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## Solving Counterproductive Tensions Induced by Russian Diction in American Singers

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF MUSIC

SOLVING COUNTERPRODUCTIVE TENSIONS INDUCED BY  
RUSSIAN DICTION IN AMERICAN SINGERS

By

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This treatise is dedicated to my husband, Bruce, and my daughter, Melissa. Both endured the ups and downs of academic life for an “older” student with grace and good humor. The opportunities inherent in academic pursuit allowed us each to grow personally and as a family, and I am perpetually grateful for their generosity, compassion, flexibility, and encouragement. I am also indebted to Svetlana Velichko, my mentor in all things Russian, my coach, and my friend. Without her patience and dedication to teaching, my interest in and love of Russian vocal literature would never have been realized. My thanks to all of you!

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## ABSTRACT

The razing of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has resulted in an influx of Russian opera and an awareness of Russian art song literature heretofore unparalleled in the West. American singers, who train diligently to sing Italian, French, and German song and opera, sing in Spanish, Portuguese, and Czech as well. The Cyrillic alphabet is the biggest stumbling block to English-speaking, American singers, because it looks so very different.

For classically-trained singers, the sounds of the Russian language are not particularly unique, nor particularly difficult. There are only two sounds not found in English, represented by the letters **ѣ** and **х**. The latter is pronounced exactly the same way Germans pronounce the *ach-laut*, with the /x/ sound in the word *Bach*. The vowel sound **ѣ** is the single element of Russian diction that provides needless fear for American singers. Its closest English sound equivalent is the /i/ found in the word *dim* with a rapid /i/ off-glide. Most want to form it too far back in the throat, adding unnecessary and unproductive tension to the muscles of articulation in the jaw and tongue.

This treatise proposes to focus on those counterproductive tendencies, offering American singers of Russian opera and art song a more viable path to achieving excellent, understandable diction with beautiful vocalism.

A survey of Russian vowel sounds will be followed by a similar approach to Russian consonants, dwelling particularly on those which present difficulties and pitfalls to American singers. Throughout the treatise are exercises, both articulatory and musical, to aid the singer in achieving the correct Russian sound without counterproductive tongue and jaw tension. One section will focus on the stress and length of Russian vowel sounds, double, triple, and multiple consonants, assimilations, and their applications to vocal music. Finally, a brief overview of Russian orthography and the abolished letters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century alphabet will conclude the treatise.



## INTRODUCTION

The razing of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has resulted in an influx of Russian opera and an awareness of Russian art song literature heretofore unparalleled in the West. American singers train diligently to sing Italian, French, and German song and opera, and many sing in Spanish, Portuguese, and Czech as well. Well-trained singers from the United States often study the grammar and the poetry of these foreign languages as well the diction.

All of these languages, different though they may be in orthography and etymology, have the advantage of using the same alphabet as English, the Roman or Latin alphabet. Russian uses the Cyrillic alphabet, named for one of the two brother priests (Cyril and Methodius) who were sent by the Byzantine emperor Michael III in 862 to weaken the dependence of the Slavonic empire on East Frankish priests. To unify those peoples in a common liturgical and governmental language system, Cyril began by creating a new alphabet in 863 which he called the Glagolitic alphabet. Christianity having been firmly established, in 864 King Boris I of Bulgaria commissioned the monk Climent of Ochrid to better codify the alphabet as the official state alphabet and Climent named it after his teacher, Cyril. Within a century all areas of Europe influenced by the Byzantine or Orthodox Church used the Cyrillic alphabet in everything requiring the written word.<sup>1</sup>

The Cyrillic alphabet is the biggest stumbling block to English-speaking, American singers, because it looks so different from the Roman alphabet. Both the Roman and the Cyrillic alphabets are based on the Greek alphabet; however, the contemporary Roman alphabet had already begun to transform into its own entity a century before Cyril was missionary to the Slavic peoples.<sup>2</sup> Knowing the history of the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.org>, [accessed 20 July 2004], s.v. "Glagolitic alphabet" and "Cyrillic alphabet."

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.org>, [accessed 20 July 2004], s.v. "Greek alphabet."

Cyrillic alphabet may help singers to realize that the two are not so different after all. Russian is not a difficult language to read once the sounds of the alphabet are learned; the orthography is surprisingly consistent with few silent letters or variant spellings, and no consonant clusters or vowel groups that form a single sound. Russian pronunciation rules, while strict, contain few exceptions.

For classically-trained singers, the sounds of the Russian language are neither unique nor difficult. Russian has ten vowel sounds (а, е, ё, и, о, у, ы, э, ю, and я), twenty consonants (б, в, г, д, ж, з, к, л, м, н, п, р, с, т, ф, х, ц, ч, ш, and щ), one glide (й), and two letters without sound (ъ and ь) to total thirty-three letters. There are only two sounds not found in English, represented by the letters ы and х. The latter is pronounced exactly the same way Germans pronounce the *ach-laut*, with the /x/ sound in the word *Bach*. Most singers have encountered this sound within the first two years of lessons and its use in Russian will present them with no difficulties. The vowel sound of ы is the single element of Russian diction that provides needless fear for American singers. Its closest English sound equivalent is the /ɪ/ found in the word *dim* with a rapid /i/ off-glide. Most singers want to form it too far back in the throat, adding unnecessary and unproductive tension to the muscles of articulation in the jaw and tongue. This treatise proposes to focus on those counterproductive tendencies, offering American singers of Russian opera and art song a more viable path to achieving excellent, understandable diction with beautiful vocalism.

One of any singer's best assets is his ear, which must be capable of making fine discriminations in the sounds of the language in which he is singing. A singer must be able to recognize and preserve the phonemic identity of the sounds he is making in order to communicate effectively through understandable diction. Concurrently, he must be able to make tonal adjustments within the phonemes themselves that permit him to make the most efficient use of his vocal mechanism, so that beautiful vocalism occurs and enhances the meaning of the text.<sup>3</sup>

A survey of Russian vowel sounds will be followed by a similar approach to Russian consonants, dwelling particularly on those which present difficulties and pitfalls

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<sup>3</sup> James C. McKinney, *The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults* (Nashville: Genevex Music Group, 1994), 150.

