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**Vocal Styles in Commercially Successful Popular
Music in the United States during the 2010's**

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Music and Performing Arts Senior Capstone

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ABSTRACT

Vocal performance in commercially successful American popular music during the 2010's implemented many different vocal techniques. However, the vocal styles that were prominent during this era of music are: vocal breathiness, vocal belts and the usage of the head voice. In this paper, I will examine the vocal styles and performances of pop stars who were influential during the 2010's. These artists are Katy Perry, Ariana Grande, and Billie Eilish. Through these examinations, readers will have an understanding of the popular vocal styles that were heavily used during this decade of music.

INTRODUCTION

American popular music is one of the leading platforms in the entertainment industry and continues to grow into a massive phenomenon. In 2017, an article written by Forbes, stated that Americans spend an estimated time of 32 hours per week listening to music. “At 2017’s mid-year mark, Americans had hit play on 184 billion songs on on-demand streaming outlets like Spotify and Apple Music” (McIntyre).

Used as an entertainment source, American popular music shares an important relationship with other entertainment platforms such as film and television. It has been successfully used as a soundtrack for many hit films such as *Pitch Perfect*. The franchise itself grossed more than \$500 million worldwide (McNary). In the first film, the hit song “Cups,” received positive attention from the listeners and sold over 2.5 million downloads in the US in 2013 and charted at number 6 on the Hot 100 Billboard (“Cups”).

Premiered in 2009, award-winning television series *Glee* reached massive success and impacted popular culture due to its plot, characters, and music. *Glee* is a drama/comedy series that follows a group of high school students who joins the Glee club and covers commercially successful popular music. With six seasons and ending in 2015, *Glee* has meet many achievements; they have been nominated for 208 awards and won 84 awards, including the Golden Globe for *Best Television Series – Comedy or Musical* in 2011 (“Glee”); the cast of *Glee* grossed a \$40 million tour in 2010-2011 (Bricker), and had 207 songs enter in the Billboard Hot 100 (“Glee Cast”). *Pitch Perfect* and *Glee* are two prime examples of the success and importance of using popular

music in film and television as a form of entertainment, as both reached immense success in the music industry.

American popular music is shown to be a strong component in the entertainment industry.

However, it also has artistic values. Through live performances, pop stars have the opportunity to showcase their artistic abilities through visual art performances. Lady Gaga, who embodies the pop persona with her electro-dance music and over-the-top sense of fashion, establishes herself in the music industry with her 2009 MTV Video Music Award show performance of “Poker Face” and “Paparazzi,” where she artificially bleeds out onstage in response to celebrities facing pressures of the media.

Popular music allows people to engage in a sense of connection with the artist themselves.

Through music, people can explore different meanings of life such as sadness, happiness, and joyfulness; these emotions can be a representation of what an individual may be going through.

For many people, popular music can be used as an escape from everyday life. Experiencing a live performance/concert with a community that shares the same musical interest can be a powerful force as it allows individuals to connect with each other.

As an art form, American popular music plays an essential role in people’s lives. Popular music has allowed artists to experiment with different sounds and timbres with it comes to music production. Fashion has also been incorporated into popular music and has helped push the boundaries of the fashion industry. Some unforgettable fashion moments are: Jennifer Lopez’s Versace Dress at the 2000’s Grammy Award Show (Chang) and Lady Gaga’s infamous meat

dress during the 2010 MTV VMA awards (Mapes). These different characteristics plays an important role in popular music. However, a singularly important feature involves the role of vocal music performance. In the 2010's, vocal music performance heavily used vocal breathiness, vocal belts, and head voice as vocal techniques to achieve mainstream success.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In this paper, I will examine multiple examples that were significant in vocal performance in contemporary popular music from 2010-2020. There are many artists who have contributed to this idea. However, I will be taking a closer look at Katy Perry, Ariana Grande, and Billie Eilish's vocal performances and how they helped shape vocal performance in 2010 popular vocal music. Each of these artists have captured the vocal technique of vocal breathiness, vocal belts, and the usage of head voice.

