

## Covering or 'Covering the Tone'

### **Registers and Terminology**

'Covering the tone', 'covering the break', 'hooking the tone', 'vowel modification', and many other terms have been inspired by the obvious acoustical changes that occur in every voice at certain points in the ascending or descending scale. One famous agent in Vienna believed he could identify the type of voice (the 'Fach' or vocal category) by identifying the particular note in the scale that changed acoustically, from the middle range to the upper range.

The difference in the acoustical quality of the voice at a certain point in the musical scale helps to identify so-called 'registers' of the voice. Registers, often identified in separate sections of the range or 'scope' of a voice, are generally referred to the 'chest register', the 'middle register', and the 'head register'. They are identified by noting the similarity or difference between groups of notes that seem to have the same acoustical quality. Some singers feel a strong sensation in the throat when these sections of the scale change acoustically. In France I met a singer who was taught the 'six-register' system, with terms like 'super-head' and 'ultra-falsetto' and 'super-bass' registers added to the three-register terminology we more commonly identify in the United States. She swore she could feel the voice 'moving' from one register to the next, and she demonstrated very clearly the changes she felt. Terminology denoting registers, 'breaks' and 'covering' is so common in the world of classical singing that to try to ignore it can actually be detrimental to a singer's

healthy approach to vocal production. It is better to understand registers and how to cope with them, and then forget they exist. Everyone who sings is aware of the acoustical changes that occur on certain notes in the range of a particular voice, but how shall we deal with those changes artistically and vocally?

## **The Old School**

My teacher, Olga Ryss, when I asked her on which note I should cover my voice, said, “Cover?! I will give you a blanket!”

She was very funny sometimes, but there was a very serious side to her clever response to my question. I realized ‘covering a note’ was not a concept that was in common usage back in her day. She had begun her vocal studies in 1912 at the St. Petersburg Conservatory at the height of the ‘Golden Age’. Her teacher was a student of Giovanni Lamperti, and the evidence of the fantastic Italian Bel Canto approach to the development of the voice pervaded the criteria of great singing all over Europe at that time. She actually heard Mattia Battistini, the ‘Glory of Italy’, live in 1921.

I wondered if the lack of technical concern for the different registers of the voice during that time was a geographical phenomenon that affected the vocal culture of certain countries and not others. So I made it a point to ask every great singer I met if they thought in terms of registers and ‘passing the voice’, and, if so, would they explain the concept of ‘covering a tone’. I wanted to know if each one of them applied such an idea to her/his own approach to singing, and

if they did, was the concept the same and dealt with in the same way.

## **Irritated Reactions**

When I asked great singers like Richard Tucker, Robert Merrill, Giovanni Martinelli, George London, Lauritz Melchior, Helge Roswaenge, Nikolai Gedda, Jussi Bjoerling, and Alfredo Kraus to explain the idea to me, they looked at me like I was a rank amateur and became somewhat derisive in their responses. Every one of them rejected any thought of ‘covering the tone’ or ‘modifying a vowel’ or doing any form of action on any particular note. The idea was to breathe and support in a way that “...distorting the throat or soft palate is not necessary.”

“Don’t listen to the people who never sang anywhere!” said Richard Tucker. “That kind of amateur thinking is utter nonsense! It is a crime to ask any singer to distort the throat and expect the results to be beneficial. Some fantastic natural voices may be able to sing for a while with distortions on certain notes, but the career will not be a long one.”

“Do you think I’m going to modify a vowel or change my throat every time I ascend a scale or sing a high note? That would be insane! I sing *Wotan*! Do you know what you are asking? Don’t be ridiculous!” said George London.

“The ‘turning’ (‘covering’, ‘passing’) of the registers is none of our business!” said Helge Roswaenge. “It is God’s business! He gave us registers to make it easy to sing high notes, but we have to leave it up to Him. The notes ‘turn’ when they are

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ready and not before, and the ‘turn’ can be different on each vowel, on each pitch, and at different levels of volume. A singer who sings big roles would go crazy if he had to do something in his throat every time a certain note is sung. What a nightmare! Any form of interference with the throat, the vowel, or the legato of the breath, breaks a basic and essential rule of singing. The title role of Verdi’s DON CARLO has 49 high b- flats and 9 b-naturals, and literally hundreds of high a’s and g’s and f-sharps. Do you think that a tenor who sings this role will be preoccupied with committing an act of interference with each of those hundreds of notes? You are talking about flexing and forming and making actions in the throat literally hundreds of times during the evening every time you perform, when even one activity in the throat is against the rules of singing. Forget it, and attribute activities in the ‘Uebergang’ (the ‘going over place’, the ‘break’, the ‘passage’, the ‘turning place’) to ignorance and amateurism.”

