



# "Learning to Listen: A Guide for Beginning Vocal Coaches"

by

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"Learning to Listen: A Guide for Beginning Vocal Coaches"

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Learning to Listen: A Guide for Beginning Vocal Coaches

Thesis directed by Dr. Jeremy Reger

For any pianist, working with singers can be confusing due to the terminology they use, a sort of “vocal vortex.” Currently, there does not exist a compact, elementary guide for those working with singers. Knowledge of the terms and their applications expands as pianists listen to vocal music professionals. Through this knowledge, we can start to explore the field of vocal coaching. This author researched many of the available resources on vocal coaching and posed a goal of writing the type of guide that they desired was available when starting in this field. “Learning to Listen” is the result of this goal.

Pianists who want to coach singers can learn how to listen in three areas: score accuracy, diction, and legato. For each, there are common inconsistencies for anyone who is singing. In “Learning to Listen,” some of the situations and solutions for solving them are presented. The wording used is specific because we want to offer clear feedback for singers, as we are an extension of their ears. Each of these solutions have consistently helped singers, in this author’s experience and those of other vocal coaches. The study of vocal coaching keeps growing and this author hopes that “Learning to Listen” serves as the starting point for your journey.

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## Introduction

### Purpose

As a young pianist at a university in the United States, I was delighted and terrified the first time I rehearsed with a singer. I felt that I did not know how to talk about the music. My training was based in solo piano works with clear vocabulary for discussing piano music and piano technique. For singers, words like “brighter,” “darker,” “nasal,” and “mixed vowels” are commonplace. But for me as a pianist, these words were confusing.<sup>1</sup> But if one listens, one can learn. As Timothy Hoekman says, “The most important thing a vocal coach must do is listen.”<sup>2</sup> Through listening to how people, especially pianists, talked to singers, I learned the definition and application of fundamental vocal terminology; this unlocked my “vocal vortex” and gave me clarity when working with a singer. Thus began my study within the field of vocal coaching. My journey in the study of how to assist vocalists as a pianist continues, and will always continue for those whose ears are open and who listen and form opinions. “Learning to Listen” serves as a resource for pianists who have performed with singers for a few years and are ready to give their vocal partners aural feedback and suggestions. I recommend this guide specifically for those entering a masters degree in collaborative piano as they will likely take diction classes at this point, an important element discussed in this document. However, the elements I suggest listening for are also beneficial for pianists just beginning a musical relationship with singers. Listening to specific aspects of the vocal line can guide the pianist in collaboration.

When a pianist works with a singer, they can take on one or both of two roles: a collaborative partner or a vocal coach. As collaborative partners, the musicians are likely

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<sup>1</sup> In this document, I will label any group of vocally oriented terms that are unfamiliar to pianists as a “vocal vortex.”

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Hoekman, “What is a Vocal Coach?” *American Music Teacher* 54, No. 2 (October-November, 2004): p. 72, Academic Search Premier.

preparing for a performance; their time together is used as a rehearsal. As a vocal coach, the pianist is employed to listen to the singer, provide feedback on what they hear, and offer suggestions based on previous experience, and knowledge. In his book *Opera Coaching*, Alan Montgomery says “A coach helps musicians learn music, although the help is not usually of a technical nature.”<sup>3</sup> Singing is complicated because the mechanics of the instrument lie inside the human body, and this means that vocalists cannot always clearly and accurately hear and respond to their music making without a trusted outside listener. Having a coach as another pair of ears can set up a singer for success by providing a listener who can in turn assist in making musical choices, maintaining accuracy, and helping the performer achieve their artistic goals for the performance.

There are many resources available on the essence of a good vocal coach and what is required learning for this role. After researching these excellent materials, I believe that a compact, elementary resource should be designed with specific direction towards pianists, guiding them in their listening, assessment, and critical communication with vocalists. “Learning to Listen” was created to give practical tools and vocabulary to empower young pianists as they help singers. Three elements of singing are addressed: score accuracy, diction, and legato. Each of the issues discussed are common areas for which a singer might need the extra ears and professional guidance of a vocal coach, who can listen and offer feedback. After experimenting with the techniques suggested, the study of vocal coaching can be continued using the resources listed in the Appendix. I hope that “Learning to Listen” serves as the starting point for your journey.

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<sup>3</sup>Alan Montgomery, *Opera Coaching*, New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006, p. Vii.

## Guidelines

The coach's main function is to listen to the singer. Timothy Hoekman suggests that "The basic musical elements a coach must listen for include correct pitches, rhythms, and words."<sup>4</sup> Solo pianists are familiar with striving for score accuracy, but vocalists have to internally hear pitches whereas a pianist is pressing keys. The elements of words may be unfamiliar, but pianists can learn how a vocalist perceives language both as a technical and dramatic tool. I would also encourage listening for legato. Although I do not recommend that an emerging vocal coach focus on feedback regarding the technical aspects of singing, pianists can listen for legato, especially since they use this in their own playing. A good vocal coach focuses on each of these elements, developing their specific coaching style over time. This field does not require you to know everything before you start. In her article "How to Choose a Coach," Julie Starr recommends a "a growth mindset: a state of mind that says we have nothing to prove and everything to learn."<sup>5</sup> As emerging coaches, we must give ourselves grace and space to learn how to listen and how to effectively communicate, knowing our greatest tool in working with singers is to offer sincere feedback. We must remember that when we provide critical feedback to any musician, this can affect them as a human, positively or negatively, depending on the delivery of the feedback. "It's the language coach's job not to criticize but to explain, to correct, and encourage and support."<sup>6</sup> states John Asquith, a language coach for the Welsh National Opera and Welsh College of Music and Drama. The relationship of coach and singer can be richly rewarding when marked by attentive listening and kindness.

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<sup>4</sup>Hoekman, "What is a Vocal Coach?" p. 72.

<sup>5</sup>Julie Starr, "How to Choose a Coach: Find a Good Fit for Your Ensemble," *Pitch Pipe* 6, No. 2 (October 2022): p. 39.

<sup>6</sup>Wales Cardiff, "You Have to Show the Singer How to Sing Each Bit," *Western Mail* September 22, 2017, p. 8, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A505790623/STND?u=coloboulder&sid=bookmark-STND&xid=d226b22d](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A505790623/STND?u=coloboulder&sid=bookmark-STND&xid=d226b22d).

