

The gentle timbre in the tenor voice, an approach to the voices of Giacomo Lauri-Volpi and Beniamino Gigli

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Abstract: *This study is going to debate the gentle timbre in the tenor voice in the beginning of the XX century. The gentle timbre is a characteristic in the tenor voice that is intended to be produced. This article will address the technical components of the gentle timbre in the tenor voice and study, as examples, Lauri-Volpi and Gigli's voices. Caruso, who was also a tenor star of this epoch, brought a completely different approach to the tenor voice, that evolved in a new tendency of singing, different from the gentle timbre approach.*

Key-words: *gentle timbre, tenor voice, Lauri-Volpi, Gigli, Cotogni*

1. Introduction

The tenor voice is one of the most challenging voices produced by the human being, and it impresses listeners worldwide for its color, range and interpretation. When a new tenor is born it's an event known worldwide. This is not by chance; rather, because the complexity of the technical aspects of the tenor voice are enormous, adding to the complexity of the human being itself. The technique of the tenor voice has evolved lately with scientific knowledge as never seen before, and what is known and studied today has never been addressed because the scientific instruments that are used nowadays for these studies are much more developed and advanced. Their findings are most valuable and important and allow us to measure characteristics such as air pressure, intensity of registers, harmonic quantification and balance of ranges, among others.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the gentle timbre of the tenor voice in the beginning of the XX century. Is this timbre or color a natural aspect that you are born with, or is it applied and studied regarding vocal technique? The Italian tradition says that, in the pre-nineteenth century, the singers sang with: "the smoothness of line, flexibility of phrasing and an ability to sing with lightness and agility" (Potter 2009, 79). The registers chest and head would be merged smoothly

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with no breaks (Potter, 79). It would be a *reciting cantando* with smoothness and delicacy in the phrasing, all combined in a voice that had no gaps between registers. The tradition of singing was to have a gentleness in the approach of the sound and therefore in the phrasing. When Enrico Caruso arrived, the opera scene was starving for a new Tenor because even Jean De Reske (1850-1925) and Francesco Tamagno (1850-1905), who were the stars of the time, were coming to an end (Potter, 81). Caruso brought a completely different approach to the tenor voice, that evolved in a new tendency of singing, different from the gentle timbre approach.

2. Methodology

To answer the questions above, the author of this publication believes that it's utterly important to define what is a gentle timbre, which are the characteristics that define it, and also to study the approach of the voice of Lauri-Volpi (1892-1979) and Gigli (1890-1957) in this matter. Both shared the same voice teachers - Antonio Cotogni (1831-1918) and his assistant Enrico Rosati (1874-1963) – and both had a notable gentle timbre approach. They were both in the hands of truly vocal masters in Rome - Italy! Enrico Rosati worked as Cotogni's assistant at Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome (De Biasi 446). Rosati, apparently, was responsible to teach how to negotiate the *passaggio* to tenors Lauritz Melchior (1890-1973) and Mario Lanza (1921-1959). (Marek 297)

But who was Cotogni as a teacher? Antonio Cotogni was a first-rate singer and Verdi's favorite baritone. He was a notable pedagogue that contributed immensely to the tenor voice. (GIGLI, 55-56) Cotogni's line of producing singers is very impressive: he taught Titta Ruffo (1877-1953), Carmen Melis (1885-1967), who's most notable student was Renata Tebaldi (1922-2004), Mattia Battistini (1856-1928), who taught Paola Novikova (1896-1967). Novikova was the teacher of Nicolai Gedda (1925-2017), whom Gedda claimed to be "a wonderful technical expert" (Gedda 84). This is an important fact to understand that the lineage of this specific type of singers that sang with gentle timbre came from Cotogni's legacy. All of them, somehow, produce the same quality of singing.

The author of this article wants to analyze Lauri Volpi's interviews where he talks about the technique that he learned from Cotogni. This information is an important asset that contributes to this investigation. Also, the recordings of Lauri Volpi and Beniamino Gigli singing, are a valuable tool to study what characterized the gentle timbre in their voices in particular. The author also believes that, by consulting the webinars and vocal sessions that he had with Jack Livigni, who is a voice teacher at Curtis Music Institute and a vocal consultant at the Royal Opera House - Covent Garden in London. These sessions gathered very important

information for this study because Lavigni belongs to this lineage of gentleness in the quality of producing sound, not only in his remarkable professional singing as a tenor, but as a pedagogue expert as well.

