

A study of the “i” vowel on tenor *passaggio* in the aria “Una furtiva lagrima” by Gaetano Donizetti

Marcos SANTOS¹

Abstract: *This study is an analysis of voice technique for the tenor, more specifically of the “i” vowel in the aria “Una furtiva lagrima” by Gaetano Donizetti. It studies 6 different recordings of singers who recorded this aria with a gap of 50 years from the oldest one till the recent one. It analyse the vowel modification and the vocal frontality of the i vowel in the tenor’s passaggio and in the high register. The lighter voices have a natural frontality that are richer in harmonics than the darker voices who have a squillo sound.*

Key-words: *passaggio, tenor, technique, vowel, modification, frontality.*

1. Introduction

The journey of being a tenor is a constant challenge, as one has to always be on top form and sing well in full capacity. This requires very hard work on vocal technique. As it is known, tenors have to build the high octave of the voice changing between registers. The progression of the registers is low, medium and upper register. This changing of the registers is a bridge from one to the other. This bridge is called *passaggio* and, independently of your tenor voice type – lyric, dramatic or *leggero*– this *passaggio* happens around D/Eb till G. As Kano (2016, 14) refers: “Every voice type is made of different registers”, and it’s by blending between registers (medium and upper) that you find the hardest *passaggio* for tenor voice. This demands maturity, knowledge, audacity and self-control from the singer, and only after this work is done you can have full command of your high register in your voice. To learn how to control the *passaggio* in the tenor voice one can find many different approaches and ideas regarding pedagogy principles that are based in the history of schools of singing, for example the Nordic/Germanic school versus the Italian/Spanish school, but the results always have the same intention, i.e. the larynx has to go down without forced depression, giving a more brilliant, projected

¹ Author’s affiliation: PhD, Universidade de Évora, mafs@uevora.pt

and richer sound (Potter 2009, 79). If the larynx does not go down the voice becomes too spread and wide in the *passaggio* and the tenor won't be able to reach the high octave in a stable way. So, when a tenor is singing an ascending scale, there are gradual acoustic and physical adjustments that need to be made by modifying the vowel, becoming slightly darker and narrower. To apply for this modification there is a need for physical mechanism of lowering the larynx. Some vocal pedagogues use the expression "to cover" the sound when they ask for this action. The term "cover" can have many implications and, as the eminent vocal pedagogue Richard Miller said, "The term vowel modification is a preferable expression" (Miller 1993, 38). Some vowels, as the scale ascends, became slightly different modifying toward a near neighbour. As the tenor modifies, while singing, a vowel in the upper scale, adjustments are made in your throat (Miller 1993, M41).

The authors McCoy (2012) and Ware (1998) share a similar philosophy that vowel modification is important while singing in the *passaggio*.

Without wanting to be too technically rigorous or too simplistic in this study, and now as referring only to the tenor voice, the open vowels (a, e) are harder to modify to a narrower one (ë or ö) in the upper scale since it requires more physical adjustments in the larynx. The narrow and closed vowels (i, u) are much easier to modify since they, almost by themselves, modulate unnoticed during *passaggio* (Bozeman 2008, 64).

This easiness is different for each tenor, depending on the voice type and on natural abilities while singing. Usually, more dramatic tenors, when changing the "I" vowel, choose a darker ë or ï vowel on *passaggio* and then they lose frontality and the vowel becomes too spread because of adding too much space and changing the vowel too much due to excessive covering. For light tenor voices is easier to keep the brilliancy and frontality of the vowel in all *passaggio*. In the "I" vowel, frontality is always required when singing in all *passaggio* notes, but this does not mean that the tenor doesn't need to add some space in the back of the throat while progressing in the scale. What's important is that this space needs to be well balanced with resonance and breathe support. More specifically, there are adjustments made in the back of your throat while ascending in the scale, as Miller (1993, 43) refers:

"In a quite literal sense, vowel modification may be related to "covering" because during progression from front to back vowels, the vocal folds become gradually obscured by motions of the base of the tongue and the epiglottis".

In order to sing an ascending scale with brilliancy in the voice, it's also required to have a proper breath support and clear resonance. As Kano (2016, 18) expresses: “The lyric tenor must understand and explore the necessary vowel modifications in conjunction with proper breath support and resonance in order to achieve a fully balanced voice”.