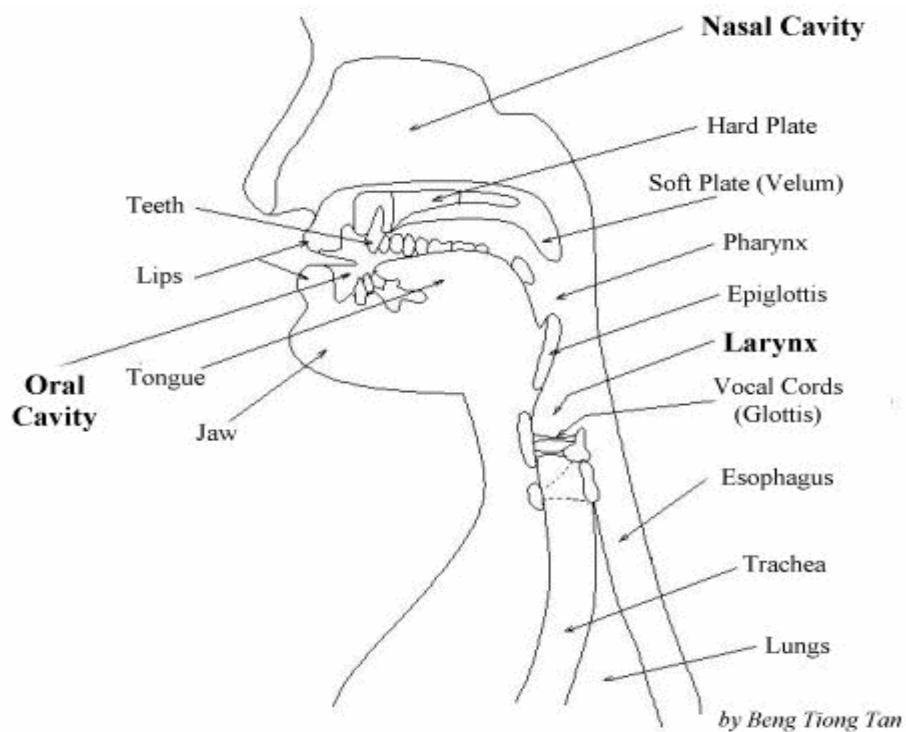
to American singers. Throughout the treatise are exercises, both articulatory and musical, to aid the singer in achieving the correct Russian sound with a minimum of tongue and jaw tension. One section will focus on the stress and length of Russian vowel sounds, double, triple, and multiple consonants, assimilations, and their applications to vocal music. Finally, a brief overview of Russian orthography and the abolished letters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century alphabet will conclude the treatise.

Throughout this treatise phonemes commonly represented by the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) will be encased within slashes: /a/, /ŋ/, /ɔ/. Cyrillic letters, words, and phoneme units will be written as such: ц, не, ты, ф. When a transliteration of the Russian is required the IPA equivalent will be encased within brackets: поэт [po<sup>1</sup>et]. Letters alone will be printed in bold-type: **a, t, u**.

It is assumed that users of this treatise will have at least an elementary working knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet; it is not the intent of this treatise to tutor those who have had no exposure to the vast realm of Russian vocal music, but rather to help prevent unnecessary tensions in efficient articulation of Russian diction by native speakers of American English. A similar assumption exists regarding knowledge of the IPA: several wonderful training manuals are widely available, particularly Joan Wall's *International Phonetic Alphabet for Singers*, which teach the symbols and their proper pronunciation in detail. Readers unfamiliar with the IPA are urged to further independent exploration.

## THE ORGANS OF SPEECH

Before the phonemes of the Russian language can be discussed and applied to efficient, effective singing, it is necessary to describe the general functioning of the organs of speech. The descriptions are as succinct as possible and are included here only to familiarize the reader with the mechanics of the major articulators specifically used by classically-trained singers: the lips, tongue, jaw, and soft palate. Fig. 1 is a cross-section of the vocal apparatus, showing these articulators, as well as the location of the larynx, pharynx, and major resonators.



**Vocal Apparatus Cross-Section**

FIGURE 1<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Beng Tiong Tan. "Organs of speech." [Online search, accessed 12 October 2004]. Available at [http://csd.newcastle.edu.au/users/staff/speech/home\\_pages/Graphics/vclsys2.gif](http://csd.newcastle.edu.au/users/staff/speech/home_pages/Graphics/vclsys2.gif).

The lips are used both in the formation of vowels and in the formation of consonants, adopting a variety of positions. The lips can be slightly parted (as in the majority of spoken vowel sounds) or completely closed (as in /m/ or /b/). They can have contact with the teeth as air is produced, causing friction (as in /f/ or /v/, resulting in *unvoiced* and *voiced fricatives* respectively). They may stay in one position or “glide” into another position during the same phoneme, resulting in a diphthong. Even in hurried speech, when lip positions for various vowels have little differentiation, the vowels can be quite distinct from each other, remaining so even when the lips are almost inactive.<sup>5</sup> Lip positions for singing purposes are generally described as *rounded* or *unrounded*; back vowels (/o/, /ɔ/, /u/) use rounded lips, while forward vowels (/i/, /e/, /ɛ/, /a/) are produced with unrounded lips.<sup>6</sup>

The tongue occupies the interior of the mouth and is the major contributor toward the articulation of both vowels and consonants. Few consonants are formed without using the tongue, and each of the vowels is formed by the various shapes taken by the tongue in the mouth.<sup>7</sup> The tongue is also related, directly or indirectly, to every other articulator in the vocal tract, being connected to the sides, back, and bottom of the mouth and lower jaw. It is connected to the hyoid bone and therefore affects the movement of the larynx, and is capable of partially or completely closing off the oral pharynx to stop the flow of air from the lungs.<sup>8</sup> Terms used to describe the tongue’s role in vowel formation are *forward*, *central*, and *back* and refer to the position of the arch of the tongue in the mouth. Furthermore, *close*, *mid*, and *open* refer to the width of the space between the tongue and the roof of the mouth. The closer the tongue to the roof, the more closed the vowel; the more dropped the jaw, the more open the vowel.<sup>9</sup>

The jaw certainly plays an integral part in the singers’ diction, as the tongue’s musculature is rooted in the densely-muscled jaw region. Moreover, the lower jaw moves

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<sup>5</sup> Dennis Ward, *Russian Pronunciation: A Practical Course* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1958), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Wall, Joan, *International Phonetic Alphabet for Singers: A Manual for English and Foreign Language Diction* (Dallas: Pst., Inc., 1989), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Francis Timerding, “Taming the Unruly Tongue: Problems and Remedies Associated with the Singer’s Tongue,” *Journal of Singing* 54 (November/December 1997): 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Wall, 15.

up and down with the tongue. The sensation a singer feels when connecting /i/ with /u/ on a sung pitch is not only a change from front to back in the arching of the tongue, but also a distinct movement of the lower jaw. Even though the jaw itself is not directly involved in singers' diction as a place of articulation, its inherent tension or lack thereof plays an enormous role in the ability of the other articulators (particularly the tongue) to function freely and efficiently.

