

TRANSITIONING FROM TENOR TO BARITONE THROUGH THE LENS OF AN AMATEUR SINGER

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TRANSITIONING FROM TENOR TO BARITONE THROUGH THE LENS OF AN
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ABSTRACT

Identifying one's vocal range whether tenor or baritone may be a challenging endeavour when the singer's voice quality tends to overlap both categories. For an amateur singer it will be significantly constructive to know one's voice range identity to enhance selection of repertoire or optimise performance. This thesis is based on the author's prior experience of vocal misclassification leading to confusion, ambivalence in choosing repertoire and general vocal discomfort. The objective of this thesis is to enable a young singer to gain control of his vocal identity through developing goals that 1) facilitate a change in vocal fache 2) gain competency of the stylistic demands in repertoire for change of vocal fache 3) perform and reflect upon a variety of repertoire that facilitates the transition of vocal fache. These objectives are performed, reflected upon and mastered through a practice-led research. The discussion in this thesis is based upon a practical standpoint of a young developing singer transitioning from a tenor to baritone. The outcome is several recitals that facilitate the process of gaining competency as a tenor transitioning into a baritone.

Keywords: baritone repertoire, practice led research, artistic reflection, breathing technique, vocal performance, singing

PERALIHAN DARI TENOR KE BARITONE MELALUI LENS SETIAP PENYANYI AMATUR

ABSTRAK

Mengenalpasti lingkungan vokal seseorang untuk menentukan samaada ia tenor atau bariton agak mencabar apabila kualiti suara penyanyi tesebut bertindih di antara kedua-dua kategori. Bagi seorang penyanyi amatur, amat penting dan konstruktif untuk mengetahui identiti lingkungan suara bagi meningkatkan pilihan repertoire dan megoptimakan persembahan. Disertasi ini berasaskan pengalaman penulis dalam pengklasifikasi vokal yang tidak tepat yang mengakibatkan kekeliruan, ketidakpastian, dalam pemilihan repertoire dan ketidakselesaian vocal secara am. Objektif disertasi ini adalah untuk membolehkan penyanyi amatur memandu identity vokalnya melalui pembentukan matlamat yang akan 1) membantu penukaran dalam fache vocal 2) mendapat kecekapan dalam seni gaya repertoire untuk penukaran vokal fache 3) mempersembahkan dan mengimbas kembali kepelbagaian repertoire yang membantu dalam peralihan vokal fache. Objektif ini dicapai melalui persembahan, refleksi dan penambahbaikan melalui pendekatan practice-led dan artistic-led. Perbincangan dalam disertasi ini berasaskan pandangan praktikal seorang penyanyi amatur yang sedang mengalami transisi dari renj vocal tenor ke bariton. Hasil kajian ini adalah beberapa persembahan yang membantu proses meningkatkan kemahiran penyanyi tenor dalam transisi ke baritone.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL WORK	ii
DECLARATION OF THESIS SUBMISSION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iv
ABSTRACT	vi
TABLE OF CONTENT	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF APPENDICES	xi

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Background of The Study	2
1.3	Problem Statement	6
1.4	Importance of the Study	7
1.5	Objective	8
1.6	Research Questions	9
1.7	Study Limitations	9
1.8	Summary and Overview of the Exegesis	10
1.9	Glossary	11
1.9.1	Fache	11
1.9.2	Tessitura	11
1.9.3	Bel Canto	11
1.9.4	Insider perspective	11

1.9.5	Outsider perspective	12
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CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1	Introduction	13
2.2	Bel Canto	13
2.3	Bel Canto and My Vocal Journey	14
2.4	Fach	16
2.4.1	Voice Classification	17
2.4.2	Range	18
2.4.3	Tessitura	18
2.5	Practice-led Research	19
2.6	Literature on Methodological Approach	21
2.6.1	Reflective Practice	21
2.6.2	Double Loop Learning	23
2.7	Background	25
2.8	The Singing Process	26
2.9	The Breathing Process	27
2.9.1	Pre-warm ups	29
2.9.2	Breathing Exercises	31
2.9.3	Approaches to Ways of Expulsion of Air for Singing	32
2.10	Summary	32

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1	Introduction	34
3.2	Artistic Practice with Insider and Outsider Perspective	35
3.3	Summary	37

