

The Diction in the Art of Singing in the English Language

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Abstract: *In this article, I have focused on some concepts of pronunciation and diction in the art of singing in the English language. I presented here the basic principles of pronunciation/diction and correct articulation. I discovered that in the English language, there are 5 different IPA symbols for the letter T, and 4 different IPA symbols for the letter R, just to give two examples. Unlike the Romanian language, where the Romanian syllable/word is pronounced the way it is written, in English, we have a different principle of pronunciation for diphthongs, triphthongs, syllables, or words in general. The singer produces sounds uttered at heights that a native speaker of the language has never been accustomed to using. The singer has a voice quality that they have systematically trained. There is a difference between spoken and sung diction/pronunciation. In singing, a tone must be sustained for a considerable amount of time at an unvarying height. The duration of time for a sustained sound is much shorter, and the height at which it is delivered increases or decreases for the same uttered sound.*

Keywords: *vowel; consonant; letter; pronunciation; diction; art of singing; singer;*

Introduction

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) was developed by Alexander John Ellis, Paul Passy, Henry Sweet, and Daniel Jones. The International Phonetic Association finalized this effort in 1888, assigning a specific symbol/sound to each letter of the alphabet from a language. It is an alphabet developed in the 19th century to accurately represent the pronunciation of languages. One of the objectives of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) was to provide a unique symbol for each distinctive sound in a language, each sound or phoneme that serves to distinguish one word from another. It is the most common example of phonetic transcription. Its creators' intention was to standardize the representation of spoken language, thus avoiding the confusion caused by inconsistent conventional spellings used in every language. The IPA was also intended to replace the existing multitude of individual transcription systems. For example, in English, there is only one *t* sound that distinguishes native speakers. Therefore, a single symbol is needed in a broad transcription to indicate each *t* sound. If a narrow transcription is required in English, diacritical marks can be added to indicate that the *t* in the words *tap*, *pat*, and *stem* differ slightly in pronunciation. In order to better understand the articulation of vowels in English, it is important to consider the correct use of diphthongs and triphthongs. There are differing opinions regarding the individual use of vowel sounds. In English, there are standalone vowels and vowels that end in a diphthong or reduced sound. The sound of a diphthong can have two distinct components - two vowels, written with a single letter and a single syllable, and diphthongs with two letters and two syllables. Vowels are speech sounds produced by correct

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articulation, supported by breathing. A diphthong is produced through a monosyllabic articulation. Consonants and vowels complement each other in a reciprocal process of support. Vowels add clarity and power to consonants. In articulation, vowels are more pronounced and much firmer than consonants. A diphthong that contains two combined letters results in a new form - a third sound, which is specific to the articulated vowel in English. A triphthong is formed by three successive sounds, which is capable of serving as a monosyllable.

According to some experts in sung English pronunciation, the vowels in the alphabet: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*, are accompanied together with the reduced vowel *i* (lost), forming a diphthong. Unlike Romanian, in English, words are pronounced differently from how they are written, and in some cases will be articulated with different vowels. The vowel *i* like *bee*, *i* like *pity*, *e* like *rate*, *ɛ* like *yet*, *æ* like *sang*, *a* like *bath*, *ɑ* like *ah*, *o* like *go*, *u* like *full*, *u* like *tooth*, *ɜ* like *further*, *ʌ* like *above*, *aɪ* like *while*, *aʊ* like *how*, *ɔɪ* like *toy*, *ju* like *using*, *iu* like *fuse*. Other diphthongs can be short or long, and the sounds *i* and *u* do not appear in these diphthongs. For example, *Practices of English Diction for Singers 1900 - 1971*, written by Carol H. Barber:

Symbol	Spelling	Spoken form
[i]	bee	[bi]
[ɪ]	pity	[ˈpɪtɪ]
[e]	rate	[ret]
[ɛ]	yet	[jet]
[æ]	sang	[sæŋ]
[ɑ]	bath	[baθ]

Fig. 1. *IPA Symbol*²

2. Pronunciation in the Art of Singing

To improve the clarity of vowels and consonants, it is important to consider syllable pronunciation. This can have a major impact on how easy it is to sing. A good tip is to relate to how you speak, so that you are more true to your own voice and improve your diction. When speaking, you rarely tighten or strain your vocal cords, and you do not become exaggerated in your pronunciation. This is because you use your voice in a way that is most natural to you, without trying to manipulate facial muscles to reach certain notes or to add a vocal style that throws your voice off balance. If you tend to rush and mumble when speaking, you will find that working on diction for singing will also improve your speech.

