

Jenny Lind's Voice: Technique, Timbre, and Artistic Strategy in Nineteenth-Century Opera

Ingela Tägil

Abstract

Jenny Lind (1820–1887), the celebrated opera singer known as the Swedish Nightingale, was a central figure in mid-nineteenth-century operatic culture. While her international career and public image have been extensively investigated, Lind's voice – as a material and historical phenomenon – continues to invite renewed analytical perspectives. This article seeks to examine how Lind's voice may be understood through contemporary accounts and pedagogical sources in a time of aesthetic changes. In doing so, her voice is approached both as an individual artistic phenomenon and as a lens through which broader transformations in nineteenth-century operatic vocal technique may be examined. The article draws on contemporary reviews, descriptions by critics and colleagues, pedagogical writings by her teachers Manuel García and Isak Berg, and a small number of autobiographical statements. Drawing on these sources, the study tries to reconstruct aspects of her vocal technique, timbre and expressive strategies. Particular attention is given to Lind's well-documented vocal impairment, which affected part of her middle register and shaped her aesthetic positioning and possibly her timbre. Rather than treating this impairment as a purely limiting factor, the article argues that Lind actively navigated and integrated it into her artistic practice. By situating Lind within the shifting vocal aesthetics of the Romantic era – characterised by a move away from florid ornamentation towards a more declamatory and powerful style of singing – the article demonstrates how changes in performance ideals necessitated corresponding changes in vocal technique. Lind's voice, with its technical adaptations, emerges as emblematic of this transition. The article argues that nineteenth-century descriptions provide valuable insight into historical voices. Jenny Lind's voice and artistry thus offer a compelling case for exploring the interaction between vocal technique, aesthetic ideals and artistic agency in nineteenth-century opera.

Keywords: Jenny Lind, nineteenth-century opera, vocal technique, vocal aesthetics, timbre, historical vocality, nineteenth-century performance practice.

The opera singer Jenny Lind (1820–1887), popularly known as the Swedish Nightingale, achieved one of the most remarkable careers in musical history. Rising from poverty, she became the first singer from her country to attain global celebrity. Her Swedish breakthrough as Agathe in Weber's *Der Freischütz* at the Royal Opera in Stockholm in

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1838 was a triumph, and in the following years she established herself as a “prima donna assoluta” at the same institution, while also enjoying considerable success in Denmark and Finland. Her European debut and international breakthrough came in 1844, performing the title role in Bellini’s *Norma* at the Royal Opera in Berlin. From that moment, Lind’s reputation spread rapidly across the continent. Her career culminated in a concert tour of the United States between 1850 and 1852. By then she had acquired a reputation as a feminine icon comparable, according to Silke Borgstedt, to the Virgin Mary, the Christian symbol of femininity (2007, pp. 223–236). This saint-like image resonated far beyond those who actually heard her sing and the illusion persisted long after her death. George Biddlecombe (2003, p. 47) asserts that no singer before Jenny Lind had been portrayed in such extreme terms of idolisation. As the musicologist Mary Ann Smart observes in relation to the nineteenth-century mezzo-soprano Rosine Stoltz (1815–1903), the “real” singers were often buried beneath the weight of plots and narratives (1994, p. 34).

To look beyond such idealising statements, in order to gain access to at least fragments of a historical singer’s artistry – and to what a voice may actually have been like – requires considerable effort. My dissertation (Tägil, 2013), published in Swedish, represents an attempt to undertake such a task. It examines how Lind’s voice interacted with her mediated identity and how it contributed to her near-sanctified image. The central argument is that the vocal impairment she suffered in her youth – her f¹–a¹ range was often described as husky and sometimes even as hoarse – affected her timbre, rendering it slightly fragile. This fragility, in turn, corresponded closely with nineteenth-century ideals of femininity. In this work, I began to analyse her voice systematically, and as Lind’s voice continues to fascinate, I have since continued to refine my methodological approach.

The purpose of this article is to use Jenny Lind as a metaphor for a transformation of vocal technique during the mid-nineteenth century. Lind’s career coincided with a marked shift in operatic performance aesthetics: from an era of florid singing towards a style increasingly characterised by reduced ornamentation. Mary Ann Smart (1997, p. 13) has identified this aesthetic reorientation, taking the voice of Erminia Frezzolini as emblematic of a broader change in vocal practice. As ornamentation gradually receded, singing became increasingly declamatory and demanded greater vocal amplitude. Such aesthetic developments were not merely stylistic but technical: they entailed corresponding adjustments in vocal production. In order to meet the demands of the emerging Romantic repertoire and its increased orchestral weight, singers experimented with technical strategies that differed from those previously employed. Frezzolini was a contemporary of Jenny Lind, and just as Smart invokes Frezzolini’s voice as a metaphor for a historical shift in performance practice, this article seeks to evoke Jenny Lind’s voice to illuminate how vocal technique changed in response to this aesthetic transformation.

Method

Jenny Lind is a historical singer beyond our audible reach. Her voice fell silent the moment she ceased to sing, a fact that inevitably complicates any attempt at vocal analysis. Nevertheless, it is not impossible to form a historically informed assessment. The voice researcher James Stark has criticised the routine dismissal by musicologists of the

possibility of investigating historical singers' vocal idioms, demonstrating in a case study how reviews can provide insights into a singer's voice – not only their musical execution, but also aspects of technique and vocal qualities such as timbre, range, vocal intensity and agility (Stark, 2008, pp. 183–189). Similarly, Smart (1997) shows how contemporary reviews and other recollections of Frezzolini may be used to gain insight into her voice and vocal style, as well as into how these characteristics are reflected in the two roles that Verdi composed for her at the height of her career. Writing in the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* in 1848, the critic “R.” described Frezzolini as having a range from a low B-flat to a high D-flat, but with a very weak chest register and a colourless, inflexible middle. The lower range, he argued, had been sacrificed to a remarkably developed head voice, in which she could create any effect at any dynamic level (Smart, 1997, p. 15). Two years later, the critic Pierangelo Fiorentino offered a comparable assessment:

Her middle range is rather covered and tired-sounding, but her high notes are very beautiful and very pure. Perhaps she overuses them a bit; she multiplies the most brilliant and most difficult passages; sometimes she changes slightly the character of the piece she is singing. But it is true that she has energy, range, and elan, and that she puts her soul even into her vocalises. (Fiorentino, 1850, cited and translated from French in Smart, 1997, p. 19)

These quotations alone provide insight into Frezzolini's voice. When combined with Smart's (1997) analysis of the relevant scores, a vocal profile emerges. As she further observes, nineteenth-century critics frequently described singers' voices in considerable detail, noting their strengths and limitations, vocal ranges, register qualities and transitions, tone onset, flexibility and ornamentation, as well as voice colour, referred to in a vocal context as timbre (Smart, 1994, p. 48). Before the advent of recording technology, reviews constituted the public's primary means of forming a conception of a singer's voice prior to hearing them in person. When approached today with a broader understanding of vocal function, nineteenth-century vocal aesthetics and the specific vocal conditions of the singer in question, such reviews – considered alongside the scores of the roles performed – offer substantial insights into historical voices.

The body of source material relating to Lind's voice is substantial. In addition to numerous contemporary reviews describing her singing, both her teachers articulated their aesthetic positions: Manuel García in *Traité complet de l'art du chant* (1847), *New Treatise on the Art of Singing* (1872) and *Hints on Singing* (1894), and Isak Berg in four unpublished manuscripts (1868, 1869, 1879, 1880). On the basis of these sources, I have constructed an account of Lind's vocal methods. The case of her voice is distinguished by a vocal impairment, which is well documented and played a significant role in shaping her vocal practice. Available sources allow glimpses of Lind's voice and artistry to emerge from the past, rendering her a particularly apt metaphor for the transformation of operatic vocal technique during the nineteenth century. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Lind navigated her vocal impairment, how she positioned herself within the vocal aesthetics of her time and how these strategies shaped her artistry.

The most detailed descriptions of Lind's voice stem from the early years of her international career, which began in German-speaking countries and continued in England. Consequently, I have identified detailed assessments in influential German and

English music journals from the years 1844 to 1849.¹ In addition to the sources outlined above, a description by Lind's friend William Smyth Rockstro, dating from 1893, has been preserved. There also survives a letter in which Lind reflects on her singing.² Following a brief background of nineteenth-century vocal aesthetics, I first address the concept of Lind's vocal veil before turning to contemporary accounts of her voice. I then examine aspects of her vocal technique and consider the implications these may have had for her positioning within contemporary vocal aesthetics. Subsequently, Lind's vocal strengths and limitations are discussed, and the article concludes by considering how her vocal impairment may have shaped her timbre and her artistry.

A Period of Changing Vocal Aesthetics

Jenny Lind's career coincided with a period of significant transformation in vocal aesthetics. According to the musicologist Susan Rutherford, no previous century had witnessed such rapid changes in vocal technique as the nineteenth century. Opera houses and orchestras gradually expanded, and Romanticism called for a new, heroic vocal style that favoured long, dramatic lines and a vigorous sound over earlier softer voices with an emphasis on virtuosic coloratura and agile embellishment. Castrato singers disappeared in the early nineteenth century, their roles being assumed by dramatic tenors – the first singers to experiment with more passion and vocal power. Their use of full voice in the upper range, where falsetto had previously been employed, established a new archetype of masculinity, defined by vigorous sounds in high tessituras. This emphasis on passion and vocal volume influenced singers across all voice types, not least sopranos (Rutherford, 2006, pp. 90–97, 162; 2012, p. 131).

At the same time, as Stark (2008) observes, some singers and vocal schools resisted these emerging singing techniques, striving to uphold the florid singing ideals of the so-called “old Italian school”. From the mid-nineteenth century, this tradition became closely associated with *Bel Canto*, which, by then, was characterised by a bright tone quality with little or no vibrato – certainly less than is customary today.³ Its principal means of

1 German assessments used were written by Julius Weiss, Karl Galliard, Dr. Lange and “C.G.” (probably Carl Gollmik) in *Berliner Musikalische Zeitung*; by Carl Gollmik and “H.T.”, “T.”, “J.P.S” (probably J. P. Schmidt) and “L.R.” (likely Ludwig Rellstab) in *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, by “W.” and “T.S.” in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and by Feldmann, Theodor Hagen, Wilhelm Koffka, August Schmidt, J. P. Schmidt, as well as “LMALA” and “A.S.” (probably August Schmidt) in *Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung*. Ludwig Rellstab also wrote for the daily newspaper *Köngl. Priv. Berliner Vossische Zeitung*. English assessments were written by Desmond Ryan and Louis Desmoyers, who provided extensive critical reviews in *The Musical World*. Swedish reviews were published in the daily press during 1838, written by Oscar Patric Sturzen-Becker, writing under the pseudonym Orvar Odd, who contributed to *Aftonbladet*, and anonymous accounts in *Dagligt Allehanda*.

2 The letter, dated 1868 and addressed to Oskar Byström, is translated into English in Holmström, 1917, pp. 548–551.

3 There is no scholarly consensus regarding the use of continuous vibrato in the nineteenth century, or earlier. Some scholars argue that straight-tone singing was the basic technique until approximately the mid-nineteenth century (Liljas Juvas, 2007, pp. 114–115; Toft, 2013, pp. 4, 92–98). Others claim that constant vibrato was required (Miller, 2002, p. 92). Rutherford (2012, pp. 120–121) suggests that even in the

expression lay in agile coloratura and embellishment. This aesthetic had probably dominated opera for approximately 200 years but was gradually declining in popularity during the nineteenth century, being increasingly supplanted by the new dramatic and declamatory style. By the late nineteenth century, the delicate, ornamented style was fading and giving way to a more voluminous and heroic approach that prioritised resonance over agility (Stark, 2008, pp. 3–44; Smart, 1997).