3. Discussion

It's a fact that the production of a gentle timbre is not something natural that a singer is born with. It's something that a singer should want to produce. It's a technical choice and option, and in order to do it, you need to want to do it, purportedly. The fact of wanting to do it is essential, because singers usually rely on excuses of the nature of their voices for not doing it and are not curious enough to try to develop their instruments for a softer timbre.

According to Master Jack Livigni, to produce a gentle timbre you need to establish 3 points:

- ♦ **Length of the vocal folds.** Your vocal folds need to thin out in the proper position. If you don't do it, your sound may end up being with too much chest voice, because the air pressure increases so that the vocal folds can phonate and produce more volume. The author of this article will go back to this idea later, because Antonio Cotogni would specifically state the same to the young Lauri Volpi and Gigli. It's important to not increase volume in certain parts of the voice. The proper position for the vocal folds to thin out is through the yawn position, like the Italians say: *lo sbadiglio*. With yawn position your larynx tilts and the vocal folds elongate and thin out. If your larynx doesn't tilt, you are not singing in the right position.
- ♦ **Intention of lightness.** Your mind needs to help in order to define the intention of your sound. If you are aware of what you should do, this will determine your action with your sound. Sometimes we sing and we don't think about what is the intention of what we want to bring to our sound. You usually build images about the way you sound, which are not the same as people listen outside. That's why recording your voice is important when you studying. As an example, if you think you have a heroic dramatic sound but outside people don't agree with you, you might end up forcing a sound that is not yours, because you listen yourself in that way. You need to study with your teacher and discover that in the frame of your voice, what is your gentle sound. So that your mind creates a vivid image of this process. It's the process that makes you grow and be aware of why you are sounding that way, not the result. The result is a compensation of all the process in obtaining a master technique. Your focus, as singer, is to rely in the process.

- ♦ **Support and efficiency.** Many singers frequently misunderstand that by supporting the sound they have to pressurize the vocal cords. By pressurizing them you make a heroic sound that may lead you to think you are a *spinto* or a dramatic tenor, but you will lack in making *nuance* or other dynamics and colors with your voice. Your *vibrato* will soon become wider, harmonics will be shut with lack of resonance and the voice will become more rigid or with a stiff sound. On the opposite side, through gentle singing, required for the *belcanto*, you are required the efficiency and very precise, rigorous and intentional measuring of breath flow. By vibrating breath, the air does not get stuck in the larynx. The air will move freely, as it should. Should never be pushed.

By listening and recognizing this kind of sound, you create an image in your mind as a singer of what kind of sound you should produce. You can recognize this sound in many tenors: Gigli, Lauri Volpi, Jussi Bjorling, Di Stefano, Alfredo Kraus, Titta Schipa, Carlo Bergonzi, Nicolai Gedda, Fritz Wunderlich, Luciano Pavarotti, Bonisolli, Roberto Alagna, Juan Diego Florez. The list can be immense. The author of this article doesn't mention Enrico Caruso, Giovanni Martinelli and Aureliano Pertile because, with Caruso, a different branch of school of singing emerged. This school was later solidified with Arturo Melocchi (1879-1960), the teacher of Mario del Monaco, who worked on a darker and more robust medium, forcing the larynx to move down and obtaining a more muscular sound.

The history of singing changes with Caruso, not just the audience response but the singing itself: all tenors from the 1920s onwards (...) would routinely need to apply more power. (Potter 84)

When listening to Caruso singing one can immediately recognize a darker sound, like a cello, in the medium register. Here, his voice is richer and with more timbral power. According to a Lauri Volpi's public interview, he became famous because this darker sound in the tenor voice was a novelty. The fact that this sound had not been heard before, associated with the new gramophone technology that allowed him to record, and sell, his recordings worldwide, made him the first tenor star in the world. Lauri Volpi also stated that Caruso fattened his middle voice too much, but while this tendency was natural in him, other singers started to imitate him, such as Martinelli and Pertile (who become Toscanini's favorite tenor). When we listen to Martinelli's voice and Pertile, the robust sound is there. Gentleness in timbre and more colors and dynamic control is seldom heard in the recordings available. Lauri-Volpi, who heard them, refers this in one of his books: *Caruso's proximity and imitative obsession altered the purity of Martinelli's emission. Trying to reflect the dark sounds of the model, the Veneto (referring to Martinelli) began*

to pipe, and to sing darker the notes, not realizing that in Caruso this was natural, but it turned out to be artificial in him. (Lauri-Volpi 185)

With this new approach of a robust medium register, a new trend emerged. It started with Caruso and it was continued by Martinelli, Pertile, Del Monaco, Corelli, Vickers, Giacomini, Carreras among others. One could speculate that it had already started with Duprez in the 1800's, as he was the one who started to sing the high register with a chest sound and not break into a falsetto as it was done before. However, although Duprez sang with a more virile sound in the high register, his medium register was a gentle one.

