

The Diction in the Art of Singing in the German Language

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Abstract: *In the art of singing in the German language, diction is of utmost importance. The pronunciation of each word must be clear and precise, allowing the audience to understand and connect with the lyrics. When singing in German, singers must pay attention to vowel sounds, consonant placement, and the overall musicality of the language. German is known for its complex sounds and consonant clusters, so it is important for singers to practice and master the pronunciation of each word. Additionally, singers must pay attention to the nuances of the German language, such as umlauts and diphthongs, to accurately convey the emotion and meaning of the lyrics. Overall, diction is a crucial aspect of singing in German, as it enhances the overall performance and allows the audience to fully appreciate the beauty and depth of the language.*

Keywords: *diction; vowel; consonant; pronunciation; language;*

Introduction

The German language, as spoken today, has evolved from the same roots as all European languages, with the exception of Finnish and Hungarian. Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish; Slavic languages; German, English, Dutch; Scandinavian languages, and some Asian languages, all belong to the Indo-European languages (sometimes called Indo-Germanic). It is believed that the first Indo-European language originated in Asia Minor at the southern end of the Caspian Sea, as early as 2500 BCE. From there, speakers migrated to Northwestern Europe. The Indo-European roots come from a long-lost language from antiquity. It was studied by scholars who knew it very well, as seen in the oldest writings in the Germanic language and other languages. The linguistic transformation that distinguishes the Germanic languages from the others in this "family" is what is called the first consonant shift. Jacob Grimm (1785-1863), the older of the two brothers who wrote the famous Fairy Tales, recognized and codified the first of these two consonant shifts. In this shift, the plosive consonants *b*, *d*, and *g* become *p*, *t*, and *k*, respectively, becoming mute. The second consonant shift, which occurred around 700 CE, in the higher geographical regions of Germanic language speakers, namely in the mountainous regions of the Alps and the Germanic territories from south to north - Cologne and Frankfurt. However, this *shift* did not reach the low coastal areas, leaving the Dutch, Flemish, and English languages unaffected by this transformation. In the second consonant shift, the sounds *p*, *t*, and *k* become *pf*, *z* [ts] and *ch*. The modern German language evolved from what is called *Old High German*, spoken from the 7th century until the 11th century. This was followed by *Early Middle High German*, spoken from around 1050 until 1350. This period saw the emergence of the first lyrical poets, known as *minnesingers*. *Early New High German* was spoken from around 1350 until 1650 and eventually evolved into the new German language of today. High German

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(*Hochdeutsch*) in the sense of standard German was formed in the 16th and 17th centuries based on intermediate dialects (*Mitteldeutsch*), between Upper German and Low German.

Works for the mass media, especially written ones, are almost all produced in *Hochdeutsch*, which is a universal language understood in all German-speaking areas globally (except for preschoolers in areas where only dialects are spoken - but in the era of television, even they come to understand High German, even before going to school). However, High German (*Hochdeutsch*) also has another meaning, namely the totality of the following languages and dialects: standard German, Yiddish, and Luxembourgish, dialects from the central and southern regions of Germany, dialects spoken in Austria, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Luxembourg, South Tyrol (Italy), Alsace and Lorraine (France), Belgium, Poland, the USA, Russia, Romania, Denmark, as well as several countries in South America and Southern Africa.

The first dictionary by the Brothers Grimm was published in 16 parts between 1852 and 1960. It was and still is the most comprehensive dictionary of German words.

In 1880, the grammatical and spelling rules of that time appeared in the Duden lexicon, named after its author, Konrad Duden. In 1901, this book was declared the standard definition of the German language. From then until 1996, there was no major spelling reform. In 1996, the decision was made to reform the spelling rules, leading to the so-called "new" German orthography, for which German linguists from four German-speaking states, FRG, GDR (before reunification), Austria, and Switzerland (German-speaking cantons), worked together for decades. The new rules were introduced on August 1, 1998.

