

The Use of the International Phonetic Alphabet in the Choral Rehearsal

Reviewed by Debra Shearer-Dirié, choral conductor and teacher

We are fortunate, in this day and age, to be able to access music from different regions of the world through commercial recordings, the internet, and by connecting with people from different cultures living in our community. Through YouTube, Joost, Vevo, Jango and others, we are able to hook into such a wide variety of music. We can even work through video links to learn how to play or sing certain types of music. But where do we go if a piece of music is sung in a language that is not familiar to us? Our first port of call probably would be to find a native of that language within the community and ask him to visit a rehearsal to talk through the language and its nuances. In order to give an authentic performance of music from other cultures, it is essential that the language and dialect of the region be captured in the performance. When there isn't an informant nearby inform whom to learn from, we must look to other sources to become familiar with these details. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a valuable tool to use when a live language source is not available. It is certainly a 'language' of which all choral conductors and singers need to have knowledge.

The IPA enables singers and conductors to perfect their diction in languages that they are not familiar with. It is a system of phonetic notation based mainly on the Latin alphabet that attempts to offer a standardized representation of the sound of oral language. Incorporated in the system are not only the qualities of a language in terms of phonemes, but the

intonation can also be captured with the use of the IPA, as along with the separation of words and syllables.

The Use of the IPA in the Choral Rehearsal by Duane Karna is a valuable resource for singers and conductors. Duane was introduced to the IPA under the mentorship of Thomas Goleekee, Director of Voice and Opera at the University of Puget Sound's School of Music in Tacoma, Washington, USA. The contributing writers for this publication seem to be largely based in the United States, however, those that have contributed on some of lesser well known languages in the Western World, seem to be natives of that country. This surely must add to the validity of this publication.

Karna begins this collection of chapters with 'The Use of the IPA in the Choral Rehearsal' with co-writer Sue Goodenow. Goodenow and Karna provide the argument as to why choral educators and singers should include the IPA in their preparation for a performance. In a choral setting, the IPA can be reinforced in each rehearsal in the warm-ups, suggests Karna, to introduce known and unfamiliar symbols and sounds to the choristers. This will not only lead to uniformity of sound and precision in diction, it will also save rehearsal time and, in the end, lead to a deeper understanding of the text in order to communicate with the audience.

The second chapter, 'Vowel and Consonant Modification for Choirs,' is written by John Nix. It reads like a typical chapter from a Vocal Science compilation, offering suggestions as to how to modify vowels, in particular, across a section of singers, rather than just for solo voice.

Chapter three begins the list of 26 chapters that provide specific information on a variety of languages. The first few chapters deal with English diction (written by Thomas Goleekee), Ecclesiastical Latin (written by Andrew Crow), Italian diction (written by Susan Bender), German diction (written by Kathleen M. Maurer), Germanic Latin (written by

Hank Dalhman), and French diction (Kathleen Maurer). Although these chapters offer similar assistance to that given by Wall, Caldwell, Gavilanes, and Allen's *Diction of Singers*, or Wall's *International Phonetic Alphabet for Singers*, they do have an added extra. Each chapter provides an IPA version of the text of a piece specific to that language. For example, the IPA is given for Barber's *The Coolin*, *Dolcissima mia vita*, Brahms' *O Süsßer Mai*, and Orff's *Carmina burana* in German Latin.

It is from chapter nine, *Spanish Diction and the IPA*, written by Joshua Habermann, that we start viewing some more added features. Habermann leads us into a discussion on the differences in pronunciation of European and Latin American Spanish. He also presents chapter 18 on Hawaiian diction. Ethan Nash provides a brief history of the Hebrew Language in Chapter 10 and stresses the difficulty in pronouncing Hebrew, simply due to the fact that there is not one uniform system of transliteration into Roman characters.

Chapters 11 to 14 provide us with some depth into the Romanian language (written by Bogdan Minut), Japanese diction (writing by Minoru Yamada), Chinese pronunciation (written by Mei Zhong), and Korean diction (written by Soojeong Lee).

Brazilian Portuguese is the fifth most spoken language in the world and spoken in eight countries, thus worthy of inclusion in this compilation. The music from this region of the world has become more and more prevalent in the libraries of singing ensembles around the world. Martha Herr and Wladimir Mattos present us with the significant differences between the pronunciations of European Portuguese and that of Brazilian Portuguese. Derived from the ancient classical Spanish language, *Gallego*, one of the main differences Herr and Mattos point out, is that the Brazilian Portuguese is more "vowel-oriented" and sweeter in sound than that of the European Portuguese, which is more consonantal. The IPA for the folk melody, *Rosa Amarela*, collected by Heitor Villa-Lobos, is given at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 16, 'Swahili for Native English Language Choral Singers', by Stephan and Kathleen Wilson, takes us to the African continent. Swahili draws from a history of interactions with people from ethnic groups of African, Middle Eastern, Asian, and European origins and as it is spoken over an ethnically and linguistically diverse area and have variations in pronunciation. The chapter begins with three short Swahili sayings to illustrate the composition of words in this language. The authors point out that in the phrase 'Mtu utu kitu si kitu' almost every other letter is a vowel and most words end in vowels. A language that is so vowel based must be a good language for singing.

The language of the Basque culture is the last surviving pre-Indo-European language in Western Europe, and is spoken by the Basque people in north-western Spain and south-western France. Gotzon Ibarretxe and Kepa Larrea lead us through this language and its similarities in sound to Spanish.

The last section of this publication represents the northern and eastern regions of Europe with chapters on Hungarian (written by Harald Jers and Ágnes Farkas), Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian (by Heather MacLaughlin Garbes and Andrew Schmidt), Dutch (by Petronella Palm), Georgian (by Clayton Parr), Russian (by David M. Thomas), Swedish (by Christine Ericsson and Sten Ternström), Finnish (by Jaakko Mäntyjärvi), Greek (by Areti Topouzides), Norwegian (by Dan Dressen) and Polish (by Anna Helwing) diction.

There are several publications which provide clear manuals of the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet for singers and several that provide IPA guides to languages such as English, German, Latin, Italian, French and Spanish. Very few publications, however, supply the breadth and depth of languages that is collated by Karna in this book. It is a valuable resource for anyone who works with singers, whether it is in the secondary classroom, university lecture room, from the podium, or in a private studio.



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