

Diction for Singing

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My first job was that of a Jr. High Choral Director. I inherited an unauditioned choir. I placed the students into their respective sections as well as I knew how. I selected some music, taught them the pitches, rhythms, dynamics (by rote of course), and guess what? They sounded like a community "sing song." I had no idea what was wrong. I knew they were out of tune, out of rhythm, no blend, no one could understand the words, but I had no clue as to how to fix it.

About this time the Texas Music Educators Association brought Irvin Cooper, a Jr. High expert, to the February convention in Galveston. I attended all of his sessions, learned something about proper literature and auditioning, but I knew this would not alone solve my problems. I made an appointment with Dr. Cooper and explained generally what I have talked about above. He simply said, "Fix the vowel sounds. Get everyone singing the same vowel sound and you will solve the blend and pitch problems." It worked!!

Hence my conclusion: **DICTION IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF SINGING.** The old Italian voice teachers used to say, "A good vowel sound is a good tone, and a good tone is a good vowel sound." The vowel sounds may be classified as the enunciators and the consonant sounds may be said to be the articulators (Ross). With the vowel sounds we sustain. With the consonant sounds we separate.

This brings us to the definition of words. Most of the time the answer you receive is something that pertains to meaning. In fact, the dictionary definition is: "a sound or sounds that express meaning" (Oxford). However, before the meaning of a word can be understood, the sounds of that word must be sounded in a reasonably accurate way. So! From the standpoint of sound, the definition of words is: vowels sounds broken up into long and short segments by the use of consonant sounds (Jones). It means that the sounds used in some words have different stresses and lengths than when used in other words. This is true in all languages.

The above explanations pertain principally to speech because when speaking the speaker controls the tempo, the stress, and the length of the sounds. Pitch is not important except in inflection. There is a big difference, however, between speaking and singing. When singing songs you are at the mercy of the composer who has set the words of a poem to the tempo, rhythm, and pitch of the melody. The sounds of the words must be emitted within the rhythmic framework of the melody. Hence, the term **RHYTHMIC DICTION**; the idea that all sounds in the words have a rhythmic designation within the measure.

Let us now review the sounds of the English language. The principles, however, are the same regardless of the language. In my opinion, the best way to learn the sounds of a language is to learn the **INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET**. This is a collection of symbols (not letters) that represents every sound of any language. It is very easy to memorize these symbols because they are so logical.

THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET (IPA)

Chart #1 Vowels

Diphthongs

Pure	Primary	Secondary	Triphthongs
[ɑ]- father	[aɪ]- night	[ɛə]- air	[aɪə]- ire
[ɛ]- wed	[ɛɪ]- day	[ɪə]- ear	[aʊə]- our
[ɪ]- it	[ɔɪ]- boy	[ɔə]- ore	
[i]- me	[aʊ]- now	[ʊə]- sure	
[æ]- cat	[oʊ]- no		
[u]- too			
[ʊ]- full			
[o]- obey (unstressed)			
[ɔ]- warm			
[ɜ]- learn			
[ʌ]- up			
[ə]- sofa (unstressed)			
[a]- ask			
[ɒ]- hot			

Diphthong: Two vowel sounds adjacent to each other, one receiving more stress than the other (English).

Dissyllable: Two vowel sounds adjacent to each other, both receiving equal stress (Italian).

Consonants

Voiced	Unvoiced	Liquids	Semi-vowels
[b] b	[p] p	[l] l	[w] wait
[d] d	[t] t	[m] m	[j] you
[g] g	[k] c	[n] n	
	[k] k	[ŋ] sing	
	[k] q		
[z] z	[s] s		
[v] v	[f] f		
[r] r	No counterpart		

Voiced	Unvoiced	Semi-vowels
[dʒ] Judge	[tʃ] church	[w] wait
[ʒ] vision	[ʃ] sheet	[j] you
[ð] that	[θ] think	
[w] wait	[hw] where	
No counterpart	[ks] x	
[j] you	[h] h	
[ʔ] glottal		

Definitions

A **voiced** consonant is a consonant that uses the vocal cords as part of the sound.

A **liquid** consonant is a consonant on which you can sustain a pitch.

An **unvoiced** consonant is a consonant that does not use the vocal cords as part of the sound.

A **glottal** attack is used only at the onset of vowel sounds.

An **aspirate** consonant is always unvoiced.

A **semi-vowel** is a vowel sound used as a consonant or a consonant used as a vowel sound. Also known as a half vowel or half consonant. Both are voiced consonants.

