

Singing in French

*A MANUAL OF FRENCH DICTION
AND FRENCH VOCAL REPERTOIRE*



Thomas Grubb

Foreword by Pierre Bernac

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An Introduction to Singing in French

Diction, the Missing Link

There are many approaches to the study of diction depending upon the means, nature, and level of the communication involved. A diction lesson may be useful to the actor, the television announcer, the chairman of the board, or to a politician. In each case, the method and nature of study will be different. An individual may wish to rid his speech of an impediment or a regional accent. Again, a specialized approach will be necessary.

Courses in "diction" are offered to singers throughout the country, very often as electives and as part of their "academic" study. They are all too often considered necessary evils. Some highly reputable institutions consider the study of English diction unnecessary and even demeaning to the American-born, English-speaking singer. Courses in the diction of a foreign language are usually cluttered with a misguided emphasis on grammar and vocabulary and, occasionally, a flimsy set of general rules for pronunciation. Such courses and attitudes serve to demonstrate the widespread ignorance concerning the role of diction in singing.

Yes, the singer, too, needs to have a specialized approach to diction study, whatever the language in question may be. Singers must undertake the study of the singing of their own language, as well as that of several foreign languages: the "big three" (in alphabetical order)—French, German, and Italian—and others, notably Spanish and Russian. The latter should not be excluded, since a respectable percentage of the basic repertoire involves these languages as well. How formidably vast this study becomes when one very obvious fact is overlooked: the singer must above

all learn to *sing* comfortably and intelligibly in these languages, not necessarily to pronounce them, read them, or converse in them.

The singer's highly specialized and stylized method of vocal production and delivery—*singing*—dictates a similarly specialized and stylized approach to the study of language. This is the study of "singing diction," the term to be used here to differentiate it from other diction study. The study of singing diction has many of the same aspects as general diction study, but it is differentiated from the latter by the added aspect of learning how to *sing* in an intelligible and vocally comfortable way the sounds of any given language.

Singing diction is the missing link in the chain of vocal study. It bridges the gap between language and vocal delivery itself by defining the sounds upon which the voice is to be transmitted. The sonorities and shapes of words and their sounds are to the singer what steps and patterns are to the dancer and what colors and strokes are to the painter. The sound of a word is the vehicle upon which vocalization is conveyed. It makes the essential connection between basic vocal production and the end result: correctly produced, pleasing, intelligible, and expressive singing. The sounds and the meanings of words can color and highlight the voice, shape and align its approach to a phrase, choreograph and sketch its path.

The presence of language most significantly distinguishes vocal music from all other music. The role of words in the singing process is equal in technical and expressive importance to those of production, support, resonance, and phrasing. Since the uniform production or occasional modification of a vowel-sound is an integral part of the study of singing diction, even a vocalise or a coloratura display piece cannot escape its sphere of influence. The singer should make diction his ally and consider it as a means of definition and simplification. Diction is musical; diction is vocal; diction is expressive. Only when it is studied with the same zeal as the other aspects of vocal and musical training and is properly integrated into the study process will the singer discover the missing link that singing diction can be for him.

So, good singing diction has two purposes:

1. to facilitate and clarify the singing process by a definition and mastery of the sounds to be sung; and
2. to communicate the sounds, meanings, and overall message of a text in an intelligible, natural, and appropriately expressive way.

Furthermore, singing diction has three essential aspects, all equal in importance:

1. *pronunciation*, or the conversion of the letters of a word into the proper vocal sounds as represented by the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (I.P.A.);

3 The French *heu* and the English *um*

2. *vocalization*, or the distinct and natural singing of these sounds in all registers of the voice with responsible modification where absolutely necessary, the aim always being toward intelligibility and natural, unhindered vocal production; and
3. *interpretative expression*, or the effective communication of the meaning, mood, and character of the text as set to music.

The French heu and the English um

When a Frenchman is at a loss for words, which happens more often than one might expect, he rounds his lips in the position of a pout and drones on "heu" for a moment, a sound that approximates the *-er* of English but which is much more frontal and without the final *r*. This rounded, definitely frontal utterance is the "at ease" position of the French mouth and clearly illustrates the typical placement of French vocalic emission and resonance, which is somewhere between the upper front teeth and the base of the nose. In contrast, the English-speaking conversationalist fills his void with a heady "um" or a throaty "ah." His lips are flat and the resonance tends to remain somewhere beneath or in back of the nose.

