

Diction in the Art of Singing in the Italian Language

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Abstract: *The vowels in the Italian language are usually pronounced very clearly and are not altered by the adjacent consonants, compared to other languages. The articulation of consonants is essential because it provides the rhythmic and expressive framework of the text. Good diction is important to convey the emotional content of the text. Musical pieces in the Italian language often use the expression legato in performance, which requires smooth transitions between notes while maintaining clear sounds for both vowels and consonants. Singers should practice the musical text (the musical notes assigned to the corresponding sounds) thoroughly, without compromising the clarity of pronunciation.*

Keywords: *vowels; consonants; diction; Italian language; pronunciation; articulation;*

Introduction

The Italian language has specific intonation patterns that can affect meaning and expressiveness. Correct stress on syllables can improve the overall interpretation of the music. In Italian, nasal sounds must be managed very carefully. While avoiding excessive nasality is important for voice quality, subtle resonance can enhance the sound. In the Italian language, syllables are usually marked with a uniform rhythm. Singers should maintain a constant rhythm that reflects the natural syllabic structure of the language, which helps achieve an authentic sound. Understanding the cultural and emotional context of the text is essential for pronunciation. This knowledge allows singers to connect with the lyrics and interpret them with appropriate expressiveness. By focusing on these aspects, singers can improve their pronunciation in Italian, leading to a good vocal performance and an authentic interpretation of the music. The Italian language requires seven different vowel sounds to form words and sentences. The vowel sounds are the purest and easiest to produce. This "purity" comes from the formation of any specific diphthong in the Italian language, and it is the main reason for the positioning in articulation, which is predominantly open. All of this creates the basis for the style known in musical terms as *bel canto*.

1. Pronunciation of Vowels in the Italian Language

The sound [a] in Italian pronunciation is always bright. In its production, the tongue must be relaxed, with the tip slightly anchored on the lower ridge of the teeth. The vowel [a] can be long or short. It is long when found in an accented syllable, before another vowel or a consonant. It is always short before a single consonant. Exemple: short - *p[a]tria* (country) / *p[a]lpiti* (beats)

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from *Tancredi* by Gioacchino Rossini - Recitativo and Aria of *Tancredi* - *Oh, patria...Di tanti palpiti*; and long - *all'[a]rmi* (alarms) from *Il trovatore* by Giuseppe Verdi.

*Any language has distinctive sound characteristics resulting in its own unique color. Italian has always been justly praised for the purity of its vowel sounds*².

The vowel sound [e] is always open when placed at the end of a word or if it occurs in an unstressed syllable of a polysyllabic word. In the following words, the final [e] is pronounced as: *che, poicche, tre, me, vende* (which, since, three, I, sells) and other forms in the third-person singular. This is also true if [e] precedes a double consonant: *vend[e]tta* (revenge), *foll[e]ggiare* (to frolic). Some words with [e] are encountered in short stressed syllables, as in *frat[e]llo* (brother), *sor[e]lla* (sister), or in suffixes such as -[e]nte, -[e]simo, and -[e]stre.

The sound [e] or [ed] is always long and closed. "Eh" or "deh" (in exclamation) is also closed. The stressed [e] in suffixes is closed, as in diminutives like -etto and -etta, and in forms like -ese, -essa, -evole, -ezza. Its pronunciation in *de'e* is [dee].

The sound [i] in Italian is almost always long. Double consonants where [i] occurs will not be pronounced short, only final [i]s are usually short. [I] can be silent and remain unpronounced in the following combinations: *cia, cie, cio, gia, gie, gio, giu, scia, scie, scio, sciu, glie, glio, gliu*.

