

nouns, and negatives—which add greater depth to the transmitted thought. In order to communicate with your listener, you must *always* stress the circled words, but you may choose which of the underlined words you would like to stress.

***To Be* or Not *To Be*? The Question Is “Is the Verb ‘to be’ Stressed?”**

RULE Do *not* stress any forms of the verb “to be” unless they are in the subjunctive mood or conditional tense. Only the subjunctive mood, which is contrary to fact, or the conditional tense should be stressed. The verb “to be” is a weak, non-active, intransitive verb form. Its modifiers, the predicate nominative or predicate adjective that follow the verb, should receive primary stress.

Let’s see how this applies to a line of poetry.

Is she (kind) as she is (fair?)

(William Shakespeare, “Who Is Sylvia?”)
from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, act 4, scene 2

The verb “is” does not need to be stressed. Rather “kind” and “fair,” the adjectives that follow “is,” should be stressed. They are *predicate adjectives*. They were adjectives but now have become part of the verb or predicate and now function as predicate adjectives. “Is” in essence, now functions as the auxiliary verb and therefore does not need to be stressed.

For the grammarphobes, a short grammar review is found in the glossary! Let’s try another example.

(Rose leaves) when the (rose) is (dead),

Are (heaped) for the beloved’s (bed);

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Music When Soft Voices Die”)

Here the forms of the verb “to be” (“is” and “are”) do not need to be stressed. Like the Shakespeare example above, the adjective “dead” takes on primary stress because it functions as a *predicate adjective* and becomes part of the verb phrase. “Heaped” is passive tense and receives primary stress because “are” in this case functions merely as an auxiliary verb.

And for the brave of heart, let's try another example.

(Flowers) alone are (chaste,
 For their (beauty) is so (brief. . . .
 (Years) are their (love,
 and (time's) their (thief.)

(Benjamin Britten. "Lucretia's Aria"
 from *The Rape of Lucretia*)

In the first two lines of "Lucretia's Aria," "chaste" and "brief" function as predicate adjectives. In the second two lines, "love" and "thief," which were already nouns, have become part of the verb and function as *predicate nominatives* (nominative = noun).

Pulsing the Phrase

English is a Germanic stop-language. It does not have an innate legato and words are often punched when we want to emphasize them. To sing well in English, English must be treated as though it were Italian; we must swell on the stressed vowel sounds rather than punching them.

RULE On the stressed syllable of the stressed word types, swell on the vowel sound and relax the sounds down into the body. This is called *pulsing the phrase*.

It should feel like you are sighing or moaning on these stressed syllables. Deepen the body connection with the tone and use a full sound that relaxes down into the center of the body. Pulsing the phrase refers to singing into and opening up the voice on the stressed syllables of the stressed words. If the stressed syllables are pulsed and sung into, the important words will be targeted vocally and musically for the listener. The unstressed syllables will be in balance when the stressed words and syllables are pulsed. The pulses are notated with an arrow:

↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓
 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.



Imitate “The Count”!

For those of you who grew up watching *Sesame Street*, it helps to remember the speech pattern of the Dracula character, “The Count,” who taught all the children to count their numbers. “The Count” had a thick Hungarian accent and would “SWEEEEELL on the Vowel Sounds”! Rather than punching at words like English speakers do, he spoke with in a very “sing-songy” voice and would count “Oooooone! Twoooooo! ThRRRRreeeeeeee! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Though trying to imitate “The Count” may seem ridiculous, it can be a helpful aid to feel what it is like to swell on the stressed vowel. English speakers need to be able to “override” the habit of punching, which is inherent in English speech patterns. Actually, a good intermediate step before singing a text is to intone the text and swell on the stressed vowels. Then try to transfer the sensation of “the swell” or “the pulse” into your singing.

Now let’s apply this technique to the Roger Quilter setting of “Come away, Death.”

