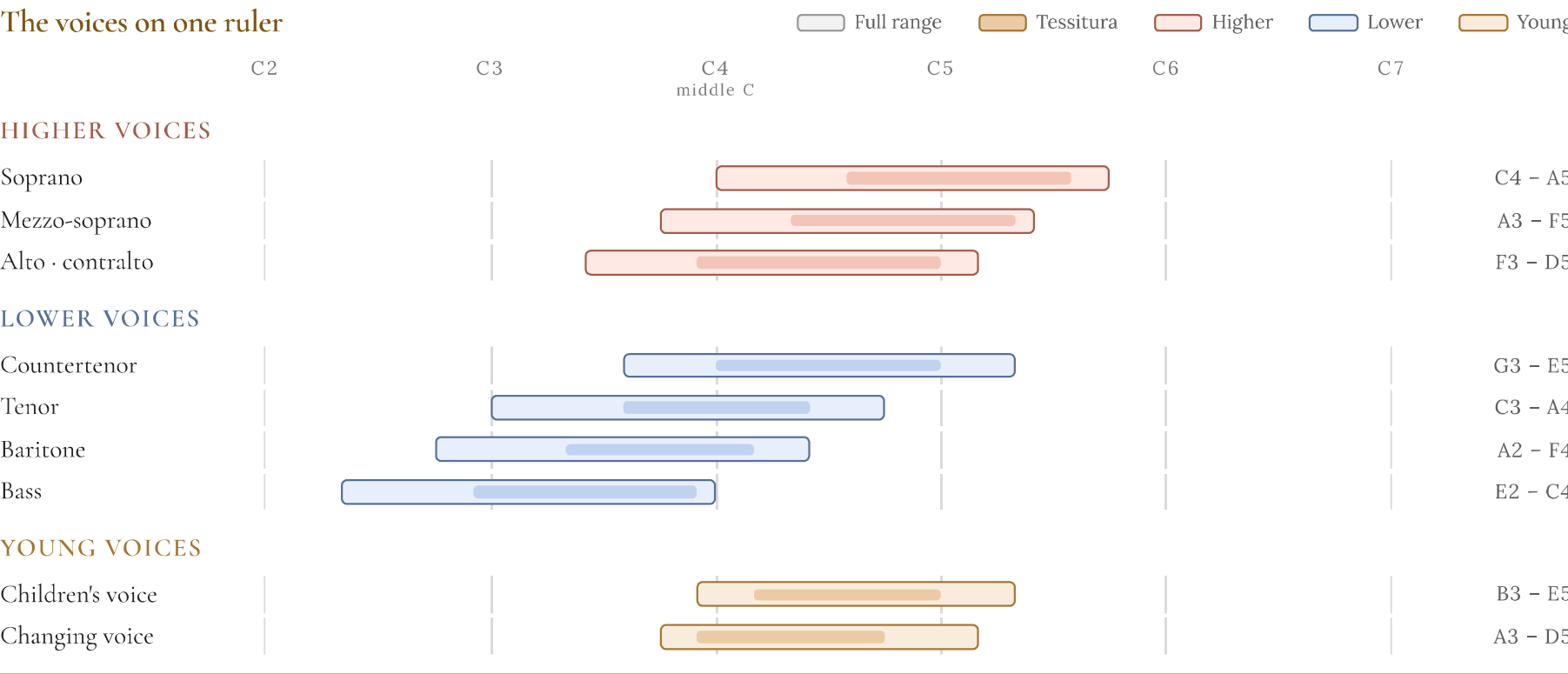


# Voice Types & Ranges

A singer is not a keyboard. The outer notes of a range exist but cost effort, and every voice has a break in the middle where its quality changes. The outlined bar below is what a voice can reach; the solid block inside it is the tessitura — the comfortable middle where a part should live. Write there and any singer of that type will sound easy all evening.

## The voices on one ruler



## What each voice sounds like And the part it usually takes in a choir

| VOICE            | CHOIR PART | WRITTEN IN                          | CHARACTER, AND THE PARTS IT USUALLY SINGS                                         |
|------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Soprano          | S          | Treble clef                         | Bright and carrying; takes the melody in a choir and the heroine on stage         |
| Mezzo-soprano    | S or A     | Treble clef                         | Warmer and fuller than a soprano, and the commonest female voice                  |
| Alto · contralto | A          | Treble clef                         | Dark and even; holds the inner harmony that glues a choir together                |
| Countertenor     | A          | Treble clef                         | A man singing in the alto range in head voice; early and baroque music            |
| Tenor            | T          | Treble clef, sounds an octave lower | Ringin <span>g</span> at the top; the male melody voice, and often a counter-tune |
| Baritone         | T or B     | Bass clef                           | The middle male voice, and the commonest — speech-like and flexible               |
| Bass             | B          | Bass clef                           | The foundation; usually sings the root of the chord and defines the harmony       |

## Inside a single voice Why two notes the same distance apart are not equally easy

Chest, head and the break

Low notes resonate in the chest and sound strong; high notes shift into head voice and sound lighter. Between them lies the passaggio — the break — where the tone changes gear. Crossing it repeatedly inside one phrase is hard; a good line either stays one side of it or crosses once, on a long note.

Range is not tessitura

A soprano can touch a top C. She cannot sit near it for eight bars. Judge a part by where its notes cluster, not by its highest one: a line that lives at the top of the stave tires a singer far faster than one that leaps to a single high note and comes straight back down.

Words change everything

Open vowels — ah, oh — carry high notes; closed ones — ee, oo — do not. Put the important word on the strong beat, keep consonant clusters off the fastest notes, and leave a breath at every punctuation mark you would honour when speaking the line aloud.

## Writing for a choir Four habits that make a part singable

Keep the spacing sensible

No more than an octave between soprano and alto, or alto and tenor. The tenor and bass may spread further apart; wide gaps at the top sound thin.

Mind the young voices

Children's and changing voices want a sixth or so around the middle of the stave. Parts written for adult sopranos simply will not sound in a school hall.

Give the entry a note to find

Let a singer's first note appear in the accompaniment or another part just before it. An unprepared leap into silence is the hardest thing you can ask.

Sing it yourself

If you cannot get through a phrase in one breath at the marked speed, neither can a choir. Breath is the real bar line in vocal writing.