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IMPORTANT NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

I support the literary choice of my expert translator, Michael Aspinall, who, in order to preserve as much as possible of my not at all simple original Italian text, opted for using the male pronoun *he* as a generic one, especially whenever I speak of “the singer” – which in Italian is a male noun derived from a verbal form (*il cantante*, present participle of the verb *cantare*, “to sing”).

A more gender-neutral, plural pronoun would have in fact made the comprehension of several passages of this book much harder, if not impossible, whereas the choice of a feminine pronoun would have suggested other issues, that are not related to the topic of the book itself.

The choice of *he/his/him/himself* was therefore judged by both of us to be the most neutral, functional and pleasingly literary in the present context.

From now on, the generic pronoun *he* will stand for “the singing human being”.

The Author

Introduction

*And today the Italian who asks himself questions, who falls over backwards to discover what constitutes the story of this national reality which makes us feel united, even throughout the immense widening in our differences and despite the conviction that unified Italy is not an absolute value but rather a phase, a transitory historical condition – this Italian who asks himself questions and who wants to identify the nature of his own national consciousness, will discover, God willing, no opaque thickness of flesh and earth, no blind groping of protoplasm and sperm, but rather, everywhere, **the light formed by spirit, the transparency of art, the busy forge of civilization.** "We have made Italy; now we must make the Italians." When Massimo D'Azeglio pronounced his celebrated phrase he wanted to warn us not to deceive ourselves too much as to the concrete results of a legislative measure that declared the new nation officially constituted, and recognized by the other states of Europe. The new national reality still needed to be built up not only by passing laws, but principally in the consciences of men,*

Massimo Mila,
Verdi

Italian is the *mother tongue* of Opera, since Opera was born in Italy on the foundation of a precise aesthetic project whose fulcrum was, precisely, the language spoken by the inventors of the *genre*. This is explicitly declared by the composer Jacopo Peri in the preface to his *Euridice*, the first opera in history whose complete score has survived, composed by him to the libretto of his friend Ottavio Rinuccini (both of them were members of a *coterie* of artists who met in Florence in the late Renaissance thanks to the munificence of Count Bardi). Peri states that "*the idea was to imitate the spoken word with singing (.....) so that harmony, enhancing that of everyday speech, should arise from melody, from singing, so as to form something between the two.*"

Despite the fact that in theatres throughout all the boot of Italy the people had already for centuries been listening to the common language – Italian – sung by the singers, the poet Ugo Foscolo, at the time of the Unification of Italy, could write that "...a man from Bologna and a man from Milan cannot understand each other, except by making an enormous effort". And yet, in the Opera house Italy had already been unified, thanks to the language, and the State of Opera would continue to exist until our times – from 1600 until after the invention of YouTube – moreover, expanding exponentially first

with the invention of the gramophone record and then through internet.

Despite all this, curiously, no manual of Italian operatic diction written by an Italian author and published by an Italian publisher has been issued until now: it seems incredible; this prevents us Italians from complaining about any slovenliness, at home or abroad, that might have been perpetrated so far to the detriment of Italy's most precious and *constituent* national patrimony. This text-book of mine is arriving more than one hundred and fifty years late with respect to Garibaldi's unification and more than twenty with respect to the unification of Europe, which has poured a flood of Erasmus students (added to those hailing from Asia, even greater in number, plus all the others) into Italian universities and conservatories. It comes to fill one of those gaps typical of new organizations – such as Italy is – after having practically written itself during the past ten years of my specialized teaching practice in the subject; and it comes, at the historic moment in which the Italian language is already yielding place to English (which is taking over the role that once belonged to Latin), aiming precisely at repeating that, even when Italy might hypothetically be once more losing her national geographic borders, the State of Opera, on the other hand, stretching along the boot of Italy from Donizetti's Bergamo to Bellini's Catania – can never be lost, and so it is with its language, which is the *matrix* and the *basic material* of the *genre*.

Italian singing, therefore, cannot be reduced to a merely orthoepical matter: we are dealing with an *ontologically musical* affair: singing *is* Italian, Italian *is* singing. There cannot be any vocal technique without a knowledgeable *vowel formation technique* of the Italian language. This implies that the singer's diction must be understood as consisting only in part as merely facilitating the understanding by the audience of the words being sung: the higher this level of intelligibility is, the better it is – it goes without saying – but, significantly, correctness of diction in singing has a great effect, perhaps an even greater effect, on an audience that does not understand the language being sung, as they do not speak it: as if the correct diction contained a magical component of *enchantment*¹ upon audiences, almost