It's essential to discover balanced resonance between frontality, clarity, brilliancy and the need to add back space through vowel modification in the *passaggio*, which can be a hard process for the tenor. There are vocal pedagogues that recommend the use of nasal consonants as n and m help to obtain the frontality of the vowel with proper balanced resonance during *passaggio*. By losing frontality the vowel takes a different focus and might lose harmonics and brilliancy and, most importantly, the meaning of the word expressed while singing. As Garcia (1894, 45) expressed, regarding the importance of words: “To express any particular feeling or idea we must make use of words. Hence, it is important for the singer to deliver these with utmost distinctness, correctness, and meaning, under the penalty of losing the attention of the audience”.

In this study of the “i” vowel it is also important the frontality of the language that you are singing in. Italian language is a very frontal language and in this language there are just seven vowels (Kano 2016, 21). Other languages of the operatic repertoire, like German and French, have more vowel sounds. Lips, mouth, tongue; dental ridge and nasal cavities are all very important in the use to obtain frontality and balanced resonance of singing. The author David Adams (1999, 1), in his book, states that to sing in Italian is challenging because of its nuances and distinctive sounds. Adams also encourages that there are ten directives to manage a high level of Italian for singing:

1. Clear vowels, with particular attention to unstressed syllables;
2. Proper linking of vowels between words;
3. Forward articulation and non-aspiration of consonants;
4. Long sustained vowels in stressed syllables before a single consonant;
5. No diphthong when pronouncing a closed e and open e;
6. A full understand of open and closed e and o;
7. To have brightness in the vowels a and e;
8. Long double consonants;
9. Short single consonants;
10. Some lengthening of l, m, n, and r when initial consonant clusters.

The importance of the Italian language is addressed in this article because the object of study is an Italian aria.

2. Objectives

In this article we address the study of the “i” vowel in the aria *una furtiva lagrima*, because there is a significant amount of words with “i” vowel located in the *passaggio* for the tenor (Eb-G). Therefore, the objectives of this article are:

- a) to analyse which words with “i” vowel are located in the *passaggio* (Eb-G);
- b) if the singers, who are object of this study, can sing the vowel i clearly without changing it towards a neighbour vowel, thus putting at risk the real meaning of the word;
- c) if the studied vowel in the highest pitch of the *passaggio* remains with frontality and brilliancy without disturbing the quality of the timbre.

3. Material and Methods

As object of study, the author of this article chose the aria for tenor of the 2nd act of the opera *l’elisir d’amore* by Gaetano Donizetti, *Una furtiva lagrima*, which is a *romanza*. This aria is sung by *Nemorino*, in order to conquer the heart of his beloved *Adina*, spends all his money to buy a magic potion, which is in fact a cheap wine sold by a charlatan. He sings the aria very passionately, believing that *Adina* is falling in love with him due to the magic potion that he drank. Musically, this aria is in the key of *Bb* minor, a key usually associated to create a more tragic set. It changes to *Bb* major in the words *cielo si può morir*, ending on a traditional *cadenza* and with a vocal range from F3 to A4.

To obtain a more profound and larger spectrum of outcome, the author of this article decided on using 6 professional recordings of 6 different tenors, 3 with more dramatic voices and other 3 more in the *leggero* side. The dates of the recordings have a gap of approximately 50 years from the oldest one (1955) to the most recent one (2002), so to analyse the approach of their “i” vowel in the *passaggio* of the referred aria. It’s important to mention that there are words with “i” vowel in the middle that are not pronounced and those ones are not analysed, because the “i” vowel is not sung. For example, the word *Cielo* has an i, but it is not sung nor pronounced.

To analyse the text of the aria it was decided to divide it in 2 parts:

1st part:

Una furtiva lagrima

negli occhi suoi spuntò:

Quelle festose giovani

invidiar sembrò.

Che più cercando io vo?
 Che più cercando io vo?
 M'ama! Sì, m'ama,
 lo vedo, lo vedo.

2nd part:
 Un solo istante i palpiti
 del suo bel cor sentir!
 I miei sospir confondere
 per poco a' suoi sospir!
 I palpiti, i palpiti sentir,
 confondere i miei co' suoi sospir.

Cielo, si può morir;
 di più non chiedo, non chiedo.
 Ah, cielo! Si può! Si può morir!
 Di più non chiedo, non chiedo.
 Si può morir! Si può morir d'amor.

