ISSN 3034-3836 (Online)

Horizons of Musicology

Original article
UDC 784, 78.06
https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2026.3.130-140
EDN UOSXMT

Historical Transformation of Approaches to Working on Vocal Registers in Dedicated Educational Literature: from Old School Principles to Contemporary Performance Requirements

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Abstract. The study discusses the historical development of vocal educational theory on vocal registers. The work opening section outlines the foundations of contemporary understanding of register quality and sound. Research data on sound of the singing voice are presented. The thorough analysis of the vocal methodology evolution in European schools enables to systematize changes in pedagogical views on the principles of organising vocal registers. A brief historical overview covers the period from the late 15th century to the 20th century, inclusive. It is emphasised that concepts of vocal register quality and sound, as known today, were established only in the early 19th century. This once again confirms the complexity of applying the guidelines of old vocal schools to the contemporary practice. The study attends to the history of developing the techniques of covering the upper register in male voices—a most complex element in vocal training. Traditionally, this mechanism is thought to have been first recorded in the technique shown by the renowned French tenor Gilbert Duprez. However, the paper provides evidence challenging this view. Furthermore, the research addresses the issue of the relevance and applicability of principles of old vocal schools in contemporary educational practice.

Keywords: fundamentals of vocal pedagogy, vocal registers, technique of "covering" the upper register in male voices, Florentine Camerata vocal school, Old Italian school of singing, "New French" school of singing, Russian school of singing, "primary tone" school of singing, vocal educational principles of 20th-century schools

For citation: Vujošević Jovanović S., Grinikh D.N. Historical Transformation of Approaches to Working on Vocal Registers in Dedicated Educational Literature: from Old School Principles to Contemporary Performance Requirements. *Russian Musicology*. 2026, no. 3, pp. 130–140. https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2026.3.130-140

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Историческая трансформация представлений о работе с певческими регистрами в вокально-методической литературе: от принципов старинных школ к современным требованиям исполнительства

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена историческому развитию вокально-методической мысли во взгляде на регистры певческого голоса. В начале работы излагаются основы современных представлений о звучании регистров. Приводятся научные данные по исследованию звучания певческого голоса. Рассмотрение исторического пути развития вокальной методики в европейских школах позволяет систематизировать изменения во взглядах педагогов на принципы организации регистров певческого голоса. Краткий исторический экскурс охватывает период с конца XV до XX века включительно. В работе подчёркивается, что представления о звучании певческих регистров, близкие к современным, сформировались лишь в начале XIX столетия. Это ещё раз подтверждает сложность использования методических указаний педагогов старых певческих школ в современной практике. Значительное место в статье отведено истории становления техники прикрытия верхнего регистра мужских голосов — одного из наиболее сложных элементов в обучении пению. Традиционно считается, что данный механизм был впервые зафиксирован в технике известного французского тенора Ж. Дюпре. Однако в статье приводятся доказательства, опровергающие эту точку зрения. Кроме того, затрагивается проблема целесообразности использования принципов старинных вокальных школ в современной педагогической практике.

Ключевые слова: основы вокальной методики, регистры певческого голоса, техника «прикрытия» верхнего регистра мужского голоса, вокальная школа «флорентийской камераты», староитальянская школа пения, «новая французская» школа пения, русская школа пения, школа пения «примарного тона», вокально-методические принципы школ XX века

Introduction. Contemporary Concepts of Vocal Registers

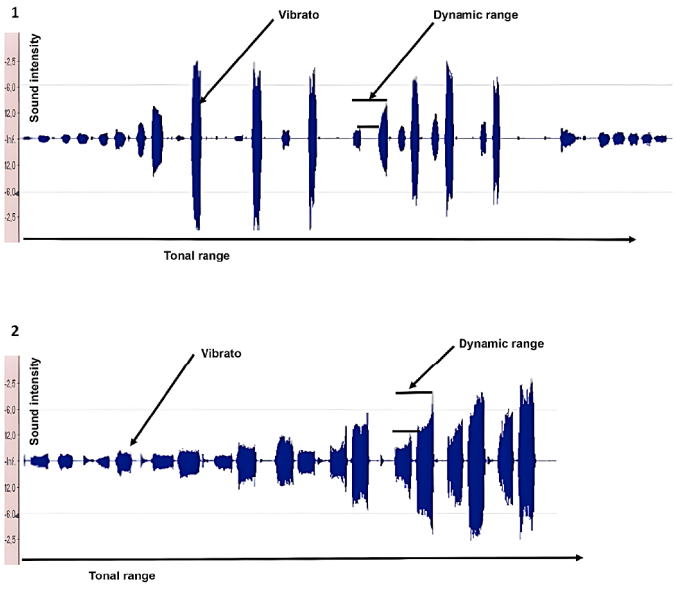
The voice register structure is given by nature, and it shapes the entire process of vocal technique training. In vocal pedagogy, the search for and establishment of a specific timbral organisation across different sections of the vocal range is the core of the methodological work.