Both the hard palate and the soft palate, or velum, are used as points of contact against which various consonants are made with the tongue. The tip of the tongue comes into contact with the back of the bottom teeth almost constantly in Italian diction, while the raised velum is crucial in insuring that air cannot escape inadvertently through the nose while singing a well-produced tone. Most singers are capable of and aware of making nasal or non-nasal sounds, but few are aware of the lowering and raising of the velum to achieve those differing sounds.<sup>10</sup>

These various places of articulation are the specific points in the vocal tract where interruption of air flow occurs, and their interaction with the other articulators and with the teeth and alveolar ridge determine the manner of articulation that will result. For instance, the tip of the tongue in contact with the upper teeth can result in an unvoiced /θ/ or a voiced /ð/; the back of the tongue in relation to the hard palate and a lowered velum results in the /ŋ/ phoneme.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ward, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Wall et al., *Diction for Singers: A Concise Reference for English, Italian, Latin, German, French and Spanish Pronunciation* (Dallas: Pst., Inc., 1990), 5-6.

## THE RUSSIAN ALPHABET

The Russian alphabet contains a total of thirty-three letters. Russian has ten vowel sounds (а, е, ё, и, о, у, ы, э, ю, and я), twenty consonants (б, в, г, д, ж, з, к, л, м, н, п, р, с, т, ф, х, ц, ч, ш, and щ), one glide (й), and two letters without sound (ъ and ы) that serve to change the quality of the consonant which precedes them. The following table displays each Russian letter in alphabetical order, the letter's name in English spelling, a sound-alike English word, and the IPA symbol for each letter.

TABLE 1

**The Russian Alphabet with Letter Name, IPA Symbol, and English Pronunciation**

Russian letter	Russian letter name (not IPA)	Pronounced as	IPASymbol <sup>12</sup> (unmodified sounds)
А	ah	a in car	ɑ
Б	beh	b in bite	b
В	veh	v in vase	v
Г	geh	g in gas	g
Д	deh	d in do	d
Е	yeh	ye in yet	jɛ
Ё	yoh	yo in yoke	jɔ
Ж	zheh	s in pleasure	ʒ
З	zeh	z in zoo	z
И	ee	ee in see	i
Й	ee kratkoyeh	y in toy	i
К	kah	k in kitten	k
Л	ehl	l in lamp	l
М	ehm	m in map	m

<sup>12</sup> Jean Piatak and Regina Avrashov, *Russian Songs & Arias: Phonetic readings, word-by-word translations, and a concise guide to Russian diction* (Dallas: Caldwell Publishing, 1991), 2-5.

Table 1, cont.

<b>Н</b>	<b>ehn</b>	<b>n in nose</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>О</b>	oh	o in folk	o
<b>П</b>	peh	p in pet	p
<b>Р</b>	ehr	r in roll	r
<b>С</b>	ehs	s in say	s
<b>Т</b>	teh	t in tape	t
<b>У</b>	oo	oo in boot	u
<b>Ф</b>	ehf	f in face	f
<b>Х</b>	khah	harder h than in house	x
<b>Ц</b>	tseh	ts in sits	ts
<b>Ч</b>	ch eh	ch in chip	tʃ
<b>Ш</b>	shah	sh in ship	ʃ
<b>Щ</b>	shchyah	sh in sheep	ʃtʃ
<b>Ъ</b>	tvjordiy znakh	hard sign	<i>unpronounced</i>
<b>Ы</b>	ih	similar to i in ill	i
<b>Ь</b>	myakhee znakh	soft sign	<i>unpronounced</i>
<b>Э</b>	eh	e in met	ɛ
<b>Ю</b>	yoo	yu in use	ju
<b>Я</b>	yah	ya in yard	ja



## RUSSIAN VOWELS

There are ten vowels in the Cyrillic alphabet. However, the ten Russian vowel letters represent only five distinct vowel sounds. These vowels can be paired by function as either *regular* or *softening*, as illustrated in this chart:

TABLE 2<sup>13</sup>

### Russian Vowels Classified by Function

	<i>Regular</i>		<i>Softening</i>		
<b>А</b>	а	/a/	<b>Я</b>	я	/ja/
<b>Э</b>	э	/ɛ/	<b>Е</b>	е	/je/
<b>Ы</b>	ы	/i/ <sup>14</sup>	<b>И</b>	и	/i/
<b>О</b>	о	/o/	<b>Ё</b>	ё	/jo/
<b>У</b>	у	/u/	<b>Ю</b>	ю	/ju/

Piatak and Avrashov point out that the softening function for the vowels in the right column includes a /j/ sound before the vowels, as illustrated in the chart above, when they are pronounced on their own or following another vowel. Note that и is the only softening vowel without the /j/ glide. И only has a glide when it follows the soft sign ь (мягкий знак).<sup>15</sup>

The tongue can be moved in two main directions: vertically, it can be raised or lowered; horizontally, it can be fronted or retracted. Vowels are described according to

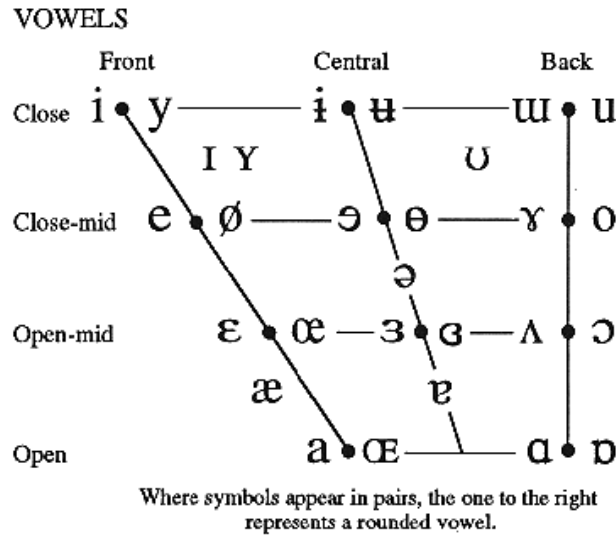
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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 11.

the vertical and horizontal positions of the tongue. The vertical positioning defines the resulting vowel as close, half-close, half-open, or open; the horizontal positioning of the tongue defines the vowel as front, central, or back.<sup>16</sup> The following diagram, taken from the International Phonetic Alphabet Society’s webpage, provides a precise visual explanation of an abstract vowel space, while changing the terminology only slightly.



