

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## Diphthongs

A diphthong, pronounced [dɪfθɔŋ], is a sound composed of two consecutive vowels in the same syllable. It comes from the Greek word *di*, meaning “two,” and *phthongos*, meaning “sounds.” Since the majority of words in English contain diphthongs, it is very important that we learn to treat them correctly. The pronunciation of the diphthongs varies a great deal in the various regional dialects. Therefore, our first task is to standardize the pronunciation of them. Even if singers may pronounce them accurately in speech, they often distort the vowels or drop the second vowel when singing. In every diphthong, the first vowel must be sustained, and the second vowel added at the very last moment. Even when the diphthong is to be sung over several notes, the first vowel is sung on all the notes and the second vowel is sung at the end of the very last note.

### GENERAL RULES FOR DIPHTHONGS

1. There should be no break between the two vowels. After the first vowel is sustained, it *blends* into the second vowel.
2. The change from one vowel to the next should be almost imperceptible.
3. There should be very little movement of the articulators during the production of the compound vowel.
4. The *first* vowel is sustained with the second sung at the very last moment.
5. When the diphthong is sung on more than one note, the *first* vowel is sustained on all the notes, with the second vowel added at the very end.
6. There is a tendency to lose pitch during the glide to the second vowel. Work to achieve level pitch with added support for second vowel.

The diphthongs of American Standard are listed below:

[aɪ] night, buy	[ɛə̃] air, care, there*
[eɪ] day, break	[ɪə̃] ear, fear, here*
[ɔɪ] joy, voice	[ɔə̃] pour, soar, o'er*
[oʊ] no, go, slow	[ʊə̃] sure, poor, tour*
[aʊ] now, doubt, about	[ɑə̃] are, heart, garden*

The phonetic spellings of the diphthongs listed above may seem different from the way they are pronounced in spoken English, particularly spoken regional American English. There is good reason for this. The initial primary vowels have been purposely opened for easier articulation when singing.

In speech, the secondary vowels of the first list of diphthongs are also pronounced [i] and [u]. These have been opened to [ɪ] and [ʊ] in order to facilitate less movement of the lips and jaw when singing. Similarly, [i] and [u] are used in speech as the initial vowel of the diphthongs with “r colorings.” The initial primary vowels may seem more open than in colloquial American speech.

EXAMPLE     [hiə̃] vs [hɪə̃]

Singing them as written makes it easier to articulate both adjacent vowel sounds and not anticipate and twang on the r coloring. They have been opened so that they are more relaxed, and also closer physiologically on the vowel chart to the secondary vowel, which makes them easier to produce with less vocal tension.

### Tips for Vocal Ease

For all the diphthongs, check the tips section for each individual vowel for suggestions. It is very important to be very precise with the shape of the first vowel. The [o] vowel of [oʊ] should not spread to [ɔ]. If it does, “no” could sound like “now” and be very confusing for the listener. It should also never be sung [əʊ] as in spoken RP, except in Gilbert and

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\*The r-colored diphthongs in the second column above are unique to American Standard pronunciation. The reduced r-colored diphthongs used in RP and MA pronunciation are listed below:

[ɛə̃]- [ɪə̃]- [ɔə̃]- [ʊə̃]- [ɑə̃]

These are discussed in depth on page 221.

Sullivan or some musicals requiring it. The [e] of [eɪ] must be closed. All the diphthongs are easier to sing if you really sing the vowels as precisely as they are written in IPA.

The second vowel has been purposely opened up, [ɪ] and [ʊ]; to make it closer in position to the first vowel. Be sure to sustain the first vowel and sound the second only as you are phrasing off the note.

Also note that the first vowel of the r-colored diphthongs has been opened up in order to avoid anticipating and twanging on the r coloring.

### [aɪ] Production

The diphthong [aɪ] is found in the English words: light, smile, delight, silence, divine, beguile, aisle, isle. It is spelled with a bright [a] symbol that is not found in English as a single stressed vowel sound. As a single vowel, only [ɑ] exists in English. The vowel [a] is used because of its adjacency to [ɪ], making the “a” vowel brighter and with a higher tongue arch.