¹ «The dead are beings who sing though petrified. The Spanish language has preserved this ideal megalithic connection between *canto* and *pietra* ("singing" and "stone") in the word *canto*. *Encantar* must originally have meant not only "to cast a spell", but also "turn to stone by singing".»; Marius Schneider, *Il significato della Musica*, Rusconi, 1979. In Italian as well *canto* ("the act of singing"), *cantiere* ("construction yard") and *canto* ("angle, corner stone") share the same etymon.

apart from the content being transmitted. The *poetic* word is, in fact, by definition *creative*: *poetry* comes from the Greek *poièò*, meaning “*I make, I create, I model*”. If a word does not produce a concrete and *meta-linguistic* reality, it has been badly pronounced and robbed of its *poetry*. Furthermore, most of the great arias in Opera are great soliloquies, which the character sings without being heard by anyone beside himself (if every singer kept this fact in mind, many more indications of *pp*, *ppp* and *pppp* would be respected). The singer’s duty, therefore, rather than making the words clear, should be to create for himself an *interior voice* of the character, giving utterance, though through the medium of words, to his *meta-verbal* soul, using what in this manual we will generally refer to as *interpretative diction*.

This manual does not exist, therefore, to tell the reader if a vowel is open or closed, except occasionally and only with the intention of pointing out to him some other more structural concept; this is *not* what we mean, here, by *diction*! Furthermore, this kind of everyday information is available today at a mere click² and, whenever needed, more rapidly put to use than by reading this book. The object of this little treatise will, if anything, be the emotion that opens or closes a vowel, or that a vowel means to disclose to the human soul according to the musical and dramaturgical intentions of the composer in demanding *that* particular word from the librettist in *that* particular position; it will be the history behind a lemma; sometimes it will be free associations on its root word; it will be the genetic content of its *DNA*; and much more besides.

The great English stage director Peter Brook, in an interview³, compared Opera as it is understood by today’s market to a crumbling building whose pipes, which once carried water, had progressively rusted and deteriorated to the point in which people had forgotten their original function, transforming the building itself into a museum whose very *walls* (i.e. the essential matter) were torn down with the incomprehensible aim of admiring the empty tubes in ecstasy.⁴ The aim of this text is to praise the ancient

² The reader is recommended to consult the *Treccani* dictionary, available online and always reporting the etymon and the orthoepy – the correct diction – of words.

³ Discussion with Charlie Rose, 2003.

⁴ Peter Brook, *Op. Cit.*: “You come to Mozart and find a perfect marriage between the artificial and something that is fully alive – here’s an example: the rigid pipe and the water flowing through it. But

beauty and the functionality of those tubes, but in the hope that pure water may once more run through them and that this water may bring back a thirst for so long unjustly frustrated that it has dried up in audiences.

Riccardo Muti has recently⁵ and perhaps rather provocatively claimed that no opera staging can be better than the one that each member of the audience has in his own mind, when his imagination is stimulated exclusively by the *audible instruments* of music and words. One might agree or not, but, in fact, when we listen to an opera over the radio or on a recording, we have no choice but this: to create for ourselves a vision starting from the poetic sound. Furthermore, we know very well how far historical memory and the cult of the art form even today lean upon certain legendary disc recordings of the past (of most of which no corresponding video material exists): just *listening* to them, they have forged our taste and nurtured our *visual imagery* for decades. It is therefore essential that students make a profound and accurate study of the libretto, making the text so malleable as to furnish the singer and the listener with the necessary instruments for creating their *own* production of the opera: this preliminary study, necessary and sometimes enough to guarantee the success of a production, may be considered one of the few new frontiers possible to the *avant-garde* of stage production, given the rigid structure of Opera's market. When such a study of *interpretative diction* exists and when it is well constructed, it will cast the *spell* and work the magic; never mind the rest – whatever that may be⁶.

gradually the attention begins to go more and more to the artificial until suddenly you're into sclerosis. Suddenly that pipe is taking all the attention and less and less water is trickling through it. Finally you get a fundamentally unwell and crazy society in which people forget that pipes were put into buildings for the purpose of letting the water through, and they now consider them to be works of art. People knock the walls down and admire the piping and totally forget its original purpose and function. This is what happened in many art forms, and Opera is the clearest example."

⁵ In an interview on the occasion of the opening ceremonies of the XXVIII edition of the Ravenna Festival, 2017.

⁶ The quotation by Federico Fellini that we opened this book with is taken from his *Block-notes di un regista* ("A director's notebook"), published by Longanesi in 1988. A whole chapter of the book is dedicated to Opera, and it was written by Fellini with the sole purpose of explaining the reasons why he never, ever agreed to direct an operatic production, in spite of the incredibly generous offers made to him at the time by the administrators of the most important Opera houses in the world (the then administrator of the Metropolitan Opera House, New York offered the director a whole trip across the United States in order to convince him: Fellini accepted the trip, but eventually turned down the commission).