### International Phonetic Alphabet Vowel Diagram

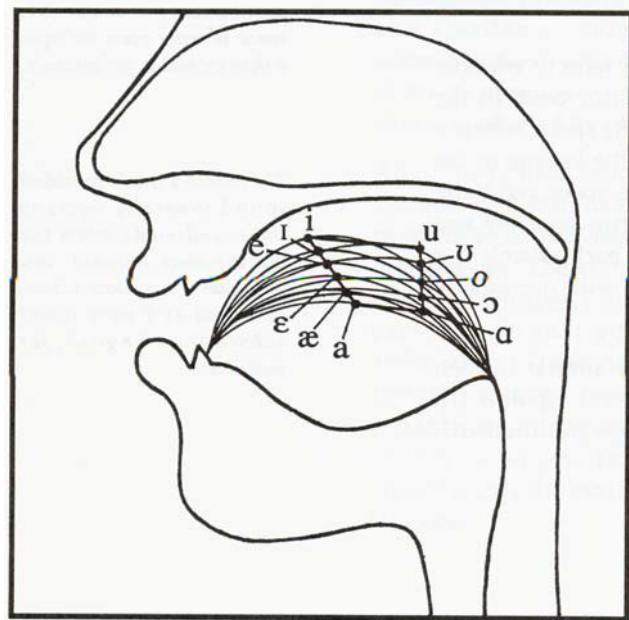
FIGURE 2<sup>17</sup>

A vowel diagram is a useful teaching device because it is “a schematic representation based on the traditional physiological classification of vowels” as it applies to tongue position.<sup>18</sup> The vowel diagram is often better understood in a specific physical context. In the following figure, Joan Wall has superimposed a streamlined version of the vowel diagram above onto a lateral view drawing of the singer’s face, showing very clearly how the tongue’s position changes front to back as the different vowels are produced.

<sup>16</sup> S. C. Boyanus, *Russian Pronunciation and Russian Phonetic Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 37.

<sup>17</sup> “Vowels,” from International Phonetic Alphabet Society website [accessed 16 July 2004]; available at <http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/IPA/index.html>; INTERNET.

<sup>18</sup> Ward Thorvel Rasmus, “Conceptual trends in voice and diction training in American colleges and universities” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1955), 190.



**Vowel Diagram Superimposed onto Lateral View of Singer's Face**

FIGURE 3<sup>19</sup>

The value of the vowel diagram (Fig. 2) is based on the fact that the eight cardinal vowels provide a convenient basis for describing the vowels of any language. (The eight cardinal vowels are those that are listed externally on the right and left axes of the diagram, excluding the /æ/.) All vowels of different qualities can be described as occupying different positions within the space of the diagram and can be identified by their relationships to these cardinal vowels.<sup>20</sup> The singer's physical formation of vowels is greatly influenced by how he distinguishes the vowel qualities of his own native language and how he judges the degree of their similarity to other languages. This

<sup>19</sup> Wall et al, *Diction for Singers*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Olga I. Dioubina and Hartmut R. Pfitzinger, "An IPA Vowel Diagram Approach to Analysing L1 Effects on Vowel Production and Perception" (paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Spoken Language Processing, Denver, CO, September 2002), 2265.

perception indicates that his native language vowels are “like known places on a map, and that he is making a phonetic judgement in [bridging] the distance between one of his own vowels and a vowel produced” in another, foreign language.<sup>21</sup>

If it can be assumed that trained singers have knowledge of and experience with the basic dimensions of vowel formation in singing, it can be expected that they will be able to produce any vowel sound plotted as a given point within the vowel diagram (Fig. 2). Voice and diction teachers labor to instill in each student not only the correct pronunciation for each vowel, but also the correct *idea* of the formation for each vowel, diligently trying to approximate the sounds made by native speakers of a particular language. However, it is extremely difficult to instill these “native” sounds when a student has not been able to hear them correctly pronounced. Even when the ear is well-trained to hear the phonemes “correctly,” speaking or singing them correctly is never an easy task.

Dioubina and Pfitzinger conducted an interesting study at the University of Munich involving four subjects, two native speakers of German and two native speakers of Russian, all of whom were phonetically trained and had taught phonetics. Although the researchers’ main concern was to investigate first language interference, the study clearly showed that the speakers neither produced nor perceived the same vowel quality on a given vowel *whether in their own language or a foreign one*; or to rephrase, when the subjects thought they were forming a “perfect” /a/ they were judged by the other participants as not producing that sound, and when they listened to the others producing it there was no agreement that /a/ was actually being fashioned. This is quite informative for singers and their teachers, and serves to emphasize the importance of approaching diction training from a physical rather than an aural standpoint.<sup>22</sup> If singers learn to sing a Russian vowel by finding its place *in relation to their own native language* they will stand a much better chance of being “correct” than by simply mimicking a native speaker (as valuable as that can be) in a diction classroom, let alone from an operatic stage or an art song recording, as students are often wont to do.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 2266-68.



be sung as a closed /e/.<sup>25</sup> An excellent example can be seen in Rachmaninov’s well-known song *Сирень*, or *Lilacs*. The phrase Я пойду своё счастье искать (*I go to seek my own happiness*) ends the first section of the song. The underlined vowels illustrate the vocalic assimilation principle in that the first vowel would be sung as a closed /e/ because the letter following it (the second underlined vowel) is one of the front vowels, /i/. Likewise, the very next phrase in the song is В жизни счастье одно мне найти суждено (*In life only one happiness I am fated to find*). Here the final vowel in the same word for “happiness” or “good fortune,” счастье, would be sung with an open /ε/ because the letter following it is not a front vowel.

### The a vowel

Most American singers perceive the **a** vowel to be fairly bright in French, slightly darker or more rounded in Italian, darker still in German, and very dark in Russian diction. Just as American voice students tend to over-dramatize French nasality and German consonants when beginning to learn to sing those languages, beginning singers of Russian tend to over-darken every vowel. It is true that the **o** vowel can lean towards darkness in certain syllabic placements, but it is a mistake to attach that tendency to every Russian vowel. Professor E. A. Briygunov compares the French /a/ with the Russian /a/ in Figure 5 below:

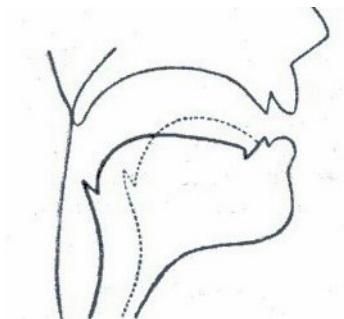


Рис. 2. Пример более заднего положения языка при произношении французского *a* и более переднего при русском *a*

The text translates “Fig. 2. The example more to the back is the location of the French /a/ and more forward, the Russian /a/.”

### Comparison of French and Russian /a/ Tongue Position

FIGURE 5<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Richter, xi.

<sup>26</sup> E. A. Briygunov, *Prakticheskaya fonetika i intonatsiya russkovo yazyka* (Moscow: Moscow University Press, 1963), 26.