Jenny Lind's second teacher, Manuel García the younger (1805–1906), was among the prominent proponents of the earlier tradition. He inherited both his vocal aesthetic and his pedagogical methods from his father, the opera singer Manuel del Pópulo Vicente García (1775–1832). García the younger is, by several voice scholars, regarded as the last great teacher of the virtuosic bel canto tradition and his pupils as the last singers to employ its vocal methods (Stark, 2008, pp. 3–44; Bloem-Hubatka, 2012, pp. 5–7; Lawton, 2001, pp. 56–64; Manson, 2000, p. 213). Several statements from Lind's first teacher, the Swede Isak Berg (1803–1886), singing master at the Royal Opera in Stockholm, indicate that he also opposed the voluminous declamatory style. As we will see further on, Lind probably adopted her teachers' principles.

Jenny Lind's Voice Veil

A crucial factor in Jenny Lind's voice is the defect she endured. Her mid-range notes, particularly from f^1 to a^1 , were frequently described by critics as veiled, husky and sometimes even hoarse. This is noted already in the earliest biography of Lind, written in 1845 by her friend, the German author Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer. Lind overstrained her voice once or twice in her youth. As a child, she was regarded as a prodigy, and the Swedish journal *Heimdall* predicted her a brilliant future as an opera singer (1832, 24 April, p. 64; 1832, 1 December, pp. 191–192). Yet when, at the age of fifteen, she performed in Adolf Fredrik Lindblad's opera *Frondörerna*, the composer wrote to a friend: "Little Jenny Lind [...] has a weak, almost non-existent voice"⁴ – a first indication of her vocal exhaustion (Lindblad, 1836). Despite this setback, Lind achieved her breakthrough a few years later, in 1838, as Agathe in Weber's *Der Freischütz*. Although she was widely celebrated for this performance, two reviewers commented on an unpleasant hoarseness in her middle and lower registers (Sturzen-Becker, 1838; *Dagligt Allehanda*, 9 March 1838).

Following Lind's breakthrough, the demands on her voice increased, and her vocal fatigue worsened. During ten months throughout 1841–42, she sought help from the renowned singing teacher Manuel García in Paris, who succeeded in restoring her voice almost completely. However, the f^1 – a^1 range remained veiled for the rest of her life. I have previously suggested that the recurring assessments of a "veil" in her middle register indicate that her tone in this range was characterised by an airy or breathy quality. During the nineteenth century, critics frequently employed the terms "voice veil" and "vocal veil"

nineteenth century, opinions on the subject varied. Singers and pedagogues may have debated even then the acceptability of vibrato use.

⁴ Originally: Lilla Jenny Lind som uppträdte i Mamsell Mathilda Fickers ställe har, ehuru en svag, nästan ingen röst [...].

to denote a vocal quality characterised by varying degrees of audible breath leakage. In the case of Jenny Lind, references to this characteristic recur frequently in reviews throughout her career. The voice veil suggests the possible presence of calluses or nodules on the vocal cords, hindering complete glottal closure in this specific tone area. Such a condition could have contributed not only to the breathy timbre in this specific portion of her range, but also to a certain degree of vocal fragility (Tägil, 2013, pp. 108–128).

Contemporary Accounts of Jenny Lind's Voice

In 1893, the musicologist William Smyth Rockstro published a model of Jenny Lind's voice. Rockstro, a close friend of Lind, was well acquainted with her vocal qualities. According to this model (Figure 1), she appears to have been an exceptionally high soprano, with a range extending up to g^3 :



Figure 1 Model of different and characteristic areas in Lind's vocal range, published in Holland and Rockstro, 1893, p. 355.

Each letter in the model denotes a specific area of Lind's voice: (a) marks her veiled range f^1 – a^1 ; (b) highlights her brilliant high range, which Rockstro describes as her greatest strength. Notably, the model underscores the extent of her highest tessitura and the fact that Rockstro chose to mark her veiled range before her advantageous high range. This suggests that the veiled quality was both widely recognised and central in perceptions of her voice. (c) represents her $f^{\#2}$, a note particularly admired by Mendelssohn, as evidenced in the soprano part he composed for her in *Elijah*. (d), (e) and (f) denote additional notes identified by Rockstro as particularly remarkable; and (g) spanning marks the range (c^2 – g^3) in which Lind felt most comfortable (Holland and Rockstro, 1893, pp. 355–357).

Although Rockstro's model was created retrospectively, it aligns relatively well with descriptions from Lind's early international career. In December 1844, Julius Weiss described her voice as extending from c^1 to e^3 or f^3 , with an even, beautiful quality and a "flute-like" timbre (Weiss, 1844). Several critics emphasised the brilliance of her upper register as one of her greatest assets. The signature J.P.S. wrote: "Miss *Lind* has a perfectly pure, not particularly powerful, yet pleasantly well-sounding soprano voice in which her high range is particularly beautiful (the lower and middle range has less intense timbre)"⁵ (1845, p. 12). Feldmann found that her range from e^2 to c^3 possessed extraordinary beauty

5 Originally: Fräul. *Lind* ist im Besitz einer durchaus reinen, nicht besonders starken, jedoch angenehm wohlklingenden Sopranstimme, von besonders schönem Klang in der Höhe. Die tieferen und Mitteltöne haben weniger intensive Tonfülle.

(1845, p. 183). Rellstab described the brightness of her high notes as the “purest silvery clarity” (1861, p. 388), while Ryan acknowledged her exceptional brilliance in the upper soprano range: “The manner in which she reaches the high notes exhibits great art. She sustains a C or D [in the third octave] in alt with unerring intonation and surprising power” (1848, p. 564). The reviewer L. R. observed that Lind effectively leveraged her bright, light voice to her advantage: “Miss *Lind* is by nature assigned to the second octave; she has followed nature’s hint and thereby won a smoothness, an easy onset of tone and bright timbre in these notes”⁶ (1845, p. 895).