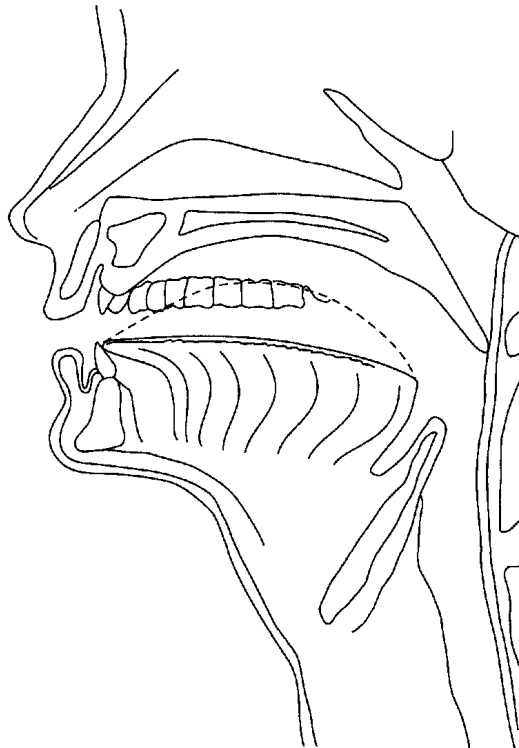


FIGURE 7.1 [aɪ]

### Action

<i>Tongue</i>	sides of tongue against lower molars tongue moves upward and forward toward the upper molars for [ɪ]
<i>Lips</i>	released minimal movement
<i>Mouth</i>	mouth contour does not change when going to [ɪ]

### Pitfalls to Avoid

Do not add [i] instead of [ɪ] for second vowel.

Avoid regionalisms

- Eastern/British: sky [skaɪ] not [skɔɪ] or [skʌɪ] Modern RP
- Southern: substituting [ə] or [ɛ] for [ɪ]

EXAMPLE spite [spart] not [spaət] or [spaet]

- dropping [ɪ] altogether

EXAMPLES fine [faɪn] not [fa:n]  
blind [blaɪnd] not [bla:nd]

- avoid nasality when diphthong is followed by a nasal consonant

EXAMPLES mine, time, find, sign, rhyme, and so on

Remember always to sustain the first vowel in a diphthong and put the second vowel on at the end.

Moderately Slow (♩ = 76)

[a - - - - ar tə] [o - - - - ou]

*mp* *rit.* *a tempo*

Where the rock threw back the bil-low Bright - er than snow

(“Long Time Ago” from *Old American Songs*, Aaron Copland)

**DRILL**

Practice the following words, taking care not to allow the diphthongs followed by nasal consonants to become nasal.

my	my	mine	tie	tie	time
fie	fie	find	sigh	sigh	sign
die	die	dine	kite	kite	kind
lie	lie	lime	buy	buy	bind

**EXERCISES**

1. Transcribe and drill the following words:

sigh	mile	finite	island
right	pile	subside	daylight
twice	I'm	diary	license
rise	beguile	certify	diamond
guide	triumph	bicycle	biography

2. Transcribe and intone the following song text in Historic RP or MA:

Drink to me only with thine eyes,  
 And I will pledge with mine;  
 Or leave a kiss but in the cup  
 And I'll not look for wine.  
 The thirst that from the soul doth rise  
 Doth ask a drink divine;  
 But might I of Jove's nectar sup,  
 I would not change for thine.

(Ben Jonson, arr. Roger Quilter, "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes" )

3. Transcribe and intone the following text in colloquial American:

Buddy on the nightshift! I hope you slept all day,  
 Until the moon came out and woke you up and sent you away.  
 Hello there buddy on the nightshift, I hope you feel fine!  
 I left a lot of work for you to do on the assembly line.

(Kurt Weill, "Buddy on the Nightshift" from *Lunchtime Follies*)

## [eɪ] Production

The diphthong [eɪ] is found in the words: fate, day, ancient, afraid, proclaim, and so on. Often this diphthong is written phonetically as [eɪ]. It is preferable to use the closed vowel [e] in singing. When the open [ɛ] is sung, it often causes a spread and diffused vocal tone. The [e] is especially helpful when singing in the upper register and passaggio.

