

Robert Edwin, Associate Editor

The Multiplicity of Belting

Lisa Popeil



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IN ANY DISCUSSION AMONG SINGING TEACHERS concerning belting, it quickly becomes apparent that there is little consensus on what belting should sound like or even what belting is. Does this term describe a technique or a vocal style? Can an R&B singer be a belter? Can men belt? Should belting be thought of only as loud, brassy, and nasal? This lack of consensus is to be expected, and there always may be disagreement among voice teachers about the definition and aesthetic of *any* vocal sound. Having said that, I hasten to add that this is an exciting time for singers and teachers of voice as we continue to discuss and codify a vocal technique and style that, traditionally, has been vilified or ignored by the classical voice community.

The root of the word “belt” probably does not originate from the Borscht Belt, that concentration of hotels in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, however charming that derivation would be. Rather, the term most likely comes from the slang term for “wallop,” meaning “delivering a hard blow,” as in boxing. In the early years of the twentieth century, without the availability of microphones, loud singing was not only an acoustic necessity, but also turned out to be a big hit with audiences. Sophie Tucker and Al Jolson were examples of such powerful singers. With the advent of electronic amplification, however, conversational singers called “crooners” became popular.

In this modern age, should the term *belting* continue to be defined solely as loud, yell-like singing? Perhaps, but in my continuing quest for clarification and ease of communication with my students, I define belting as speech-like or yell-like in character and as the style used in much of today’s music theater. I explain that singing technique in Western music can be divided into two basic categories: popular voice technique and classical voice technique. The former uses predominantly a speech-like or yell-like sound in both men and women, and the latter, in women, uses predominantly a head voice dominant or nonspeech-like sound. More simply put, popular singing sounds like someone’s speaking voice and classical doesn’t.

Popular voice technique is used in the styles of pop, R&B, country, rock, jazz, and music theater belting, although there may be occasional excursions into head voice on higher notes for a lighter effect.

Classical voice technique is used in the styles of opera, operetta, choir, and legit music theater, although there are exceptions, such as some operatic tenors creating a yell-like sound on high notes, or some female classical singers using a chest voice sound which is more speech-like in character.

Any discussion of belting must include the topic of voice registers. Since I have never had a clear understanding of the terms “chest voice” and “head voice” (and I know I am not alone in this), I long ago decided to sidestep these terms and focus instead on my ever increasing awareness of laryngeal sensations related to pitch change. By focusing my attention on different sensations in vocal fold thickness, tension, and length, I came to a visceral and direct experience of voice registers. I concluded that vibrations felt in the head and face are actually the secondary effects of laryngeal muscle activities, along with resonance coupling. Together, these two sources could be manipulated to create the panoply of human vocal sound. Modern voice science has confirmed visceral perception.

Although speech-like and yell-like sounds are not exclusive to music theater and are the basis of pop, R&B, rock, jazz, and country styles, for the purposes of this article I limit the term belting to its music theater context. Within this style, one can hear a stunning diversity of voice timbres—loud, soft, high larynx, anchored larynx, more nasal, less nasal, more or less ringy. These various belting styles can be called heavy belt, nasal belt, twangy belt, brassy belt, and speech-like belt.

This sonic diversity is a relatively new development in the music theater world and allows singers to suit their vocal choices to the requirements of a character’s emotions. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear a singer/actor move among these belt sounds, with a few notes in classical production thrown in for good measure and all within one song!

There is no one belt sound that effectively can express all human emotions. Each belt sound conveys particular personality traits. Heavy belt can convey age, world-weariness, and anger. Nasal belt is often used for the heightened projection it provides and can convey matter-of-factness and conviction. Twangy belt combines strong ring and nasality and is the most penetrating of the belting types. It is superb for comedic, shrill, or dominating characters. Brassy belt is the original belting sound, popularized by Ethel Merman—also ringy and nasal but, unlike twangy belt, with the emphasis on nasal resonance. This style is perfect for confident, mature characters. Speech-like belt is natural, sincere, and pleasant. I teach the speech-like sound as the basic modality

of music theater belting style since it is comfortable to produce and pleasant to the ear. Other strategies, such as the addition of nasality, twanginess, or increased thyroarytenoid activity as in heavy belt can be added to taste. In music theater, style choices should be character-driven and not determined by the technical limitations of the singer. The more versatile one’s vocal technique, the more able the acting singer becomes in expressing human emotion.

