

"The Beginner Singer" - by Gilles Denizot

Working with a beginner takes a similar approach at first whatever the vocal category. The basics notions of posture and breathing are almost identical. However, once the true voice type of the student is established, a voice tutor must respect it. Teaching a soprano in the mezzo range does not help at all; training a tenor as a baritone until he gains high notes is counter-productive, to say the least. It is of the utmost importance that a student be trained in his/her appropriate vocal category.

At the time of my debut in 1985, I had a powerful, rich, and odd mature voice. Its colour was dark and full; the range and abilities largely above normal. This voice allowed me to make my debut at the Grand Theatre in Geneva aged 18, after only six months of voice lessons. At the age of 22 I sang the Verdi *Requiem* in Paris and got hired as a *permanent soloist* by the Opernhaus in Zurich. At 24, I was invited to represent my country at the 1991 *BBC Cardiff Singer of the World*. I did not have any real technical knowledge, and did not especially want any. I had *ways* to succeed in difficult music lines, and I was carefree and bold. After years of singing on an international level, I discovered what was preventing me from singing consistently.

Although I strongly believed to be a tenor, I got trained in the wrong vocal category. Being a *Heldentenor*, my instrument was heavier and darker than a lyric tenor. It sounded a lot like a lower voice and I did not know how to access the high tenor range. I needed to be trained as a tenor, and not as a bass-baritone. My voice therefore became larger in the areas where a tenor's voice must be narrow. My muscles never learned to support the tenor tessitura. This literally robbed me of my true vocal nature for over 15 years.

Detecting Vocal Category

Sometimes, the vocal category is not clearly audible. A soprano or a tenor may not have the appropriate support to access high notes. A mezzo or a baritone may sound like an upper voice by using a high larynx. When I start teaching a beginner, I make sure that the posture and the breathing are addressed. As the voice releases, I may detect the *passaggio* notes. With the correct training, the result is a balanced voice whatever the range or category. It has been my personal experience that true *passaggio* notes only reveal themselves when specific requirements of singing are achieved (posture, breath management). However, *passaggio* notes give a certain indication. So does the evident sensation of ease and comfort in a certain voice line, or area within the range. Some singers like to sing high, others don't. This sensation is often interesting to observe among beginners. I have once taught a singer whom I immediately identified as a possible tenor. *Passaggio* notes were not obvious, particularly because some tenors can have a dark colour and easy low notes. However there was a definite change of colour around high F#4, a typical pivotal note amongst numerous tenors. I knew that as soon as certain crucial technical notions would be absorbed and used by this singer, the high register would be allowed to develop more easily above this *passaggio* note.

Detecting *Passaggio* Notes

We have to look for differences in sensations and colours in the *unbalanced raw* voice. Detecting the low *passaggio* note can be somewhat tricky, mainly because some tenors may have a strong and dark voice, and a lot of chest resonance in the low register, even resembling the low register of a baritone. One can be fooled by the colour of the voice. This is why I often prefer to look for the upper *passaggio*, where it is difficult or almost impossible to cheat. When dealing with a dramatic voice such as mine the *passaggio* note is an excellent indication. One has to recall that dramatic sopranos and Heldentenors have a *second passaggio* or *upper*

passaggio on a lower note than their higher colleagues. Example: my *lower passaggio* (*first passaggio*) is around C4 and my *upper passaggio* (*second passaggio*) is F4. These are the typical pivotal notes of a *Heldentenor* or a *drammatico/robusto* tenor (C.f. Frisell's *Tenor Voice; Baritone Voice*; and Miller's *Structure of Singing; Training Tenor Voices*). Higher tenors (*spinto, lirico, di grazia* etc.) have a higher *passaggio*, around F#4 or G4. Light lyric and Rossini tenors may even have a higher upper *passaggio*. It is therefore unconceivable to teach all singers the same way.

Choosing Keys in Music

It might also be a good idea to choose easy and comfortable keys for the beginner within his/her vocal category. I once worked with a student on Schubert's *Ave Maria*. He immediately told me that he felt *at home* in the tenor key (which goes up to F4) compared to the baritone key. This certainly is not the usual reaction of a baritone, even less so of a bass. One should remember that male singers share more or less the same medium range (this also applies to the female medium range). The real difference lies in the repertoire as a tenor/soprano sings a third above a baritone/mezzo. Vocal categories therefore must be respected in choosing repertoire. My regular coach and pianist often suggested a higher and brighter key, particularly in Schubert *Lieder* (written for *pianoforte* which had a clearer low range than modern pianos). On the other hand, Mahler *Lieder* require an absolute control of the mixed and head voice, utterly-balanced registers (which I surely did not have when in 1991 a famous agent sent me to Germany to sing *Die fahrenden Gesellen* with orchestra).

Explaining Vocabulary

I usually begin the very first lesson by providing the student with an anatomical worksheet describing the larynx, the upper body, and the vocal cords (closed and open). The student has to know the basics of his instrument. He also will be hearing various vocal terms, and the vocal tutor must explain them when appropriate (C.f. [Of Vocal Registers](#)).