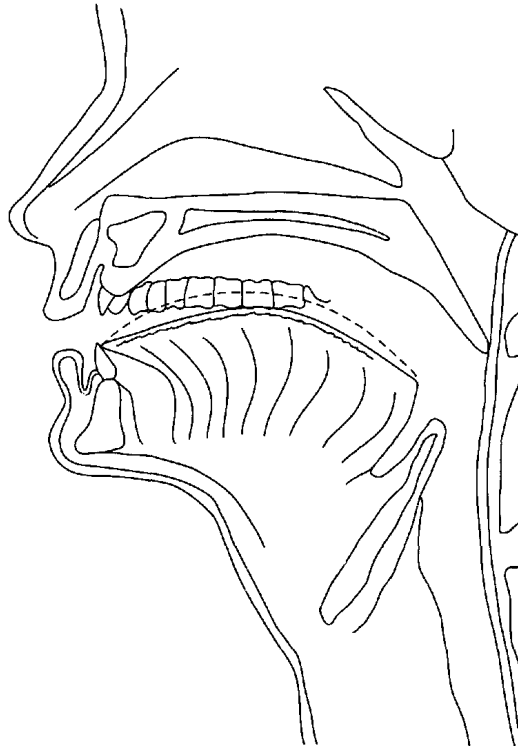


FIGURE 7.2 [eɪ]

### Action

<i>Tongue</i>	front arched—sides aligned with upper molars sides of tongue rise and front arches for [ɪ]
<i>Lips</i>	unrounded—horizontal throughout entire production
<i>Mouth</i>	do not change mouth opening or jaw while enunciating vowels

### Pitfalls to Avoid

Use care not to spread the first vowel; [e] can easily incorrectly modify to [ɛ] or [æ]. This vowel seems to open more in Modern RP, toward [eɪ]; keep it [e] in singing.

EXAMPLE    save [seɪv]      not [sɛɪv]

The vowel [e] should be produced with relaxed tongue base.  
Do not anticipate an [ɪ] by switching [ə] for [ɪ].

EXAMPLE fail [feɪ] not [feəl]

Don't close [e] so much that it sounds like [i].

EXAMPLE fate [fɛt] not feet [fi:t]  
say [seɪ] not see [si:]

## EXERCISES


1. Drill the following words:

fate	rage	vain	reign
day	great	maid	obey
lace	face	disdain	grateful
betray	they	radiant	proclaim

2. Transcribe and intone the following song text in Historic RP: 

The sun whose rays are all ablaze in ever living glory,  
Does not deny his majesty but scorns to tell a story.  
He won't exclaim "I blush for shame" so kindly be indulgent.  
But fierce and bold in fiery gold he glories all effulgent.

(W. S. Gilbert / Arthur Sullivan, "The Sun Whose Rays" from *The Mikado*)

3. Transcribe and intone the following text in AS: 

Quaint name—Ann Street.  
Width of same—Ten feet.  
Barnum's mob—Ann Street,  
Far from obsolete.  
Narrow, yes. Ann Street  
But business, Both feet.  
Sun just hits Ann Street,  
Then it quits—Some greet!  
Rather short, Ann Street . . .

(Maurice Morris/Charles Ives, "Ann Street")

## [ɔɪ] Production

The diphthong [ɔɪ] is found in the words: joy, voice, avoid, boisterous.

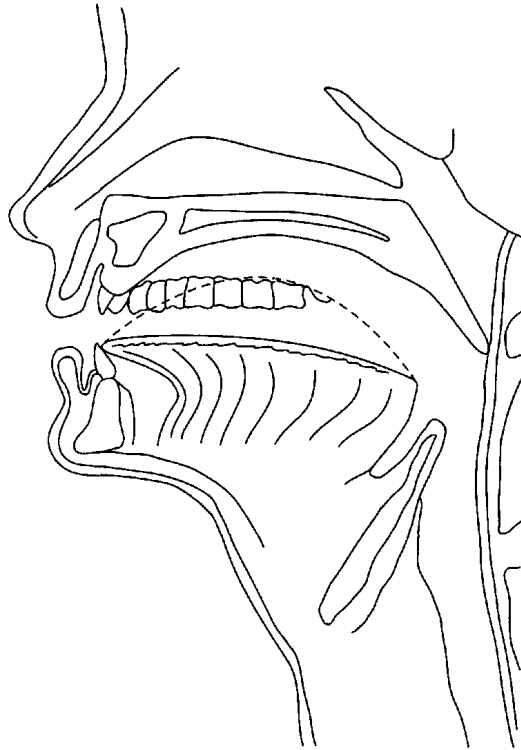


FIGURE 7.3 [ɔɪ]