In his early reviews (1844–45), Rellstab noted that while Lind’s voice was sonorous, it was not particularly powerful; her middle tones were veiled, whereas her highest notes were pure and clear (1861, p. 388). Galliard similarly praised the brilliance of her high register but noted some shortcomings in her lower range (1845). Hagen was especially fascinated by her *mezza voce* (“half voice” – singing at half-strength) and her *pianissimo*, which he found crystal-clear, sweet and beautiful (1845, p. 223). Together, these reviewers depict a soprano voice that was soft yet exceptionally high, sonorous – particularly in its upper register – though not powerful, with a veiled or weakened middle range.

Aspects of Lind’s Vocal Technique

As the demand for a more voluminous vocal aesthetic increased, singers were compelled to develop new vocal methods, not only to enhance their audibility but also to prevent injuries resulting from pushing the voice to be heard. By the mid-nineteenth century, during Jenny Lind’s most active period, two key technical aspects associated with achieving a more voluminous voice became subjects of extensive debate: breathing technique and larynx position.

Rutherford asserts that abdominal breath support was one of the primary mechanisms for vocal power and volume (2006, p. 97). Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, printed vocal methods seldom addressed breathing methods in detail. Around 1850, the discussion began to distinguish three principal methods of respiration: *clavicular*, *lateral or thoracic* and *abdominal breath support*. Clavicular breathing, most closely associated with earlier traditions, centres on the elevation of the upper chest and clavicular region during inhalation. Lateral or thoracic breathing – terms used somewhat interchangeably in nineteenth-century sources – engages the lower and lateral regions of the chest. It may be regarded as a bridge between the older clavicular method and the emerging approach to abdominal breath support, which emphasises abdominal engagement and facilitates more powerful vocal production. Abdominal breath support, as its name indicates, emphasises the active engagement of the abdominal muscles to regulate the diaphragm. During inhalation, the abdomen expands, while during exhalation, it contracts, thereby supporting the expulsion of air. This facilitates a more voluminous vocal production. This technique gradually supplanted the clavicular and lateral or thoracic methods during the latter half of the nineteenth century and remains the predominant technique among opera

⁶ Originally: Fräul. *Lind* aber ist von der Natur entschieden auf die zweigestrichene Octave angewiesen; sie ist diesem Winke treu gefolgt und hat sich dadurch einen Schmelz, eine leichte Ansprache und einen hellen Klang dieser Töne erworben, wie er eben nur so zu gewinnen ist.

singers today (Miller, 2002, pp. 14–19; Rutherford, 2006, p. 97; Stark, 2008, pp. 91–93). The widespread adoption of this technique reflects the broader shift towards an increasingly powerful vocal aesthetic, which in turn demanded greater carrying capacity and placed respiratory efficiency at the centre of operatic technique.

Lind's teachers Berg and García both advocated lateral or thoracic breathing and criticised clavicular and abdominal methods as incomplete. Berg described his method as lateral, emphasising that air should be drawn into the lower sides of the lungs (1868, pp. 28–29; 1880, p. 1). García used the term “thoracic” and maintained that during inhalation the ribs expand and the abdomen contracts, with both gradually returning to their original positions during exhalation (1894, pp. 4–5). Lind did not specify which type of respiration she employed, but it is reasonable to assume that she used the lateral or thoracic technique taught by her teachers. This suggests that she never adopted the respiratory approach associated with producing increased vocal volume but instead retained an earlier method that did not prioritise acoustic power.

Lind's audiences appear to have perceived her breathing as highly skilful. Despite her own complaints about a natural predisposition to short breaths – “My breathing was by nature very short”⁷ – the reviewer Gollmik praised her breath control and ability to sustain long phrases: “Often when one imagines that surely, now she cannot continue, she will execute – without taking a breath – another trill, perform another ornament, or introduce another embellishment in the middle of a run” (1845, p. 801).⁸ Lind herself explained that she compensated for what she understood to be a limited breath capacity, with multiple rapid inhalations:

It does not matter if one breathes often when singing as long as the phrasing is not interfered with. It is therefore imperative to breathe anywhere and at any time so that it is not perceived. In passionate things, one must naturally breathe oftener because the emotions affect the breath and make it shorter. Also in singing *forte* the breath is a good deal wasted.⁹ (Lind, 1868, cited in Holmström, 1917, p. 550)

It is possible that Lind mastered “air-snatching” so effectively that Gollmik perceived her as singing with less breath than she actually did.

The second technical issue under debate concerned laryngeal positioning. The larynx is mobile, and, according to the voice-acoustics researcher Johan Sundberg, its placement affects the sound character of the voice, commonly referred to as timbre (vocal colour). Laryngeal position also influences vocal volume (Sundberg, 2001, pp. 69, 154–155). As with breathing, laryngeal height was scarcely mentioned in vocal-pedagogical treatises before the nineteenth century. Richard Wistreich, a scholar of pre-Romantic singing

⁷ Originally: Min anda var mycket kort af naturen (Lind, 1868).

⁸ Originally: [...] und oft, wenn man glaubt, jetzt geht es nicht mehr, schlägt sie – ohne Athem zu schöpfen – noch einen Triller, macht noch einen Mordent, oder wirft mitten in einem Laufe noch ein Blümchen als Zugabe hin.

⁹ Originally: Det betyder ingenting om man tager ofta andehämtning i sång så länge man ej därigenom bryter af ord och den musikaliska frasen. Därför är det nödvändigt att så fiffigt kunna taga up andan när som helst och hvar som helst att den ej höres ok till följe deraf ej stör fortgången af sången. I passionerade saker måste man naturligtvis andas oftare, emedan känslan inverkar på andan, ok gör den kortare. Äfvenså då man sjunger *Forte* så öder man naturligtvis luft (Lind, 1868).

methods, suggests that historical evidence indicates that opera singers prior to this period did not stabilise the larynx in any fixed specific position; rather, its movement followed the tones (Wistreich, 2000, p. 180). By the 1830s, however, some tenors began experimenting with a fixed lowered larynx position, a technique referred to as *voix sombre* (dark voice). According to Rutherford (2012, p. 131) and George W. Bloch (2007, pp. 14–15), this approach was intended to produce a virile, heroic sound. A lowered larynx is advantageous when seeking to increase vocal volume (Sundberg, 2001, pp. 69, 154–155). The higher or flexible laryngeal position nevertheless remained standard, to some extent, and came to be known as *voix blanche* (bright voice) in order to distinguish it from the newly emerging *voix sombre* technique. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the lowered laryngeal position became increasingly standardised and by around 1900, a fixed low larynx had become the prevailing vocal method among opera singers (Wistreich, 2000, pp. 179–180; Mason, 2000, p. 212; Miller, 2002, p. 85; Stark, 2008, pp. 41–42).

