

JOHN MORIARTY

Diction

Italian Latin
French German
...the sounds and
81 exercises
for singing them



ECSPUBLISHING COMMITTED TO THE
COMPOSER'S CRAFT

singing them

John Moriarty

Dictation

Boston, Massachusetts

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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.

Margaret Harshaw

Professor of Voice at the University of Indiana

EDITOR'S NOTE

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

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The first edition of this book was put together primarily for use in my diction classes at the New England Conservatory. It was not intended to be used independently. Consequently much detail was omitted, to be filled in during class and drill sessions. The widespread interest evinced by singers, teachers, schools and professional organizations has indicated that a more complete version could be of practical use. Hence this new edition.

Part 1 describes the physical factors in the production of vowel and consonant sounds in the four languages. 81 exercises are included covering all phases of the text, complementing the rules of pronunciation set forth in Part 2 language by language. A beneficial way of using the text, therefore, would be the alternation of the rules of Part 2 with the appropriate exercises of Part 1.

Much of the material in Part 2 is unchanged from the original edition. Some has been expanded. Since its publication in 1969 I have found a more effective order or manner of presentation of some of the material. Sometimes students have devised ingenious short cuts which I have been hasty to incorporate into the text. To them I acknowledge indebtedness.

Thanks are also due to Mark Pearson, Barbara Reutlinger, Nadine Harris and Anna Yona, all of the Conservatory faculty, and Elizabeth Boehme and Paul Laplante of Northeastern University for their assistance and invaluable suggestions.

J.M. Boston, 1973

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 Madeleine Marshall's **Singers Manual of English Diction**, 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*.

J.M.

Boston, 1969

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To my students

*When first I considered my diction
I knew my Italian was fiction.
But this year I know
How to round a closed [o]
And open [ɛ] causes no friction.*

SPHS

1 Forming and practicing the sounds

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 the 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 be **love**, **Liebe**, **amour** or **amore**.

TABLE OF VOWEL SOUNDS