French is a frontal, highly placed language. English, especially American English, is median, somewhat contained and occasionally dropping in its placement. The Frenchman's lips are highly active in the formation of words and his vocalic flow is buoyantly resonated in the upper teeth-to-nose area of his face. Yet French is truly devoid of the raspy nasality of some American accents. The Frenchman coos and clicks onward at what seems to be breakneck speed due to the legato character of his tongue, whose syllabic flow is only slightly more rapid than that of English. To a foreign ear, the absence of both a strong tonic accent, or the heavy stressing of a syllable in the word at the expense of others, likens French to the patter of a typewriter. The Frenchman's voice seems to rise and descend in a highly predictable, monotonous melody devoid of cadences and resolutions.

But listen to French! It sings, it floats, it groans, it purrs, and it titillates the ear with its crisp, clean consonants, its pure, highly resonated, frontal vowel-sounds. The French and English languages are both tongues of exceptional beauty and share many etymological similarities. But they are, in their essential resonances, as different as the people who created them. Americans, with their own set of characteristic speech habits, will find themselves using a previously neglected set of facial muscles and resonating chambers when pronouncing French words and phrases. Singers, with their heightened vocal awareness, will experience these sensations even more acutely. The singer's study of French will necessarily involve

a greater adjustment and technical precision than that of the conversationalist. He must master the singing of these sounds with authenticity, but without vocal discomfort or loss of personal timbre.

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a system of phonetic symbols representing fixed sounds that appear in languages. Each language employs only certain of the IPA symbols according to the sounds making up the language. Some languages share common sounds and symbols. One should be reluctant, however, to transfer the use of the same symbol from one language to another without the guidance of an expert. The sounds of these symbols may vary slightly from language to language. After all, the languages evolved naturally before any such system was heard of. For this reason, the singer must adapt his use of the IPA to each language being studied, for, although basic similarities are most certainly present between vowel-sounds in two different languages that are represented by the same phonetic symbol, they may differ significantly with respect to resonance and coloration. Beware of systems that rely on equivalents in English or other languages. It is just not that simple. Languages cannot be expected to share identical vowel-sounds just because of a set of phonetic symbols, as helpful as they may be. In this manual, the phonetic symbols under examination, and the sounds they represent, are applicable to French *only*, except when, in rare instances, they can be safely compared to sounds in other languages.

In French singing diction there are thirty-six sounds represented by a corresponding number of phonetic symbols: fifteen vowel-sounds, eighteen consonant-sounds, and three semiconsonant sounds. IPA symbols will of course be used extensively in this manual. These symbols must *always* be enclosed in brackets, whether single ([a], [ø],) or multiple ([b o t e]). Whole lines of verse should be enclosed in *one* set of brackets if comprising a single, uninterrupted musical phrase:

Dans ton cœur dort un clair de lune.

[dã t õ k œ r d ɔ r œ k l œ r d œ l y n œ]

(In your heart there sleeps a moonlight.)

Phonetic symbols should *always be made clearly and exactly*. A slight variation in the formation of the symbol might make for ambiguity. Never write phonetic symbols in script or capitalize them for any reason unless the symbol happens to be a capital, which is very rare in French. "Bright a" ([a]) must not be confused with "dark a" ([ɑ]), and so on. The symbol [œ] must always be drawn "Siamese-style" and not [oe], since the latter

symbols represent *two* different neighboring vowel-sounds. All punctuation such as commas, apostrophes, periods and the like are foreign to phonetic spelling and must not appear in phoneticizations. **Phonetic symbols are pictures of exact sounds, not of inflection, stress, or duration.**

Two diacritical marks may be used within the brackets of a phoneticization. The first, [/], may be used to indicate a *hiatus* or any break between neighboring sounds:

Hélas! hélas!
[e l a s / e l a s]
(Alas! alas!)

The second, [→], may indicate a sizable prolongation of a vowel-sound and serves to phoneticize the effect of a legato:

Ah, fuyez! douce image!
[ɑ → f u j e → d u → s i m a → ʒ ə]
(Ah, be gone! sweet image!)

French: A Legato Language

When singing in French, the basic tenet of *bel canto* must be strictly and constantly observed: **legato**. Although almost everyone knows that legato involves a connected, smooth, and uninterrupted production of sound, this vocal ideal is rarely linked to singing diction as it should be. Also, there seems to be considerable confusion as to what a true legato is and how it can be achieved.