In Italian, there is the case where the vowel appears doubled as *ii*, and it is pronounced and sung as a prolonged [i], for example, in the word *fugii* (I fled). The pure [i] tends to sound shrill and metallic, especially in its upper tones, i.e., in the high and super-high registers. It is recommended to produce the sound without opening the lips or with the sensation of a "smile." The tip of the tongue should again be anchored on the lower ridge of the teeth. The front part of the tongue should curve upwards, but it should not move too high, as this would make the front cavity of the mouth too small. While the metallic [i] sound has been accepted in Italian operas, great singers have almost always modified it towards [e] or [y]. It will depend a lot on the singing teacher to discourage the spreading of the [i] sound, blending it with the other vowels in a musical phrase. The letter [Y] in Italian mostly appears in derived Greek words and is pronounced as [i].

The sound [o] in Italian is produced by rounding the lips and lowering the jaw, keeping the oral cavity open and round, with the tongue positioned low. The lips should be rounded, but not excessively, as this would result in a closed [o]. In monosyllabic words, the vowel [o] is always pronounced [ɔ], as in *non, con, don*. In the stressed syllables of polysyllabic words, [o] can be either open or closed, as seen in the aria *La donna è mobile* from Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Rigoletto*. The vowel [o] is pronounced [ɔ] before double consonants like *mm, nn, rr, ss, or zz*. It can be open or closed before double *tt*. The vowel [ò] (with a grave accent) is always pronounced [ɔ]. This type of [ò] only indicates the word's accent and does not change the original sound, as in the word *sarò* (I will be), pronounced *sar[ɔ]*.

The sound [u] is always long, never diphthongized. In Italian, [u] is pronounced with rounded and prominent lips, much more prominent than in the pronunciation of a closed [o]. It is important to note that for a performer, particularly a lyric artist, it is necessary to keep the mouth and throat relaxed, otherwise, the vowel will sound muffled. The tongue should be kept low, and the jaw should be raised more than when pronouncing [o].

² David Adams. 2008. *A Handbook of Diction for Singers. Italian, German, French*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 3.

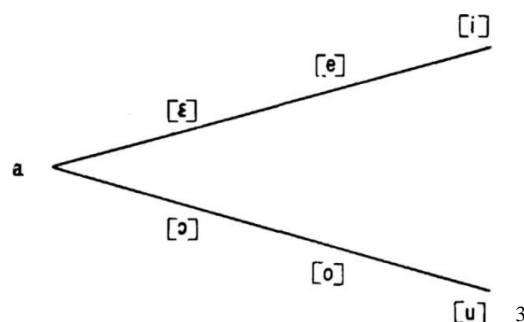


Fig. 1. *Vowels in the Italian Language*
Graphical representation after Kurt Adler

2. Semivowels in the Italian Language

The Italian language has two semivowels, which belong to the class of diphthongs. The letter [i] can sometimes become a semivowel, expressed phonetically as [j]. It is always a semivowel in its initial form when followed by another vowel, except in words derived from Greek. [I] is a semivowel between two other vowels, for example, *acciaio* (steel), in words ending in -iera, -iere, such as *cavaliere* (knight). It is also a semivowel in verb forms ending in -iamo, -iate, like *facciate* (to do or facades, depending on the context). In words derived from Latin, such as *dieci* (ten), derived from the Latin word *decem*. In the word *obietto* (I object), [i] is pronounced as a semivowel.

[U] can sometimes become a semivowel, pronounced phonetically as [w]. Also, [u] becomes a semivowel when combined with the consonants q, g, and ng. In all of these cases, the accent does not fall on the semivowel, but on the preceding vowel or the following vowel. Words with the accent on [i] or [u] are not considered semivowels, and all nouns with endings -ío, -ía, and -íe, with stressed [í], like *Dío* (God). Vowels that do not contain semivowels due to [ú] are: *túo, súo, túa, tío, sío, dúe, lui, cúí*, etc. From a musical perspective, the distinction between a vowel and a semivowel should be made with great care. Usually, the semivowel is expressed with a single note. The note should be divided so that the accented vowel receives a longer musical value.

