

DICTION for Classical Singers**Lecture-demonstration by MAX VAN EGMOND (transcript).**A) Meaning

- 1) CLEAR pronunciation: a technical, physical matter: how to handle vowels and consonants resulting in intelligible singing. (See part one, below.)
- 2) CORRECT pronunciation: an intellectual matter: the knowledge of pronouncing the main (foreign) languages in classical music (e.g. Italian, German, French, English, Latin). (See part two, later.)

B) Motivation

- 1) The fundamental difference between instrumental music and singing is that vocal music is based on text, meaning, story, message. If the words are not well understood, half of the job gets lost. The listener is more *involved*, when the words are intelligible.
- 2) The *placement* and *legato* of the singer are improved by (voiced) consonants that are filled with resonance, sound, ringing. Thus, the (voiced) consonants do not create a gap between the vowels. They provide a *bridge of sound*, helping the *legato*. Obviously, the unvoiced consonants can not fulfil this function. They, however provide a *percussion-like* quality, as in the plucking of the guitar, the pizzicato of strings, or the 'puffs' in an historic organ.

===== Part one: clear pronunciation =====

C) Explanation

- 1) Voiced consonants, as the word says, activate the voice (just as in vowels). E.g.: **m, n, l, z, w, v, b, d**, etc. Some have an UNvoiced counterpart, e.g. **d** and **t** / **b** and **p** / **z** and **s** / **v** and **f**, etc. The same can be seen in clusters of sounds. E.g. the voiced **dzj**-sound in Italian **giorno** as opposed to the unvoiced **tsj**-sound in Italian **certo**. And the voiced **zj**-sound in French **Jean**, as opposed to the unvoiced **sj**-sound as in French **chant**. Further: the voiced **g** as in English **good**, with its unvoiced counterpart **k** as in English **could**.
- 2) Vowels could be subdivided in **wide** and **narrow**. — WIDE: the mouth is open, as in **aa** (German **Vater**) or **o** (German **solche**) or **è** (French **chère**). — NARROW: the mouth is less open, as in **u** (German **Blume**, English **food**, French **amour**) or as in **ü** (German **süß**, French **future**).
- 3) Vowels can also differ in **length** and **colour**, depending on the following consonant. E.g. look at the difference between English **foot** and **food** and German **muß** and **Blume**. (More about this in Part two: correct pronunciation.)

D) Recommandations

Hereafter, I will suggest some **exercises** for the awareness of consonants and vowels. I like to emphasise two things:

- 1) That they are not meant to **replace** your own trusted vocalises, but to be **added and combined** with them.
- 2) That they should not interfere with your **legato** singing, but sustain it. This will work, when you consciously fill each voiced consonant with sound & resonance, so that you feel the 'ringing' equally on vowels and consonants. Initially, try to exaggerate that effect, but only for the sake of the exercise. This way, you will get used to the sensation of uninterrupted resonance, which provides a legato line. Later, when it comes to the real singing, the exaggeration is left out and the legato remains, *as well as the intelligibility*.

E) Exercises for consonants

1)

Speak (in a declamatory way) these words, while consciously resonating and connecting the underlined consonants:

(German:) Am Brunnen vor dem Thore.

(Italian:) Ombra mai fu.

(French:) L'armoire brune est magnifique.

2)

In the next exercises, I use sounds, not words. Therefore, I will need to make clear which sounds are meant, as the international phonetical signs are not available on my computer:

- aa is the vowel as in German 'Strasse', Italian "amare", & French 'dame'.
 a " " " " " German 'halten', English 'far', French 'astre'
 é " " " " " German 'Seele', & French 'l'été'.
 è " " " " " German 'Herz', Italian 'bello', & French 'chère'.
 ë is the schwa (mute e), as in German 'behaupten', French 'je me demande' & English 'father', 'mercy'.
(Note: in the French word 'élève', you find all 3 shades of e in one word.)
 i is the vowel as in German 'Liebe', English 'feeling', French 'mirage', Italian 'misero'.
 ô " " " " " English 'hope', French 'beauté', German 'Loben'.
 o " " " " " German 'solche', French 'fortune', English 'torture'
 ü " " " " " German 'Frühling' French 'future'.
 ö " " " " " German 'schön', French 'heureux'.
 oo " " " " " English 'food', German 'Blume, French 'amour'.