CASE STUDY: Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream" Album as Pop Perfection

"Teenage Dream" Reaches New Heights

Prior to the release of "Teenage Dream," superstar Katy Perry found big success with her debut single, "I Kissed a Girl." After releasing her second studio album, "One of the Boys," Perry found more success with hits like "Hot N Cold" and "Wake Up in Vegas." In the summer of 2010, Perry continued her momentum of success and released bubble-gum pop song, "California Gurls," featuring Grammy-Nominated Rapper, Snoop Dogg. This song was named the song of the summer in 2010 and the first song to reach the 300,00 mark in digital sales ("California Gurls"). In late August of 2010, Perry released her third studio album "Teenage Dream." The album received positive reviews from critics. "Teenage Dream" was monumental and spawned

five number one singles from one album: “California Gurls,” “Teenage Dream,” “Firework,” “E.T.” ft. Kanye West, and “Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.).” The only other artists that have achieved this milestone was Michael Jackson with his album “Bad.” With “Teenage Dream,” Perry has established a name for herself in the music industry.

Analyzing Perry’s Vocal Performance

There were many factors to the success of “Teenage Dream.” However, her vocal choices on the album helped shape the pop vocal performance at the beginning of the 2010’s. In the verses of “California Gurls,” Perry often used slight breathiness in the chest voice on the last syllable of the vocal line to create texture. She also adds a slight inhale to emphasize the meaning and light-heartedness of the song. The trend of the breathiness continues in her song “Teenage Dream;” Perry starts the song with a light and soft head voice with added breathiness. When the chorus starts, she is in full chest voice and then transitions in and out of her head voice in the second verse. The usage of breathiness continues in other parts of the album like her ballad, “Not Like the Movies” and bass-filled song “E.T.” Many artists during this era also used vocal breathiness to enhance their vocal performance. Rihanna’s 2012 hit “Diamonds” also used slight breathiness at the last few syllables of the lyrics line in the verses, similar to how Perry used breathiness in “California Gurls.” Taylor Swift’s 2014 ballad, “Wildest Dreams,” from her “1984” album, also used this method in order to capture the essence of the song.

Using the head voice is widely popular in pop music and has been used from time to time. As previously discussed, Perry used this technique through her “Teenage Dream” album. Along with her song “Teenage Dream,” Perry continues to use her breathy head voice in “E.T”

throughout the verses. However, in “E.T.” she sings the entire bridge in a delicate and soft head voice before heading back to the chorus with a full chest voice. Adele’s massive hit “Rolling in the Deep,” uses the breathy head voice technique throughout the pre-chorus and chorus. Many vocalists during this time used this technique to build anticipation before reaching the chorus. Another example of this method is male popstar, Bruno Mars. In Mars’s 2012 hit ballad, “When I was Your Man,” he used his falsetto and sings on the “oo” vowel before signing the chorus in full chest-voice belt.

In her inspiration hit, “Firework,” Perry belts out in the chorus. Belting is a vocal technique that has been used for years. Its purpose is to add power and intensity to the vocal performance. Perry often uses this technique throughout the album and continues to help fuel this vocal trend.

“Prism”

In October 2015, Perry released her fourth studio album “Prism,” and produced two mega-hits, “Roar” and “Dark Horse.” In “Roar,” Perry continues the trend of ending the last syllable of the lyric line with a breathy chest voice. In the chorus, Perry sings a catchy “oh” hook as a simple sing-along. Her breathiness also occurs in “Dark Horse,” “Legendary Lover,” “Birthday,” “Walking on Air,” and “By the Grace of God.” In her other songs on the album, she continues to use the breathiness but it is not as prominent. In “Dark Horse,” Perry incorporates a slight chromaticism to add flavor to the song. This was a new idea coming from Perry, and it worked in her favor as she saw great success with this song. Throughout Perry’s discography, she has showcased her vocal versatility by embodying the vocal trends on 2010 pop vocal performance: belting, head voice, and breathiness..

From “Yours Truly” to “Thank U, Next:” Ariana Grande as 2010’s Vocal Virtuoso

With her signature high ponytail hairstyle, Ariana Grande establishes herself in the music industry with her impressive vocal performance. Music critics and fans have compared her vocal abilities to Grammy Award winning and R&B singer Mariah Carey. Grande showcases her extensive vocal range in her discography with her 2015 pop hit, “Problem,” where she belts out an G#5 in her mixed voice at the end of the pre-chorus. In her Pop/R&B ballad, “Imagine,” from her 2019 critically acclaimed album “Thank U, Next,” Grande present fans and listeners with whistles notes that peak at C7. Grande has been praised by multiple vocalists from the music industry and has proven that she is a vocal virtuoso.

