

An assessment framework for contemporary commercial music (CCM) in higher education

An assessment
framework for
CCM

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the article is to develop a framework for assessment for contemporary commercial music (CCM) in a music department that is still organised in a traditional way. Assessment of CCM in tertiary institutions and external graded music exams were described and analysed, followed by the presentation of an assessment framework.

Design/methodology/approach – This research design is a content analysis. Data was collected through purposive sampling of primary sources of CCM syllabi. These syllabi are used descriptively and analytically for comparison.

Findings – The major findings from the content analysis are presented as an assessment framework for CCM. The assessment framework has implications for teaching and learning vocal CCM at both undergraduate and postgraduate in higher education.

Practical implications – The study focused on the development of assessment criteria for CCM, in a music department where no degree specialisation for CCM exists, and CCM is manifested in the principal instrument only. The framework for assessment may be useful to practitioners and academics who are attempting to introduce CCM in classically oriented music departments and where external constraints prohibit the introduction of a degree specialising in CCM.

Originality/value – This article presents an authentic assessment framework for CCM, that considers its style and performance practices.

Keywords CCM, Higher education, Assessment criteria, Vocal music

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present assessment criteria for undergraduate and postgraduate singing students in the genre of contemporary commercial music (CCM), in a classically oriented music department, in a developing country.

This study arose due to the introduction of CCM as an alternative to classical voice to increase access for students, in a bridging qualification, designed for students from mainly underprivileged backgrounds who did not have formal music training at school. Once these students articulated to the Bachelor of Music degree, assessment criteria needed to be developed which would be suitable for CCM at the degree level, to place it at the same level as classical voice which was the established genre, and within the context of limited resources.

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Ethical considerations: This study is a desktop study, consisting of a content analysis and the application and development of assessment criteria based on the authors' experiences in the field of CCM at a tertiary institution in a developing country.

Conflict of interest: The authors have no conflict of interest.



At the same time, we also had an influx of students enrolling for the Bachelor of Music degree, who wished to continue with CCM, after completing external graded exams in contemporary genres. While this article focuses on assessment, the assessment informed teaching and learning, resource allocation and timetabling.

The qualitative research methodology used in this article is content analysis, which focuses on describing and interpreting written artefacts (Krippendorff, 2018; Leedy and Ormrod, 2001). In this study the artefact was the CCM singing curricula, and specifically the assessment. For the scope of this article, the researchers selected representative samples of syllabi from international and local tertiary institutions, the syllabi of external examining bodies and secondary sources such as academic articles and dissertations. For each of the curricula presented, we focused on assessment, which in our sample, was expressed in diverse ways, including assessment tools, graduate outcomes, assessment criteria and assessment processes and products. Furthermore, descriptive and interpretive analyses of the data were conducted.

Review of the literature

CCM is a term coined by Jeanette Lovetri to refer to all genres that are not classical (LoVetri and Weekly, 2003; Kempfer, 2014; Bartlett and Naismith, 2020). CCM encompasses a wide variety of sub-genres and styles, each with its own performance cultures, and includes funk, R & B, rock, heavy metal, soul, pop, country, rap, experimental, reggae, indie, folk and jazz. Experts in the field of CCM state that each sub-genre of CCM needs to be taught, performed and assessed authentically (Bartlett, 2011; LoVetri, 2002). Various vocal techniques for CCM exist, which differ from classical voice training, and include the Estill Method (Sainato, 2022), complete vocal technique (CVT) and the somatic voicework (LoVetri Method) [1]. The commonality among these vocal methods is that they are designed to develop the vocal quality needed for CCM performance. Through voice training exercises, these methods combine the head and chest registers to create a balanced mix, which is needed for CCM and contemporary examples of musical theatre. For example, Jeanie LoVetri's Somatic voice method uses traditional technical exercises, such as scales and arpeggios to cross-train the sounds in the middle register, to enable performers to sing CCM repertoire. Somatic voicework results in a balanced mix of registers, undistorted vowels, strong aligned posture which in turn facilitates deep and easy inhalation and exhalation (Cobb, 2022). Bartlett (2020, p. 188) describes her own cross-over work in vocal pedagogy, at Griffiths University in Australia, where in the musical theatre curriculum, she works with repertoire and an awareness of "style-relevant tone, timbre, resonance, intonation, articulation, registration, breath flow parameters, and authentic, style-specific features (effects and embellishments)". Successful, authentic performance of CCM is thus dependent on appropriate vocal pedagogy, which is reflected in performance.

