



On the Voice

Matthew Hoch, editor <mrh0032@auburn.edu>

A Stepwise Approach to Teaching French Diction in the Rehearsal Setting

by James Wilson

One of the main deterrents to programming French repertoire is the time it takes to separate the text from the score. A repetitive call-and-response approach may serve the basic need, but it leaves singers with little understanding of the language, the rules of its pronunciation, and the stylistic flow. Conversely, the conductor typically does not have time to teach a crash course in IPA and French diction. What follows in this article is a step-by-step approach to maximizing the singers' understanding of French diction within a timeframe that respects the many objectives of the rehearsal process.

Step 1.

Incorporate IPA into your teaching

For directors who do not have a background in IPA, I recommend "IPA Made Easy" by Anna Wentlent. This is a straightforward pocket guide to understanding the syllables and their applications to English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Latin. Alfred Music offers a corresponding set of posters for the rehearsal space. For those who have open wall space that is visible to all singers, I recommend hanging a set in the arrangement of a vowel chart.¹ This illustrates where vowels are formed in the mouth from a side point-of-view, with tongue vowels making up the left-side border and lip vowels forming the right-side border (see Figure

1 on the next page).

For singers who are new to IPA, applications to American and British repertoire are typically more digestible than applications to foreign languages. This can help in sculpting the precise vowels for which we all strive. If, for example, your choir is flattening an [ɛ] vowel, the vowel chart may be used as an aid to describe and demonstrate the tongue placement spectrum from the vowels [e] to [ɛ]. Rather than simply telling the singers that their [ɛ] vowel needs more "height," they will understand we are asking for a different tongue position. Moreover, if the choir is mixing an [o] vowel, we can describe and demonstrate the migration between a purely formed [ɔ] vowel and a tongue-affected [œ] vowel. It can be helpful to understand and anticipate what vowel formations our choirs may be prone to forming based on their region.²

Step 2.

Introduce French Vowel Sounds Using a Vowel Chart

Once our singers have built an understanding of the primary IPA syllables and their applications to English repertoire, they should be ready to incorporate French vowel sounds. It may be helpful to teach or remind the choir that English is a language of Germanic or-

igin, with Germanic cadence and glottal interruption, whereas French is of Latin origin and features a much more lyrical and uninterrupted flow of syllables. Like most languages, French flows in a regular alternation between vowels and consonants. Take, for example, the opening line of Debussy's *Trois chansons*:

Dieu, qu'il la fait bon regarder.³
[djø kil_ la fε bõ rə.gar.de]

Unlike American English, the vowels in French are quite pure. In introducing these vowels to a choir, it is better to slowly entone the syllables than to simply speak the words.⁴ This offers singers a better opportunity to experience the unique formation of each vowel and how each connects seamlessly to the following consonant. While entoning the above example from *Trois chansons*, be sure to maximize the length of the vowel sounds, minimize the consonant interruption, and con-

nect each syllable as seamlessly as possible.

French features several vowels that do not appear in English. These include the mixed vowels [y], [ø], and [œ]; and the nasal vowels [ɑ̃], [ɛ̃], [ɔ̃], and [œ̃]. Using a vowel chart, describe and demonstrate the position of each of the mixed vowels in relation to their basic vowel cousins:

Mixed vowel [y] is tongue vowel [i] with the addition of lip vowel [u]

Mixed vowel [ø] is tongue vowel [e] with the addition of lip vowel [o]

Mixed vowel [œ] is tongue vowel [ε] with the addition of lip vowel [ɔ]

Next, describe and demonstrate the position of each of the nasal vowels in relation to their basic vowel cousins. Technically, a nasal vowel is formed by the slight lowering of the soft palate, which results in greater resonance (i.e., resonant space) in the nasal passage.⁵

Nasal vowel [ɑ̃] is modified open vowel [ɑ]

Nasal vowel [ɛ̃] is modified tongue vowel [ε]

Nasal vowel [œ̃] is modified mixed vowel [œ]

Nasal vowel [ɔ̃] is modified lip vowel [ɔ]

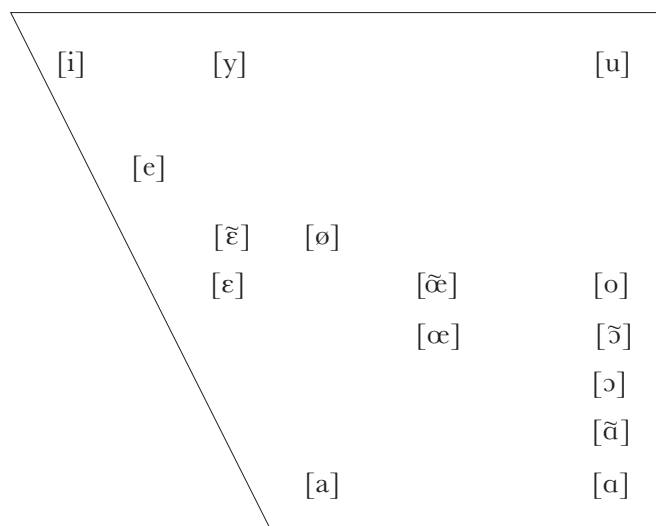


Figure 1.

A vowel chart featuring vowels used in the French language.

Step 3.