## Preparation

Whether for a rehearsal or a coaching session, the pianist should prepare a musical score beyond learning the notes/rhythm of the piano part. Vocal music normally has text, with the exception of vocalises; I recommend starting preparation with that element because the existence of text in music is often new for pianists. I concur with Kurt Adler's conviction that "the song is nothing else than a poem set to music, a poem inspiring a musical thought which is then expressed in the song. The poem, therefore, assumes great importance."<sup>7</sup> Frequently, vocal music is written in a language other than English so knowing the translation can be vital. Listen to "Du Ring an meinem Finger" from *Frauenliebe und Leben Op. 42* by Robert Schumann. This song sounds contemplative, perhaps even loving. But the music makes more sense when we know the text is the voice of a woman just engaged who admires her ring and dreams of her life to come. By knowing the translation, we can offer feedback on a singer's text portrayal through body language, diction, and acting. There are three types of translations available: poetic, singable (rhymed like the original language), and literal (word for word). I recommend writing into your score the literal translation as specific words are often highlighted by the piano part. The poetic translation can help you grasp the meaning of the text when the literal meaning appears fragmented. The singable translation is often inaccurate; the only purpose for this translation occurs when the vocalist needs to sing the song in English. For poetic translations, [oxfordsong.org](http://oxfordsong.org) or [Lieder.net](http://Lieder.net) are both good online resources, based on my own experience with comparing these translations with a literal translation. For a literal or word-for-word translation, you can use a dictionary or an online resource like [WordReference.com](http://WordReference.com). Google translate used to

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<sup>7</sup>Kurt Adler, *The Art of Accompanying and Coaching*, Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1965, p. 219.

be unreliable, but has improved; I would still recommend cross referencing the previously recommended sources for accuracy.

Referencing back to Adler's emphasis on the poem, we will want to provide feedback to our singers if we can or cannot understand the articulation of the text. Learning how the text is pronounced in a musical performance requires some studying of the lyric diction resources available. Lyric diction refers to words that are sung compared to spoken diction which is not sung; there are some differences between the two for each language. You can listen to recordings to practice speaking the text, although taking diction classes is recommended if possible. This leads to another step, one of a coaches' greatest tools: the ability to sing and play. Martin Katz has been a collaborative pianist and vocal coach for over 45 years. Mr. Katz's book, *The Complete Collaborator*, is considered a comprehensive textbook for collaborative pianists. Early in his book, Mr. Katz states, "I have never (well, almost never) stepped onto a stage or even into a rehearsal without being able to sing the soloist's music and play my own part simultaneously."<sup>8</sup> This preparation helps us as pianists in three ways: to anticipate where the singer needs to take a breath, to know what the vocal part sounds like, and to understand how the text pronunciation aligns with the music. As a collaborator, we listen for breaths to align the music. As a coach, we listen for breaths to make suggestions that improve the legato of the line, bring out the character, or assist with finishing a phrase successfully. Singing while playing teaches us what the vocal and piano parts sound like together and prepares us to coach any incorrect pitch/rhythm.

Working with singers as either coach or collaborator requires us as pianists to prepare our ears. We learn to anticipate places to breathe by singing and playing, as well as the correct pitch/rhythm for the vocal line. Preparation gives us confidence to collaborate because we understand the meaning of the text and how the piano part works with that. I recommend starting

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<sup>8</sup>Martin Katz, *The Complete Collaborator*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 7.

vocal coaching in the order of elements listed in the guide: score accuracy, diction, then legato. While practicing how to coach score accuracy, pianists at the master's level can take diction classes and start to familiarize themselves with text pronunciation. This provides a foundation to begin coaching diction through the basic exercises recommended here. Finally, as you grow in listening with intention, start coaching legato, an important element for all singing but not always easy to catch inconsistencies. Whether you use this resource for vocal coaching or simply as a way to improve collaboration with singers, I encourage you to always prepare your ears as you learn to listen.

## Score Accuracy

Everyone makes mistakes when it comes to pitch and rhythm. As another set of ears, a vocal coach can catch inconsistencies of these elements with the singers they work with. The vocal coach should take great care in how they speak to a singer about pitch accuracy, either incorrect or not in tune. A recurring joke among musicians and non-musicians is how bad one's timbre can be when learning a new instrument. Think of the jokes made about middle school orchestra or band. But for a singer, their instrument is a part of their body. Criticism delivered the wrong way may correct the singer, but destroy the person. When addressing an incorrect pitch/rhythm, avoid the phrase "that was wrong." Instead, say "you sang a (insert pitch/rhythm), but that is actually supposed to be a (insert pitch/rhythm)." When the pitch is out of tune, use phrases like "that is not in the center of the pitch" or "can you sing that pitch a little higher/lower." The vocal coach should use phrases that promote improvement through a specific solution rather than negative comments about inaccuracy.

While I do recommend one solution for fixing pitches not in tune, this is more common when the diction, specifically vowels, needs correcting/modifying. Please reference the diction portion of this guide for direction on teaching correct vowels as well as the resources in the Appendix. If the pitch is not amended after adjusting the vowel, the vocal coach should recommend that the singer ask their primary teacher. There may be a vocal technique or lack thereof which is causing the pitch to be out of tune.

## Pitch

### Incorrect Pitch

*Solution: The vocalist can sing the line until the pitch in question and then hold the note while the coach plays it on the piano.*

When one note is incorrect, the singer may have learned it that way, especially if the melody is very intuitive and tonal. For example, in the aria “Rejoice Greatly” from Handel’s *Messiah*, there is one entrance pitch which in some previous editions was written as a B-flat, while newer editions indicate the pitch C. In recent years, I have encountered voice teachers teach that C is the correct pitch. However, the melody can start on C or B-flat, and not sound incorrect to the listener; hence why many singers learn the pitch as B-flat. In this instance, I recommend the coach play the bar before the entrance and the singer sing the first pitch as a sustained note. When a singer has learned a pitch incorrectly, they need to hear and feel the distance from the pitch they are singing and what they should be singing. This aids in relearning the pitch. They can also note that the C is played by the orchestra just an eighth note before they enter.

The image shows a musical score for the aria "Rejoice Greatly" from Handel's *Messiah*. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom two staves are the piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a rest, followed by the lyrics "be-hold, thy King com-eth un - to thee,". The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The score includes dynamic markings such as [p] and tr.

Figure 1.1 “Rejoice Greatly” in B-flat Major, mm. 30-32, from *Messiah* by Handel<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>George Friedrich Handel, *Messiah*, London: Novello & Co Limited ©1992, p. 74.