Robert Merrill’s reaction, when I described some of the concepts I had heard about the ‘passing of the voice’ and ‘vowel modification’ and ‘covering’ was one of shock. “What are these ideas and where do they come from?” he exclaimed! “Is it not hard enough to sing well without adding pure baloney? This stuff is invented by people who never sang the big roles. Let them try their ideas out in RIGOLETTO. They will have a horrible surprise waiting for them! They will either not be able to sing the role or damage something and the career will be over very early.”

One of my students asked the famous Wagnerian soprano, Birgit Nilsson, how to sing the upper register of the voice.

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Nilsson answered, “There are no registers in the voice, my dear. Just fix your deep breathing. The high notes, just like the other notes in your range, are automatic if your breath is sitting low enough in your body. Believe me, the notes know better where to go in the resonance than you know where to put them, and any effort you make to improve them other than deep breathing will diminish them. Keep your head up, breathe deeply to get your throat and jaw loose, smile a lot, and your high notes will place themselves.”

Another quote of Tucker’s, after demonstrating a massive high b-flat, was, “You see?! The throat does nothing! The breath does everything!”

Caruso said in his book that there should be “...no change in the throat when singing from a low note to a high note. The original shape of the throat must not be allowed to change when singing from low to high.”

Giovanni Lamperti said, “The open throat in the Italian School is the same shape as the bright ‘ah’ in the Italian word ‘stai’. According to Caruso, the shape of the throat must remain in the form of an ‘ah’ regardless of what text is to be sung, and the ‘ah’ shape is created by inhaling deep into the lower back and created anew every time the singer inhales. All of the vowels must be phonated within the ‘ah’ form in the throat, like singing text through a megaphone. The megaphone (the throat shape) does not change its form from vowel to vowel and its shape “...is maintained by the power of the respiration. The throat must maintain its original shape, created by the inhalation, as the voice passes from the lower note to the higher note.”

Rosa Ponselle said Caruso insisted that she “...keep a horizontal rectangle in the back of her neck at all times while singing.” That means the throat does not change its shape, regardless of the vowel or the range to be sung, although the acoustical quality can change dramatically when ascending into the upper range, especially in men’s voices. It is not confusing if the singer, male or female, high voice or low voice, big voice or small voice, will neutralize the throat (make it utterly soft and relaxed) by inhaling deeply into the lower back. A powerful inhalation into the lower back can ‘open the throat’ into a horizontal rectangular shape (Lamperti’s bright ‘ah’ shape), and the emission is then controlled by ‘leaning’ the breath (‘pressing the breath’) sufficiently against the lower chest. The singer must not allow the slightest change or gust of breath to disturb the completely loose, ‘ah’-shaped throat and the perfectly even emission that supports the tone.

Unfortunately, some male singers sing ‘out of Fach’ (in the wrong vocal category) and usually ‘load up’ the vocal folds with too much breath and too much activity in the vocal folds themselves. Lyric tenors sing as dramatic tenors, heavier tenors sing as baritones, true baritones sing as bass-baritones, and lyric basses sing as deep basses. The most serious consideration when this happens is that all of the vocal folds begin to vibrate instead of just the edges. As it was explained to me by the most famous Otolaryngologist in Vienna, Dr. Hans Ruedi, the unofficial ‘singer’s doctor’ in all of Europe, “...The correct use of the vocal folds while singing should vibrate only their **edges** and not involve the entire thickness of the folds”. This explains physiologically

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why the male voice should be developed from the falsetto function of the vocal folds and not from the heaviest, darkest possible sound a singer can make. The falsetto function of the vocal folds allows only the edges to vibrate. Richard Tucker repeated over and over, “Keep it light. Keep it light, and don’t let any baritone quality come into the sound.”