While there is research on CCM for singers, it does not address assessment, but instead focuses on the challenges of CCM in higher education, focussing on (1) vocal pedagogy (Keskinen, 2013; DeSilva, 2016; Bartlett, 2020; Bartlett and Naismith, 2020; Cox, 2020; Higgins, 2022) and (2) vocal health (Taylor, 2020). The research mainly reports on the challenges experienced in tertiary music departments, which are attempting to accommodate CCM, where academics are trained to teach classical voice, which requires a completely different vocal pedagogy. According to this body of research, CCM is not as established in some higher education settings, despite its popularity and growth in society and ever increasing external graded exams in CCM in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia.

Other research focuses on the CCM performer and focuses on aspects of performance, including, (1) the work life of CCM performers (Bartlett, 2011, 2014); (2) register preferences of female singers in CCM (Cooke, 2017); (3) voice classification in CCM (Ravelin, 2017), (4) voice

quality of CCM students (Sielska-Badurek *et al.*, 2018) and (5) the development of a contemporary music programme (Hannan, 2000).

CCM at tertiary institutions: international perspective

While this article reports on a lengthy process of developing assessment criteria, for this paper, the researchers selected the most relevant and pertinent institutions that helped to inform their practice. They report on representative international universities, which offer a three- or four-year degree qualification, in CCM, and the institutions that are included are, Berklee College of Music in the United States of America (USA), The Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in the UK, London College of Music (LCM), which has close ties with the University of West London and Southern Cross University and Griffiths University, which are both in Australia.

Berklee

Berklee is the world's largest independent college of contemporary commercial music (Keskinen, 2013). It is well-known for its study of jazz and modern American music, and also provides college-level classes in a variety of contemporary and historical styles, such as rock, hip-hop, reggae, salsa, heavy metal and bluegrass. Berklee graduates have received numerous prizes, including Grammys, Latin Grammys, Emmys, Tonys, Academy Awards and Saturn Awards [2].

Berklee presents a four-year performance Bachelor degree. The CCM course material for the voice as a principal [3] instrument includes private instruction for the principal instrument, ensemble, music application, contemporary theory, contemporary ear training, music technology, college writing, arranging, contemporary harmony, literature, solfège, history, health and wellness, composition, recital preparation, improvisation, conducting and vocal styles survey. The entrance criteria include an audition [4] process, which includes performance and an aural component. The graduate outcomes that students are to achieve are [5]:

- (1) apply proper breath management skills to all aspects of vocal performance;
- (2) sing with accurate intonation;
- (3) perform in a variety of contemporary and traditional styles;
- (4) sing with good diction in multiple languages;
- (5) perform in ensembles of varying size, instrumentation and stylistic orientation;
- (6) synthesise and integrate the knowledge of posture, breathing and vocal production techniques into daily practice routines; and
- (7) improvise in a variety of contemporary and traditional styles.

The Masters [6] of Music programme focuses on contemporary performance with an emphasis on music production.

Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM)

The RNCM [7] approach to pop music education is claimed to be unique, with the goal of educating, preparing and developing creative, practical and professional talent for lucrative, long-lasting careers that will determine the course of music (Merrick, 2022). Entrance to the RNCM BMus (Hons) Popular Music is dependent on passing an audition and inclusive of demonstrating a high standard of performing ability equivalent to the Associated Board of

the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), RockschooL or Trinity Grade 8 and a theoretical level equivalent to ABRSM Grade 5 theory.

Their courses concentrate on artist development and instil the essential skills of the 21st-century 3D musician: performance, composition and production. Performance, composition, production, artist development and musicianship are five key focus areas in their Bachelor's degree in popular music. Graduates should be proficient in the following areas [8]:

- (1) performing a diverse repertoire as original artist/band or as session musician;
- (2) composing, producing and performing original material;
- (3) band musicianship: band rehearsal, performance techniques, give and take musical direction, and
- (4) integrating technology in live and studio performance environments.

RNCM follow two specific options in their contemporary master's degree programmes, Master of Performance [9] and Master of Music [10] in popular music.