This example is at the singer's entrance, but the principle also relates to the pitches anywhere in the melody. Another example occurs in "The Monk and His Cat" from the *Hermit Songs* by Samuel Barber. In Figure 1.2, the singer may learn the G on the word "study" as the pitch A. This would make sense with the intervallic nature of the line, matching the skip of a 3rd between the two previous pitches. Here again, the singer can sing until the first pitch of the word "study" and sustain that note. The coach should play the G so the singer can hear and feel that they are a Major 2nd away from the correct pitch.

The image shows a musical score for the vocal line and piano accompaniment of "The Monk and His Cat" from Samuel Barber's *Hermit Songs Op. 29*. The vocal line is written on a single staff with lyrics: "For you it is hunt-ing, for me stud-y...". The piano accompaniment is written on two staves (treble and bass clef). The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *p* (piano). The piano part features chromatic lines and rests, which are used to help the singer learn the correct pitch for the word "study".

Figure 1.2 "The Monk and His Cat," mm. 11-12, from *Hermit Songs Op. 29* by Barber<sup>10</sup>

### Chromatic Pitches

*Solution: Play the line quickly for the singer, ignoring rests and rhythms. Then the vocalist can sing along while the coach plays in this way. (Use for chromatic or atonal melodies, especially those separated by rests.)*

Melodies which are interrupted by rests can be more difficult to learn as the singer is likely to forget the previous pitch, making the next entrance appear nebulous. This is further

<sup>10</sup>Samuel Barber, *Hermit Songs Op. 29*, New York: G. Schirmer Inc., ©2010, p. 141.

complicated when the melody is chromatic or atonal. “Sleep” from Dominick Argento’s *Six Elizabethan Songs* serves as an excellent example of this challenge; Figure 1.3 shows the first page of this song. The melody is chromatic and the rests, which allow the singer time to breathe, also challenge the performer’s sense of the tonal center. For example, the ending pitch of the first measure is D-flat, but the pitch after the eighth rest is a D-natural. A simple glance at this page indicates the chromatic tendencies of the melodic line. The slow tempo of the song further complicates matters. If the singer is struggling to sing correct pitches for their entrances or anywhere in the vocal line, I recommend that the coach play two to three phrases without stopping, not in rhythm and at an even quicker tempo. Then the singer should join the coach in this exercise. The exercise enables us to hear the connection between phrases, pitch-wise, and to hear how the chromaticism resolves or remains unresolved. After applying this method, ask the singer to sing two phrases in rhythm and at the right tempo.

## II. Sleep

original key

SAMUEL DANIEL

**Lentamente** (♩ = 66)

*p*

Care-charm-er Sleep, son of the sa - ble Night, Broth-er to Death, — in si-lent

*sonoroso*

*pp*

*non arp.*

4

*pochino cresc.*

dark - ness born, — Re-lieve my an-guish and re - store thy light;

*pochino cresc.*

7

*mp*

*dimin.*

*p*

With dark — for-get-ting of my care re - turn. —

*p*

*dimin.*

*pp*

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 1-3) shows the vocal line starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic and the piano accompaniment marked *sonoroso* and *pp*. The second system (measures 4-6) features a *pochino cresc.* marking in both parts. The third system (measures 7-8) includes dynamics of *mp*, *dimin.*, and *p* for the vocal line, and *p*, *dimin.*, and *pp* for the piano accompaniment.

Figure 1.3 “Sleep,” mm. 1-8, from *Six Elizabethan Songs* by Argento<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Dominick Argento, *Six Elizabethan Songs*, New York: Boosey & Hawkes Inc., ©1970, p. 24.

## **Pitch not in Tune**

*Solution: Play the melody one-two octaves above and below the vocal line.*

Learning how to sing in tune is complicated because of the way we experience our voice through both vibrations of sounds waves outside of us and those within our body. A singer may struggle to sing in tune when their vocal line is played in the same octave they are singing due to the matching frequency. You can help by playing their melody with them, one or two octaves above and below their actual pitch. By adding a lower and higher frequency to the vocal line, the sound has balance and grounding.

## **Relation of the Accompaniment to the Pitch**

*Solution: If the pitch is in the piano/orchestra part or a part of the chord, simplify the accompaniment by playing only chords under the vocal line.*

Until the invention of atonal music, vocal composers consistently helped the singer by relating the vocal line and accompaniment through harmony or even exact pitches. There are instances where atonal music follows a similar method, but often this aid is purposefully obscured through rhythms, non-chords tones, and thick harmonic structures, both in atonal and tonal music. Coaches can reinvigorate the aid by playing the harmonic progression of the music in tempo while your partner sings. While doing this, the singer can note pitches that are part of the harmonic structure and those which are not. This exercise can be combined with the first pitch exercise described previously. Debussy's song "En sourdine" from *Fêtes Galantes* has many places where this exercise is helpful. In the two lines shown in this example (Figure 1.4), the accompaniment should be played as blocked chords while the vocal line is sung. This eliminates the rhythmic complexity and any non-chord tones so the harmonic progression becomes clear.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "En sourdine" by Claude Debussy. It consists of two systems of music. The first system includes a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has a triplet of eighth notes and the lyrics "souf-fle ber-ceur et doux Qui vient à tes pieds ri-". The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes. The second system also includes a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has a triplet of eighth notes and the lyrics "-der Les on-des de ga-zon roux." The piano accompaniment includes markings for "mf Dim." and "p". The tempo marking "Un peu plus lent" is placed above the second system. The key signature is B Major, indicated by two sharps (F# and C#).

Figure 1.4 “En sourdine” in B Major, mm. 26-32, from *Fêtes Galantes* by Debussy<sup>12</sup>

## Rhythm

### Incorrect Rhythm

*Solution: Ask the vocalist to sing the rhythm on a neutral syllable. Then ask them to speak the words in rhythm.*

Unlike instrumentalists, singers are tasked with both saying words and singing pitches with accurate rhythm. This does add a level of complexity. The best solution for this is to simplify the task by removing either pitch or words. The vocalist should first sing the phrase on a neutral syllable like “do”, “di”, or “da”; then they should speak the words in rhythm while the vocal coach plays the accompaniment. During this exercise, the coach can observe any additional

<sup>12</sup>Claude Debussy, *Fêtes Galantes*, Paris: Societé des Editions Jobert ©1924, p. 1.

inconsistencies with regard to pitch or diction. Please refer to the sections of this guide that provide solutions to those topics.