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

4.1 Recital 1 39

4.2 Recital 2 42

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Findings and Recommendations 46

5.1.1 Vocal Fach 46

5.1.2 Technique 47

5.1.3 Choosing Repertoire 48

5.2 Conclusions 49

REFERENCES 50

APPENDICES 53

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure No		Page
2.1	Double- and Single-Loop Learning	24

LIST OF APPENDICES

- A Reflective Journal
- B Programmed Notes

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Practice-led research is a fairly new paradigm yet is becoming increasingly accepted in the academic world. This study is an autoethnographic exploration of my singing journey within the artistic research frame. It is a reflection, as well as a juxtaposition of my past and current experiences as a vocalist, including my personal recollections and as well as reflective writing about my current singing repertoire. The study includes findings in relation to the chosen theories, in addition to empirical content.

1.2 Background of The Study

I was trained as a tenor when I started my singing studies. I completed a degree while singing standard tenor repertoire. My vocal journey through the degree course culminated in my final graduation recital. My personal impressions about what I felt practicing and performing through that recital revolved around struggling to satisfy the expectation of those around me representing the institution to display a classic ringing timbre typical of a tenor voice associated with the Bel Canto technique. Although this did produce some results in my singing, which at times according to my then teacher was approved of verbally, personally I was not entirely convinced that I was indeed a tenor. The reasons for my confusion were my suspicions that during my attempts at pieces meant for the tenor voice, my entire singing process became physically challenging. This confusion combined along with my maturity level then which was in my early 20s resulted in me thinking that I was weak and simply needed to practice more to achieve the 'level of a tenor' therefore I tried to believe that being a tenor was something that can be 'attained'. After my graduation I did not resume my vocal classes and had a brief break from singing lessons. During this break my then future vocal coach heard me during a performance and suspected that I was a baritone after hearing my voice timbre. I decided to try out lessons with her and she facilitated my shift to repertoire for the baritone voice.

In my previous vocal studies, I placed much emphasis on attaining a high G (G4), however, I consistently failed to achieve this, and felt compelled to keep trying to achieve this by using the same unsuccessful approach. This resulted in me being unclear about what good singing should be like and more importantly, how I should



sound when I sing well. The only available examples put forth for me by my teacher then as ideals to look up to were *Bel Canto* trained famous singers such as Luciano Pavarotti and Jerry Hadley. When I tried to emulate this kind of pure Bel Canto sound, in almost in every instance, I developed fatigue in the laryngeal muscles. As a young singer, I lacked adequate instructions and a clear direction as to what the actual problem was in my singing and how I could overcome it. I was not sure if the problem was occurring during my personal practice, private classes or performances. The same problem was present on all occasions regardless of whether I sang in a classical setting or in a contemporary one, perhaps as this was the only way I knew how to sing.

I clearly remember when my first vocal coach asked me to start talking like a tenor (with a higher resonance and pitch), in the effort to classify me in a certain category that is best described as a typical tenor; the lower the note, the smaller the resonance, without using too much chest voice to produce the sound, and the higher the notes, the more head and open voice I should use by directing the sound through the ‘back of the throat and towards the forehead’. From what I understood, I was asked to switch to the falsetto register and was encouraged to talk in that register. As a result, I completely ignored my lower range, or modal register, because I did not have the opportunity to develop it. Instead, my practice sessions were focused on attempts to reach the high notes while trying to ‘sound like a tenor’. This resulted in my singing becoming forced, loud and limited in the higher range due to an incorrect technical approach. A beautiful voice cannot be achieved when a singer consistently sings in an incorrect part of their vocal range. Yet a few years later, when I was performing at a concert, my future vocal teacher was in the audience and told me that she suspected that I have a *tessitura* that must be within the range of a baritone since it did not resonate as





comfortably as a tenor would. After taking lessons with her, she explained to me that I am a baritone who is able to sing the low and middle range with ease, and that the difficulties I had with reaching the top notes were due to an incorrect technical approach.

