CHORAL DICTION: ACHIEVING ENSEMBLE WITH A “SOUND” APPROACH

Constantina Tsolainou, clinician – FMEA 2013
Director of Choral Activities and
Paul S. and Jean R. Amos Distinguished Faculty Chair
Schwob School of Music, Columbus State University

VOWELS
Tongue vowels/bright, forward:
ee, ih, ay, eh, ae, aa
[i i e e æ a ]
peel-hit-pray-bench-cat-Harvard
closed-open-closed-open-open

Lip vowels/round, warm:
oo, oo, o, oh, aw, ah
[u u o o ɔ ɑ ]
pool-book-note-for-law-father
closed-open-closed-open-open-open

Variations of “ah” high to low: aa, ah, aw, uh
[a ɑ ɒ ʌ ]
Variations of “ah” narrow to wide: aw, ah, aa, ae
[ ɒ ɑ a æ ]

“preferred alternatives” to “uh” [ ʌ ]
the schwa (as in “the”, “upon”, “about”, again, etc.) [ ə ]
and “oh” (as in “love”, “byd”, “come”, etc.) [ ɔ ]

the schwa or “neutral vowel”
simultaneously saying “eh’ in the tongue and “oh” in the lips

CONSONANTS
Sorted by inherent qualities:
Legato Staccato Marcato
l, m, n p, t, k b, d, g
f, s f, s
v, z v, z

Voiced/marcato: b, d, g, v, z
Voiced/legato: l, m, n, v, z
Unvoiced/staccato: p, t, k, f, s
Unvoiced/legato: f, s
LANGUAGES
Categorized by articulation:

Legato (no aspiration between consonants & vowels)
French; Latin, Italian, Spanish; “Relaxed” English

Marcato (aspirated consonants)
“Formal” English; German, Austro-German Latin

BASIC RULES FOR FORMAL ENGLISH

British/formal: vowels are more closed/narrow; consonants are more aspirated
American/folk/spiritual: vowels are more open; consonants are more relaxed, less distinct.

R’s - roll or flip
1. always before a vowel (praise, reign, glory, etc.)
2. never before a consonant (Lord, mercy, courts, etc.)
3. not before a pause (far..., pasture..., forever..., etc.)
   (governed by what follows silent letters (spelled not sounded)
   in same or adjoining words: where are, there by, for hours, etc.)

Unstressed syllables
1. initial = ih (“delight, rejoice, before, eternal,” etc.)
2. initial = schwa (“a-way, a-lone, a-gain, u-pon, etc.)
3. final = schwa (“children, angel, presence, nation,” etc.)

Articles of speech
1. “the” before a consonant or a glide = schwa: “the Lord, the sound,
the universe, the one,” etc.
2. “the” before a vowel = “ee” “the angel, the earth, the hour” etc.
3. “a” as an article signaling a noun = schwa: “a” song, “a” voice, etc.

“Higher” position vowels when appropriate
1. They, Their (closed “ay”), not There (open “eh”);
2. You, Your (closed “oo”), not Yore (open “oh”);
3. We, We’ll (closed “ee”), not Will (open “ih”), etc.

“Preferred-alternatives” to “uh”
   “oh” – us, up, love, doth, of, slumbers
   schwa – u-pon, a-fraid, a-gainst

“ah” in your “ae” vowels
   shall, as, and, that, wrath, hath, etc.

Wh combinations
1. aspirated as “hw” (“what, where, when, which, why, while,” etc.)
2. aspirate as “h” (“who”)
English, continued

“Daniel Sitteth” rule
use glide “ju” with the consonants “d”, “n”, “l”, “s”, “t”, “th”
(“endure, pursue, consume, duty, new, lute, suitor, tune, enthusiasm”
Also use the glide in “future, fortune, pasture, question,” etc.)

Sample text:
Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace; where there is hatred, let me bring love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy; and all for thy mercy’s sake…

BASIC RULES FOR ITALIANATE LATIN – ITALIAN

Latin/(Italian) vowel spectrum:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ee</th>
<th>eh</th>
<th>ah</th>
<th>oh</th>
<th>oo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| [i | e | e | o | o | u ]

Tongue vowels soften consonants: ci, ce, cæ, coe, gi, ge, sci, sce, etc.
“h” is used to harden the consonant: chi, che, ghi, ghe, schi, sche, etc.

Lip (back) vowels harden consonants: ca, co, cu, ga, go, gu, sca, sko, sku, etc.
“i” is used to soften the consonants: cia, cio, ciu, gia, gio, giu, scia, scio, sciu, etc.

Never aspirate between consonants and vowels

‘h’ is always silent except in ‘mihi’ and ‘nikil’

Glides: spelled with i, j, and u as in iustorum, jacentem, quoniam, etc.; gn as in ‘onion’; ‘li’ in Italian combinations like ‘gli’

‘ti’ before a vowel = tsi
ph = f
th = t
ch = k
z = dz in Latin; ts in Italian
ex + vowel or h = egz (examine)
xc after a forward vowel = ksh (excelsis)
r’s are flipped when intervocalic, rolled when next to a consonant

Rules for e and o in Italian
1. final o = always open
2. final e = open when not marked with an accent
3. final e = when marked with an accent = closed except for caffè, tè, è
4. unstressed e and o in a multi-syllable word = open
5. contractions = open: di+il=del, in+il=nel, per+il=pel, con+il=col
Italian/Latin, continued

intervocalic ‘s’ is sounded in Italian but NOT in Italianate Latin
zzle or tts (mezzo, pizza)

Sample texts:
Ave verum corpus, natum de Maria virgine; Vere passum, immolatum, in cruce pro homine;
Cujus latus perforatum, unda fluxit sanguine; Esto nobis praegustatum, in mortis examine.