### **Rhythm Conflicts with Accompaniment**

*Solution: Use the “Relation of Accompaniment to Pitch” exercise*

There are countless examples in the vocal repertoire when the vocal line and accompaniment differ in rhythm with the effect of feeling disconnected. The singer can become hyper aware of their rhythm. “Beau soir” by Debussy is frequently assigned to singers as an introduction to French mélodie. This song is challenging for an inexperienced singer because of the duple eighth-note patterns paired with the triplet eighth-notes, seen in Figure 1.5.



The image shows a musical score for the song "Beau soir" by Claude Debussy. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a slur over the notes. The lyrics are "Un conseil de goûter le charme d'être au". The bottom two staves are the piano accompaniment, also starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern with duple eighth-note patterns and triplet eighth-note patterns. The tempo marking "a Tempo." is placed between the vocal and piano staves.

Figure 1.5 “Beau soir” in E Major, mm. 20-22, by Debussy<sup>13</sup>

By playing the harmonic structure through blocked chords, we can reassure our singer that they are singing the correct rhythm, even if the vocal line does not rhythmically align with the accompaniment.

<sup>13</sup>Claude Debussy, “Beau soir,” New York: Dover Publications ©1981, p. 2.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Singing is a complicated juggling act of so many moving parts all contained within the human body. Coaches listen for pitch/rhythm accuracy because they want their singers to be set up for success. We can provide tools for establishing good habits of learning music, always coaching with kindness and encouragement.

## Diction

The legendary French singer and pedagogue Pierre Bernac, who premiered many songs by Francis Poulenc, said “The music of the poem is as important as the music set to the poem.”<sup>14</sup> Coaching diction is part of our role because we can listen for intelligibility, an important aspect of communicating the meaning of a song and honoring the poet. I experienced and currently see many other pianists in the United States spend a large amount of time learning about diction due to unfamiliarity. Pianists are comfortable talking about style, they can correct pitches and rhythm, and they can even offer advice on stage presence. But coaching diction often requires some study. I recommend you begin reading the diction books I list in the Appendix. But one need not read all they can about languages before starting to coach a singer on their diction. Every language, including English, has a few elements that need attention unless the singer is a native speaker. What follows are sections for four of the major sung languages (Italian, German, French, and English) frequently taught at American universities; each section addresses common diction inconsistencies that the coach can listen for.

### *Special note*

In this guide, I use phonetic spellings for the sounds of syllables/words, i.e. tag = (tahk). As you study diction in depth, you will learn about the International Phonetic Alphabet or IPA. This is an important resource because the symbols used are applied to each language almost interchangeably.

## Italian

We can classify Italian as a “singable” language with an emphasis on vowels, which allows for free airflow of the breath. In my experience, Italian songs/arias are the first foreign

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<sup>14</sup>Pierre Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970, p. 4.

language pieces given to undergraduate singers in the United States. This language is often considered one of the easier languages because there are fewer rules to learn and many of the sounds are very “pure” in tone because they do not engage as many parts of the mouth. Evelina Colorni, whose Italian diction book is still used consistently today, says, “Through the centuries, Italian has played a very special role in the training of voice, a role directly linked with a particularly fortunate pattern of speech sounds which is conducive to singing, and to releasing the voice.”<sup>15</sup> I believe that Italian also benefits a beginning vocal coach because any inconsistency in diction is apparent and we can learn to listen to language beyond lining up the piano part with the words.

### **Single vs Double Consonants**

*Solution: Ask the singer to change the length of the consonant or the plosive\* quality based on the number of the same consonant(s).*

In the Italian language, there are many words which use two of the same consonants in a row, known as a double consonant. Words like “tutti”, “mamma”, “bella”, etc. are exciting to sing because the additional consonant can be used as an expressive tool. However, we only need to articulate double consonants when the word requires it. Singing/speaking a double consonant instead of a single consonant will change the meaning of the word. For example, “caro” translates to “dear” but “carro” translates to “wagon.” If you hear a singer lengthening a single consonant, you can instruct the singer to shorten the length of the consonant. Conversely, if they are not lengthening a double consonant, you can ask them to do so. In Figure 2.2 from the famous aria “Bella siccome un angelo” from Donizetti’s *Don Pasquale*, I have marked in green

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<sup>15</sup>Evelina Colorni, *Singers’ Italian: A Manual of Diction and Phonetics*, New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1970, p. i.

the double consonants where the singer should lengthen the sound; in red are the single consonants which they might lengthen, but should avoid. .

*\*Special Note*

Unvoiced double consonants are lengthened through the stopping of air, sometimes referred to as plosive. In Italian, this should not result in an explosion of air.

The image shows a musical score for the aria "Bella siccome un angelo" from Donizetti's opera Don Pasquale. The score is in D-flat Major and 3/4 time, marked "a tempo". It consists of a vocal line in bass clef and a piano accompaniment in treble and bass clefs. The lyrics are: "Al - ma in - no - cen - te, in - ge - nu - a, che sè - me - des - ma i - gno - ra, mo - de - stia im - pa - reg - gia - bi - le, bon -". The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Figure 2.1 “Bella siccome un angelo” in D-flat Major, mm. 25-30, from *Don Pasquale* by Donizetti<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Gaetano Donizetti, “Bella siccome un angelo” New York: G. Schirmer, Inc, 1991, p. 96.

### **Three letter words with two vowels**

*Solution: Point out three letter words where the stress is on the first vowel instead of the second vowel.*

There are many words in Italian with clusters of vowels; often when a phrase is spoken or sung, there are strings of vowels without any interruption by a consonant. Proper stress placement is important. The most common misconception occurs with three letter words that have two vowels. Examples of these include “mio”, “mai”, “lei”, and “voi.” In each case, the stress is placed on the first vowel. To demonstrate, compare the words “miei” and “mio.” In “miei,” the stress is placed on the second vowel, (eh); in “mio,” the stress is placed on the first vowel, (ee). If you see a three letter word with two vowels in the score, listen to see where the singer places the stress. You should hear it on the first vowel. If not, ask the singer to say the word with this emphasis.

### **Maintaining the vowel quality**

*Solution: Ask the singer to maintain the same lip and tongue position throughout the remainder of the vowel. If the word/syllable ends in a consonant, use an exercise where they leave out the consonant and end with just the vowel.*

In Italian songs and arias, sometimes a vowel sound is not maintained for the duration of a note, especially if it has a longer rhythmic value. As a native English-speaker, I am comfortable with using diphthongs, often written as one vowel; but in Italian, diphthongs are written as two separate vowels. Colorni says, “because of the prevalence of diphthongs in English, the English-speaking singer tends erroneously to diphthongize the vowels of other languages as well.”<sup>17</sup> Think of the word “I.” In English, we understand that this is actually two vowels, “ah” and “ee,” with the second occurring quickly at the end. But in Italian, this would be written as

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<sup>17</sup>Colorni, *Singers’ Italian: A Manual of Diction and Phonetics*, p. 13.