Posture and Breath

These are the very first notions to teach a beginner. The great Italian Masters of the *Bel Canto* era always devoted a great amount of time for that purpose. The *postura nobile* (noble posture) ensures that the instrument is available for vocal studies. Once this is achieved, breathing must be explained and trained so that the student may use it to his own benefit. Proper breath management will release tension in the larynx and pharynx areas, thereby allowing for a better sound (C.f. [Posture and Breath](#)).

Cord Closure and Onset/Offset of Sound

The first vocal training must be based on the concepts of *onset* and *offset*, especially with a beginner whose vocal cords might have a tendency to leak air. There is a very simple exercise in order to understand the cord closure and *where the vocal cords are located*. As weird as it may seem it took me 15 years of singing and a simple exercise with my teacher to feel the cord closure operate. I usually start around G3/A3/B3 with a man, going down so that the last note touches the low range but still easily. This study, combined with breath management, teaches the student the *staccato* ability.

The Italian *uh* Vowel

This vowel elongates the throat space to a maximum, compared to other vowels. The student may also say *ah-oh-uh* and feel what changes in the throat and in the mouth. Basically, the *uh* allows the larynx to lower, thereby tensing and thinning the vocal cords. I teach all sorts of exercises on *uh*; they are hard but unbelievably good for quick and lasting progress. For instance I use different versions of scales in the medium and low registers, starting on B3/A3/G3. The extended versions of these scales always have to be initiated right below the first *passaggio* (between A3 and C4) and not above in order to avoid unfortunate and counter-productive tensions. One must remember that with singers, particularly male singers, the high register can scare. It is the responsibility of the teacher to avoid a *fear reflex*. I use these scales downwards so that the singer's voice warms up gently but quickly. We stop when touching the low register; this can be a G2 for a

baritone, or a C3 for a tenor.

Garcia's Pharyngeal Vowels

The Garcia's exercise helps a lot in identifying each vowel (its sound image). This vocalise uses a five-tone scale, tongue between the teeth, then another five-tone scale, tongue in mouth, on the five *ee - eh - ah - oh - uh* vowels. By using this exercise, the study of *legato* and vowel alignment begins. I recommend to use this exercise in the middle area of the voice only. Later on, confirmed singers can practise it in the *passaggio* area and above.

Lindquest's and Bjoerling's Scales

Singing higher and faster must also be addressed. The idea is to alternate closed vowels (*ee* or *eh*) and open vowels (*ah* or *oh*) i.e. *ee-oh* or *eh-ah*. I usually offer the singer to choose the easiest combination. There are several versions of these scales, from the simplest one to the most elaborate one. This is used as a relaxed moment in the session. With a beginner who clearly is a tenor, I use a different version of the Lindquest/Bjoerling scales. It involves the pivot of the larynx and the vowel adjustment with the *Umlaut*. The pivot of the larynx and the vowel adjustment allows for an instant discovery of the essence of the male singer's training: the *passaggio* and the *cover*. This subject is by far one of the most controversial of all. It takes time (and proper teaching) to understand the *passaggio* and the *cover*. When correctly produced, singing in the upper register becomes enjoyable.

Caruso's Scales

Twenty-nine different versions of the scales Caruso practised daily are reproduced in *Caruso, and the Art of Singing*, by Salvatore Fucito and Barnet J. Bayer (Dover). They all are an excellent tool for the study of vowel adjustment and the blending of the registers.

The Cuperto Exercise

This exercise involves the *false* in the male voice and trains *piano* singing in the high female voice range. Some men have an easy and natural *false*, some don't. The latter ones close the throat and push the jaw forward in attempt to reach the very high notes. There are two ways to prevent that. One is to explain every parameter *before* starting, basically feeling a soft, floating sensation. This is how I would describe my *false*. Very pure, no body engagement other than proper posture and breath management. It is of the utmost importance that the shape of the mouth be as narrow and oval as the throat is wide and open. The greatest responsibility of the teacher is to select the first note so that the singer is not taken too high, close to the *fear reflex area*. The other way to avoid the fear of the *false* is to use *full voice* version of the *Cuperto* on the Bjoerling *Umlaut*. It seems that this version helps tenors more than baritones.

The Sieber Vocalises

Sieber was a Viennese Italian-trained voice teacher who composed these 8-measures exercises for his students, with different tunes for each voice type. These exercises, published by Schirmer, train the *passaggio* in a clever way by using closed and open vowels. They always make singing easy, healthy, technically correct. I have noticed that beginners find a great amount of joy and satisfaction in applying technique to repertoire via Sieber. It prevents the student to think that there is technique on one side, and music on the other.

Applying Technique to Repertoire

The main reason for technique is to memorize vocal mechanisms until they become habits. As we have seen, the student must be taught in the correct vocal category for this to become productive. Then one applies technical abilities to repertoire. Not the other way round. Students should realize that technique and musicality are closely intertwined. A singer who truly possesses a complete range of exercises can always go back to that *home base* when facing trouble in a piece of music. The student gradually becomes his own vocal tutor, the utmost gift a teacher can give to his/her student.

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Articles

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