During the 1830s and 1840s, broader discourses on vocal issues increasingly adopted the terms *voix blanche* and *voix sombre* to describe timbre. Although these terms were already in circulation before, it was García who consolidated their usage and established their practical application. He expanded them into a sophisticated system in which laryngeal positioning served as a means of expressing distinct emotional affects. For García, *voix blanche* and *voix sombre* functioned as technical tools for shaping contrasting expressive qualities. He regarded them as equally important (Tägil, 2021). His *Treatise on the Art of Singing* (1872) provides specific recommendations, associating *voix sombre* with sorrow, lamentation, and suffering, whereas *voix blanche* was considered more suitable for expressions of joy, vitality and lightness. García also cautioned against excessive use, warning that an overapplication of *voix blanche* could result in shrillness, while an overuse of *voix sombre* might produce a dull or hoarse quality (1872, pp. 6, 44, 69–71; 1894, p. 45). To cultivate mastery of these techniques, he even taught his students to shift from *voix blanche* to *voix sombre* at the same note within a single breath (García, 1894, pp. 11–12). Lind's colleague, Isidor Dannström, noted that she excelled at shifting between timbres (larynx positions) on the same note (1896, p. 36). This suggests that Lind employed a highly flexible laryngeal technique – one consistent with García's nuanced emphasis on expressive timbral modulation, which he regarded as central to artistic singing – rather than the fixed, lowered laryngeal position associated primarily with increased vocal volume.

In Swedish, the French terms were translated as *klar timbre* (clear timbre) and *mörk timbre* (dark timbre). Lind herself wrote on the subject:

Timbre and tone color are words which always seem to me unnecessary and lacking in clearness. I do not understand them, for through the careful and detailed placing of all vowels as well as the conscientious study of the consonants in harmony with the vowels, must all possible tone-color be produced, and I need only choose according to need. Timbre again, belongs according to my idea to the *expression of the soul*. My timbre must obey my feelings. Therefore a correct declamation and careful phrasing in all its fine and endless shadings together with a right development of the *inner being* must absolutely help me over the technique to the real subject (emotion) which the vowels stand for. If I sing of

joy, sorrow, hope, love, my Saviour, folk-songs, moonlight, sunshine, etc., I feel naturally quite differently, and my voice will take on the *Timbre of my soul* without my caring in the least with what tone color or Timbre I sing!¹⁰ (Lind, 1868, cited in Holmström, 1917, pp. 550–551)

Lind did not explicitly associate the concept of “timbre” with García’s term *voix blanche* and *voix sombre* or link it directly to larynx positions. Although occasionally acknowledging technical aspects, her writings suggest that she prioritised artistic expression above technical classification.

A third technical aspect of Jenny Lind’s singing – the tone onset – was perhaps the most debated and contentious issue of the nineteenth-century vocal discourse. In the 1840s, García introduced the controversial term *coup de la glotte* (the stroke of the glottis), which he regarded as fundamental to his vocal method. As the term suggests, this is a hard or explosive onset. To understand the implications, it is necessary to consider the function of the vocal folds. Sundberg (2001, p. 72) explains how phonation frequency is controlled by the tension and thickness of the vocal ligaments. The space between the vocal ligaments is referred to as the *glottis*. In operatic singing, three principal modes of glottal closure are recognised: *aspirated*, *simultaneous*, and *explosive* or *hard* onset. Aspirated onset occurs when phonation begins with an initial escape of air before the glottis closes, as when initiating a tone with an “h”. Simultaneous onset, now the most common in contemporary operatic singing, occurs when phonation and onset of airflow coincide. In explosive onset, the glottis closes before the onset of phonation. Sundberg explains that, in this mechanism, adduction of the vocal folds is completed before air pressure is applied; air therefore accumulates beneath the closed folds. Considerable adductory muscular force is required to resist this pressure, producing a forceful glottal release that generates high subglottal pressure as it overcomes the resistance of the folds. The mechanism is physiologically similar to that employed in coughing and laughing (Sundberg, 2001, pp. 24–28, 52–83).

García’s description of *coup de la glotte* corresponds closely to Sundberg’s account of the explosive onset, although he did not intend it to be as forceful as a cough (Tägil, 2021). In his treatises of 1847 and 1872, García explains that phonation must be prepared by first closing the glottis so that air accumulates behind the vocal folds, after which the tone is initiated with a vigorous stroke (García 1847, cited in Stark, 2008, p. 13; García, 1872, p. 11). He admits that, even though they differ in force, the impulse of coughing and the execution of the *coup de la glotte* are essentially the same (García, 1894, pp. 13–14). The method – likely in use for roughly two centuries before García (Stark, 2008, pp. 12, 21) – became widely criticised once he formally defined it and has remained controversial ever

10 Originally: *Timbre* – ok *tonfärg* äro ord som altid synes mig oklara ok onödiga, jag förstår dem ej, [...] *Timbre* återigen hör – enligt min idé – till *uttryck af själen* – min *Timbre* måste lyda min känsla – därför en riktig *Declamation* – ett noga iakttagande af *punktering* i alla dessa fina ok *oändliga* nyanser, sammanparad med ett riktigt utbildande af den *inre människan* måste ovilkorligen hjälpa mig öfver den tekniska termen till den egentliga *saken*, hvilken ordet representerar om jag sjunger om fröjd – sorg hopp kärlek – min Frälsare – *folkvisor* – månsken solsken etc. etc. – så känner jan naturligtvis aldeles olika, ock min röst antager min *själs Timbre* utan att jag på minsta vis bryr mig om med hvad tonfärg eller *Timbre* jag sjunger!

since. García's definition of the technique may also have coincided with its growing unfashionability. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, its use declined steadily, and by the turn of the twentieth century, it had virtually disappeared as a vocal method.