A vocal register is generally understood as a series of the homogeneous timbre sounds produced by a unified physiological mechanism. [1, p. 440]

At present, the vocal technique training is oriented on the mastery of balanced registers, whose timbral unity should resemble that of a well-tuned musical instrument. “The singer’s voice has its distinct registers with defined boundaries, which are not to be noticed by listeners. The voice should sound even from bottom to top, as if in a single register— meaning, without an audible change in timbral

coloration," noted the singer and educator Ksenia Dorliak. [2, p. 172]

It should be noted that achieving such sound balance and unity is a complicated task. It takes the vast majority of singers a long time to develop necessary sensations involved in forming, for example, the "mixed register," negotiating "passaggio notes," or mastering the technique of "covering the upper tones" in male voices. However, professional vocal technique cannot be achieved without the command of these skills, which is evidenced by scientific research. Thus, for example, the Russian phoniatrician Ekaterina V. Osipenko, analysing the acoustic data from recordings of an ascending pitch sequence (Il. 1), in which each note was first performed *piano* and then repeated *forte*, found out that a well-trained vocalist demonstrated smooth transitions between notes and a gradual change in acoustic characteristics. By contrast, beginners showed drops in acoustic parameters when transiting between registers.



Il. 1. Spectrographic Representations of Scale Performance by Two Singers: (1) a Beginner (Upper Image) and (2) a Trained Singer (Lower Image) [3, p. 56][1]

The efforts of both practical and scholarly thought to understand the problems of free vocal production across the two-octave range required of a professional singer led to the emergence of an important branch of vocal methodology—the "theory of registers."

The singer internally feels the need to change this mechanism while transitioning from one register to another, since the failure to do so results in discomfort during phonation. This entails a certain paradox: for the voice to maintain a uniform timbral quality, the vocalist must employ different modes of vocal fold function. Conversely, the use of one mechanism only throughout the entire vocal range, which should extend to at least two octaves, will, at least, lead to a break in phonation (a crack), vocal defects, and, if applied consistently over time, even to occupational voice disorders.

Thus, it may be argued that problems of voice register imbalance are closely linked to a linear use of the physiological capacities of the larynx, as well as to the absence of a search for complex and highly flexible sensations, movements, various vocal associations etc.

It should be noted that contemporary educational methodological frameworks have been shaped relatively recently. For centuries, issues of register production remained central to vocal pedagogy. However, methodological orientations always evolved in response to

[1] The singers were asked to perform all notes of their range using two dynamic levels: *piano* and *forte*. In the upper image (1), register shifts of the scale are clearly visible during the intonation, particularly regarding the intensity scale. The singer experienced difficulty adjusting when moving from one register to the other. In the lower image (2), a smooth increase in intensity is observed as pitch rises. The vibrato and singers' dynamic ranges are also specified.

changes in the aesthetic concepts of vocal sound. A key factor shaping the direction of vocal-methodological inquiry were new musical pieces, which were increasingly demanding to the voice. The development of large concert halls and opera houses with complex acoustics also exerted a significant influence, requiring adjustments in approaches to the organisation of vocal registers in order to ensure the optimal production and sound quality under new performance conditions.

Despite the development of vocal methodology, the teaching practices and techniques of solo singing frequently followed and preserved the principles rooted in the old master's traditions. This raises a legitimate question regarding their relevance and methodological appropriateness in the contemporary contexts. Moreover, the use of the obsolete approaches may potentially affect the proper development of mechanisms governing register coordination. To make well-grounded conclusions, it is necessary to undertake a historical and analytical study of vocal educational concepts related to the process of the singing voice register organisation.