When listening Gigli and Lauri Volpi singing, the gentleness of timbre is always there, no matter what's their age or the type of repertoire they are singing. Lauri-Volpi sang and performed *Otello* many times and *Calaf* in *Turandot*, *Puritani*, *William Tell*, *Les Huguenotes* and *Trovatore* and he was not a dramatic tenor. He was Lirico-spinto with a silvery bright ringing quality in his voice and a remarkable top high D and E natural until he was in his 70's (Potter 88). His voice was a rare one, like Corelli said in public interview.

Gigli also sang dramatic repertoire, such as *Trovatore*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Andrea Chenier*, *Pagliacci* and *Tosca*, and lyric repertoire, such as *Sonnambula*, *Pirata*, *L'elisir* among others. But the gentleness of Gigli's timbre is always there, smooth, soft like velvet in the medium register. Sometimes there is a tendency of singing with a reinforced *falsestto* but that is for the purpose of musical and artistic effects in singing *mezza voce*.

Gigli is recognized as the priority in the introduction of the falsestto as a method of phonation in the Italian school, validating it in the middle voice, peculiar to the old school practiced in the 800's after the appearance of the virile tenor voice in Duprez. (Lauri Volpi 194)

As it was mentioned before, the tendency of singing soft in the medium register was already a practice in Duprez's old school.

3.1. Antonio Cotogni and Lauri-Volpi

Lauri-Volpi gave interviews talking about his technique and published books about his view of the human voice. By having access to these, the author of this article gathered valuable information. Lauri-Volpi always stated that the characteristic of the tenor voice is to sing in the center of the voice (referring to from F3 to F4) but the voice should resolve in the high register. This is the key. Antonio Cotogni would tell Lauri-Volpi that singers shouldn't make it darker in the center. Baritones sing with the center voice but tenors, although they also sing in the center, they should

not increase the volume there. Instead, a tenor should aim for the high register where the voice should be intended. Cotogni also referred that singing is vibrating breath - that's the idea of not pushing the sound. If you don't send this vibration to the harmonic cavities, you won't be developing the harmonics of the voice but rather sing from chest voice (increasing volume in the medium) or from the strength of the abdomen, where the voice doesn't find its correct exit because it doesn't thin out. When the voice thins out you are singing with gentle timbre and with a constant laser beam in the sound. Our purpose, as singers, is that the whole voice needs to exit from the low notes to the high notes. Cotogni would tell Lauri Volpi to attack the high register and then go down with the same emission and he would find the correct point of *appoggio* of the sound because the voice would thin out with a laser beam. Lauri Volpi would also quote the Cotogni's dogma which was: *volume in the voice is like fat in the body, it's not made of muscle!* Lauri-Volpi claimed that he always had this dogma in his mind for his entire career. The idea that volume is like fat in the body gives us the notion that we shouldn't push the sound to make it louder or darker (referring to muscle), but we should rather create a gentle, clean attack on the note and then, together with the naturally resulting vibrato, will give to the sound a small laser beam like a ray (fat) on the basis of the yawn position (thin vocal folds). Cotogni would say: *canta con un raggio sonoro*. This means that you should sing gentle and not push the air; it's about singing *sul fiato*, **on** your breath and **not with** your breath. By listening to the recordings of Lauri Volpi and Gigli, they never darkened or fattened the middle register and always expanded for the top notes, cutting through the orchestra.

3.2. Establishing gentle timbre

To establish the gentle timbre, you should consider the following guidelines:

- **Resonance is your mentor.** Your voice should be a non-stop river of resonance through all range. As you articulate you should, as a singer, never stop or compromise your resonance, even with the words of the text, and by this you can sing *legato*.
- **The slimness of sound production guides your breath correctly.** By thinning out your sound, you will find a specific ring in your voice, like a laser beam.
- **Remove edge sounds from your sound production.** They are usually connected with jaw, tongue, larynx or pharynx tension.
- **Vibrato should be free.** The freer your vibrato is, the least you are controlling.
- **Vibrate the consonants** to continue the vibrato and establish a legato line with gentle timbre. Often, we chop the words because we don't sing the consonants and then we lose the resonance structure.

