

Pronunciation in the Art of Singing in English and French During the Middle Ages

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Abstract: *In the Middle Ages, the English language was undergoing significant changes and evolution. During this period, English was heavily influenced by the French language, which was spoken by the Norman conquerors who ruled over England. One notable feature of Middle English and French in the art of singing was the use of various regional dialects and accents. Different regions of England had their own unique accents and pronunciations, which could be heard in the way singers performed their music. For example, singers from the north of England might have a different accent and way of pronouncing words than singers from the south. Another interesting aspect of Middle English in the art of singing was the use of rhyming and alliteration. Overall, the use of English and French in the art of singing during the Middle Ages played an important role in the development of English and French language and music. Through the use of different dialects, rhyming, and alliteration, singers were able to create powerful and evocative pieces of music that continue to be appreciated and studied today.*

Keywords: *language; pronunciation; Middle Ages; singing; music;*

Introduction

Between the 10th and 18th centuries, the English language underwent significant changes, unlike other European languages. Foreign words, particularly French, entered the English vocabulary, and during the 15th century, there was a complete modification of the pronunciation of long vowels. The English language as we know it today, known as Middle English, was initially the language of the middle and lower classes. There were some literary texts that continued the tradition of Old English, but they were probably less original and innovative. However, English kings became more identified with England as a country. An important event that led to the restoration of the English language as the official language of the island was the loss of French possessions in 1204 by King John. From that moment on, English re-emerged as the main language of the country, but rather different from the language that was spoken before 1066. The influence of the French language was already remarkable in structure, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, and also in the literary language. If the first nobles could not speak the language, later kings became bilingual. English was spoken among the Anglo-Saxons, society under the control of the French Normans, which spread to the rural environment to take over lands and estates. As a result, the Norman French began to gradually learn the English language. The coexistence of the Norman French language and the emerging English was known as Middle English. In the early period, especially in the middle of the 18th century and probably later, pronunciation was much more flexible than it is today. We know that there are different

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pronunciations between dialects in England, with the speaker usually using the dialect pronunciation of each word. In the Middle Ages, many words were pronounced the same way. The metrics used then actually represent the basis of today's modern language. The history of the English language is traditionally divided into the following periods: Old English (650 - 1100), Middle English (1100 - 1500), Early Modern English (1500 - 1800), Late and Modern English (1800 - present day).

Regarding the French language, it is a Romance language that evolved from the Latin language spoken in the Roman Empire in the 1st century BC. The earliest known records of the French language date back to the 9th century AD, when it was used in written documents in the northern region of France. In the Middle Ages, French became the official language of the French Court and Administration. It was also widely used in literature, poetry and music. The French language continued to evolve during the Renaissance and became the dominant language in France in the 17th century. In the 18th century, French became the international language of diplomacy and was spoken by aristocracy and the upper classes throughout Europe. French also became the language of culture and was used in literature, art and theater.

The French Revolution of 1789 had a significant impact on the French language. The revolutionaries sought to establish a new form of French that would be more democratic and accessible to the masses. They introduced new words and expressions and simplified the grammar and spelling of the language. In the 19th and 20th centuries, French continued to evolve and expand. It became the language of science, technology and commerce, and was spoken by millions of people around the world. Today, French is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, with approximately 300 million speakers. It is an official language in 29 countries, including France, Canada, Switzerland, and Belgium. The French language of the Medieval period falls approximately between 1350 and 1610, from the disappearance of Old French to the emergence of Modern French. The Middle French period roughly corresponds to the beginning of the Hundred Years' War (1328/1346) to the end of the Wars of Religion (1598). The characteristic changes of the Middle French period are widespread linguistically: phonological, grammatical, syntactical, orthographic and lexical. There are changes in the way it is viewed in relation to Latin and Italian. The story of Middle French is primarily used in poetry (religious and lyrical) and in chronicles. It became in the 17th century a respected language, with an increasingly explicit grammar and spelling, used in writing with a variety of subjects and styles.

