

# Women Teaching Men: Taking the Mystery Out of Male Pedagogy

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### Differences Between Male and Female Voices

1. Men sing in "chest" voice (thyro-arytenoid dominant) almost exclusively. The way they move into head voice is mostly acoustical and they never let go of the "chest" voice sensation completely. Women's head voice is very different. The sensations and the description of how the voice feels are different.
2. Men "crack" more often due to this chest voice/heavy mechanism predominance.
3. Male voices often change later in life than female voices—even through college.
4. The need for Singer's formant ("ring") is greater for the male voice.

### Location of Registration Points (Passaggio)

Barbara Doscher, *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988) 148.



Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing* (New York, NY: Schirmer Books, 1986) 117.  
Zone of the Passaggio



David L. Jones, "Male Voice Protection: Understanding the 'Cover'," 2004,  
<[http://voiceteacher.com/male\\_voice.html](http://voiceteacher.com/male_voice.html)>

Male singers may need to begin the head voice earlier (lower) than often-quoted pitches.



[Accidentals in parentheses indicate two pitches—the one with the accidental and the one without]

## Registration Strategies and Images:

1. *Straw Work.* Use a small coffee stirrer straw for seating the larynx and finding a smaller mouth and vowel space. Be sure the tongue doesn't retract from the straw. While singing, sneak the straw out of the mouth and continue phonating on any vowel.
2. *Lip Rounding.* Touch the tips of the forefinger and thumb, forming an [O]. Place the "O" around the lips. Listen to the change in vowel and tone quality that occurs, then slowly pull the fingers away from the mouth while maintaining the new vowel and tone. This can add length to the resonator.
3. *Vowel Modification.* Allow the vowels to modify as the pitch ascends. With a low larynx and wide pharynx, back vowels become more rounded and front vowels more closed and rounded. The vowel [i] rounds, but doesn't close. It migrates toward the mixed vowel [y]. Think of these vowels as "narrow" in the zone of the passaggio.
4. *Go Fishing for Vowels.* Find a vowel that is "happy" on a given pitch by experimenting with different vowel sounds until maximum resonance, clarity, and freedom are achieved. Try to migrate through various vowels on this pitch while maintaining the optimal placement. Mixed vowels are often happy vowels! Tune the vowels for each individual pitch.
5. *Small Mouth Frog.* Don't over open the mouth.
6. *Long Narrow Pipe.* Imagine a long pipe from front to back through the head (at varying heights). The longer the pipe the greater the head voice and a better chiaroscuro.
7. *Hourglass.* The shape of an hourglass can be a good picture for imagining the narrowness of the zone of the passaggio with a wider shape below and above these pitches.

## Tongue/Jaw Release and Low Larynx Strategies:

### Tongue

Any method designed to lower the larynx must include the intentional release of the tongue. It should be full, wide, and slight arched in its neutral position. One should be able to see the tongue of the singer, even from a seated position. Tension in the root (base) of the tongue may not be visible. In this case, tension is determined by listening for absolute clarity of sound and quality of vibrato. Is there extraneous noise in the voice? Is the vibrato too prominent, uneven, wide or too narrow?

### Jaw

When the jaw protrudes or its muscles tense, the throat cannot release to the optimal position. The jaw should swing slightly back and down during inhalation while the tongue relaxes laterally toward the molars and the soft palate stretches to a wide position. One can easily feel the impact of jaw position by inhaling to an open throat position, then jutting the jaw forward and back. (Similarly, the result of poor head/neck alignment is noticeable, both aurally and physically, when one sustains a pitch while alternating between a forward-reaching head position, and that in which the spine is properly aligned.) The transfer of jaw tension to the throat is noticeable by hanging the mouth open and engaging the masseters without allowing the mouth aperture to change.

## Tongue Strategies:

1. *Tongue Muscle Release.* Place the tip of the tongue on the roof of the mouth where the hard and soft palates meet. Open the mouth wide, and situate the thumbs under the tongue as far back as they can go. Lower the tip of the tongue to the bottom teeth, stick out the tongue and pinch the tongue between the thumbs and forefingers just on either side of the midline of the tongue. While pinching, slide thumbs/forefingers forward to the front of the tongue. Repeat three more times.