² Carol H. Barber. 1991. *Practices of English Diction for Singers 1900 - 1971*, Dissertation Thesis, August, Denton, Texas, p. 12. [Electronic version], from https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc500330/m2/1/high_res_d/1002778891-Barber.pdf.

3. Pronunciation of Vowels in English Singing Art

We all know the vowels of the alphabet: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*. However, when we sing, we pronounce these vowels in a distinct way due to the position where they form in the mouth. We can now order these vowels based on these positions, from front to back.

I pronounced as *eee* - pronounced in the very front of the mouth *e* - pronounced as *ay* - pronounced in the front half of the mouth In producing this vowel in English, the tendency to mechanically raise the position of the tongue must be removed, not through its own muscles, but rather by raising the lower jaw. The singer must practice keeping the position of the jaw and tongue constantly throughout the sound. The vowel *e* pronounced as *ay* cannot be sung as easily on high notes as *ee* or *y* the tone quality becomes increasingly harder and rougher. Its recurrence is always unpleasantly felt in all songs. However, it is greatly improved by lowering the larynx and widening the pharynx, just like in the transition from *ee* to *y*. Since the larynx naturally lowers with height, there is also a tendency to improve the quality of *ay* on low notes by this means. Allowing this tendency changes *ay* to *e*. Practice singing *ay*, *e*, *ay*, *e*, gently tightening the throat and notice the tightening for *ay* and the relaxation for *e*, although not as strongly marked as for *ee*.

A pronounced as *ah* - pronounced in the back half of the mouth. The tongue is altogether very low, but the front part is perceptibly higher than its tip, which still remains just above the lower teeth. Relaxation of the tongue is produced by completely removing the upper teeth.

O pronounced as *oh* - pronounced in the back of the mouth *u* - pronounced as *ooo* - pronounced right at the back of the mouth. Try pronouncing these vowels in order and you will feel the sound moving towards the back of the mouth. This should demonstrate how important pronunciation is for singers and why you should focus on improving diction. Improving diction in the art of singing must be very clear. This is very important when singing, so you should focus on it when developing your voice. Diction must remain correctly articulated on both vowels and consonants. The two main components to consider when improving diction are vocal performance and vocal technique. To improve the pronunciation of vowel sounds, practice each vowel: *ah*, *ee*, *ay*, *oh*, *oo*. Once you have mastered both consonants and vowels, combine the two: *mah*, *mee*, *may*, *moh*, *moo*, on the same pitch - perfect prime (1P), then at a second (2M)↑↓, third (3M) ↑↓, fourth (4P) ↑↓, fifth (5P) ↑↓, and ninth (9M) ↑↓. The nasal consonant *m* can be replaced with all other consonants, for example: *nah*, *nee*, *nay*, *noh*, *noo*; *bah*, *bee*, *bay*, *boh*, *boo*, etc.

4. A Few Diction Rules

From a technical standpoint, for some singers, words can be unclear, mumbled, or hissed. Here are some rules for proper diction when singing. Warm up and include diction exercises. This will train you to get used to shaping your mouth and placing your tongue correctly. It will also help warm up all the muscles necessary for singing. Be careful about what you eat and drink before singing. Some foods and drinks may be good for your voice, but there are many others that can affect your larynx, which will change the way you pronounce words. Always record your performances, and if you continue to have problems with diction, then a good vocal coach should be able to help you address any issues and improve your diction. Avoid tobacco and alcohol, not only for your general health but also for your singing. They are harmful to your

voice, and tobacco is particularly bad for your lungs and breathing. Practice the lyrics thoroughly. This means that you can spend more time focusing on pronunciation. The most common causes of poor diction can be any or all of the following: mouth shape, tongue placement/position, external muscles around the jaw or internal muscles in the larynx, and breathing.

