

Student Model

Writing Arguments

Talent Over Pitch

by Paige Patel

Did you know that when you are listening to your favorite singer, you might be hearing a computer-generated pitch? Many record companies use pitch-correction software to ensure that their performers are pitch-perfect. While perfectionism is an admirable goal, there is a fine line between using technology to enhance music and using it to make performers into something they're not. Whether recording in the studio or playing a live performance, musicians should not use pitch-correction software.

Music production has become a digital experience. Producers use software to cut and paste pieces of music together, just like you cut and paste words together in your word-processing software. When editing these pieces together digitally, slight imperfections can occur where the pieces are joined. Enter the correction software. What was created as a method to streamline the editing process and correct the occasional off-note has turned into an almost industry-wide standard of altering musicians' work. "Producers and engineers use it because it's their job to make a recording sound good," says Jon David, a professional sound engineer. "The software can and should be used sparingly to fix small mistakes, but, sonically, it's usually a noticeable effect."

As a result, these noticeable "touch ups" are making many different musicians sound alike. Perfect pitch isn't the only element of a good vocal performance—emotion, personality, vulnerability, and minor flaws all contribute to what makes a musician and his or her performance memorable. Music historian Professor Estelle Rhymes passionately opposes the use of pitch-correction software or any other voice-altering equipment. "Think about what it might have meant," she pointed out, "if the voices of Ella Fitzgerald, Bob Dylan, or John Lennon had been digitally altered. These legendary singers weren't popular because their performances or their voices were

perfect. On the contrary, each voice had its own imperfect but naturally appealing quality.” With pitch-correction software, many of these so-called imperfections get stripped away, eliminating what makes a performance authentic. All that is left is another bland voice.

Beyond being used to “improve” studio music, pitch-correction software has been making appearances in live performances. It is dishonest to advertise something as a live performance but then deliver a show that has been generated electronically. Even popular singing competitions—some that are televised live—have been criticized in blog posts across cyberspace for using these smoke-and-mirror tricks for their contestants. Whatever the public’s expectations may be of studio albums, it is clear that when we experience a live performance, we expect it to be just that. If you aren’t a reliable performer or you aren’t willing to take a risk in front of an audience, then maybe you shouldn’t be performing live.

Those who favor the use of this software say that it is just a tool in every musician’s tool box. Like digitally retouching a photo to remove a blemish, correcting a vocal performance with software allows people to hear musicians at their best. While correcting a stray note here and there may not sound like such a terrible thing in theory, in practice the software is being used to mask a sheer lack of talent. “It’s a crutch,” one music critic pointed out in her review of a popular hip-hop band’s recent live performance. “The singers’ voices were obviously enhanced electronically. I don’t know what makes them think they are fooling anyone. It’s insulting to the audiences who pay such high ticket prices to hear them.”

So the next time you listen to your favorite song, ask yourself if you want to hear a musician or a computer. It is performers’ individual talents and imperfections that make them who they are. If they need to “hide” their voices electronically, perhaps they are in the wrong profession. There’s a reason pitch-correction software was listed on *Time’s* 50 Worst Inventions list. Musicians should reject the software and stay true to their own voices.