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## FOREWORD

Most of us who call ourselves singers have had, at one time or another, a dream in which a mythical being descends from above—as in Baroque opera—and imparts to us instantly and painlessly the knowledge possessed by a linguistic scholar. Most of us awaken, smiling, and then proceed to our study of diction, frowning.

Herein, three common hazards to singers (Italian, French and German) are dealt with in concise terms, using the standard international phonetic alphabet, and are made lucid by a thorough comparison to equivalent sounds in English. Even the simplest among us cannot but benefit from the serious application of this amassment of material.

My only regret is that so many of us had to learn the hard and long way what is available here.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

The text runs continuously on the left pages in Part 1. When an exercise is indicated, it will be found on the facing right page. All references to exercises are given in parentheses in the indices to the several languages spread throughout Part 2 and in the general index at the end of the book.

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# INTRODUCTION

The American singer who desires a career in opera has to be able to act, perhaps dance, look like a movie star, and sing expertly in at least four languages. The singer who aspires to a career on the concert stage must have at his command at least four or five languages, and is expected to pronounce them with even more refinement and skill than his operatic colleagues. The task of developing such language skill seems enormous; difficult it is, but not impossible.

Speaking a foreign language is difficult because of problems of intonation, stress and cadence. Singers have most of these problems solved for them in advance by composers, who determine where the voice rises and falls, how long the syllables are, where pauses occur, and even where the stresses fall. But the singer is faced with a situation that the speaker can often slur over: he must sustain each vowel and consonant sound to satisfy the most careful listening. It becomes, for example, a matter of major importance whether the vowel is pronounced *aw* or [o], or as the English diphthong *o-oo* when it occurs as the first syllable of *Ombra mai fu*, held for four slow beats. At such times accuracy of pronunciation becomes tremendously significant.

All singers must study diction. But American singers, because their speech tends to be quite imprecise, in particular need to make a thorough study of phonetics and diction. Our vowels are vague and often back-produced. We tend to make diphthongs out of monophthongs, triphthongs of diphthongs. Our consonants are carelessly produced, often imploded, almost never clearly articulated, and the strong tonic stress of our language encourages us to slur over unstressed syllables. We practice bad diction in nearly every utterance.

American singers striving for good diction often erroneously believe that the solution to their problems can be found in a highly explosive production of consonants. While it is true that the consonants must be articulated more clearly in singing than in the usual sloppy speech of every day, just as important for the singer (perhaps more so) is the production of clear and easily identified vowels.

Accuracy and clarity in pronunciation are the subjects of this book. But they are only first steps in the establishment of authentic style in language. Capturing the flavor and subtle colors is a skill resulting from long study of singers singing their native language. And the flavor and color are not the only benefits of accurate pronunciation: often vocal production makes a startling and immediate improvement when the articulation of vowels and consonants becomes clear. Diction might be called the orchestration of singing, and far too many singers neglect the wide range of possibilities for color found in the spectrum of vowel and consonant sounds.

The symbols used throughout this book are those of the International Phonetic Association. Singers who grumble at having to learn another alphabet may soon find the symbols a remarkably economical shorthand, useful in self-reminding, and an aid in teaching once a sound has been associated with its symbol. For, while spelling varies greatly from language to language, a symbol always represents one sound—a help in assisting singers in using the many excellent pronouncing dictionaries now available.

The multi-lingual approach to diction set out in this book was first developed in classes attended by Apprentice Artists at the Santa Fe Opera. It has been developed further at the New England Conservatory. It proceeds from American English, compares the vowel and consonant sounds of Italian, French, German and Ecclesiastical Latin with each other and relates them to sounds spoken in the United States. All too often foreign-born language teachers, lacking a clear understanding of English, have been unable to draw useful or even accurate parallels and find themselves in the position of the Russian teacher who, in describing the Russian dark *l*, said that it was like the *l* in the English word *lead*, unaware that such a sound could only occur if the English word were pronounced with a heavy Russian accent.

Those wishing to pursue more intensive study will find Ralph Errolle's *Italian Diction for Singers* excellent, as are Dorothy Uris' *To Sing in English*, Sieb's *Deutsche Hochsprache*, and Fouché's *Traité de la prononciation française*, whose many footnotes point out the differences between conversational style and *le style soutenu*.

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# VOWEL CLASSIFICATION

**What are vowels?** In his book *The Sounds of English and German*, William G. Moulton defines them as “sounds articulated in such a way that the breath stream flows essentially unhindered along the median line of the vocal tract.” The vocal cords are in vibration. Consonants, on the other hand, are produced either by a partial obstruction of the breath stream (as with *l* or *v*), or by a total obstruction followed by an expulsion of air (as with *t* or *p*). The vocal cords may or may not be in vibration, according to the consonant.