A Historical Overview of the Vocal-Methodological Concepts of Singing Voice Registers

The contemporary conceptions of a classical singer vocal registers did not emerge overnight. As long as composers created their pieces within the natural voice range, there was no need to develop techniques that would extend beyond the limits of the primary (comfortable) vocal production. Instead, only minor adjustments were required to expand the range.[2]

The Concepts of Vocal Registers in Vocal Pedagogy from the Late 15th to the Early 19th Century

The earliest surviving descriptions of vocal registers were presented by Lodovico Zacconi in his 1595 treatise *Prattica di musica*. He distinguished the head voice (voce di testa), the chest voice (voce di petto), and an intermediate voice (mezzana / mezzante), while giving his preference to the second. He wrote: "The natural voice is the chest voice: not only because it resonates in the chest, which contains the special organs of sound (the lungs), but also because, in terms of musicality and sonority, it is always the most accurate. It is free from falseness, which is encountered in head and muffled voices."[3] [4, p. 17]

The composer and singer Giulio Caccini, in his 1601 treatise *Le nuove musiche*, wrote: "When singing with a stringed instrument accompaniment, a singer should choose a key where he can sing using a full and natural voice, without resorting to artificial tones." [5, pp. 118–119]

Based on this description, it may be inferred that the earliest "operatic prima donnas," such as Vittoria Archilei and Francesca Caccini, structured their entire ranges focusing on two registers, corresponding to the distinct mechanisms of sound production: the chest and falsetto register. The latter was used rarely and only when necessary. A similar register configuration could most likely be observed in the performance of singers associated with the Florentine Camerata, including Giulio Caccini, Jacopo Peri, and Luca Marenzio. The chest register was extended to its maximum possible limits, while the uppermost notes, used only

[2] Nevertheless, as early as in Ancient Rome there were special teachers (*vociferarii*) who worked on developing vocal range and strength, which demonstrates the long-standing relevance of register issues for singers. [4, p. 11]

[3] Lodovico Zacconi also describes a voice type he calls "obtuse," which most likely refers not to the mechanism of sound production but to the voice quality.

rarely, were performed by means of the so-called supported falsetto (see more on supported falsetto below).

A representative of the Old Italian School[4] Pier Francesco Tosi, in his 1723 treatise *Opinioni de'cantori antichi e moderni*, *o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato* (Observations on the Florid Song), distinguished between the chest and falsetto registers and noted: "The natural chest voice compass normally extends up to *C* or *D* (in the second octave). From there, the falsetto begins, if the voice ascends to higher sounds… The major difficulty lies in uniting these two registers, and if this is treated carelessly, the inevitable outcome will be the deterioration of the student's voice…" [4, p. 33]

A vocal register system classified similarly to the modern one emerged only in the 19th century, and it was documented, e.g. in the 1803 guideline entitled *Méthode de chant du Conservatoire de musique de Paris* (Method of Singing of the Paris Conservatory). Its authors identified three vocal registers, but only in the soprano voice, whereas it was assumed that mezzo-sopranos and contraltos possessed only two registers. [6, p. 143]

Further development of French and Italian vocal pedagogy involved the active use of the concept of register blending, though not across the entire range, but only within the *passaggio* (transition zone). That way, the representative of the new French school, the bass Luigi Lablache,[5] wrote in his 1846 work *Méthode de chant* (Method of Singing): "In both registers of male voices, there often exists such an inequality of tone that they would appear highly unpleasant to the ear if it were not possible to reconcile them through practice. The upper chest notes, due to the effort they require, tend to be very harsh, while the first head tones may be very soft and often weak. Therefore, one must seek to strengthen the latter and soften the former. Since our organs allow us to produce the extreme notes of each register, the best way to unite these two kinds of sounds is to transfer the same pitch from the chest register to the head register and vice versa." [7, p. 6]