3)

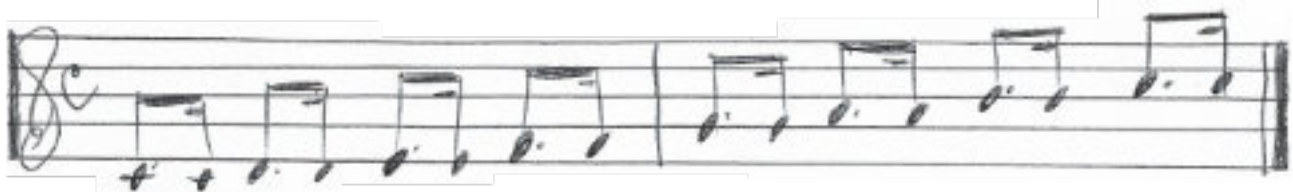
Sing legato and possibly in one breath, raising and lowering the pitch ad libitum, using each of the lines of made-up words. (And remember: ë means schwa.):



Nam-më noom-më, nam-më noom-më, nam-më noom-më, nam-më noom-më.
 Zim - më zom - më, zim - më zom - më, zim - më zom - më, zim - më zom - më.
 Rüm- më rëm - më, rüm - më rëm - më, rüm - më rëm - më, rüm - më rëm - më.
 Loom-më lom - më, loom- më lom - më, loom-më lom - më, loom- më lom - më.

4)

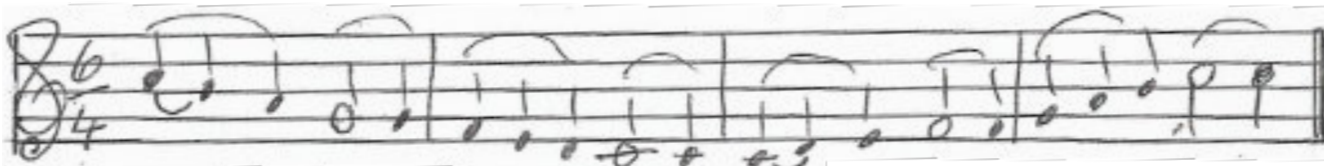
Sing the same melody upside-down (like this), using the same lines of words:



NOTE: By singing these exercises higher and lower - and in one breath - they can also act as a regular voice- and breath training and warming-up.

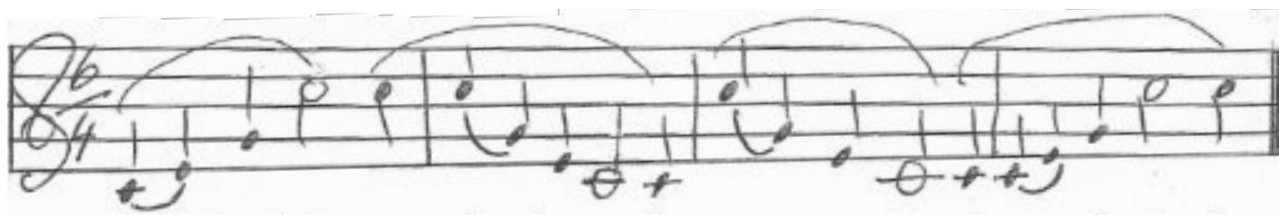
5)

After those fantasy words, take frases from existing arias/songs, containing the same challenges, minding double consonants (in German and Italian). Remember that the double t sounds like a tiny silence followed by one t (German 'matten'). Remember also that, in German, a word starting with a vowel is not connected with the preceding consonant: *schlummert / ein*, not *schlummergein* and *matten / Augen*, not *matteaugen*! — I realise that these language rules create a slight interruption of legato. That, however, is inherent to the German language (and a bit to Italian).