‘Weighting’ the voice by using the vibrations of the entire vocal folds means trouble when ‘passing’ the voice from the middle range into the high range. If the voice is falsely ‘weighted’, the pure, inactive, totally reactive process of allowing the voice to ‘pass’, without any change of emission, becomes impossible to execute. It is essential to ‘lighten’ the middle range as much as possible. Allow the ‘appoggio’ and the principle of the ‘large drum’ (‘the bigger the drum, the bigger the sound’) to create the amplitude of the voice. Vibrating air in the ‘air-box’ (the chest, the lungs, and the ribcage) makes the power and volume and, ultimately, the ‘color’ of the voice. The vibrating ‘reed’ (the edges of the vocal folds) is exactly that in its function... a vibrating pair of edges that without the ‘air-bucket’ under them cannot make an efficient, resonant, projecting sound. Remove the mouthpiece from a clarinet and blow the reed and see how it sounds. It will only squeak. The vibrating reed must have a body of air under it to set in vibration or there will be no overtones to complete the totality of the sound.

It is important, when discussing the ‘break’ (the ‘passing’ note, the ‘passaggio’, the Uebergang, the ‘cover’) to emphasize the necessity for ‘lightening’ the voice, especially the middle range, and to permit the enclosed body of air in the lungs to amplify the sound. If the vocal folds are limited to vibrations

along the edges only (called ‘schlank singen’ in German and ‘squillo’ in Italian), the voice will ‘pass’ (cover, ‘go over’) automatically if the throat is kept loose and the emission is continuous and unchanged. If the singer sings too heavily, either by vibrating too much vocal fold or by overloading the vocal process in the larynx and throat by sending more’ breath upward than can be utilized, the ‘passaggio’ will become jammed and clogged and the easy, natural ‘passing’ of the voice will not happen. Some form of active ‘cover’ method may have to be employed because the singer is singing too loud or too dark. To avoid having to employ some ‘hooking’ method or a ‘vowel modification’ technique, just ‘lighten’ the voice (do staccato exercises until the natural width of the voice is established) and sing more lyrically. (Video demonstration)

As Richard Tucker and Robert Merrill and Helge Roswaenge and Lauritz Melchior said to me, “Sing as close to the falsetto as possible for the core of the sound. Use the intensity of the ‘appoggio’ to sing with a full-voiced tone.

Jussi Bjoerling said, “The voice is really a blown up falsetto, and that is why all good male singers can sing softly. Even Melchior and Leo Slezak with their monstrous voices could sing fantastic soft tones and entire sections of operas mezza-voce. Listen to a recording of Melchior singing the second act of TRISTAN UND ISOLDE. It is a fantastic example of how to use the mezza-voce and how the male voice is based on the slenderest use of the core of the voice. His amazing mastery of mezza-voce was based on the fact that he ‘lightened’ his voice to be able to change from baritone to tenor.”

Leonard Warren, whose mezza-voce singing was truly magnificent, had the biggest Verdi baritone voice in the world during his reign at the Metropolitan Opera. When asked which note in his range was his ‘cover’ note, he thought for a moment, and then said, “Actually, my whole voice is ‘covered’ ”.

The most powerful male voice I ever heard, even more powerful than Del Monaco’s, was the voice of German “Heldenbariton”, Paul Schoeffler. He was world famous for the size of his incredible voice that was unlimited in range and amplitude in low bass-baritone, ‘Heldenbariton’ (heroic baritone), and bass roles. The main point I wish to make about his monstrous voice is that he was also world famous for singing concert repertoire that included the most subtle Schubert and Schumann Art Songs. His ‘Lieder’ were exquisitely sung, full of ravishing ‘pianissimi’ and light expression. His ‘mezza-voce’ singing was exemplary in its ease and fullness of color. The predictable result of such ‘light’ singing was that he sang through his ‘passaggio’ without the slightest change of emission or phonation. He was the best example I ever heard of a singer who could sing *The Flying Dutchman* or *Wotan* one night with an all-powerful, orchestra-smothering resonance, and the next night a recital of the lightest, most subtle Art Songs. Needless to say, his high notes were gorgeous, indescribably huge, and as easy as Leonard Warren’s.