After a change of vocal teacher, the subsequent approach to my singing and the reclassification of my voice to a baritone, I experienced significantly less tension and stopped forcing my high notes. On a psychological level, the higher notes became more of a friend to me rather than a subject of fear as I started to believe that they can be attained through a different technical approach. The new approach I learned is when singing notes in the high part of my range, the vocal resonance has to be increasingly shifted to the mouth cavities away from the larynx. Before this, whenever I had to sing high notes, I unconsciously dropped the voice into the back of the larynx because of two main reasons: firstly, a developed fear of letting go of my modal voice which would often result in an uncomfortable sound when attempting high notes, and secondly, I was previously taught to approach high notes like a tenor. When I used to sing as a tenor, I felt relatively comfortable in the middle and lower range, however never so in the higher range. I developed a fear of notes higher than G. Reclassification of my voice to a baritone allowed me to embrace my lower and middle range and take an optimal approach towards singing high notes.

By comparison as I juxtapose the state of my vocal journey to a few years later in another university while undertaking a Master's programme during the first semester recital, there have been a number of changes in my singing and my understanding of it. From my previous ambiguous understanding, I had a more specific series of realisations





during my preparation for the first semester and subsequently during my preparation for the second one - a further understanding of the interrelationship of the circumstances around the singer and their direct and indirect effects on the sound produced.

During my first semester, due to studying with a new teacher, I became increasingly aware of the importance of vocal placement which refers to the physical sensations of vibration and movement of air that occurs as a product of the singing process. In my situation, my teacher urged me to maintain this concentration of vibration and movement of air towards a point which moves along the contour of the hard palette towards an inch in front of the upper lip. My understanding of the purpose for this visualisation is to concentrate the sound or voice at an advantageous location in the head which allows my voice easy access into cavities that exist in the head, mouth, larynx and chest. Psychologically this proved to be of assistance, as I experienced a significant difference as my voice felt and sounded to me and to other listeners, more stable. Due to this new found knowledge, my singing was focused largely on training myself to adopt this method and keep it consistent.

In the second semester, I began to face another important aspect of singing which also affected it profoundly: the involuntary behaviour of the muscles in my body that affected every performance. Besides that, another highly important aspect of singing I was almost entirely unaware of was the role of the rest of the body during the singing process. How not only the sensations in the vocal resonators mattered but also sensations that occurred in the torso and limb areas. I learned that the basis of correct and natural breathing which I needed is complete relaxation of as many muscles as possible in order to find the most efficient way of using the most suitable muscles to



breathe naturally (Linklater, 2006). Some insight into the Alexander Technique was enough to get me started to work on balancing the weight of my head and using it to help me achieve my task instead of doing the opposite, which was being unaware of the balance of the weight of my head, and as a result of it, a combination of muscles in my body had been constrained as I was doing the action of singing. The result was evident; every recital I became more and more aware of the importance of consistency - physically, mentally and psychologically. I realised that all three are interrelated and are like dominoes; when one malfunctions, it triggers the other one in a similar way. Throughout the year, I have performed in a few recitals in different circumstances. Looking back at the results of each recital I believe it is possible to explain in a logical manner from the first-hand encounter point of view of the participant/subject of research to benefit anyone else in similar circumstances.

1.3 Problem Statement

During my transition from tenor to baritone I encountered the following problems:

1. A difference in my personal breathing techniques required to sing as a baritone as compared with as a tenor. The problem I encountered was that my breathing was too forced when I sang as a tenor. I needed to re-learn to breathe, this time effectively as a baritone. This meant that my breathing technique (which is an essential part of singing,) was inefficient. An inefficient breathing technique can affect the progress of a young singer adversely.

2. The inconsistency of hearing the sound of my voice by myself and how it actually sounds like for someone else outside my body. According to scientific research we hear a deeper version of our own voice through the resonance in our bones as compared to what others hear through the resonance in the air outside our mouth. The difference between the perception of our voice through bone conduction (how we perceive our voice with our own ears during vocalization) and air conduction (how anybody else hears our voice mainly from the vibrations in the air) has been sparsely investigated.
3. It is common knowledge that many vocal instructors use various methods and techniques to teach the technicalities and expressions of singing. There is no ultimate method that encompasses every aspect of singing and there is a consistent occurrence of vagueness in the teaching instructions of obscure and well-known vocal instructors alike.

