

# Breaking the Code: An Investigation on The Vocal Registers of Malaysia's National Songstress Puan Sri Saloma

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## ABSTRACT

*Investigations on vocal registers have been a great subject of debate. Early vocal pedagogues and scholars like Bacilly (1668–1690) and Behnke (1836–1892) paved the way for the modern-day investigation to take place through the categorisation of vocal registers across various music genres such as classical, jazz, and popular. However, an investigation on the vocal registers of Puan Sri Saloma (1935–1983) as a popular music icon of Malaysia has yet to be done. This paper intends to examine Saloma's vocal registers through vocal analysis of five selected songs using case study as its research design. These songs are transcribed using music notation software (Sibelius) and analytical diagrams using similar software are produced to show the use of chest, middle, and head registers in each song. The finding shows the usage of the said registers and a diagram of Saloma's vocal range is then produced, proving that Saloma was an alto. This study does not intend to limit Saloma's vocal capability, but rather to celebrate her vocal prowess and encourage other scholars to conduct further investigations concerning Saloma as Malaysia's national songstress.*

**Keywords:** music analysis, case study, Saloma, vocal registers, voice categorisation

## INTRODUCTION

This section consists of an overview of investigations on vocal registers through time, female vocal registers, and a brief background of the national songstress, Puan Sri Saloma. The mentioned subsections would help to provide a summary of the past and current views surrounding the understanding of female vocal registers and Puan Sri Saloma's biography to provide a clear direction to the readers to comprehend the context of this investigation.

### Brief Background of Investigations on Vocal Registers through Time

“There is perhaps more controversy and disagreement about the registers of the human voice than about any other part of the art of teaching technique” (Larkcom 1919, 211).

Vocal registers are controversial in the pedagogical, clinical, and scientific domains of vocology. A well-known general definition of vocal registers is “perceptually distinct regions of vocal quality that can be maintained over some ranges of pitch and loudness” (Titze 2000, 282). Investigations on vocal registers have been conducted for centuries. Though this area of interest started to gain the interest of scholars and vocal pedagogues from the 19th century onwards, Bénigne de Bacilly, a 17th century French composer and scholar,

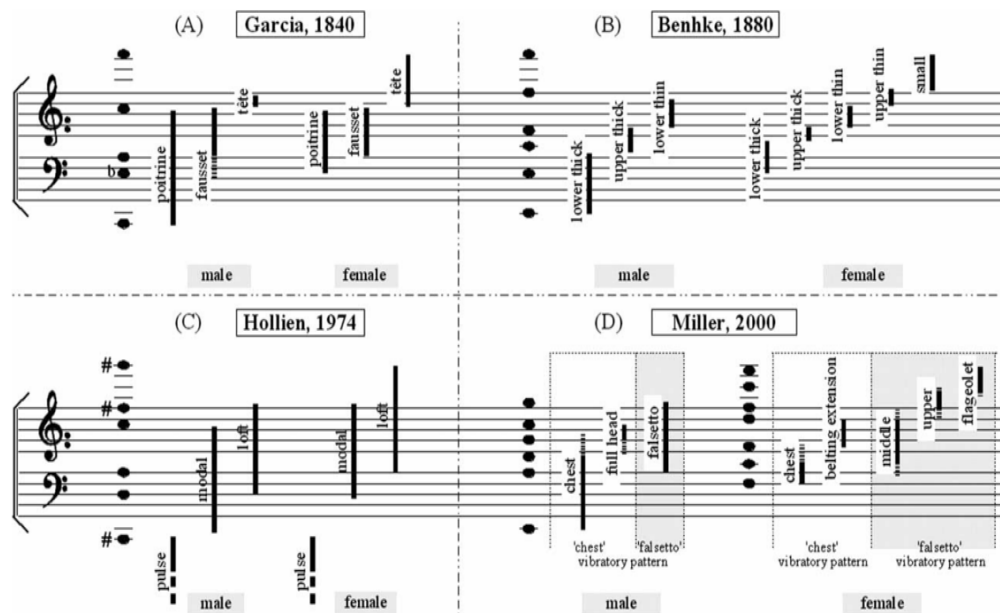
had written a lengthy remark on the art of singing. Bacilly (quoted in Honea 2018) claims that some people take pride in their high voices, and others in their low tone, later stating there are two vocal registers; high and low. Behnke (1886, 1) defines a register consists of a series of tones produced by the same mechanism, improving Bacilly's division of vocal registers by subdividing vocal register into two main categories: (1) lower and upper thick, and (2) lower and upper thin. Larkcom (1919, 5–6) states that Manual Garcia (1805–1906), a renowned Spanish singer, music educator, and vocal pedagogue, defines vocal register as “a series of homogenous sounds produced by one mechanism” and has divided women's voice into three registers; high, medium, and low. This phenomenon is consistent with Giles (1994) that the development in the investigation of vocal registers by vocal experts evolved in explaining vocal registers from two parts before the mid-19th century, to three parts from the mid-19th century forward.

Donington (1970) claims that the most important element in vocal technique is the production of sound and strength in the use of registers from the lower register to the high register. However, he also argues that only some vocal teachers are still practising Western classical vocal techniques, but it is starting to show improvement over time. Brown and Sadie (1990) emphasise that the correct use of registers is determined by the range of a singer's voice, briefly mentioning the falsetto register is used for the male voice and the female voice has a larger middle register where it will be separated between the chest and head register.

### Female Vocal Registers

Henrich (2006) found that the categorisations of male and female vocal registers have evolved through time. She made a comparison of the difference in the categorisation by four prominent vocal pedagogues—Garcia (1840), Behnke (1880), Hollien (1974), and Miller (2000), as shown in Figure 1.

Beginning from the mid-19th century until recent times, experts began to divide these registers into three parts; high (head), medium (middle), and low (chest), as opposed to early vocal experts that only divided the vocal registers into two parts—high and low register. Larkcom (1919), Brown and Sadie (1990), Giles (1994), and Nur Fardilla Nadia (2018) agreed that: (1) head register is a result of the highest vocal register which consists of a bright tone that can be felt when the echo or resonance is produced around the cheek or mask area of the face; (2) middle register is the combination between chest register and head register (other terms commonly associated with this register are mix or blend register); and (3) chest register is the result of the voice register in the chest or simply described as the most closely related to the speaking voice.



**Figure 1** The frequency range of human voice and vocal registers, as defined by Garcia, Behnke, Hollien, and Miller.

Source: Henrich (2006)