1. International Phonetic Alphabet - IPA Sounds of the German Language

In the second half of the 19th century, a system of transcribing the sounds of language began to be developed by scientists in phonetics and linguistics, so that speakers of other languages could read and understand the phonemes (sounds) necessary for forming words as they are spoken. The standardized transcription system is called the International Phonetic Alphabet or IPA. The symbols are easy to learn, and we can use IPA to indicate what sounds or phonemes are used in forming the sounds of any language. Most languages use more sounds than can be represented by conventional spelling with individual symbols. The alphabet is used for writing several Western languages, with a limited number of symbols, so many symbols are used for multiple sounds.

Before we start using IPA, it would be wise to explain which symbols we have for the German language as commonly spoken. Theodor Siebs provides guidelines for German, as it should sound on stage, diction in lyrical singing. *Specifically, we have chosen the following IPA symbols: [aē], [ɔ̄ø], and [aō], for the diphthongs in mein, Freude, and Haus. We use the symbol [̣] to connect the sounds in the diphthongs as above, in affricates as [ts] and [ks], and double consonants as [td]. The symbol [j] is used for the voiced palatal fricative in ja and jene. The glottal separation (glottal stop) is indicated with the symbol [ʔ].*²

The following table presents the German sounds and their IPA symbols. Sounds can be classified in many ways. In this table, we include the most common classification of sounds in the order they are introduced and further explained in each individual section.

² Valentin Lanzrein & Richard Cross. 2018. *The Singer's Guide to German Diction*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 7.

Category	IPA Symbol	German language example / Translated into English	
Monophthongs	[i:]	Liebe ['li:bə] / love	
	[i]	Lilie ['li:liə] / lily	
	[ɪ]	Licht [lɪçt] / light	
	[e:]	Leben ['le:bən] / life	
	[ɛ]	Herz [hɛrts] / heart	
	[ɛ:]	Räder ['rɛ:də] / wheels	
	[ə]	Erde ['e:rdə] / Earth	
	[ɑ:]	Tag [tɑ:k] / day	
	[a]	Ratte ['ratə] / rat	
	[ɐ]	Vater ['fa:tə] / father	
	[o:]	Rose ['ro:zə] / rose	
	[ɔ]	Wonne ['vɔnə] / wonder	
	[u:]	Blume ['blu:mə] / flower	
	[ʊ]	Mutter ['mʊtə] / mother	
	[ø:]	Flöte ['flø:tə] / flute	
	[œ]	Götter ['gøtə] / gods	
	[y:]	Tür [ty:ɐ] / door	
	[ʏ]	Küche ['kyçə] / kitchen	
	Nasal Vowels	[ɛ̃]	cousin [ku'zɛ̃] / cousin
		[ã]	orange [o'rãzə] / orange
[õ]		jargon [ʒar'gõ] / jargon	
[œ̃]		Parfum [par'fœ̃] / perfume	
Diphthongs	[aɪ]	Hain [haɪn] / meadow	
	[aʊ]	Maus [maʊs] / mouse	
	[ɔɪ]	Freude ['frøʊdə] / joy	
Fricative	[f]	Fenster ['fɛnstə] / window	
	[v]	Wasser ['vasə] / water	
	[s]	Ross [rɔs] / horse	
	[z]	Sonne ['zɔnə] / sun	
	[ʃ]	Schuh [ʃu:] / shoe	
	[ʒ]	Genie [ʒe'ni:] / genius	
	[j]	Jäger ['jɛ:çə] / hunger	
	[ç]	Licht [lɪçt] / light	
	[x]	Bach [bax] / spring	
	[h]	Haus [haʊs] / house	
Plosives	[l]ʒ	ihrem Aug' ['li:rəm laʊk] / her eye	
	[p]	Platz [plats] / place	
	[b]	Burg [bɔrk] / castle	
	[t]	Tat [tɑ:t] / act	
	[d]	Dach [dax] / roof	
	[k]	König ['kø:niç] / king	
	[g]	Garten ['gartən] / garden	
Nasal	[m]	Morgen ['mɔrgən] / morning	
	[n]	Nacht [naxt] / night	
	[ŋ]	Gesang [gə'zɑŋ] / song	
Lateral	[l]	Lied [li:t] / song	

