



Rehearsal Break

Diction and Textual Artistry: Successful Communication When Singing in English

by Donald Neuen

The reason the arts exist is to express feelings. They begin with the creator of an artistic endeavor and proceed to the performer, listener, or observer. The arts include sound, design, movement, form, writing, film, and pictures. As vocal performers, we refer specifically to vocal or choral composition, vocal pedagogy, choral conducting, and singing. The reason for the existence of singing, therefore, is to expressively communicate the feelings of a composer in a manner that stimulates an emotional response from the listener. This is the antithesis of only performing accurate pitches and rhythms.

This entire process is based on the singer's ability to freely and successfully express innermost feelings. These can be serious or light-hearted. They may be based on religion, patriotism, love, peace, joy, nature, justice, inalienable rights, humor, or anything else within the wide range of human emotions.

The responsibilities of the choral

conductor are to:

- 1) Select music that has expressive potential.
- 2) Perform in a manner that successfully transcends that potential through the minds and voices of the singers to the minds of the listeners.

In my many years of studying with, performing with, and working for Robert Shaw, his most important admonition to me was: "90% will never be good enough." I encourage each of us to heed his advice and apply it to textual artistry: *understandable English diction and singing with direct personal communication*. Both are crucial to the success of a choral performance and are especially true with compositions that tell a story or have a very significant meaning. Singing should be a direct, personal, and expressive reflection of text.

In most instances, the voice teacher, soloist, choral conductor,

and chorus will know the song and its text very well. They may not be aware, therefore, of the necessity for emphasis on understandable English diction. The challenge for each of us is to enable listeners to understand every word—*upon first hearing*. The following outline of English diction techniques, if consistently and thoroughly practiced, will guarantee the listener success in understanding the words of an English text.

Seven Important Rules for Clearly Articulated English Diction (listed according to their importance):

1) **Employ a very slight glottal attack on most words that begin with a vowel.** This is singularly the most important technique in articulation when singing in English (and German). We do not speak with this clarity. To ac-

complish it when singing, therefore, takes patient, relentless, and repetitive teaching, as well as total commitment.

“Come all,” not “cuh-mall”; “God of our,” not “Gaw-duh-vour”; “I always am,” not “I yal-weh-zam”; “It is,” not “Ih-tis;” “way over,” not “Weh-yover;” “Many of us are,” not “many-yuh-zare.”

Admittedly, this may be impractical in very fast tempi, and to exaggerate the glottal attack can be harmful to the voice. Consultation with an otolaryngologist, who was also a baritone oratorio soloist, re-

sulted in his assurance that doing as is recommended here will not be harmful to the voice—even if done over a lifetime of singing.

This method can be practiced by singing the sustained vowels “ah, ay, ee, oh, oo,” repeated several times, with only a very slight glottal attack on each new beginning vowel. Breaks in the continued tone and accented glottal attacks should not take place. Musical line is not interrupted. This technique is the first (major) step when singing in English, with the message clearly understood.

2) **Make use of the percussive effect of final consonants.** They are seldom heard. The echo of the preceding vowel and/or the accompaniment usually covers them up. Both are often louder than a final consonant. To help the clarity of the final consonant, add a slight vowel sound: “Said” = “Sai-duh,” “Lord” = “Lor-duh,” “Love” = “Lo-vuh,” “Meek” = “Mee-kuh,” “Will” = “Wi-lluh.” In softer (and a cappella) music, “ih” may suffice, rather than the more vocal “uh.” The minimal “dh,” “vh,” “kh,” and “lh” are seldom sufficient and usually inaudible.

Caution: This will seem over-done and unnatural to the singers. Teach them to understand why they are doing it (see previous paragraph). Explain that it will not sound over-done nor unnatural to the listener. The text will simply be understood. Do not exaggerate this technique in an attempt to do it well. Exaggeration often negates function and distracts from the music.