In the female voice you can also find the gentle timbre in many great singers. The author of this article firmly believes that Maria Callas was the maximum exponent of the gentle timbre in the medium register. She always sounds very legato with clean vowels and singing consonants, but her sound is like a little girl, simple and clean with a constant beam that cuts through the orchestra. Her constant resonance flow, and the use of U vowel above C4, is notorious. She could do endless colors and manage dynamic controls easily, with outstanding mastery in her *portamento*.

3.3. Beniamino Gigli

Gigli's timbre was characterized by a unique blend of lyricism, warmth and richness, as it was mentioned above, which allowed him to bring an exceptional level of emotional intensity to the roles he performed. His voice had a sweet, honeyed quality in the middle and upper registers, allowing him to deliver phrases with a captivating warmth that distinguished him from many of his contemporaries. It's an important fact also that, in Lauri-Volpi, the honeyed quality of his timbre is more centered in the medium register rather than in the high register, where he always resolved (Cotogni's technique). However, Gigli had the ability to sing the high register with a sweet approach. This warmth paired with a natural ease of production, in particular in the high register where Gigli could sing loud. Unlike the highly dramatic tenors, whose voices might tend toward a heavier or more forceful sound, Gigli maintained a lyric quality with a light timbre that was nonetheless capable of conveying profound emotion. His timbre allowed him to navigate on a range of roles, from *L'elisir*, *Manon* and *Pirata*, *Sonnambula* to *Bohème* and *Tosca*, *Il Trovatore*, *Aida* among others. His natural gift of a velvet timbre was envisioned by Cotogni, who develop on him a routine of practice with discipline, allowing his natural voice to develop with a gentleness that one can listen through all his career (Potter 90).

Gigli's voice had an exceptional control over dynamics and phrasing, which brought additional depth and color to his vocal delivery. His voice was capable of conveying subtle nuances in tone, a quality often referred to as "*mezza voce*", where the singer delivers notes with a softer, half-voice effect that still projects the fullness of his gentle tone. Gigli's mastery of this technique allowed him to shape phrases with exquisite subtlety, giving the impression of intimacy and vulnerability that was highly effective in his roles that expressed love and lamentation. He was particularly known for interpolated sobs on his voice, which Lauri Volpi stated that he did that with two goals: first to project a deep feeling of sorrow and sadness, second to capture a secure attack on a note. (LAURI-VOLPI, 194). The interpolated sobs also contribute to create a laser beam in his voice. This ability to vary his vocal

color and volume without losing the beauty of his tone was particularly effective in roles requiring emotional sensitivity.

While Gigli's timbre was characterized by warmth and his phrasing brought a unique perspective to characters that might traditionally be portrayed with a heavier sound, such as *Andrea Chenier*, *Trovatore*, *Pagliacci*, *Manon Lescaut*. Rather than relying on sheer power, Gigli emphasized the emotive aspects of his timbre to convey the intensity of such roles, making his interpretations distinctive and memorable.

4. Conclusion

In this study of the tenor voices of Beniamino Gigli and Giacomo Lauri-Volpi, the author observes a unique characteristic of gentle timbre that contributes to their distinctive artistic appeal. Both singers possessed an extraordinary ability to produce resonant yet delicately nuanced timbre, based on the technique of Antonio Cotogni. Lauri-Volpi achieved a timbre in the medium register that, while gentle, carried a bright, silvery edge that complemented his robust vocal projection in the high register. Gigli's timbre, on the other hand, is noted for its warmth and sweetness, which he used to deliver emotional depth with a seemingly effortless quality through all his range. This gentle timbre in both voices is the center of their precise control of vocal cords closure. They do this not by over singing and darkening the medium register of the voice, but by thinning out the sound in the medium register for expanding to the high register, with resonance and vibrato. This allows the sound to modulate dynamics effectively while maintaining clarity and tonal beauty. The importance of the intention of lightness, length of the vocal folds and support and efficiency in the yawn position (tilting the larynx) are essential for the production of a gentle timbre.

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