2. Vowels and Consonants in English, during the Middle Ages

It is necessary to define the sounds precisely in terms of the organs of speech, especially the mouth and tongue, in order to produce the sound. A brief explanation of the standard descriptions of the sound produced in phonetics, accompanied by some examples from modern English. By placing your fingers on the larynx (on the Adam's apple in men) and pronouncing the word *thin* and then the word *then*, you will feel that the larynx vibrates for the *th* sound in the second word, not in the first. This activation of the larynx is called voicing. A consonant that does not activate the larynx is called unvoiced. The parts of the mouth that cause obstruction of the air passage are identified by adjectives derived from anatomical Latin names: lips - labial, teeth - dental - sounds that are formed behind the teeth, alveolar, palatal, velar, uvular. There are also sounds that are formed in articulation: bilabial *p*, *b* (from lips) or the lips and teeth produce a labiodental sound *v*, *f* is pronounced like in Modern English. In southern England this sound was

pronounced *v* and is often spelt *v* or *u* *voxe/uoxe*, like *fox*. Letter *g* is pronounced as in *goat* before the vowels *a*, *o* and *u*. Before *i* and *e* it may be pronounced like *j*. The combination *gg* sometimes represents the *g* sound *pigge* and sometimes represents the *j* sound *egge*, *segge*. The letter *j* sound sometimes appears in Modern English as *y* like *to say*.

The tongue is often not included in phonetic description, a sound is called alveolar *t*, *d*, palatal *ch*, *j*, velar *k*, *g* or uvular *r*, as in some dialects of the French language. The consonant can be produced by completely closing the inspired air, in which case a stop is produced, and it is called a fricative consonant. We also encounter a palatal consonant, if the tongue moves to the back of the mouth, in the hard palate, for example *tch* as in *kitchen*. Between vowels such as *a*, *o*, and *u* it was pronounced like the *ch* in Scottish *loch*, but with more vibration of the vocal cords. Next to *e* and *i*, it is pronounced like *y*. The letter *h* is pronounced like in Modern English. Because many medieval scribes were used to writing French, in which *h* is silent, the letter *h* occasionally occurs at the beginning of words that in English begin with a vowel. Letter *k* is pronounced like in Modern English. It is always pronounced before *n*, as in *knife*, *knight*. Letter *l* is pronounced like in Modern English. It is always pronounced in words like *folk* and *talk*. Letter *þ* is the Middle English for example *thorn*. It is pronounced like Modern English *th* in *then* or *thigh*. Letter *v* is pronounced like in Modern English. It may be spelt *u*. Letter *w* is pronounced like in Modern English. It is always pronounced before *r*, as in *write*. Consonants produced by redirecting the inspired air through the nose are defined as nasal: *m* and *n*. Affricates are fricative consonants, they are produced by stopping the inspired air. They are included in phonetic symbols such as *dʒ* as in *edge*, or *tʃ* as in *itch*, these are different in voice intonation. The position of vowels is generally defined by two axes: forward and backward, *high* and *low*. The *ee* sound is a high vowel, while *ah* is a mid-low vowel. The terms *front* and *back* vowels are called *anterior* and *posterior*. When the vowel sound transitions from *ah* to *oh* to *oo*, the lips become rounded. Many languages make a distinction between rounded and unrounded vowels. The process of phonation is aerodynamic and myoelastic. It transforms air into tone and the flow of air in the art of singing should be induced independently. The laryngeal function itself is often misunderstood. The larynx's response to full inhalation and the resonator capacities of the larynx itself should be understood by the singing teacher. This information needs to be clearly conveyed to the student. Managing one's own instrument and describing how it feels to oneself is not sufficient for training others. Often in the art of singing, the term *covering* is used, for most of the pedagogies that underpin this vocational discipline. Firstly, one should consider what that covering might mean; the numerous languages and pedagogical traditions in which the term appears. Furthermore, how different methods of covering relate to physical and acoustic levels. For this reason, if we refer to the specific term often used for the most practiced singing technique, such as the covering of the Italian school, called *copertura*, it may be preferable to use the expression *vocal modification*. This Italian expression would be equivalent to the covering in the French system, called *couverture*, and this means confusing quite different pedagogical procedures for correct vowel articulation. Each vowel has its own laryngeal configuration. Vowels are phonetically described as articulated in *front* and *back*. Singers often prefer to call them *high* or *low*, or *bright* or *dark*. The communicative language is not formed by stringing isolated words together. We express ourselves by organizing words into sentences, which allow the progression of a certain idea. Groups of such sentences develop what is called the initial thought. There is a direct correspondence between the roles of words and sentences in spoken language, as well as the notes (sounds) and musical phrases in singing.

In accomplishing such acoustic tracking of the vowel, the physical and acoustic principles that contribute to ideal speech intelligibility must also be present in singing. In this regard, „si canta come si parla”.²

3. The Great Vowel Shift in Medieval English

The pronunciation in early English is complicated due to the Great Vowel Shift, which is very difficult to pronounce accurately. The duration of the Great Vowel Shift varied in different regions of England. In urban centers, such as London, it was an important factor because the pronunciation before and after the Great Vowel Shift could be reconstructed with some accuracy by extrapolating from the language used in the 15th century. For singers with repertoire in English from the 15th century, it is more difficult to perform this shift in vowels. The Great Vowel Shift affected the pronunciation of vowels positioned in the back and front. For example, the sound [a], which we find in the word name, was shifted to a long [a:] at the end of the 14th century, and to a long [ɛ:] by the year 1500. The vowels [i] and [u] became diphthongs for the pronunciation of modern English in words like rise and house. In the middle period, the long vowels [i:] and [u:] became the diphthongs [ai] and [au].