“ai.” Thus, we should only sing a vowel if written. In Figure 2.2, the singer is asked to hold the first vowel for “senti” for a long time. You may hear the vowel sound change as the singer holds the note. If this happens, you can use this exercise.

The image displays a musical score for the aria "Com'è gentil" from Donizetti's opera Don Pasquale. It consists of two systems of staves. The top system shows the vocal line starting with a forte (f) dynamic and a long note on the word "sen" that is held for a significant duration. The bottom system shows the piano accompaniment, featuring a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords. The lyrics "so-spi - ri sen - - - - - ti;" are written below the vocal line.

Figure 2.2 “Com’è gentil” in A Major, mm. 30-32 from *Don Pasquale* by Donizetti<sup>18</sup>

## German

English-speaking vocal coaches benefit from German art song, or Lieder, because German and English originate from the same family of languages. Though the vowels are still very important, the consonants are the distinguishing factor of the German language. While in Italian one word may use 3 or more vowels in a row, many German words combine consonants, creating what is called a consonant cluster. Listening to consonants in German will guide the pianist as a collaborator, and as a coach, they may provide opportunities to give feedback to their singer.

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<sup>18</sup>Gaetano Donizetti, *Don Pasquale*, Milan: Casa Ricordi, 2002, p. 109.

## Missing the Ending Consonants

*Solution: Remind the vocalist that the ending consonant must be a part of the rhythm for the word/syllable. Ask them for what part of the note's duration will they place the consonant.*

For American singers, German can feel like the easiest language to learn, based on the fact that their native language is Germanic. Indeed, many words in German have a similar counterpart in English that is quite recognizable. However, in the United States, we tend to have very relaxed speech patterns, specifically with consonants. But in German, every consonant must be heard and those which end a word are often not emphasized enough to be heard from a stage. Sometimes this also has roots from singers primarily trained in a choral setting; in choir, students are taught to place ending consonants at the last possible part of the rhythm, even extending into the next beat. However, when it is one singer with piano, this practice leads to either missing consonants or the tempo dragging, though the former is more common. I recommend asking the singer to decide at what part of the rhythmic unit will the ending consonant/s be placed. In Figure 2.3, the words “gemeint” and “Freund” need the sound of a “t” at the end. Here, the singer can think of placing the “t” sound on the last sixteenth note of the note's duration.



Figure 2.3 “Danksagung an den Bach” in G Major, mm. 5-6, from *Die schöne Müllerin* by Schubert<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Franz Schubert, *Die schöne Müllerin*, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1895, p. 10.

## **Pronouncing consonant clusters**

*Solution: Ask the singer to slowly pronounce every consonant, first without pitch, then on the actual pitch.*

As stated in the introduction, German is a consonant-forward language. There are numerous words where two or more consonants are pronounced in a row, called a consonant cluster. Like in Italian with vowels, the audience needs to hear every consonant in order to understand the text. For a word like “brausend,” you can ask the singer to slowly pronounce the “b” and “r” sounds, first without a pitch, then with pitch (if a voiced consonant<sup>20</sup>). This exercise works for consonant clusters at the beginning, middle, and end of words.

## **Differentiating between ich-lauts and ach-lauts**

*Solution: Ask the singer to maintain the vowel shape when they pronounce the hiss of air. If necessary, try it once without “ch.”*

In German, “ch” is pronounced with a sound similar to a cat hiss. The syllables “ich,” “äch,” and “ech” are ich-lauts and any other vowel combined with “ch” is an ach-laut. Because of the way the “ch” sound is produced, you may hear the sound as being swallowed in the mouth, causing the vowel to change slightly before the “ch.” To prevent this, ask the singer to maintain the vowel shape as they start the “ch,” if necessary removing that sound entirely as an exercise. An ich-laut should not sound like the “sh” in “fish,” although the sounds are similar. Susan Ashbaker is the Associate Professor and Director of Westminster Opera Theatre for Westminster Choir College at Rider University and has actively worked in the world of opera for over forty years. In her recent book, *The Vocal Coach Approach: When Practice Makes Perfect*, she says that for the “ch” in ich-lauts and ach-lauts the “closest approximation can be found in the

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<sup>20</sup>See page 32 for explanation of voiced vs unvoiced consonants.

following English sentence in how we pronounce /h/: *Huge humans of every hue live in Houston.*”<sup>21</sup>

## **French**

The French language appears daunting when you first study it. French does have many rules, with exceptions; but when a non-English speaker studies English, they tend to be more confused than studying French because many words simply are pronounced a certain way without a rule to say why. So do not be discouraged! Bernac says that “French is a language based completely on vowels, the opposite of English.”<sup>22</sup> As a vowel-based language, French is “singable,” like Italian. Unlike the other languages in this guide, French does not have stress but rather emphasis or length; each syllable has similar length, with the longest or most emphasized occurring second to last in a phrase. We can learn to listen for both legato in the vocal line and the subtle emphases as we coach this language. Please note that there are some differences between speaking French and singing French.

### **Unnecessary emphasis of the schwa**

*Solution: Ask the singer to shorten the length of the schwa as an exercise.*

In French, words ending in “e” without any accent written are typically known as a schwa, a neutral vowel. In spoken French, schwas are not pronounced, but we do pronounce them in singing French when the composer has assigned a pitch to the syllable. Sometimes, however, a composer notates this pitch with a longer rhythmic value, comparatively to the rest of the phrase. In these cases, you can ask the singer to emphasize the syllable preceding the schwa and change the note value of the schwa. For example, in Figure 2.4, the last syllable in

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<sup>21</sup>Susan Shiplett Ashbaker, *The Vocal Approach: When Practice Makes Perfect, A Guide to Help Singers of All Levels Learn to Practice-and Love It*, Gahanna, OH: Inside View Press, 2022, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup>Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song*, p. 22.

“amoureuse” is a schwa, here notated as two beats (time signature is 3/8). The schwa can easily be emphasized in this instance. You can ask the singer to sing the schwa as a single eighth note, or even sixteenth note, as an exercise to help them feel where the emphasis should be.