The Russian composer and singer Alexander Varlamov,[6] in his work *Polnaya shkola peniya* (Complete School of Singing), published in 1840, which means six years prior to Lablache's work, also singled out two registers in male voices: the chest and the head (fistula) registers, alongside three registers in female voices: chest, middle, and head. [8, p. 20] In this work, the author recommended the combination of registers in order to form a unified mechanism of sound production: "It is very useful to blend different tones, extending them across many notes, both high and low; that is, to make one take notes both with the chest and with the fistula, so as to be able, when necessary, to sing certain musical phrases without changing the tone (register)." [Ibid., p. 25]

The History of Developing the Mechanism of Covering in the Male Voice Upper Register

Among the most significant developments in vocal practice was the active adoption of the then novel technique known as "covering" in the upper register of male voices (see more

[4] The Old Italian vocal school refers to a system of singer training (primarily castrati) of the late 17th–18th centuries in cities such as Bologna and Naples. One of its prominent representatives Pier Francesco Tosi (1654–1732), a castrati singer, a singing teacher, theorist and composer.

[5] The New French school refers to the development of vocal-pedagogical theory in the mid-19th century France, formalized in the revised edition of the *Méthode du Conservatoire de Paris* (1868).

[6] Alexander Varlamov (1801–1848) was a renowned Russian composer, singer (tenor), a choral conductor, educator and musical critic.

details on the covering mechanisms below). It is generally accepted that this vocal technique innovation—referred to in the original as *voix sombrée* or *voix mixte sombrée* ("dark mixed voice")—is associated with the French tenor Gilbert Duprez,[7] who convincingly showed it in his performance of the Arnold in *William Tell* by Gioachino Rossini.

However, in his vocal-methodological treatise *L'Art du chant* (1845), [9] Duprez neither described the technique of *voix sombrée* nor even used this term. Only in his later memoirs, *Souvenirs d'un chanteur* (1880), did the eminent tenor and professor of the Paris Conservatoire depicted how his work on a dramatic characterization led him to produce the famous high *C* in the role of Arnold using the chest voice (at that time corresponding approximately to the modern *B* natural, since pitch standards were about a semitone lower). [10, p. 43] Yet even in this account, Duprez did not provide any vocal-technical analysis and made no reference to the concept of covering.

Moreover, his contemporary, the distinguished educator Manuel García (the younger), characterized Duprez's celebrated high *C* as an open, "white" timbre of the chest register, rather than associated it with a dark, mixed quality. [11, p. 24] A similarly critical, though more sharply worded, assessment was expressed by Gioachino Rossini, who remarked: "I do not like unnatural effects, and that high *C*, with its harsh timbre, offends my Italian ear like the cry of a capon[8] being slaughtered." [12, p. 188]

Only in a 1840 report presented to the Paris Academy of Sciences by the vocal physiologists Diday and Pétrequin is it suggested that Gilbert Duprez may have possessed the technique of *voix sombrée*, through which it is thought to have entered France coming from Italy, where he had lived and worked for a considerable period. [13, p. 92] However, in a report by Manuel García, presented to the same Academy several months later, it was said that the researchers had examined the characteristics of the dark timbre exclusively within the chest, not the falsetto register. This indicates that the defining features of the *voix sombrée* technique were not, in fact, identified or described by them.

The aforesaid allows us to conclude that the "attribution" of *voix sombrée* to Gilbert Duprez in the history of vocal art is erroneous. It is more likely that this innovation should be credited to Manuel García (the younger), who pointed to the possibility of producing tones with a dark timbre both in the chest and in the falsetto (head) register, while modifying the length of the vocal tract only. [Ibid.]

It should be highlighted that the technique of "darkening" the upper notes, accompanied by a perceptually seamless increase in chest resonance, was already employed by singers prior to the 19th century. Thus, for example, Alexander Mezenets,[9] in his 1688 work entitled *Azbuka znamennogo peniya* (Primer of Znamenny Chant), wrote with regard to shaping the upper register that the highest notes should be produced in a dark and "covered" manner. [14, p. 19]

Thus, it may be concluded that the vocal technique of so-called covering, or *voix mixte sombrée*, had been known to singers earlier, but appeared in truly high demand only when composers began significantly to extend the upper range of male voices.

[7] Gilbert Duprez (1806–1896) was a French operatic singer (tenor), a teacher and a composer. He performed leading opera parts in France and Italy.

