consuming and artistically stifling in transcription) with a simple sequence of eighth notes; further, transcribers and even composers trusted adept performers to develop, change or interpret these simplified eighth note sequences in style, as they saw fit. The four eighth notes rule asks the student to rebel against equal and repetitious rhythmic values, and to alter the rhythm to a conversational cadence or to suit emotional priorities, ideally avoiding any rhythm that could be easily transcribed. Notice how Linda Eder avoids the beat in “A New Life” (“A new day, bright enough to help me find my way”), how Bing Crosby paces the opening of “White Christmas,” and how Barbara Cook reconfigures the rhythm in “Will He Like Me?” (“Will he like me? Who can say?”). Have your students compare the spontaneity and authenticity of these recorded songs with their corresponding sheet music, identify which eighth notes were altered, and explain the effect of those choices.

9) Use the five options for delivering phrases relative to the beat. The options are: (1) B.S. (back syncopation: phrasing behind the beat enough to merit a rhythmic notation change); (2) B.P. (back phrase: phrasing just behind the beat); (3) O.T.B. (on the beat); (4) F.P. (forward phrase: phrasing just in front of the beat); and (5) F.S. (forward syncopation: phrasing in front of the beat enough to merit a rhythmic notation change). Slightly off beat (B.P. and F.P) vocal delivery effects a credible spontaneity. If a beat is conceived of as chalk lines segmenting a song, keep phrasings on the outside edge of each line to “fight the beat.” Have your students imitate the “fighting the beat” phrasing used in Green Day’s “Good Riddance” (“Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road; time grabs you by the wrist, directs you where to go. So make the best of this . . .”).
test and don’t ask why. It’s not a question but a lesson learned in time. It’s something unpredictable but in the end it’s right. I hope you had the time of your life.”) to convey a grounded and nostalgic conversationality.

THEATRICAL ORNAMENTATION

Rock musicals utilize authentic rock vocal devices within the musical performance on behalf of the storytelling function. Thus, students of rock singing must commit to act through vocal delivery with theatrical manifestations unique to the rock aesthetic. The following three essential components for theatrical ornamentation are genre specific avenues for emotional characterization that can enrich a performance technically and tactically.

1) Deliver vocal presence on beat and off beat to convey emotional confidence or uncertainty. An off beat delivery will sound somewhat unconvinced while an on beat delivery will sound absolutely convinced. Your student can adjust phrasing using this theatrical device to deliver compelling characterizations. In Jason Robert Brown’s “If I Told You Now,” the first three phrases are off beat and final phrase is on beat: “If I told you now that I didn’t have the answers, that I didn’t know the reasons, that I didn’t hold the key, . . . could you bear to look at me?” The character considers leaving her relationship, though she finally resolves not only to stay, but to admit weakness, even pleading that he might “make her better.” Although the singer worries, “confused” about how she feels or what solution she is seeking, an apt performance will indicate that she subconsciously knows the truth of her commitment to the relationship. Other examples of dramatic characterization via on-and-offs include Kelly Clarkson’s “Hear Me” and Brian Lowdermilk’s “Say the Word.”

2) Vary pitch at the end of a phrase with fall offs and fall ups to signify intent. Fall offs are easily executed and have the obvious theatrical effect of determined ire or resentment, as in AC/DC’s “Guns For Hire” (“The word is out that I’m about—and I’ve come gunning for you”). Fall ups are a more advanced vocal technique and imply transparency, playfulness, or positivity. The fall up should not end with a sustained pitch, but, like a meringue, feather away as the pitch rises. Classical and traditional music theater students have been trained to fully voice each notated pitch and often struggle to overcome this instinct; they might imagine the fall up note heads as gray and translucent (rather than black and opaque) and treat the pitches accordingly. Have the student imitate the fall up in Sara Bareilles’s “Gravity” (“You loved me ‘cause I’m fragile”). Other examples of emotional elaboration via fall ups include Carole King’s “Beautiful” (“Yes, you will”), Rihanna’s “Only Girl” (“Like I’m the only one that you’ll ever love”), and Aerosmith’s “Cryin’” (“Love wasn’t much of a friend of mine”).

3) Comprehend the four thirds of rock theoretically and practically, and emphasize inherent thirds to convey mood in performance. Due to the impossibility of transcribing underlying thirds, scores note only the most proximate pitch and trust performers to understand and interpret the inherent thirds; therefore, recognizing and utilizing thirds in a composition is essential for a musically savvy and musically grounded performance. The four thirds of rock and their theatrical implications are the major (happiness), minor (sadness), flat major (happiness and foreboding), and sharp minor (sadness with optimism). While the major and minor thirds are familiar and conventional devices in Western music, the flat major and sharp minor thirds represent non-Western alternative tunings. Notice the effective presence of all four thirds in The Rolling Stones’ “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” particularly how the flat major third (“can’t”) and the sharp minor third (“want”) add emotional tone to the chorus. Another example of the emotion of the flat major is Janis Joplin’s “Me and Bobby McGee” (“Nothin’ ain’t worth nothin’ if it ain’t free”). Lastly, your student will learn to recognize pitch constructions more easily if you connect the pitch with a variable gesture, such as the height of your hand. For example, when teaching “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” begin with your hand at your side and move it to denote pitch changes (e.g., the minor third at belt height, sharp minor third at chest height, flat major third at shoulder height, and major third at head height).