Trills	[r]	Ruh [ru:] / rest
	[ʀ]	Haar [ha:r] / hair
Affricates	[ps]	Psyche [ˈpsyçə] / psyche
	[pf]	Pforte [ˈpfortə] / gaate
	[ts]	Zauber [ˈtsaʊbər] / magic
	[tʃ]	Deutsch [dɔɐ̯tʃ] / German
	[ks]	Hexe [ˈhɛksə] / witch
	[kv]	Quelle [ˈkvɛlə] / good
Semi Vowel Glides	[w]	Toilette [twaˈletə] / toilet
	[ɥ]	Nuance [ˈnyɑ̃sə] / nuance
Other IPA Symbols	[ː]	Liebe [ˈli:bə] / love
	[h]	Tor [tho:r] / gate
	[̃]	Orange [oˈrɑ̃ʒə] / orange
	[̂]	Vogel [ˈfo:gəl] / bird
	[,]	Vogelgesang [ˈfo:gəlgə,zəŋ] / birds song

Table 1. *Sounds of the German Language* after Valentin Lanzrein and Richard Cross

Plural Forms of Nouns

In the plural of some nouns, the stressed vowel in the stem changes its quality by adding theumlaut (¨) (diaeresis); *thus* a becomes ä, o becomes ö, u becomes ü, and au becomes äu.

Singular / English Translation	Plural
Vater [ˈfɑ:tər] / father	Väter [ˈfɛ:tər]
Macht [maxt] / power	Mächte [ˈmɛçtə]
Boden [ˈbø:dən] / floor	Böden [ˈbø:dən]
Schloss [ʃlɔs] / lock	Schlösser [ˈʃlɛsər]
Bruder [ˈbru:dər] / brother	Brüder [ˈbry:dər]
Frucht [frɔxt] / fruits	Früchte [ˈfryçtə]
Baum [bɑo:m] / tree	Bäume [ˈbœmə]

Table 2. *Plural Forms of Nouns*

Comparative Forms of Adjectives

The stressed vowel changes its quality by adding the umlaut (diaeresis) in the comparison and superlative forms of most monosyllabic adjectives.

Pozitive / English Translation	Comparative / English Translation	Superlative / English Translation
nah [na:] / near	näher [ˈnɛ:ər] / nearer	am nächsten [am ˈnɛ:çstən] / nearest

stark [ʃtark] / strong	stärker [ˈʃtɛrkɐ] / stronger	am stärksten [am ˈʃtɛrkstən] / strongest
groß [gro:s] / big	größer [ˈgrø:sɔ] / bigger	am größten [am ˈgrø:stən] / biggest
kurz [kurt͡s] / small	kürzer [ˈkʏrt͡sɐ] / smaller	am kürzesten [am ˈkʏrt͡sɛstən] / smallest

Table 3. Comparative Forms of Adjectives

Verb endings indicate the subject of the sentence and the tense of the action. Verbal endings are always unstressed, and the vowel *e* is pronounced as *a* schwa, [ə]. The dictionary usually lists verbs only in the infinitive form; therefore, you may need to refer to a conjugation book when you have difficulty identifying a verb in a conjugated form. The infinitive form of the verb ends in *-en* or *-n*. In weak regular verb forms, the stem remains unchanged when the verb is conjugated. Most German verbs are weak and follow the following pattern:

Infinitive	hören [ˈhø:rən]	to hear		
Past Perfect	gehört [gəˈhø:rt]	heard		
	Pronoun	Present tense	Past tense	Subjunctive
Singular 1st person	ich	höre [ˈhø:rə]	hörte [ˈhø:rtə]	höre [ˈhø:rə]
Singular 2nd person	du	hörst [ˈhø:rst]	hörtest [ˈhø:rtəst]	hörest [ˈhø:rəst]
Singular 3rd person	er, sie, es	hört [ˈhø:rt]	hörte [ˈhø:rtə]	höre [ˈhø:rə]
Plural 1st person	wir	hören [ˈhø:rən]	hörten [ˈhø:rtən]	hören [ˈhø:rən]
Plural 2nd person	ihr	hört [hø:rt]	hörtet [ˈhø:rtət]	hörtet [ˈhø:ret]
Plural 3rd person	sie	hören [ˈhø:rən]	hörten [ˈhø:rtən]	hören [ˈhø:rən]

Table 4. Conjugations regular verb forms

In strong irregular verb forms, the stem changes its quality in some conjugated verb forms.