In the 1st part, the words with i vowel that are in the tenor's *passaggio* (Eb-G) are: *Giovanni* (E-F), *invidiar* (F-Eb-F-Eb), *piú*(Gb), *si* (F).

In the 2nd part, the words in the tenor's *passaggio* that have a pronounced i are: *I* (F), *miei* (E), *sospir* (Ab), *i*(F) *sospir*(F), *chiedo* (G), *morir* (G), *morir* (Gb).

4. Results and Discussions

This analysis will be done chronologically, starting by the oldest recording in each category.

4.1. Category of the more dramatic voices

Placido Domingo-Tenor

London Symphony Orchestra/Nello Santi - conductor (1971)

In the first part of this aria, Placido Domingo, with a dark timbre, sings all the “i” vowels purely, with focus, brilliancy and a well-balanced frontality versus back space and breathing support. In the word *si* (F) Mr. Domingo does a *portamento* to an Ab with i vowel opening it when reaching the high note for *m'ama* (Ab), always

with a precise balance of support and lustre in the voice, keeping the meaning of the word.

In the second part of the aria the same happens until we word *sospir* (Ab). Since it's already reaching the high register again, Mr. Domingo has a tendency to modify, as described previously, keeping the frontality of the vowel. It's a very well balanced opened up vowel but not losing its essence. In the following part, all the words with i vowels are sung exactly with the same placement, with focus and ring, which proves why Mr. Domingo is an example of *legato* singing with exquisite music taste. At the end in the *cadenzain* the first *morir* (G) Mr. Domingo is very assertive in the vowel and on the last *morir* (Gb) the singer does a remarkable dynamic of *pianissimo*, changing the register from chest to a *falsettone* which makes a slight change of the vowel to a more ü direction rather than keeping the natural ring of the vowel. This happens to the natural adjustments of the tenor voice when he changes the register to falsetto.

Rolando Villazon- Tenor

Münchner Rundfunk orchester/Marcello Viotti - conductor (2003)

Mr. Villazon is a tenor, like Mr. Domingo, with a natural dark timbre and resembles in many things the timbre of Placido Domingo. His approach is a lesson in *belcanto* singing also with all the dynamics respected. In the first part, the i's in *giovanni* and *invidiar* are all in the same place, brilliant, frontal, clear and with breath support. Like Mr. Domingo, Mr. Villazon uses a *portamento* in the *si*(F) to reach the *Ab* before *m'ama*, with support and keeping the core of the vowel I always with frontality.

In the second part of the aria, in *imieisospir* (F, E, Ab), all the i's are well balanced and the vowel modifies by reaching of the *Ab* (high register), keeping frontal and breathing support. In *sospir* and transiting to *cielo*, the i's are frontal again and with ring and lustre. In the end in both *morir* with different dynamics from *forte* to *piano*, the first *morir* has a bright frontal focus and the second one because of the dynamic goes to a more ü direction, but he doesn't change to *falsettone*, keeping is chest voice all the way.

Piotr Beczala- Tenor

Münchner Rundfunk orchester/ Ion Marin- conductor (2007)

In the whole aria Mr. Beczala keeps his interpretation very lyric and light. In the first part of the aria the vowel i is clear with good balance and frontal, particularly in the word *invidiar* with all the i's in the same place. In the second part the same

happens, even though Mr. Beczala has a tendency to open up the referred vowel with excessive back space in the throat, losing focus of the vowel. In the word *sospir* (Ab), the i vowel has a tendency to be too spread, even though it has some frontality the singer uses excessive back space in the throat losing the focus of the vowel. The second *sospir* (F) is more *sostenuto*. He starts with more focus but it changes, predicting the word *cielo* Mr. Beczala adds again more back space. In this case, the interpreter loses the core of the vowel. In the end, in both *morir* of the cadenza, the i's vowel are clear enough to understand the text and the vowel although the tendency to modify the vowel happens sometimes.