Surprisingly, the professor's illustration shows the formation and tongue position of the Russian /a/ to be much more forward in the mouth than the French /a/. If the singer's goal is to achieve a forward placement, then tongue position must be considered as a part of achieving that goal. The position of the tongue is related to the lower formant frequencies in the vowel spectrum, with the dimension of vowel height directly related to whether the tongue has been arched high or low in relation to the palate; furthermore, the height of the vowel is linked most directly to the first formant (F1) in the spectrum, with high vowels having low F1 frequencies. The much-desired singer's formant is, as a rule, produced by the clustering of F3, F4, and F5 frequencies in male and lower-voiced female singers, ranging from 2.5-4 kHz, with F3 coinciding most frequently with the singer's formant.<sup>27</sup> The classification of vowels into front (/i/, /e/) and back (/o/, /u/) is linked mostly to F2 in the sound spectrum: it is high for the front vowels and low for the back vowels.<sup>28</sup> It would stand to reason, then, that singers would want to maximize the formant frequencies of each vowel, and that the more forward the vowel is placed by a more frontal tongue placement, the closer the singer is to hitting his artistic target. A voice placed forward is characterized by an increase in the level of the singer's formant as well as in the frequencies of F2 and F3, and a correctly positioned vowel certainly aids in achieving this goal.

### **The o vowel**

The Russian **o** can be pronounced in one of three ways: as /o/ when stressed, as /a/ when immediately before a stressed syllable or beginning a word, or as /ə/ when in any post-stressed syllable.<sup>29</sup> An example of the first two techniques can be seen in the familiar word used in conjunction with the famous Moscow ballet or opera, the Bolshoi. (Большой—the word simply means “grand” or “large,” and is an adjective modifying the ballet or opera companies.) Americans accent the first syllable, saying /'bol-foi/. The correct Russian pronunciation accents the second syllable (/bal-'foi/), rendering the first, unstressed **o** as an /a/ sound while the second, stressed **o** takes the darker Russian sound.

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<sup>27</sup> Allan Vurma and Jaan Ross, “Where Is a Singer's Voice If It Is Placed ‘Forward’?”, *Journal of Voice* 16 (September 2002): 386.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>29</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 4.

Knowing the stress of an **o** in a Russian word takes either practice or a good dictionary. If the **o** is not stressed, it will most likely be pronounced as an /a/, as in the word *иногда*. Stress falls on the last syllable requiring a pronunciation of /i-nag-<sup>1</sup>da/. The last rule occurs frequently in Russian as well, particularly because the post-stressed **o** syllable forms an adjectival ending. An example is the word *бедное*. The strong accent is on the first syllable, and to emphasize the **o** even with an /a/ is to give it too much importance in the word. Here only the /ə/ can suffice since it disappears into the texture of the unaccented second syllable more readily. Generally the composer is sensitive to this disposable syllable, making it easier for the singer to achieve a tapering effect after the stressed syllable. This often coincides with a musical phrase ending as well, since adjectives frequently follow their nouns in Russian poetry.

An example of Russian **o** pronunciation is seen in the opening line of Sergei Rachmaninov’s song *В молчаньи ночи тайной* (*V malchani nochi tainai—In the silence of the secret night*), Op. 4, No. 3. In the musical example below (Fig. 6) there are eight **o**’s, representing the three rules outlined by Piatak and Avrashov. For ease of explanation, each word appears in chart form (Table 3) with stressed syllables underlined:

TABLE 3

**O Pronunciations in Opening Phrase of Rachmaninov’s *В молчаньи ночи тайной***

*О долго буду Я, в молчаньи ночи тайной, коварный лепет твой,...*  
*Oh, for a long time I will be in the silence of the secret night, Aware of that treacherous babbling of yours,...*

<b><u>О</u></b>	Stressed, pronounced /o/
<b><u>ДО</u>ЛГО</b>	First syllable stressed (/o/), second syllable post-stress, pronounced /ə/
<b>МОЛ<u>ЧАНЬИ</u></b>	Immediately before stress, pronounced /a/
<b><u>НО</u>ЧИ</b>	Stressed, pronounced /o/
<b>ТА<u>ЙНО</u>Й</b>	Post-stress, pronounced /ə/
<b>КОВА<u>РН</u>ЫЙ</b>	Immediately before stress, pronounced /a/
<b>ТВО<u>Й</u></b>	Stressed, pronounced /o/



*В молчаньи ночи тайной* was written when Rachmaninov was 17 years-old, yet the young composer already was sensitive to the cadence of the Russian language by naturally tapering the phrase as seen in the second system, second measure of this example:

**Opening phrase of *В молчаньи ночи тайной***

FIGURE 6

American English speakers have a similar approach to the vowel **a**. In the following sentence, the letter **a** can be pronounced 6 different ways:

**M**ary **c**an **c**artwheel **a**round **g**racefully on the **l**awn.

Phonetically, the **a**'s in order are pronounced /ɛ/, /æ/, /ɑ/, /ə/, /e/, and /o/, barring regional speech differences. American singers already have the tongue positions required for these sounds, making the Russian **o** rules seem almost easy by comparison. No greater tension is required in the tongue or jaw for the darker Russian **o** than for any of the American **a**'s, provided the /o/ is correctly formed without tension. However, the Russian **o** does have an off-glide (ə) which very nearly makes it a diphthong, and likely accounts for the

darker character English speakers attribute to it. One author compares the Russian **o** with its ə-off-glide to the Southern American English pronunciation of the word *or* with protruded and rounded lips.<sup>30</sup> As stated previously, Russian vowels in general are pronounced slightly more open than in English, and the **o** with a ə-off-glide dictates that the tongue move rapidly from a back position to a central one (see Figs. 2 and 3). Understanding the nature of this movement prepares the American English speaker for correct pronunciation of that most generally feared and elusive of Russian vowels, the **ы**.