“WITH IT” ORNAMENTS

Relevant art holds a mirror to emerging truths in contemporary society. Rock music is the standard bearer for and the manifestation of this principle. The legacy
of rock music is to be cutting edge, forward thinking, relevant, and, in short, “with it.” It is therefore essential that students have four technical and theoretical fundamentals to express within, improvise from, and polish off rock songs.

1) Train to effect quick and accurate pitch changes; such pitch dexterity “wows” an audience. Classical music has myriad pedagogies for this technique. Have your students use their rectus abdominus in coordination with their diaphragm to pulse a sequence of notes (quarter, eighth, eighth, and quarter) on “ah.” Then have them pulse the sequence with the pitches do, re, mi, fa. Challenge your students to execute longer and more difficult melismas from the rock literature. Have them try the slow riff in the last four measures of Celine Dion’s “To Love You More,” the tempest tossed “waves” in Fiona Apple’s “Sullen Girl,” the funky “surprise” in Adele’s “Daydreamers,” the climbing riffs in the final third of Christina Aguilera’s “Dirty” (“get fired up in a hurry”), and the pre-verse riffing in Mariah Carey’s “I Don’t Wanna Cry.” If these are intimidating, encourage them to break the riff down and sing it slowly before they attempt the performance version.

2) Embellish a performance with the blues scale (where applicable) by detecting and using the blues underpinnings of many rock songs. As Fräulein Maria says in The Sound of Music, “When you know the notes to sing, you can sing most anything.” Have your students train the blues scale by singing “I like to sing a blues scale” with the ascending notes C, Eb, F, F#, G, Bb, C and the descending notes C, Bb, G, F#, F, Eb, C. Challenge them to sing the blues scale in any order using lyrics from everyday conversation. Gretchen Wilson’s “All Jacked Up” has a pedagogically useful blues scale in the lyric, “I wouldn’t even tell anybody where you are.” Mariah Carey uses an extended blues scale in the final lyric of “Vision of Love” (“it was all that you turned out to be”). Other songs that rely heavily on the blues scale are Christina Aguilera’s “Soar” and Fiona Apple’s “Criminal.”
3) Rock ornamentation hides the accessory notes in a riff by rendering them with soft and subtle adjustments to vocal volume. Such evocative artistry is perceived by the audience as infinitely nuanced, amazing, and beyond their understanding. Observe that pop styling flaunts ornamentation, as if to say to the audience, “Bet you can’t do what I’m doing.” Because pop ornament necessitates straightforward delivery as a basis for clear showmanship, its artistic potential is finite no matter how complex the riffing is. By contrast, rock virtuosity must be “so cool” that it doesn’t have to flaunt; thus, rock styling conceals ornamentation, as if to say to the audience, “Bet you can’t tell what I just did.” Have your student imitate Mel Carter’s riff in “Hold Me, Kiss Me, Thrill Me” (“they never stood in the dark with you love”) and notice how he alters the volume of the accessory notes to achieve a mysterious suavity. Other examples include Marc Cohn’s “Walking in Memphis” (“Beale”) and The Dixie Chicks’ “Wide Open Spaces” (“foundation of stone”).

4) Embellish a performance with facile riffing from the pentatonic scale. Have your student train the scale by singing a 6/9 jazz chord; the pitches do, re, mi, so, la; or “You will bring honor to us all” from Disney’s Mulan. Have the student return to the pentatonic ornament from Mel Carter’s “Hold Me, Kiss Me, Thrill Me” (on the pitches A, G, E, D, C, D, E, G). Challenge her or him to insert and extrapolate on a pentatonic riff in rock songs, nursery rhymes, and from any held note attached to a major chord. Further, the amhemitonic pentatonic scale is a global scale, musically and culturally inclusive and undisonant, and ubiquitously resonant. The rock aesthetic is globally accessible and continues to flourish because of its grounding in pentatonic composition, and any musician who purposes self-expression, especially within the rock aesthetic, must have mastered the theory and application of the pentatonic scale.

Since Hair added rock to the music theater palette in 1968, the demand for music theater performers to present themselves as credible rock performers has steadily increased. Fifty-eight percent of all current musicals (encompassing nonunion, regional, touring, and Broadway productions) are rock or pop-based.² With the stipulation that young and fresh out of school performers are most likely to be typed into a rock musical, conservatory graduates will find that rock auditions comprise a clear majority of their employment opportunities. Vocal educators are obligated to enable the professional and artistic success of their students. Helping students acquire these skill sets will lead to sophisticated, nuanced, and intention driven rock performances.

NOTES


Dr. Neal Tracy, BM, MM, DM, has voice studios in New York City, Philadelphia, and Bucks County, PA. His current students are active as lead and ensemble roles in Broadway productions, national and international tours, and regional theater nationwide. Students include a wide range of professional vocalists, from opera singers to Cirque du Soleil soloists to pop/rock recording artists to cabaret circuit performers. Neal is a regional opera and music theater director, Metropolitan Opera Awards national finalist, and member of NATS, MTEA, and NYSTA. nealtracy@aol.com

It is a mistake to breathe in just one part of the body.

Abdominal breathing alone brings high focused voice. But it remains throaty, small.

Diaphragmatic breath alone secures good diction. But resonance of head and chest will be lacking.

Intercostal breathing alone brings low resonance only. It destroys diction.

When the top and bottom of the lungs are equally full of compressed air, the voice will focus in the head, and awake all the resonance in head, mouth and chest. Diction then is master over all.

Brown, Vocal Wisdom, 43.