Assess the Singers' Individual Understanding and Ability to Pronounce French Syllables Correctly

Entoning takes time, and rehearsals will not often allow for extensive repetition. This is where directors often resort to a reactive call-and-response method that leaves us vulnerable to scattered Americanisms. One way to offer the individual reinforcement and practice that will best benefit the choir is to record and share a full entonation of your French repertoire. If you have one or more French-speaking singers, this can be a nice way to recognize and incorporate their specialized skill.⁶

Directors working in a classroom setting may wish to ascribe entonation recordings as a point of assessment. Your institution's Blackboard or equivalent media sharing platform is an excellent place to upload, assign, and assess entonation recordings. If students are provided the written IPA, the French text, and a recording of the correct pronunciation entoned slowly and clearly, a fair and objective point-assessment should be possible to execute.

Step 4.

Apply Correct Pronunciation to the Music

Directors often choose to separate the text from the pitches and rhythms as an initial step in the learning process. Whether the preference is solfège singing, count singing, or singing on a neutral syllable, it may be helpful to remove text as a point of concentration, thus allowing singers to devote most of their attention to notes and rhythms. This is especially true when a new and potentially challenging text is to be applied. If the music and text is taught separately and to a moderate level of proficiency, directors will enjoy a smoother transition in aligning proper pronunciation to the notes and rhythms. The smoother the transition, the easier it is to catch noticeable inaccuracies and offer corrections in the moment. Naturally, some singers will take to proper pronunciation more readily than others. Recorded entonations can help in bringing each singer to the same level of proficiency without the loss of rehearsal time.

Common Pitfalls

American singers who are new to French will often fail to entone pure vowels and, instead, maintain the mixture of American diphthongs, for example, [feɪ] instead of [fɛ] in the word *fait*. Slow entonation will help to clear away unintended vowel mixtures and purify the aggregate vowels.

When working with mixed vowels, it is common to have to ask for adjustments to either the tongue or lip positions. Note that when singers are asked to make these adjustments, the lips and tongue will tend to migrate together as a result of English-speaking muscle memory. A good way to teach mixed vowel purity is to isolate the lip vowel before adding the tongue position. For example, ask the singers to phonate on [u] before adding [i] in the tongue so that a pure [y] is the result. Conversely, singers may be asked to isolate a pure tongue vowel before adding the lip position. If making these new and unique vowel sounds causes your choir members to laugh, you're probably on the right track.

Singers may be prone to incorporating the "American r," leading to pronunciations such as [ɪə.gæ.ɹeɪ] instead of [rə.gar.de] in the word *regarder*.⁷ When singing in French, singers should be instructed to lightly flip the *r* [r] with a forward tongue placement. Some directors allow for stop-plosive [d] as a substitute for flipped *r* [r], but the French *r* should always remain vibrant and maintain airflow.

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Like [r], the consonant [l] may be formed in different places either frontally, with the tip of the tongue against the upper front teeth, or back with the mid-portion of the tongue pressing back in the throat. The latter is common in American English, whereas the former is required for proper singing in French. Singers should avoid singing on an [l] despite it being a voiced consonant. In the second phrase of Debussy's *Trois chansons* no. 1, the [l] in the word *belle* should be minimized and formed at the front of the mouth. The initial vowel [ɛ] should be maximized while carefully avoiding migration to the [l]. In this and other instances, it may be helpful to instruct your singers not to let the consonant pollute the quality of a pure vowel.

There are many complexities, nuances, and exceptions that go beyond the scope of this overview of instructional approach. For a more detailed and thorough study on these topics, see *A Course in French Lyric Diction* by Deborah Williamson. 

Resource List for Further Study

Adams, David. *A Handbook of Diction for Singers*, 3rd ed. Oxford University Press, 2022.

Davis, Eileen. *Sing French: Diction for Singers*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. Éclairé Press, 2003.

Debussy, Claude. *Trois chansons*. Choral Public Domain Library (CPDL), 1999 (rev. March 22, 2001). <http://www.cpdl.org/>.

Grubb, Thomas. *Singing in French: A Manual of French Diction and French Vocal Repertoire*. Schirmer Books, 1979.

IPA Source LLC. Library of Congress ISSN 2771-876X. <https://www.ipasource.com/>.

Wentlent, Anna. *IPA Made Easy: A Guidebook for the International Phonetic Alphabet*. Alfred Music, 2014.

Williamson, Deborah. *A Course in French Lyric Diction*. GIA Publications, 2019.

James Wilson, DMA, is lecturer of music at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse and assistant director and chorus master of the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra. jwilson2@uwlax.edu

NOTES

¹ Wentlent uses [ɔ̃] in both the guidebook and corresponding posters, however [õ] is more standard in the teaching of French diction.

² For a more detailed list and IPA-based description of regional accents in the United States, see Eliza Simpson's *The Complete Guide to Regional American Accents* at www.boldvoice.com.

³ Author Deborah Williamson illustrates French consonant/vowel alternation using the line “mais j'entends, que tu m'aimes bien” from Reynaldo Hahn's *À Chloris*. Deborah Williamson, *A Course in French Lyric Diction* (GIA Publications, 2019), 5.

⁴ Although *entone* is a lesser-used spelling of the word *intone*, it is grammatically correct to use. In this context, it separates what we as directors would recognize as a chanted, i.e., “pitched,” *intonation* from that of a spoken exercise for improved diction. Moreover, the word's origin is from Middle French—*entoner*.

⁵ Williamson, *A Course in French Lyric Diction*, 37.

⁶ French speakers may need to be instructed to avoid the French guttural *r* [ʁ], which is generally limited to speech and French popular song.

⁷ For those unfamiliar with the IPA syllables [ɹ], [ʁ], and [ɛɹ], pretend you are Brad Pitt's character in the movie *Inglorious Bastards* attempting to pronounce the word *regarde*.