

A Singer's Journey of Vocal Transformation

Heidi Skok, Vocalist and the REST™ Vocal Technique

***In order to overcome her own greatest vocal difficulties, Heidi Skok
learned that she needed to go back to her roots as a low voice,
and that's where her success was found.***

***She now draws from her own transformational experience
to show other developing voices the keys to also transform themselves,
by incorporating what she has learned into her own
Skokstudio REST™ Vocal Technique and REST™ Toolkit***

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Author's Foreword

This is not the complete lifetime legacy of a world-class international vocalist, but an apologetically abbreviated snapshot of a singer's own journey of deep personal and professional transformation, shared with love, humility, and courage, and for the benefit of other singers so that they can avoid similar difficulties. Today, the transformative REST™ Vocal Technique that Heidi Skok has created from the lessons she discovered from her transformative journey now helps other singers establish a solid core of vocal ability. Moreover, the REST Vocal Technique helps singers of all development levels find the transformation they may require as they want to develop to their own "next level", or if they have already been experiencing a vocal problem or injury.

The Early Years

Heidi Skok is a highly transformative teacher, whose own journey of transformation as a vocalist was a long road of many steps. It began early; even as a toddler Heidi could be found cheerfully singing to the animals in the barn on her parent's small farm for hours a day, growing up in a small rural mid-west town. Singing mostly pop music or church hymns as a child, she possessed a low, husky voice and was led in that lower direction with her first voice teacher Louise Savage at age twelve.

She continued taking lessons and in her mid-teens as she began to study with her second teacher, she soon learned how to access *head voice*, which is such an important basic component to the fully developed voice. However, although this successfully opened a higher head range for her, she was then promptly guided into soprano repertoire.

Throughout her teens, Heidi sang both soprano and mezzo-soprano vocal parts in musical theater roles, winning the prestigious Regional Rotary Award for her performance in her high school's musicals and plays while attending Riverside High School. She attended Carnegie Mellon University, pursuing a Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance and continued to sing only in the soprano range. It's usually here, with formal academic training where a vocalist will most commonly begin to identify a specific vocal range that they then focus on specializing entirely upon.

Onward, to the Met, and Beyond!

Even at this early age Heidi had already received much media attention nationally, and word had reached the Metropolitan Opera that Ms. Skok possessed a very warm, particular quality to her voice. As much then as it does today, Heidi Skok's voice embodies a silver beauty that is clear and present - a sound so uniquely evocative and all her own. This was attractive to the Metropolitan Opera, and shortly after graduating from Carnegie Mellon University, and while yet still a member of Duquesne University's Young Artist Program at Pittsburgh Opera, they came calling for the young Ms. Skok. At age 23 she became a member of the Metropolitan Opera's Young Artist Development program, and from 1991-1994 sang many small, secondary soprano roles with some of the world's greatest performing operatic talent including Luciano Pavarotti, Jessye Norman, Placido Domingo, Tatiana Troyanos, Kathleen Battle, Elisabeth Soderstrom, and Leonie Rysanek, and many other great singers. In the year to follow, Heidi Skok sung to great acclaim on four different continents, appearing in many high-profile productions, some of which included performances at Carnegie Hall in New York City, The 92nd Street Y, and Jordan Hall in Boston. She also sang in regional operas including Wolf Trap Opera, Lyric Opera of Kansas City and Pittsburgh Opera. She has been awarded top place in many competitions such as Opera Index, The Sullivan Foundation, the Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions, and The Center for Contemporary Opera. Heidi Skok sang at the Metropolitan Opera over a period of 12 years, a truly lengthy engagement for what were small, secondary soprano roles. She strove to always be well prepared, kind and supportive to all colleagues, and ready to achieve. During this time Heidi also recorded an album in 1998 for Newport Class label called *Women's Voices and Songs of Martin Hennessy*, which currently sells on Amazon. (Heidi Skok currently also has plans to record another album now as a low voice.)

Signs of Trouble

Singing in the soprano range was always very difficult and it required Heidi to carefully plan how she would be able to sing both her lessons and coachings. Unfortunately, oftentimes she was not given the option to plan accordingly and so after a few hours of singing, she would feel very vocally tired.