### **The ы vowel**

The Russian vowel **ы** is not an English sound; in fact, it is not commonly found in other languages, making it quite distinct. Boyanus states that the /i/ and the /i/ belong to the same family: /i/ is formed in the front of the mouth while /i/ is formed in the back of the mouth. Russian speakers use /i/ after a palatalized consonant and /i/ after a non-palatalized one, forming the two sounds in a similar way.<sup>31</sup>

Piatak and Avrashov state that to produce the **ы** correctly it must be combined with the preceding consonant. If that consonant uses the front of the tongue (as in /t/) then the singer must lower the back of the tongue to begin /i/, quickly raising the tongue to the /i/ position. If the consonant uses the back of the tongue (as in /g/) then the singer must lower the front of the tongue to begin /i/ and quickly raise the tongue to the /i/ position. In other words, the tongue must move quickly from a low position to a high position to pronounce /i/, the lowered position adding a distinctly “guttural quality” to the vowel sound.<sup>32</sup>

The American singer’s goal is to allow this to happen without tensing the mylohyoid and other muscles associated with the root of the tongue. The tongue that is pulled back and is tight at the root may cause an undesirable guttural, nasal, or tight sound and result in tense, forced singing.<sup>33</sup> Obviously, all singers should sing with a free tongue; American singers have a greater struggle with this in general due to the nature of the English language. If the singer has worked diligently towards training the tongue to

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<sup>30</sup> Boyanus, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>32</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Timerding, 16.

respond in the most efficient manner for singing in all languages he should have no difficulty with the Russian **ы** vowel. The greatest challenge lies in keeping the mind free as well as the tongue. The **ы** vowel has acquired a poor reputation among American singers who have had a small amount of experience (but not much) with Russian songs and arias. Those singers have spread the word of how “difficult” the vowel is, raising an attitude of trepidation in the new-to-Russian singer before he even begins. It requires practice, as any skill does, but the result is certainly attainable. The singer would be wise to remember that the final off-glide of the **ы** vowel is an /i/. On a sung pitch sustained at any length on the vowel **ы** the singer must be careful not to sustain the /i/ sound but the /i/, gliding rapidly through the backed tongue position and resulting in a vowel sound very similar to Italian in its forward-tipped tongue stance.

An excellent comparative drawing appears in Moscow University’s 1963 publication *Prakticheskaya fonetika i intonatsiya russkovo yazyka (Practical phonetics and intonation of the Russian language)*. Professor Briygunov illustrates the difference in the figure on the left side of the Russian vowels /и/ and /ы/. The figure on the right side is simply the vowel **ы** or /и/ alone.<sup>34</sup>

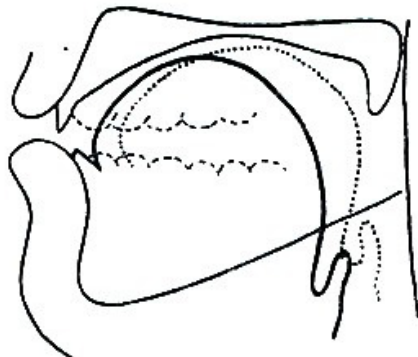


Рис. 8. Гласные и —  
ы ····

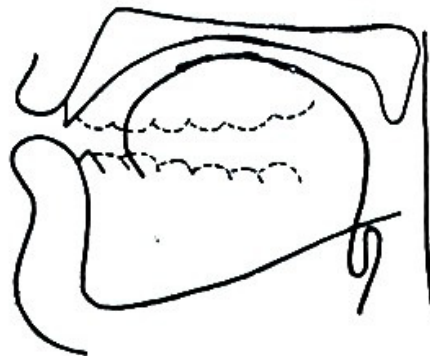


Рис. 9. Гласный ы

**Comparative Tongue Positions of и and ы**

FIGURE 7

<sup>34</sup> Briygunov, 41.

Briygunov seems to understand the tendency of foreign students of Russian to place the **и** vowel too far back in the mouth. He gives the following exercise to keep the vowel as far forward as possible, always an excellent suggestion for singers.

1. Pronounce **и** together with **и**, combining the difficult vowel pronunciation, but not making them both hard together.
2. Pronounce **и** with more forward articulation.
3. Pronounce **и** with the lips.

By following this sequence the foreigner's tongue should be trained to more readily accept the rapid articulation required.<sup>35</sup> As illustrated by the vowel diagrams of the International Phonetic Alphabet Society in Fig. 2 and by Gioubina and Pfitzinger in Fig. 3, the /i/ phoneme is really very central in the mouth, not back or in the throat, as many Americans assume. In fact, Fig. 2 shows the /i/ phoneme of native Russian speakers to be placed even more forward than the generic IPA vowel diagram. Most American singers would be well-served to think of this forward placement as more Italianate than Germanic. The best direct English comparison is found in Boyanus' book on Russian pronunciation. He claims that after the labial consonants /p/, /b/, /m/, the fricatives /f/, /v/, and the non-palatized /l/ (which resonates like an unrounded **u** or /u/), the /i/ is a back sound with an element of the unrounded **u** in it, very similar to the sound sometimes heard in the middle of spoken English consonant groups with the letter **l**: *supple*, *table*, *camel*, and *travel* all have a touch of the /i/ phoneme present in isolation.<sup>36</sup> When singing these types of words in English we are taught to modify the vowel somewhat so that a "flat," non-vibrant tone does not result. (To fail to modify those final vowels would make all singers sound like American country-western or pop-rock singers.) American classically-trained singers tend to brighten these generally unspoken vowels when singing to a light /ε/ to give them resonance and vibrato; in German words such as *kinder*, *Bibel*, and *helfen* the final vowel may be even more brightly sung, although never emphasized or stressed.

The **и** vowel only occurs in Russian after an unpalatized, or hard, consonant, which explains why this sound can never be the initial sound in a word. Therefore, the /i/

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Boyanus, 47.

sound is the only vowel realizable after a hard consonant, whether or not the letter **и** occurs in the spelling of the word.<sup>37</sup> Some examples can be found in the words утехи, отдыхать, улыбку, руки, пылает, illustrating both hard and soft consonants in the underlined consonant-vowel pairs and are spelled accordingly. The following examples, taken from Richter's book on Rachmaninov songs, offer an extension of this rule and exemplify instances where the **и** spelling would be pronounced not as /i/ but as /i/ because the preceding consonant is hard: **вот и он** (vot i on); **дал им** (dal im); **к Ире** (k irje unless the singer breaks the elision and attaches a glottal to the **и** vowel, then: k irje)<sup>38</sup> These issues will be revisited in the section on consonants.

### The **я** vowel

The letter **я** [ja] is the final letter of the Russian alphabet and causes the American singer problems not because of the /a/ but because of the glide /j/. Americans want to over-do and over-extend the /j/ to the detriment of the beauty of the /a/. To do so requires the tongue to thrust forward, backing against the posterior hard palate, and brings tension to a tone that doesn't at all require it. In the attempt to make sure the /j/ is heard American singers generally overemphasize its presence in the phoneme, turning a glide into an obstacle.

