

“How sweet the sound”?
A study of pronunciation in performance

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1. Introduction – words and music

Like ballet is to walking, singing is to talking. (LaBouff, 2008 : vi)

There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence of misunderstandings caused by the pronunciation difficulties of those using a second or other language, and it is often used to humorous effect for rare moments of levity in otherwise dense and difficult texts filled with hieroglyphic-like symbols (an IPA font used by the author was once mistakenly identified as Greek for printing purposes) and cutaway diagrams of the human vocal tract or photographs of speech wave spectrograms that would not seem out of place in medical or scientific journals (Ball & Rahilly, 1999 ; Ladefoged, 1975 ; Sato & Sato, 1997 ; a random but not unrepresentative sample).

While prior knowledge of areas likely to cause confusion and the context can usually help overcome brief moments of incomprehensibility in conversation (although on one occasion the Japanese transliteration of the word “stew” in katakana script as “shichuu” シチュー did take considerable time to recognise), even those of us familiar with the typical variations of pronunciation in second language (L2) speakers from particular countries can have problems when that established awareness provides insufficient clues, as Jenkins (2000 : 36) describes

in the example of a Japanese student's speech-closing "Don't lie a fizz off score", where multiple inaccuracies (mostly phonological, but also grammatical and lexical) delayed any understanding of the intended humorous plea, "Don't rise the fees of school".

Similarly, awareness of song-writing conventions allows most listeners to adjust to the vagaries of individual performances, with, after all, the variety of accents and vocal mannerisms being part of our appreciation of particular vocalists, from the broad Yorkshire intonation of the Arctic Monkeys' Alex Turner or Ian Dury's definitively North-East London bark, to David Bowie's precisely clipped vowels or John Martyn's slurred delivery, thinking of just a few British examples, past and present, and it would be easy to continue with the varieties of English sung by artists from North America and beyond. Neither do we expect or indeed want all international artists to emulate native-speaker¹⁾ diction. Without wishing to descend into the stereotypical, some audiences may feel, ironically, that a French accent adds a kind of authenticity to *chanson*, for example, even when sung in English translation (conceivably Charles Aznavour's 1974 hit "She" might have had less widespread appeal without it, the same presumably holding true for the artist's recording in various other European languages).

However, widespread familiarity with particular songs (standard numbers that can be heard in cocktail bars and karaoke clubs around the world - "My Way", "Let It Be", "Danny Boy", "Love Me Tender" and so on) can also breed a certain amount of contempt, in unsympathetic listeners, for obvious errors, the author having heard otherwise admirable versions of "Amazing Grace" undermined by "was

1) Jenkins' "Monolingual English Speaker" (Op. Cit.) is probably more appropriate, but as that debate deserves more coverage than is possible here, the longer established term will be used.

lost” sounding like “was roast” (due to obvious first language, henceforth L1, interference) and, less understandable or expected, the mispronunciation of “blind” as “blinned” in the following line. Though examining the katakana transcription provided in a guide accompanying an NHK educational television series on singing gospel (Kamebuchi, 2000), it is perhaps surprising that lyrics are not more frequently and further modified.

Immediately apparent in purely visual terms as seen below, the full syllable count, or more correctly *mora* count (Paterson, 2008, discussing Shibatani, 1994) for the first verse of the song, which gives this paper its title, is over 80 (approximately 20 per line) compared to just 28 (8 and 6 syllables in alternation) in English. It is important to remember that for Japanese speakers, virtually each single written character, including indications of long vowels, consonantal mora, nasals and characteristic word-end epenthesis (Celce-Murcia et al., 2007 : 164), need to be allocated a beat of similar rhythmical length, as described in Mizutani & Mizutani, (1987 : xiv).

