

Brown Bag Music Seminar

with Daniel Molkentin

IPA Toolkit Part I

What is IPA?

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is a pronunciation guide created by an international team of linguists around the turn of the century, with the purpose of providing one set of symbols that could be used by everyone. This team has catalogued nearly every known spoken sound and given each one a specific symbol. Over the past three decades this system has become increasingly important to linguists, language teachers, speech pathologists, singers and conductors.

Why is it useful?

In American English there are 16 vowel sounds and only 6 vowels. Therefore, trying to apply a letter to a specific sound is troublesome and can cause some confusion. With IPA each sound has its own symbol so, after you learn the basics, there's no need to guess what sound you're aiming for. Additionally, an IPA transcription shows the stress in a word. For example, the noun "content" ['kɒntənt] has the stress placed on the first syllable, while the adjective "content" [kən'tent] has the stress placed on the second syllable.

In any language, especially English, there are so many regional variations on vowel sounds that trying to get a large group of people to agree on the pronunciation of certain words can be difficult. After learning the basic symbols and their corresponding sounds, an entire group of people can see and accurately say the correct sounds at the correct time.

Learning the notes and words is only the first step in preparing for a performance. The quicker and more accurately one can learn the notes and text, the more time there is during the rehearsal process for creating music. By everyone speaking the same pronunciation "lingo" during rehearsal, time is saved if a pronunciation problem arises.

Note: All IPA will be found in brackets [].

Sung vs. Spoken

In every language there is a difference between sung and spoken pronunciation. It's important to recognize these differences so everyone is on the same page in rehearsal and all the words can be understood when the time comes to sing for an audience.

A few examples

- In spoken American English we don't pronounce "t"s [t] very clearly. They usually come out like a [d] or are not spoken at all. In sung English, all [t] sounds must be clearly articulated.

-All final syllables and consonants must be heard when singing. Often times we drop final syllables and final consonants when speaking.

-In American English, we tend to speak our vowels in the back of the throat. In sung they must be very forward in order to facilitate beautiful singing.

-There are three types of English diction that one may hear in classical music: American (like Katie Couric), Mid-Atlantic (like Katherine Hepburn), and British or Received Pronunciation (like Tony Blair or BBC Newscasters). The standard versions of these may sound artificial to you but will sound great and be understood by the audience.

IPA can be used as a tool to help remind us of these differences. Simply writing a [əd] in your score at the end of "healed" as a reminder can be a great help. Similarly, if the conductor asks you pronounce a word differently than you are used to, you can use IPA to remind yourself for the following rehearsals (example- glory [glɔːri] and not [glɔːri])

Important Reminder

It is important to keep in mind that IPA is only a tool to help individual and group singing and the learning of a piece. IPA does not present an interpretation of the text. It only tells you how each word is to be pronounced; it is up to you and/or your conductor to decide which words are important and how you want to express each phrase textually and musically. Furthermore, each language has subtleties which cannot be transcribed by the IPA.

IPA Symbols for Mid-Atlantic English

[b], [d], [f], [g], [h], [k], [l], [m], [n], [p], [s], [t], [v], [w], [z] Are all the same as our English (Roman) alphabet.

Consonants

[ŋ]	(ng)	ring [ɹɪŋ], pink [pɪŋk]
[θ]	(unvoiced “th”)	thick [θɪk], thing [θɪŋ]
[ð]	(voiced “th”)	there [ðɛə ^r], then [ðɛn]
[ɹ]	(hw)	where [ɹɛə ^r], what [ɹɒt]
[j]	(j glide)	yippee [jɪpi], yes [jɛs]
[ʃ]	(sh)	ship [ʃɪp], motion [məʊʃən]
[tʃ]	(ch)	chip [tʃɪp], pinch [pɪntʃ]
[ʒ]		measure [mɛʒə ^r], vision [vɪʒən]
[dʒ]		jump [dʒʌmp], jet [dʒɛt]
[ɹ]	(burred “r”)	rich [ɹɪtʃ]
[r]	(flipped “r”)	very [vɛri], truth [truθ]

