

The Importance of Diction in the Art of Singing

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Abstract: *The idea for this article's subject started from the importance of diction that accompanies the music. It's essential to be able to understand very well the words that are sung, because they give the "tone" of the entire lyrical-dramatical action. The listeners will perceive the emotion that is conveyed through the verses, the music, as a unity. I have listened to various interpretations of singers that approached arias, lieds, etc, who don't have a good diction, therefore in their musical discourse I could hear the predominance of the vowels A - E - O - U, and I could barely hear the consonants. This way, instead of following the lyrical-dramatic action itself, brought by the music and the words, I was experiencing auditory discomfort. In order to bring their own interpretation to the musical language, and to express mastery, the artist must have theoretical knowledge, and technical training and use them precisely. This way they would be able to reach high performances of the vocal tract, which will lead to the harmonious delineation of a singing style that matches the demands of the musical piece.*

Key-words: *diction, vowels, consonants, music, singing*

1. Introduction

There are many points of view regarding the symbiosis between art and science, and many do not even consider it, and they forget that everything that was produced in art, belonged to prominent people, who need to combine scientific research with artistic expression. We should understand that art is not only color, form and sound, but also a reproduction of reality, and it starts with a thorough knowledge of it by using complex technical processes. A real artist must be able to express themselves properly, intentionally and personally while interpreting a musical piece. In order to positively manifestate the symbiosis between art and science, vocational education must take into account the vast human experience in the said field, the vocal phenomenon research manner, and a series of procedures

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and techniques specific to the vocal expression, capable of carrying into effect the theoretical findings.

Singers who lean towards operetta and musicals must overcome the “obstacle” they encounter through the switch between the singing and the talking sections of their roles, which becomes very difficult and dangerous. The text of these roles need the following aspects to be met: intensity, timbre, and frequency, the inability to resolve the musical phrase. A relevant example is rhetoric with a flat tone, inconsistent with the sound requirements. *The study of diction enforces the observance of the singing rules, which refers to the “round” singing of the vowels and the “vocal” sound of consonants.* (Rusu 2006, 78)

The dramatic artist can be compared with the lyrical one regarding the mastery of their own vocal cords and the acquiring of the correct technique. However, although research is very developed in this field, there are sometimes errors, be it in the theoretical findings or in the practical methods. One of the errors appears in the methodologic phase. This is the theoretical method which should be approached for gaining new knowledge, and leading to new scientific research. The human voice and music are in a continuous cooperation to render emotions and to convey the message of a musical piece, which has been carefully thought out by the composer. *In vocal art the world is lifted up and ennobled by the music, the music is made clear and brought into focus by the word.* (Adler 1965, 3)

2. The Method

The science of rendering and pronouncing sounds is called phonetics. The pronunciation of the words and sentences, consisting of all the words, syllables and sounds is called diction. The pronunciation and singing of the sounds falls into the category of vowels, semi-vowels, vowel combination (diftong and triftong), and consonants. Although it seems very complicated for an artist who studies vocal music, the study of diction and phonetics represents a high necessity. Diction, according to the dictionary, represents the manner of pronouncing words, syllables and sounds. To have a good diction, not only you need a focused and set voice, but also the ability to pronounce and articulate sounds very clearly, on top of a sustained breathing technique. Breathing is vital for singing. Any musical phrase in a vocal interpretation will begin with the taking of a breath.

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) has a symbol for each sound. The 7 vowels in Romanian are: *a, e, i, o, u, ă, î*. These vowels can be part of syllables singularly and are very important to the phonetic system and Romanian words. *L* and *e* vowels are foregoing, *a, ă, î* are medial and *o* and *u* are posterior. This

classification is made according to the position of the tongue opposing the dental-alveolar area. The tip of the tongue will lay on the lower teeth for foregoing vowels, and it will withdraw for medial vowels until the last posterior one, *u*.