García also employed *coup de la glotte* exercises to rehabilitate veiled and airy voices (1894, p. 15), which suggests that Lind used this technique to reduce excessive airflow during her lessons with him in 1841–42. Berg (1868, pp. 36–37) testified that she succeeded in covering her veiled quality, especially in her middle range, through the *coup de la glotte*, thus confirming that this method played an integral role in her technical approach.

Both Lind's admirers and her critics acknowledged her technical proficiency. Even those who noted her limitations conceded that she compensated for them with exceptional technical skill (LMALA, 18 February 1847, p. 87). It appears likely that all three of the outlined vocal techniques employed by Lind were falling out of fashion during her lifetime: she did not rely on abdominal breathing, she cultivated a highly flexible laryngeal technique, and she utilised García's explosive tone onset, the *coup de la glotte*. Taken together, these elements reinforce the argument that her artistry was rooted in an earlier vocal tradition, one that prioritised agility over resonance and sheer volume. Given the likely fragility of her voice following earlier damage – and in an era of rapidly shifting vocal aesthetics – it was probably important that she navigated her voice in a way that aligned with the aesthetic best suited to her instrument. This strategic positioning enabled her to highlight her strengths while diverting attention from her limitations.

Aesthetic Characteristics of Lind's Singing

In addition to these technical aspects, two aesthetic features further support the argument that Lind's vocal approach was rooted in earlier singing traditions. The first concerns her use of ornamentation. Lind appears to have been highly skilled in coloratura and bravura singing, though contemporary critics differed in their assessments. Rellstab praised her virtuosic coloratura passages and ornamentations (1845b). Gollmik (1845, p. 801) likewise admired her cadenzas and coloratura technique, noting her precise intonation, which he compared to the sound of the violin and the flute. By contrast, Emanuele Muzio voiced criticism of these characteristics in a letter to Verdi, with whom he studied:

I have heard Lind in *La figlia del Reggimento*, in *La Sonnambula*, and in *Robert le Diable*, and I tell you that she is an artist in every sense of the word. She is great in all three of these operas [...] Her trill is incomparable; her agility unequalled. But generally, in order to show off her vocal bravura, she sins by using too many fioriture, gruppetti, and trills—things that pleased in the last century but not in 1847. (Muzio, cited and translated in Lawton, 2001, p. 56)

The roles Muzio referred to are bravura roles, characterised by elaborate coloratura passages and cadenzas that encourage embellishments and virtuosic high notes. Although Muzio acknowledged that Lind was remarkable in such repertoire, he considered her bravura style somewhat old-fashioned.

The other feature that situates Lind within an earlier vocal tradition is the reported absence, or at least markedly reduced presence, of vibrato in her singing. Both her

teachers, Berg and García, were staunch opponents of a continuous vibrato. García (1894, p. 17) regarded it as evidence of insufficient technical control, while Berg (1879, p. 5) criticised what he termed “artificial shakings” which he believed had become increasingly prevalent in the latter half of the century and should be strictly avoided. Most significantly, Lind’s colleague, Dannström (1896, pp. 36–37), asserted that Lind habitually sang with a straight tone and employed vibrato only as an occasional dramatic device.

In the excerpt cited above, Muzio expressed admiration for Lind’s trill, a particularly significant ornament in earlier traditions. Several reviewers likewise singled out Lind’s trill for praise. Both Weiss (1844) and Hagen (1845, p. 223) described it as extraordinarily impressive while the signature J.P.S. (1845, p. 12) characterised it as astonishingly even. The trill is one of the few vocal elements for which Lind herself provided explicit exercises:

In the trill, the uppermost note is the principal thing because there is the same difficulty as when one tries to jump up from below. The lowest note of the trill goes of itself when it has been practised in connection with the higher note.¹¹ (Lind, 1868, cited in Holmström, 1917, p. 551)

Then she advised beginning the exercise with an octave and gradually reducing the interval until reaching the major and minor second, which she regarded as the most challenging to execute:

i.e., this interval of a whole or a half tone (the half is more difficult than the whole) is the *last* exercise for the trill. The real trill exercise ought to begin with the octave and so forth till one arrives at the half note interval.



Figure 2 An image inserted by Lind at this point in the surrounding citation, illustrating how exercises of the trill should begin with the octave interval.

The under note should only hang “in the air,” so to speak; both notes in the trill must be “led,” but the lower one lets go and the upper one holds fast. Finally it becomes one stroke and this stroke must then be repeated. This exercise one can begin with at once, for there is nothing so helpful for coloratur and portamento as this trill exercise when done properly. But it is not easy to describe with pen and ink. Sing an octave and bind upward, only letting the notes “hang together” (*not cease*) when going down,—is as near as I can put it.¹² (Lind, 1868, cited in Holmström, 1917, p. 551)

11 Originally: I drillen är den *öfversta* noten hufvudsaken emedan den har samma svårighet – som när man vill *hoppa upåt nedifrån*. Den nedersta tonen af drillen går af sig själf sedan den blifvit öfvad i sammanhang med den öfre (Lind, 1868).

12 Originally: Stora eller lilla secunden (denna sednaste svårare än den stora) är den *sista* öfningen för drillen. Den egentliga drillöfningen bör börja med *Octaven* och så vidare, tills man kommer till lilla secunden [...] [D]en understa noten skall bara hänga i luften, men dock noga vidröra den ton man ämnar beröra båda tonerna i drillen måste ledas. Men den nedersta släppes af ok den öfversta hålles fast. Till slut blir det ett slag af—ok detta slag måste repeteras. Denna öfning kan genast börjas med, ty ingenting stärker så för *coloratur portamento* – *piano* som denna drillöfning då den göres rätt. Men den är ej lätt att

By advocating that the trill be practised across a spectrum of intervals, from the octave to the minor second, Lind implicitly affirms her command of trills over multiple intervallic spans. She was not, after all, called a nightingale without reason.

