

Listening comparison: Different vocal timbres

Listen to each of the following voices without judgment—we're not thinking about "I like this" or "I don't like this." Instead, we're thinking about how to *describe* the sound we hear and compare it to other sounds, leaving "good" and "bad" out of the discussion.

Margaret Price, "Ach, ich fuhs" from *Die Zauberflöte* (W. A. Mozart, 1791; recorded 1984)
Marianne Pousseur, "Nacht" from *Pierrot Lunaire* (Arnold Schoenberg, 1912)
Billie Holiday, "Georgia on My Mind" (1941)
Mahalia Jackson, "Move on Up a Little Higher" (1947)
Big Mama Thornton, "Hound Dog" (1952)
Joni Mitchell, "Big Yellow Taxi" (1970)
Dolly Parton, "I Will Always Love You" (1974)
Hole (Courtney Love), "Violet" (1991)
Estelle, "American Boy" (2008)

Different musical cultures have different vocal etiquettes.

etiquette (n) – manners or preferred behavior; the customary code of polite behavior in society or among members of a particular profession or group. The way a singer in one musical culture uses his or her voice is often the *wrong* etiquette for another musical culture. Some (ethno)musicologists refer to "vocal etiquette" as "tradition," "expectations," or "patterns."

The "correct" vocal etiquette is determined by members of a group (or a society) over time, but it can change from one generation to the next. Sounds and behaviors that audiences, patrons, and performers all like are reinforced (e.g., audience claps or cheers, performers are paid more or asked to do the same thing again) and passed down from professionals/masters to students/apprentices.

Vocal etiquette is determined not just by what people like or personal preference. Three other factors help shape vocal etiquette (and all other variables that make different music sound *different*):

- 1) Purpose – why the music is made
- 2) Venue – where the music is played or listened to
- 3) Cultural values – things that matter or are important to a society or group, things that seem "natural" to a society or group

Additional writings on vocal etiquette (e.g., musical style as a function of sociology):

Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (2004)

Phillip Mason, "Soul in the Culture of African Americans," *Music Educators Journal* (November 1992), pp. 49-52

Richard Rischer, "A Vision of Love: An Etiquette of Vocal Ornamentation in African-American Popular Ballads of the Early 1990s," *American Music* (Autumn 2004), pp. 419-422

Robert Stephens, "Soul: A Historical Reconstruction of Continuity and Change in Black Popular Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* (Spring 1984), pp. 26-27