I. Hints on vocal physiology

*When you speak, the sound flows from your mouth like a wave
overflowing from an over-filled basin.
It impregnates your body and spreads through it.
Every syllabic wave flows over you and spreads through you,
Without your realizing it, but surely.*

Alfred Tomatis,
The Ear and the Voice

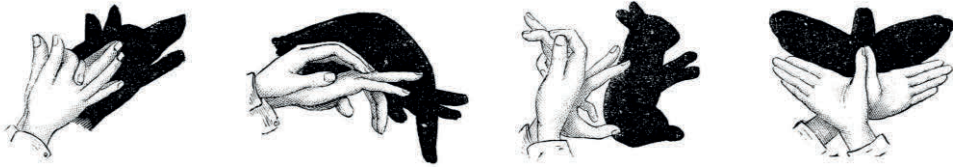
The physiology of the act of phonation consists of an extremely complicated apparatus, involving more than a hundred muscles in a singer's body: it is therefore useless to try to acquire physical and mechanical control of it. However, here we shall try to briefly describe it, greatly simplifying it and illustrating the little that it seems to us useful to know about it, not so much with the intention of doing anything special once we know about it, but rather to avoid inadvertently doing useless things: in the art of singing, economy means concentration; and concentration, success.

Anatomy and transmission

The voice diffuses its vibrations within the singer's body, not through the air, but through the *solid* path, passing through the skeleton; for this reason Alfred Tomatis⁷ defines the good singer's voice as *osseous voice*. The reactor emitting these vibrations is also a part of the bone structure and is called the *larynx*: it is a hollow cartilage, placed at the front middle of the throat. It is almost always visible in the adult male, in whom it is significantly known as the *Adam's apple*: this indicates the divine and ancestral heritage of the human voice, besides confirming that the *word* – the *logos*, that opens John's Gospel⁸ and traces of which we find in any other early culture – is the origin

⁷ Alfred Tomatis, *The Ear and the Voice*, Scarecrow Press, 1987.

⁸ «In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.» - John 1:1.



The projection becomes an independent, third entity¹⁷ to the extent that, once sketched out on the wall (which is the singer's self-listening), it is always to that projection that we turn to get our bearings when modifying our work: while adjusting it we look at the wall, not at our hands themselves, which meanwhile continue to fumble until the visible image is exactly what we wanted.

At this point – and this is just as true for the singer learning to vocalize as it is for the child learning to speak – it will be the accuracy of the result, that is, its correspondence with the idea that evoked it, together with the satisfaction it arouses, that will create in us – eventually, by constant repetition – also the *physical memory* of the movement and of the position necessary to sustain the excellence of that shape through time. In other words, we must develop a muscular automatism as a consequence of the search for the *correct vowels*; but to this end it is clear that we must first know how to envision those vowels in our mind. This practice will help the singer, furthermore, to acquire ever greater rapidity and precision as time goes by, never forgetting, however, the inevitable margins of adaptation due from time to time to variables such as the singer's psycho-physical condition, or the environmental and acoustical conditions of the performance¹⁸.

¹⁷ To get a clearer idea of the separation of sound and language, and keeping to our metaphor of Chinese shadows, let us say: can a light be lit without hands necessarily moving in front of it? Certainly: sound can exist without being classed by a particular language. Can hands move in the dark, where there is no light? Yes to this too: there can be language without sound (see note 15). Can any kind of surface potentially suitable for the projection of *Chinese shadows* exist even in the absence of a light source, or of a child who wants to try to project the shadow of a dog onto it? Yes: the case of a *listener* in the *silence* could arise. In our case the projection or receiving surface is *hearing* – *in primis* the singer's hearing of his own voice, or what Tomatis calls *self-listening*. Just as the exceptional case might arise of a rabbit so well constructed and so well articulated in its movements as to take on truly lifelike movements in our eyes, going so far as to make us forget that it is only the fruit of *illusionism* (an *acoustic illusion* in this case of ours): and that is the case of an expert singer, when singing.

¹⁸ Laura Habegger, *Apprendimenti motori e pratica strumentale*, essay published in the Italian magazine *Musica Domani* in 2005.