Figure 2.4 “C’est l’extase” in E Major, mm. 8-9, from *Ariettes oubliées* by Debussy<sup>23</sup>

### Fast consonants

*Solution:* Ask the singer to sing the phrase only on vowels. Then encourage them to “track” the vowels as they sing.

Based on Bernac’s statement quoted in the introduction to French, the vowels are the defining factor of this language. While they are needed to form words, consonants should initiate the vowels and not delay them. Thus, consonants should be pronounced quickly. Revisit Figure 2.4. For this excerpt, I would ask the singer to only sing the vowels. Then I would ask them to sing the complete word, but to “track” the vowels. The idea of “tracking” focuses attention on

<sup>23</sup>Claude Debussy, *Ariettes oubliées*, New York: Dover Publications, 1981, p. 9.

vowels. Sylvia Olden Lee, the first African-American vocal coach to work at the Metropolitan Opera, used this technique. In her memoirs, she is quoted as saying, when coaching French, “Put the final consonant on the last twentieth of a second before you change to the next syllable. Try doing it without any consonants at all and keep them in your mind.”<sup>24</sup>

### **English**

For native English-speakers, the study of English diction seems unnecessary. Kathryn LaBouff’s book *Singing and Communication in English* frequently finds a place in diction classes. In her opening chapter, she says “If we are native speakers, we tend to be very careless with our language. Since English is easy for us to speak and understand, we assume our facility with it will automatically be transferred to our singing in English.”<sup>25</sup> If English is not your first language, you may have an advantage over those of us who have the presupposition LaBouff talks about. English relates closely to German with an emphasis on consonants. Since this audience is based in the United States, we should remember that the audience for our singers are mostly English-speakers. We can foster a singer’s success by listening and coaching to ensure their English pronunciation is intelligible.

#### **R’s before a consonant or silent final letter**

*Solution: Ask the singer to omit singing an “r” before a consonant or a silent final letter, sometimes replacing with a schwa.*

The letter “r” has multiple rules for pronunciation, often determined if the composer was/is British or American. But one rule remains consistent in either dialect: we should omit saying a true American “r” before a consonant or a silent final letter. Say the word “bird” with

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<sup>24</sup>Sylvia Olden Lee and Elizabeth Nash, *The Memoirs of Sylvia Olden Lee, Premier African-American Classical Vocal Coach: Who is Sylvia*, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001, p. 102

<sup>25</sup>Kathryn LaBouff, *Singing and Communicating in English: A Singer’s Guide to English Diction*, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2008, p. 3.

lots of emphasis on the “r.” Madeleine Marshall, who taught English diction at Juilliard for over fifty years, says “The American *r*, when sung before a consonant, gives the voice an unpleasant, snarling noise.”<sup>26</sup> Now say the word “bird” again without any “r” and a slightly longer emphasis on the vowel. That is the pronunciation which sounds best on the classical music stage. Figure 2.5 shows the opening phrase of one of Samuel Barber’s most famous songs, “Sure on This Shining Night.” The words “Sure” and “starmade” both follow the rule for omitting the “r.” For some words like “dear,” simply omitting the “r” sounds incorrect. Instead you can replace it with a schwa or neutral vowel; in English diction, Marshall describes this as “the vowel sound of the second syllable of *sofa*.”<sup>27</sup>



Figure 2.5 “Sure on this Shining Night” in G Major, mm. 2-3 from *Four Songs Op. 13* by Barber<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Madeleine Marshall, *The Singer’s Manual of English Diction*, New York: Schirmer Books, 1953, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup>Marshall, *The Singer’s Manual of English Diction*, p. 150.

<sup>28</sup>Samuel Barber, *Four Songs Op. 13*, New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., ©2010, p. 79.

## **The rhythm of the language**

*Solution: Ask the singer to say the phrase without looking at the rhythm. Point out to them how the syllables are different lengths, even if the music indicates the same rhythmic unit.*

Every language has a rhythm, as Bernac points out in his previously quoted line “the music of the poem...”<sup>29</sup> In music, we understand rubato to be “The expressive alteration of rhythm or tempo.”<sup>30</sup> Since the words have a rhythm, they can potentially have rubato; I have heard the term linguistic rubato used. Look again at Figure 2.5 and read the line “Sure on this shining night.” Notice how some syllables are slightly longer than the others, even if the music has the same rhythmic unit for most of the words. If you hear multiple rhythmic units in vocal music sound the same, ask your singer to speak the phrase and focus on the length of each syllable. Then they can sing the phrase with the same syllable length as when they spoke it.

## **Glottal stops**

*Solution: Listen for and encourage glottal stops on important words starting with a vowel and on the second word when there are two words with vowels.*

Say the word “apple.” Now say “happle.” Notice the slight emphasis on the “a” of “apple” and how this is not present for “happle.” You are experiencing a glottal stop, defined as “in phonetics, a momentary check on the airstream caused by closing the glottis (the space between the vocal cords) and thereby stopping the vibration of the vocal cords.”<sup>31</sup> Both English and German use glottal stops (sometimes shortened to glottals). In English, we should hear this

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<sup>29</sup>Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song*, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup>Richard Hudson, “Rubato,” Grove Music Online, 2001; Accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000024039?rskkey=f2JkO6&result=1>.

<sup>31</sup>Britannica.com, “Glottal Stop,” Accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/glottal-stop>.

at the beginning of important words that start with a vowel. We also use a glottal to distinguish between two words in a row that each start with a vowel. For example, in the phrase, “Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil,”<sup>32</sup> we would place glottals at the beginning of the second “upon” and “anvil.” The second “upon” follows a word starting with a vowel; without a glottal, this might sound like the two words are actually one. “Anvil” acts as an important word in this phrase and follows another word starting with a vowel. Glottal stops are useful and you can vary how much emphasis is added. Listen and encourage your singer to add glottal stops based on these guidelines.

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<sup>32</sup>James Joyce, “I Hear an Army,” Song of America.net, Accessed March 20, 2025, <https://songofamerica.net/song/i-hear-an-army-op-10-no-3/>.