### Action

<i>Tongue</i>	back arched toward soft palate arches gradually toward hard palate or [ɪ]
<i>Lips</i>	oval shape minimal movement
<i>Mouth</i>	open vertically jaw remains flexible and steady

### Pitfalls to Avoid

Do not protrude lips too much for [ɔ] or spread sides of mouth excessively for [ɪ].  
Do not separate two vowels—it should be a continuous sound.

Do not let pitch fluctuate during diphthong pattern—keep support firm.

Do not omit second vowel.

EXAMPLE joy [dʒɔɪ] not jaw [dʒɔ]

Do not substitute [a] for [ɔ].

EXAMPLE boys [bɔɪz] not buys [baɪz]

### Tips for Vocal Ease

In the passaggio and with [ɔɪ] vowels set melodically, close the vowel down to [o].

(“Rejoice Greatly” from *Messiah*, G. F. Handel)

### EXERCISES

1. Transcribe and drill the following words:

joy	voice	rejoice	destroy
toil	noise	royal	employ
choice	join	embroil	poignant
enjoy	oyster	sirloin	disappoint

2. Transcribe and practice the following text in Historic RP:

When first my old, old love I knew,  
My bosom welled with joy;

My riches at her feet I threw—  
 I was a love-sick boy!  
 No terms seemed too extravagant  
 Upon her to employ—  
 I used to mope, and sigh, and pant,  
 Just like a love-sick boy!

(W. S. Gilbert / Arthur Sullivan, From *Trial by Jury*)



3. Transcribe and practice the following text in Historic RP or MA:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion,  
 Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem:  
 Behold thy King cometh unto thee:  
 He is the righteous Saviour,  
 And He shall speak peace unto the heathen.

(G. F. Handel, "Rejoice Greatly" from *Messiah*)

4. Transcribe the following text in AS:

On the lake where droop'd the willow,  
 Long time ago  
 Where the rock drew back the billow,  
 Brighter than snow.  
 Dwelt a maid beloved and cherish'd,  
 By high and low.  
 But with autumn leaf she perish'd,  
 Long time ago.  
 Rock and tree and flowing water,  
 Long time ago.  
 Bird and bee and blossom taught her  
 Love's spell to know.  
 While to my fond words she listen'd,  
 Murmuring low.  
 Tenderly her blue eyes glisten'd,  
 Long time ago.

(Aaron Copland, "Long Time Ago" from *Old American Songs*)

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**[ou] Production**

The [ou] vowel is found in such English words as: no, oh, role, though, shoulder, roam, and reproach. It is found in all *stressed* words and syllables pronounced with the “o” vowel sound and in the *unstressed* final syllables as in window, piano, sorrow, and so on. As a schwa substitute in all other unstressed positions, the monophong [o] is used.

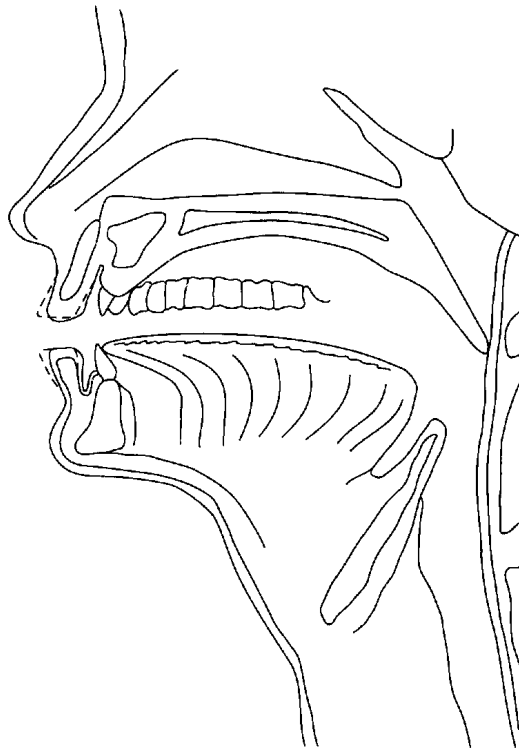


FIGURE 7.4 [ou]