Amazing	grace,	how	sweet	the	sound			
アメエージング	グレース	ハウ	スイートゥ	ザ	サウンドゥ			
that	saved	a	wretch	like	me			
ザットゥ	セイーブド	ア	ウレエッチ	ライク	ミー			
I	once	was	lost	but	now	am	found	
アイ	ワンス	ワズ	ロオストゥ	バットゥ	ナウ	アム	ファンドゥ	
was	blind		but	now	I	see.		
ワズ	ブラインドゥ		バットゥ	ナウ	アイ	シー		

(Kamebuchi, Op. Cit. : 44)

To give a final example, a programme of pieces from Handel’s “Messiah”, sung by classically-trained Japanese singers, was especially memorable for the

clarity of the words “Rejoice!”, “Arise!” and “Glad tidings!”. This may be taking LaBouff’s advice regarding the “telegramming” of musical texts (Op. Cit. : 21) to the extreme, considering that they were actually the *only* recognisable phrases in their respective movements.

It becomes increasingly apparent that many listeners might have reasons to sympathise with the comment by English composer Frederick Delius after a recital of his own songs: “Admirable, but what language was he singing in?” (from Beecham, 1944, as quoted in Crystal & Crystal, 2001: 280). This may be evident when musical settings of *any* language are sung by performers with *any* linguistic background, even using their first, where (substituting any appropriate L1) the “almost cavalier assumption...that since this is the vernacular, English speakers already have an “inborn skill and sensitivity to singing in English” is less easy to explain or excuse (LaBouff, Op. Cit. : 5).

Having presented an admittedly ad hoc sample of situations in which singing was heard as often being something still more akin to walking than ballet, with varying success in negotiating numerous obstacles in the paths taken, this study will continue with an examination of some of the guidance provided in the relevant literature, before discussing the results of a survey conducted with the assistance of two groups of singers, one in Japan and the other in the United Kingdom.

2. The singing voice – user’s guides

Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take of themselves
(Lewis Carroll, in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865 : 96)

It became immediately evident in searching for academic literature on the subject of language and singing that there was a surprisingly limited selection. Of the few reference works available, some inevitably appeared somewhat dated, while others include relevant sections only within highly specialised volumes (concerning musical theatre, training the soprano voice, specific languages and so on). The relative paucity of material is perhaps a reflection of the lower priority apparently granted to pronunciation in general language textbooks, where brief introductions (often indicating variations from particular L1s) or one small text box per chapter (introducing a single feature) are the norm. Some of the classic linguistic guides or practice manuals also made their first appearance decades ago, though they have continued to be published in updated editions (Roach, 2004 ; Baker 2006).

Although there are innumerable Japanese books available on the subject of pronunciation, particularly English, of which the author is familiar with just a few (for example, Tatsumi, 1997 ; Kinoshita, 1990), many of the more academic texts display the tendency towards specialisation noted above, examining regional or other variation in minute detail (Hattori, 1991 ; Misono, 2007).

Eventually, four key texts specifically designed for singers (and by extension, their teachers) were identified. Firstly, Marshall’s traditional manual of English diction (1953) and secondly, LaBouff’s contemporary communicative guide (Op. Cit.). While written for a slightly more specific readership, the third, Kayes’ work on singing for actors (2004) and fourth, the recent guide by Adams (2008) to singing the three principal lyric languages *other* than English (French, German and Italian), both cover many topics of general relevance. Given the limitations of space, what follows is a small sample of some of the key points made regarding areas important for language learners in general as well as the singers to which they are directed.

2.1 Vowels and consonants

Modification of unequal vowels is a staple tool, but both LaBouff and Kayes warn against lapsing into unclear “singerese”. The latter proposes “medialising” instead of classical bel canto technique, plus manipulation of the lips to adjust vocal tract length for expression, even on long single notes, ‘EE’ becoming darker when protruded, ‘AH’ pulled back into a smile for brightness (Op. Cit. : 100-8). LaBouff recognises the benefits of Italianate swelling into vowels for legato phrasing, recommending gentler ‘breath pulses’ instead of glottal onsets, or ‘lifts’ for any stress required (Op. Cit. : 36).