## Legato

For the beginning vocal coach, there is one more element to listen to: legato. Legato literally means “bound.”<sup>33</sup> In music, we can think of this as notes being bound or tied together. One might ask “why do we need to sing with legato?” Ask a friend to listen to you say this sentence: “I am doing fine today, but I wish the rain would stop.” First, say it with a pause between each word; now say it as you would normally. Ask your friend “In which version do you understand both the words and the meaning of the words?” Likely, they preferred the second version. When we speak, the words keep flowing; for our ears and brain, the through line makes a phrase/sentence intelligible and understandable. Now imagine you are singing the same sentence on a stage for multiple people. How much more important that you sing with as little space between words as possible! Stephanie Blythe is a concert vocalist and opera singer who has performed on stages like Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera; Alan Smith was the chair of Keyboard Collaborative Arts at University of Southern California Thornton. In a masterclass, they asked one singer, “Does your life depend on everyone hearing what you are saying?” Here legato becomes the singer’s friend. What follows are exercises that promote the use of legato. Though the exercises are in an order that I have found works best when legato is the main focus of the coaching, you may find yourself skipping some steps, or spending less time on one vs another.

**Exercise #1:** *Ask your singer to sing a few phrases on one vowel that is comfortable in the range of the music, articulating a “v” or “z” sound after every breath.*

We can listen to someone sing a phrase on one vowel and offer feedback on any inconsistency of legato. Ashbaker states “singing all your phrases on your comfort vowel will

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<sup>33</sup>Collins Dictionary, “Legato: Definition and Word Origin,” Accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/legato>.

help you with your consistency... .”<sup>34</sup> What Askbaker calls a “comfort vowel” is a vowel that feels good to sing throughout the range of a phrase. Vowels, when pronounced without a glottal stop, do not stop breath flow. Remember when you go to the doctor and they want to look at your throat? They tell you to stick out your tongue and say “Aaaaaaaaah.” In singing, the concept remains the same: the vowel opens the airway. In asking a vocalist to sing one vowel, we eliminate the complication of switching from vowel to vowel. I recommend starting each phrase with a “v” or “z” sound because that activates the airflow for the vowel and prevents glottal stops.

**Exercise #2:** *Ask your singer to sing the phrase with just the vowels in the phrase.*

I love asking a singer to sing just the vowels of the phrase. Though this exercise is hard to accomplish, a vocal coach can hear where the legato disappears by listening to the vowels. Because vowels do not stop the airflow unless used with a glottal stop, we should hear a continuous line of sound. I liken it to the sound of a string player playing one note without changing the direction of the bow. I encourage both you and the singer you are working with to be patient with this exercise. Not forming complete words by only singing vowels can be mentally challenging, and listening for a continuous line of sound takes practice. But legato feels excellent in the body when singing and we should do everything possible to help singer’s achieve this.

**Exercise #3:** *Focus on maintaining legato through the voiced consonants.*

Once legato has been established with just the vowels, we need to discover how to use consonants to help, not hinder, legato. In every language, there are voiced and unvoiced (sometimes called voiceless) consonants. William Odom teaches German language and music

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<sup>34</sup>Susan Shiplett Ashbaker, *The Vocal Approach: When Practice Makes Perfect, A Guide to Help Singers of All Levels Learn to Practice-and Love It*, Gahanna, OH: Inside View Press, 2022, 33.

diction at the University of Southern Mississippi, and Benno Schollum is a singer who taught at Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst in Vienna. In their book, *German for Singers: A Textbook of Diction and Phonetics*, they describe the two consonant types as follows: “When the vocal chords vibrate during the production of a sound, for example [z], the sound is said to be *voiced*. When they do not vibrate, as in the production of [s], the sound is said to be *voiceless*.”<sup>35</sup> There are several pairs of voiced and unvoiced consonants, including “z” and “s”; if you place your fingers on your throat where the larynx is and say these one right after the other, you will feel the difference. When singing, voiced consonants can act similarly to vowels because they maintain pitch, unlike unvoiced consonants that produce only air and unpitched sound. Ask your singer to look at a phrase and to mentally note every voiced consonant. Then they should sing the phrase, focusing on keeping legato through the voiced consonants.

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<sup>35</sup>William Odom and Benno Schollum, *German for Singers: A Textbook of Diction and Phonetics*, 2nd ed, Belmont, CA: Schirmer Wadsworth Group (division of Thomas Learning, Inc.), 1997, p. 14.

## Style: The Umbrella for Coaching

Each of the principles and exercises proposed are guided by the dictates of a song's style. Dr. Carol Kimball is a singer and Emerita Professor of Voice and a Barrick Distinguished Scholar at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her book, *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*, has been praised by the Art Song Preservation Society of New York as "a widely used text and reference that has become the principal one-volume American source on the topic."<sup>36</sup> She demonstrates at the beginning of her book how a song's style affects every decision we make as performers.

When we hear a song, we experience it as a complete entity—we get an overall impression. Our understanding of the song's art is stimulated by the images in the song, which composers create with words, melodies, harmonies, and rhythms. All the images of the poem merge with the images in the music, creating the distinctive overall images of the song—a unique blend of word and sound, poetry and music. As we listen, we respond to those images, we form mental pictures and experience emotions, or even tastes, smells, and physical sensations. In order to understand these images at a deeper level, we need to probe into the parts of the song that create them. How do we study a song to discover the underlying causes of the imagery in it? We learn to look at the song's style.<sup>37</sup>

We listen and coach differently the elements I have discussed based on a song's style. As a vocal coach, there are three major genres of vocal music that we can encounter: opera, art song, and musical theatre. This section provides some practical implications for each element based on the genre.

### Opera

Opera has developed as a genre since the 1600's and encompasses a wide range of styles. But there are some general conventions that hold true. Score accuracy remains important, with

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<sup>36</sup>Art Song Preservation Society of New York, "Dr. Carol Kimball," Accessed March 22, 2025, <https://www.artsongpreservationsocietyny.org/carol-kimball.html>.

<sup>37</sup>Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*, Revised ed., Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005, p. 1.

some caveats. Pitches should be sung based on the music score, but there are two times when this has flexibility: ornaments and cadenzas. The operas in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries frequently have arias that repeat; the tradition was and still is that the singer would add ornamental notes to the melody. As coaches, we can listen to ensure the ornaments a singer chooses work harmonically, but we do not need to treat the ornament in the same way as an incorrect pitch. Cadenzas have been common to varying degrees throughout operatic history. Sometimes a composer notates a cadenza, in which case we can listen for these specific pitches. But often the composer leaves the cadenza to a singer's discretion. Rhythms should also be coached based on the score except in two cases: cadenzas/ornaments and recitatives. The rhythm for cadenzas and ornaments follow the same rules as pitch accuracy. Recitatives are "A type of vocal writing, normally for a single voice, with the intent of mimicking dramatic speech in song."<sup>38</sup> Since the music is imitating speech, the rhythm in a recitative may have some flexibility, notably the avoidance of rests where the text continues with the thought.