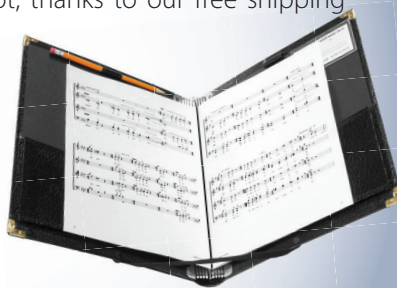
The best way to achieve this technique is to instruct singers to make the following changes to the text: “Love my” would be “Luh v’m’y”; “Meek shall” would be “Mee k’shall”; “Will my” would be “Wi l’m’y.” Placing the final consonant with an apostrophe prior to the following word will remind the singers to sing it as explained above. Obviously, not all final consonants need this reinforced help. You be the judge. Let common sense and understandability be your guide.

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3) **Th and V:** Involve the tongue for “th,” and the lower lip and upper teeth for “v.” For “th,” slightly stick the tongue out, then draw it back touching the upper teeth. Do this for actual tone with a voiced “th” as in “the, they, these, thy, that,” etc., and for extra breath for voiceless “th” as in “think, thought, through-out, throw.”

“Is thy” is often heard as “izz-eye,” instead of either “is thy,” or even better, “ih-z’thy.” “Deep thought” is often “Dec-ought,” instead of “Deep thought,” or better, ”Dec-p’thought.”

Clarify “v” as in “live, dive, voice,

victory,” etc., by tucking the lower lip under the upper teeth, and pull the lip out for the voiced “v”. As with the voiced “th,” the “v” should have audible tone.

4) **W vs. Wh:** For words that begin with W, start with a slight, quick “oo,” as in “oowe, oowill, oowin.” “Wh” begins with extra breath: “what, where, why, when,” etc. Singers tend to sing both “w” and “wh” as though they were all anemic “w’s.”

5) **The word “our” is a triptong:** “ah-oo-wur” (although pro-

nounced quickly), but certainly not pronounced as “are,” which often happens.

6) **In classical music, double consonants such as T’s or D’s, should both be slightly articulated:** “Night to,” “God did.” In pop, country, and other music, in which we emphasize a natural speaking style (as opposed to a bel canto singing style), we would employ the stop-consonant, which is a very brief staccato/stop on the first word: “night” immediately followed by “to” = “nigh-to,” as though it were one word.



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7) **Take advantage of the second sound of diphthongs (for greater over-all vocal and word color/sound):** “Thy” = “thah-ee”; “they” = “they-ee”; “Thou” = “thah-oo”; “though” = “tho-oo”; “Joy” = “jaw-ee.” The second sound should not be approached earlier, nor last longer than a “t.” Consider the second sound indicated above as unique and vital, which may be more effective than a passive, neutral “uh” or “ih.”

Although the first four rules are the most important, all seven will successfully clarify the message in our music. They will clean up nearly all English diction problems.

Granted, it is logical to assume that in lighter music such as ballads, country, folk, show, and pop styles, lesser attention to some of the previous suggested techniques may be appropriate. It is up to the conductor to make those decisions. One thing, however, is absolute: the text must be clearly understood by the listener upon first hearing, and it must *mean* something.

We might call this effort to achieve understandable English a “commitment to perfection.” This, by the way, is the exact definition of Robert Shaw’s overall contribution to choral music in America. Perfection is greater than excellence. Granted, no one can be—nor is

expected to be—totally perfect. However, with great teaching, inspiration, and 100% commitment, most singers can attain perfection most of the time—which will result in the ensemble consistently achieving collective perfection.

The “trilogy” of successful choral teaching/conducting:

- Know what perfection is.
- Know how to teach it.
- Know how to inspire singers to want and commit to it.

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Syllable and Word Inflection

Syllable inflection: For words with more than one syllable, emphasize those normally emphasized when speaking articulately, and de-emphasize those normally de-emphasized.

Somehow, when singing, singers are so concerned with correct pitches and rhythms that all syllables result in a manual production with exactly the same emphasis. Nobody speaks in that monotonous way, but choirs often sing in that manner unless specifically taught to do otherwise.

Many soloists also lack consistent syllable inflection. Unless the tempo is too fast to effectively do it, logical syllable inflection should be a way of life for all singers, greatly *beautifying* the natural sound of text. For example: the word “anticipation” would have a slight crescendo during “antici,” plus forward motion added to the syllable “ci,” followed by an appropriate emphasis on “pa,” and a gentle-softness on “tion.” Similar attention should be given to most words with more than one syllable.