Vowels

[i]	(ee)	meat [mit], peep [pip]
[ɪ]	(ih) (tall “i”)	pit [pɪt], busy [bɪzi]
[ɛ]	(eh)	get [gɛt], many [mɛni]
[æ]		pat [pæt], ask [æsk]
[ɑ]	(ah)	father [fɑðə ^r], dance [dɑns]
[ɒ]	(rounded [ɑ])	honest [ɒnəst], from [frɒm]
[u]	(oo)	boo [bu], loop [lup]
[ju]		music [mjuzɪk], tune [tjun]
[ʊ]		look [lʊk], pull [pʊl]
[ɔ]	(aw)	saw [sɔ], bought [bɔt]
[ɜ ^r]	(er) (stressed)	turn [tɜ ^r n], bird [bɜ ^r d]
[ə ^r]	(er) (unstressed)	father [fɑðə ^r], doctor [dɒktə ^r], murder [mɜ ^r də ^r]
[ʌ]	(uh) (stressed)	but [bʌt], bubble [bʌbəl]
[ə]	(uh) (unstressed)	lotion [ləʊʃən], reason [rɪzən], heaven [hevən]

Diphthongs

[aɪ]	light [laɪt], my [maɪ], guy [gaɪ]
[eɪ]	may [meɪ], rain [reɪn]
[ɔɪ]	boy [bɔɪ], moist [mɔɪst]
[oʊ]	nose [noʊz], brooch [brʊtʃ]
[aʊ]	round [raʊnd], out [aʊt]
[ɛə̃]	air [ɛə̃], wear [weə̃]
[ɪə̃]	ear [ɪə̃], peer [pɪə̃]
[ɔə̃]	oar [ɔə̃], pour [pɔə̃]
[ʊə̃]	poor [pʊə̃], tour [tʊə̃]
[ɑə̃]	are [ɑə̃], pardon [pɑə̃dən]

Triphthongs

[aɪə̃]	lire [laɪə̃], choir [kwaɪə̃]
[aʊə̃]	our [aʊə̃] power [paʊə̃]

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Vowel Overview

Fronting Vowels

beat [bit]
peel [pil]
weak [wik]
Niko [nikou]
bit [bit]
pill [pil]
begin [bigɪn]
rejoice [ˌɹɪdʒɔɪs]
bet [bet]
elevate [elə'veɪt]
read [ɹɪd] or [ɹɛd]
red [ɹɛd]
bat [bæt]
had [hæd]
Daniel [dænjəl]

Backing Vowels

boot [but]
you [ju]
rule [rul]
music [mju:zɪk]
book [buk]
would [wʊd]
hood [hʊd]
all [ɔl]
Paul [pɔl]
saw [sɔ]
applaud [ə'plɔd]
bought [bɔt]
father [fɑðəʳ]
got [gɒt]

Mixed Vowels

but [bʌt]
buck [bʌk]
about [ə'baʊt]
photography [fə'tagɹəfi]
none [nʌn]
nun [nʌn]
father [fɑðəʳ]*
Earth [ɜʳθ]**

Diphthongs

I [aɪ]
my [maɪ]
pile [paɪl]
may [meɪ]
paid [peɪd]
made [meɪd]
boy [bɔɪ]
moist [mɔɪst]
no [noʊ]
glow [gləʊ]
cow [kaʊ]
round [raʊnd]
our [aʊəʳ]
air [eəʳ]
care [kɛəʳ]
wear [weəʳ]
ear [ɪəʳ]
here [hɪəʳ]
or [ɔəʳ]
pour [pʊəʳ]
poor [pʊəʳ]
are [ɑəʳ]
car [kɑəʳ]

*For final “er” ending we’ll be using the British/Mid-Atlantic [əʳ] and not the American [ə].