The **я** is one of the four "iotated vowels,"<sup>39</sup> a linguistics term used by Leon Stilman to describe those vowels which begin with the *iota* symbol, or /j/ sound. The iotated vowels correspond to the "softening" vowels chart (except **и**, which is included in the chart because it occurs only after soft consonants) shown on page 9. These four vowels—**я**, **е**, **ё**, **ю**—are phonetically written /ja/, /je/, /jo/, /ju/. Stilman suggests that it may be better to think of the /j/ sound as a very rapidly articulated **й** [i], since the iotated vowels represent diphthongs consisting of an initial **й**-sound followed by one of the simple vowels **а**, **э**, **о**, or **у**. These diphthongal sounds can occur initially, after other

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<sup>37</sup> Laurence R. Richter, *Rachmaninov's Complete Song Texts* (Geneseo, NY: Leyerle Publications, 2000), xi.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Leon Stilman, *Russian Alphabet and Phonetics* (New York: Columbia University, 1957), 11.

vowels, or after consonants.<sup>40</sup> His suggestion is especially excellent for singers who might be tempted to overstress the /j/ sound of the iotated vowels. For example, if one sees the word ярд (pronounced exactly like *yard* in English) one should think йард, which would soften the /j/ impact tremendously; the English word *humor* has the exact cognate in Russian, spelled юмор. By thinking йумор the word immediately sounds more authentically Russian. Finally, the Russian word маяк almost begs the American singer to close the jaw and tense the base of the tongue in order to form the /j/ glide which initiates the stressed second syllable. A much more legato tone can be maintained if the singer thinks of the second, stressed syllable as beginning with an easy /i/: майак.

A similar aspect occurs with the **ia** cognate when singers are beginning to sing in Italian. How often voice teachers and coaches hear novice American singers pronounce *gioia* as /'dʒoi-ja/, when a correct Italian pronunciation would be /'dʒo-ia/. The tendency to exaggerate the glide is not only incorrect, but also interrupts the flow of the language and the musical line.

In instructing singers there are a number of excellent exercises that can be employed to help keep the tongue and jaw relaxed through the /j/ glide. One many American voice teachers use is a 5-note diatonic scale (descending or ascending) in which the student lightly sings *ya-ya-ya-ya-ya*, keeping the jaw loose and relaxed without allowing the tongue to become overly involved in the production of /ja/. Of special interest also is an exercise used by Russian diction teachers for stage performers. In this figure the phonemes shown use the Cyrillic alphabet:

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



The first line is simply /i/-/a/-/ja/-/a/-/ja/; the second line is a phrase translating as “my sweet one”

### Musical Exercise of Я Vowel

FIGURE 8<sup>41</sup>

One final element of the letter **я** is that the /j/ glide is often buried in the consonant that precedes it. This is especially true in the reflexive verb-ending cognate of **ся**, where few American singers can resist the temptation to separately enunciate the /s/ and the /j/ sounds. The concept of a vowel altering a preceding consonant can be better understood by examining similar instances in English. In the word *explosion*, the **i** is not pronounced separately; instead, it becomes a part of the **s** which is altered to a /ʒ/ sound. This is also very easy for Americans to do with the word *onion* or *canyon*, perhaps partly because of our familiarity with the sounds of the Spanish language. In Russian, one must do this with other consonants that do not seem quite as natural to an American English speaker. A singer might practice speaking the word *tension* substituting an /s/ for the actual /ʃ/ sound that is heard when the word is said normally. It seems quite unnatural, but when repeated time after time develops a more familiar ring. This is the same sound that must be interpolated into words such as *воротится* and *излиться*. If the /j/ is pronounced with too much emphasis the resulting sound is ugly and unbalanced to the Russian ear.

The most difficult consonant in which to bury a /j/-glide is **б**, and the cognate **бя** occurs quite frequently in Russian. A recent magazine interview of a bilingual Russian-

<sup>41</sup> K. B. Kurakin, “Vosemnadtsat uprazheni vokalnovo kharaktera po bocpitaniju golasa i diktsi dramaticheskovo actera (Eighteen exercises of a vocal character for education of the voice and diction of the dramatic actor),” in *Teoria i praktika stszenicheskoi rechi (Theory and practice of speech for the stage)*, (Leningrad: Leningrad State Institute for Theatre, Music, and Cinematography, 1985), 143.

American professional singer highlighted this problem. Baritone Nicolai Janitzky told this author that the major error he hears when American singers sing Russian is a

misunderstanding of the “ya” syllable, the letter that looks like a backward R. The connection following a consonant is not always smooth, like in the word “teb-YA,” which is often sung because it means “you.” The tendency is for the singer to insert almost an additional syllable in there, and pronounce it almost like “te-bi-YA.” But it’s very similar to Italian when an *ia* follows a *c* or *g*; the glide of the *y* sound is imbedded in the consonant before it and doesn’t need to be emphasized.<sup>42</sup>

A simple exercise to help overcome this unintentional stress is to add a /b/ before the /j/ in the 5-note diatonic scale exercise described previously. When the /bjɑ/ phoneme is sung lightly, rapidly, and repeatedly on varying pitches a higher comfort level will be achieved, rewarding the singer with livelier, freer articulation, less tongue and jaw tension, and more authentic Russian diction.

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<sup>42</sup> Sherri Weiler, “Russian Art Song: An Interview with Nicolai Janitzky,” *Classical Singer*, July 2004, 22.



## RUSSIAN CONSONANTS

Consonants are speech sounds formed when the articulators interrupt the flow of air through the vocal tract. They can be classified as *stop-plosives*, *nasals*, *fricatives*, *lateral* and *glides* based on their manner of articulation. They can be *voiced* or *unvoiced*.<sup>43</sup> In Italian and Russian they can be *dentalized*, and in Russian, *palatized*. Consonants are subordinate to vowels in sonority, and do not form the nucleus of syllables but rather define the borders of them. The function of consonants as sound interrupters or stoppers is what separates the vocal tone into recognizable units which communicate meaning.<sup>44</sup>

The twenty Russian consonants can be divided into three groups to aid English speakers: those letters which look and sound the same in English; those which look like English letters but are pronounced differently; and the letters which are totally foreign to the alphabet used in English. Most of these new symbols are derivatives of the Greek alphabet, modified to incorporate the sounds peculiar to the Slavic languages encountered by Cyril in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The following table organizes this information.

TABLE 4

### Comparison of Russian and English Consonants

Sound as English	Look Alike, Sound Different	New Symbols
<b>K, M, T</b>	<b>B, H, P, C, X</b>	<b>Б, Г, Д, Ж, З, Л, П, Ф, Ц, Ч, Ш, Щ</b>

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<sup>43</sup> Wall, 129-130.

<sup>44</sup> McKinney, 143.