London College of Music (LCM)

This institution operates in the University of West London [11]. The entry requirements for the three-year Bachelor of Music degree are Grade 6 practical standard, or an audition and Grade 5 theory. Each year of undergraduate and postgraduate study of the University of West London [12] is equivalent to a diploma of LCM, with the final year at the Associate of the London College of Music (ALCM) level, and the postgraduate Master's degree at the Fellowship of the London College of Music (FCLM) level. The degree prepares students for a career as a performing artist in industry, including business skills, song writing and arranging. Performances are assessed against assessment criteria that are applied at increasingly higher levels for each year of undergraduate and postgraduate study and the performances also increase in duration. The broad categories for assessment of performances are technical accomplishment, musicality, musical knowledge, communication and the written programme. A pass mark for the undergraduate degree is between 75 and 100%, and at a Master's degree level, a candidate either passes or fails. This institution's practice of benchmarking their degree programmes, with external graded exams, for the different years of study, is similar to the practice followed at some South African universities.

Southern Cross University [13]

This university presents a three-year degree with specialisations in performance, song writing and production. The qualification offers a comprehensive industry oriented approach for each specialisation, with an emphasis on studio work. Final year outcomes for the module, Creative Music Practice, includes

- (1) Advanced level ensemble rehearsal and performance practices;
- (2) Pre-production and recording project planning;
- (3) Creative record production techniques, and
- (4) Advanced level collaborative creative recording studio practices.

Students are assessed on performances, and composition and song writing portfolios, as well as recording portfolios.

Griffiths University

Griffiths University offers a three-year Bachelor of Musical Theatre [14], and develops graduates who will be creative and flexible 21st century theatre performers. The institution is

included, because of [Bartlett's \(2020\)](#), cross-over vocal pedagogy which prepares graduates for the demands of CCM in contemporary musical theatre, which are not comparable to classical voice.

Although the courses and foci differ, the international institutions all offer comprehensive qualifications to prepare the graduate for a career in the performance industry, with assessment being aligned to future practice in graduates' chosen careers.

CCM at tertiary institutions: the view from South Africa

The shortcomings in South Africa, is that none of the universities offer a comprehensive CCM degree as is the case at international institutions. Nevertheless, staff who are listed on the institutional websites and who lecture CCM, perform popular music and jazz, and are knowledgeable of the music industry and performance practices, which is similar to the academics who lecture CCM at international institutions.

In the undergraduate music degrees presented by South African universities, students can major in performance, with voice as the main instrument. All the universities offer classical voice, with CCM voice, as a component of jazz programmes, which is the case at Nelson Mandela University (NMU) [\[15\]](#), the University of Cape Town (UCT), [\[16\]](#) the University of Kwazulu-Natal [\[17\]](#) and North-West University (NWU) [\[18\]](#).

The entry requirements for the Bachelor of Music degree programmes, of several higher education institutions, in South Africa, list external examination grade levels, which mirrors their British counterparts. For example, NMU [\[19\]](#) and NWU [\[20\]](#) require prospective students to be at grade 6 on their instrument and music theory at grade 5. The UCT, [\[21\]](#) have higher entry requirements, of grade 7 for the instrument and music theory at grade 5. For the Master's in Performing degree, at NWU [\[22\]](#) students perform two public concerts and complete a research component. This is similar to the practice at NMU [\[23\]](#). The programmes for the public performances at all the universities need to be approved by a university committee, with none of the universities listing graded levels, except NMU which requires public recitals be at the licentiate level [\[24\]](#).

South African universities incorporate CCM into jazz or in classical singing. Students enrolled for the principal instrument modules would then select CCM songs as part of their jazz repertoire. The dilemma faced by the researchers was how to assess CCM voice in a department where the singing modules were developed around learning other language repertoire, performing with a piano accompanist, singing a classical repertoire of song cycles, opera arias, performing in spaces such as the auditorium, concert halls and without amplification. One of the researchers is well-versed in curriculum development and management and has worked in higher education for several decades, and the second researcher is classically trained in voice and has completed the Somatic voicework course and also has a career as a performer in contemporary music. They conducted the research and put their findings, which are presented as an assessment framework into practice over several years.

External examining bodies and assessment criteria

Music teachers and learners at schools are familiar with external examining bodies, which mainly assess the performance of repertoire. These examining bodies provide comprehensive repertoire lists and assessment criteria for each grade. Of particular interest to this study were the repertoire lists and assessment criteria from grades 6 onwards.