## **“Non passare la voce!”**

I worked with some of the top Italian repertoire coaches in the world when I was a young tenor, and they all had one thing in common. Cesare Alfieri (Teatro alla Scala, Milano); Dick Marzollo (Toscanini's main musical assistant and rehearsal conductor); Ettore Campogaliani, the most famous coach in Italy when I was singing there in 1963-64, and Victor Trucco, head coach of the Italian and French repertoires at the Met, would scream at the male singers: “Non passare la voce! Non passare la voce! (Don't pass the voice! Don't pass the voice!) The Italians would use the word ‘pass’ because the word for ‘cover’ (coprire) has never been used in the history of Italian vocal music.

Where in the world did the term ‘cover’ come from? We all know, just as the great Italian coaches knew, that there is an acoustical change in the voice as it passes from one register to another, but there should never be an action in the throat or soft palate or nasopharynx to accommodate it. The great coaches would accept the ‘passing’ of the voice if it happened without action, but as a result of an even emission and a loose throat. The coaches would have a fit if the singer raised the soft palate to achieve a high note. They insisted that the voice would ‘pass’ from one register to another by and of itself, if the throat was totally loose and the emission of the breath was steady and unchanging as the ‘passaggio’ (the ‘passage’ or ‘going over place’, known as the ‘break’ in the U.S.) was reached. They were all concerned with the posture of the head, insisting that the singer pretend to look up at the higher balconies in a theater. Marzollo would say, “Don't

look at me! Look at the audience! You sing for them, not for the orchestra down below!”

The throat must be free when singing, and it is almost impossible to flex muscles in the throat and tilt the head up and back at the same time. It is also more acoustically efficient if the head is facing upward toward the second balcony. The coaches mentioned here thought it was impossible to sing the Italian language with the head facing down or the jaw pulled down. Both Manuel Garcia II and Giovanni Lamperti said the mouth should open no wider than the width of one finger in the middle range and no wider than the width of two fingers in the upper range.

This process of ‘passing’ the voice while doing nothing in the throat is easy to experience and demonstrate, by the way. Just keep the throat soft and loose by inhaling the ‘ah’ form into the lower back, and don’t let its shape change at all when singing, especially by using muscular contractions to lift the palate or lower the jaw. As you sing up the scale, don’t change the emission in any way (sing as legato as possible, especially at the ‘point of passing’), and watch what happens. The voice will ‘pass’ into the upper range when singing from the middle register without the slightest action necessary in the throat. The voice will ‘cover’, and the tones above (the high notes in the upper range that are above the ‘passing tone’) will all be ‘covered’. The ‘passing process’ can and should be accomplished without separate actions in the throat, soft palate, or nasopharynx. (Video demonstration)

I am making a distinction between action and reaction.

The deep inhalation into the lower back will cause reactions in the soft palate and the nasopharynx. The soft palate will

rise up and forward as an opposite and equal reaction to the deep inhalation into the lower back. As the breath is sucked down into the lower back, the nasopharynx will open upward and create a sealed air chamber behind the eyes. When the air in the nasopharyngeal chamber is set into vibration by activating the vocal folds, the resonance will be felt there and the sensation is called 'singing in the Mask'. Vibrations lower in the face, especially in the nasal cavity, are not the result of correct breathing or phonation and must be avoided. A good exercise to identify the True Mask is to hold the nose closed while singing. Only 'm', 'n', 'ng' and some of the French nasalized vowels actually require the nose to be open. Practice all other sounds in classical singing by holding the nose closed. (Video demonstration)

Dame Eva Turner taught young singers the concept of the 'invisible throat', the 'invisible tongue', and the 'invisible jaw'. When asked about covering and registers, she said, "I've been asked this question many times, and I still don't understand what it is that the singers want to know. I never heard of such things when I was a student or during my years as a performer. There is no action in the throat, ever, when singing. When asked what I felt in my throat when I sang, I always have to answer with the same answer: Nothing! I sang as if I didn't have a throat, and never felt a thing. I think that is why I was able to sing the most difficult roles for so many years. I simply didn't use my throat, so it was never 'used up'! The resonance of the voice, if the throat is not involved while singing, moves from the chest to the forehead to the top of the head by itself, without the slightest guidance or interference from me. It is like the elevator in one of your skyscrapers here in New York. The elevator moves up and