3. Diphthongs and Triphthongs in the Italian Language

We speak of diphthongs when two vowels appear in the same syllable. Vowels with diphthong combinations that belong to the same syllable are: *ae, ai, ao, au, ea, ei, eo, eu, ia, ie, io, iu, oa, oe, oi, ua, ue, ui, uo*. These diphthongs should be pronounced very clearly, separately, without connecting the letters together. This is a frequent error and should be immediately corrected by singing teachers. Diphthongs in Italian are either vocalic (syllabic vowel plus asyllabic vowel) or semivocalic (semivowel plus syllabic vowel). If the semivowel precedes the syllabic vowel, we are talking about an ascending diphthong with the accent on the vowel, as in words with *ia, ie [iɛ], io, iu, ua [uɛ], ue, ui, uo [uɔ]*. For the descending diphthong, the accent always remains on the vowel, for example: *ai, ei [ɛi], oi [ɔi], au, eu [ɛu]*.

³ Kurt Adler. 1965. *Phonetics and Diction in Singing Italian French Spanish German*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 12.

*The elements in Italian diphthongs are nearly equally prominent, and the connecting glide is very short, so the union appears extremely lax, and the effect is more like two separate syllables than a single syllable, whereas the monosyllabic character is always well-marked in English and German*⁴.

Triphthongs are three vowels next to each other in the same syllable. Each of these vowels must be pronounced clearly and separately but connected by a legato. The musical accent must conform to the phonetic accent. The stressed vowel receives the longest part of the note under which it is placed, for example: *aio*, *iei* - as in *miei* (my, as in “my apples”), *iuo*, *uai*, *uia*, *uoi* - as in *vuoi* (you want).

4. Pronunciation of Consonants in the Italian Language

The distinction between simple consonants and double consonants in Italian must be made very clearly, more than in any other language. The classification of consonants, based on their degree of singability, includes vocal consonants and non-vocal, voiceless consonants. A native Italian speaker always pronounces consonants as clearly and distinctly as vowels, with articulation. Except when vocal line adjustments are necessary, consonants are pronounced clearly but without the explosive force that characterizes certain consonants. The consonant [m] is a bilabial nasal sound, produced by both lips, with air exiting through the nose. The lips are firmly closed but not under pressure, and when sung, [m] equates to a hum. In bel canto phrases, it is essential that the flow of the vocal line from vowel to vowel is not interrupted, and the [m] should be pronounced gently, with the lips not closing too tightly. The [m] between two vowels receives a soft accent, as in the expression *ti amo* (I love you). The [m] before or after a consonant receives a moderate accent, as in *tempo* (time).

The consonant [n] represents an alveolar nasal sound, produced by flattening the front part of the tongue on the upper alveolar ridge, with the tip of the tongue touching the upper teeth. At the same time, the soft palate should be in a raised position. [N] between two vowels should be produced with care not to exaggerate the pressure of the tongue. [N] is soft between two vowels, as in the Italian word *lana* (wool), and moderate before or after another vowel, as in *mente* (he/she lies). You must be very careful not to lower the oral cavity too much, as this would reduce the resonance size of the mouth cavity and increase the nasalization of the [n]. [N] changes its quality when followed by the consonants [f] or [v]. If followed by [g] or [k], [n] becomes [ŋ]. The sound [ŋg], transcribed phonetically, would be [ŋ].

The consonant [l] is a dental-alveolar voiced sound, produced by placing the tongue near the upper teeth, close to the gum ridge. After the dental-alveolar placement, the tongue should quickly drop to the lower teeth. To form the next vowel, [l] should transition to the position of the next consonant if followed by such a sound. [L] can be articulated differently depending on the accent. It is soft between two vowels and moderate before or after a consonant. In words like *là* (there), *lì* (there), [l] receives a strong accent. The initial [l] is produced so easily that almost all languages use it to illustrate melodies and rhythms, usually followed by the vowel [a]. In melismatic singing, the accent on [l] is soft. When expressing rhythmic patterns, the accent on [l] becomes moderate or even strong, approaching a double [ll].

⁴ Alexander J. Ellis. 1900. *Pronunciation for the Singers with Especial Reference to the English, German, Italian and French Languages*. London: J. Curwen & Sons, p. 45.