Let us consider the vowel *a* as a *matrix*⁴⁰ – a sort of gravitational pole of the open position. From this matrix two variants branch off and can be distinguished, one more rarified – æ – and another, more dense – æ.⁴¹

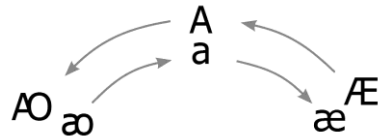


Fig. 1

Consequently, the vowels nearest to the open æ and the open æ will be their respective, closed homographs: *e*, *o*:

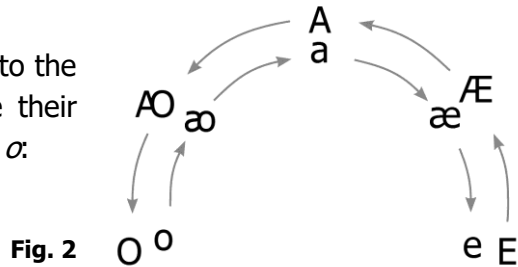


Fig. 2

Finally, *o* and *u* are contiguous because they are “sister” vowels, often constituting interchangeable alternatives in languages that are neighbors either in space (like Italian and French) or in time (like Italian and Latin), if found within the sphere of one and the same etymon; furthermore, in many languages the sound of the Italian *u* can be obtained writing “ou” or “oo”.

The same may be said for the consequentiality between *u* and *i*, since in many languages their pronunciation is extremely similar (the French *u* is almost an Italian *i*, and so is the German ü).

⁴⁰ In almost all alphabets, including the Italian, the *alpha* -A- is drawn as an open mouth, a triangle (with its vertex at the top or at the side and open on the opposite side). The grapheme is also thought to descend from a stylized bull’s head derived from the constellation of Taurus, the one that opens spring and is therefore the appropriate symbol of a primigenial sound.

⁴¹ Not by chance we speak here of more *rarefied* or *densified* vowels, instead of *clear* and *dark* ones, to avoid confusion: an æ may be as rarified as it is dark at the same time (for instance, when we sing of the *di estræmo*; in the same way an æ may be as dense as it is sunny (in *un mæto di giæya*).

So much so that we will integrate our circle as follows:⁵³

Finally, it will be the good *teacher's* task to teach how to use it where necessary in singing, allowing it to pass unobserved in *legato*, just as it does in speech. On condition that it is adopted as it should be, with taste and *with a grain of salt*, the potential objection raised above is firmly rejected.

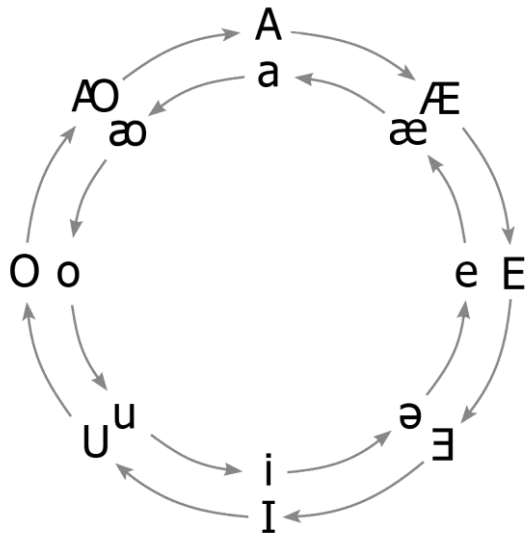


Fig. 4

Synopsis

Up to here we have counted all the vocalic sounds in the Italian language, coming up with eight:

- ✓ three wide ones: **a, æ, ə;**
- ✓ four narrow ones: **o, u, i, e;**
- ✓ one polyvalent *passepartout*: **ə.**

The singer will first practice them with *legato* in the circular order already suggested (try and *chant* them):

a_æ_e_i_u_o_ə_a,

also backwards (try and *chant* them):

a_ə_o_u_i_e_æ_a,

in order to memorize it and help himself to differentiate vocalic volumes from those near them. This order has also, in fact, the virtue of relativizing these apertures one to another, forcing the singer to bring into focus the *subtle* differences between the adjacent ones and to learn above all to distinguish them with his own ears (this is by no means negligible: very many cannot distinguish an open vowel from its closed homologue, and quite often struggle to differentiate between an *i* and a closed *e*, or a *u* and a closed *o*).

⁵³ In this drawing we placed the schwa between the *e* and the *i* for mere reasons of visual symmetry, not of consequentiality.