Front	Central	Back	
i		u	high
ɪ		ʊ	
e	ə	o	mid
ɛ	ʌ	ɔ	
æ		ɒ	low

Table 1. *The basic English vowels and their position in articulation*

In early times, the relationship between the recited/sung text and the audience/public was an auditory one, rather than a visual one. After the 16th century, rhymes such as *tea* together with *away* and *obey* were often pronounced as *tay*. *Similarly his rhyme venturelenter gives us a strong clue to the lateness of the development of palatalization in the unaccented -ture syllable (Modern English [-tju:r] or [tʃu:r]) since the rhyme would be impossible with this pronunciation.*³

Since the English language of the Medieval period did not have a well-established spelling system, it is difficult to find a pronunciation guide that works for the wide variety of texts we can encounter. Most guides settle for the London dialect from the end of the 14th century of

² Richard Miller. 2011. *On The Art of Singing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 47.

³ Timothy J. McGee, A.G. Rigg, David N. Klausner. 1996. *Singing Early Music The Pronunciation of European Languages in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 14.

Geoffrey Chaucer. He wrote in the late decades of the 14th century, so the language belongs to the late Middle English period. The dialect of the English language spoken throughout its history has been characterized by considerable variety in its written form. Therefore, where modern English has only one way of spelling most words, there were numerous ways of spelling common words in Middle English. The word not for example, could appear spelled as *nat*, *noght*, *nawt*, *naught*, *nazt* and many other similar forms. Due to this variation in dialect, reading from the Medieval period, as detailed by author Geoffrey Chaucer, is an entirely different experience from reading and pronouncing the works correctly. In Chaucer's dialect, his vocabulary is also reflected. Basic words, including grammatical words such as conjunctions and, but; pronouns *I*, *you*, *he*, were inherited from Old English spoken by the Anglo-Saxons. During the Medieval Period, English was heavily influenced by the French spoken by the invading Norman aristocrat. Since French was the language of the Court, and of fashionable manners, much of the vocabulary of polite discourse and behavior was borrowed from French. Some examples include *courteous*, *gentle*, *noble*. Latin was another important source, especially in religious writing, because Latin was the language of the Church and of the Bible, hence words such as scripture and monastery. The pronouns used in Middle English are similar to those in Modern English. The difference lies in the fact that in Old English, the third-person plural pronouns were borrowed from Old Norse, which is the ancestor of modern English. *They*, *their*, and *them* were adopted as replacements for the Old English equivalents: *hie/hi*, *hira*, *him*, which were easily confused with other pronouns. Chaucer's pronoun system appears as a mix; he used the Old Norse form for the nominative pronoun *they*, but derived *his/her* and *them* from Old English. One of the differences between the pronoun system of the language used in the Middle Ages and the modern one is the use of the neuter possessive pronoun *his* (*its*). This uncertainty was eliminated in the sixteenth century with the introduction of the pronoun formed by adding the genitive *-s* ending to the nominative neuter pronoun *it*.

Early Middle English	Late Middle English	Early Modern English
ich	I	I
þou	thou	thou
he	he	he
he, heo, ha	she	she
hit	hit	it
we	we	we
ye, you	ye, you	you, ye
hi, heo, ha	they	they

Table 2. *English pronouns in different eras for the subject of a sentence*

The *thou* form is used to refer to one person, whereas the *ye/you* form refers to more than one person. Middle English adopted to some extent the French *tu/vous* distinction, in which the singular *tu* is used by those of higher social status and the plural *vous* is used in formal address or by those of higher social status address. This convention appears in Middle English texts.