An understanding of what vowels and consonants are, and their proper relationship, is necessary to the realization of a true legato. A vowel (*ah, ee, oh, and so on*) is a **free, unobstructed**, defined vocal sound produced by the breath, which becomes voice at the vocal cords, passes through the mouth, and ultimately takes on its particular vocalic definition through the various and precise positions assumed by the lips and tongue upon emission. The word *vowel* comes from the Latin word *vox*, meaning "voice." A consonant (*tuh, vuh, muh, and so on*) is the stoppage, blockage, or friction, partial or complete, of the breath sufficient to cause audible separation of the vocalic flow. The word *consonant* comes from the Latin word *consonare*, meaning "to sound with."

A true legato is the uniform production of pure vowel-sounds for the duration of their assigned note-values, these pure vowel-sounds being separated and ushered in by rapid, late, and clear consonants that, in turn, must never be allowed to shorten or alter the preceding or following vowel-sound.

To illustrate the principle of legato and its relationship to the flow of vowel- and consonant-sounds, the opening phrase of Henri Duparc's well-known song "Chanson triste" shall be examined here.

"Chanson triste," H. Duparc-J. Lahor

Lent

très doux

Dans ton cœur dort un clair de lune,

Dans ton cœur dort un clair de lune,

As demonstrated on the accompanying recording, (Recording Illustration A) in line one only the vowel-sounds are intoned in an uninterrupted stream of vocalized sound. These vowel-sounds must be as distinct but at the same time as **uniformly "placed"** as possible. It is misleading to assume that good diction is founded on exaggerated, highly differentiated vowel-sounds. Instead, **neighboring vowel-sounds should always be closely matched in singing by a conscious examination of what they have in common.** The first five vowel-sounds of this line are all very closely related, all being centered around the basic *heu* position. **Their individual differences may be subtly and distinctly underlined in order to make the text intelligible, but never at the expense of the uniformity of the vocalized flow of sound.** The vowel of the word *clair* is the only unrounded one of the phrase; in its "raw" state it is bright and wide. But to exaggerate these aspects of the vowel-sound [ε] would be a mistake, just as it would be to conceal them entirely. Also, the vowel-sound of the *u* of the word *lune* is the most closed and pointed of the line of verse that speaks of a heart filled with sleeping moonlight. It would be a jolt to the mood and vocal flow of the phrase to fail to match this [y] of *lune* as closely as possible to the surrounding open, mellow vowel-sounds while at the same time retaining just enough of its intrinsic quality for the sake of intelligibility. "Singing diction," yes, by all means, but never "singers' diction" and the self-conscious exaggerations such a term implies!

In the second line of the example above, the consonants have been slipped in **rapid, late, and clear, on the same stream of vocalic sound.**

French consonants must be:

rapid, not prolonged or dwelled upon;

late, never anticipated or shortening the preceding vowel-sound, but "postponed" as long as possible, serving only to usher in the following vowel-sound; and

clear, not mumbled, fuzzy, or inaudible.

As can be seen by the phoneticization and heard by the intoning and singing of the second line, consonants in singing exist only in relation to the vowel. They serve to separate and propel the vowel-sounds without ever inhibiting or arresting their flow.

Even and especially in fast-moving, wordy, so-called staccato recitations the legato principle is applicable. A vocal staccato is the reverse of an instrumental one because words are involved: in singing it is the attack on the consonant that creates the effect of staccato; on an instrument it is the release of the sound (or vowel, in vocal terms). The singer must render his consonants even more rapid, late, and clear than before to provide the incisive, wordy nature of the vocal staccato. More important, at the same time, he must elongate and *sing* as much as possible the vowel-sounds so that the voice is at all times resonant and audible and the text intelligible. (See the section on "Vocal Staccato" in chapter 5.)

Consonant-Vowel Flow

Beginning students of French often complain that the language seems to "run together" and that, unlike English and German, there are no clear separations between words of a French sentence. Although but a superficial impression, it is true that the tendency to melt words together makes French the legato language that it is. Singers need not complain of this characteristic, for it makes the language eminently singable and a good starting point for the mastery of a true legato. The legato character of the French language is due to the regular and practically uninterrupted alternation of consonant and vowel flow within the individual word and from word to word as well. This word-to-word flow is achieved by means of three linking devices.

1. **Liaison** is the sounding of a normally silent final consonant in a word that is followed by another word beginning with a vowel or a mute *h*. (See the following section for a discussion of the mute *h*.) Note how liaison is marked in the following example:

Elle est ici avec un homme.

[ɛlɛtisiavɛkɑ̃nɔ̃mɔ]

(She is here with a man.)

Here, the *t* of *est* and the *n* of *un* are said to be "in liaison" with the following vowel-sounds. Normally, these final consonants would be silent, as in the following example:

Elle es~~t~~ venue avec un~~n~~ cadeau.
 [ɛ l ɛ v œ n y a v ɛ k œ k a d ɔ]
 (She has come with a gift.)