(Germ.) Schlum - mert ein ihr mat - - ten Au - gen, schlum - mert ein ihr mat - - ten Au-gen.
 (Ital.) Quel - - - la fiam - ma che m'ac - cen-de, quel - - - la fiam-ma che m'ac-cen-de.
 (Fr.) Al-lons en - fants de la Pa - tri - - e, al-lons en - fants de la Pa - tri - e.
 (Latin) Quo - - - ni - - am tu so - - lus sanc-tus, quo - - -ni - - am tu so - - lus sanctus.
 (Eng.) If God be for us, who shall be a-against us, if God be for us, who shall be a-against us?
 (Germ.) Freu - - den-trä - nen auf den Wang-en, Freu - -den - trä - nen auf den Wang-en.

And the same text lines on this melody:



F) Timing / spacing

It is important to know when/where to place the consonants and vowels within the given time of the rhythm. The best organised way is to place the vowel ON the beat and the preceding consonant(s) BEFORE the beat. — In one of his priceless books, the most famous Lieder accompanist, Gerald Moore (UK), made this idea visible on paper in somewhat the following way:

(We use again “Schlummert ein, ihr matten Augen” and “Quella fiamma che m'accende”)

Schlu...mmert ei...n ihr ma...tten Au..gen.
 Quel:..... la fiam...ma che m'acchen.de.

This serves two purposes: 1) When the consonants come BEFORE the beat, they are better heard, since there is less accompanying sound than ON the beat, 2) The accompanists hear the beat of the singer announced/anticipated by the preceding consonants.

G) Credo (I believe)

- 1) Voiced consonants help each other to resonate, if they are connected. E.g. “Am Brunnen....” and “In dulce júbilo”. (See E-1, page 2.)
- 2) Voiced consonants help the placement of the following vowels, if their resonance is transmitted from one to the other. E.g. “Männer suchen stets zu naschen”.
- 3) Consonants help the EXPRESSION.
E.g. In “Ich grolle nicht”, the GR, when pronounced in a harsh way, underlines the meaning. However in the French “gracieusement”, the same GR, when spoken in an elegant way, will do justice to that word. — Other example:
In “Mein Wut ist groß”, the W expresses the meaning, if pronounced with a quasi explosive quality. However in “So weich du bist” the same W, pronounced in a soothing way, makes “weich’ more gentle.
- 4) Intelligible singing creates A LINK between you and your audience. They will PARTICIPATE in the story, rather than only be RECIPIENTS of beautiful sounds.

===== Part two: correct pronunciation =====

H) Explanation

- 1) While the first part of my lecture was mostly technical/physical, now we turn to the more intellectual aspect of diction: the knowledge of the (foreign) languages in which we often sing, predominantly: Italian, French, German; occasionally: English and Latin.
- 2) I am dealing only with the Stage Language (“Bühnensprache”), as has been used by recent generations of classical singers. Other specialists are required, if performers want to present the pronunciation in Shakespearean times or in the years of Bach in Bavaria.
- 3) This lecture is directed to professional singers who have the required knowledge of these languages to begin with. Hereafter, I will only mention some challenges, encountered during my years of singing and teaching.

I) Some points of interest

Looking at differences and similarities between our frequent concert languages, two languages may go hand-in-hand. For instance: double consonants work for German and Italian and are forbidden in French and English. However, ‘aspiration’ (see # 2, below) is heard in English and German, but not in French and Italian. — Look at this:

1) Double & single consonants.

German: “Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis”. Italian: “Quella fiamma che macchende”. (The underlined letters sound double.)

In French, this is never done: in “La femme dans la ville”, the m and l do not sound double.

In English, there is not much difference in the sound of double or single consonants: E.g. in “It’s possible that I follow you”.

2) 'Aspiration'.

After the t, k & p, a light h (puff of air) is heard. This goes for English and German, but is forbidden in French and Italian. E.g.:

English: "tea for two" sounds like "t(h)ea for t(h)oo" / "pass" = "p(h)ass" / "come" = "k(h)ome".

German: "kommen" = "k(h)ommen" / "passen" = "p(h)assen" / "tanzen" = "t(h)anzen".

It would be very ugly if this were done in French "tu est poli" or Italian "tanto caro".

3) Length of vowels and colouring.