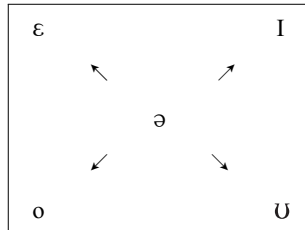
Additionally, rather than “breaking the line”, clear articulation of consonants can provide focus (Marshall, Op. Cit. : 31) and moving them to start the *next* syllable or word increases space for expressive vowels, though this may create problematic new clusters, and there is also the risk of “intrusive schwa contamination” (LaBouff, Op. Cit. : 187-8), a pre-existing condition for L1 Japanese and Italians.

2.2 Stress

Increasingly regarded as even more fundamental to aural comprehension than accurate pronunciation of vowels and consonants (Celce-Murcia et al. ; Jenkins, both Op. Cit.), appropriate stress is equally important in singing. LaBouff writes of “pulsing the phrase” (relaxing vowel swell into the body) for primary stress nouns or verbs and interpretively (alongside consonantal doubling for stressed syllables in stressed words) elsewhere (Op. Cit. : 24).

There is also the need to maintain neutral vowels (contrasting with full purity in Italian and Japanese) in unstressed syllables, vocalists being able to choose from

various alternatives, as in LaBouff’s example of “heaven”, to be pronounced as [hɛvən] or with [I] or [U] instead of schwa [ə], the possible substitutions summarised in visual form (Op. Cit. : 19) :



(Diagram 2.1)

Where unstressed syllables are set on long musical notes, defying natural spoken inflection, Kayes warns of “melodic distortion” (Op. Cit. : 151) giving a surprisingly familiar example, “Somewhere Over The Rainbow”. The initial octave rise makes ‘somewhere’ difficult to avoid musically, unless decay is applied to the second, weaker syllable to retain the sense of longing inherent in this particular ‘somewhere’.

2.3 “Sing-as-you-speak” ?

While this may be appropriate for actors (ibid. : 177) and perhaps as a guideline for using songs in the language classroom, the unnatural aspects of trying to communicate vocal texts “in slow motion...over long phrases in extreme ranges and... volumes” (LaBouff, Op. Cit. : vi) make this unrealistic for singers, whose opinions shall be heard shortly. With intelligibility an indisputable goal, taking care of the sounds has been found to be vital to transmitting the sense.

3. The singer not the song – a survey of vocalists’ views

I do not mind what language an opera is sung in so long as it is a language I don't understand
(Appleton, 1955, as quoted in Knowles, Op. Cit. : 25)

Questionnaires were given to two groups, one in Japan and the other in the United Kingdom (see Appendices 1 & 2 for both in their original form). The first consisted of twelve individual female singers in their 20s to 40s, most with formal musical training and now predominantly performing either classical or popular music, or in some cases both. It was hoped that the range of genres and levels of experience represented would provide a correspondingly broad selection of responses. The latter were all members of a single choir, in their 40s to 60s, whose experience of singing in a wide variety of languages was of particular interest.

With some minor differences in format, Questions 2-10 in the English version are close translations of Questions 7-15 in the original Japanese, with necessary adjustments according to linguistic background. This chapter will present the replies to each section in turn, the level of detail in the discussion in part reflecting that provided by the participants. Where possible, links may be made between the response and the literature described earlier in this paper, or new insights gained from those rather more involved in the practice than theory of vocal performance.

3.1 The languages

Charles Dickens described the vocal repertoire of his genteelly cultured characters the Misses Noriss in the novel “Martin Chuzzlewit” (1844, as quoted in Crystal & Crystal, Op. Cit. : 280) in the following manner :

They sang in all languages - except their own. German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Swiss; but nothing native; nothing so low as native.

The two groups surveyed for the current study certainly cannot be accused of such snobbery, in fact one will be seen to sing very much in their own language, while the other was asked specifically about their experience in *other* languages, given the basis of the project as a whole in EFL (English as a *Foreign Language*).