Trinity College London [\[25\]](#) criteria for assessment for grades 6 to 8 are time (duration), range and register, improvisation, accompaniment, melodic writing, other directions and techniques, such as creaks, growls, slides, screams, glottal theatrics, which are all used in

different styles of CCM. These performance directions also point to the performance of a diverse repertoire encompassing a wide variety of styles in CCM.

LCM Exams [26] were discussed under West London University, and includes technical accomplishment, musicality, musical knowledge and communication. The assessment for RockSchool [27] for grades 6 to 8, are duration, performance elements and expressive techniques (Harrison and Brandt, 2021). The assessment criteria for Orange Learn [28] are time (duration), range and register and melodic composition.

Comparative analysis of external examining bodies

The assessment criteria for each of the external examining bodies differ slightly, but the commonality that they share is that the criteria are progressively more complex for each grade and are focus on the performance of the graded repertoire lists. All the examination bodies require that the students perform using backtracks which is a starting point for working with technology and a requirement for working in the music industry and for contemporary music performance. Learning to sing with backtracks forces a singer to know the song off by heart; expressing each crescendo or decrescendo, acknowledging various dynamic aspects and having a solid understanding of the arrangement of the song and being able to present the song as it was composed.

The merits of the London College of Music Exam (LCME), system is that it has syllabi for CCM at postgraduate level and also has an extensive list of technical work. This technical work can be applied to developing the middle register. Moreover, it allows for free choice of songs, which make it more inclusive of different genres in the broad category of CCM, and also then allows for regional choices of CCM. LCME, Rock School (RSL) and Trinity College Rock and Pop, have sight-singing and aural development that includes singing harmonies and improvisation. The main shortcoming of LCME is that it does not have genre-specific stylistic tests, whereas the benefits of RSL is the increased scope of repertoire, and its more authentic approach to genre-specific performance criteria, with its main weakness being that it does not have a postgraduate level.

For LCME, the examiners require written programme notes, with the recital treated like a contemporary performance. Even though the vocal aspect of the performance is the principal means of assessment, the candidate is encouraged to enhance the performance with the use of gesticulation, facial expression, movement or dance (LCME Vocal Syllabus, 2022).

Trinity College London (TCL) Rock & Pop's has an authentic approach to genre-specific performance criteria. The major disadvantage is that it has very limited technical skill development, has exams that are short in duration and only has the option to choose between playback and improvisation in the exam. It also does not have any programmes beyond grade 8.

Orange Learn relies on the technical aspects of each song presented in the exam and has no supporting tests. This would imply that teachers would have to develop voice exercises using extracts from their selection of songs for vocal development. Orange Learn also has no programmes beyond grade 8 and also lacks an authentic approach to genre-specific stylistic tests.

A music department in a developing country with limited resources to introduce CCM, needs to be mindful of performance practice and how to include sufficient aspects thereof, based on an analysis of international practice, so that we meet national and international standards, which is a requirement for new curricula or modules.

The assessment framework was informed by the literature on vocal pedagogy, somatic voicework, the syllabi and assessment criteria of external examining bodies and the assessment practices at tertiary institutions, in addition to one of the researcher's experiences as a performing artist.

The assessment of the principal instrument, CCM voice necessitated some changes to how the teaching was organised. One on one lessons, were always with an accompanist (the lecturer fulfilled this role), and/or backing tracks and the students always had the opportunity to use amplification and practice their microphone technique, which was also assessed in the exams.

For the first two years of the Bachelor of Music degree, we used the assessment criteria of grades 6 to 8 of LCME, with the main difference between the two years, was the length of the programme, which was between 15 and 20 min, and the expanding of the repertoire to include a wider variety of CCM styles, and repertoire that is age appropriate and suits the emotional maturity of the singer. Additionally, vocal techniques were assessed in the exam or as formative assessment during the lessons. We also added gesticulation, facial expression, movement and/or dance as criteria for assessment.

For the third and fourth years, we continued to assess vocal technique and we added the ability to work with a band or small ensemble. However, the main focus of the recital exam was the technical exercises and the performance. Furthermore, the duration of the recital was extended to between 30 and 35 min, with repertoire from any of the Grade 8 lists, and the inclusion of own arrangements, as well as South African contemporary music in any language and style.