2. *Tongue Tension Check.* Place the thumb under the fleshy part of the chin, and rest the side of the forefinger just above the chin and below the bottom lip. Pinch the thumb and forefinger to check for tension while singing. If a bulge presses against the thumb, the tongue is extremely tense. Press upward with the thumb to release the tongue and to allow it to move more into the mouth. A slight gagging sensation may be present.
3. *Ich-laut/ach-laut.* Produce an ach-laut [x] or hocking sound and move directly to any sung back vowel. Use uvular R if the sound is too far back. Use an ich-laut [ç], uvular R, or cat hiss for front vowels.
4. *Up and Over.* Place a large straw, chopstick, or similarly shaped item under the tongue, allowing tip of tongue to rest at teeth. Practice vowel formations in this position, first speaking, then singing. This discourages retraction of both the tip and the root.
5. *Pre-vomit.* Keep the tip of the tongue down, then, thrust the middle of the tongue upward by simulating a pre-vomit position.
6. *Uhl.* The following strategy releases the base of the tongue and allows the pharynx to relax, eliminating laryngeal squeezing. Produce an American [ɪ] (tip of tongue down, not dental) simultaneously with an [a] vowel. Be sure to supply adequate airflow. Reinforce the new position and sound by vocalizing on this “new [a].” Once the position and sound are easily accessible, migrate to other vowels by only altering the arch of the tongue body. Concentrate on keeping the pharynx and base of the tongue in the same relaxed position.
7. *Wide Tongue.* Relax the tongue by widening it in the back. This action both helps to keep tongue from bunching in the mouth, and prevents the root of the tongue from pulling downward. Possible images include thinking of the top as a cap over the lower molars, or picture wings on the back of the tongue that angle out and up.
8. *Nose Yawn.* To avoid pressing down on the tongue while opening the throat, think of yawning in the nose instead of in the back of the throat.
9. *Arched Tongue.* To avoid pulling down on the tongue to facilitate a low laryngeal position, arch the tongue forward to prevent pressing that can create tension in the pharynx and extrinsic laryngeal muscles, both of which can impair production of high notes. This can be done either with intentional muscular action (necessary when extreme tension is present) or through the thought of [ɪ] or [ɛ].
10. *Slurp.* To avoid pressing the tongue down in the mouth, and to help find the small space needed for vowels in the passaggio.

### **Larynx/Pharynx**

1. *Ear Pop.* Simulate the jaw release and throat expansion experienced when trying to pop the ears with a small mouth opening. Be sure the tongue is released and forward.
2. *Touchy-Feely.* Teach the singer to locate and palpate the larynx while swallowing (lifts the larynx) and yawning (lowers the larynx.)
3. *Down ‘n Out.* Place the thumb and forefinger around the top of the larynx between the hyoid bone and the thyroid cartilage. With pressure against the skin of the throat, slide the fingers down the throat. As the fingers line up with the inferior edge of the thyroid cartilage, move the thumb and forefinger outward around the neck while continuing to apply pressure on the throat. An image for this action is an upside down Y.
4. *Gorilla Grunt.* While pressing in and pulling downward on the chest, produce forceful, low-pitched, breathy, grunting gorilla-like sounds and imagine these noises emanating from the chest. Practice producing two of these noises immediately followed by the desired starting pitch. “Huh, huh, huh!” (Low, low, high.)
5. *The Little Mouth.* Visualize the sound emanating from the indentation in the throat just below the larynx and above the clavicle bones. Placing a finger in this “dip” may improve the outcome. One can think of this as a little “mouth.”

6. *Inhalation Phonation (also call ingressive phonation)*: The tongue must feel relaxed and thick to the point of almost gagging. This sensation is alleviated at the onset of the phonated inhalation. Relax shoulders, neck, and jaw. Exhale fully, then sing an unspecified pitch with inhalation phonation. Follow this phonation immediately with the onset of normal exhalation phonation on the desired pitch. Avoid re-setting the throat before the actual onset. This can be done on any vowel.
7. *Excuse Me!* Inhale as though you are about to burp; then, suddenly suppress the “burp.”
8. *Gobble-Gobble*. Imitate a turkey gobble to assist in releasing a tense, locked larynx. Lay the back of the fingers along the side of the throat, pointing the fingers toward the back of the neck. Move the hands up and down quickly, with or without phonation.
9. *Straw Trick*. While humming through a straw, close the end with a fingertip and continue to hum. The resulting air pressure will cause the larynx to drop. Work to maintain this position while phonating normally.
10. *Buh*. Inhale and form a [b] with the lips. Begin phonation, but allow no air to escape from the lips. Just as the air pressure increases to the point where phonation is no longer possible, “explode” the sound with a “buh.” First use a spoken sound, then a sung pitch.

## **Diagnosing vocal technique**

### **What to listen for:**

1. Even, natural vibrato rate (5-7 cycles per second)—vibrato is the barometer of a good sound
2. Clear sound, lacking any extraneous noise or breathiness
3. Equally balanced resonance between bright and dark
4. Supple sound, not a thin, speech-like quality
5. Clear diction, no muddled vowels or consonants
6. Chest dominant register
7. Balanced onset that is clean/clear
8. Steady, even breath flow
9. Intonation---flat could mean not enough airflow (press) or tongue depression or general tension. Sharp could mean too much airflow, or pinching of the pharynx. General pitchiness can be a product of an unstable larynx
10. Comfortable range---especially the bottom (to determine voice type)
11. Part of the voice that rings the most when all is right
12. Vowels with depth---not the bright [a] of speech, nor the closed [i], chiaroscuro (Light and dark within the same sound)
13. Listen for the student's best vowel—the one that seems to have the best resonance/ease of production
14. Focus on the notes that precede the “problem” note. These notes will determine where the problem actually begins
15. Pay attention to the speaking voice to inform you of what your expectation of the sound might be