That is because these same final consonant-letters are here followed by consonant-sounds. But, to avoid the meeting of two vowel-sounds, as in the first example sentence, these final consonants are pronounced as if they were the first letters of the following words. As always, the consonant in liaison must be rapid, late, and clear, smoothly ushering in the new vowel-sound, never altering or shortening the preceding one. Liaison is more frequently and stylistically used in singing diction than in everyday speech, and is generally modeled after the usage of the French classical theater. Its application is governed by a few set rules, grammar and syntax, euphony and good taste. Liaison is further discussed in chapter 3.

2. *Elision* is the omission of a final, unstressed *-e* in a word that is followed by a word beginning with a vowel or a mute *h*. Note how elision is marked in the following example:

Elle~~e~~ est ici depuis un~~e~~ heure.
 [ɛ → l ɛ → t i s i d œ p y i → z y → n œ r ə]
 (She has been here for an hour.)

Here, the final *-e*'s of *elle* and *une* are said to be "elided," a basic rule of French versification, since they are followed respectively by a vowel-sound and a mute *h*. The consonant-sound preceding the elided *e* is delayed until just before the following vowel-sound of the next word. In this example, the [l] of *elle* is sounded with the [ɛ] of *est*, thus allowing the [ɛ] of *elle* to occupy the total duration of its syllable. Above all, liaison is not to be confused with elision. The two words are not interchangeable, nor is elision a translation of liaison. Whereas liaison is the addition of a consonant-sound that is otherwise unsounded, elision is the contraction of a vowel-sound that is otherwise sounded. Elision is common to both everyday speech and to singing diction, and is relatively inflexible. The final *-e* and its musical setting and phoneticization are more thoroughly discussed under [œ] below.

3. *Normal Linking-Up* is the carrying over of a normally sounded final consonant into a word beginning with either a vowel or a consonant. Note how normal linking-up is marked in the following examples:

Il^h est ici.
 [i l ɛ t i s i]
 (He is here.)

Dans ton coeur dort un clair de lune.

[dã → tō → kœ → rdɔ → rœ → klɛ → rdœly → nœ]
(In your heart there sleeps a moonlight.)

In the first example, the *l* of *il* is said to be “normally linked-up” with the following vowel-sound, in **rapid, late, and clear fashion**, as always. Although its effect is the same, normal linking-up should not be confused with liaison, since each is governed by a different set of rules concerning phonetic changes. (See chapter 3, “Phonetic Changes Due to Liaison.”) For example, an *-s* that is in liaison becomes [z], but an *-s* that is normally linked-up remains [s]:

sans amour	sens extasiés
[sãz amur]	[sãsekstaziɛ]
(without love)	(senses in ecstasy)

Here, the normally silent, final *-s* of *sans* is in liaison with the first syllable of *amour*, and is sounded as [z]. But the final *-s* of *sens*, normally pronounced as [s], remains [s] when linked with *extasiés*. Sounding the final *-s* of *sens* as [z] in this expression would render “sans extasier,” which is sheer nonsense meaning something roughly akin to “without giving ecstasy.” In the second example above (“Dans ton coeur dort un clair de lune”), the normally pronounced *r* of *dort* (do not link the *t* in liaison!) is linked with the [œ] of *un*, and the *r* of *clair* with the [d] of *de*. Similarly the *r* of *coeur* is sounded immediately before the [d] of *dort*. Consonant-sounds must be normally linked-up with ensuing consonant-sounds just as they are with ensuing vowel-sounds in the interest of the legato. Remember: rapid, late, and clear.

Hiatus, Mute and Aspirate h

Hiatus is the meeting of two vowel-sounds, either in the same word (as in *chaos* [kaɔ], meaning “chaos”) or in two different words (as in *tu es* [tyɛ], meaning “you are,” and in *peu à peu* [pøapø]; meaning “little by little”). Hiatus is often indicated by the presence of the **diæresis** in such words as *Noël* [nœl], *Azaël* [azaɛl], and *naïf* [naif]. Although the tendency in French is toward a constant alternation of consonant- and vowel-sound, hiatus most certainly does occur upon occasion. Above all, it must not cause any real interruption in the legato. When in the same word, or in different, closely related words, there should be no glottal click interrupting the vocalic flow:

cru/auté	lui/et/elle
[kryote]	[lyieɛlə]
(cruelty)	(he and she)

Nor should a forbidden liaison be made just to prevent hiatus:

Le printemps est triste.
[lœprêtâtɛtristə]
(The springtime is sad.)