Early Middle English	Late Middle English	Early Modern English
me	me	me
þe	thee	thee
him	him	him
hir(e)	hir(e)	her
hit	hit	it
us	us	us
you	you	you
hem	them	them

Table 3. *English pronouns in different eras for the object of a verb or preposition*

4. French vowels and consonants in the Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages French music, vowels and consonants were used in a particular way to enhance the musical and poetic expression. In general, the vowels were elongated and pronounced more distinctly, while the consonants were softened or even sometimes eliminated. This technique, known as *liquescence* involved blending consonants together and making them less distinct to create a smooth and flowing vocal sound. The term *liquescence* appears in the notation of Gregorian chant, the notation used at the Vatican, and sometimes distinguishes notes by a smaller size. *Liquescence* is reflected graphically in the cursive form of the neume, usually by shortening or wavering the sound. They occur when the articulation of a syllable is made through a liquid consonant on the last note of the group: *m, l, n, y, ng, w*. These consonants or semi consonants are sung accordingly, as would be the vowels, but in singing they are impeded in their pronunciation. They will be tightened in the mouth emission, and the note loses not half of its duration, but half of its strength. The nature of these articulations requires the voice to flow from one to the other and to become, so to speak, liquid, hence the name *liquescence*.

The purpose of this was to make the text more intelligible to the listener, while also highlighting the melodic and harmonic aspects of the music. In terms of specific vowels, the French language of the Middle Ages had a system of open and closed vowels, which were used to create different musical effects. Open vowels, like *a* and *o* were more resonant and full, while closed vowels, like *e* and *i* were more nasal and focused. Consonants were also used in specific ways to enhance the musical expression. For example, the *r* was often rolled or trilled to create a dramatic effect, while the *m* and *n* were used to add depth and resonance to the music. Overall, the use of vowels and consonants in Middle Ages French music was a highly nuanced and expressive art form that played a crucial role in the development of Western classical music.

In the Middle Ages, the French language had five vowel sounds: *a, e, i, o, and u*. However, the pronunciation of these vowels was different from modern French pronunciation. The vowel *a* was pronounced as *a* like *cat*, in French, *chat*, in Middle French. The vowel *e* had two pronunciations: a closed sound like *e* in *pet*, in modern French. The open pronunciation was more common in the Middle Ages. The vowel *i* was pronounced as *ee* in Middle French. In Old French, it was pronounced more like *i* in *machine*, in French, *voiture*.

The vowel *o* was pronounced as *o* in bone or tone in Middle French. In Old French, it was pronounced more like *o* in *pot*, in French, *pot*. The vowel *u* was pronounced as *oo* in Middle

French. In Old French, it was pronounced more like *u* in *duke*, in French, *duc*. It is worth noting that these pronunciations varied depending on the region and time period. In addition, the spelling of French words was not standardized in the Middle Ages, so the same word could be spelled differently depending on a certain writer/text author. In Old French, there were some hesitations in the notation of new sounds that did not have a close equivalent in the currently used tradition from Latin, such as diphthongized vowels and palatalized consonants. *The palatalized n [ɲ], for example, was written frequently as gn or ng, but sometimes as simple n, or ni, in, ign; or in the Walloon area nh.*⁴

In the Middle Ages, Walloon was spoken in the Walloon region, which is part of present-day Belgium. Walloon is a Romance language closely related to French. In the Middle Ages, Walloon had a set of vowels and consonants that were used to form words and sentences. The vowels in the Walloon dialect were similar to those in French and included: *a, e, i, o, u* and sometimes *y*. The consonants in the Walloon dialect were also similar to those in French and included: *b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x* and *z*. However, there were some differences in how these sounds were pronounced in the Walloon dialect compared to French. For example, the consonant *j* was pronounced as the *zh* sound, and the *ch* sound was pronounced as the *k* sound. Overall, Walloon in the Middle Ages would have sounded similar to French, but with some distinct regional variations.

The sound aspect of the French language presents several general characteristics. The articulation of sounds is done with a high and constant muscular tension, which mainly results in a great stability of the timbre of the sounds. In French, sounds with anterior place of articulation are predominant. Open syllables are prevalent 55% of them compared to closed syllables, which gives the French language a very vocalic, clear, and sonorous character. Speech is segmented into rhythmic groups, whose unity is ensured by a single main accent, consonantal and vocalic linkage, elision, and liaison. The rhythm of speech is characterized by the relatively regular periodicity of stressed and unstressed syllables, the equality of duration and intensity of these syllables, and the number of syllables in a rhythmic group, which is neither too small nor too large (3-7).

IPA Symbol	French spellings for the vowel a	Word French example
a	a or à	Paris or là
ɑ	â in a few verb forms	allâtes
ɑ	â (except as above) ɑ before [s] and [z] sound	pale or extase or lacer
ɛ	ai, âi, aie, ais, aise, ait, aient	mais
ə	ai in some verb forms of faire when before [z]	faisais or faisons
e	ai final	gai
aj	ail, aill, aille	travail or cailloux
é	aim, ain when final or before a consonant except m or n, or h	faim or ainsi
em	aim, ain when followed by a vowel	aime
en	aim, ain when followed by a vowel	plaine

⁴ Timothy J. McGee, A.G. Rigg, David N. Klausner. 1996. *Singing Early Music The Pronunciation of European Languages in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 70.

