

(L to R) Robert Swensen, Kathryn Cowdrick Swensen, and their son Matthew



# Training the Young Male Voice

ROBERT SWENSEN

*What makes the young male voice unique, and how does that impact its training? Find the answers, including specific vocalises to help in the process, here.*

**T**he great tenor of my generation, Luciano Pavarotti once said to me, “The piano is a completely free instrument but very difficult to play well. The voice is an instrument that requires many hours to make free, but once free, is very easy to play . . .” His words and his voice resound within me to this day. The privilege I had to have access to him, as a mentor and advisor, is as priceless now as it was when I was in the beginning of my own singing career. Now as I approach my 20th year as a collegiate voice teacher, I share what I have learned as a student of singing, a singer on the stage, and a teacher of singing over these

many years. The culmination of these seasons of singing has directly informed my clinical vocal approach and has given me a pedagogical foundation with which to help liberate the voices of my students.

This article, as the title alludes, focuses on the classical training of the male voice. The implication that there is something special about how voice teachers approach the training of the male voice that is different from how we approach the training of the female voice is a controversial subject for some. Some of my colleagues believe there is no difference at all in the training of male and female singers. In my experience, I am quite certain there is a difference.

First, we know there are physical laryngeal gender differences. The adult male larynx is approximately twice the size of the adult female larynx, and yet we use them in the same atmospheric and acoustical environment. Second, because we live in a world where social norms dictate how the female voice should “sound” in speech compared to the male voice, the two instruments are conditioned from our very early years to conform to these social expectations. Pedagogically speaking, the male voice has a chest-dominant quality to its speaking voice in society while the female voice (before the advent of the

“glottal fry,” regrettably so ubiquitous in our current culture) has a head-dominant quality to its speaking voice. It stands to reason then that over the years, the dominant register of the two voices will be the one that is most developed.

In the male voice, the voice teacher must intervene to identify and develop the “unused” head register. Many male singers of high school age—only four or five years out from puberty—attempt to sing classical repertoire using the only voice that they know, the chest voice. Their attempts result in a severely strained, uncontrolled, and spread sound as they ascend.

When I hear these young men in a collegiate audition, I imagine a violinist who, instead of learning to position his fingers correctly on the fingerboard of his instrument to effortlessly play the high tones, decides to grab and turn the peg of his instrument to stretch the string taut in

order to make the pitch. The violin was never intended to make high tones in this manner, and neither was the voice. To do so will certainly break the string of the violin—and damage the voice.

As voice teachers, one of our most important goals is the unification of the registers in both the female and male voices. In the female voice, the challenge is in the seamless transition from the lower middle register to the chest register, while in the male voice, the challenge is in the seamless transition of the upper middle register to the head register.

These areas of register shift are called *passaggi* (passages). Noted vocal pedagogues Richard Miller and Clifton Ware have identified two *passaggi* in vocal registration: the *primo passaggio*, a subtle adjustment which occurs several semitones below the *passaggio secondo*, the area where the real adjustment of the instrument occurs to access the top

“head” register. For the purposes of this discussion, let’s focus on the *passaggio secondo*—what it is and how to access it in the male voice.

In my many conversations with Maestro Pavarotti, the idea of a perfectly executed *passaggio* tone was of critical importance to him. His singing colleagues have referred to him as “the apostle of the covered sound.” He said that it is a technical skill that must be mastered if the male singer desires to sing the Bel Canto operatic repertoire. He offered the example of Giuseppe Verdi who, in his letters, revealed his reasons for writing for the male voice in a tessitura that is located in the male *passaggio*. Verdi felt that the *passaggio* tones of the male voice are the most beautiful and the most expressive.

Pavarotti was determined to master this sound, so easily heard but so difficult to explain—and with the help of his teacher Arrigo Pola, he began to form his amazing



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technique, which sustained his superstar career for over 40 years. He freely shared with me on many occasions his vocal approach to the male passaggio, and I have incorporated his approach in my own teaching of my male students.