IPA Symbol	Description	Articulation of the vowels and consonants
a	Bright Ah	open front unrounded vowel
ɑ	Father Ah	open back unrounded vowel
ɒ	RP dark Ah	open back rounded vowel
æ	Ash-A-E ligature	mid-open front vowel
aɪ	Bright Ah, Open I	“eye” diphthong
b	Lower-case B	voiced bilabial plosive
B	Small capital B	voiced bilabial trill
ç	C cedilla	unvoiced palatal fricative
d	Lower-case D	voiced lingual alveolar plosive
ɟʒ	D-Ezh ligature	voiced affricate
ð	Ethe; Eth; Voiced TH	voiced dental fricative T
e	Closed E; Lower-case E	mid-close front vowel
eɪ	Closed E-Open I diphthong	“hate diphthong”
ɛ	Open E; Epsilon	mid-open front vowel
ə	Schwa; Unstressed uh	unstressed mid vowel
ɚ	R-colored schwa	unstressed r-colored mid vowel
ɜː	R-colored reversed epsilon	stressed r-colored mid vowel
ɚ̥	RP r-colored schwa, Superscript r schwa	unstressed milder r-colored mid vowel
ɜ̥ː	RP r-colored reversed epsilon; RP superscript r reversed epsilon	RP „earth”
ʌ	Caret; hat; Turned V; Stressed UH	open mid-back unrounded vowel. In stressed syllables
f	Lower-case F	unvoiced labialdental fricative
g	Lower-case G	voiced lingual velar plosive
h	Lower-case H; aspirate sound	unvoiced glottal fricative
i	Closed I; Lower-case I	close front unrounded vowel
ɪ	Allophone I; Barred I;	near-close near-front unrounded
ɪ	Open I; Small capital I	near-close near-front unrounded
j	Lower-case J, “J glide”	voiced palatal approximant
ju	J U glide, Liquid u “Yod”	voiced approximant and rounded lip vowel
k	Lower-case K	unvoiced lingual velar plosive
l	Lower-case L	voiced dental or alveolar lateral

m	Lower-case M	voiced bilabial nasal
n	Lower-case N	voiced dental or alveolar nasal
ŋ	Eng	voiced velar nasal
o	Closed O; Lower-case O	mid-closed back vowel
ɔ	Open O	mid-open back vowel
oʊ	Closed O-Open U	“Oh!” diphthong
p	Lower-case P	unvoiced bilabial plosive
ɹ	Burred r, Turned r, American r	consonant R is followed by a vowel sound
ɾ	Fish-hook R, flipped/flapped r	voiced dental or alveolar flap
r	Voiced trilled r, Rolled r; lower-case R	voiced dental or alveolar trill
s	Lower-case S	unvoiced alveolar fricative
ʃ	Esh	unvoiced postalveolar fricative
t	Lower-case T	unvoiced dental plosive
ɾ̥	lower-case T with subscript wedge	semi-voiced, imploded t
tʃ	T-Esh ligature, also tʃ	unvoiced postalveolar affricate
θ	Theta; unvoiced TH	unvoiced dental fricative
tʃs	T-S ligature	double articulation
u	Closed U; Lower-case U	close back rounded vowel
ʊ	Open U, cookie vowel, Upsilon	near-close near-back rounded vowel
v	Lower-case V	voiced dental-labial
w	Lower-case W	voiced labial-velar approximant
ʍ	Turned W; whine sound	unvoiced labial-velar fricative
z	Lower-case Z	voiced alveolar fricative
ʒ	Ezh; tailed Z	voiced post-alveolar fricative