Lind's Soft Voice: Strength and Limitation

One of Jenny Lind's most remarkable attributes was her ability to execute soft nuances such as *pianissimo*, *mezza voce* (half voice) and *messa di voce* (a controlled dynamic swelling from pianissimo to fortissimo and back). Her soft voice was both her strength and her limitation. Some critics praised her capacity to project even the most delicate pianissimo over a full orchestra, while others lamented her lack of vocal power. L.R., one of her admirers (possibly Ludwig Rellstab), as well as a critic writing in *The Illustrated London News*, maintained that her most distinctive quality was the intensity of her pianissimo, which was carried clearly to every corner of the opera house and situated her among the highest ranks of artists (L.R., 1845, p. 894; *The Illustrated London News*, 1847, p. 309). Louis Desmoyers (1847, p. 687) described her soprano voice as "neither powerful, nor of great compass, but it possesses much suavity, a dazzling lightness, a neatness of execution which surprises, perfect intonation, and a captivating grace". Even Desmond Ryan, generally critical of Lind, acknowledged her mastery of soft dynamic nuances:

In her mezzo [sic] voce singing scarcely any vocalist we ever heard can be compared to her. The most delicate notes, given with the most perfect intonation, captivate the hearers and throw them into ecstasies of delight. This is undoubtedly the great charm of Jenny Lind's singing. (1848, p. 564)

Critics such as Ryan (1848, p. 564), LMALA (1847, p. 87) and Koffka (1846, p. 611), while acknowledging her mastery of soft nuances, also maintained that she lacked vocal power. Ryan went so far as to argue that she was most admirable as a soloist, while ensemble singing placed a strain on her voice:

From an organ, neither naturally sweet nor powerful, she has elaborated a voice capable of producing the most vivid sensations. [...] For this reason her solo singing is almost that alone in which she makes any extraordinary impression. In ensemble singing, except in the piano, her voice, being forced beyond its natural powers, loses all its beauty and peculiar charm, and becomes nothing short of disagreeable. (1848, p. 564)

Read together, the quotations given above suggest a voice whose principal strength lay in pianissimo and soft dynamic nuances. Ryan's observations further indicate, to some extent, a voice that was fragile and easily strained when vocal power was required. Critics largely agreed that roles such as the gullible Amina in Bellini's *La Sonnambula*, the trusting Alice in Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* and the melancholic Lucia in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* were particularly well suited to Lind. However, a significant watershed was her interpretation of Norma, a role demanding relatively dramatic intensity, which some reviewers deemed beyond Lind's vocal capabilities. Critics of this

med bläck och penna beskrifva. Sjunga en octave och binda *upåt* ok blott låta tonerna hänga tillsammans (*icke uphöra*) vid nedgåendet —är så nära jag kan beskrifva (Lind, 1868).

interpretation argued that her voice lacked the requisite dramatic weight. Lind downplayed the character's vengeful fury, most notably in the Act I finale's tercet. Instead of portraying furious anger, she played almost motionless. The signature D. (1847, p. 399) remarked that while her vocal execution was impeccable, it lacked dramatic passion, especially in this particular scene. Those who considered the scene the opera's dramatic climax, embodying Norma's essential character, contended that Lind's interpretation distorted the role. In contrast, her most ardent admirers praised her performance as refined and distinctly feminine. They emphasised her portrayal in the Casta Diva scene and the opera's final moments, in which the broken Norma pleads for her children's lives before ascending the pyre. These passages, dynamically more in pianissimo, were particularly well suited to Lind's vocal strengths (Feldmann, 17 April 1845; Rellstab, 1861, pp. 387–391).

Norma serves as perhaps the most prominent example of how Lind adapted her interpretations to accommodate her vocal limitations, although she faced similar criticism for her portrayals of Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the title role in Weber's *Euryanthe* and Julia in Spontini's *La Vestale*. J.P.S. critiqued her performance in the latter role, while noting that she excelled in the more subdued passages, such as the poignant prayer scenes. Rather than delivering the dramatic intensity traditionally associated with the role, Lind offered an interpretation of the Vestal that was empathetic, tender and self-sacrificing (J.P.S., 1846, p. 107). Koffka identified this quality as a defining characteristic of her artistry:

In parts that do not demand significant vocal power, where she can showcase the beauty of her voice through messa di voce and mezza voce, in fading tones and exquisitely tasteful cadences and trills, in elegiac and sentimental passages, she is magnificent, captivating to the point of admiration and that is why I found her Amina and Lucia to be exceptional. [...] However, she lacks a dramatic voice and the passionate portrayal required for Norma, so she is compelled to adjust this role to her specific vocal and theatrical abilities.¹³ (1846, p. 611)

Koffka perceived Lind's voice as particularly enchanting in passages that did not require significant exertion, allowing her to exploit its beauty in pianissimo and other soft, delicate nuances. It seems probable that she was compelled to modify her singing to her vocal fragility. Given this, it is likely that she exercised considerable caution to avoid overstraining her voice.

I have argued that Lind aligned herself with an earlier vocal tradition that prioritised agility over vocal power and resonance. This stylistic approach likely suited the characteristic qualities of her voice, as the emerging operatic ideals may have been too exhausting. While Lind's vocal agility and soft nuances constituted her most distinctive

13 Originally: In den Partien, die keine besondere Kraftanwendung der Stimme verlangen, wo sie Gelegenheit hat den Vorzügen ihrer schönen Stimme der messa und mezza voce, dem Verhallenlassen derselben und mit ihren ungemein geschmackvollen Cadensen und Trillen zu glänzen, in elegischsentimentalen Partien ist sie gross, zur Bewunderung hinreissend, und daher fand ich ihre Amina so wie die Lucia vorzüglich. [...] Zur Norma fehlt ihr die grosse Stimme und die Leidenschaftlichkeit der Darstellung, darum ist sie gezwungen, diese Partie ihrer Darstellungs- und Gesangsfähigkeit anzupassen.

strengths, they also, to some extent, defined her boundaries. Roles such as Norma suggest that she was required to adapt her interpretations to her softer voice, both to avoid strain and to divert attention away from her limitations.