**RULE** Always diphthongize “o” spellings in:

1. Words or exclamations of *one* syllable.

EXAMPLE Oh! O, no, go, road

2. Words of more than one syllable where the “o” syllable receives stress.

EXAMPLE devotion, suppose, open, soldier

**Action**

<i>Tongue</i>	back raised in [o] position minimal movement when gliding to [ʊ]
<i>Lips</i>	rounded outer contour should not change for [ʊ]
<i>Mouth</i>	jaw released no movement during production

**Pitfalls to Avoid**

Avoid regional habit of modifying [ou] to [ɔʊ] or [əʊ]\*

EXAMPLE	know:	not [nɔʊ] or [nəʊ]* but [noʊ]
	woeful:	not [wɔʊfʊl] or [wəʊfʊl]* but [woufʊl]

\* [əʊ] is used in speech for RP, but for lyric diction this diphthong should be sung as [ou]. See chapter 14.

**EXERCISES**

1. Practice speaking the following words using care to differentiate between [aʊ], [oʊ] and [ʊ]:

[ɔ] →	[oʊ]	[oʊ] →	[ʊ]
pause	pose	bowl	bull
walk	woke	showed	should
shawl	shoal	pole	pull
chalk	choke	stowed	stood
saw	sew	code	could

2. Transcribe and intone the following text in RP:

Away in the shadows a lone bird is singing,  
The wind whispers low in a sighing refrain;  
Their music makes memory's voices go winging:  
The Ash Grove in beauty I see once again;



How little we knew, as we laughed there so lightly,  
 And time seemed to us to stretch endless away,  
 The hopes that then shone like a vision so brightly  
 Could fade as a dream at the coming of day!

(Excerpt from “The Ash Grove”—Old Welsh Melody)

3. Transcribe and intone the text in Historic RP or MA:

O, be still, be still, unquiet thoughts, and rest on love’s adventer.  
 Go no more astray, my wanton eyes, but keep within your center.  
 Delight not yourselves for to stand and gaze  
     On the alluring looks of a beautyous face  
     For love is like to an endless maze,  
 More hard to get than to enter.

(Thomas Campion / Peter Warlock, “The Lover’s Maze”)

**[aʊ] Production**

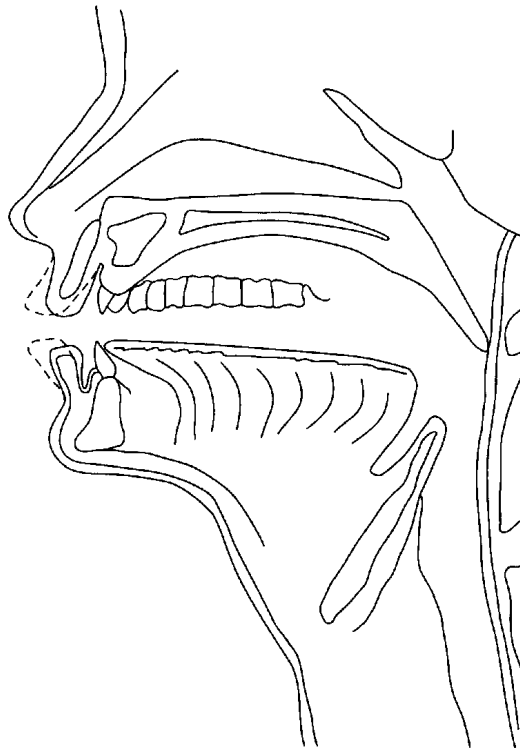


FIGURE 7.5 [aʊ]

The diphthong [aʊ] is found in words such as: shout, now, doubt, house, and vow. Regionally, this diphthong has two different highly prevalent pronunciations: [æʊ] and [aʊ]. The latter is much preferred for singing.