One of the biggest challenges for classical voice teachers new to the topic of belting is to be able to discern what makes a speech-like sound speech-like. Simply put, a speech-like sound is not head voice dominant; it does not sound “heady.” Speech-like production sounds like people talking or yelling. The sung sound may be nasal, ringy, dull, loud, or soft, but vibrations are not felt in the head; rather, the sound feels as though it is shooting straight through the mouth. Mechanically, cricothyroid (CT) activity continues as the pitch rises while the thyroarytenoid (TA) remains active, although in decreasing percentages. A speech-like sound can be taken, by males and females, to the top of the range, comfortably, safely, and often quite easily.

Since over-pressing of the vocal folds can create hoarseness and possibly vocal fold lesions over time, I’m always on “press patrol.” Firm closure of the folds is acceptable, but there is a fine line between closed and pressed folds, so for vocal longevity’s sake, I caution against over-squeezing of the folds in any belting production.

For teachers of classical singing who wish to become better acquainted with belting for music theater, I offer the following listening examples. Though many of the following singers are capable of singing any style (e.g., belting, pop, jazz, R&B, country, opera, and music theater legit), these recorded excerpts highlight the five main belting types. These recordings can be heard easily and at no charge on www.itunes.com and www.amazon.com.

Heavy Belt

- Lisa Kirk—“Big Time,” from *Mack & Mabel*
- Elaine Stritch—“Ladies Who Lunch,” from *Company* (Elaine Stritch at Liberty)
- Liza Minelli—“Some People,” from *Gypsy* (The Best of Liza Minelli)
- Bernadette Peters—“Wherever He Ain’t,” from *Mack & Mabel*

Twangy Belt

- Kristin Chenoweth—“Calamari,” from *A New Brain*
- Debbie Gravitte—“O Diogenes,” from *The Boys from Syracuse* (1997 Revival)
- Ann Harada—“The More You Ruv Someone,” from *Avenue Q*
- Jason Opsahl—“Greased Lightning,” from *Grease* (1994 Revival)

Nasal Belt

- Jonathan Hadary—“Heartbreak Hotel,” from *All Shook Up*
- Patti Lu Pone—“You’re the Top,” from *Anything Goes* (1987 Revival)
- John Tartaglia—“Purpose,” from *Avenue Q*
- Hugh Jackman—“If You Were Wondering,” from *Boy from Oz*

Brassy Belt

- Ethel Merman—“Everything’s Coming Up Roses,” from *Gypsy*
- Robert Lambert—“All I Need Is The Girl,” from *Gypsy* (1989 revival)
- Toni Collette—“Welcome of My Party,” from *The Wild Party*
- Joel Grey—“Willkommen,” from *Cabaret*

Speech-Like Belt

- Lisa Howard—“My Friend, the Dictionary,” from *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*
- Debbie Gravitte—“He and She,” from *The Boys from Syracuse* (1997 Revival)
- Marissa Jaret Winokur—“I Can Hear the Bells,” from *Hairspray*
- Idina Menzel—“No Good Deed,” from *Wicked*
- Austin Pendleton—“Miracle of Miracles,” from *Fiddler on the Roof* (1962)
- Adam Pascal—“One Song Glory,” from *Rent*
- Michael Cerveris—“I’m Free,” from *Tommy* (1992)
- Sam Harris—“Those Magic Changes,” from *Grease* (1994 revival)
- Eden Espinosa—“Once Upon a Time,” from *Brooklyn* (2004)

Listening carefully to elite music theater singers is required in order to tune our ears to sounds that are often radically different than classical. We must keep in mind that vocal beauty is not the primary goal of mu-

sic theater singing, but rather emotional expressivity and story telling. That’s not to say that belting must be ugly and loud by definition. It can be romantic, even refined, but never reticent.