Infinitive	singen [ˈzɪŋən]	to sing		
Past perfect	gesungen [gəˈzʊŋən]	sung		
	Pronoun	Present tense	Past tense	Subjunctive
Singular 1st person	ich	singe [ˈzɪŋə]	sang [zaŋ]	sänge [ˈzɛŋə]
Singular 2nd person	du	singst [zɪŋst]	sangst [zaŋst]	sängest [ˈzɛŋest]
Singular 3rd person	er, sie, es	singt [zɪŋt]	sang [zaŋ]	sänge [ˈzɛŋə]
Plural 1st person	wir	singen [ˈzɪŋən]	sangen [ˈzaŋən]	sängen [ˈzɛŋən]
Plural 2nd person	ihr	singt [zɪŋt]	sangt [zaŋt]	sänget [ˈzɛŋet]
Plural 3rd person	sie	singen [ˈzɪŋən]	sangen [ˈzaŋən]	sängen [ˈzɛŋən]

Table 5. Conjugations irregular verb forms

2. Compound Words

German Romantic poetry is characterized by long words that are constructed from multiple shorter words. An example would be the title of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* [The Magic Flute]. Many compound words are formed from two nouns, such as the title of Franz Schubert's *Der Winterreise* [The Winter Journey]; others can be composed of a verb and a noun, as in *Sehnsucht* [longing], a noun and an adjective like *eiskalt* [ice-cold], or an

adverb and an adjective like *wunderselig* [wonderful]. Compound words can also consist of more than two words, such as *Mindest/haltbarkeits/datum* [expiration date]. Some words used in everyday language include *Vogelgesang* [birdsong] and *Todesangst* [fear of death]. Other more complex words have a highly poetic value that can be difficult to translate or may require a lengthy explanation, and the singer will need a deeper understanding of the German language to grasp their meaning. In most cases, however, it is possible, with the help of a dictionary, to easily recognize and translate separate elements.

Examples:

Diamantenpracht - compound of *Diamanten* [diamonds] and *Pracht* [splendid] [splendid diamonds]; *Mondesglanz* - compound of *Mond* [moon] and *Glanz* [shine] [moonshine].

Accent in non-Germanic origin words - final *-ie* is usually stressed in words of Greek origin: *Harmonie* [harmoni:] [harmony]; *Melodie* [melo'di:] [melody].

Other words ending in *-ie* are stressed on the penultimate syllable, and *-ie* is pronounced [iə]. Most of these words are of Latin origin: *Arie* ['ɑ:riə] [aria]; *Lilie* ['li:liə] [lily].

Word endings *-ion*, *-ist*, *-tät*, *-phon*, and *-tiv* are stressed: *Motion* [mo'tʃiɔ:n] [motion]; *Komponist* [kɔmpo'nɪst] [composer]; *Universität* [uni'versi'te:t] [University]; *Xilophon* [ksylo'fo:n] [xylophone]; *Stativ* [ʃta'ti:f] [tripod]. Words of Greek origin ending in *-ik* usually have the stress on the penultimate syllable: *Lyrik* ['ly:rik] [lyric]; *Tragik* ['tra:gik] [tragic]. Other words, also of Greek origin, ending in *-ik* and stressed on the final syllable: *Mathematik* [matema'ti:k] [Mathematics]; *Musik* [mu'zi:k] [Music].

3. Vowels

Vowels are sounds that resonate without any obstruction above the vocal cords. The term vowel is derived from the Latin word *vocalis*, meaning *sound*. The German word for vowel is *Vokal* or *Selbstlaut*, which means a sound that sounds by itself. Vowels can be classified as follows: *long vowels* and *short vowels*, based on length and manner of phonation; *bright vowels* and *dark vowels*, based on the quality of tone resulting from the presence or absence of high tones; *front vowels*, *back vowels*, *central vowels*, based on the position of the highest point of the tongue; *rounded vowels* and *unrounded vowels*; *tongue vowels* are vowels formed with the help of the tongue; *lip vowels* are vowels primarily formed by the lips. Vowels formed with both the tongue and rounded lips are called *mixed vowels*; *open vowels* and *closed vowels* depending on the space in the oral cavity.