An **exploded** consonant is one that uses infra-glottal pressure to achieve the plosive (English).

An **imploded** consonant is one that uses only supra-glottal pressure to achieve the plosive (Italian and French).

A **principal vowel sound** is a vowel sound that you choose to sustain.

A **subordinate vowel sound** is a vowel sound that you use as an articulator and is sustained only momentarily.

Rhythmic Diction

When singing:

1. Attack the sound the way you want it! Sustain the sound the way you attacked it! Release the sound the way you sustained it! (Jones)

In other words do not change the "set" of the articulators from the onset (Miller) to the release. If you do you will change the vowel sound, and what is called a "chewing" (Sundberg) of the vowel sound will result.

2. Find the first principal vowel sound! Put it rhythmically on the note above it! Whatever comes before the first principal vowel sound (a consonant) place it in a desired rhythmic position in the previous measure.

Now find the second principal vowel sound. Put it rhythmically on the note above. Place every sound between the first principal vowel sound and the second principal vowel sound "in the twinkling of an eye" just before the second principal vowel sound. Continue in this manner throughout the song!

BEFORE PROCEEDING! GO BACK AND MEMORIZE THE (IPA)

Chart #2
 "My Country, 'tis of Thee

3/4
 a... I k A... ntr I... t

3/4
 I... z A... v i... sw

3/4
 i... t | a... nd A... v

3/4
 I... ba... t I

3/4
 A... v i... a... IS

3/4
 I... etc.

3/4
 a... nd h w e... ma... I f

3/4
 a... z a... z da... Id | a... nd A... z a... p

3/4
 I... l g r I... p r... Id fr

3/4
 A... m e... v r I... m

3/4
 a... U n t a... n s e... Id |

3/4
 E... t f r i... d a... m r

3/4
 I...

(* Slip + ...)

Chart #2 is a rhythmic breakdown of the diction in the familiar national hymn, *America*. You will notice that the rhythmic pulse is represented by the quarter note. We have chosen the sixteenth note as the note of articulation, that is, the rhythmic position in the measure where there is a change from one sound in the word to another. Or, of course, to another word.

Re-read the second rule above, "Now find the first principal vowel sound," while applying it to the first line of Chart #2. Notice: the [a] in "My" is on the note above, the [m] in "My" is in the measure before, the subordinate vowel sound [ɪ] along with [k] is sounded "in the twinkling of an eye" just before the next principal vowel sound [ʌ] in "country." Continue the song all the way through and you will notice the same consistency throughout. Try tapping out the subdivision (the sixteenth note) while you sing the words of the song! **A good exercise!**

While singing the exercise make sure to engage rule #1 above, i.e., keeping the "set" on each principal vowel sound. **DO NOT CHANGE THE VOWEL ARTICULATORS WHILE SUSTAINING A VOWEL SOUND!**

A Word About Articulators:

A **vowel sound articulator** is any change in musculature that causes a change in shape of the laryngeal, pharyngeal or bucal cavities, therefore causing a change in the overtone spectrum.

A **consonant sound articulator** is any change in position of the "mover" of primarily the bucal cavity. These include the tip of the tongue, back of the tongue, palate, lips, and vocal cords. Also, what and how they touch each other and other parts of the bucal anatomy used in the process of making the desired consonant sounds. The vocal cords are approximated on both implosive and voiced consonants.

The consonant can actually be identified by naming the articulations. For example, the letter [p] is a bilabial-stop-plosive. A [b] is a bilabial-subvocal-stop-plosive. The only difference in the two being the subvocal sound [Refer to the definition section and to Chart #1 (IPA)]. All the consonants may be broken down in this manner. You must insist that your singer sound all the articulations of the consonants, because without one or more of these articulations the consonant will not be heard clearly.

Examples of Other Articulations of Consonants:

[f]	labia-dental-fricative
[v]	labia-dental-subvocal-fricative
[θ]	lingua-dental-fricative
[ð]	lingua-dental-subvocal-fricative
[k]	post-lingua-palatal-stop-plosive
[g]	post-lingua-palatal-subvocal-stop-plosive

Notice that each of the pairs of the examples are different only by the absence or presence of a voiced or unvoiced articulation. Every consonant has its voiced and unvoiced counter designation except the [r] (It is either flipped or rolled), the [x], and the liquids. Refer to Chart #1 (IPA).

There you have it! A quick and specific guide to the singing of rhythmic diction. Remember! Just make sure to put the proper sounds of the words in their assigned rhythmic positions and you will be able to sing good, clear, and understandable diction.