In the English phrase "The dog's FOOD is beside my FOOT", the two sets of "OO" sound different, both in length and colour. The same can be heard in the German "Die BLUME MUSS blau sein." Each U-sound has a different length and colour.

In spoken language, this creates no problem: the length of syllables comes automatically.

However, when we have to sing a SHORT vowel on a LONG note (or melisma), we have to pay attention. In our frequently used example: "Schummert ein, ihr matten Augen" (aria by Bach), the "Schlu" is composed on two long notes. Here, the sound of "Blume" would be wrong but that of "Kuß" would be correct.

In the English language, this happens frequently. If that is your 'mother tongue', there is no problem. But for non-native speakers, it is worth trying these two phrases:

"I BEG you, take this BAG from my BACK". We hear 3 varieties of the basic e sound (as in German "Herz"). Some ill informed people from Holland or Germany would say: "I BECK you take this BECK from my BECK". Further:

"He HAD a HAT on his HEAD". Badly pronounced: "He HET a HET on his HET".

Obviously, the consonant after the vowel plays the leading role in deciding about the length and colour of the vowel. E.g. "his" and "hiss" or "of" and "off" or "God" and "got", etc.

4) Legato or glottis.

In singing (and in music generally), legato is a precious thing. But the need for legato can differ from one language to another. We might call German the least, and French the most legato language. E.g. A German word starting with a vowel should be slightly separated from the preceding word: "Am / Abend da / es kühle war" (A Frenchman would tend to say "aMabend daEs kühle war".) Also: "Es / soll nicht geschehen". (We should hear both the s and the z; not just one z-sound.) Also: In French "le théâtre", the e and a are closely connected; in German, they are slightly separated: "Im The/ater".

The French are so afraid of glottis sounds that they go out of their way to avoid them. E.g. If we translate "What has he said?" into French, the basic structure would be "Que a il dit?" Since that would create 2 glottis situations, the French change that into "Qu'a-t-il dit?" As you see, the clash between "que" and "a" is avoided with the help of an apostrophe, and the embarrassment of "a" / "il" is solved by inserting -t- (out of nowhere). Likewise, the French will make mute sounds audible to avoid a glottis: "nous avons" (= liaison). (See hereafter:)

5) Liaison. A typical French phenomenon.

In his book *The Interpretation of French Song*, Pierre Bernac (famous French Lieder singer) has devoted one entire chapter to the use of "liaisons". The word means that a letter that is usually not pronounced (like the s in "nous" or the t in "fait") will sound when followed by a vowel. As a result, "Nous avons" will sound as "Nou Zavons" (the s becomes audible AND changes into a Z.) Likewise, "Un fait accompli" will sound like "Un fai Taccomplì".

But that is not all.... Bernac distinguishes three groups:

I) The liaison is compulsory, e.g. after an article (les enfants) or a personal pronoun (ils ont peur). And in a few other cases.

II) The liaison is forbidden, e.g. before an "h aspiré" (= an aspirated h). Example "Les Hollandais" and "Les héros". However, when the h is not aspirated, the liaison is made: "Les hommes" and "les heures". How can one tell which h is aspirated and which not? A good French dictionary will indicate the distinction. — Another forbidden case: If words are separated by a comma, no liaison is made: "Les filles, / en route à l'école...."

III) The liaison is voluntary. See next page.

In conversation, a minimum of the voluntary liaisons is made. In announcements and speeches, it is used more. In poetic and classical declamation (and classical singing!) a maximum is heard. For detailed instruction, see P. Bernac.

Classical singers of the youngest generation sometimes restrict the voluntary liaisons, when they don't want to sound 'old school'.

6) Nasality. A mostly French subject.

There are 4 nasal sounds:

-**in**, as in "malin" or "impossible". (The sound is the same with n or m after the i.)

-**an**, as in "l'an", "en voiture" or "l'enfant" (The sound is the same when written with e or a, as in "enfant".)

-**on**, as in "onduler" and "ombre" (The sound does not change with n or m after the o.)

-**un**, as in "l'un et l'autre" or "humble". (Again the sound is the same with n or m after the u.)