The consonant [v] is a voiced labiodental fricative sound, produced by lightly and relaxed placing the upper teeth against the inner part of the lower lip. The tongue should be in a low, relaxed position, without touching the lower teeth. This forms a narrow opening through which the sound is produced. [V] must always be voiced (it should vibrate). [V] is slightly accented between two vowels, moderate before or after a consonant.

The consonant [s] is a voiced sound. Sometimes pronounced [s], other times pronounced [z]. [S] is a fricative alveolar-dental sound, produced in the front by arching the tongue upwards, with the tip touching the center of the upper front teeth. This sound should always be pronounced in a relaxed manner, never hurriedly. The [z] in Italian is pronounced in different ways, depending on the geographical area. The northern regions generally pronounce it as [z]. In Tuscany, the pronunciation is mixed, so sometimes it sounds like [s], other times like [z]. There is no general pronunciation rule. In singing, it is best to always pronounce [s] when it is between two vowels or before another voiced consonant.

The consonant [b] is a voiced bilabial plosive sound. The lips must be closed lightly and remain in this position for a fraction of a second, but long enough to create an occlusion, allowing the air to exit. The lip muscles should not be tense. In Italian singing diction, the occlusion should always be light. In all plosive sounds, voiced or voiceless, maintaining the melodic line may force the singer not to make a complete occlusion, meaning to simulate the occlusion.

The consonant [d] is a voiced dental plosive sound. The tip of the tongue touches the point where the upper gum and hard palate meet. After remaining there for a moment to make an occlusion, the tongue quickly but gently moves to the next sound, with the appearance of an air current. [D] between two vowels and before another consonant is lightly accented.

The consonant [g] in Italian is a voiced velar plosive sound, produced in the area of the soft palate with the back of the tongue. This sound causes a brief occlusion that should be resolved gently. The tip of the tongue should be anchored to the lower teeth. [G] is pronounced before the vowels [a], [o], and [u]. A silent [h] is added before *ghe*, *ghi*. It is also pronounced [g] before the consonant [r] and sometimes before the consonant [l]. The sounds [gl], [g], and [gh] have a soft accent between two vowels and before another consonant, with a moderate emphasis after another vowel.

The consonant [dʒ], *ge* or *gi*, is a semi-occlusive alveolar palatal voiced sound, essentially a combination of the sounds [d] and [ʒ]. The tongue positions itself on the alveolar ridge, with the center of the tongue touching the hard palate. The resulting sound allows a small space for air to escape. The sound [dʒ] should be pronounced gently to maintain its full tonal quality. In Italian, [dʒ] is expressed by the letter [g] before [e] or [i]. If the same sound is desired before vowels like [a], [o], or [u], a silent [i] must be inserted, as seen in words like *giardino* (garden), *gioia* (joy), *giù* (down).

The consonant [r] in Italian pronunciation, due to the various ways it can be articulated, holds a special position. In its pure Italian form, it is a voiced alveolar trill, produced by keeping the tongue forward, with the tip vibrating against the upper alveolar ridge. Depending on the accent, the trill may be repeated. The air flows over the tongue, not along its sides. The rolling of the [r] is sometimes referred to as a "dental [r]" or "rounded [r]." The rolling of the [r] should not be exaggerated. Some Italian singers use a uvular [r] (guttural), rolled at the back of the tongue. The [r] between two vowels always receives a soft accent. Initial and final [r]s, and [r]s before and after other consonants, are pronounced with a moderate to strong accent.

The consonant [z], phonetically represented as [dz], can also be a voiceless consonant, in which case it is represented phonetically as [ts] or [dz]. [Z] is a semi-occlusive dental voiced sound. The air can escape through a narrow passage, which is why it is classified as [dz] semi-occlusive. There is no strict rule to determine when the Italian [z] is voiced [dz] and when it is voiceless [ts]. Regional differences exist. [Z] can be voiced, as in *zero* (zero). A voiced [z] can also appear between two vowels, as in *ozono* (ozone), or after another consonant, as in *garza* (heron). Even the double [zz] can be voiced, as in *olezzo* (smell).