There are, of course, exceptions. These are instances in which the composer or arranger has indicated a constant *forte* or continuous *marcato* markings. This may make syllable inflection impractical. Very fast tempi or the placement of important syllables or words on off-beat positions may also make syllable inflection difficult or impossible. Normally, however, this concept of syllable inflection is absolutely crucial to the success of

expressive singing. Without it, text becomes meaningless and monotonous.

Like other techniques that bring professionalism to our singing, consistent employment of syllable in-

flexion takes time. Consider two thoughts:

- 1) We should never be in a hurry for anything in the arts. Take time to do things right.



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2) If need be, do fewer songs, and do them well.

Word inflection is a similar emphasis/de-emphasis concept concerning continuous words within a phrase. Some words are logically more significant than others. Some may actually be insignificant—except as they serve as the vehicle to move (with forward motion) toward a word with special meaning. Such insignificant words might be “and, the, be, of, to, on, from, for, am, at, in, a,” etc.

The following is an example of syllable and word inflection analysis within a phrase.

“From *all* falseness, *set* me free.”

One way in which this phrase might be interpreted:

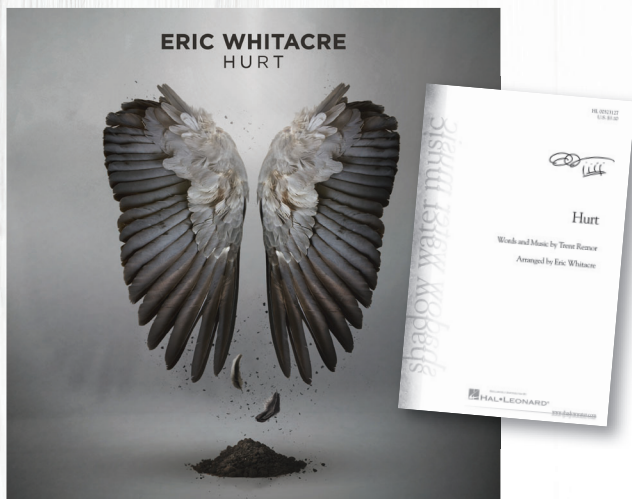
- 1) Primary emphasis on the words “falseness” and “free” (underlined).
- 2) Next, slightly less emphasized, are the words “all” and “set” (italized).
- 3) The least emphasized words are “From” and “me” (regular font).
- 4) In addition, syllable inflection is necessary for the word “false-

ness,” de-emphasizing “ness” to the level of “From” and “me.”

In the above example, there are three levels of *dynamic intensity* within only one indicated dynamic level. Additional (different) interpretations might be based on melodic rise and fall, harmonic intensity, rhythm, and/or dramatic impact. It is at the discretion of the conductor to determine which best fits the music and the composer’s intent. *How* it is done is not as important as simply *doing it!* *Do something*. Beautifying the sound of words is a crucial part of interpreting and teaching choral music.

It is important to remember that

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composers rarely—if ever—draw attention to inflection with their markings. The same may often hold true with other interpretive markings. Igor Stravinsky said, after hearing the Robert Shaw Chorale recording of his *Symphony of Psalms*, “I didn’t know my piece was that beautiful.”

Composers seldom know the potential beauty and message-impact of their composition. It is their job to simply create a musical work that has never been previously heard. That’s it. It is the conductor’s responsibility to take the work, study it thoroughly, and determine what can be done to fully realize its potential while preserving it as the composer’s, avoiding making it “the conductor’s composition.”

Figures 1 and 2 are examples of syllable and word inflection and are taken from Handel’s *Messiah*, Nos. 9 and 23. Some measures, involving rests or repetition, have been omitted or condensed to focus only on points of inflection. The markings

(< - >) should flow naturally and unobtrusively.

Reminder: Syllable stress and word inflection should flow naturally, never being over-done, which will draw attention to the technique itself.

Word-Meaning Emphasis

Many words have a very definite meaning and are important to both the singer and listener regarding the full communication of the song’s message. It is up to soloists and con-

ductors to identify these words and see that they are performed with the full dramatic intent of their meaning—exactly the same as a great actor would speak the word.