Siepe, che gli orti vaghi, E me da me dividi, Si bella rosa in te giammai non vidi, Com’è la donna mia, Bella amorosa e pia; E mentr’io stendo sovra te la mano, La mi stringe pian, piano.

BASIC RULES FOR AUSTRO-GERMAN LATIN – GERMAN

Austro-German Latin: closed and mixed vowels are added, including the schwa; consonants are hard, crisp, aspirated; words are separated when the second begins with a vowel as in German.

VOWELS
Single vowels: closed- ee, ay; open- eh, ah, oh, closed- o, oo
[ī e ā a ɔ o u]
Mixed vowels: ee+oo, eh+oh, e+o (closed version); schwa for unstressed syllables
[ī e ā a ɔ o u]
e + 1 cons = closed e
e + 2 cons = open eh
exceptions: et, per, es = eh
ae at end of word = eh
unstressed e = schwa
o + 1 cons = closed o
o + 2 cons = open oh
y = mixed vowel ee+oo
oe = mixed vowel eh+oh (open), e+o (closed)

CONSONANTS
C before forward/tongue vowel = ts
G = always hard
H = h
Qu = kv
Initial s = z
Intervocalic s = z
X = ks

German: all long/closed and short/open forms of vowels added, including all mixed vowels
[ī / ī e / ē a / ə o / ɔ u / ū y = ɨ+ɨ / y = ɨ+u / ə = e+o / ɔ = e+o / ə = e+o ə]

VOWELS
Long/closed
1. vv (vowel-vowel)
2. vcv (vowel-cons-vowel)
3. vh (vowel+h)
4. 1 syllable words
5. derivatives
German, continued

Short/open

1. vcc (vowel-cons-cons)
2. 1 syllable words
3. derivatives
4. unstressed initial/final syllables (schwa: ge-, be-, -e, -en, -et, -er; um-, un-, ver-, ent-)

Diphthongs:
au, äu, eu, ai, ei
ah-oo, oh-ih, oh-ih, ah-ih, eh-ih

CONSONANTS
R’s are rolled; no uvular R as in speech
final/end of word or syllable: b=p, d=t, g=k
initial: v=f, s=z, w=v, z=ts, sch=sh, st=sht (internal and final st usually remain st as in ‘Liebsten’),
sp=shp, schw=shv, c=ts, h=h, j=j, y=y (mixed vowel), qu=kv, ng=ng (without sounding hard g),
nk=ngk

“CH” combinations:
forward/tongue vowels=ch, cons+ch, -ig endings = forward/soft ch (as in ich, durch, ewig)
back/lip vowels+ch = back/hard ch (as in ach, doch)
initial ch = k, but initial c=ts before forward vowels, otherwise =k in words of foreign origin;
chs=ks when part of the root (wechseln) exceptions: hoechst, etc.

Sample texts:
Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth. Pleni sunt coeli et terra Gloria tua.
Hosanna in excelsis. Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis; dona nobis pacem.

Es rinnen die Wasser Tag und Nacht, deine Sehnsucht wacht. Du gedenkest der vergangenen
Zeit, die liegt so weit. Du siehst hinaus in den Morgenschein und bist allein.

BASIC RULES FOR FRENCH

Addition of nasal vowels; minimized consonants to create a true French legato;
vocalic flow dominates while the consonants are dropped lightly on the line of vowels

Liason: required, optional, forbidden + elision and “normal linking up”
No glottal attacks

VOWELS

Nasals: in, un, en/an, on
“nasalizers“ = n, m
Bien, parfum, enfant, bon
French, continued

au=closed o (eau)
ou=oo
u=y
eu=eh+oh (open) or e+o (closed)
ui glide is formed first as oo+ee, then glided into ee: nuit, fuit, depuis, puisque
il and ill (j) glides as in papillon
other glide (w) as in toi, oui

CONSONANTS
R’s are all flipped to minimize; no uvular R’s as in speech

s=s, z, silent
x=ks, gs, z, silent
l=l, j, silent
m=m, nasal/silent
n=n, nasal/silent
c=s before a,o,u (garçon)
c=si, se, ka, ko, ku
ch=sh
g=soft w/forward vowel; hard w/back vowel
gu hardens g before forward vowel as in orgueil
gn as in onion
qu=k

Sample text:
Notre Père qui es aux cieux, que ton nom soit sanctifié, que ton règne vienne, que ta volonté
soit faite sur la terre comme au ciel.

REFERENCES FOR SINGING DICTION


Cox, Dr. Richard G. The Singer’s Manual of German and French Diction.
    New York, Schirmer Books, 1970

    New York, Schirmer Books, 1979

    New York, Schirmer Books, 1953

Moriarty, John. Diction: Italian, Latin, French, German…the sounds and 81 exercises for singing