

What do Marilyn Horne, Cleo Laine and Joni Mitchell have in common? All are internationally popular singers, and all are mezzo-sopranos. But there, as Henry Pleasants explains, the resemblance ends

## Three Throats

It is unlikely that more than a scattering of Joni Mitchell's fans know anything about the voices of Marilyn Horne or Cleo Laine. Switch the names around and you could say the same thing of Cleo's and Marilyn's followers. These diverse and exclusive tastes are uniquely characteristic of musical life in the 20th century. Marilyn Horne is an opera singer. Cleo Laine is a jazz singer, or at least began as one, and still feels most at home in that idiom. Joni Mitchell is known as a folk singer. In each case the category imposes upon the singer a distinctive approach to song and a distinctive set of technical, interpretative, stylistic and idiomatic requirements. Each sings a distinctive repertoire to a distinctive audience. It was not always thus.

A hundred years ago Adelina Patti, an opera singer, was not only the Queen of Song, she was also a household word. She sang popular music. This was true 70 or 75 years ago of Enrico Caruso, Nellie Melba, Lillian Nordica and John McCormack. All were opera singers, but they were also popular singers who performed popular songs for ordinary folk in concert halls and on phonograph records. The strictly popular singers of that time sang very much as opera singers did, only with less voice and not so well. With the emergence of ragtime and jazz—now recognized as heralds of a new Afro-American musical idiom—all that changed. The popular songs that opera singers had sung and could still sing were no longer widely popular, and the new popular songs proved incompatible with the opera singer's approach. Opera singers could sing them, and sing them well, but they could not sing them idiomatically.

The phenomenal careers of Al Jolson and Sophie Tucker in the second and third decades of the century demonstrated that the projection of text in a manner of singing closer to the cadences of speech—a style popularized by black vaudevillians—had taken precedence over the artful spinning of a melodic line by a beautiful voice building to a triumphant high-note climax. Then came radio and the microphone, enabling the singer to sing not *at* you, as Jolson and Tucker had done, not *for* you, as opera singers do, but *to* you, as Bing Crosby did.

How is all this reflected in the singing of Marilyn, Cleo and Joni? Let's begin with Marilyn—or Jackie, as she is known to her friends. In her case it is reflected primarily in the fact that for all her versatility she is restricted to opera and the art song recital. There she must fulfil vocal, technical and interpretative requirements very different from those confronting Cleo and Joni, beginning with a range (or vocal compass) of 2½ octaves from a low G, or thereabouts, to

the soprano high C. She works in large auditoriums without a microphone and must have at her disposal a greater volume of sound than is expected of Cleo or Joni. And—most importantly—she must carry more voice much higher. She accomplishes this by controlling the larynx—or voice box or Adam's apple. That is the essential objective of operatic vocal training. Uncontrolled, the larynx tends to rise as the voice rises in pitch. At a certain point—which opera singers call “the passage”—it begins to get in the way, to obstruct the free flow of breath and tone. The opera singer must learn to see that it doesn't, depressing the larynx so that the tone flows freely into the head, a device known as “covering.” All opera singers use it, more or less successfully. An opera singer visiting his nose and throat doctor does not need a tongue depressor.

What has changed for Marilyn is that she has to sing higher than her sisters of 100 years ago, and not just because the standard pitch has risen by more than a semitone since the time of Mozart and Beethoven. Two centuries ago there were only contraltos, with a basic two-octave range of F to F or G to G. They were famous for big baritone-like chest tones, and composers catered to those tones. Rossini took his contraltos higher (notably in *The Barber of Seville*), and with the role of Fidès in Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*, which Marilyn sang at the Met last season, the mezzo-soprano was born. But what was gained at the top was lost at the bottom. Those booming chest tones of yore are no longer fashionable or—for most mezzos—reachable.

Another price was paid in intelligibility of the text. Very few opera singers handle words well, as everyone knows who has heard opera in English. An even, uninterrupted, flowing melodic line is the opera singer's objective, and most opera singers—and art song singers—tend to neglect consonants, fearing that the consonant will disturb the melodic and vocal flow. The voice is treated like any other instrument—a violin, for example—and as far as verbal articulation is concerned it might often just as well be one. Size of voice and a range far above that of ordinary speech compound the mischief. Words get lost in the amplitude of sound, and in the upper register even vowels are altered to suit the singer's vocal convenience. Popular singers on the other hand pitch their voices closer to the level of ordinary speech, and have long since learned that consonants can contribute eloquence rather than disturbance to melody.