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down smoothly without jerking or sudden swinging or shuddering. The energy for the movement of the elevator comes from the power source in the basement. The energy source for singers comes from down below, also. All that is necessary is deep breathing into the lower back. The lower back is our 'basement'. That is the only action I ever used while singing. After the breath is inhaled, the emphasis psychologically should be on 'non-action' in the 'invisible areas' of the throat, the tongue, and the jaw. Every mental effort is directed toward doing nothing at all in the throat. Something must work and be constantly active while singing, but not the throat or tongue or jaw. All of the energy for singing comes from the lower back and is held against the chest at a diagonal angle that avoids the throat. I always felt that keeping the throat soft and neutral forced me to sing somewhere else. The only place to sing if you are not allowed to use the throat is in the body.

I see young singers pressing the jaw down, and I wish I could show them that it is not necessary, and that the voice is negatively affected by any degree of tension in the area of the body from the middle of the chest upward through the throat, the jaw and the tongue. And pulling the jaw down or leaning the head down and forward or jutting the head or jaw forward will most certainly affect the longevity of the career.

(Video demonstration)

When I was young, everyone talked about not showing the slightest bit of effort while singing. It was considered amateurish to let the audience see you working at the production of the tone. How can you portray a character and the many moods and feelings of a character if you can't smile or frown or cry or laugh when you sing? Imagine a *Tosca*

who can't smile at the tenor in the first act because when she sings, she has her jaw pulled down all of the time. And the tenor can't smile back at her because he is looking at the floor with his chin pressed against his chest. It is absurd to even contemplate, but, in reality, singers do these things and I don't know why.

And when the voice must go up into the higher range, the throat must be totally 'invisible', with no action of any kind occurring. Only deep breathing must be involved in the production of the high notes. The body is the instrument and not the throat."

That lecture went on for a long time, and I remember it very well. The reaction among the young singers was, "How is it possible that she has such a fantastic, huge, gorgeous voice and such a long career if she didn't do anything but breathe deeply?" Later, I realized the information Dame Eva was trying to pass on to us was the same information I received from every great singer I met or read about. No great singer who wrote a book about singing ever mentioned 'covering' or singing into the nasal cavity. Today, everyone talks about covering and 'focusing' the voice in the nose. And, of course, if the voice is placed in the nose, the natural 'passing' of the voice will not occur and the singer must apply some form of assistance, usually an abrupt raising of the soft palate, to help the voice change registers. Caruso said to "... never sing into the nasal cavity" and to "...never change the shape of the throat when singing from the lower note to a high note". If the inhalation is deep into the lower back, the throat will open vertically and the correct, 'original' 'ah' form necessary to sing through the 'break' (the passage, the 'going over place') will occur. The soft palate will rise up and forward and create the access to the Mask that the 'passing' of notes

requires. The key to alleviating every problem that may arise in the pursuit of vocal technique is to breathe deeply into the lower back before singing, and ‘lean’ the breath against the chest while singing.

### **An Exercise** (Video demonstration)

Do nothing in the throat. Inhale as deeply as possible into the lower back. This type of inhalation will cause the soft palate to move upward and forward. Press the breath against the chest the instant the singing begins. Maintain the shape of the throat and the legato, and don’t change the emission in any way as you sing through the range of the voice, from low notes to high notes. The ‘registration’ of the voice will become automatic, and the ‘passage’ of the voice from one register to another will be as smooth as silk, with no separate or individual actions necessary in the throat or nasopharynx or soft palate.

### **In Conclusion**

When dealing with the ‘passaggio’, I would like for singers to try the approach as described and demonstrated here. I’m sure they will find that any concerns they may have had will disappear almost as if by magic.

Every true vocal artist should be free from constant concerns about actions in the throat while singing. This method became available to me when I was a young, aspiring, curious, and bold tenor. I was always asking questions and ‘picking brains’. I was and still am very grateful to the great singers who spent time with me and tried to answer my sometimes presumptuous questions. I offer the answers to those

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questions, asked over 50 years ago, to all singers who read this article.

I wanted to know what the great singers were thinking when they were singing. I have shared here some of the thinking I learned from them. I hope you will benefit from it as much as I did.