

# ABSTRACT

## Examining “good singing” in the age of *The Voice*

What constitutes “good singing” can be hotly contested amongst voice pedagogues. The literature on singing evaluation tends to focus on quantitatively measuring the acoustic properties of the voice or qualitative evaluations by expert listeners, who assess the singer’s vocal technique relative to the performed genre. However, little is known about what the general public considers to be “good singing”. Within a larger program of research on musical identity and singing self-concept, this small-scale, mixed-methods survey considered how people ( $N = 52$ ) described and evaluated three stylistically different versions of a melody as sung by amateurs and professional vocalists to test a hypothesis that reality TV singing may be deemed as “good singing” by the public. Specifically, participants were exposed to three versions of “Happy Birthday”: 1) amateurs singing “as they would normally sing”; 2) professionals performing a “plain” version; 3) the same professionals singing a version in the style of *The Voice* reality TV show. Quantitative and qualitative results indicate that both professional versions were considered “better singing” than the amateur singing. While respondents focused on the technical deficiencies for amateurs, descriptions of the professionals concerned style. For the professional singers, it seems that technical considerations such as singing in tune were not remarked on because they were able to sing with pitch accuracy. Contrary to our hypothesis that the popularity of reality TV singing shows would influence public perceptions of good singing, people’s preferences for “good singing” were split between the two professional versions, with people focused on sophistication and creativity (the “professional voice” version) or vocal quality (the “professional plain” version). While respondents’ preferred version largely matched their chosen exemplar of “good singing”, participants were more likely to sing along with the “amateur” version. Implications for vocal pedagogy and engagement in singing activities for wellbeing will be considered.

Keywords (5): singing evaluation, performance quality, singing style, vocal technique, CCM singing

# Examining “good singing” in the age of *The Voice*

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# Background



“good singing”  
and musical  
participation



# Aim



## Key question

Due to its dominance within popular culture, might reality TV show singing be described and evaluated as “good singing” by members of the public?

# Method



## ▶ **Sample** ( $N = 52$ )

- 37 Females (71.2%), 14 Males (26.9%), 1 Non-binary gender (1.9%)
- Aged 17-71 ( $M = 27.67$ ,  $Mdn = 23$ ,  $SD = 12.79$ )

## ▶ **Research Design**

- 1 cross-sectional online survey

### **Stimuli** (One male/female singing the melody of “Happy Birthday”)

**Professional: plain version** - Professional CCM singers instructed to sing without melodic or rhythmic embellishment. Both professional singers are highly experienced CCM vocalists with careers in live and recorded performance

**Professional: embellished version** - Same professional CCM singers performed in the style of The Voice reality television series—the singers were instructed to use melodic and rhythmic embellishment, melisma, and to build the version to a loud, high climax using belt voice or chest-mix voice.

**Amateur version** - Amateur singers asked to perform “as they would normally sing the song”. The amateur singers did not identify as musicians and work in non-music related fields. The only guidance provided to the amateur singers was key and tempo, to ensure consistency across versions.

# Method



## Survey

**Demographic questions** – Age, gender, country of residence, Level of musicianship (Kreutz, et al., 2008)



## Randomly ordered presentation of audio clips

Professional: plain version

Professional: embellished version

Amateur version

After each clip:

Open-ended question, “How would you describe what you heard?”

Seven quantitative items (5-pt scale; Forbes, et al., 2021)

→two factors, Singing quality & Sing-along ability



## Two open-ended questions

“Which version did you prefer, and why?”

“Which version would you consider to be the best example of ‘good singing’, and why?”

# Results: Describing and evaluating the versions

| Amateur                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Professional: plain                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Professional: embellished                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Most often described as “<b>untrained</b>” or “<b>unprofessional</b>”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• deemed to have “poor technique”</li><li>• pitch inaccuracy (e.g., “pitchy”, “out of tune”)</li><li>• “hesitant and unsure”</li></ul> | <p>Commonly described as <b>having good technique</b>, tone, or timbre, and as <b>sounding “professional”</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the singing was “very nice” and “on pitch”</li><li>• several respondents said these voices were “much better” than the amateur voices</li></ul> | <p>Singers were described as “<b>professional</b>”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• most referred to musical and technical element was the ability to sing “high notes” or “high pitch”</li><li>• some identified specific stylistic elements (e.g., trills and runs) and described the singing as “belting”, “soulful”, “jazzy”</li></ul> |
| <p>Overall evaluations ranged from <b>negative</b> (“horrible”, “can’t sing for shit”) to <b>middling</b> (“they sounded ok”, “average voices”)</p>                                                                                                       | <p>Evaluations <b>differentiated the male from the female</b> and <b>pointed to an emotional response</b> (“the female sounded soulful and beautiful”; “The female voice had a greater storytelling ability”)</p>                                                                                         | <p>Numerous <b>highly positive evaluations</b> (“excellent”; “stunning”; “definitely better than the other performances”). + <b>some critical responses</b> (“over the top, trying too hard”)</p>                                                                                                                                                     |

# Results: Stated singing preferences

| Nominated version ( <i>n</i> = 43)                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Professional: embellished                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Professional: plain                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Amateur                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 14 (32.6%)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | 27 (62.8%)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | 2 (4.7%)                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p>“it sounded more sophisticated and was more emotionally impactful.”</p> <p>“it was the one that caught my attention the most”</p> <p>“it was unique and it was evident that they had been trained on how to shape their voices into the perfect version”</p> | <p>“the vocal quality was good and I could hear the singers individual subtle styles without needing to embellish”</p> <p>“it sounded the most natural yet polished in terms of vocal quality”</p> <p>“it was much easier/more soothing to listen to and sing along with compared to the other clips”</p> | <p>“honestly, overall I did prefer the Amateur over the rest. possibly due to its relatability and familiarity”</p> <p>“the amateur version was my preferred option ... [it] was most endearing”</p> |



# Results: Exemplifying “good singing”

## Nominated version (*n* = 40)

| Professional: embellished                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Professional: plain                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Amateur  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| 18 (45.0%)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 22 (55.0%)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | 0 (0.0%) |
| <p>“because very few people can sing that way”</p> <p>“they sounded like they knew how to sing as the voices where more skilled at reaching higher more complicated notes.”</p> <p>“the embellished, the singers had been trained and didn't follow the original version of the song, the song was a mystery, you couldn't predict how it would sound and that is how interesting good music is meant to be to captivate its audience.”</p> | <p>“The female professional singer in the professional plain version. She sounded like she had good control of her voice but wasn't overdoing it with the flourishes in the professional embellished version, which almost sounded like a parody of "good singing"!.”</p> <p>“it flowed well and showcased the musical talent of the singers. It demonstrated that you don't have to go 'full out' in a performance to impress others.”</p> <p>“their voices were soft, experienced, and pleasant to listen to.”</p> |          |

# Discussion



- ▶ Link between preference and chosen exemplar of good singing
  - ▶ Implication for studio
- ▶ Consideration of hypothesis
  - ▶ Bartlett 2020 benchmarks commentary?

# Discussion



- ▶ Implications for participation in musical activities



# Questions?

**Thank you.**

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