### Action

<i>Tongue</i>	flat in mouth—as moves toward [ʊ] back rises higher adjustment should be minimal
<i>Lips</i>	unrounded, rounds gently for [ʊ]
<i>Mouth</i>	opening for [a] closes smoothly for [ʊ] released jaw follows with little movement

### Pitfalls to Avoid

Do not mouth or exaggerate movement between the two vowel positions.  
Be careful not to substitute [æʊ] for [aʊ].

EXAMPLES    bound [baʊnd] not [bæʊnd]  
                  vow [vaʊ] not [væʊ]

## EXERCISES

1. Drill correctly and incorrectly the pronunciation of this diphthong:

now [naʊ] → [næʊ] → [naʊ]  
count [kaʊnt] → [kæʊnt] → [kaʊnt]  
howl [haʊl] → [hæʊl] → [haʊl]

2. Transcribe and drill the following words:

thou	owl	foul	ourselves
shout	sound	scowl	mountains
mouth	ground	devout	doubtful
frown	thousand	resound	boundary

3. Transcribe and intone the following text in Historic RP:

He who doubts from what he sees,  
Will ne'er believe, so what you please,  
If the Sun and Moon should doubt,  
They'd immediately go out.

(William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" )

## 4. Transcribe the following song text:

Come away, come away, death,  
 And in sad cypress let me be laid;  
 Fly away, fly away, breath;  
 I am slain by a fair cruel maid.  
 My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,  
 O, prepare it!  
 My part of death, no one so true  
 Did share it.

Not a flower, not a flower, sweet,  
 On my black coffin let there be strown;  
 Not a friend, not a friend greet  
 My poor corpse, where my bones shall be thrown:  
 A thousand, thousand sighs to save,  
 Lay me, O. where  
 Sad true lover never find my grave,  
 To weep there!

(William Shakespeare, "Come Away, Death")

## The R-Colored Diphthongs

Since all the individual vowel sounds that make up the r-colored diphthongs have previously been discussed earlier in the text, they will not be dealt with individually but all together as a group. They are listed together as the r-colored vowels of the American Standard and reduced r-colored vowels of RP and Mid-Atlantic dialects below.

<i>R-Colored</i>	<i>R-Reduced</i>		
[ɛə̯]	[ɛə̯]	as in	air, care, there
[ɪə̯]	[ɪə̯]	as in	ear, dear, we're
[ɔə̯]	[ɔə̯]	as in	pour, four, o'er
[ʊə̯]	[ʊə̯]	as in	sure, tour, poor
[ɑə̯]	[ɑə̯]	as in	are, heart, garden

Please note once again, the initial vowel sounds of each of these diphthongs have been opened to facilitate easier vocal production. In speech, these vowels are usually more closed.

Acoustically, the substitution of the more opened counterparts cannot be discerned. The more opened initial vowels encourage less mouthing and exaggeration of the mouth and lips and decrease the amount of movement required to produce these diphthongs.

As with all stressed and unstressed r-colored vowels, care should be taken not to pull back and arch the tongue tip, producing instead the characteristically constricted colloquial American “r” vowel. Like all other vowels in English, the r-colored diphthongs must be produced with the tip of the tongue forward and in contact with the back of the lower front teeth.

Like the other diphthongs of English, the first vowel of the r-colored diphthongs should be sustained; with the secondary vowel sound, the r coloring, added at the very last moment.

**RULE** Like the other diphthongs of English, the first vowel of the r-colored diphthongs should be sustained; the secondary vowel sound, the r coloring, is added at the very last moment.

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## EXERCISES

1. Practice alternating the r-colored and r-reduced diphthongs below:

[ɛə-/ɛəʹ]	[ɪə-/ɪəʹ]	[ɔə-/ɔəʹ]	[ʊə-/ʊəʹ]	[ɑə-/ɑəʹ]
air	dear	o'er	sure	are
hair	mere	yore	poor	heart
despair	we're	pour	moor	charm
rare	weir	adore	tour	depart
prepare	cheer	before	*endure	garden
e'er	revere	implore	*secure	partner
ensnare	sincere	restore	*obscure	marvelous

The [ʊə-/ʊəʹ] diphthongs are found only in *stressed* syllables. All “ure” spellings in UNstressed positions should be pronounced [ə-/əʹ].

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\*These words contain the [j] glide preceding the [ʊə-/əʹ] diphthongs. Others like this include: pure, cure, lure, demure, allure, and so on.


