

## IPA – It’s Not Just for Voice Studios Anymore

Colin Brown  
Omaha Bryan High School  
Omaha, Nebraska

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I believe language and dialect are at the center of group or cultural identity and pride in any society. We choral directors strive to bring that language and cultural identity to life in as authentic a way as possible for every work our choirs sing. I advocate the study of, teaching with, and use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) during the preparation phase of the choral music rehearsed and performed with our choirs.

IPA is a scientifically-based alphabet that represents language sounds with symbols which tell us how each sound is formed in the mouth and by the tongue, with or without the voice. IPA is precise, and when followed according to the rules of the selected language and regional dialects, singers can sound like native singers.

IPA is also a tool for helping singers agree on the target vowel in each word. I teach the IPA symbols for what I call the basic vowels, the five cardinal Latin vowels, at the beginning of the school year. We then apply these symbols and sounds to all of our music throughout the remainder of the year. This approach gives singers a sense that all languages are approachable. It also puts foreign languages on a par with English.

Choral teachers know that in some choral situations, it is necessary to motivate the singers to work on songs in foreign languages. In the process, students begin to appreciate the sounds of languages in general and attune their hearing to subtleties and differences.

I teach IPA even when singing in English because singers in our choirs come to the English language from diverse backgrounds and various dialects in other languages, e.g., Spanish. By studying IPA symbols for Standard Singing English, singers are more willing and able to sing with unified vowel shapes, proper placement and consistently idiomatic consonants.

Several excellent websites are listed below. Your taking advantage of their content will develop and expand your knowledge of the IPA. Charts on many of these sites tell you how to form vowels and consonants and where they are formed in the mouth.

By using a uniform, international system, singers develop an intimate knowledge of diction rules and practices which they will carry with them to other choral experiences. Students

also learn appropriate foreign-language nuances (glides, closed [e], open [e], double consonants, rolled or flipped r’s, dental or aspirate t’s, for example) that will apply over a lifetime of singing, both as soloists and as members of choirs.

When singers study music in languages that sound different from their native tongue, IPA symbols help them learn the feel of different and sometimes unique sounds. The more subtle details of IPA and its use and application are the subject of a number of doctoral dissertations, so they will not be explored here.

For a brief example of how IPA charts work, please see the Wikipedia IPA consonant and vowel charts with audio links at the following websites:

- (a) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_Phonetic\\_Alphabet#Pulmonic\\_consonants](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Phonetic_Alphabet#Pulmonic_consonants)
- (b) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vowel#Audio\\_samples](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vowel#Audio_samples)

Many choral music publishers now include various language guides to help singers and conductors perform their music more authentically; however, there are problems with English-oriented phonetic spellings used instead of IPA. Here are just a few:

- Inconsistent letters used for sounds. This differs from publisher to publisher. For example, is “j” pronounced “jay” or “yay?”
- The American accent in a foreign language—the French *repetez* being transliterated as “ray-pay-tay.” The closed [e] in French is quite different from the English diphthong [e:i].
- Lost educational opportunity for singers to learn the high standards expected and maintained in the professional voice world.
- The numerous dialects and nuances in the English (British) and American English languages make unity of vowels and consonants a major challenge. Why do publishers base their phonetic spellings on a language of such complexity and subtle variation?

We choral directors should, as a major block of consumers, communicate with publishers and let them know that we prefer

IPA symbols be used for pronunciation. Tell these companies we need songs transliterated using IPA not phonetic spelling.

For our recent summer conference reading session, I chose four works:

- Elementary level: *Arlequin Dans Sa Boutique*, a French folk song arranged by Earlene Rentz and Suzanne Rita Byrnes for two-part treble voices, keyboard and optional percussion. This octavo uses the English phonetic spelling for French. I recommend that you listen to the recorded example for the best guidance.
- Middle level: *Korobushka* (The Peddler - a Russian folk song) arranged by Emily Crocker for three-part mixed voices, Hal Leonard. English phonetic spelling is also employed. The title, *Korobushka*, is transliterated as “kah-roh-bush-ka.” Is the vowel in “bush” supposed to be an [u] as in hoot or [U] as in foot? A Russian speaker in your audience would certainly know the difference!
- Small high school: *Papa Loko*, a Haitian song by Sten Kallman, arranged for SATB and percussion by Sperry and published by Earthsongs. My hope is that Earthsongs utilizes IPA because Haitian is similar to French but different enough to make it a treacherous language journey without proper guidance.
- Large high school/community chorus/collegiate choir: *Babethandaza*, a South African folk song for SATB divisi and percussion arranged by Daniel Hughes, Santa Barbara Music. Minimal errors in pronunciation are possible because the five vowel sounds are similar to what is utilized in Italian, and the consonants are similar to what you find in English with three exceptions, all of which are clearly listed with examples of each.

I encourage you to begin this rewarding journey by teaching your singers a few IPA symbols. Start with the basic vowels then add a few of the special consonants if needed. Prepare yourself through practice alone or seek help from a colleague.

In my way of thinking, being precise with texts and the language of a choral work is a sign of respect for a culture, the composer/arranger, and the choral work. Such an approach using IPA shows the due diligence and meticulous work necessary in our quest for excellence and authenticity in performances by our choral ensembles.

Recommended IPA websites

- [www.ipasource.com](http://www.ipasource.com) - thousands of art songs and choral works are transliterated using IPA
- [www.ipa.group.shef.ac.uk/](http://www.ipa.group.shef.ac.uk/) - IPA charts and related information
- [french.about.com/library/pronunciation/bl-ipa.htm](http://french.about.com/library/pronunciation/bl-ipa.htm) - French language IPA
- <http://ipap.calpoly.edu/ipa/ipap.html> - English, French, German, and Spanish IPA and related tools
- [www.ipanow.com](http://www.ipanow.com) - type in a text in a foreign language and the “tool” will transliterate into IPA
- [www.langsci.uci.ac.uk/ipa/](http://www.langsci.uci.ac.uk/ipa/) - official site for the International Phonetic Alphabet



## Quotes and Sayings for Teaching Lessons about Music and Life

Terry J. Barham  
University of Missouri-Kansas City  
Kansas City, Missouri  
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For eight summers in the 1990s, I was privileged to be a part of the teaching staff at a one-week summer music camp for young, developing singers founded and managed by Leonard Van Camp and sponsored by Southern Illinois University—Edwardsville. During the day, students, ranging in age from about ten to eighteen, learned about the fundamentals of music, including music literacy, and how to sing in a healthy manner. Students sang in choirs and had great fun meeting new friends in a supportive, positive atmosphere.

In the evenings, music teachers from the area had opportunities to examine and reflect on their teaching, learn and