Sometimes from day to day she would even be hoarse, but at that stage in her vocal development she thought little of it and believed this must be how it was supposed to be, and told no one of the discomfort. Since everyone thought the sound was so good, she thought perhaps the way it felt was normal and continued telling herself she was a soprano. But a voice should not feel tired after singing, and she always felt exhausted and vocally fried. Nonetheless, Heidi buried all of this struggle and worked each time to continue with even more determination.

As a young artist at the MET, Heidi often sat in the auditorium and watched many other artists on stage. It seemed to her that all of the other sopranos made it look so easy. Thus, when Heidi had finally begun to fear that she might be doing something wrong after all, she also feared exposing her struggle as a weakness to anyone else around her and continued to remain suffering in silence. Heidi was afraid to admit to anyone that she was struggling, and thought that the effort and strain she felt would be perceived as a weakness. She feared that if she were to expose her own vocal issues in the extremely competitive peer realm of opera that it would hurt her professional standing and cast doubt on her ability to perform. As seasons began to pass, however, her self-confidence in her abilities had also begun to suffer from the growing difficulty of performing, which then even further reduced any chance of her telling someone how difficult it was to be in the soprano range.

Coming to A Sudden Full Stop

Years of success were still to follow, yet with such great undue effort. However, after singing for twenty plus years in the wrong range, it was preparation for one fateful orchestral concert in 2006 that finally and abruptly changed her trajectory. The score called for a high b natural to be sustained for over 12 bars. And while practicing the score on her own, her headstrong determination while attempting to get into an unreachable top worked against her, and Heidi injured her voice. Heidi was unable to sing at all or even speak with more than a whisper, and she was frightened more than ever.

This was not just a hoarse throat that would sound fine again in three or even seven days, nor was it a case of acute laryngitis that several weeks and antibiotics alone would heal. There was serious injury to her cherished vocal instrument caused by the way she had been using it for decades, and it threatened a real possibility of ending her life's work. To her dismay, Heidi would learn that she had begun to develop vocal nodes from this final experience as a soprano. Having tried over and over to get into a high-top note of a high sustained b natural, her voice was simply not physically capable of repeatedly sustaining this over such a length of time. This was potentially devastating for Heidi, and it demanded that she stop what she was doing and get to the bottom of what was wrong. Heidi knew she must find how to sing in a healthy way, without causing herself further vocal injury or risking possibly even complete permanent loss of her voice.

Inner Reflections and Realizations

This injury had been coming on for a long period of time, unbeknownst to her, as problems caused by singing in the wrong range can develop slowly over several years. And, Heidi had indeed been singing in the wrong range all along. It was now apparent to her why she always felt so uneasy and unsure. This was the reason for feeling inside that she “could not find her own voice”, and the reason why it had become such an altogether difficult effort for her to sing. At the immediate advice of her voice instructor, Trish McCaffrey, and after a period of rest having taken a few weeks off vocally, Heidi began the slow switch to mezzo-soprano. And not surprisingly, a such switch such as this does not happen overnight. This is especially true with a voice that has not only sung for so long at a certain vocal range but has also sustained an injury and had begun to develop vocal nodes.

For the trained singer, the entire body as a whole can be thought of as a sensory organ that acts like an ear. And, it naturally requires time to become retrained to recognize and respond to the complete connected kinesthetic feeling of the different resonance produced when singing in a new range. It thus took Heidi eighteen months of determined work to make the technical vocal range switch, as her voice gained strength, stabilized, and “settled” in the new range. Her early stage vocal nodes eventually healed and vanished, and she would begin a new leg of her career as a mezzo-soprano.

In the end, Heidi Skok realized she had been afraid to admit to herself the fact that she had been struggling all along, just so she could continue to do what people were praising her for being capable of doing so well. This was partially because to her it looked so much easier for other people throughout her vocal development and career. Heidi had privately wondered if other singers were struggling with the same fears and difficulty that made them question if they’re doing something wrong, but nobody had ever approached her with admission of such a problem. Basic human nature is often driven by this

survival instinct to intuitively continue “successfully” doing something exactly the way it’s being done when everyone around affirms that it is correct, and when absolutely nobody says anything differently. But the hidden, hard truth that she herself could not face was that she just would never be able to reach into those high notes in a healthy way and she needed to sing lower, but she had made sure nobody had any idea for fear or reproach or tarnish.