Ariana Grande’s Rise to Fame

As a child, Grande performed in local community theatre in her hometown of Boca Raton, Florida. At the age of 8, she made her first national television appearance during a Florida Panthers game where she performed the national anthem. Since then she continued to take part in musical theatre performances to exercise her skills as an actress and singer. When she was 13, Grande was casted as “Charlotte,” in the musical, Musical 13 (“13 Musical”) which helped give her momentum to success.

In 2009, Grande entered the entertainment industry and was casted as “adorably dimwitted,” Cat Valentine in Nickelodeon television show, “Victorious.” After the show ended February of 2013, she started to pursue a career in the music industry as a solo act. With the release of her debut

EP, “Yours Truly,” Grande presented herself as a vocalist who is able to belt and perform vocal runs flawlessly.

An Examination of Grande’s Vocal Performance

From Grande’s 2014 sophomore album “My Everything,” she produces tracks that emulate breathy vocals throughout the album. “Love Me Harder,” featuring The Weeknd, was released as the fourth single from “My Everything.” It soon became Grande’s fourth top ten single on the Billboard charts, peaking at Number 7 (“Love Me Harder”). “As of April 2018, the song had sold 1.7 million copies in the United States and has been certified triple platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America, RIAA (“Love Me Harder”).” This song is a great example of Grande using her breathy vocals to produce a sultry sound in order to convey the meaning of the song. In the first verse Grande sings:

“Tell me something, I need to know
Then take my breath and never let it go
If you just let me invade your space
I’ll take the pleasure, take it with the pain

And if in the moment, I bite my lip
Baby, in that moment, you’ll know this
Is something bigger than us and beyond bliss
Give me a reason to believe it”

From the verse, Grande is expressing her desire to be with a potential love interest. Once the chorus approaches she tells her love interest:

“Cause if you want to keep me, you gotta gotta gotta gotta got to love me harder
And if you really need me, you gotta gotta gotta gotta gotta got to love me harder
(Gotta love me harder)
Love me, love me, love me
Harder, harder, harder”

Grande informs her love interest that if they want to pursue a romantic relationship with her, they must show her more affection. The chorus gives a double entendres about love and physical intimacy. Many commercially successful songs during the 2010's explored the concept of love and its psychical relationship. Some examples of this are: 2019 smash hit "Senorita" by Shawn Mendes and Camilia Cabello and Ellie Goulding's 2015 "Love Me Like You Do" from the *Fifty Shades of Grey* soundtrack. The vocal characteristics of "Love Me Harder," "Senorita," and "Love Me Like You Do" share a common usage of vocal breathiness. In order to portray the tone of the song, using the vocal breathiness will enhance the meaning of the song. These three songs found immense success through their vocal performance.

With the release of her third studio album in 2016, "Dangerous Woman," Grande continues to deliver a pop and R&B sound with a more mature perspective. Throughout the album, she continues to showcase her vocal abilities. During this time of pop music, many singers such as Katy Perry, Selena Gomez, Taylor Swift, and Justin Bieber were heavily criticized for having weak vocal performances. Fans and critics have stated these artists have intonation problems, and have "no vocal range." Compared to Ariana Grande, who has formal training in musical theatre, she has delivered consistent vocal performances from her studio recordings to her live performances.

With the release of her album title track, "Dangerous Woman," Grande releases a promotional video of her singing an acapella rendition of "Dangerous Woman." Singing acapella with an ensemble or solo is a demanding and challenging practice for vocalists. Acapella requires intensive ear training skills as there are no instruments accompanying the voice(s). Many

vocalists find it difficult to stay in tune throughout a song. However, throughout this acapella rendition, Grande maintains consistent pitch control and stays in the same key she started. She uses minor vocal breathiness throughout the verses, but this characteristic is not the focus of the song. Her vocal belts towards the end of the song draws in the listeners and showcases her vocal talents. When she reaches her upper range, she is able to keep her throat open and place the sound through her nose to create a more nasal sound in order to achieve those higher notes. This rendition proves Grande as a talented vocalist.

Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Demi Lovato are also vocalists who are held in high praise due to their vocal performance. These three vocalists have proven that they are able to produce vocal range through their years of training and experience. Many pop stars have been criticized for weak vocal performances. However, there are still mainstream artists who focus on vocal performance and deliver outstanding live performances. It's important to acknowledge this in commercially successful mainstream music as there is a misconception about popstars weak vocal talent. Throughout the 2010's, there are still artists who have dedicated their time to producing a strong singing voice through proper training.

A Look at How Billie Eilish Captivated Listeners with her Voice

In the late 2010's, the general views about popular music began to shift due to political and social awareness in the United States. The American society begins to celebrate the cultural differences in America and strives to empower marginalized communities. As a result, many issues within the American society were acknowledged and protests such as the *Black Lives Matter Movement* and *Me Too Movement* sparked national and global attention. As society

moves forward, the entertainment industry must progress with society in order to maintain a strong connection with society. If the entertainment industry fail to represent society's progressing standards, they will commercially fail and receive backlash and criticism from the public. In response to this, the general audience begins to seek interest in music with depth and in search for artists who have a "distinctive" voice type.

The "New" Pop Sensation in the Mid and Late 2010's

Australian native, Lorde, gained mainstream success with her global mega-hit, "Royals." Before dissecting Lorde's vocal performance in this song, I must acknowledge that this song was the beginning of the "dark pop" phenomena where artists wrote music surrounding darker topics such as drugs, political issues, and mental health. In America's social climate, writing about more in-depth topics allowed the audience to acknowledge and understand an individual's artistry. During this time, the music industry was embracing the idea of being "different." The writing aspect went hand-in-hand with their vocal performance.

Lorde is an alto who has a husky timbre. Her voice is distinctive compared to her contemporaries. During this time of pop music, artists who wrote more about darker topics were usually accompanied by their "unique" voice type. Lana Del Rey, Halsey, and Khalid are artists who have gained the title of having a "unique" voice type. This idea meant that their voices were distinctive due to their vocal timbres. It's not based on how high or low they can sing or how they implement certain vocal techniques into their vocal performance. The "unique" voice type is about timbre. One artist who exemplifies this idea is rising star, Billie Eilish.

Billie Eilish's Vocal Performance

In 2015, 14-year-old Billie Eilish uploaded an original song, produced by her brother Finneas O'Connell, onto Sound cloud. This song was "Ocean Eyes." Eilish's vocals caught the attention of many. "Billie Eilish's voice is unique - as a soprano, she sits above the standard female pop alto, something which gives her music an immediate dream-like quality, allowing her to create an atmospheric listening quality" (Reeder).

With the release of her 2019 debut album, "When We Asleep, Where Do We Go?" Eilish produces a vocal performance that emphasizes her minimalistic and airy vocals. Throughout the album, she heavily uses vibrato to enhance her vocal performance. She is consistently in her head voice which creates the dream-like quality. Eilish never fully belts out a note in her chest voice. Eilish's vocal performance has captured the attention of many listeners.

Conclusion

There were many vocal styles that were present in popular American music throughout the 2010's. However, some key vocal features that many pop singers emulated were the usage of vocal breathiness, head voice, and vocal belts. In this paper, we examined the vocal performance of Katy Perry, Ariana Grande, and Billie Eilish. Perry's immense success during the first half of the 2010's lead her to become a pop icon. With her success, her discography consists of vocal performance that heavily used vocal breathiness. In the mid 2010, Ariana Grande began to find success with her voice. She is one of the most vocally talented pop artists of the 2010. Through her strong voice control, she is able to belt with ease, achieve whistle notes, and showcase consistent ab libs during live performance. Towards the end of the 2010, teen popstar, Billie

Eilish, made a name for herself with her angelic and dream-like voice and reshaped the idea of the modern popstar. Her airy and minimalistic vocals captured the attention of many listeners and deemed her voice to be “unique.” With the examination of these three artists, the three-key signature vocal performance of commercially successful music in the 2010’s were vocal breathiness, head voice, and vocal belts.

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