International Phonetic Alphabet Symbols for Italian	
Vowels	Glides
/a/ amo, fama	/j/ pianto, patria, buio
/e/ vedo, stella	/w/ sguardo, sangue, tuoi
/ɛ/ bella, gelida	
/i/ mio, addirittura	Plosive Consonants
/o/ colore, dottore	/b/ /bb/ abate, babbo
/ɔ/ sposa, memoria, povero	/p/ /pp/ popolo, gruppo
/u/ tuo, crudele, fortuna	/d/ /dd/ Alfredo, freddo
	/t/ /tt/ tutore, tutto
Fricative Consonants	/g/ /gg/ fuga, fuggo
/v/ /vv/ evviva	/k/ /kk/ seco, secco
/f/ /ff/ farfalla, buffo	Vibrant Consonants
/ʃ/ /ʃʃ/ scendo, lascia, pesce	/ɾ/ /ɾɾ/ caro, carta, carro
/s/ /ss/ sasso, stesso	
/z/ rosa, smania	Nasal Consonants
Lateral Consonants	/n/ /nn/ pane, panna
/l/ /ll/ libro, giallo	/m/ /mm/ ama, mamma
/ʎ/ /ʎʎ/ gli angeli, figlio	/ɲ/ fianco, languire
	/ɲ/ /ɲɲ/ gnocchi, agnello
Affricate Consonants	Other Symbols
/tʃ/ /tʃʃ/ cerco, caccia	/ː/ lengthen preceding sound
/dʒ/ /dʒʒ/ gemo, fuggire	/˘/ syllabic stress
/ts/ /tts/ zio, pazzo	/_ / phrasal diphthong
/dz/ /ddz/ Zerlina, mezzo	

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Fig. 2. Vowels and Consonants in the Italian Language
IPA for the Italian Language, by David Adams

Voiceless consonants contain no sonority. In diction for the art of singing in Italian, the voice does not stop on them, but, after articulating the preceding vowel, it links them to the following vowel. In Italian, voiceless consonants are never aspirated, as in German or English. The exception is only when emotional, poetic, or onomatopoeic reasons require it. In lyrical singing, where the projection of sound is much stronger and more important, or even vital, than in other vocal music genres, certain voiceless consonants, especially [f], [p], and [k], must receive strong emphasis to be heard. The consonant [f] is a voiceless labiodental fricative sound. However, the upper teeth and the interior of the lower lip must connect more firmly. The small amount of air must be released suddenly. The emphasis on [f] is soft between two vowels, and moderate if it precedes another consonant. The distinction between simple consonants and double consonants in Italian is extremely important. A simple consonant is always pronounced gently, with various degrees of soft accent, moderate, and sometimes strong. Double consonants are always strongly emphasized. The distinctive pronunciation of a double consonant is the only way to mark the difference between words written similarly: *eco* - *ècco* (echo - here you go),

⁵ David Adams. 2008. *A Handbook of Diction for Singers. Italian, German, French*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 4.

caro - *carro* (dear - wagon), *fato* - *fatto* (fate - done), *casa* - *cassa* (house - cash), *pala* - *palla* (shovel - ball), *nono* - *nonno* (ninth - grandfather), *fumo* - *fummo* (smoke - we smoked), *Papa* - *pappa* (Pope - baby food), *libra* - *libbra* (balance - pound). Voiced double consonants include: [ll], [mm], [nn], [rr], [gg], [ddʒ], [bb], [dd], [gg], [zz] - [ddz], [ggh], [vv]. Voiceless consonants are: [cc] - [tʃ] or [cch] - [kk], [ff], [pp], [ss], [tt], [cqu] or [qqu] - [kkw]. Double consonants are pronounced as an extended consonant. Double consonants in Italian shorten the preceding vowel.