- ✓ **sce, scio, scia** → **schæ/schææ, schəo/ schəə, schəa** (e.g.: *scelgo* → **schæ**lgo; *scena* → **schææ**na, *sciolgo* → **schəə**lgo; *poscia* → pə**sschəa**; *pesceca*ne → pes**schəe**caⁿe);
- ✓ **gli, glie, glia, glio** → **lləi, llæ/llææ, lləa, lləo/llə** (e.g.: *figli* → filləi; *moglio* → m**əlləo**; *biglietto* → bill**ə**tt**ə**to; *medaglia* → med**əlləa**);
- ✓ **gni, gne, gna, gno, gnu** → **nnəi, nnæ/nnææ, nnəa, nnəo/nnəə, nnəu** (e.g.: *sogni* → s**ənnəi**; *degne* → d**ənnə**; *bagnato* → bann**ə**at**ə**to; *agnostico* → ann**ə**ə**stic**o; *ignudi* → inn**ə**ud**i**).

Ambiguous consonants

The following notation is recommended for these *ambiguous* consonants, that is consonants that are to be pronounced differently according to where and how they are placed (see the upcoming paragraph “Enunciation of the consonants”):

- ✓ **hard c** → **k** (e.g.: *chiedo* → **k**i**ə**do; *vecchio* → v**æ**k**k**i**o**);
- ✓ **soft c** → **c** (*certo* → **c**ə**r**t**o**, *bacio* → b**ə**c**ə**o, *accetta* → **acc**ə**t**t**ə**; *Cina* → **C**i**n**a);
- ✓ **soft g**, single → **dg** (*getto* → **dg**ə**t**t**o**) and double → **ddg** (*aggir*o → **add**g**g**i**r**o);
- ✓ **hard g** → **g** (*gatto* → **g**at**t**o);
- ✓ **unvoiced s** → **s** (e.g.: *sabbia* → **s**ab**b**ia, *assolto* → **ass**ə**l**t**o**);
- ✓ **voiced s** → **z** (e.g.: *naso* n**ə**z**o**);
- ✓ **unvoiced z**, singular → **ts** (e.g.: *zampa* → **ts**am**p**a; *azione* → **ats**i**ə**n**e**)⁵⁶ and double → **tts** (e.g.: *pazzo* → p**att**t**so**);
- ✓ **voiced z**, singular → **dz**⁵⁷ (e.g.: *zelo* → **dz**ə**l**o) and double → **ddz** (e.g.: *azzardo* → **add**z**ə**r**d**o).

⁵⁶ Truth to tell, an Italian always doubles this z there is no difference in intensity between the pronunciation of the z in *grazie* and in *pezzo*. The non-Italian singer is advised, however, to differ the notation between single and double because this instinctive identical pronunciation is not found in foreign singers.

⁵⁷ See the preceding note: the same observation might be made, but only if the voiced z is found as initial of the word.

Ex. 3: Händel, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, Act III, *Piangerò la sorte mia*, Cleopatra.

<i>Piangerò la sorte mia...</i> ⁷⁶	pianger<u>æ</u>llas<u>æ</u>rtemia
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In the metrically and phonetically illuminating libretto by Nicola Francesco Haym⁷⁷ it is very interesting and significant to see how, in a line of just four words, we find the perfect symmetry of *ræ/ær*, with the doubled // standing in the very middle of the verse as some sort of physical diaphragm between the two open tonic vowels and the two halves of the line; then comes the repetition of the painful *ia/ia* and finally the sighing effect of the *s* and of the soft *g*.

Ex. 4: Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act I, *Pari siamo*, Rigoletto.

<i>Io ho la lingua, Egli ha il pugnale!</i>	i<u>æ</u>llalingua ell<u>æ</u>ilpunn<u>æ</u>le
<i>Ma la saprò riprender! Ella è là...</i> ⁷⁸	mmallasap<u>r</u><u>æ</u>rrip<u>r</u><u>æ</u>nder... ell<u>æ</u>lla...

The hatred and the disdain of the main character towards the Duke are expressed by: the percussive effect of *æ/l/al/ell/ail* (this assonance is echoed in the perfectly repetitive *ellælla*), the strong *ng/gn/nn* groups and the raging *pr/rr*.

Ex. 5: Verdi, *La Traviata*, Act I, *È strano... Ah, fors'è lui... Sempre libera*, Violetta Valéry.

<i>Che spero or più? Che far degg'io? Gioire!</i> ⁷⁹	kkess<u>æ</u>ror<u>æ</u>pi<u>u</u> kk<u>e</u>ffar<u>æ</u>deg<u>g</u>io ggioire
---	---

⁷⁶ "I shall weep over my fate..."

⁷⁷ Nicola Francesco Haym (1678 - 1729) was an Italian composer, cellist, librettist and impresario.

⁷⁸ "I have the tongue, he has the knife! But I know how to get her back! She is in there..."

⁷⁹ "What more can I hope for now? What should I do? Enjoy myself!"