Letter	Long IPA	Example / English translation	Short IPA	Example / English translation
<i>i</i>	[i:]	Liebe ['li:bə] / love	[ɪ]	Lippe ['lɪpə] / lips
<i>e</i>	[e:]	Heer [he:r] / army	[ɛ]	Herr [hɛr] / mister
<i>ä</i>	[ɛ:]	Mär [mɛ:r] / old story	[ɛ]	März [mɛrts] / March
<i>a</i>	[ɑ:]	Bahn [ba:n] / train/way	[a]	Bann [ban] / magic
<i>o</i>	[o:]	Ofen ['o:fən] / oven	[ɔ]	offen ['ɔfən] / open
<i>ö</i>	[ø:]	Höhle ['hø:lə] / cave	[œ]	Hölle ['hœlə] / hell
<i>u</i>	[u:]	Grube ['gru:bə] / hole	[ʊ]	Gruppe ['grʊpə] / group
<i>ü</i>	[y:]	fühlen ['fy:lən] / sense	[ʏ]	füllen ['fʏlən] / to fill

Table 5. Long and Short Vowels

4. Consonants

Unlike a vowel sound that resonates without any obstruction of airflow above the vocal cords, a consonant is a sound that results from interference with the airflow in some way in the resonance tract. The term consonant is derived from the Latin verb *consonare*, meaning *to sound with*. Consonants can be distinguished from each other based on three major criteria:

1. Voice (voiced/voiceless); 2. Place of articulation; 3. Manner of articulation.

1. The classification used in phonetics to describe consonants produced with the help of vocal cord vibration - by placing fingers on the larynx and pronouncing a prolonged *z* as in *zoo*, one can feel the vibration similar to a vowel sound. These consonants are called *voiced* (vocalic). In contrast, if you say an extended *s*, no vibration can be felt throughout the duration of the consonant. Such a consonant is called *voiceless*. *These consonants can be sustained on musical tones passing through the whole diapason of the human voice. Singable consonants in German are, for all practical purposes, m, n, ng, l, w, s, j, and, to some extent, r.*³

2. Place of articulation The place of articulation refers to the resonance location where the airflow is obstructed:

Bilabial - between the upper and lower lips;

Labiodental - between the lower lip and upper front teeth;

Dental - between the tip of the tongue and upper front teeth;

Alveolar - between the tongue and the alveolar ridge;

Prepalatal - between the tongue and the area behind the gum ridge;

Palatal - between the tongue and the hard palate;

Velar - between the tongue and the soft palate (velum);

Uvular - between the tongue and the uvula;

Glottal - between the vocal cords (glottis).

3. The manner of articulation refers to the method by which airflow is interrupted, diverted, or stopped: *Fricative* – airflow is directed through a narrow path between articulators causing turbulence of air. The rubbing of air is audible as a speech sound; *Plosive*, also called stop or stop-plosive – airflow is stopped by articulators from passing through the mouth or nose and then released abruptly; *Nasal* – airflow is prevented from passing through the oral cavity and redirected through the nose by the lowered soft palate; *Lateral* – airflow exits laterally (sideways) around the tip of the tongue, which blocks the central path; *Trill* – the tip of the tongue is held against the alveolar ridge, and the forced air between them causes the tongue to produce a trill; *Affricate* – a combined sound of a plosive consonant immediately followed by a fricative consonant, creating the impression of a single sound. German also has some unique consonant sounds, such as the *ch* sound (as in *Bach*) and the *ü* sound (as in *fühlen*). Additionally, German has the *ß* character, known as the *Eszett* or *sharp S*, which represents a double *s* sound.