Table 1. *I.P.A. List of Vowels and Consonants in English Language*

In addition to the vowels and consonants in the table above, according to the IPA, in English, we encounter five diphthongs as follows: *aɪ* - bright ah-open *i* "eye" diphthong, *aʊ* father ah-open *u* "house" diphthong, *ɔɪ* open *o*-open *i* "boy" diphthong, *oʊ* closed *o*-open *u* "oh!" diphthong, *eɪ* closed *e*-open *i* "hate" diphthong. There are also five *r*-colored vowel diphthongs and two *r*-colored vowel triphthongs in American English: *aɚ* ah-*r*-colored schwa "star" diphthong, *ɔɚ* open *o*-*r*-colored schwa "oar" diphthong, *ʊɚ* open *u*-*r*-colored schwa "sure" diphthong, *ɛɚ* open *e*-*r*-colored schwa "fair" diphthong, *ɪɚ* open *i*-*r*-colored schwa "fear" diphthong, *aɪɚ* "fire" triphthong, *avɚ* "flower" triphthong. Additionally, we will encounter five *rp*-*r*-colored diphthongs and two *rp*-*r*-colored triphthongs in English: *aɚʳ* ah-*r*-colored schwa *rp* "star" diphthong, *ɔɚʳ* open *o*-*r*-colored schwa *rp* "oar" diphthong, *ʊɚʳ* open *u*-*r*-colored schwa *rp* "sure" diphthong, *ɛɚʳ* open *e*-*r*-colored schwa *rp* "fair" diphthong, *ɪɚʳ* open *i*-*r*-colored schwa *rp* "fear" diphthong, *aɪɚʳ* "fire" triphthong *rp*, *avɚʳ* "flower" triphthong *rp*.

Learning the correct principles of diction for singing vowels requires more than a list of sounds coupled with key words for identification. Vowels have traditionally been specified in terms of the position of the highest point of the tongue and the position of the lips. Those vowels for which the highest point of the tongue is at the front of the mouth are called front vowels. There are also mid-vowels, as well as vowels produced in the back of the mouth. If the tongue is forward, the vowel is said to be bright; if the tongue is back, the label applied is dark or somber. The terms high or close refer to vowels in which the tongue is raised to the highest position. The tongue is lowest in low or open vowels. The lips may be rounded or not. These terms clarify the method of production and describe the unique quality of individual vowel sounds.

*There are many sounds in the range of vowel-color between these extremes. The language which uses the greater variety of these sounds is richer, more expressive, because of them. The singer whose speech is cultivated to formal perfection and tonal elegance will, therefore, find his art aided by a language which includes a variety of singable vowels, offering, therewith, less restriction of expressional or expressive sounds.*³

5. Pronunciation of Consonants in English Singing Art

Consonants are speech sounds that are characterized by a constriction or closure at one or more points of the breath stream. The terms indicating the place refer to the upper and lower structures of the vocal tract involved in articulating consonants. They are bilabial (both lips), dental (tip or blade of the tongue and upper front teeth), alveolar (blade or tip of the tongue and the ridge of the teeth), retroflex (back, part of the tooth ridge and the tip of the tongue), palato-alveolar (blade of the tongue and the back part of the tooth ridge), palatal (front of the tongue and hard palate), velar (soft palate and back of the tongue) and glottal. All consonants can be classified as either voiced or voiceless. In the articulation of a voiced consonant, the vocal cords vibrate. In the articulation of a voiceless consonant, the vocal cords do not vibrate. Consonants must combine with vowels to form authentic syllables and words. Voiced consonants are d, l, n, z, t and s, which do not require any voice and are therefore voiceless consonants. Unlike the open sounds of vowels, consonants are closed sounds. This means that there is a certain type of obstruction of the airflow from the lungs to parts of the mouth that come into contact with each other and thus close off the free flow of air.