IMPORTANT: As soon as the combination of these vowels and consonants leads to nasality, the consonant (n or m) is NOT pronounced separately. The exception is, when the combination with the following word leads to A LIAISON. E.g. "un bonn enfant" and "en eté". Now, the n is sounding, but the nasality disappears. (So the options are only: nasal without consonant or non-nasal with consonant.)

7) Voiced, unvoiced.

Not all singers pay enough attention to the question if consonants should sound unvoiced or voiced.

Non native English speakers might pronounce "God" like "got", or "his" like "hiss", or "plug" like "pluck" and even "very" like "ferry".

On the other hand, non native German singers might forget that the German language has no voiced final consonants. "Ich hab' nicht viel Geld" should sound , with a p in "hab" and a t in "Geld". Singers of English background might go wrong, here.

Looking at the beginning of German words, we are surprised that "Vater" sounds like "fater" and "Sommer" like "zommer", not to mention "Zimmer" like "tsimmer". Sometimes, the beginning v is not changed into f: In "die Violine" and "das Vibrato", the v is very voiced, almost turning into w. This can happen in German words of foreign origine.

In Italian, an s between 2 vowels becomes a z: "Pisa" and "bisogna".

The same in French: "deuxième fase" & "basale"

French is particularly sensitive for nonchalance with voiced / unvoiced:

"Jean" should not become "chant", "vin" not "fin".

Similarly in English: "garden" should become "karden" and "goal" not "coal".

8) The tongue-tip R.

In Spain and Italy, there is still an original 'rolling r' (= tonge-tip r).

In England, Germany and France this r is hardly used in conversation (except in Bavaria and Austria). However, in declamation and classical context (= "Bühnensprache"), the rolling r is still used in English, French and German. though not as 'rattling' as in Italy, let alone Spain.

In English stage language, the rolling r is restricted to the beginning or middle of words: "road", "bright" & "morose". At or near the end of a word, the r is usually mute: "Lord", "first", "here", "lover". An exception is the elegant way of connecting words wil a slightly rolling r: "forreverrand ever".

(Classical singers of the youngest generation may ignore the rolling r in English, German and French (as meant above), as they fear to sound too 'old school'.)

9) The three appearances of E.

(Look also at paragraph E-2, page 2)

In the French word “élève”, we find the 3 main sounds of the letter e (united in one word):

In addition to paragraph E-2, some extra remarks are useful:

The é (Germ. “Seele”, French “l’été”) is quite narrow in German and French: “am Meer”, “der Alte”, “réveiller”.

But it is more open in Italian (“vero”) and English (“labor”).

A special word about the mute e or schwa. (“Je me demande”, “bedeuten”, “father”, “summer”).

In **French**, the schwa must be very closed (lips forward to a small opening). Thus we have a clear difference between “me” and “mes” or “le” and “les”.

In **German**, the schwa can be slightly more open, leaning towards è (“der Mann”, “mein Vater”).

In **English**, it is also slightly open, now leaning towards ah (“the father”).

10) Q in French, Italian, Latin.

“quasi”, when in English and Italian, has an oo-sound (as in “food”) in it: k-oo-aa-zi.

However, in French, there is no oo after the q: kaa-zi.

The same goes for “quality” / “qualità” / “qualité”:

Only in French, “qualité” becomes “kaa-li-té” (no oo-sound after the q).

Latin “quoniam” has an oo-sound after the q. But when ‘German Latin’ is required, it will become “kwo-ni-am”

11) Warning about “ui”.

In **Italian** “lui”, “tui”, etc., an oo-sound is heard: “loo-i”, “too-i” (oo as in Eng. “food”).

Important:

In **French**, there can be only an ü-sound (like in “süß”): “la nuit” or “je suis” can NOT sound like the vowel in “Louis”, but clearly like “nü-i” and “fü-i”.

12) A tongue twister, for a desert:

Speak these 4 French words:

“les yeux” (= the eyes) (sounds “lè-zi-eu”),

“les cieux” (= the skies) (sounds “lè-ssi-eu”),

“les oeufs” (= the eggs) (sounds “lè-zeu”),

“les jeux” (= the games) (sounds “lè-zjeu”)

GOOD LUCK.