

Kim Chandler

“The Passaggio”: Technical and Interpretative issues

Known by various names: the ‘*passaggio*’ (or ‘passage’ in Italian), the ‘*break*’, ‘*gear change*’ or ‘*gear shift*’, ‘*bridge*’, ‘*register change*’ etc, it’s the small area where a major adjustment can be felt and often heard, especially in singers just starting out, when going from the lower range into the higher, lighter range of the singing voice. It’s a fundamental area of vocal technique that most singers and coaches like to address early on in vocal training.

When passing from what is traditionally called the ‘chest voice’ into the ‘head voice’, the change that is taking place is akin to, in very simplified terms, a ‘baton change’ from one set of vocal muscles to another. In essence, the muscle ‘bulkers’ (or thyroarytenoids - ‘T.A.’s for short) are more dominant in the lower range and give way to the muscle ‘stretchers’ (or cricothyroids - ‘C.T.’s for short) which are more dominant in the upper range. It’s the smooth transition of this changeover that is desirable to most singers and teachers.

To use a different analogy, when one is first learning to drive a manual car, changing gears smoothly is one of the basic requirements, but it’s not easy to coordinate at first (as I well remember!) - much unpleasant juddering and crunching of gears occurs. Eventually though, through practice, one gets so good at smoothly changing gears that it feels like one continuous gear. This is also the goal of technical balance in singing; the aural illusion of continuity from the bottom to the top of the vocal range.

I’ve found that the standard range of semi-occluded exercises, such as lip trill, tongue trill or puffy cheek ‘sirens’ (i.e. controlled sliding from one end of the singing range to the other), are very effective in dealing with this issue. It seems that the favourable back pressure created in these exercises makes the transition easier to negotiate. I also advise that people take the main ‘gear change’ area itself a little slower initially if they are finding it problematic. And there are also postural considerations that need to be addressed.

In my years of experience as a singing coach, I’ve made some interesting observations in regards to the *passaggio*. I’ve noticed that those with lower, denser voices (i.e. with longer, thicker vocal cords housed in a larger larynx) often struggle with this particular transition point more than those with lighter, higher voices (i.e. with shorter, thinner vocal cords housed inside a smaller larynx). Perhaps it’s like the difference between changing gears in a large truck or a small car – the size of the ‘gear box’ does seem to count!

Another observation I’ve made is that most students/clients of mine who suffer some sort of disconnection present, at first, with an ability to connect up more efficiently in one direction only, i.e. either the ascent or descent. I’m yet to find any particular pattern in determining which the favoured direction will be as it appears, at this stage at least, to be quite random. Nonetheless, I use it to pedagogical advantage and advise that they continue to consolidate the smoothness of the favoured direction and apply the same general approach to the temporarily disconnected direction in due course.

Another relevant issue to this topic is the fact that there are times in the performance of certain repertoire where it’s desirable to be able to effect a controlled, deliberate ‘break’ for stylistic

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Kim Chandler is a highly qualified and experienced pop vocal coach. She has a busy private vocal studio in West London where she teaches an elite team of professional singers, artists and other vocal coaches. Kim is a part-time senior lecturer in contemporary singing at the London College of Music from where she also holds a Masters degree (with Distinction) in performance. Kim is a regular presenter at international vocal conferences, and in July 2008 became a director of the British

Kim will be presenting several keynotes and workshops at the ANATS Conference The BalanSing Act, being held in Brisbane, in September 2010. Here are a few titles to whet your whistle:

SO YOU WANT TO TEACH SINGING? A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

BEYOND THE MAJOR SCALE: CONTEMPORARY VOCAL EXERCISES FOR A NEW GENERATION

VOCAL ATHLETES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXTREMES OF THE SINGING VOICE

VOCAL EXERCISES ‘HARVESTING SESSION’: HOW TO DEVELOP A RANGE OF VOCAL EXERCISES FROM COMMERCIAL REPERTOIRE.

Coup de la Glotte, Continued from page 8.

25. Lennox Brown and Emile Behnke, *Voice, Speech, and Song* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 162.
 26. Barbara Doscher, *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press Inc.),
 27. Manuel Garcia, *Complete Treatise on the Art of Singing*, 23.
 28. Frederick Hustler and Yvonne Rodd-Marling, *Singing: The Physical Nature of the Organ* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), 75.
 29. Stark, 24.
 30. Franklyn Kelsey, *The Foundations of Singing* (London: Williams and Northgate, 1950), 14.
 31. William Vennard, *Developing Voices* (New York: Carl Fischer, 1970).

Dr. Austin has presented recitals, lectures, and workshops across this country and in Australia and Europe. He is regularly featured on the faculty of the Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice sponsored by The Voice Foundation. He has made presentations to national conventions of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), the American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA), and the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA).

He has been a featured guest lecturer at the summer and mid-winter workshops sponsored by NATS. Dr. Austin has been a regular contributing author to Australian Voice, the journal of the Australian National Association of Teachers of Singing, and he serves NATS as the chair of the Voice Science Advisory Committee and as a member of the editorial board for the Journal of Singing. He also is a member of the Scientific Advisory Committee of The Voice Foundation.

Dr. Austin is a successful studio teacher with students singing in the opera houses of Germany and the United States. His students are regular members of young artist apprenticeship programs around the country including the Houston Grand Opera Studio, Grass Roots Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera, Seagle Colony, and many others.Δ

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purposes; e.g. that characteristic 'flip' in country, folk, indie pop/rock and occasionally in pop R&B. Yodelling makes an art form out of abrupt alternations between chest voice (thick folds) and head voice (thin folds), and is surprisingly difficult to do well. The important issue though in these examples is that the 'break' is being featured deliberately and consciously as an artistic, interpretative choice by the singer and isn't a technical fault - therein lies the difference!

Finally, there are also certain voice qualities that result in little to no sensation of change when going into the upper range, e.g. 'twang' and 'belt'. The addition of 'twang' (i.e. aryepiglottic constriction) when approaching the part of your range where one would normally experience the 'break' can take one seamlessly through it with an edgy, penetrative sound. Or it's possible to recruit core stabilisers and support in the torso to create a more muscular, full-blown 'belt'.

In summary, it seems that most singers, as a starting point on the journey of technical control, desire to have a smooth passage from the bottom to the top of the singing range and this can be achieved via various tried and true methods. In addition to this, some may also wish to have controlled 'flips' at their command, and/or the ability to securely access thicker vocal qualities above the traditional 'break' point for styles such as gospel, soul, R&B, rock and metal. The beauty of this is in having choices and options - a benefit of vocal technique we can all enjoy...

For more information about UK vocal coach Kim Chandler, visit her official website at www.kimchandler.com. For details about her "Funky 'n Fun" vocal training system visit www.funkynfun.com Δ



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