Diction in opera does not vary based on the language, but instead the range of the vocal line. Opera has always been about dramatizing a story, and an excellent way to do this is through impressive vocal writing. When a vocalist sings in the extreme part(s) of their range, the diction will be modified to accommodate for ease of vocal production. In essence, the music in opera becomes more important than the diction, all for the service of the drama. You can learn about diction modification by listening to voice teachers at your singers' lessons. Some of the diction suggestions I give should be ignored or modified based on what part of the range the vocal line is

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<sup>38</sup>Dale E. Monson, Jack Westrup, and Julian Budden, "Recitative," Grove Music Online, Accessed March 22, 2025, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000023019?rskey=WB59df&result=1>.

in. The importance of legato remains the same in opera; occasionally, legato can be sacrificed, but only when that serves the drama.

### **Art Song**

Art song tends to be strict in adhering to each element. Score accuracy does not have any exceptions unless a pitch/rhythm is called into question based on researching different editions of the same song. Many art songs are written in a smaller range than a significant number of opera arias. This translates to fewer times when the diction needs to be modified based on the pitch the vocalist is singing. In my experience, art song composers notate any moments where they want the vocal line to be non-legato.

### **Musical Theatre**

Musical theatre perhaps varies the most with regard to score accuracy, diction, and legato. Score accuracy has been influenced by performers as well as the composers. For example, “Don’t Rain on My Parade” from *Funny Girl* by Jule Styne has been recorded by singers Barbra Streisand and Lea Michele, and each recording demonstrates rhythmic differences from the score. Yet each recording has been accepted as a model for other singers. Learning what to listen for with score accuracy takes time working with musical theatre singers, although I do recommend reading *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course* by Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera for an overview of the musical theatre styles and performance traditions. Because musical theatre is primarily telling a story, people need to know what is being said; thus, coaching diction regularly occurs when working on this style. You can learn how to listen for good diction through recordings and voice lessons, especially since this genre uses many accents and dialects. Legato should serve both diction and drama. You can coach legato based on if you are hearing all the words and if the story is portrayed honestly.

## Concluding Thoughts

The title of this paper, “Learning to Listen,” describes the journey of every vocal coach and any pianist playing with a singer. Singers always need another set of ears to listen to them, provide feedback, and offer informed musical suggestions. As vocal coaches, our time with a singer goes beyond being their musical partner. Janine Reiss was a harpsichordist and prepared singers in the French Baroque repertoire. In an interview, she said “We’re supposed to help them to read a score and find their own personality.”<sup>39</sup> Our job aids singers by making sure what is on the page is what the audience hears. With as vast as the vocal repertoire is, learning what to listen for and how to communicate can feel overwhelming. Start small and start now. The next time you are going to work with a singer, prepare one element that you normally do not, in addition to what you are comfortable listening to. Maybe you choose to listen to a recording for specific pronunciation or maybe you write in where the singer might breathe. Then when you meet with the singer, listen to the element you have prepared. If you hear an inconsistency with score accuracy, diction, or legato, consult “Learning to Listen.” Try some of the solutions I offer, paying special attention to how to communicate those solutions. Again, start small, and start now. The study of vocal coaching offers numerous possibilities and experiences, made possible to us as we learn to listen.

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<sup>39</sup>Janine Reiss, “Historic Interview: Janine Reiss, Vocal Coach,” by Bruce Duffie, WNIB, Classical 97, July 21, 1982, p. 56.

## Appendix

### Diction

*Singers' Italian: A Manual of Diction and Phonetics* by Evelina Colorni

Focuses on Italian lyric diction, provides descriptions of what happens in the mouth to produce different sounds.

*German for Singers: A Textbook of Diction and Phonetics* by William Odom and Benno Schollum

Focuses on German lyric diction, provides exercises for pronunciation and repertoire examples.

*Singing in French: A Manual of French Diction and French Vocal Repertoire* by Thomas Grubb.

Detailed descriptions for the rules and exceptions in French

*Singing and Communication in English: A Singer's Guide to English Diction* by Kathryn

LaBouff

Provides specific guidance for different dialects of English.

*The Singer's Manual of English Diction* by Madeleine Marshall

Provides concise advice, starting first with consonants and followed by vowels.

## **Style**

*Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature* by Carol Kimball

Catalogue of styles for major composers in German, French, American, British, Italian, Spanish, Scandinavian, and Eastern European music. Descriptions for some of their major works of art song.

*The Interpretation of French Song* by Pierre Bernac

Guidance for many major French art song composers, with recommendations of pronunciation in their art songs.

*Opera Coaching: Professional Techniques and Considerations* by Alan Montgomery

Detailed advice for pianists on how to work with and coach singers in the opera repertoire.

*Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course* by Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera

Designed for a musical theatre singer, but useful for learning about each style in this genre.

## **General**

*The Complete Collaborator: The Pianist as Partner* by Martin Katz

Gives specific advice for the pianist on how to prepare to work with a singer.

*The Vocal Coach Approach: When Practice Makes Perfect; A Guide to Help Singers of All Levels Learn to Practice-And Love It!* By Susan Shiplett Ashbaker

Provides singers with exercises for practicing pitch/rhythm, legato, recitatives, and practice strategies. Useful for finding further exercises to coach the elements listed in “Learning to Listen.

*The Art of Accompanying and Coaching* by Kurt Adler

Provides background of coaching and an overview for lyric diction in several languages, as well as style.

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# Abstract

**Matthew Sebald**

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Name & Title

"Learning to Listen: A Guide for Beginning Vocal Coaches"

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Thesis title

**Jeremy Reger**

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**Jeremy Reger**

Directing Professor & Title

For any pianist, working with singers can be confusing due to the terminology they use, a sort of "vocal vortex." Currently, there does not exist a compact, elementary guide for those working with singers. Knowledge of the terms and their applications expands as pianists listen to vocal music professionals. Through this knowledge, we can start to explore the field of vocal coaching. This author researched many of the available resources on vocal coaching and posed a goal of writing the type of guide that they desired was available when starting in this field. "Learning to Listen" is the result of this goal.

Pianists who want to coach singers can learn how to listen in three areas: score accuracy, diction, and legato. For each, there are common inconsistencies for anyone who is singing. In "Learning to Listen," some of the situations and solutions for solving them are presented. The wording used is specific because we want to offer clear feedback for singers, as we are an extension of their ears. Each of these solutions have consistently helped singers, in this author's experience and those of other vocal coaches. The study of vocal coaching keeps growing and this author hopes that "Learning to Listen" serves as the starting point for your journey.