So, what is this technique and what exactly is this “covered sound” which he referred to? In a word, it is the deliberate modification of the vowel shapes in a specific range of pitches which, when properly executed, opens access to the top of the male voice. This skill applies to all male vocal categories: tenor, baritone, and bass.

We commence the technical discussion with a bit of laryngeal anatomy. The human larynx is a physiological miracle with its array of extrinsic and intrinsic musculature. In training the male voice, we will focus primarily with two bilateral pairs of laryngeal muscles. First are the thyroarytenoid muscles, another way of saying the vocal folds themselves, or the vocalis muscle. The activation of these muscles are what causes the singer to phonate. They are involved in providing the modal register quality, the chest voice. The character of this sound is powerful and projecting.

Then we have the cricothyroid muscles, a bilateral pair of muscles in the larynx that are not the vocal folds but have a large influence on the quality of the voice when activated. When contracted, the cricothyroid muscles cause the larynx to rotate slightly, the top of the larynx tipping forward. The contraction also allows the voice to slenderize, the thyroarytenoid muscles becoming more passive to allow the vocal cords to stretch easily to the top range. The cricothyroid quality is characterized by purity, sweetness, expressiveness, and nuance.

The coordination of these two muscle groups is critical to the smooth equalization of the voice throughout its range from top to bottom. So often with the young untrained male singer, the chest voice is so dominant in his singing that his perception of the lighter adjustment (apart from a comedic falsetto sound he may

have heard) is nonexistent. He attempts to continue upward in range using his modal, chest sound. The higher tones come under great strain, and he resorts to shouting the top tones. There is no vocal control or ease as he ascends, and his voice will ultimately break into that comedic falsetto with an embarrassing crack.

The solution to this technical dilemma is to introduce the young singer to the idea that these top tones can be sung with much more ease and confidence and that they can be quite beautiful and expressive in quality. The young male singer must understand how to activate the cricothyroid muscles of his voice. He must be taught that the head voice will occur when he learns to close the vowels in his passaggio. Vowel modification or “closure” shifts the aesthetic of the open vowel quality to a more “closed” vowel quality.

In the case of the main vowels created by the lips ([ɔ], [o], [ʊ] and [u]), the more he modulates towards the pure [u] vowel, the more closed the vocal vowel position becomes and the voice begins to “turn” (or “pivot” or “cover”). Access to the top is correctly accomplished. Similarly, when the singer is performing vowels created by the tongue and not the lips ([E], [e] and [i]), the more he modulates his sound toward the closed [i] vowel, the more the cricothyroid muscles are activated, the more passive the thyroarytenoid muscles become, and the more successful the entrance to the head voice is.

Suddenly, he senses that the tones he could never sing comfortably before become far easier. He becomes confident. He becomes aware that singing top tones are no longer associated with effort, physical strength, and risk but, rather, they are associated with physical coordination, stability, and reliability. He



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realizes that he understands his voice for the first time and that he has finally found a “technique” that he heard in his vocal heroes but could never replicate in his own singing. This is the great secret that the young male singer must learn.

Figure 1 represents the area where the passaggio from middle voice to head voice exists in each male voice type. This is the range of notes where the singer must begin to modify the vowels to increase its closure in order for the mechanism to “turn.”

Fig. 1



free middle voice function that will support the tilt of the larynx as it accesses the top part of the range.

In Figure 2, we have the exercise that I begin with all of my students, male and female.

Fig. 2



I use this combination of vowels because both the [i] and [u] vowels are at the beginning and end of the vowel chart: [i], [e], [a], [o], [u]. The two vowels used are naturally closed. They are already calling on the activation and coordination of the cricothyroid muscles, guaranteeing a balanced mix of adjustments that is so necessary as the students ascends.