4.2. Category of the more lyric voices

Giuseppe di Stefano-Tenor

Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino/Francesco Molinari-Pradelli - conductor (1955)

Mr. Di Stefano has a very warm timbre with both ring and focus at the same time. In the first part of aria all i's are extremely frontal, bringing ring to his voice. In *giovanni* and *invidiar* all i's are perfectly placed forward and always keeping the core and the purity of vowel. Mr. Di Stefano uses a *portamento* to go from *si* (F) to *m'ama* (Ab) and always keeping the i with an exquisite frontality and well supported. In the second part of the aria, in *imieisospir* (F E Ab), the tenor has a pure i vowel in all notes with just a slight modification by giving breath support to the high note. This modification is very smooth and has ring, frontality and it's a very forward sound with harmonics. In *sospir* (F) to *cielo* (G), Mr. Di Stefano keeps the i with a bright, clear focus and a forward penetrating sound always in *crescendo*, doing a little *ritardando* when reaching the G in *cielo*. In the end in both *morir* of the cadenza, the singer uses the first *morir* in *forte*, holding the note on the i vowel spinning the air and the vowel very much forward with aplomb and ring, but in the second *morir* Mr. Di Stefano does an exquisite *decrescendo* in the i vowel to a soft tender *pianissimo*, always keeping essence of the vowel i with ring.

Luciano Pavarotti-Tenor

The Metropolitan Orchestra/James Levine - conductor (1989)

Mr. Pavarotti has an approach in the same line of Mr. Di Stefano; both voices have natural resemblances. In *giovanni* and *invidiar* all the i's are well placed with ring and purity. Mr Pavarotti doesn't do the traditional *portamento* from *si* (F) to *m'ama* (Ab), keeping *hissi* very forward and frontal. In the second part, in

imieisospir (F E Ab), the vowel i is clear and with frontality, with some modification in the Ab, opening up in a bright way with ring. In *sospir* (F) the “i” vowel has ring, frontality, is well balanced and with breath support. In the *morir* of the *cadenza*, the first one in *forte* has ring and the vowel spins very freely, in the second one Mr. Pavarotti keeps it in *mezzoforte* and doesn’t lose the essence of the vowel.

Juan Diego Flórez-Tenor

Orchestra di Milano Giuseppe Verdi/ Riccardo Frizza - conductor (2002)

Mr. Florez is a lighter voice in this category with ring and piercing sound in the i vowel in *invidiar*. Also, Mr. Florez doesn’t do the *portamento* from *si*(F)to *m’ama*(Ab), but he sings the *si*with frontality and ring. In the second part in *imieisospir* (F, E, Ab), the i’s are brilliant, forward and with the essence of the vowel, not changing anything, modulating slightly in the Ab, not disturbing the real core of the vowel. In the *sospir* (F), sung in *crescendoto cielo* (G), Mr. Florez sings forward the vowel and keeps a natural balance between frontality and breath support showing a ring and harmonics all the way. In the end in both *morir*of the *cadenza*, the first *morir* in *forte* with a bright and frontal vowel and in the second *morir* Mr. Florez does an exquisite *pianissimo* in the i vowel with harmonics and not losing frontality with breath support.

5. Conclusions

After analysing all the recordings of the studied aria, we conclude that all tenors performed this aria with remarkable high level of technique and interpretation and all the *passaggio* transitions are very well mastered by each tenor. This aria is simple at a first glance, because it doesn’t sit very high, but it sits in the *passaggio*. After knowing how to master your technique you become more conscious of the vocal challenge that this aria represents and that you need to sing well in the high register. Mr. Pavarotti used to state in his public masterclasses that when he could sing this aria well, his voice would be in good shape for a performance. In the more dark voices category, Mr. Domingo is remarkable in his approach in his *passaggio* with the “i” vowel always showing frontality, vowel modification without changing it. Mr. Villazon also does the i’s with ring and naturally modifies in the high register keeping the meaning of the vowel. Mr. Beczala has a natural tendency to spread too much the vowel with excessive back space in the throat and excessive cover showing sometimes, in the high register, a slight tendency to open up too much the studied vowel. In the more light voices category, Mr. Di Stefano has an exquisite ring when singing the “i” vowel on his *passaggio*, he sings always with aplomb,

bright focus, frontality and right balance of breath support. The singer does a very smooth modification of the vowel when reaching the high register (*Ab*) and when singing in all dynamics, Mr. Di Stefano always keeps the essence of the vowel with ring and bright focus. His performance is a lush in ring, bright and rich harmonics.