**Similarly, for stressed “er” sounds we’ll be using the British/Mid-Atlantic [ɜʳ] and not the America [ɜː]

Exercises

1. [pɪl] _____ 18. [pɪl] _____

2. [pɛt] _____ 19. [nɪt] _____

3. [nɪt] _____ 20. [foun] _____

4. [pɪpəl] _____ 21. [kʌp] _____

5. [ðɪz] _____ 22. [θɪŋ] _____

6. [bʊk] _____ 23. [ɑːr] _____

7. [dʒaɪənt] _____ 24. [ɪ'mʊv] _____

8. [kɒfi] _____ 25. [kəm'pjutəː] _____

9. [teɪp] _____ 26. [sə'saɪətɪ] _____

10. ['glɒrɪ] _____ 27. [mə'saɪə] _____

11. ['lɪvaɪ] _____ 28. [suzənz sʌməːz] _____

12. [sʌθ pæːk] _____ 29. [en bi si] _____

13. ['dʒʊlɪəːd] _____ 30. [maɪkəl dʒæksən] _____

14. [straɪps] _____ 31. [læːd] _____

15. [ɪp] _____ 32. [kraɪst] _____

16. [tʃæstəɪzment] _____ 33. [trænzgrɛʃənz] _____

17. [ə'sʌndəː] _____ 34. [wɜːðɪ] _____

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Word Stress

Putting the stress on the correct syllable in a word is key to making the word be understood. Even if you have all the correct vowel sounds but put the stress on the wrong part of the word there is a very large chance that your audience will not get the meaning.

Knowing which syllables are stressed cannot be determined just by looking at the word. But you can look it up in a dictionary. In most books, stress will be indicated as followed:

(ˈ)- primary stress 'watermelon [ˈwɔtəˈmɛlən]

(ˌ)- secondary stress ˌrecogˈnition [ˌɹɛkəgˈnɪʃən]

Note: a syllable with a schwa [ə]/[əː] will never be stressed.

Look at the following example from Messiah:

He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities
hi wɒz wʊndəd fəər əʊər ˌtrænzˈgrɛʃʊnz hi wɒz bruzəd fəər əʊər ɪˈnɪkwɪtɪz

Prefixes

In spoken English many prefixes like “be-,” “re-,” “de-” etc. in words like “behold,” “receive,” and “deliver” are pronounced with a closed [i] sound. In singing, in order to more clearly articulate the that stress is on the second part of the word, the prefix is pronounced with [ɪ].

For example- behold [bɪˈhoʊld] rejoice [ɹɪˈdʒɔɪs] deliver [dɪˈlɪvəːr]
begin [bɪˈɡɪn] receive [rɪˈsɪv] delight [dɪˈlaɪt]

Suffixes

In spoken English many suffixes like “-ed”, “-est” and “ness” at the ends of words are pronounced with a neutral schwa sound [ə] or and sometimes with an [ɛ]. We will be pronouncing these unstressed suffixes with a schwa sound [ə]

For example- trusted [trʌstɛəd] tellest [tɛləst] youthfulnes [ˈjuθfəlnəs] bruised [bruzəd]

For a more historic English pronunciation, and to ensure that the final syllable is unstressed, we will be pronouncing most “y” endings with [ɪ] instead of [i].

For example- glory [ˈglɔɪ] not [ˈnɔɪ] heavy [heɪvɪ] surely [ʃʊərəli]

Exercises

[ˈʃʊərəli hi hæθ bɔɛˈn əwəˈr grɪfs ænd cærid əwəˈr sarouz]

[glɔɪ tu ɡɒd ɪn ðə hæst ænd pɪs ən ɜːθ]

[hɪz ʒʊk ɪz ɪzɪ ænd hɪz ˈbɜːdən ɪz laɪt]

[ɔl wi laɪk ʃɪp hæv ɡɒn əˈstreɪ]

[ˈevrɪ ˈvæli ʃæl bi ɛksləd]

[brˈhould ðə læm ɒv ɡɒd]

[aɪ pi eɪ ɪz ðə best]