

CHAPTER TWO

Communicating the Thought

Through my years of working with singers, I have found that the singing of exact vowels and correct pronunciation is of the utmost importance; however, in order to communicate the text to the audience, of even greater importance is the correct application of the natural stress and inflection patterns of the English language. If you have had the experience of trying to understand a person speaking to you with a thick foreign accent, you have probably dealt with the difficulties about to be described. If a non-native English speaker speaks to us and most of the grammatically stressed words are properly emphasized, we can understand them. However, if they speak with almost exact vowels but their “emPHAsis is on the wrong syLLAble,” we have to re-translate, putting the syllabic accents right before we comprehend what they are saying. The adherence to the correct stress and inflection patterns of English, both syllabically within the words and within phrases, seems to be *primary* to language clarity and communication. For this reason, I will discuss appropriate stress first.

Communication through Appropriate Stress

For native English speakers, it is second nature to communicate clearly and effectively in conversational speech. Unless we mumble or drop the ends of our phrases, usually we can be understood. Because it is second nature to us, we probably have never analyzed just how we communicate through our language. If we hope to successfully transfer our abilities in

spoken English to sung English, we need to take the time to understand how we communicate, listen to, and process text.

The study and understanding of the innate cadence or inflection patterns of the English language is imperative for effective lyric communication. Rarely as listeners do we listen to every word that a speaker is saying. Instead, we instinctively listen for key words and phrases in order to exact the meaning of the person's speech.

Our ears are so tuned to listening for the stressed syllables within a single word as well as the stressed words within a phrase that if the syllabic or phrasal stress is incorrect, we often have to re-process the words, mentally adding the correct stresses in order to comprehend the meaning. When a person with a thick foreign accent speaks, if the cadence or stress patterns are correct, we will still easily understand him regardless of his inaccurate vowels or consonants. However, if the vowels and consonants are accurate but the stress and inflection are wrong, it will be very difficult for us to comprehend.

Let's analyze the stress patterns of English.

Syllabic Stress within Words

The weak and strong pulses within words in English are an integral part of the language. When *all* the syllables are stressed (or conversely, unstressed) within a word, even if the pronunciation is precise, the words are often not understood. A syllable can be an entire word (sing) or a subdivision of a word with a single vowel sound (re-hearse). The listener does not listen to individual speech sounds but rather recognizes the syllabic stress within a word.

Stress can occur in all positions in English words. There can always be found a primary stress, sometimes a secondary stress also, and occasionally a word will contain a double primary stress. Primary stress is indicated by an accent mark above and before the stressed syllable (ˈ), while secondary stress is indicated by an accent mark before and below the syllable (ˌ).

<i>Primary Stress</i>	<i>Primary + Secondary Stress</i>	<i>Double Stress</i>
ˈmu-sic	ˌad-ver-ˈtise-ment (AS)	ˈsun-ˈrise
re-ˈmem-ber	ˌre-cog-ˈni-tion	ˈrose-ˈbud
in-ˈflec-tion	ˌcha-rac-te-ˈris-tic	ˈdiph-ˈthong

In general, the majority of words have only one primary stress. The predominance of a weak/strong stress pattern within English words is what makes English unique among the lyric languages.

The Unstressed Neutral Vowel

In order to energize the strongly accented syllables with sufficient stress, strength must be taken away from weak syllables. We do this by shortening and neutralizing the weak syllables by the use of the [ə] schwa vowel. For example, with the word “problem,” we would pronounce the second syllable with a [ə] vowel [pɹɒbləm] in AS or [pɹɒbləm] in RP rather than with an [ɛ] vowel [pɹɪə/ɒblɛm]. If it were pronounced like the second version, “problem” would sound to our ears like a double stressed word and sound like the German “kein pro'blem” rather than English.

This neutralizing of the weak vowel does not occur in the Romance languages and appears only in a limited fashion in German with the neutral schwa occurring in weak final syllables.

EXAMPLES	English	Italian
	'aria [ɑɪə / ɑriə]	'aria [aria]
	a'merican [əmɛɪkən]	a'merican [amerikan]

Though unstressed, the Italian vowels do not become weaker and neutralized. The Italian vowels remain pure and full while the English vowels shift to the reduced schwa vowel to accommodate the stressed syllable.

RULE The unstressed syllables in English should be pronounced with a neutral schwa [ə] vowel or one of the possible substitutions [ɪ], [ʊ], [ɛ], [o].

EXAMPLES	
	heaven [hɛvən] or possible [ɪ] or [ʊ] for schwa.
	motion [mouʃən] or possible [ɪ], [ɛ], or [ʊ] for schwa.
	melody [mɛlədi] or possible [ɪ] or [o] for schwa.

In other words, as singers we have several vowels choices when singing the unstressed syllables of English.

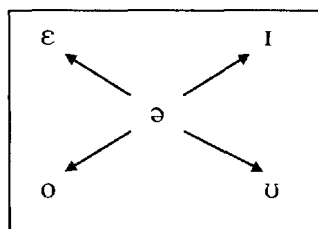


DIAGRAM 2.1

In many instances, the [ə] vowel may seem like too dark or dull a vowel color for certain syllables. In this case, [ɪ], [ʊ], [ɛ], or [o] may be substituted. The bottom line is that it must sound natural and normal.

RULE When there are two adjacent unstressed syllables in a word, the use of a [ə] vowel as well as one of the substitute vowels is preferable to two adjacent [ə] vowels.

For example, beautiful, [bjʊtɪfʊl] or [bjʊtɪfəl], when sustained with any duration, would command the listener's attention more than [bjʊtəfəl] because of the variety of adjacent vowel sounds.

The choice of the substitute vowel will depend on the individual preference of the artist and the vocal ease of certain vowels in specific ranges. For example, in the higher tessitura, the more closed and rounded vowel substitutions [ɪ] or [ʊ] would perhaps be easier to negotiate. No matter which schwa substitution you choose, remember that it *must sound normal* to the listener's ear. If it sounds modified or distorted, it will only confuse the listener and sabotage your efforts.

Tips for Vocal Ease

In the passaggio, try using [ʊ] for the schwa substitute as in a word like "heav[ʊ]n." The lip rounding adds more head resonance and comfort. In the lower register, try using [ɪ] or [ɛ] as a schwa substitute for more point and resonance.

Stress/Sense within the English Phrase

Similar to the strong/weak patterns of individual words in English, a strong/weak pattern strongly exists within the English phrase or sentence. In order for the listener's ear to be directed to the relevant ideas of a sentence or phrase, the strong word-types must be energized and highlighted. Without this highlighting, the phrase or sentence will make little to no sense. In daily speech, native speakers respond almost instinctively to proper word stress of a sentence or phrase in order to communicate their ideas. But, because the natural speech rhythm is stretched and slowed down when English is set to music, singers cannot immediately transfer what they would instinctively in speech. A conscious grasp of English grammatical structure is very helpful for the singer to understand how a listener receives the ideas of his lyric text.