There had been many nights of self-doubt and grief spent alone, with the temptation to quit because it was so physically hard for her. It had been Heidi’s injured voice that finally made her stop singing, forcing her to also stop denying the truth and admit to herself that she needed to be in a new range. Accepting the uncomfortable fact that she must change her vocal range was necessary to begin her forward progress toward a new voice. As hard as it was for her to learn, she discovered the truth that singers must be *willing* to make changes in order to be able to transform and achieve. Admitting something is wrong is never easy, but this is needed first in order to then effectively summon the will to change.

The Road to Real Transformation

The road to transformation for Heidi Skok's voice thus began when crisis finally forced her to stop singing and to come to terms with the difficult fact that she was singing in the wrong vocal range for her voice. Although it was true that she was an excellent "technical" singer, this had only allowed her to get to such a high level professionally while setting her up for eventual disaster vocally. She also realized that her own lack of confidence had foremost kept her from admitting something was not right, but that the triple combination of continued worthy positive feedback of peers, the logical casting decisions of her superiors, and innocent misguidance from voice teachers had all been influencing her decision to remain quiet.

Heidi found a wonderful vocal coach to help her make the full switch to alto, but in a distant city. Nevertheless, she committed herself to drive from before dawn every week at 4 am for three hours to meet her coach at 7 am, to work with him before returning to teach lessons all day. She did this for an entire academic year. Heidi's vocal transformation came because she not only realized she had to be honest with herself about needing to change, but she was further willing to commit to making a highly dedicated, determined effort to transform herself. In order to overcome her own greatest vocal difficulties, Heidi learned that she needed to go back to her roots as a low voice, and that's where her success was found. Now in her correct range, all of Heidi's vocal fears, worries, doubts, strain, vocal fatigue, and pain disappeared and singing became so easy for the first time in her entire career.

Sharing The Keys to Transformation

Heidi began to see that within the professional opera world and certainly more so in the larger world of professional pop music, this was actually a much bigger, widespread issue that was also impacting other singers' development across the whole industry. In time, she began to take note of other professionally-trained and untrained singers alike, coming from all music genres and styles, whose careers have been affected by vocal injury. It became evidently clear to Heidi, that so many of these cases had been a direct result of vocalists singing with strain or difficulty. From there, Heidi arrived at the new belief that she couldn't possibly then be the only singer who had ever felt this either.

While this may be due to poor basic singing technique for a number of reasons, it could also be from having forced one's voice into an incorrect vocal range like she herself had, or the result of some other technical misguidance. She found this to be especially true when a vocalist does have the ability to perform technically well and achieves some degree of recognition or success for it. Singers have too often found themselves trying to go forward into a career lacking technical skill or inner confidence, but accompanied by nothing but praise then feel to resistant to acknowledge to themselves that they need to make a change. Too many singers at an advanced level of every genre of the music industry will just keep on doing what they are doing if they are simply told it was good, no matter how bad it is for them vocally. And where the music industry as a whole can't be concerned with this influence on individual singers, Heidi Skok has dedicated herself as an instructor to helping them avoid these development pitfalls that have hurt other singers like herself.

The overwhelming joy and new self-confidence that Heidi feels today from being in the right vocal range for her own voice is something that she is compelled to share with any singer who might be challenged with finding their voice. Heidi has a deep passion to help other singers to avoid the struggle

that she had along their journey and to have a straighter pathway to their healthy vocal success. She now draws from her own transformational experience to show other developing voices the keys to also transform themselves, by incorporating what she has learned into her own REST™ Vocal Technique and REST™ Toolkit.

Heidi Skok created the REST Technique out of her desire to show her students how to build the core solid foundation for a good vocal technique, but in addition, she also has a desire to instill self-esteem, confidence, and self-love in every student with her teaching. She finds that these qualities were most essential when she began to achieve her own healthy progress and vocal development success, and additionally, that other singers struggle with them as well, holding them back from achieving their own goals. Thus, Skokstudio's REST Vocal Technique has been also been designed to bring confidence to students who use it to successfully find their own voice. Student who train using REST will learn to sing with great ease, and will avoid vocal nodes, vocal fatigue, strain, hoarseness, and loss of their voice as vocal stress continues over time. The REST Vocal Technique helps singers not only to find their own healthy voice, but then shows them exactly how to use it correctly to establish a solid vocal foundation for a professional career singing in any genre.

Find your own voice, and sing effortlessly

Transform the strain into strength and be vocally stress-free

*Learn to sing with **Skokstudio's REST™ Vocal Technique***