The continuous, unobstructed stream of breath may be shaped in two ways to produce vowels and to give them identity:

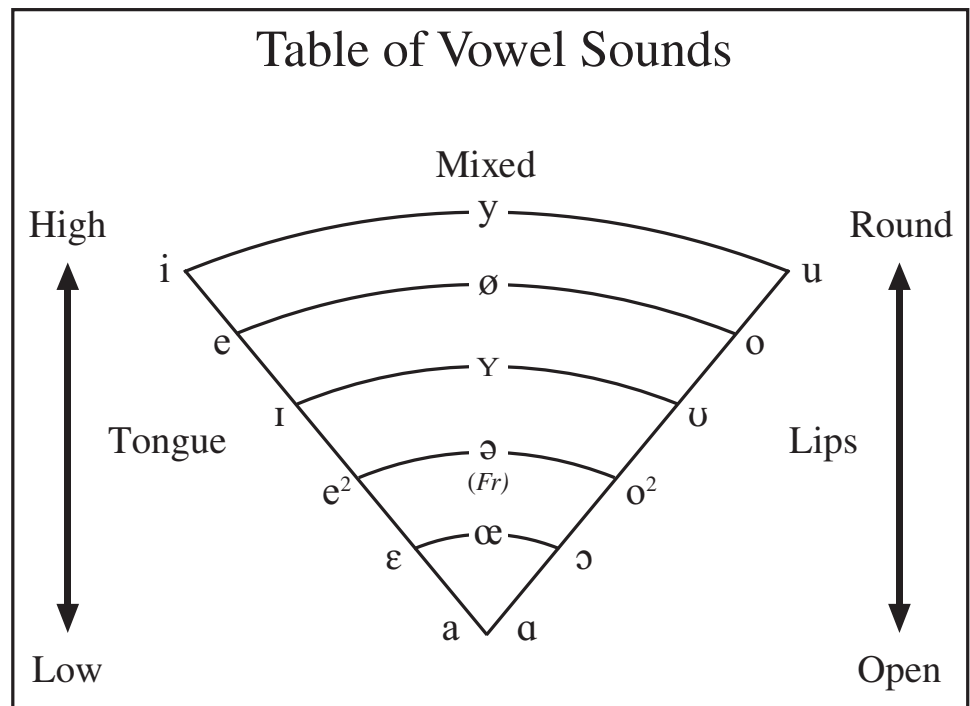
1. by varying the height of the tongue (compare English *me* and *met*)
2. by varying the position of the lips (compare English *moo* and *ma*)

The Italian name for vowel is *vocale*. We may infer from this name that clear, accurate, effortlessly produced vowels are the basis of singing, that they carry the timbre of the voice and musical line. They are also the basis of good diction. In singing, much more time is spent on vowels than on consonants, whether the word is *love*, *Liebe*, *amour*, or *amore*.

Most phoneticists classify vowels in three groups: frontal, central and back. These terms refer to the position of the tongue. For example, in the English *me* the vowel would be frontal, in *ma* it would be central, and in *moo* it would be back.

The word “back,” however, is anathema to many singers and teachers of singing. For this and additional reasons, we find it more useful to classify vowels in the following groups:

1. **Tongue vowels** are formed by varying the height of the arching of the tongue (p. 5).
2. **Lip vowels** are formed by varying the rounding or opening of the lips (p. 8).
3. **Mixed vowels** are formed by combining the tongue position of one vowel with the lip position of another vowel (p. 14).
4. **Neutral vowels.** English, French, and German have an obscure, unstressed vowel sound whose placement varies according to the general placement of the language (p. 16).
5. **Nasalized vowels** are formed by allowing a small amount of air to pass through the nasal passages while singing a vowel (p. 44).



# FORMING VOWELS

## Tongue vowels

[i] [ɛ]

Smile and say English *me* and *met*. The first vowel, spelled variously as *ee* in *seek*, *ea* in *feat*, *ei* in *receive*, *ie* in *chief*, etc., has the phonetic designation [i]. When it is pronounced, the center of the tongue has a higher position than for the vowel in *met* [ɛ]. The tongue is arched closer to the roof of the mouth and the space between is partially closed. The adjective “closed” is often applied to this vowel. Since the term “closed vowel” can be wrongly equated with “closed throat,” the unfortunate connotations will be avoided by the designation “high vowel.” However, as the terms “open vowel” and “closed vowel” are common usage, they will be employed throughout this manual.