Romanian vowels can be classified according to the pronunciation method, *a* being an open vowel, *e*, *ă*, *o* being half open vowels, and *i*, *î*, and *u* are closed vowels. Semivowels, unlike vowels, will be pronounced only next to another vowel, forming together a diphthong, or in a combination with a vowel or another semivowel, forming a triphthong. Consonants can be classified in nasal consonants like *m* and *n*, lateral nasal consonants like *l* and vibrant consonants like *r*. Silent consonants are: *p*, *f*, *h*, *s*, *ș*, *t*, *ț*, *ce*, *che*, *k*. Silent resonant consonants are *b*, *v*, *z*, *d*, *j*, *ge*, *ghe*, *g*. Consonants are also classified by the place of articulation: bilabial - *p*, *b*, *m*; labiodental - *f*, *v*; upper dental-alveolar - *t*, *d*; lower dental-alveolar - *s*, *z*, *ț*; prepalatal - *ș-j*, *ce-ge*, *l*, *n*, *r*; palatal - *che-ghe*; velar - *k-g*; laryngeal - *h*.

The Italian language adapts artistically to the singing discourse through vowels and breathing. Vowel pronunciation is usually studied in solfeges, vocalizations, and a correct pronunciation, with no dialect involved.

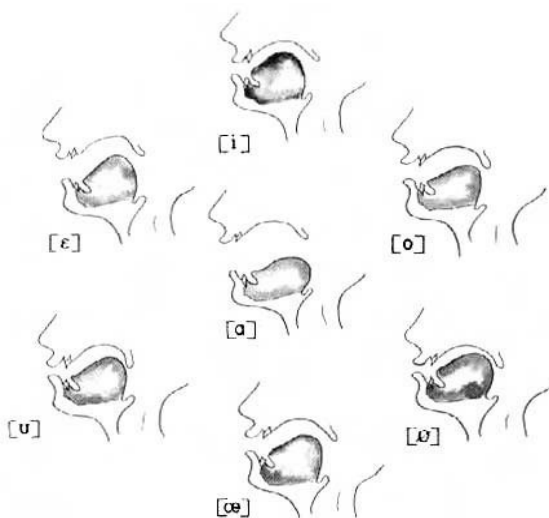


Fig. 1. *Opening of the mouth,
its position during articulation of the main vowels while singing*
Graphic representation after Adler book
(Adler 1965, 8)

Practical methods for diction and declamation during singing: correct vowel declamation exercises, correct consonants declamation; training for the correct execution of a text, while using different intensities; correct declamation of a text while singing; exercises for stage laughter; acquiring the proper technique for speaking during musical acts; researching the speech defects; relaxation exercises; breathing training for declamation; singing exercises; exercises for breathing - speaking - singing coordination. Within breathing, the place where the exchange between the inhaled oxygen and the contained carbon dioxide takes place, is composed of upper airways and the lower airways. The upper airways consist of: nasal cavity, rhinosinusite cavity, pharynx, oral cavity, larynx, ventricular bands, Morgagni ventricule. Lower airways consist of: vocal cords, trachea, bronchi, lobes, pulmonary lobes and alveoli, lungs, pleura, pulmonary arteries, pulmonary veins, rib cage, breathing muscles, nervous system of the respiratory apparatus. Both upper and lower airways form together the phonorespirator apparatus of the human being. The sounds that we release come into existence because of the phono apparatus. The tongue also helps with the phonation process, along the face muscles, oral cavity and teeth in a more passive way. Vowels and consonants are expressed through the vocal cords vibration.

There are 4 types of breathing: upper rib or clavicular, lower rib or intercostal, diaphragmatic or abdominal, costal-diaphragmatic or artistic breathing. Of all these types of breathing, the best and most efficient is the costal-diaphragmatic one.

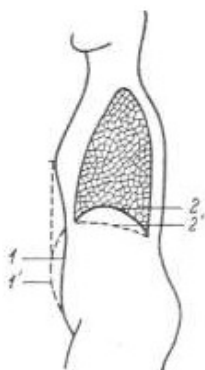


Fig. 2. 1 - 1' *The abdomen*; 2 - 2' *The diaphragm*
Diaphragm and abdomen during inhaling and exhaling

Graphic representation after Stan book
(Stan 1972, 16)

This type of breathing is used on the stage, especially during singing. It is a type of breathing one can use without tremendous effort and it ensures the inhaling of large air quantities. It offers the possibility to phrase a melody continuously, with a strong vocal intensity, which also determines the precise pronunciation of words. A professional singer must master this type of breathing, and practice until it becomes an automatism, which they can control very well. This type of breathing is the key to having a pleasant voice timbre, a good

diction and good interpretation. It enables all the other methods of performance. The human voice has two aspects: speaking voice and singing voice. The singing voice doesn't have the same level of control from the brain as the speaking voice. To sing one needs to release a sound that is under complete control regarding the pitch, intensity and duration. Singing requires the participation of the cortex.