**RULE** The [ʊə-/ʊəʳ] diphthongs are found only in stressed syllables. All “ure” spellings in UNstressed positions should be pronounced [ə] in AS and [əʳ] in RP and MA.

EXAMPLES pleasure [plɛʒə-/əʳ] not [plɛʒʊə-/əʳ]  
treasure [tʃɛʒə-/əʳ] not [tʃɛʒʊə-/əʳ]

The unstressed [ʊə-/əʳ] pronunciations sound affected and dated.

2. Transcribe and sing the correct pronunciation of the following words with “ure” endings:

measure	leisure	treasure
pleasure	nature	stature
verdure	rapture	capture

3. Transcribe the following text in Historic RP or MA: 

Endless pleasure, endless love,  
Semele enjoys above,  
On her bosom Jove reclining,  
Useless now his thunder lies,  
To her arms his bolts resigning,  
And his lightning to her eyes.

(G. F. Handel, from *Semele*)

4. Transcribe the following text in AS: 

I was standing in a garden,  
A garden gone to seed,  
Choked with every kind of weed.  
There were twisted trees around me,  
All black against the sky;  
Black and bare and dead and dry,  
My father called: “Come out of this place.”  
I wanted to go, but there was no way:  
No sign, no path, to show me the way:  
Then another voice was calling:  
It barely could be heard.

I remember ev'ry word:  
 "There is a garden:  
 Come with me, come with me:  
 A shining garden: Come and see  
 There love will teach us  
 Harmony and grace,  
 Then love will lead us  
 To a quiet place."

(Leonard Bernstein, "There Is a Garden" from *Trouble in Tahiti*)

## Triphthongs

A triphthong is the combination of three vowels within the same syllable. Like the diphthong, the first vowel is sustained vocally with the remaining two vowels added at the very end. The General Rules for Diphthongs on page 79 refer also to triphthongs.

**RULE** When singing a triphthong on two or more notes, sing the first vowel on all the notes, adding the last two vowels at the very end of the last note.

And the de - sire \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ of all na - tions shall come.

("Thus Saith the Lord" from *Messiah*, G. F. Handel)

The two principal triphthongs of English are:

[aɪə/əʔ] as in lyre, fire, choir

[aʊə/əʔ] as in our, flower, power


**RULE** Sing all three vowels in triphthongs.

In Modern RP especially, triphthongs seem to be dissolving into diphthongs or even single vowels. For example, the word “choir” has become [kwaəʃ] or even [kwa]. Words become unintelligible when the vowels are dropped. Make sure to sing all three vowel sounds in triphthongs.

## EXERCISES

1. Transcribe and drill the following triphthongs and practice singing them on one or more notes:


[aɪə/əʃ]	[aʊə/əʃ]
lyre	our
ire	hour
choir	dower
tire	flower
desire	power
inspire	shower
conspire	tower
admire	devour

2. Transcribe the following song texts into phonetics and practice the diphthongs and triphthongs in their musical settings in Historic RP or MA: 

Oh had I Jubal's lyre,  
 Or Miriam's tuneful voice  
 To sounds like his I would aspire  
 To songs like her rejoice!  
 My humble strains but faintly show  
 How much to Heaven and thee I owe.

(G. F. Handel, From *Joshua*)

But who may abide the day of His coming?  
 and who shall stand when he appeareth?  
 For He is like a refiner's fire,

(G. F. Handel, From *Messiah*) 



3. Transcribe and practice the following text in AS or Modern RP:

Beloved, thou hast brought me many flow'rs  
Plucked in the garden, all the summer through  
(And winter), and it seemed as if they grew.  
In this close room, nor missed the sun and show'rs  
So, in the like name of that love of ours,  
Take back these thoughts which here are unfolded, too,  
And which on warm and cold days I withdrew  
From my heart's ground. Indeed, those beds and bowers  
Be overgrown with bitter weeds and rue.  
And wait thy weeding: Yet here's eglantine,  
Here's ivy! Take them, as I used to do  
Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not pine.  
Instruct thine eyes to keep their colors true,  
And tell thy soul their roots are left in mine.

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning / Libby Larsen, "Beloved,  
Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers")

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