The UK group, while principally focused on the Welsh choral tradition, cited over twenty sung languages (including a number from Africa and Eastern Europe), reflecting their contact with a wide repertoire of songs from around the world. It should be noted that none of the members had any previous knowledge of over half of these, while only one or two had experience of the next few listed. Basic conversational ability in German, Spanish and French can often be traced back to initial study in school, with the last being the most widely spoken, and second most sung behind Welsh, in which all bar a single fluent speaker have gained a limited knowledge, presumably in no small part due to participation in the choir.

A scale for self-assessment of ability in each language was not included in the Japanese survey, partly due to prior awareness of the limited opportunities available to those responding. Everyone frequently sings in Japanese, while almost all sing in Italian (largely as their main sung language), and the Japanese-Italian combination is the most common, listed as the top two by over half. The latter was also the most frequently mentioned referring to non-musical study. The remaining languages were steadily less represented, although English is sung to some extent by all, German and French a little, by few, with single responses for Latin, Chinese and Portuguese relating more to artistic than linguistic choices.

Concluding the initial theme was an enquiry into how those taking part approach this range of frequently quite unfamiliar languages in terms of assistance sought, particularly regarding pronunciation, with the Japanese group asked a supplementary question about previous study. The latter answers showed a relatively even distribution of those having taken lessons (some conversational, others vocal) from Japanese, native-speaking teachers or both, with study at university and abroad indicated by a minority. Much of the UK group also mentioned seeking advice from native or fluent speakers, and their universal use of recordings was similarly reported in Japan. In this way, most respondents appear to follow at least part of Adam's somewhat strict doctrine :

It is crucial that students of singing hear Italian, French, and German sung by a variety of native singers...important to experience the inflections of the spoken languages...and to gain at least some expertise in speaking them...absolutely essential to study the grammar of each language...Fluency is not required, but developing an ear for the cadences, modulations, and phrasings of a language will make a significant difference in the authority with which it is sung. (Op. Cit. : xi)

The use of some form of phonetic transcription also reflects the expert advice discussed in the previous chapter, whether it be using the IPA script, some other system comprehensible (possibly uniquely) to the individual concerned, or for a small proportion of the Japanese, in the katakana script that was seen as a potential cause of considerable confusion in the introduction.

3.2 The texts

Many of those surveyed indicated that recording themselves (in both private practice and while receiving instruction) for later listening was a key part of their studies, as recommended by Kayes in her section on “putting it together” (Op. Cit. : 120), and it is interesting to note other ways in which the process prescribed is

mirrored by their approaches to new material. Reading the text aloud prior to adding the required rhythm, then progressing to simple vocalisation appears to be a consistently followed pattern (although the UK group were less specific about the order), before the eventual full combination of words and music.

The two groups described a number of shared pronunciation problems, in many of the areas identified earlier in this article, from the physical, such as unfamiliar use of muscles and mouth shapes, to the phonological, as in the nature of the sounds and syllables required. For many of the Japanese group, their sheer number can also be rather overwhelming, though this last may stem from the L1-rooted difficulty with consonantal clusters (making unnecessary additions) and various elements of connected speech (*not* making the necessary deletions). The lack of available reference points to link the target language to their own (or others known) was also a concern for many in both parties, giving rise to questions such as which sounds to extend or their appropriate placement to fit the demands of musical scores, many aspects of which are, by definition, open to interpretation. Kayes (*ibid.* : 180) is sympathetic to their plight, but firm regarding the importance of finding personal solutions :

Very rarely does a composer indicate such precise intentions to the singer... Nevertheless, the decisions about making the sung text intelligible need to be made. Working out how is part of making the song ‘your own’.

One Japanese singer echoed the sentiment, in admitting the fundamental need for accuracy, but warning of the risks inherent in letting yourself be “ruled by the sounds” (here of the text, as distinct from the music), with another commenting on the related danger of excessive listening to existing models (though recommended earlier) hindering the search for original individual interpretation.

3.3 Comparisons and contrasts

The next three questions asked participants what they believed to be the fundamental distinctions between singing and speaking a language, followed by perceived differences in singing their own and other languages and finally, where applicable, comparing singing in a variety of second languages.

