

# Diction for Singers 101

What sets singers apart from every other musician is the wonderful fact that *we get to sing words*. This is perhaps our greatest gift and our greatest responsibility. All good musicians are expressive, but we have this extraordinary extra tool.

This section of this site is designed to give you some suggestions, some new ideas and some resources to help you develop your ability to sing text with integrity.

There are two basic ingredients to singing text with integrity. They are, in no particular order, effective diction, and thorough understanding of the meaning of the text.

## ***Diction***

Great diction can make a world of difference in your performance. Great diction can improve intonation, rhythmic vitality, and communication of text. Many vocal problems, from scooping pitches to tension in extreme ranges to poor intonation can be remedied with simple changes in pronunciation.

Basic rule: Vowels go on the beat, consonants come slightly before the beat.

Basic rule: breath so that you cheat the previous note, rather than coming in late for the next note.

## **Vowels**

1. Vowels carry the vocal line, pitch and tone – they are what we spend the lion's share of our time singing:
2. Vowel challenges in the English (and some other) languages:
  - a. Vowels in unaccented syllables: When a word contains two or more syllables, the sound of the unaccented syllable is not always sung uniformly. Some examples: because (some pronounce [bɪ-kəʒ], some pronounce [bi-kəʒ], lemon ([le-mɪn] or [le-mən] or [le-mʊn]); Every singer should make decisions as to what vowel they will be singing in unaccented syllables, even if English is their native tongue.
  - b. Vowels followed by r: When speaking, especially in the Midwest, vowels followed by r have a somewhat harsh tone. These words should not be sung like we speak. Instead of pronouncing words such as heard, river, and water as [hɜ-d], [rɪ-və] and [wa-tə] respectively, we need to modify the sounds to soften them. We can achieve this by substituting the [ə] sound with the German sound [œ].
  - c. Diphthongs: Diphthongs are vowel sounds that begin with one sound and end with another. Most of you are familiar with the diphthongs that you were taught in grade school such as the *ow* in *cow* or the *oy* in *boy*. However, there are several vowel sounds in the English language that we

don't always recognize as diphthongs. Some examples include the vowel sound of the word *eye* (normally associated with the letter *i* but pronounced [aɪ]), the vowel sound in the word *cat* (frequently spelled with the letter *a* but pronounced [æ]), the vowel sound in the word *boat* (represented by the letter *o* but pronounced [oʊ]) and the vowel sound in the word *hate* (generally associated with the letter *a* but pronounced [eɪ]). Since these sounds are frequently represented by a single letter, we often forget that they are really diphthongs.

**Note to live by:** *When singing a diphthong, **sing** on the initial vowel, and color that vowel with the final vowel just before you release the word.*

**One more thought:** *Keep vowels tall and on top of the tongue so that they do not get "spread" or "wide".*

## Consonants

1. Voiced consonants: Voiced consonants are consonants that carry pitch such as *d*, *g*, *l*, *m*, *n* and *z*. Special care must be taken when using these vowels because of this fact.
  - a. When words start with a voiced consonant, make certain that the pitch on which you sing the voiced consonant is the same pitch as the vowel that follows. If you do not do this, you will scoop the pitch.
  - b. When a voiced consonant follows a vowel in the same syllable, follow the same rule that you use for diphthongs: In other words, *when singing a vowel followed by a voiced consonant, **sing** on the vowel, and place the consonant just before you release the word.*
2. Unvoiced consonants: These are consonants that carry no pitch, such as *t*, *s* and *k*.

## Shadow vowels and Glottal Stroke

A few special approaches can help to make your words much more clear.

1. Shadow vowels: When a word beginning with a consonant follows a word ending with a consonant, they need a neutral vowel in between them (the schwa sound) to make them understood. That neutral vowel is called a *shadow vowel*.
2. Glottal Stroke: When a word beginning with a vowel follows a word ending with a consonant or vowel, the word beginning with the vowel often needs what is called a *glottal stroke*. This is a gentle coming together of the vocal folds, which produces a light separation in sound. Care must be taken with this, as too harsh a glottal stroke can cause vocal damage. However, without it, text can be very difficult to understand. Find a healthy balance.

## Diction and Rhythm

1. Every consonant must be placed in a rhythmic context. This helps to clarify the

rhythm.

- a. Consonant attacks should generally come *before the beat*. When accenting a consonant, take care not to also accent the vowel, unless requested.
- b. Singers need to make rhythmic choices as to where they will release the consonant. It is helpful to write these choices directly into your score as rests or breath marks.

### **Diction and Expression**

1. To sing with expressive diction, it is crucial to understand the meaning of the text.
2. The vocal line will be greatly improved if you inform the line with the natural accents of the spoken language. In other words, don't accent unaccented syllables, even if they fall on a downbeat or a high note.
3. Use this same musical idea with sentences as a whole – stress the important words and put less stress on the less important words.
4. Sing each phrase with the verbal thought behind it. Not only will this help communicate text, it will help improve the phrasing.
5. Don't just sing sounds, sing *words*.

### **Singing in Languages other than your own**

1. Use International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) or some other system to write pronunciations directly into your music.
2. If there are recordings of the pieces or the texts that you can access, take the time to listen to them and practice with them.
3. Pronounce the text over and over, in rhythm, but without singing, to get comfortable with the text. Begin by speaking slowly, then speed up as you get more comfortable.

### ***Understanding the Text***

It is your responsibility to make certain that you know the meaning of what you are singing, *word for word*. It is not enough to have a rough idea of the meaning. This will greatly improve your diction as well as your ability to communicate.

1. Be aware that many vocal scores have the original language and an English version below or above. The English version may approximate the original version in meaning, but in general it is what we call a *singing translation*. In other words, the translation has been made to fit the melodic line rather than be an exact translation.
2. If the text is in a foreign language, translate it yourself or look for a good translation. Write the translation directly into your music, putting the words directly above or below the original language so that you can see the meaning at a glance. It is important to do (or find) both a *word for word* translation (what we frequently call the *dumb English version*) and a good paraphrase that makes more sense.
3. Do further research. Check into all of those references that don't make sense to

- you. This will happen in both your own language as well as foreign languages. For example, if there is a word that you don't know the meaning of, even if the song is in your first language, to look it up. There may also be references to people, places, things, and events that you don't know much about.
4. Write the text out and look at the over all shape of it. Most song texts are poems, with very few exceptions (some twentieth century composers, for example Dominick Argento, use prose, but this is not common practice). Take the time to look at the poem as a structure - what sort of rhyme scheme does it have, how many syllables are in a line, is there a verse structure, do the lines of the poetry match the punctuation? These things will take on significance when you compare them to the composer's setting of the text.
  5. Read the text aloud many times. This is especially important when singing in a language other than your first, as this is the time to get comfortable with the diction. But it should be done in your native tongue as well, because you are also reading for expression.
  6. Text underlay: text underlay refers to the way the words line up with the notes. Sometimes text underlay can make things challenging to sing – it may be unexpected, or awkward or may unwittingly accent an unaccented syllable. For these reasons, the more that you practice the text, the better.

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