Mr. Pavarotti is also very assertive in his *passaggio* with his strong technique he always keeps the frontality of the “i” vowel with a mastered breath support. Even singing in the high register, Mr. Pavarotti does not have any weakness in his vowel production since he keeps a natural modification of the vowel without losing the meaning of the word. The famous tenor sings always with ring, lust and rich harmonics. Mr. Florez, the last tenor in the light category, also has a very self-confident technique in his *passaggio*. Mr. Pavarotti, in his last years, stated on a public interview that Mr. Florez would be a rising star and the next great tenor of his lineage. A performance with a crystalline ring in his *passaggio* showing the frontality of the “i” vowel in all notes with a slight modification in the high register.

It’s relevant to enunciate that lighter voices have a natural frontality that are richer in harmonics than the darker voices, who have a *moresquillo* sound. In tenor history we can include in the lighter voices singers as Tito Schippa, Beniamino Gigli, Jussi Bjorling, Nicolai Gedda, Luigi Alva, Alfredo Kraus, Fritz Wunderlich, Georges Thill and Peter Schreier, to name some. All of these singers were remarkable in their repertory with a very rich timbre, tenderness, easy and forward sound.

It is curious to observe that the Mediterranean tenors in this study – all but Piotr Beczala - have a natural easiness in the approach of the i vowel on *passaggio*. This doesn’t imply that just by being born a Mediterranean singer one can rely only on the natural easiness given by God. On the contrary, you have to understand well how do you achieve certain vocals aspects that are natural and easy for you so that you can explain or put into words what exactly you’re doing with your instrument. This is the way to develop your pedagogy skills. When singers are teaching simply exemplify by singing and ask the student to imitate, not always explaining the steps, which can be a *faux pas* if you want to be known as a voice teacher. To develop the easiness and richness in harmonics in the “i” vowel in *passaggio* it’s required the most profound study and perseverance from the singer. Keeping the frontality without changing the vowel requires the sound to be in the mask and in frontal teeth without changing the natural colour of the voice or adding too much dark in the sound. Mirella Freni, Renatta Scotta and Alfredo Kraus, in their public master classes all over the world mention this and state that many singers have a tendency of adding too much cover and dark in their sound, sounding like old singers or that they want to sound bigger than they think. It’s by singing forward, sending the air into your mask resonance and frontal teeth, that your sound becomes bright with ring and goes above the orchestra in the auditorium. They also mention the

tendency of sounding too big doesn't mean that the public hears louder. On the opposite, the sound stays and doesn't travel forward, losing projection. *Si cantacommesiparla* is a principle being said very often in the operatic industry since the XX century, that involves the frontality in singing and it's still mentioned and studied by vocal pedagogues nowadays.

In this study it has to be considered that the microphones used in all the recordings are from different times and, of course, different types and models. In the last 40 years the recording industry has developed tremendously due to the study of the capture by microphones of operatic singing to get a more reliable recording of the real sound. There are voices that record much better than others and this is due to focus of the timbre, size in volume and control of the air, to mention a few. Listening to a lyric voice live is in no way identical of listening the same voice on a recording. With that being said, the author of this study doesn't want to criticize any interpretation, because being an opera singer is a demanding profession and being on a recording environment can also be very stressful. Hours of recording, renting an orchestra by hour and all the entourage that is necessary to make a recording is an extremely expensive industry, and usually the stress goes on the shoulders of the singer who has to be in top form vocally in every take. Singing is a work of a lifetime and to develop a secure technique that allows to be on the spot and always in top form is a requirement to have this profession.

References

- Adams, David. 1999. *A Handbook of diction for singers: Italian, German, French*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bozeman, Kenneth W. 2008. "On the voice: registration strategies for training the male passaggio". *The Choral Journal* 48 (12): 59-72.
- Garcia, Manuel. 1894. *Hints on singing*. London: Forgotten Books.
- Kano, Mark Aaron. 2016. "A performance guide for lyric tenor: A pedagogical analysis of ten Francesco Paolo Tosti songs." *Theses and dissertations- Music*. 59.
- McCoy, Scott. 2012. *Your voice, an inside view*. Delaware: Inside view press.
- Miller, Richard. 1993. *Training tenor voices*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- Potter, John. 2009. *Tenor history of a voice*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ware, Clifton. 1998. *Basics of vocal pedagogy the foundation and process of singing*. New York: McCraw-Hill education.