For the fourth and final year, performance in ensembles, the ability to work with a band, solo work and programme notes were added criteria. Moreover, the candidates had to demonstrate mastery of a wider variety of CCM styles. The final recital exam was a themed programme consisting of songs that have contrasting themes and/or styles, to showcase the candidate's versatility in CCM. The exit performance programme would be at the LCME, licentiate level, with the duration between 35 and 45 min, to match the requirements for the other principal instruments, in the department. Furthermore, the use of technology would be encouraged, including the use of backtracks, live accompaniment and/or a combination of these. The student would also design or be involved with the design of the poster to advertise the concert. Working with a live accompanist or incorporating a band in an exam would require that the student lead the band and ensure that the standard for performance is met by organising rehearsals, so developing a rehearsal schedule is also a criterion. These new skillsets incorporate experiential learning, leadership, effective negotiation, teamwork and collaborative strategies. Further assessment criteria also included:

- (1) The performance should exhibit a performance that is well crafted, highlighting the strengths of the candidate. This has reference to the voice quality and choice of songs.
- (2) The candidate should display vocal intelligence, musicality and maturity. Examples of these can include the ability of the singer to effortlessly glide between registers and attempt songs that include forms of belting techniques and varying contemporary techniques that would broaden the anatomy of vocal approaches yet maintain control of pitch execution and proper breathing techniques.
- (3) The programme should include contrasting selections from jazz, pop, rock or other CCM repertoire. The singer may specialise in a particular genre and have contrasting selections within the chosen genre or may select repertoire from more than one genre to display an understanding of genres and stylistic differences in CCM.

Prospective Masters in Performing Arts students are expected to be at the required level and familiar with the performance practices of their genre. Masters in Performing Arts students therefore need to demonstrate mastery of the genre and the ability to perform in contemporary spaces, such as clubs, which could be the venue for the exam, with YouTube video links of the performance made available to the examiners. The university at which we work also includes a research component in the form of a treatise in addition to two public

recitals of one hour each. For the public recitals, the candidate is required to write extensive programme notes as motivation for each programme, which are approved by a department committee, and which should reflect a wide choice of repertoire across the genre. Additionally, the programmes for each recital should contain notes for the audience. While the academic and administrative staff would assist undergraduate students, to manage their final recital, for the Masters in Performing Arts degree, candidates should demonstrate additional skills, inclusive of:

- (1) Managing a budget;
- (2) Marketing: venue, posters, programme, tickets, advertising on social media;
- (3) Evidence of a rehearsal schedule;
- (4) Stage plan;
- (5) Appropriate use of technology such as specialised lighting, smoke machines, pyrotechnics and special effects;
- (6) Appropriate use of music technology, eg microphones, amplifiers and vocal effects such as reverb or delay;
- (7) Extensive programme notes;
- (8) A stylistically, well-presented programme, consisting of diverse CCM styles, and that highlights the strengths of the performer, and shows evidence of:
 - Own arrangements of songs and not only original versions of songs
 - Vocal intelligence, musicality, breath control, pitch control
 - Command of the instrument using, stylistic and vocal effects, such as belting techniques, riffs and be able to glide effortlessly between registers and perform other genre specific nuances
- (9) The candidate should exemplify stage performance, through
 - The ability to command the stage
 - Use gesticulation, facial expression, movement and/or dance or backup dancers
 - Audience engagement
 - Costume, hair and makeup
 - Communication and synergy with the band and backing vocalists (Barker and Taylor, 2015; Plasketes, 2010; Damster and Tassiopoulos, 2005).
- (10) The candidate should also demonstrate maturity and personality and character through the performance.

Concluding thoughts

The researchers have reported on the sources they read and analysed in order to develop an assessment framework for CCM. They do not report on the process which was fraught with obstacles and several challenges that almost derailed the project of introducing CCM as a distinct genre that is different from classical voice and jazz. The authors are appreciative of the number of students who choose CCM and journeyed with us to institutionalise CCM.

The researchers acknowledge that the findings in the form of the framework for assessment may not be directly transferable to other tertiary institutions due to different contexts, and entry requirements of bachelor degree programmes. However, it is hoped that

the findings may be of interest to academic staff who wish to introduce CCM in a Music Department where there are insufficient resources to embark on a comprehensive degree programme in CCM.

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Notes

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