Lind's Timbre: The Vocal Veil

Timbre is shaped largely by a singer's individual physiological conditions, and every voice is, by definition, unique. Jenny Lind's sound is therefore the most difficult aspect to describe with any precision. However, vocal technique also plays a decisive role in shaping timbre. Since we now have some indication of the techniques she employed, as well as a partial understanding of her vocal physiology, it is possible to formulate at least a few cautious conclusions. At least parts of Lind's timbre seem to have been shaped by her earlier vocal strain, which likely contributed to its characteristic colour.

Although both admirers and critics acknowledged her technical mastery, they diverged in assessments of her timbre, particularly with regard to the perceived veil in her sound. Several reviewers considered her timbre to be distinctive, sweet, and unique. More interesting in the present context is that critics described it as veiled and even hoarse. In 1847, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (p. 214) reported that her lower register was hoarse and that this quality occasionally extended into the upper range when she exerted herself. One of the harshest appraisals, published by *The Musical World* (1847, p. 517), deemed her voice veiled throughout. In the same journal, Ryan offered the following evaluation:

Jenny Lind's voice is a high soprano of singular brilliancy, clear and silvery in the upper register, but somewhat throaty in the middle. [...] When forced it has by no means an agreeable sound, and falls hard and grating on the ear. (1848, p. 564)

It is evident that Lind's earlier vocal damage left the middle register uneven, characterised by air leakage and perceptible transitions between registers. Several critics drew attention to the marked contrast between her low-to-middle and upper range. LMALA (1847, p. 87) observed that while her upper register was clear and resonant, the lower range remained veiled. Likewise, J.P. Schmidt (1845, p. 20) noted that although her high notes were well executed, her lower register lacked uniformity and refinement. Yet some commentators regarded Lind's vocal veil not as a flaw but as an intrinsic and potentially advantageous component of her timbre. Gollmik, for instance, argued:

Many criticise the veiled middle notes. I count myself among those who defend this characteristic, for I believe that it is precisely in this subtly covered timbre that imbues her singing with a mellifluous quality, touching the very fibres of the heart. With a fully bright timbre, she could hardly achieve the same expressive effects.¹⁴ (1845, p. 802)

Here, Gollmik identified Lind's vocal veil as a defining element of her timbre. In the same text, he suggested that the flute-like quality of her upper register was directly connected to the deficiencies in her middle range, which he regarded as an asset. Similarly, L.R. (1845,

14 Originally: Viele wollen darin, dass ihre Mitteltöne bedeckt sind, einen Tadel finden. Ich gehöre zu denen, welche diese Schattenseite in Schutz nehmen, indem ich glaube, dass gerade in dem etwas belegten Timbre das Wesen oder der Schmelz liegt, womit sie die Fibern des Herzens berührt, denn mit vollen, hellen Klängen würde sie schwerlich dieselben Effecte hervorbringen.

p. 893) expressed a reluctance to sacrifice Lind's veiled register in the pursuit of perfection, arguing that the veil contributed to the mystery and poetic allure of her voice. The critic A.S. (1846, p. 198) likewise proposed that the unevenness endowed her singing with a distinctive and captivating charm. Even *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (1847, p. 214), despite the earlier criticism, acknowledged that this unevenness imparted a striking expressive quality. In this sense, her vocal defect may have contributed to the uniqueness of her timbre, allowing her brittle or slightly fragile sound to be perceived not as a defect but as an integral part of her distinctive vocal character.

Jenny Lind appears to have been a high and agile lyric coloratura soprano, whose greatest strengths lay in her upper range and in her ability to produce exceptionally soft dynamics. Some reviewers compared her voice to a flute (*Weiss* 28 December 1844; *Wiener-Zeitung* 26 February 1847) or a bell (*The Illustrated London News* 19 June 1847) – descriptions which, together with repeated observations of a weakened middle register, suggest a voice of light character with a somewhat limited power, particularly in the lower range. Sonorous, but not particularly powerful, Lind possessed a virtuosic coloratura technique that, as consistently noted, aligned her with earlier vocal traditions, perhaps because the stylistic demands of these traditions were better suited to her vocal conditions. Her earlier vocal damage likely rendered her voice vulnerable and imbued a degree of fragility. Forte and fortissimo passages may have been exhausting, prompting her to favour softer dynamics. Rather than executing dramatic singing, she excelled on high, bright tones performed with refinement in pianissimo, *mezza voce* and *messa di voce*.

Lind's admirers, including Rellstab, Gollmik, and Galliard, found her timbre enchanting, a quality that may well have been rooted in the very aspect of her voice that was damaged, or at the very least, compromised: her vocal "veil", likely caused by glottal air leakage and a fragile middle register. It is conceivable that this leakage extended into her higher range, though to such a reduced degree that it was perceived as softness rather than as a flaw. In this sense, Lind's vocal damage may paradoxically have contributed to the unique timbre that audiences found delicate, ethereal and enchanting. This quality became her defining vocal signature, her hallmark as an artist. Her vocal imperfections were transformed into an impression of an enchanting voice; the "vocal veil" evolved into a symbolic marker of her artistry.

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Biography

Ingela Tägil is a musicologist and author specialising in nineteenth-century opera and its female singers. She has a background as a singer, graduating in 1998, and has worked as a freelance soprano for fifteen years. Tägil received her PhD in musicology in 2013 with the dissertation *Jenny Lind: The Impact of Her Voice on Media Identity*, which examines how Lind's voice contributed to her status as a symbol of femininity in her own time. She subsequently held a postdoctoral position in Bern (2015–2018), researching the vocal techniques of the nineteenth-century singing teacher Manuel Garcia, and now works as an independent researcher and writer. Her publications include the Jenny Lind biography *Näktergalen* (2020) and *Förbrukningsvaran* (2025), a study of female performing artists, their association with prostitution, and their working conditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She also holds recurring teaching appointments as a lecturer in musicology at Linnaeus University.