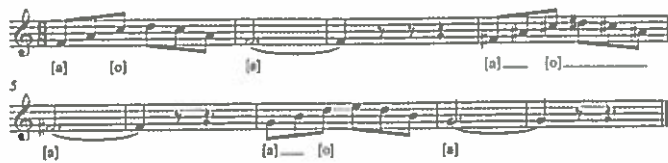
In the exercise in Figure 3, the singer begins on an open [a] vowel. On the third note of the exercise, he changes to the [o] vowel and then cadences on the last note on [a].

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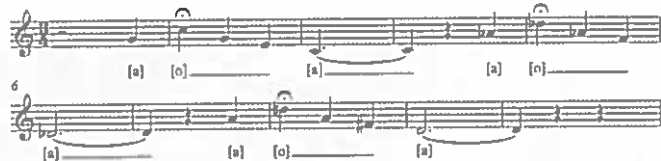
Fig. 3



The advantage of this 1-3-5-6-5-3-1 sequence is that the modifying or “closing” of the voice occurs on the 5-6-5 notes in the sequence during the stepwise portion of the exercise, making the transition to the top tones smoother and under less stress. As the student transposes upward by half tone, the [o] vowel will help him close and turn the voice gradually as he moves through the keys. It should be remembered that the success of this exercise is not a result of effort but of coordination. Physical coordination is never something to be rushed, but to be repeated with guidance and patience from both teacher and student.

The exercise in figure 4 should be used after the previous exercises are well mastered.

Fig. 4



Now we arrive at the top tone of the exercise by a perfect fourth interval. Again, the idea of verticality is crucial to the success of this exercise. The [o] vowel on the top should feel very “tall,” “narrow,” and “elongated”—use these kinds of adjectives! The [o] must have an element of [u] in its mix.

As the young singer works through these exercises, it must be emphasized that a feeling of height (verticality) and not width should be the focus. There is an image sense that all of the vowels we use live above the top teeth. This configures the mechanism into a suspended, elongated shape. When the soft palate is allowed to rise, the larynx will reflexively lower, creating a longer vocal tract. Longer is better!

In my class I give annually at the Classical Singer Convention and Competition, I have detailed the importance of these exercises, not only by explaining what they do but also by demonstrating what they sound like with my own voice. It is very important for the teacher to be able to correctly demonstrate the access to the top for the male singer. A teacher should find online or recorded examples from great singers of the past singing in their prime vocal years.

Exposing younger singers of the current generation to these recordings helps them embrace the traditions of excellence,

Robert Swensen



vocal security, and vocal artistry of the legendary singers of the past. They can benefit greatly from what these great singers did and, perhaps more importantly, what they did *not* do. The economy found in the singers of the previous two generations is a great lesson. So many immortal recordings are instantly accessible through YouTube, and those videos of these great singers are worth a million words.

The successful top voice in the male singer need not be elusive. This article explains the procedure by which an understanding of the equalized male voice can be found, but it is no substitute for the direct vocal guidance given by the singer’s teacher. I cannot stress this enough! Once this understanding is acquired and familiarized, the young singer can enjoy a technical mastery of his entire voice.

*Robert Swensen has appeared with major opera companies that include Teatro La Fenice-Venice, Bayreuth, Saito Kinen Festival, Opera Comique, Turino, Opera della Roma, the Vienna State Opera, Santa Fe Opera, and at Carnegie Hall with the Opera Orchestra of New York. After winning prizes in the Munich and ’s-Hertogenbosch competitions, he went on to Fest contracts in Munich and Berlin. A very successful recording artist, Swensen can be heard on an extensive discography in opera and oratorio for Deutsche Grammophon, EMI, RCA, and Phillips. He is a passionate Lieder recitalist and has appeared with the late Herman Prey at the Schubertiade in Vienna. Using projections from the George Eastman House archives, he recently performed Schubert’s Winterreise at the Morgan Library in NYC. He is a member of the voice faculty at Eastman School of Music and a yearly adjudicator for the finals of the Classical Singer Competition. ©*