Here, the liaison is forbidden on a singular noun, the word *printemps* meaning "springtime." But, the absence of liaison is *no* reason to interrupt the legato vocalic flow. Instead, the vowels should occupy, each in turn, the full note-value assigned them, with no glottal click in between.

Occasionally, for the sake of textual clarity, or because of the presence of an aspirate *h* (to be discussed immediately below), a gentle separation may be made between the neighboring vowel-sounds of two different words that create the hiatus, or even between the consonant-sound that would normally be linked by elision or liaison and the ensuing vowel-sound. This latter separation may be due to punctuation or the need to avoid confusion in the meaning of the text:

Elle/à la mer; nous/au tombeau.
[ɛl/a→la→mɛr/nu/o→tõ→bo]
(It, to the sea; we, to the tomb.)
("Beau soir," Debussy-Bourget)

Here, a slight separation after *elle* avoids the ambiguous intrusion of [lala] in the line of verse. The separation of *nous* from *au* can be justified by the clarifying punctuation in the English translation:

Comme une larme, il s'évapore.
[kõ→my→nœ→la→rm/i→lse→va→põ→rœ]
(Like a tear, it vanishes.)
("Le Secret," Fauré-Silvestre)

Here, although Fauré does not indicate such a separation in his setting of the line, the comma and the syntax cry out for a slight separation between *larme* and *il*. To say *larme il* would be tantamount to saying "tear it" in English.

une/honte	la/haine
[ynœ/õtə]	[la/ɛnə]
(a disgrace)	(hatred)

In the above examples, both *h*'s are aspirate, which does not really mean what it suggests. The letter *h* in French is almost never sounded (or aspirated) as it is in the English word "how." But in French an aspirate *h* forbids liaison and elision. Furthermore, its presence may justify a slight reattacking of the vowel-sound following it, as shown in the above examples.

Anyone who does not speak French fluently cannot expect to detect the difference between a word beginning with an aspirate *h*- and one beginning with an *h*- that is mute. To do so, he must consult the dictionary. Only an initial *h*- can be potentially aspirate, such as the *h*- in the word *honte*; the *h*'s in the word *brouhaha* could never be aspirate. To ascertain the presence of an aspirate *h*, look up in the dictionary the word in question that begins with *h*. If it is preceded in the dictionary by an asterisk (*), an apostrophe ('), or a dagger (†), the word definitely begins with an aspirate *h*. If, however, there is no such sign in the dictionary before the word beginning with *h*, the initial *h*- is mute. Whereas an aspirate *h* forbids them, a mute *h* permits liaison, elision, and contraction:

un <u>h</u> omme	un <u>h</u> orreur	l' <u>h</u> onneur
[œ n ɔ m ə]	[y n ɔ r œ r]	[l ɔ n œ r]
(a man)	(a horror)	(honor)

~~Only in operatic outbursts such as "Je te hais!" ("I hate you!") might the aspirate *h* be truly aspirated as in English *how* or German *hell*. This sound, however, is not typical to French and should be used sparingly and only for reasons of expressive emphasis.~~

This discussion of the interruption of the flow of vocalic sound (or the *legato*) is not to encourage an indiscriminate use of hiatus. Some singers and coaches show an exaggerated, even misguided respect for punctuation, especially commas, at the expense of the vocalic and textual flow. A comma does *not* necessarily indicate an interruption of the *legato*, either in French or in English. Both the hiatus and the "punctuating breath" are threats to a good *legato* if used irresponsibly and to extremes. Downright butchery occurs if, in the following line, a slight break or breath is allowed for each comma. The English translation should amply explain why.

Voici des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles, et des branches.

[v wa → si → d ε → fr u i → d ε → f l œ → r d ε → f œ j œ → z e → d ε → b r œ → f œ]

(Here are fruits, flowers, leaves, and branches.)

("Green," Debussy—Fauré-Verlaine)

Nor do other punctuation marks always call for breaks in the phrase:

Ah! s'il était ici!

[a → si → l e → t ε → t i si]

(Ah! if only he were here!)

(*Faust*, Gounod)

Only meaning and expression may determine breaks in a musical line, not mere punctuation, just as in everyday speech.

Syllabic Division

To determine the pronunciation of a French word, a fundamental knowledge of syllabic division is desirable, especially since most musical scores, including those printed in France, give incorrect or unclear division. Some simple rules govern the division of syllables in the French word. They are best grouped according to vowels and consonants.

VOWELS

As a general rule, syllabic division in French is made *after* the vowel-sound. In other words, most French syllables end in vowel-sounds, not in consonant-sounds as they do in English. A syllable in French contains at least one and only one vowel-sound.