An exercise for expressing consonants and vowels while singing is: start with *m* and follow it by *a, e, i, o, u*. The vowels can always be paired with the nasal consonant *m*. Do the same with the nasal consonant *n*, and other consonants followed by the same vowels: *a, e, i, o, u*. You can do for example: *ba be bi bo bu; da de di do du; fa fe fi fo fu* etc. Practice using the vibrant consonant *r* and the lateral consonant *l*. For the same exercise you can use the upward/downward second and third (2M↑↓, 3M↑↓). Use these syllables while singing up and down, following this example:

m...ma me mi mo mu m...ma me mi mo mu m...ma me mi mo mu
n... na ne ni no nu n... na ne ni no nu n... na ne ni no nu
ba te bi bo bu ba te bi bo bu ba te bi bo bu
la le li lo lu la le li lo lu la le li lo lu
ra re ri ro ru ra re ri ro ru ra re ri ro ru

m...ma me mi mo mu m...ma me mi mo mu m...ma me mi mo mu
n... na ne ni no nu n... na ne ni no nu n... na ne ni no nu
ba te bi bo bu ba te bi bo bu ba te bi bo bu
la le li lo lu la le li lo lu la le li lo lu

Fig. 3

Breathing exercises are to be performed in a very organized and measured way, because breathing is a rhythmic action. They are not to be done in a constrained position, but during total relaxation, maintaining the body in a straight position. It would be very beneficial if the breathing exercises had 2 steps: step 1 would be a qualitative breathing exercise and step 2, quantitative breathing. The voice, together with the act or speaking and breathing are 3 components that should be in a perfect collaboration. One cannot achieve good diction without a set voice and a perfectly sustained breathing technique. Diction exercises should be performed while breathing correctly, during correct exhalation. The space between the vocal cords and lips is called the speaking channel, and it consists of: vocal cords, pharynx, soft palate, uvula, hard palate, tongue, maxillaries, teeth and lips.

An example of pronunciation and articulation of vowels, consonants, and double consonants - typical for Italian language, as well as air dosage. I chose for this example a musical phrase from a famous Mozart opera. Musical example from *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Bartolo's Aria, *La Vendetta* (Act I, 4th Aria, m. 58 - 66). What makes this aria difficult is the *Allegro tempo* and the multitude of consonants (some even double) that the words contain. The singer has to carefully dosage the air they inhaled into portions that help them pronounce the words in a very focused and precise way. *A pure and strong articulation, with a potent support of the final consonants will guarantee the air supply during phonation and vocal release: articulation is the voice trampoline* (Stan 1972, 208).

3. Conclusions

Vowels are produced by exhaling the air from the larynx in a resonant way. The sonority is conditioned by the volume and the shape of the speaking channel, which changes due to the varied positions of the tongue, lips and lower jaw. Consonants are speech sounds that can be produced in two ways, by closing entirely the speaking channel or by narrowing it. Consonants need a greater effort and a higher energy discharge, as compared with the vowels, because they are not pronounced through exhalation, instead through closing the speaking channel. Consonants produce more of a noise, but if they are very well pronounced and articulated, they can result in speech accuracy.

The Romanian alphabet doesn't include *ä*, *ü* or *ö*, or other vowels from foreign languages. That's why it's imperative to correctly articulate these vowels. I often hear these vowels pronounced in a deficient way. Exhalation is the use of the inhaled air to produce the voice. The exhaled air goes through glottis, via vocal cords, which are signaled by the cortex. The voice will then amplify within the resonance cavities, and the simple sounds will gain harmonics, giving it a specific timbre.

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