Emotional magic is all well and good, but what does science have to show us about the physiology of belting compared to classical voice production, considering the different approaches and aesthetics involved? Based on my research and that of belting research pioneers, there is general agreement that belt production is characterized by:

- 1) thicker edge of vocal fold;
- 2) tensor TA (vocalis) muscle;
- 3) lack of zippering action in vocal opening/closing—more of a clapping action;
- 4) high speed quotient—folds snap shut quickly;
- 5) high closed quotient—longer closed phase (over 50%);
- 6) increased sensation of breath-holding;
- 7) heightened activity of jaw and extrinsic laryngeal muscles;
- 8) possible pulling forward of hyoid bone;
- 9) higher larynx position, but singer has some lifting and lowering ability;
- 10) epiglottis more horizontal, lessening space in vallecula;
- 11) increased “support”/subglottal pressure;
- 12) even distribution of amplified harmonics up to 4 kHz and spectral energy above 15 kHz.

Obviously we are still in the infancy of belting research. Methodologies such as CT scans, videofluoroscopy, MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), direct EMG (electromyography), EGG (electroglottography), OCT (optical coherence tomography), videolaryngostroboscopy, ultrasound, high speed photography, and kymography will help unravel the still remaining mysteries of the belt voice.

In the meantime, voice pedagogues should examine preconceived notions regarding vocal beauty and accept the challenge to become more aware of contemporary commercial singing styles in general. In summary, there is more than one aesthetic in the grand scheme of belting for music theater. Only by listening and learning how to make and teach these sounds can we truly appreciate the multiplicity of belting in the modern world of singing.

Lisa Popeil has studied the singing voice for over forty years and has taught professionally for over thirty years. She received her MFA in Voice from the California Institute of the Arts and is the creator of the Voiceworks® Method and the *Total Singer* instructional DVD. A private teacher, voice researcher, and international lecturer, Lisa is based in Los Angeles.

Beginning at age four with piano lessons and classical voice training at six, Lisa has sung in many styles, including opera, music theater legit and belting, jazz, pop, rock, R&B, country, and Bulgarian. Her voice, both singing and voice-overs, has been featured on commercials, television, and film. She has recorded and performed with Frank Zappa and "Weird Al" Yankovic, and has performed with the Pasadena Symphony. In the 1980's, her self-titled album *Lisa Popeil* was a Billboard Top Album Pick. In addition, Lisa is a songwriter, composer, piano accompanist, and recording engineer. She is a member of NATS, The Voice Foundation, VASTA, AFTRA, and is a writer-publisher member of ASCAP (American Society of Composers & Publishers).

Lisa's three-day Total Singer Workshop outlines the Voiceworks® Method and Pedagogy of Styles for teachers, advanced singers, choral conductors, and speech pathologists.

Her international voice research concerns primarily the physiology and acoustics of belting vs. classical voice technique and of American vocal styles. Projects have used MRI, CT scans, high speed photography, videofluoroscopy, and endoscopy at labs in the US, Japan, Sweden, Canada, and Norway. Upcoming projects will use EMG and videokymography. Lisa has written for *Journal of Singing*, is a regular contributor to *Singer & Musician* magazine, and presents workshops and scientific papers at international voice conferences.

Lisa has been a frequent radio talk show guest and has been featured in magazines such as *Music Connection*, *Classical Singer*, *Los Angeles Variety*, and *The Hollywood Reporter*. She has appeared on NBC's *Starting Over* reality show and recently on TV Guide Channel's *Idol Tonight*. She is the recipient of a 2006 LA Music Awards "Career Achievement in Vocal Instruction." lisa@popeil.com www.popeil.com

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