Consonants in English are classified into five main groups: plosives - *p, b*, nasals - *m, n*, fricatives - *s, f*, affricates - *tʃ* - examples - chop, *dʒ* - examples - jam, approximants - *w, r, l, j*. Consonants: *p* - pot - bilabial plosive, *b* - bet - bilabial plosive, *d* - dog - alveolar plosive, *t* - top - alveolar plosive, *k* - kit - velar plosive, *g* - got - velar plosive, *f* - fog - labio-dental fricative, *v* - vat - labio-dental fricative, *θ* - thick - dental fricative, *ð* - that - dental fricative, *s* - sat - alveolar fricative, *z* - zoo - alveolar fricative, *ʃ* - shut - post-alveolar fricative, *ʒ* - measure - post-alveolar fricative, *h* - help - glottal fricative, *tʃ* - church - post-alveolar affricate, *dʒ* - jump - post-alveolar affricate, *m* - mom - bilabial nasal, *n* - nod - alveolar nasal, *ŋm* - thing - velar nasal, *l* - lot - alveolar approximant, *r* - rat - post-alveolar approximant, *w* - won - bilabial approximant, *j* - you - palatal approximant.

³ Louis Arthur Russel. 1905. *English Diction for Singers and Speakers*, The Music Students Library, Oliver Ditson Company, Boston, p. 4.

Consonants can be classified as either voiced or voiceless. In the articulation of a voiced consonant, the vocal cords vibrate. In the articulation of a voiceless consonant, the vocal cords do not vibrate. Stating the obvious, consonants must combine with vowels to form authentic syllables and words.

6. Conclusions

The English language has a remarkable spelling system, such that someone who sees a word cannot be sure how it should be pronounced, and someone who hears a word cannot be sure how it should be spelled. Both the pronunciation and spelling of the English language have varied greatly in the past few centuries. As a result, there has been a need for a pronunciation dictionary of the language in the last hundred years. The ultimate goal of a dictionary would be to provide those additional signs/rewriting of words based on a systematic phonetic principle. However, another difficulty arises here: no one is empowered to declare what the correct pronunciation of the English language is or should be. In fact, English is spoken differently in each area. Rarely will we be able to detect a speaker of Scottish, Irish or American origin after hearing them say a few words. *The vocabulary of pronunciation was written by a Scot, James Buchanan, in 1757. The pronunciation dictionary was written by an Irishman, Thomas Sheridan, in 1780. One of the widely used pronunciation dictionaries today is written by an American, Joseph E. Worcester, 1847⁴*, says author Alexander John Ellis in his book.

In the art of singing, the organs of the voice are: the larynx, glottis, uvula, tongue, soft palate, hard palate, and lips. The voice in singing descends from the highest to the lowest tones and rolls various modulations depending on how the air is compressed by the larynx. The muscles of the larynx bear the greatest burden, as they are the organs that direct the voice. Emission represents the use of exhaled air to produce the voice. The exhaled air will meet what is called the glottic zone, under the vibration of the vocal cords, which are impelled by the cortex. The voice is amplified in the resonance cavities. Correct pronunciation is a difficult skill to acquire when learning a foreign language.

When pronouncing English vowel sounds, non-native English speakers tend to rely on the spelling knowledge of their mother tongue. These letter-to-sound associations differ significantly between English and Romanian, especially for vowel sounds.

Singing can be an effective way to practice correct English phonetics, supporting better articulation of sounds in a foreign language. Given the strong differences in vowel pronunciation between English and Romanian, there are more chances of pronunciation errors and, therefore, more opportunities to improve vowel sounds. An advantage of singing over pronunciation can be most evident in vowel sounds. Individuals tend to exaggerate the length of vowels in singing compared to speaking, especially when singing in their native language. In addition, vowels are characterized by stable frequency information, like melody. The text can be initially processed at a superficial or phonetic level before delving into semantic understanding. Some research has shown that learning foreign vocabulary through singing will result in only superficial levels of processing. In certain studies, namely the use of direct word association method between a foreign word and its corresponding word in the native language, called direct associated learning,

⁴ Alexander John Ellis. 1900. *Pronunciation for Singers with especial reference to the English, German, Italian, and French Languages; with numerous examples and exercises for the use of teachers and advanced students*, J. Curwen & Sons, Music Printers, Plaistow, E. London, p. 182.

has yielded results. In direct associated learning, paired words provide two levels of representation, lexical and conceptual, which can create a more concrete memory representation to support vocabulary learning.

7. References

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