- French vowel-sounds may be represented in spelling by one vowel letter:

<u>a</u> /ma/bi/li/té	<u>i</u> /nu/ti/le
[a ma bi li té]	[i nu ti le]
(friendliness)	(useless)

- French vowel-sounds may be represented in spelling by more than one vowel-letter, by two or three, and even four at a time:

<u>trou</u> ba/dour	<u>beau</u> /té
[t ru ba dur]	[bo té]
(troubadour)	(beauty)
<u>coeur</u>	<u>queue</u>
[k œ r]	[k ø]
(heart)	(tail)

- Consecutive vowel-letters are usually grouped together, as above, in the same syllable, *except*:

1. When the second vowel-letter is marked by a diæresis (¨)

<u>na</u> /i [¨] f	<u>A</u> /za/ [¨] ël
[na i f]	[a za ë l]
(naïve)	(Azaël)

2. When *é* or *è* (acute- and grave-accented *e*) is preceded or followed by a vowel-letter:

<u>po</u> /è/te	<u>bien</u> -ai/mé/ <u>e</u>
[p ø e t ə]	[bj ɛ̃ n (e) m e ə]
(poet)	(beloved)

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3. In combinations *ail*, *eill*, *euill*, *œill*, *ouill*, *ueill*, where division occurs after the vowel-sound and before *ill*:

<u>tra/va</u> iller	<u>a</u> /be/ille	<u>feu</u> /ille
[travajɛ]	[abɛjə]	[fœjə]
(to work)	(bee)	(leaf)
<u>gre/nou</u> ille	<u>œ</u> /illet	<u>cue</u> /illir
[grənɔjə]	[œjɛ]	[kœjir]
(frog)	(carnation)	(to gather)

4. When two or more vowel-letters are preceded by a consonant plus *l* or *r*, in which case division is made between the vowel-letters:

<u>cru</u> /el	<u>bleu</u> /et
[kryɛl]	[bløɛ]
(cruel)	(cornflower)

5. When letter *y* occurs between two vowel-letters, and in the word *pays* and its derivatives, where it is phonetically equivalent to *-ii-*:

voyage	pays
(<u>voi-iage</u>)	(<u>pai-is</u>)
[vwaʒajɛ]	[p(ɛ)i]
(voyage)	(country)

6. In combination *-ao-*, *ao-*, which is usually divided:

<u>cha</u> /os	<u>A</u> /oua
[kɑo]	[awa]
(chaos)	(Aoua!)

Exceptions:

<u>Saône</u>	<u>août</u>	<u>saoul</u>
[sɔn]	[u]	[su]
(Saône)	(August)	(drunk)
<u>paon</u>	<u>pao/nne</u>	<u>pao/nner</u>
[pɑ̃]	[pɑnə]	[pɑnɛ]
(peacock, m.)	(peacock, f.)	(to strut)

CONSONANTS

As a general rule, syllabic division in French is made *before* the consonant-sound. Of course, a consonant cannot constitute a syllable without being accompanied by a vowel-sound.

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- A single consonant-sound, whether represented by one or more letters, occurring between two vowel-sounds, belongs to the syllable of the *second* vowel-sound:

<u>j</u> o/ <u>l</u> i	ca/ <u>ch</u> er	bo/ <u>nh</u> eur
[ʒ ɔ̃ l i]	[k a f e]	[b ɔ̃ n œ r]
(pretty)	(to hide)	(happiness)

- Double consonants, with few exceptions, should be treated as one and divided accordingly:

<u>a</u> /ll <u>e</u> r	ca/ <u>sse</u> /t <u>e</u>
[a l e]	[k a s e t ə]
(to go)	(strongbox)

- Only those double consonants in initial combinations *ill-*, *imm-*, *inn-*, and *irr-* are doubled and must be divided accordingly. In this case, the consonant-sound is merely prolonged:

<u>i</u> l/ <u>l</u> y/s <u>i</u> o <u>n</u>	<u>i</u> m/ <u>m</u> ense
[i l l y z j ɔ̃]	[i m m ɑ̃ s ə]
(illusion)	(immense)

- Double consonants in initial combinations *enn-* and *emm-* are usually divided but not doubled, since the first of each indicates the presence of a nasal vowel:

<u>e</u> n/ <u>n</u> u <u>i</u>	<u>e</u> m/ <u>m</u> e/ <u>n</u> e <u>r</u>
[ɑ̃ n ɥ i]	[ɑ̃ m œ n e]
(boredom)	(to take along)

