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SINGING IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

[Since 1922, the year of its founding, the American Academy of Teachers of Singing has been actively writing and disseminating papers on all subjects pertaining to the teaching of singing. Inevitable changes in the profession itself and in musical life in general have since demanded that the Statements from the Academy be brought up to date. This Statement, changed to its present form in 1997, was originally published in 1970.]

English has been the language of our country since its earliest years. It is a beautiful language and comes close to being the universal one. The singing of English presents no greater difficulties than those encountered in other languages, but requires the same assiduous preparation as these other languages. The Academy believes, furthermore, that an American singer must be able to sing in his/her native language.

The person who elects to express him/herself in song has one distinct advantage over his fellow musician. He has the **word** as well as the tone to project his ideas and emotions.

It follows then that the achievement of beautiful and expressive singing in English should be a matter of great concern to every teacher of singing. However, one is far too often obliged to listen to singers who seem to lack all appreciation for the beauty of the language. Their utter disregard for vowel sounds and their failure to strengthen the consonants adequately leave the listener with an increased repertoire of songs without words.

Singing in English often fails to meet the standard of excellence one may rightfully demand. A word is made up of two elements, the consonant and the vowel. The consonant must be made short, crisp, clean-cut, and not anticipated. The singing sound is carried on the vowel which must be sustained in its pure form for its given musical value. Voice training has developed historically from *bel canto* techniques established in Italy, using the Italian vowels [a], [e], [I], [o], and [u]. (The open forms of [e] and [o], approach, but are not quite as relaxed as the English [ɛ] and [ɔ] respectively.) However, the English language includes not only these same Italian vowels but several additional ones: [I], [ɛ] (more open than the Italian open [e]),

same Italian vowels but several additional ones: [ɪ], [ɛ] (more open than the Italian open [e]), [æ], [ʌ], [ɔ] (more open than the Italian [o]), and [ʊ]. In addition there are four diphthongs which occur in English. They are [ai], [au], [ɔɪ], and [iu]. In all but the last one, it is the first vowel which is prolonged in singing, with the second vowel being very short. The reverse is true of [iu], sometimes listed as [ju].

The singer must have a perfect mental concept of the actual sustained sound of every vowel and accuracy must be achieved in all of these vowels if the singer is to be understood when singing in English. The teacher should assume responsibility for a uniform, disciplined procedure in vocalises used in training the student, thus to assure projection of the word.

In flowing speech, there is a great deal of overlapping and blending between sounds because of the rapid movement of the articulators in the mouth. When these same sounds are sung, it has been the tendency of some to try to separate the final consonant of one word and the initial sound of the following word, rather than letting them blend as in speech. This can result in the addition of sounds which do not occur naturally, and can call the attention of the listener to the mode of articulation, rather than to the meaning of the words being sung. A very slight stress placed on the initial sound of the succeeding word can accomplish clarity without sacrifice of the normalcy of the sound being heard.

Often one unconsciously adopts certain local speech habits or dialects which, when used in song, further tend to impair the beauty of the language. It is the responsibility of the teacher to offer a good example of correct speech habits to the student. However, when American composers set American poetry that is in the vernacular, or when British poetry is to be sung, the singer should honor the intentions of the poet and sing the song with the intended pronunciation.

The average student of singing is usually more concerned with the sound of a newly assigned song than with the words. Teachers should insist that the student absorb the meaning of the text before proceeding to learn the music. If this practice were diligently pursued by teachers and students alike, one would hear fewer performances in which the song becomes solely a medium of sound.

The text tends to be obscured when overemphasis is placed on the physical aspects of the functioning of the human voice. The treatment of the text must never become secondary to vocal technique which is a means to an end, never an end in itself. Nevertheless the teaching of diction--a generic term used by the voice teaching profession to encompass enunciation (clarity), pronunciation (accuracy of vowel, consonant, and stress), and articulation (physical production of the sounds of speech)--must not disturb basic vocal technique. The perfect projection of words will never be a cure-all for vocal problems, but vocal problems will never be solved without it. Thinking, listening and strict adherence to fundamental principles can result in the beautiful singing of English, which should rightfully be expressive and meaningful to the listener.

For those who are searching for an irrefutable source on American English diction, the Academy recommends *A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English*, written by Kenyon and Knott, published by Merriam.