CHEST VOICE, HEAD VOICE & FALSETTO by Sheri Gould

Understanding the different parts of our voice can at times be confusing. There is so much terminology out there and so many people using those terms without a real understanding of what they mean. One of the most common misunderstandings of the human voice can be boiled down to one question:

"Isn't 'head voice' the same as 'falsetto'?"

The lack of understanding about this aspect of the voice is responsible for many vocal problems. Even many vocal teachers and coaches don't really understand the difference and often use the terms interchangeably. This is largely due to the fact that the original intent behind the terms has been lost as a result of so little "real" or classical vocal training in the world of contemporary music. Let's have a look at the terms and what they were originally designed to mean.

Chest Voice

Most of us truly enjoy singing in what is commonly known as the "chest voice". The term "chest voice" is actually a term used to, in essence, describe an area of the voice that is resonating (or more technically: registering resonance) in the chest cavity. The "chest voice" is the area of your range which is typically used for speech. If you put your hand on the upper part of your chest and speak you will most likely feel a vibration. The chest cavity is one of the largest areas to resonate in. So in other words, we are (more properly stated) singing in a chest register. This was the original, and yes "classical", term for singing in this area of the voice. But for reasons which I will attempt to explain as we go along, we now more often hear the term "chest VOICE".

When we are resonating in the chest, we are also most likely experiencing full vocal cord adduction. This means that they are completed connected and have a "seal" all along the edges of the vocal folds. Therefore, we are able to utilize the full length and strength of the cords. This is why we like the chest voice. It is rich, it is full of resonance, and it's powerful (we have full use of the cords and we're very comfortable there because it's in our speaking range). Since this is such a favored sound, many people will try to continue singing in this manner into a range beyond what the vocal cords are able to withstand. This, of course, can cause multiple problems for the vocalist—including serious damage.

Falsetto

Simply defined, falsetto means "false voice". This is because of what happens to the vocal cords. The vocal cords are muscles and as such they have some incredible abilities! They can stretch out and become long and thin, or they can shorten and become thick as they vibrate against one another, resulting in many varied pitches. As a singer climbs to higher notes, the cords begin to tighten (and stretch), much like a stretched rubber band or even like a guitar string when tightened. At some point however, the cords will reach a crisis point; they can only stretch so far before they risk damage. At this point, they will come apart—often with a "pop" or a sound similar to the shifting of gears in a car. Then the singer can go on to sing higher and higher notes in the new vocal configuration. This takes the stress off the cords and prevents damage from occurring.

At this point the voice is typically much weaker for a number of reasons. First of all, without training and a good deal of practice, there will be a tendency to have a more airy tone since the cords are not fully adducted (closed) and air can easily escape. Secondly, since you are only vibrating on a portion of the cords, the voice will naturally be weaker since the vibrating length of the

cord is now shorter. Thirdly, the cords will be thinner as well; this is in order to hit those higher pitches. All of this is actually wonderful news if you are a guy. Why? Because if you are a man, the ability to go into falsetto will typically double your range.

What about Women?

In reality, **there is no functional falsetto for women**. Yes, they can reproduce the same scenario described above but it doesn't serve the same **function**. Instead, it becomes the natural consequence of singing incorrectly—with too much strain on the vocal cords. In the end, this vocal configuration mimics a falsetto in tone quality but doesn't provide the extra range as it does in a man. It simply **cuts the woman's range in half** rather than doubling it! It relegates everything above an A, Bb or B (on average for most women) to a voice using only a portion of the vocal cords. I doubt that the average female singer with a "break" in voice does this on purpose. Nonetheless, countless female singers DO sing in this way. The reason for this is simply ignorance of the female voice and how it can work. There is no physiological reason for the female vocal cords to abduct (split apart) in the middle of a woman's range except for the application of too much pressure on the cords. Women can learn, with proper training, to keep their cords fully adducted for the full length of their vocal range.

So what is Head Voice?

Many people commonly refer to a "falsetto" voice as a "head voice". In the same way that a chest voice is a voice that is resonating in the chest, a "head voice" should be a voice that is resonating in the head. It is specifically NOT a falsetto voice. Falsetto is a voice that is made only when the vocal cords are not completely adducted and unfortunately that is typically the type of voice people are referring to when they say "head voice". Because of a lack of training/understanding there is lot confusion today over this. I don't like the terms "head voice" and "chest voice" because they add to the confusion. We should have ONE voice as women. Men have two distinct types of voices: full voice and falsetto. There are different areas of resonance that allow for different registers. When we resonate primarily in the head, we are in our head register. Although our cords are thinned out at this point, they should not come apart if we are using proper vocal technique. The term "head voice", although frequently used interchangeable with the term falsetto, is not one in the same and should be exchanged for the more accurate term of "head register", otherwise its confusing and sends the wrong message.

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