Exception:

<u>e</u> / <u>n</u> n <u>e</u> / <u>m</u> i
[e n œ m i]
(enemy)

- Double consonants -*gg-* and -*cc-* are divided only when followed by *e* or *i*:

<u>s</u> ug/ <u>g</u> é/ <u>r</u> er	<u>a</u> c/ <u>c</u> ep/ <u>t</u> er	<u>a</u> c/ <u>c</u> i/ <u>d</u> ent
[s y g ʒ e r e]	[a k s e p t e]	[a k s i d ɑ̃]
(to suggest)	(to accept)	(accident)

When not followed by *e* or *i*, they are both relegated to the same syllable:

<u>a</u> / <u>g</u> g <u>r</u> a/ <u>v</u> er	B <u>a</u> / <u>c</u> ch <u>u</u> s
[a g r a v e]	[b a k y s]
(to aggravate)	(Bacchus)

- Division usually occurs between any two neighboring consonants:

<u>par</u> /ler	en/ <u>fant</u>
[p a r l e]	[ã f ã]
(to speak)	(child)

Except between a consonant followed by *l* or *r*:

<u>ta</u> /bleau	<u>a</u> /près	se/ <u>cret</u>
[t a b l o]	[a p r e]	[s œ k r e]
(picture)	(after)	(secret)

And except in the following consonant combinations that produce *one* consonant-sound:

ch: <u>to</u> /cher	nh: <u>i</u> /nh <u>u</u> /main
[t u ʃ e]	[i n y m ɛ̃]
(to touch)	(inhuman)
th: <u>go</u> /thi/ <u>que</u>	gn: <u>Sei</u> /gneur
[g o t i k ə]	[s e ɲ œ r]
(Gothic)	(Lord)
ph: <u>Sa</u> / <u>pho</u>	sc: <u>de</u> / <u>scen</u> / <u>dre</u>
[s a f o]	[d e s œ̃ d r ə]
(Sappho)	(to go down)

- Three consecutive consonant-letters are usually divided between the first and second letters:

<u>cher</u> /cher	<u>mal</u> /gré	<u>res</u> / <u>plen</u> / <u>dir</u>
[ʃ e r ʃ e]	[m a l g r e]	[r e s p l œ̃ d i r]
(to look for)	(in spite of)	(to shine forth)

But not in combinations affected by the rules already given above:

<u>ath</u> / <u>lè</u> / <u>te</u>	<u>A</u> / <u>phro</u> / <u>di</u> / <u>te</u>	<u>a</u> / <u>ffli</u> / <u>ger</u>
[a t l e t ə]	[a f r o d i t ə]	[a f l i ʒ e]
(athlete)	(Aphrodite)	(to afflict)

- Since the letter *x* is usually representative of two different consonant-sounds, it is generally cut in half:

<u>e</u> <u>x</u> <u>i</u> l	<u>e</u> <u>x</u> <u>ce</u> / <u>llent</u>
[e g z i l]	[e k s e l œ̃]
(exile)	(excellent)

But not in most numerical words:







<u>so</u> / <u>xan</u> / <u>te</u>
[s w a s œ̃ t ə]
(sixty)

Stress and Word Rhythm

In most languages with which the singer is concerned, one syllable in every word or word-group receives more weight or emphasis than the others. This weight or emphasis is known as *stress*, and the syllable receiving it is called the stressed or accented syllable. The intermittent occurrence of stressed syllables within a line of verse is known as word rhythm or prosody.

A stress on a syllable so heavy that it affects the vowel quality and length of the surrounding syllables is known as a *tonic accent*. An example in English is the syllable *in-* of the word *interest*. It dominates the word, so to speak, and the remaining syllables fall away from it.

In French, there is no tonic accent comparable to that of Italian, German, or English. Unlike English, the stress in a French word habitually falls on the final or last vowel-sound, but never on final, unstressed *-e*, *-es*, or *-ent* sounding as [œ] or [ə]. Compare the following words in English and French, noting the differences in stress and syllabic equality between the two languages as shown by the note-values. Whether spoken or sung, French syllabic equality is more even and regular than that of English (see Recording Illustration B):

ENGLISH		FRENCH	
(fi) <u>del</u> (ity)		<u>fi</u> délité	
<u>a</u> (morous)		<u>a</u> moureux	
<u>in</u> (teresting)		<u>in</u> téressant	

Word-groups follow the same principle in French: the stress falls on the last sounded vowel of the word-group, except final, unstressed *-e*, *-es*, and *-ent*. Compare the English "That is impossible!" to the French "C'est impossible!" Note, however, that for emphasis in both languages stress may be changed by accenting the first syllable of the word *impossible*. Most important of all, the tonic accent in English diminishes the length and resonance of the surrounding syllables, whereas the stress on the final syllable in French has no diminishing or varying effect on the preceding syllables.