## What to watch for:

### Alignment:

Head and neck aligned over the shoulders. Knees unlocked and hips released. Shoulders relaxed, not pinned back in a fixed position, to allow a lateral movement of the scapula during inhalation

### Tension Release: (Independence of articulators. Ability to move one without interfering or moving the others)

Back of neck (associated with pressing)

Jaw (jutting forward, clenching)

Tongue (look for lump of muscle under the chin)

Relaxed lips and mouth

### Breathing:

Inhalation noticeable through the ribs, back and abdomen

Inhalation relaxed and full without taking in too much air

Point of suspension preceding onset

No abdominal clutch at the end of inhalation or prior to onset

No abdominal clutch during the phrase (usually occurring when singer prematurely senses a running out of breath)

## Balancing Appoggio with Airflow:

Added muscular engagement is needed to bring the vocal cords together and this must be balanced by sufficient airflow to maintain "ease" of production. Many of these exercises are intended to encourage muscular involvement in the torso while continuing to freely move the air.

1. *Plié*. Bend the knees, keeping the body erect and the tailbone pointing to the floor as one sings through to the phrase end. This is also helpful for ascending (or descending) lines. The movement and the use of the leg muscles helps put the energy in the lower part of the body. Sing while moving through the plié.
2. *Polishing the Car*. Place your hand on the piano or other smooth surface and "polish." Some pressure is required to do the job, but the hand must be free enough to move in circles.
3. *Hand to Hand*. This must be done with a partner. Facing each other, place the palms against the palms of the partner. Leaning on each other, feeling like you both are "supporting" the other, continue to lean and move your hands in circles, thus illustrating the need to both move and tense at the same time.
4. *Shake Hands*. This is similar hand to hand, but with your partner, you now shake right hands, place right foot forward and lean back, so that you are trusting each other to keep the other from falling. Keep the knees loose and gently bounce, using the weight and strength of the legs and middle torso to engage.
5. *Push the Wall*. This may be done alone and almost anything stable may be pushed. One may do this as if doing a push-up (standing up) against the wall, or one may put one's shoulder to the door. Feel the "work" in the legs and abdominal area. (Be sure no one comes in while pushing against the door!) Sing.
6. *Phone Book Lift*. While standing in good singing alignment, hold two (or one, if they are substantial!) phone books in each hand with arms extended out to the sides. Feel the engagement of the muscles in the abdomen and torso. Sing while moving books up and down.
7. *Push/Pull*. Form a semicircle with your arms extended in front of your abdomen, resting the back of one hand against the palm of the other. Push outward with the inside hand and inward with the outside hand gradually allowing the outside hand to bring the hands toward the body.
8. *Conveyor Belt*. This image is that of a conveyor belt leaving the body from the abdomen. The idea is to imagine the movement of air away from the body, allowing the air to move while any excess breath pressure that may have built up under the larynx is allowed to release. Imagine the tone being carried away on the moving belt. This can be quite freeing while still engaging the muscles required to sing well. Multiple conveyor belts may radiate from all sides of the lower torso to encourage a continued sense of expansion while singing.

9. *Ankle Weights*. Imagined (or real, if you have them) ankle weights can direct the student to feel the necessary grounding for good singing. This is excellent for those students who might lift the heel while singing.
10. *Race-car Driver*. Imagine driving a car around the curve, hugging the road as you turn.

### **Alignment and Freeing the Breath:**

Remember that releasing airflow is sometimes the most important part of the process, especially if the student tends to press or "hold the breath" while singing.

1. *Bottom Rib Expansion*. Be sure that inhalations expand the bottom rib while sternum stays easily elevated (as if with a soft hook). Be aware that men's rib cage may seem higher than a woman's, with men having more space between the lowest rib and the hip bone.
2. *Football Dance*. This is the jiggling of the knees that many football players do when they are warming up for a game. They actually move the feet off the ground, but one may do the exercise with the feet on the ground, just wiggling the knees back and forth as quickly as possible.
3. *Running and Dancing*. Running in place or dancing (a polka, waltz, any step the student may know) while singing frees the breath and often allows the singer to be distracted enough to "let go."
4. *Air-drop Inhalation*. Imagining the air "dropping in" for inhalation, instead of pulling in the breath can aid in quicker inhalation and less noisy inhalation. It also lets the breath go lower.
5. *Resonator Inhalation*. Instead of concentrating on the inhalation, just open the resonators. This allows the expansion around the bottom rib
6. *Leg on Chair*. Standing with one leg up on the seat of a chair allows the tailbone to drop and the alignment to be "noble."
7. *Breathing into the Tailbone*. While this is, of course, completely impossible, the sense of allowing the tailbone to "open" give the breath a very low place to settle.
8. *Wall Sitting*. To align the head and release tension in the back of the neck, bend knees and place back AND HEAD against the wall. Many men will feel their heads are too far back, but it can align the head over the neck more comfortably.
9. *Gesture of Inhalation*. Sing on the gesture of inhalation, as if continuing to expand as one sings.