[8] A capon is a rooster that is castrated for fattening.

[9] Alexander Mezenets (Stremoukhov) (?–d. 1670) was a music theorist who specialised in Znamenny chant.

Voice Register Organization from the Perspective of Methodological Principles of the "Primar Tone" School

An important contribution to modern vocal register concepts is the so-called "primar tone" school, defined by the German singer and educator Friedrich Schmitt.[10] The term *primar* derives from the Latin *primus*, meaning "initial" or "primary."

The primar tone school followers maintained that the voice should be developed beginning from the most comfortable pitches within the central part of the range. Within this approach, the chest production mechanism is blended with falsetto production and further extended across the remaining parts of the range, thereby creating the sensation of a single register (*Einregistersystem*), where transitions are smoothed and imperceptible.

In his 1886 work *Gesangschule* (Vocal School), the primar tone theory follower Julius Stockhausen[11] wrote: "Registers overlap. This is a law of nature. The two main registers of any type of voice share many common notes and, with a stable position of the larynx, can be easily equalized. The connection between the chest and the middle register may be achieved either through a darkening of the timbre when ascending or through a brightening of the tone when descending. Here, the epiglottis undoubtedly has its impact. On deep vowels, such as O, ö, U, ü, it lies over the larynx like a stopper. Its action resembles that of a horn player's hand when producing stopped tones." [15, p. 19]

In turn, another German educator and composer, Ferdinand Sieber,[12] regarded the mixed voice not as an individual register, but as a mechanism. In his methodological work of 1858, *Vollständige Gesangschule für Lehrer und Schüler des Solo-Gesangs* (The Complete Manual of the Art of Singing for Teachers and Students of Solo Singing), he wrote: "The so-called mixed voice (voix mixte) is not a distinct register, but is merely internal blending of the two series of tones—the chest and the head ones…" (Cit. ex: [16, p. 454]). It should be noted that this viewpoint may still occasionally be found today among specialists in solo singing (see: [17, pp. 130–131]).

Methodological Principles of Working with Vocal Registers in Twentieth-Century Vocal Schools

By the end of the 19th century, European vocal schools had realised that timbre equalization was dependent on the singer's awareness of different mechanisms of sound production, which must be blended. Thus, for example, the representative of the new Italian school of singing, Gustavo Magrini,[13] in his 1905 work *L'arte e la tecnica del canto* (The Art and Technique of Singing), maintained that the three registers of the female voice are characterized by distinct sensations. In the lower register, the resonance was perceived in the chest cavity; in the middle register, in the mouth and pharynx; and in the upper register, it could be found in the nasal and cranial cavities (Il. 2). This conception of the structure of the female voice has, to a considerable extent, persisted to the present day.

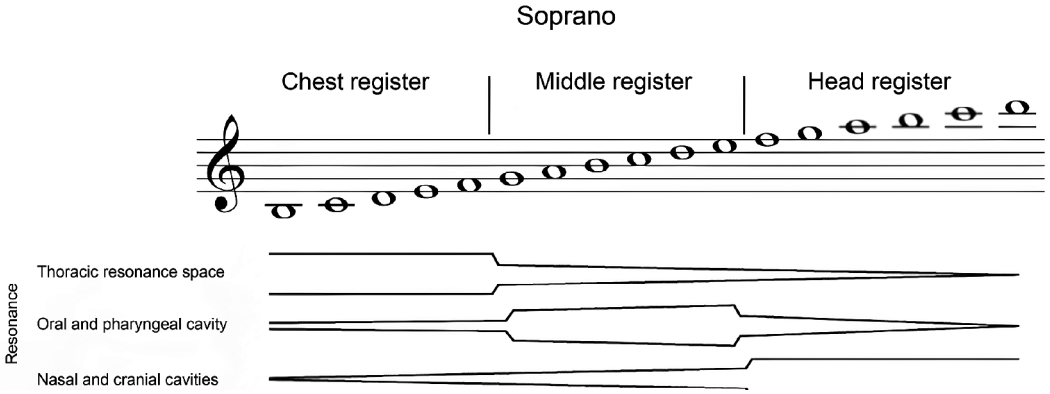
The idea, which is still employed by solo singing teachers, regarding the gradual register blending in the middle of the female vocal range, was developed by the renowned Italian educator Beniamino Carelli. He represented the middle register as a progressive merging of the chest

[10] Friedrich Schmitt (1812–1884) was a German singer (tenor) and singing teacher whose studies contributed to vocal pedagogy reforms in Germany.