That special meaning must come from the depth of the actor’s or singer’s heart. It is that important aspect of passion—the ability to freely and convincingly express innermost feelings—with which great artists consistently rehearse and perform. We are all capable of varying degrees of passion, and with coaching/teaching by the choral conductor or voice

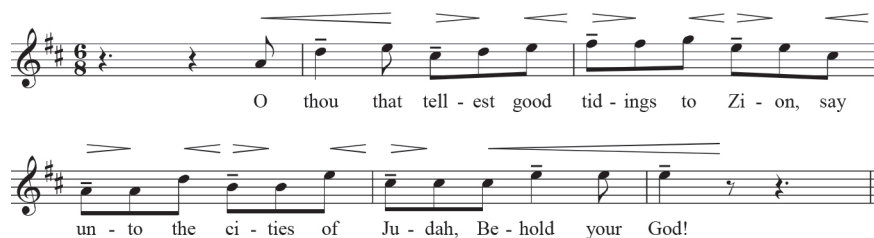


Figure 1. George Frideric Handel, *Messiah*, No. 9.



Figure 2. George Frideric Handel, *Messiah*, No. 23.

teacher, greater degrees of passion can be developed. Passion is crucial to artistic success—at all levels and areas of the arts. Singers of any age are capable of experiencing joy, sorrow, love, and anger. These, and other emotions, can be transferred to musical passion through the example and teaching of a creative and inspiring conductor.

The conductor, in her/his teaching, example, conducting gestures, and facial expressions is the source of everything—every expression and all passion. The conductor must freely demonstrate, teach, and motivate this passion. Simple accuracy of the-right-note-at-the-right-time, without expression, is lifeless. It is passion that brings the math of music into expressive, musical, art.

Language is filled with words of

expression and specific meaning. The following are just a few. First, speak the words as a dramatic actor, then sing them in a similarly expressive manner as a great soloist.

“Love,” “Sing,” “Joy,” “Sincerely,” “Anger,” “Fight,” “Destroy,” “Burn,” “Live,” “Passion,” “Great,” “Peace,” “Tenderly,” “Caress,” “God,” “Shine,” “Light,” “Happiness,” “Beautiful.”

Doing this will enable a conductor to have personally experienced the process of word-meaning interpretation, enabling her or him to effectively teach it. The meaning must be felt by the conductor, taught to the singers, and intentionally communicated to the listeners. This is particularly true if the message of the song (as has been previously mentioned) is potentially impactful or tells a story.

Search every phrase microscopically (meaning the thorough study of one word, one beat, one measure, and one phrase before moving on to the next), finding every opportunity to employ syllable and word inflection, word-meaning emphasis and our seven rules of English diction. Mark your score accordingly, and ask the singers to similarly mark their music. Then, teach it—relentlessly!

Let us establish a new "choral golden rule." If we interpret a composition musically, carefully observing the inflection of syllables and words, and solidly establishing word-meaning emphasis, our "golden rule" will quite naturally evolve: There will seldom, if ever, be two consecutive notes, words, or syllables performed with equal emphasis. Each will have a special function: 1)

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those that actively lead to the most important note, word, or syllable; or 2) the one that is the most important; or 3) those leading away from it with less emphasis.

In Closing

Great singing is an inspiration to all concerned: composers, musicologists, voice teachers, conductors, singers, fellow musicians, and listeners. It can be achieved by any chorus that is willing to be taught and ready to work hard through the relentless efforts of a knowledgeable and inspiring conductor.

A chorus will never surpass the ability and knowledge of its conductor. The conductor, therefore, must seek knowledge until the day he or she ceases to conduct, and develop an inspirational manner of continually leading the chorus to further heights of greatness and beauty.

Beautiful singing, combined with the artistry of motivating text, may be the ultimate experience within the arts. The voice is the only instrument that speaks *directly* (through music and text) to the listener's mind. The human voice is the only natural instrument in music. It is the only instrument of total human in-

volvement.

For most people, there are no limitations regarding beautiful singing except those they place on themselves. Encourage and inspire singers to always grow, expand, and be better this week than last, in every area of singing. Teach *beautiful* singing! Be free to be great! Prioritize perfection! **CI**

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