It is possible to pronounce the vowel [i] without smiling. Instructions here and below about smiling, puckering lips, etc., are given for the purpose of leading the singer to the easiest way of making accurate vowel sounds, all of which can be pronounced with a variety of facial expressions.

[ɪ]

Now say the vowel [i] and, continuing the sound, gradually lower the tongue and jaw into the position for [ɛ]. You will notice that on the way from [i] to [ɛ], there are numerous stopping places for possible vowels. About half-way between [i] and [ɛ] is the position for the vowel [ɪ], which occurs in English *mitt*. Now alternate *mitt* and *me*, and the vowels [ɪ]—[i]—[ɪ]—[i] to feel the changing tongue positions. Then try [i]—[ɪ]—[ɛ]—[ɪ]—[i].



**[e]**

Approximately half-way between the tongue positions of [ɪ] and [i] is a vowel which is quite common in French and German, but which does not really exist as a sustained vowel sound in standard English. This is [e] (closed *e*). It occurs in French in words like *bébé* and in German in words like *Beet*.

**Exercise 1**

In the previous exercise the change in the height of the tongue should be very slight between [i] and [e] or [e] and [ɪ]. From [ɪ] to [ɛ], however, you should find a marked drop in tongue and jaw.

**[e<sup>2</sup>]**

About half-way between [ɪ] and [ɛ] is still another vowel. It occurs in Italian in words like *vero*, and in German words like *Tränen* and is also known as a “closed” *e* (high *e*), even though it is not nearly as closed (high) as [e], or even [ɪ]. We shall give it the arbitrary designation [e<sup>2</sup>]. It occurs in English as the first vowel sound in *chaotic*, and is also heard in *day* if it is pronounced with an Irish brogue. Natives of the American northern mid-west (Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, etc.) will tend to pronounce *chaotic* with [e] rather than with [e<sup>2</sup>].

**Exercise 2****[a]**

If you continue lowering the tongue and jaw, keeping a smile, you will find the French vowel [a] occurring five times in the phrase *Voilà la salade!*

**Exercise 3**

# 1

*Practice saying and singing the following series of vowels:*

[i]—[e]—[ɪ]—[ɛ] and [ɛ]—[ɪ]—[e]—[i]

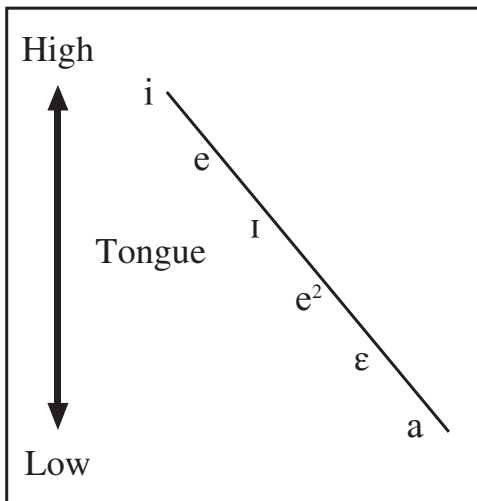
# 2

*Practice saying and singing:*

[i]—[e]—[ɪ]—[e<sup>2</sup>]—[ɛ] and [ɛ]—[e<sup>2</sup>]—[ɪ]—[e]—[i]

# 3

*Practice saying and singing the tongue vowels in succession, from top to bottom and from bottom to top. Keep the lips relaxed in a smiling position. Although you will find the smile a little broader for the lower vowels, the lips do not play an important role in this vowel series.*



## Forming lip vowels

[u] [ɔ]

With well-rounded, projecting lips and a slightly dropped jaw, say English *boon* and then, keeping the corners of the mouth in towards center, say English *bought*. It will be found that in the second word the rounded position of the lips has given way to a vertical oval, that there is less closure of the lips, and that the jaw has dropped somewhat more. We may say that the first vowel is more “closed” (“round” is a more useful term) than the second. The phonetic symbol for the vowel in *boon* is [u]; in *bought* (in standard English) [ɔ]. Natives of the southern and mid-western United States often pronounce the [ɔ] vowel with the corners of the mouth more relaxed to the sides. Correct formation of this vowel is discussed further on pages 32–33.

### *Exercise 4*

[ʊ]

As with the tongue series, if you start with [u] and gradually change to [ɔ], you will find many possible intermediate stopping places where other vowels may be found.

Midway between [u] and [ɔ] is the vowel [ʊ], as in English *look*. The lips should still be rather rounded and protruding for producing this vowel in singing. Do not allow the lips to form a horizontal oval for this vowel or it will be throaty and unpleasant.

### *Exercise 5*