All of this is to warn the singer not to insert whimsical stresses into a sung line of French verse by exaggerating or distorting the rhythm. Marking the beat with the voice is also foreign to all vocal styles except perhaps nursery rhymes and some folk music. Such monotony of stress is deadly in its effect on the legato, on the expressive delivery of the text, and is

plainly unmusical and tiresome to the ear. Instead, a consistent vocalization of all the vowel-sounds and their corresponding syllables is the key to a good legato in French. If the composer has demonstrated a good sense of prosody, the stressed words or syllables will emerge of their own accord. Sometimes, unimportant words may fall on the "strong beat" of the measure, but this is no reason to stress them. Good phrasing and legato diction must resist the "tyranny of the bar line."

Equalization of the syllabic flow by occasional stress where appropriate is the ideal here. In singing dotted and triplet patterns (♩. ♩. ♩, ♩₃ ♩₃ ♩₃, etc.) the longer note should not be accented at the expense of the shorter one unless the music is of a martial, folksy, or highly declamatory nature. In general, it is a good idea to underline carefully the syllable assigned to the shorter note. Anticipate it slightly, and vocalize it fully to insure the legato and the natural evenness of the French syllabic flow. In the following examples, in which the prosody is somewhat weak, note how a gentle underlining of the short note can "iron out" a rhythmic jerkiness inappropriate to both the text and the musical phrase (see Recording Illustration C):

"Les Berceaux," G. Fauré—Sully-Prudhomme

Andante ♩ = 58

Le long du quai — les grands — vais-seaux,

"Connais-tu le pays," Mignon, A. Thomas

Andante
dolce

Con - nais-tu le pa-ys

Remember that this underlining of the shorter note-values is a means of smoothing out and equalizing syllabic flow. It must **not be misused to create false accents** within the musical phrase.

Scores, Editions, Printing Procedures, and Errors

A good musician and a serious student of diction must always start with the premise that **there is no such thing as an edition without errors**. Some have fewer than others, but none can be completely trusted. A "reliable edition" is one that has been carefully checked against other editions by experts thoroughly acquainted with the repertoire. First editions are sometimes the least accurate. Anthologies, so common and so widespread in the United States, are the most suspect, especially the large-print variety "edited by X" or "with an English version by Y." Beware of unacknowledged transpositions and *ossia* interpolations. They can both betray and deform the true character of a composition and, more often than not, would not have been condoned by the composer.

Some points to remember when deciphering the texts in French vocal scores, whether published in France or not are:

- A capitalized word is not always an important one or a proper noun. The first word of a line of verse is traditionally capitalized in the printing of poetry and will appear so in the musical score.
- Composers and editors (both French and non-French) do not always syllabify words correctly. Furthermore, they often fail to insert dashes between syllables to show that they belong to the same word. **It is always beneficial to see the text in its original poetic format**. Some editions provide such information for this reason and should be consulted.
- Due to lack of space, **accent-marks are traditionally omitted over capital letters** in print. Thus, the word *étoile* may appear as *Etoile* when capitalized, but it still sounds the same as when uncapitalized.
- Original punctuation is often omitted or incorrectly inserted in scores. Again, verification with the isolated poetic text in a literary source is the best procedure.
- Very often there are inaccuracies and outright errors in translations provided in some editions. Always check them in the dictionary or with a qualified expert before believing in them. A smooth, even faithful translation need not necessarily be word-for-word. Such a literal translation inserted into the score may help the singer be aware of the meaning of each word he is singing. **But when reading a translation out loud a fluent one is preferable**, or one that is faithful to the original but reads well at the same time.
- Some words, alas, are truly untranslatable. It is not always an affectation to say that there is no real English equivalent for a certain French word. For example, the word *ennui* means "boredom," "slight depression," and "worry" all wrapped into one word.
- And finally, the "translation" provided directly beneath the original French text in the score should be considered an "English version,"

not a translation. This is a sad remnant of the time when art song was sung in paraphrase translations that rhymed, a blatant dismissal of the fact that the poem existed in its own right before the music set to it, and that it was the poem in its original language and poetic form that inspired and guided the composer. Fortunately, today the world has been sufficiently "internationalized" so that Schubert songs are no longer sung in French translation for after-dinner entertainment and the poetry of Verlaine is no longer paled by genteel Victorian couplets.