Find a copy of the music and do the following:

1. First say the words in rhythm. Then intone them in rhythm.
 2. Now do it again and remember to imitate “The Count”!
(It helps to say “Ha! Ha! Ha!” after each phrase.)
 3. Now try singing the musical phrases and make sure to swell on, not punch, the stressed vowel sounds.
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Stress versus Interpretation

The stress/inflection patterns of English are the groundwork for artistic interpretation, which is something that needs to be very personal and individual for each singer. For basic communication, the nouns and active verbs *must* be stressed. After that, it is the individual artist’s personal choice as to which of the modifiers he or she would like to emphasize. In the example above, a singer might choose to emphasize the fairness rather than the cruelty of the maid or vice versa, or choose to stress neither of the adjectives. This is their artistic license and the element of an artistic performance that makes it interesting and unique.

Now that we know what ought to be stressed, how do we give stress vocally with the musical phrase? By putting an overlay of the stress and inflection pattern upon every musical text setting that we sing. In other words, all musical and vocal stresses must correspond with the stress of the text. This will be dealt with in chapter 13 on expressive singing.

Before we begin to tackle the individual speech sounds of English, it is necessary to look at one more aspect of the language: how the division of syllables is affected when the words are sung rather than spoken.

The Division of Syllables


The conventional division of words into syllables in most dictionaries, or often in musical scores, does not always coincide with the division of syllables needed in song for clarity and vocal legato. In print, words are divided structurally. This will be dealt with in depth as we work with the specific consonants. But for now, in singing, consonants are shifted over to begin the next syllable.

For example, the word “diction” would be divided in the dictionary as “dic-tion.” For singing, we would divide it “di-ction.” This is done in order to allow the singer more time to sing and swell on the stressed vowel sound.


By shifting the consonants over to begin the next syllable, more vocal time can be allowed to elongate the vowels and thereby avoid the choppiness that is characteristic of spoken English. It is often this choppiness or lack of inherent legato in the English language that causes many singers to feel more vocal tension while singing in English than while singing in any of the Romance languages.

EXAMPLES	Syllables in Print	Treatment in Song
	A-mer-i-can	A-me-ri-can
	char-i-ty	cha-ri-ty
	good-will	goo-dwill
	dif-fer-ence	di-ffe-rence
	wis-dom	wi-sdom
	ex-cel-lent	e-xce-llent
	heart-break	hear-tbreak
	in-no-cent	i-nno-cent
	doubt-ful	dou-btful

EXERCISES

1. Transcribe the following words into the IPA, divide them syllabically for singing legato, and indicate the stress: 

repertoire	poverty
sensitivity	dazzled
withdraw	theater
interest	candidate
important	dictionary
extremes	characters
presumptuous	approval

2. Transcribe the following text into the IPA and indicate the stressed word-types by *circling* the nouns and verbs, and *underlining* their modifiers: 

In the scented bud of the morning O,
 When the windy grass went rippling far!
 I saw my dear one walking slow
 In the field where the daisies are.

We did not laugh and we did not speak,
 As we wandered happ'ly to and fro,
 I kissed my dear on either cheek,
 In the bud of the morning O!

A lark sang up, from the breezy land;
 A lark sang down, from a cloud afar;
 As she and I went hand in hand,
 In the field where the daisies are.

(James Stephens / Samuel Barber, "The Daisies")

3. Get a copy of Barber's song "The Daisies." Practice intoning and swelling on the stressed syllables of the words. See if you can maintain the swell when you sing it.



4. Transcribe the following texts into IPA* and indicate the stressed words by *circling* the nouns and verbs and *underlining* the modifiers:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies,
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impair'd the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress
Or softly lightens o'er her face,
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek and o'er that brow
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent.

(Lord Byron, "She Walks in Beauty")



Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's hanging course untrimm'd:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;

* Ideally these two British poems should be transcribed into RP or Mid-Atlantic. However, for the purpose of focusing on the grammatically stressed words, use whichever dialect is most familiar to you.