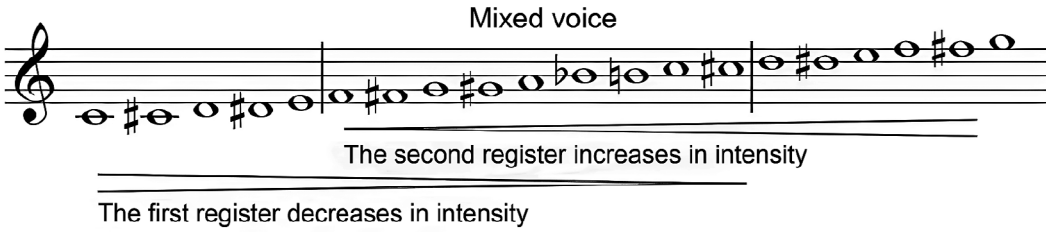
[11] Julius Stockhausen (1826–1906) was a German singer (baritone), choral conductor and a singing educator.

[12] Ferdinand Sieber (1822–1895) was a German singer, composer, singing teacher and a music critic.

[13] Gustavo Magrini (1870–1930) was an Italian educator.



Il. 2. Soprano Voice Registers and the Corresponding Cavity Resonance Sensations (after Magrini) [18, p. 92]



Il. 3. The Representation of the Voce Mista according to Carelli [19, p. 262]

and head registers, where the intensity of the former decreases as pitch ascends, while that of the latter increases (Il. 3).

Another representative of the New Italian school of singing, Giulio Silva,[14] suggested a four-part division of the professional vocal range, organised in intervals of a fourth (lower, middle, upper, and highest). Each part is characterised by its own sound qualities. Since early career singers still manifest the boundaries between these parts in a pronounced way, the training process should aim at smoothing them out. Silva wrote that one needs to "blend the timbres of different segments so as to achieve a homogeneous (but not averaged!) vocal sound across the entire range, while preserving its capacity for dynamic nuance and varied timbral coloration." [20, pp. 13–14]

The abovementioned theories show that since the late 19th century the vocal-pedagogical theory has regarded the voice register structure as a multi-component construct, comprising several mechanisms of sound production and relying on their particular blending.

The researcher of the singing voice Konstantin Mazurin[15] wrote, rather ironically

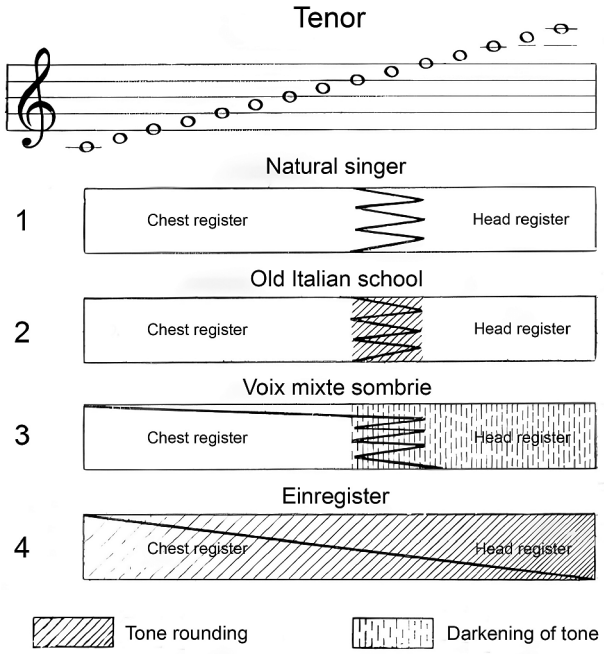
[14] Giulio Silva (1875–1967) was a conductor, singer and a singing voice educator.