In relation to the first, the UK group described a number of positive factors, both artistic and practical. The former included the additional “emotional drive” when singing, which can “bring the language to life”, with “melody taking over from intonation and meaning as the structural hook”, making singing easier than speaking another language for some. Continuing from this perspective of L2 performance, the latter were largely concerned with the liberation from meaning’s dominance when “not expecting to understand every word” or indeed sometimes having “no knowledge of what the words actually mean”. This admission should obviously be placed in the context of the impressive range of languages covered by their sung repertoire.

While the Japanese group made some similar comments regarding the increased expression of feeling in song, viewed as a form of “entertainment” where a “beautiful performance by the singer” is “‘speaking’ on behalf of the composer and lyricist”, more technical aspects were also covered, such as the need to use abdominal breathing when singing and the wider ranges of pitch and rhythm involved (elements of the stylisation described in the preceding chapter).

Meaning understandably featured strongly in all subjects’ comparisons of L1 and L2 vocal performance, with references made to a greater concentration upon meaning when singing a second language (in contrast to the freedom found above)

and the easily-forgotten importance of audience comprehension of whatever language is being used. Technical aspects covered by the literature, such as word division and stress, also made frequent appearances in the answers given.

Finally, those singing in multiple languages expressed, on the one hand, the fascination of studying the specific details of each, while on the other, the breadth of semantic and phonological differences and the potential problems they pose. Both groups commented on the apparent suitability of Italian for musical setting, with those in the UK making the contrast between its “mellifluous” nature and the “angularity” of English. Irish and Welsh were described similarly, perhaps reconfirming the following :

(about an Irish acquaintance’s reply when asked to sing the English version of a song)

‘I will sing it for you ; but the English words and the air are like a quarrelling man and wife ; the Irish melts into the tune, but the English doesn’t.’

(William Carleton, 1830, as quoted in Crystal & Crystal, *Op. Cit.* : 280)

Those in Japan felt more of an advantageous similarity between Italian and their own language, particularly in their open syllabicity.

3.4 Opinions

The final pair of questions hoped to elicit some general observations regarding each participant’s self-image as a singer of other languages, and the elements that constitute their image of an ideal vocalist. The deliberately provocative nature of the initial inquiry (created for the purpose, but with a basis in opinions actually heard and read) led to some well-argued self-defence, with admissions that while greater fluency and comprehension would be beneficial, such aspirations were pre-requisite neither to audience understanding and appreciation nor the ability to

communicate the feelings expressed in the songs to them. This point that the singer's sensibility and skill in identifying and subsequently conveying an overall image to the listener can compensate for any possible linguistic failings was remarked upon by many, with emphasis on the primary importance of the music, rather contradicting Kayes' view that

For a singer, having inadequate language skills is equivalent to having inadequate intonation; the music just does not sound right. The sensitive listener will be put off by one just as much as the other, no matter how beautiful the voice. (Op. Cit. : xii)

'Good' singers were generally seen as those who combined ability and effort to convey the message of a song with an expressive passion and the desire to please, move or excite the listener. Reflecting their particular interests, some of the Japanese group working in opera spoke of the need to do all this while acting on stage, while those in the UK focused on story-telling skills and the indefinable qualities of 'soul' and 'character'.

4. Conclusions – applications and extensions

Restrictions of space and time meant that parallel studies of pronunciation in other forms of performance such as speech making and drama productions (in these cases, observation has thus far only been made of Japanese subjects performing in English) were necessarily consigned to a future report, one that may provide insights of more general relevance to the common language learning experience (with further focus on prosodic features and role-playing activities, for example) than the current, admittedly specialised field. The latter could be extended via such projects as detailed phonological analysis of different performers' versions of particular songs, or an exploration of composers' views (Barker, 2004) on setting words in various

languages, that might both yield interesting results.

However, it would appear that there are a number of general lessons to be learnt from the problems faced by vocalists, and the methods they use to overcome them, which can be effectively transferred from the sung language to the spoken. The vital importance of intelligibility (and turning the spotlight back on to the listener could be another extension of the research), and the rhythmical implications of both sustained sounds and the contrasting brevity of words divided syllabically or otherwise, clearly have the potential to draw students’ attention to the often neglected area of pronunciation.