They must be sung clearly, without any trace of diphthongization, unless coloring, covering, or blending of tones into vocal phrases warrants a certain adjustment. In German, as in the Romance languages, the tones are sung on vowels, the consonants following them being drawn to the next vowel.⁴

³ Kurt Adler. 1965. *Phonetics and Diction in Singing Italian French Spanish German*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 121.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

		Bilabial	Labio-Dental	Dental	Alveolar	Pre-Palatal	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Glottal
Fricative	Vowel Unvoiced		[v] [f]	[z] [s]		[ʃ] [ç]	[j] [ç]	[x]		[h]
Plozive/ Stop	Vowel Unvoiced	[b] [p]			[d] [t]			[g] [k]		[ʔ]
Nasal	Vowel	[m]			[n]			[ŋ]		
Lateral	Vowel				[l]					
Trill	Vowel				[r] [ʀ]				[R]	

Table 6. Consonant Chart⁵

Double consonants are pronounced the same as single consonants. The difference in pronunciation between the word *Ofen* [stove] and *offen* [open] or *ihnen* [you] and *innen* [inside] does not lie in the length of the consonant sound but rather in the vowel sound that precedes it or in the soft connection to the following consonant. A single consonant is followed by a long vowel after decomposition [:], whereas a double consonant abruptly brings the preceding vowel to a close, shortening it entirely. All this does not mean that the sound of the consonant cannot be prolonged for clarity or emphasis. However, elongating all double consonants creates something very strange and non-German sounding. Sometimes, to create a sharp and strong link to the preceding clear vowel, which is necessary for the pronunciation of the short vowel, there is a tendency, but not a requirement, to start the sound of the consonants early. This causes a slight prolongation of the consonant sound, which is not necessary for understanding and goes against the pronunciation rule, but is rather a direct result of starting the consonant early. Compare the words in the following table, making sure to pronounce double and single consonants with equal length, while the long and short vowels create the difference in meaning.

Letter	IPA	Double consonants/ English translation	Single consonants/ English translation
<i>bb</i>	[b]	Ebbe ['ɛbə] / reflux	eben ['e:bən] / even
<i>pp</i>	[p]	Kappe ['kapə] / lid	kapern ['ka:pərn] / diversion
<i>dd</i>	[d]	Pudding ['pʊdɪŋ] / pudding	Pudel ['pu:dəl] / poodle
<i>tt</i>	[t]	Hütte ['hytə] / hut	Hüte ['hy:tə] / hats
<i>gg</i>	[g]	Flagge ['flagə] / flag	Wagen ['va:gən] / to dare
<i>ck/(kk)</i>	[k]	hacken / (hak-ken) ['hakən] / to hack	Haken ['ha:kən] / hook
<i>ll</i>	[l]	füllen ['fʏlən] / to fill	fühlen ['fy:lən] / sense
<i>mm</i>	[m]	Lamm [lam] / lamb	lahm [la:m] / limp
<i>nn</i>	[n]	Bann [ban] / magic	Bahn [ba:n] / train
<i>ff</i>	[f]	offen ['ɔfən] / open	Ofen ['o:fən] / oven
<i>ss</i>	[s]	Masse ['masə] / dimensions	Maße ['ma:sə] / dimensions

Table 7. Double Consonants

⁵ Valentin Lanzrein & Richard Cross. 2018. *The Singer's Guide to German Diction*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 109.

5. Conclusions

Proper pronunciation is essential in German diction and declamation. Clear enunciation of vowels, consonants, and diphthongs is crucial for effective communication and expression. German is a language that places a strong emphasis on stress and intonation. Understanding and mastering the correct stress patterns and intonation in German words and sentences is vital for conveying meaning and emotion in declamation. German has a distinct rhythm and pacing that contribute to the overall flow and cadence of spoken language. Paying attention to the natural rhythm of German words and phrases can greatly enhance the delivery of declamation. Effective declamation in German requires the ability to convey emotion and expression through vocal delivery. Understanding the context and meaning of the text is essential for bringing the words to life and engaging the audience. Developing strong diction and declamation skills in German takes practice and training.

Diction plays a significant role in the art of singing in the German language. Clear and precise pronunciation of words is essential for conveying the meaning and emotion of the lyrics to the audience. Paying attention to vowel sounds, consonant placement, and the musicality of the language is crucial for a successful performance. Mastering the nuances of the German language, such as umlauts and diphthongs, is important for delivering a compelling and authentic interpretation of the song. Overall, strong diction enhances the overall quality and impact of a performance in German, allowing singers to effectively communicate the message of the music and connect with their audience on a deeper level.

6. References

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