[15] Konstantin Mitrofanovich Mazurin (1866–1959) was born to a family of a textile manufacturer and a prominent figure in Russian culture—a poet, translator, public figure, and a singing voice researcher. He studied singing privately in Russia and Europe and developed his own method of vocal instruction. He also authored two-volume work entitled *Metodologiya peniya* (1902–1903), where he thoroughly analysed the vocal-pedagogical theory, ranging from the representatives of the "Florentine Camerata" to his contemporary theories of vocal training. He graduated from both the philological and medical faculties of Moscow University. After the 1917 Revolution, he left Russia and never returned, later working as a physician in Yugoslavia.

that "everyone attempted to make discoveries and acknowledge only those registers that they themselves had managed to perceive. Naturally, extremes were not avoided. On the one hand, the very existence of registers in the human voice could be denied; on the other, there would virtually be a hunt for new registers!" [16, p. 453] It should be mentioned here that the trend to classify the voice range into numerous registers is primarily associated with the fact that singing teachers were increasingly aware of the complexity of register function, particularly, the formation of the *voce mista*.

An innovative methodological approach to the correlation between register mechanisms was proposed by the Austrian educator Otto Iro.[16] In his 1923 work *Voice Diagnostics*, the author supported "the advance formation of tone in a mixed (mixte) quality to timely balance the transition from full vocal fold tension, observed in the chest register, to the marginal tension typical of the falsetto" (Cit. ex: [19, p. 436]). The principal objective of this approach to the voice register structure, as Iro saw it, was to enable the singer to produce upper notes in piano and to avoid excessive tension and shouting in this part of the range. The Austrian teacher's concept of the thus became a logical climax of the development of the German "single-register" school (Einregistersystem).

Analyzing the history of concepts concerning the voice register structure, Professor Dmitry Aspelund[17] offered their schematic representation using the tenor range as an example (Il. 4).



Il. 4. Schematic Representation of Vocal-Pedagogical Concepts of the Register Structure of the Vocal Range, using the Tenor[18] as an Example

Summing up this historical survey of voice register concepts in different schools, it may be stated that the mixed vocal production, along with smoothened and imperceptible transitions from one register to another, became firmly established over the course of the 19th century as a kind of aesthetic norm of the classical singing.

[16] Otto Iro (1890–1971) was an Austrian solo singing educator.

[17] Dmitry Lvovich Aspelund (1894–1947) was a Russian and Soviet singer (tenor), solo singing educator, Professor at Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, vocal art researcher.

[18] The diagrams are arranged based on the voice full singing range. 1 — depicts a clearly perceptible boundary of timbral coloration between registers, as used by singers up to circa mid-seventeenth century. 2 — shows merely smoothing of the transition boundary between registers through the additional tone rounding; this approach was shaped within the Old Italian school of singing in the mid-17th century. 3 — describes the so-called "covering" of the upper part of the range beginning from the passaggio notes through the tone "darkening" (see more details on the upper register covering technique below). 4 — outlines the boundaries of register blending within the framework of the German "primar tone" school.

Conclusion

Thus, in view of the foregoing, it may be concluded that the historical dynamics of vocal-pedagogical theory confirms its adaptive nature: methodological approaches evolved in response to compositional demands, seeking to achieve a balance between the physiological constraints of the voice, the phonation comfort, and the aesthetic requirements to vocal performance.

Research based vocal-pedagogical concepts in the field of organising vocal registers date back to the 19th century. It was during that period that the foundations of modern conceptions of register organisation were established, including those concerning the formation of the upper part of the male voice range.

The historical evolution of the vocal methodology highlights a significant issue: when working on early repertoire, it is necessary to identify the optimal degree of departure from the modern norm of register uniformity that ensures the authenticity of interpreting 17th- and 18th-century music. Academic discussions, particularly within the context of expert evaluation at competitions and auditions, keep focusing on the issue of balancing contemporary norms of register organisation and the demands of historically informed performance. A singer's ability to adapt to the stylistic requirements of pieces from different epochs depends on musicality, style intellectual understanding, and the technical flexibility of the voice, which allows, within certain limits, for variation in vocal production without affecting fundamental vocal skills.

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Received / Поступила в редакцию: 06.05.2026
Revised / Одобрена после рецензирования: 30.07.2026
Accepted / Принята к публикации: 31.08.2026