Cleo Laine provides a spectacular example of something else that gives today's popular singer an advantage over

Marilyn and her operatic sisters. Cleo can sing not only pretty much what she pleases, but can also sing it pretty much the way she pleases and in a congenial key, fashioning her own variations, her own embellishments, on any song according to her own view of what is appropriate to tune and text. She is not bound, as Marilyn is, by what the composer wrote. This was true of opera singers of the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. Singers then were judged by the quality of melodic invention and ornamentation they brought to the music of—in the later part of the time span—Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Rossini and Bellini, just as popular singers today are judged by how they embellish the songs of Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter and Harold Arlen.

But no longer. In opera and in the song recital the composer's script is holy. Cleo and her sisters—most notably Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Barbra Streisand and Peggy Lee—enjoy a creative privilege and responsibility which they discharge with a wealth of invention, imagination and taste that Marilyn and her sisters—Janet Baker, Maureen Forrester and Teresa Berganza—admire and even envy.

Like most other female popular singers, Cleo Laine is a true contralto, singing easily down to a low D, a fourth lower than opera mezzo-sopranos can or care to go. But she also sings higher than opera sopranos sing, up to the C an octave above the opera soprano's high C. She does this—as do Ella and Sarah, although not quite so high—by ignoring the rising larynx. Instead of “covering” she passes immediately into falsetto—the vocal device that produces a yodel. Once comfortably in that register she can continue on up into the vocal stratosphere, heading—or so it seems—where her voice would be audible only to dogs. She can't vary the sound in her upper register for interpretative purposes as Marilyn can, but it's there, and exciting when used with discretion. Cleo is discreet.

Joni Mitchell and her folk sisters—Judy Collins and Joan Baez, for example—are a different breed of singer. Marilyn and Cleo are highly cultivated, professional performers, each in her own way (Cleo is also an actress). Their professionalism shows and is admired. Joni Mitchell is also a professional, but part of her professionalism is ensuring that it doesn't show. The bulk of the audience at a Joni Mitchell concert looks like nothing so much as a group of refugees from the extras' canteen on a John Ford movie set. For them the art and charm of the folk singer is that she seems to sing like the girl next door. No big voice, no big range, no vocal or musical hijinks, no worry about register breaks, quavery tone or ambiguous intonation. No conspicuous virtuosity on guitar or piano. She's one of us, speaking for us, singing for us the way we would—and conceivably do—sing for ourselves.

That they delight in listening to Joni is her art, because she lives next door to no one. Just try singing one of her more recent songs. The melodies and key changes within them are so bewilderingly complex that other singers, who would never perform her songs onstage, work for hours to master them, just for the challenge. Joni's natural voice has a limited range, true, but she breaks into falsetto in almost every song, and once she's up there she too can fly with surprising accuracy to rather dizzying heights. She has none of Marilyn Horne's control, of course, and she can't really match Cleo for range or accuracy. But this is no flower child who's wandered in off the streets. Joni Mitchell is a practised and accomplished artist, the more surprising for her apparent artlessness.

Alan Rich, who reports on the arts for CBC Radio and writes about classical music for *New York* magazine, once stepped out of his niche at *New York* and devoted the better part of a column to Joni Mitchell. He was especially eager that his readers who were fans of *lieder*—German concert songs—should pay attention to her. I'm not sure I wholly agree with that comparison. Jazz listeners, however, should make a point of hearing her version of the Annie Ross classic, “Twisted.” If you thought only Annie could sing that song—and few other singers have tried—you were wrong. Joni has developed her own interpretation of it, a version even more manically mad than the original. As with all of her work, it sounds easy and is meant to. But it is not as easy as it sounds.

One cannot compare the voices of an opera singer like Marilyn, a jazz singer like Cleo and a folk singer like Joni without feeling a certain sadness at opera's loss since Rossini and ragtime and radio changed the rules. How much more accessible the rich literature of opera would be if only listeners could understand the words—the words that got lost as singers reached for the heights of range. How sad that even most ballet-goers, who will watch a woman move quite artificially on the tips of her toes, cannot appreciate another woman doing something quite similar with her larynx. But perhaps we've been making the wrong comparisons all along here. Perhaps the next time a jazz listener accidentally picks up Marilyn Horne on the FM band he should compare the contralto not with Cleo Laine but with Stéphane Grappelly, the great French jazz violinist. The folk music fan might measure her voice not against Joni Mitchell but against the fiddling of Quebec's incomparable Jean Carignan. That would probably be fairer for all concerned. ◀