If this can be done directly via a medium that brings pleasure to most throughout their life, then at least one small part of the acquisition process may become more enjoyable, and as such, more effective.

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(*Japanese text, author's translation of original title)

Appendix 1

(Written directly in Japanese by the author, who alone is responsible for all mistakes in its composition and in the interpretation of the replies, also in Japanese)

アンケート ～ A Questionnaire for Singers

1. 年齢 (○を付けて下さい) 20代 30代 40代 50代 60代以上
2. 主に歌っているジャンルについて (当てはまるものに○を付けて下さい)

クラシック	ポピュラー
オペラ 歌曲 合唱曲	ポップス ジャズ ゴスペル シャンソン その他

3. 以上のジャンルの中に得意又はよく歌えるレパートリーを教えてください (曲名, 作曲家など)
4. 歌っている言葉の割合について (言葉ごとに当てはまるもの一つに○を付けて下さい)

	多い	時々	少ない	ない
英語				
フランス語				
ドイツ語				
イタリア語				
日本語				
その他 _____語				

5. その外国語についてどんな勉強をしたことがありますか?
(会話のレッスン, 留学, 日本人又は外国人先生の指導, 独学など)
 6. 好きな歌手を教えてください (何人でも構いません)
-

7. 新しい曲で、歌詞の発音を理解する為に何を使いますか？（当てはまるものに○を付けて下さい）

CDなど
を聴く

母国語で話す人
に相談

辞書・電子辞書

カタカナで
書き直す

音声記号を
付ける

8. 新しい曲を習い始める時の勉強方法を教えてください
（読む、「あ〜」で歌う、意味を調べる、曲を聴く、その他）
9. レッスンか練習で振り返って勉強する為に、自分の演奏を録音しますか？
10. 苦労した曲の中に難しかったのはどんな所ですか？
（子音／母音・単語・フレーズ・曲など詳しく教えてください）

（これからの質問は自由に意見を書いて下さい）

11. 言葉を話す事と歌う事の違いはどんなことだと思いますか？
12. 日本語で歌う事と外国語で歌う事の違いはどんなことだと思いますか？
13. 外国語を二つ以上歌っている場合、それぞれを比べるとどう感じますか？
14. 「言葉を話せなければ歌えません！」「歌詞が理解出来なければ観客に伝わる訳ない！」
という考えについてどう思いますか？
15. いい歌手とは？

APPENDIX 2

A Questionnaire for Singers

(please circle as appropriate) male female | teens 20s 30s 40s 50s 60s+

1. Please list the languages (except English) that you have sung in, indicating on a 4-point scale any ability in each: (3 = fluent speaker/2 = simple conversational level/1 = a limited number of phrases or words known/0 = no previous knowledge)
2. What have you used to help you with the pronunciation of the lyrics sung in those languages indicated above? (for example, phonetic transcription using either symbols or letters, dictionaries, advice from native/fluent speakers, recordings of the songs etc. -possibly under the guidance of your musical director)
3. Can you describe the order in which you might use certain practice techniques when learning a new song? (reading the text out loud, vocalising to a single sound -‘la’ or ‘ah’ etc., checking the meaning of the words, or similar)
4. Please give examples of any elements of non-English repertoire (such as certain sounds, words or phrases), that you remember being particularly problematic. How did you overcome these difficulties?
5. What languages have you enjoyed singing in, and why?
6. What do you think is the main difference between singing and *speaking* in another language?
7. What do you think is the main difference between singing *in English* and singing in another language?
8. Have you found any notable differences (or similarities) between singing various languages, in either a musical or linguistic sense?
9. “You can’t *really* sing in a language if you can’t speak it!” “How can you communicate meaning to an audience when you don’t even understand it yourself?!” Any thoughts?!
10. Thinking of any singers you admire (examples welcome), what do you believe makes a *good* singer?

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