á	am, an, a on when final or before a consonant m or n, or h	champ or fumant
am	am, an when followed by a vowel or another m or n	tamis
an	am, an when followed by a vowel or another m or n	manne
o	au	chaud
ɔ	au before r	Fauré
ɛj	ay, aye, ayes	payer

Table 4. *French vowel A, spelling and word example*

IPA Symbol	French spellings for the consonant c	Word French example
s	c before a front vowel (e, i, or y)	ciel
ks	cc before a front vowel (e, i, or y)	accent
k	c or cc before a back vowel (a, o, u) or a consonant	encore
k	final	parc
silent	final after n	blanc
kt	ct final	direct
silent	ct final	respect
s	ç with the çédille	garçon
ʃ	ch	blanche
k	ch in words of Greek origin	Christ
k	cqu	acquisition

Table 5. *French consonant C, spelling and word example*

5. Conclusions

Diction refers to the clarity and accuracy of the singer's pronunciation and precise enunciation of lyrics. Good diction means that the audience can clearly understand the sung words, which is particularly important if the lyrics tell a story or convey a certain message. Singers must pay attention to the vowels and consonants in each word and make sure they are pronounced correctly and distinctly. On the other hand, declamation refers to the expression and delivery of the lyrics. This involves not only the tone and emotion of the singer's voice, but also the rhythm and phrasing of the lyrics. Good declamation is capable of conveying the meaning and emotion of the lyrics in a way that resonates with the audience. This may involve a variety of dynamics and tempo in the melody, as well as emphasizing certain words or phrases for an additional effect. Both diction and declamation are important for all singers. They must master all of these elements very well if they want to effectively communicate their message to the audience. By paying attention to these elements and working on their pronunciation, expression, and delivery, singers can create a powerful and memorable performance that leaves a lasting impression on their listeners. *Vocalization being essentially vowelization, it is the vowel that is the real carrier of the tone. Consonants have their own duration requirements that are to be respected, but they must not become predominant within the line; clear consonant articulation*

*can take place without glaring interruption of the vowel.*⁵ Diction is an essential aspect of classical singing. It refers to the proper pronunciation of words and the clarity with which they are enunciated during a performance. Clarity of Communication is one of the primary goals of classical singing is to communicate the emotion and meaning of the lyrics to the audience. If the diction is unclear, the audience may have difficulty understanding the words, which can detract from the performance. Proper diction ensures that the lyrics are clear and understandable, allowing the audience to fully appreciate the nuances of the music and the story being told. Interpretation of the Text: classical singing often involves performing songs in different languages, such as Italian, French, English or other languages. Proper diction is essential to accurately interpret and convey the meaning of the lyrics in these foreign languages. A singer with good diction can convey the subtle nuances of the text, such as the different vowel sounds and consonant pronunciations, which can significantly enhance the emotional impact of the music. In classical singing, proper diction is also important from a technical standpoint. It helps the singer to maintain proper breath control and vocal resonance, which can greatly improve the quality of the sound produced. Good diction also helps to avoid strain on the vocal cords, allowing the singer to perform with greater ease and longevity. In summary, diction is a crucial aspect of classical singing that allows the singer to communicate effectively with the audience, accurately interpret the text, and maintain technical proficiency. A classical singer who masters the art of diction can greatly enhance their performances and connect with audiences on a deeper level. The English and French Middle Ages languages, also known as Middle English and Old French, respectively, are important in diction for classical singers who perform music from those time periods. These languages have distinct phonetic features and pronunciations that must be accurately replicated in order to convey the meaning and emotion of the lyrics. For example, in Middle English, there are distinct vowel sounds and pronunciations that are different from modern English. Singers must be able to accurately reproduce these sounds in order to convey the meaning and emotion of the text. Similarly, Old French has distinct nasal vowels and other phonetic features that are different from modern French. Singers must be able to accurately reproduce these sounds in order to convey the meaning and emotion of the text. Accurate diction in these languages is also important for historical authenticity. Singers who perform music from the Middle Ages must strive to replicate the language as it was spoken during that time period. This not only enhances the authenticity of the performance but also allows the audience to fully appreciate the historical significance of the music. In addition, accurate diction in these languages is important for the technical aspects of singing. Proper diction allows the singer to maintain proper breath control, vocal resonance, and articulation, which are all crucial for a successful performance.

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⁵ Richard Miller. 2011. *On The Art of Singing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 20.