Double voiced consonants can play an important vocal function. They can carry the vocal line from one vowel to another. Double consonants provide more intensity, impulse, and importance to the words they contain. Although all double consonants are drawn toward the following tone, the voiced consonant should receive a certain portion of the sung sound. This is especially true for double consonants: [ll], [mm], [nn], [rr], and [vv].

Occlusive and semi-occlusive double consonants voiced and voiceless: [bb], [dd], [gg], [pp], [tt], [cc] - [kk], [zz] - [tts], [ddz], [qqu] - [kkw], [cc] - [tʃ], [gg] - [dd]. All these occlusive and semi-occlusive consonants are produced by the tongue and lips, which form the double consonant at the end of the previous tone, but without pronouncing it. After a fraction of a second, the air is gently pushed out and the occlusion ends as it slides into the next vowel. A small interruption in the vocal line is thus inevitable but serves to emphasize the double consonant.

5. Linking Vowels in the Italian Language

The vast majority of words in the Italian language typically end with vowels. In singing, these final and initial vowels must be pronounced with linkage. The rules for linking different vowels are very important and must be fully understood by the interpreter, the accompanist, and the voice teacher. Musically, these vowel connections are typically expressed through a single note. The main reason for this is that in Italian, vowels normally connect, and any Italian does this very naturally. If two words are connected by final and initial vowels that are identical in writing and sound, the liaison will simply have the effect of an extended vowel sound. If the phonetic values of these two vowels are different, one short and one long, the resulting liaison will carry the sound of the longer vowel. In evaluating the length that each vowel receives in combinations of different vowels, several aspects must be considered. First, if one of the two or more vowels is long and closed, it will receive the greatest part of the note's value, and the other vowel or vowels will receive a lesser value. Second, the length of the musical note will determine whether the longer vowel is extended. If the note is very short or the tempo is very fast, the musical note's value becomes so small that both vowels can receive the same interval/length of time. Third, accented vowels receive a larger portion of the available musical note, while unaccented vowels receive a smaller portion. An example of a vowel link between two vowels is *Largo al factotum* (Figaro's Cavatina *Largo al factotum* from *Il barbiere di Siviglia* by Gioacchino Rossini) or *Un solo istante i palpiti* (Aria of Nemorino *Una furtiva lagrima* from *L'elisir d'amore* by Gaetano Donizetti).



Fig. 3. *Linking vowels in the Italian Language*

6. Conclusions

The Italian language is known for its phonetic clarity. Typically, each letter corresponds to a single sound, which enhances understanding and fluency in speech. Italian diction is characterized by musicality, with clear patterns of stress and a melodic intonation. The Italian language has a rich system of vowels, and the vowel sounds are generally pronounced very clearly and distinctly, more so than in many other languages. As mentioned, the diphthongs in Italian tend to have elements that are pronounced equally, which can create a perception of two syllables, rather than just one. This characteristic sets it apart from other languages, such as English or German, where the monosyllabic nature is more pronounced. Italian diction often includes groups of consonants that can influence pronunciation, leading to the use of added vowels to facilitate transitions between sounds. This results in a smooth and fluent speaking style. In different regions of Italy, distinct dialects can be encountered, which may modify diction and pronunciation. This diversity enriches the language but can present significant challenges for non-native speakers and lyrical singers of Italian. Correct Italian diction effectively conveys emotion and mood. The expressive nature of the language allows speakers to transmit passion and feeling, both through words and their proper intonation. Due to the well-defined phonetic system and characteristic emphasis, the performer can highlight the expressive nuances of the text, making them more accessible and engaging for the audience. This distinctive pronunciation not only enhances the artistic quality of performances but also supports the development of an auditory and emotional connection between the artist and the audience. Thus, correct pronunciation in Italian becomes a fundamental tool in the art of singing, amplifying the beauty and impact of the music. In conclusion, the pronunciation of the Italian language is characterized by clarity, musicality, and emotional richness.

7. References

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⁶ Kurt Adler. 1965. *Phonetics and Diction in Singing Italian French Spanish German.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 39.