1.4 Importance of the Study

This study is necessary as the knowledge produced from the combination of artistic practice reflection and the double loop learning methods is aimed at producing new knowledge that is relevant to my unique situation. The combination of my accumulated singing practical experience and the application of the results of juxtaposed reflection as an insider and outsider causes the outcome of information produced to be significantly more relevant for my development as a singer than just drawing from a single loop learning mindset which limits my thoughts to direct instructions I previously received, without questioning their purpose when necessary. Few practical references

exist that offer an alternative, practical and reliable learning method that have undergone a documented personal test and review by the artist that applies it, to aid in learning singing for young developing singers who find the conventional single loop learning method to be less effective than for other singers. This dissertation may be used as a reference to aid and reassure other singers in similar circumstances to take this different path in their journey of learning singing and continue the pattern of research in that direction for the betterment of the overall pool of knowledge that adds up and brings benefit to their own vocal development.

1.5 Objectives

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The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine approaches to facilitate a change in vocal fache
2. Gain competency of the singing technique and stylistic demands in repertoire for change of vocal fache
3. Perform and reflect upon the suitability of a variety of repertoire that will facilitate the transition of vocal fache.



1.6 Research Questions

1. What approaches facilitate a change in vocal fache?
2. How can I gain competency of the singing technique and stylistic demands in repertoire for change of vocal fache?
3. What repertoire is suitable in facilitating the transition of vocal fache?

In approaching this degree and charting the journey being undertaken at this critical time in my vocal development, this research also focuses on the following questions:

1. As a young singer how does one rest assured which breathing technique is truly suitable in order to build a long lasting and sustainable voice technique?
2. What is a reliable way for a young singer to monitor his/her own voice without neglecting the other particularities picked up by an outsider's ear?
3. How does a young singer stay aware of what is going on inside his/her body during singing as he or she navigates through different instructors and institutions with various requirements?

1.7 Study Limitations

A part of the exegesis will be written in first person using words such as “I” and “my” due to the nature of this research. The terms Practice-Led and Artistic led are used interchangeably as both literature on Practice-led research and the empirical content of



this artistic-led research are essentially compatible. The choice of repertoire for analysis and performance was limited to those that aided a developing baritone. The pieces were not highly virtuosic but were suitable to assist me in transitioning from a tenor to a baritone. Due to distance, the singer did not have the privilege of free access to a rich pool of vocal specialists. During the earlier period of the singer's vocal studies the young age and maturity of the singer were of significance.

1.8 Summary and Overview of the Exegesis

Chapter one is a general introduction of my background and vocal journey as a developing singer. It discusses the challenges that I encountered in my vocal journey and how solving them may not only benefit me but also other young developing singers that may find my exegesis helpful. The limitations in this study are also discussed in this chapter. Chapter two reviews literature on vocal technique that is relevant to this study. This review also links my own vocal journey and also my personal understanding of the singing process. In Chapter three I explain how the research was conducted with the application of practice led research and the double loop learning system. Chapter four contains the findings from the recitals that were used as part of the study and examines them through the scope of reflection from an insider and outsider perspective. It presents the results of the study which it was based on through insider and outsider reflection from sources such as personal communication with my singing teacher and feedback from other professional musicians. Chapter five summarises the key findings, demonstrates my application of the methodological methods on these findings and makes recommendations for further study in this field.

1.9 Glossary

1.9.1 *Fache*

A system of classifying voices for classical singers. Originating in Germany and mostly used in German speaking countries, this system takes into account the range, weight, colour, tessitura and even physical appearance in order to assist in casting roles for opera houses.

(Han, 2006, p. 1)

1.9.2 *Tessitura*

“The natural area in which to sing with the greatest comfort and ease.”

(Reid, 1983)

1.9.3 *Bel Canto*

“A singing style developed by the Castrati of the 17th and 18th centuries”

(Potter, 2007, p. 99)

which was “associated with florid, delicate ornamentation with a need for a light flexible voice to achieve this”

(Rutherford, 2009, p. 90)

1.9.4 Insider perspective

Insider-reflection in action refers to “reflection in the midst of performance, where unexpected elements may arise, triggering on-the-spot responses”.

(Penny, 2009, p.17)

1.9.5 Outsider perspective

Outsider-reflection on action refers to reflections after the performance / rehearsal / studio session that inform and incite understandings of what was done

(Penny, 2009, p.17).