Like Russian vowels, the Russian consonant sounds are pronounced slightly more forward than their English counterparts. This means that the buccal space where the tongue stops the air is more forward in the mouth.<sup>45</sup> For example, the sound of the letter **к** in Russian is produced with less effort than in English; the blockage of the breath is accomplished without an aspirated, fricative /h/ sound as is commonly heard in the English words *cotton* or *caught*. Air escapes with the initial /k/ sound in both of those words, while in Russian it should not. A similar phenomenon occurs in the aspiration often heard in English after /t/ in the words *talk* or *time*. No such aspirated /t/ occurs in Russian.<sup>46</sup>

### **Dentalized consonants **д** and **т****

The consonant sounds /d/ and /t/ (represented by the Cyrillic letters **д** and **т**) are truly dental, as in Italian (see Fig. 9). They are formed lower in the mouth than in English, articulated with the tip of the tongue touching the inner surface of the upper teeth themselves as well as the edge of the lower teeth. The Russian tongue, without the inherent tension found in the tongues of most articulators of American English, is more lax and produces a larger contact surface.<sup>47</sup> This more forward position makes a /d/ or /t/ sound followed by an American aspirated /h/ much more difficult to achieve.

A favorite exercise to highlight the aspirated /h/ over-saturation in American English is to say this tongue twister repeatedly while holding a finger about an inch from the lips: *Ten tiny turtles in a tiny tin tub turned tan*. The speaker should then repeat the sentence with the tongue in the forward, dentalized position. It is immediately apparent that the escape of air ceases and the tongue works much more efficiently. A big bonus is that the vowel placement changes as well, being pulled forward, as occurs naturally with both Italian and Russian native speakers and is the most favorable placement for singing a free and beautiful tone.

In English (and Italian) the letters **n** and **l** are also considered to be dentalized consonants and the same is true in Russian. However, for the purpose of this treatise the

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<sup>45</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Stilman, 4-5.

<sup>47</sup> Stilman, 5.

/n/ sound will be considered a nasal consonant; the Russian treatment of the letter **И** requires further discussion in a separate section.

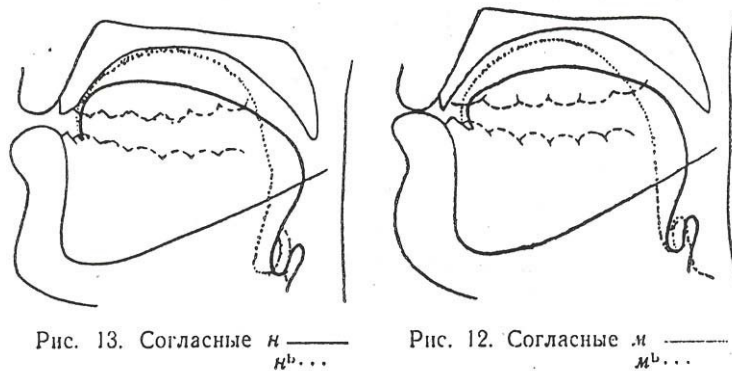
### **Nasal consonants н and м**

The illustration below in Fig. 9 compares the tongue positions for the nasal consonants /n/ and /m/. It is of significance to singers to note that the Russian /m/ incorporates a forward, almost dentalized, tongue placement, similar to the /n/. Most diction texts dealing with the formation of the /m/ discuss the vibratory aspects of the consonant and do not mention the tongue at all. It is only in discussing the Italian /n/ that the forward tongue placement is mentioned. Yet when a singer keeps the tongue forward for the /m/ the organ stays relaxed, enabling the vowel following the /m/ to be relaxed as well. This is especially important for the stressed **о** and **ы** vowels. The unfamiliarity of these vowels tends to cause American singers tension, and when the preceding consonant is not articulated properly the vowel has even less chance of being freely produced. An example can be found in the word *может*: the **о** is stressed and can very quickly go “back” in the singer’s throat unless care is taken to keep it forward. If the singer keeps the tongue in close proximity to the front lower teeth when singing the /m/ (taking care not to push or press the blade of the tongue against the teeth) the **о** will be in a correctly forward position and will sound authentically Russian.

The same is true for **ы**. A correct, “low” articulation of a dentalized consonant will make it easy to correctly pronounce **ы** after such a consonant. For example, the vowel **и** is a front vowel, while **ы** is further back. The latter is very similar in placement to the short /ɪ/ vowel in the English word *dim*. If the Russian dentalized consonant is properly articulated it is much easier to pass from the /ɪ/ sound to the Russian /ɨ/.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Stilman, 5-6.



Solid lines show tongue position for unpalatized consonants, dotted lines show palatized position.  
Left side illustrates /n/; right side illustrates /m/

### **Tongue Position for Palatized and Unpalatized Consonants н and м**

FIGURE 9<sup>49</sup>

It is appropriate to include at this juncture a few words on hypernasality. Recordings of mid-to late-20<sup>th</sup> century Russian opera singers seem to reflect a marked tendency towards nasality, particularly apparent in sopranos and tenors. Former Moscow Conservatory piano professor Svetlana Velichko, who also informally coached singers from the Bolshoi Opera, told this author that the predisposition stems from the Slavic folksong tradition. Much of this music springs from the harvest and other outdoor situations where the need for great vocal carrying power is present; the resulting “metallic” timbre is based on pure chest and throat resonance and little vibrato. Vibrato, when it is used, is an expressive device similar to a shaken trill and results from tension in the throat and is never a by-product of a free and balanced tone production such as is associated with classically trained singers in the Italian tradition. Russian opera singers, when faced with a full orchestra in a large house, were only reverting to their own Slavic roots and the vocal sounds with which they were most familiar in an attempt to “carry” over the orchestra and into the hall.<sup>50</sup> Though counterproductive in the long run, this tendency is completely understandable when the already very forward tongue position of Russian is also taken into consideration.

<sup>49</sup> Briygunov, 66.

<sup>50</sup> Svetlana Velichko, personal communication with author, 6 July 2003.

### Palatized and unpalatized consonants

In addition to comparing the forward tongue position of /m/ and /n/, Fig. 9 contrasts the tongue position for the *palatized* and *unpalatized* versions of these consonants. The fainter, dotted line illustrated the tongue position for the palatized version of each consonant in Fig. 9. Nearly all Russian consonants can occur as either palatized (soft) or unpalatized (hard). Palatization, in fact, is one of the salient characteristics of Russian phonology.<sup>51</sup> The distinction is of considerable importance, in that two words completely unrelated in meaning may differ phonologically only in the hard or soft pronunciation of the consonant, as in the following examples:

TABLE 5

#### Comparison of Word Meaning Differences in Palatized and Unpalatized Consonants

угол = <i>corner</i>	уголь = <i>coal</i>
стал = <i>camp</i>	сталь = <i>steel</i>
брат = <i>brother</i>	брать = <i>to take</i>
флаги = <i>flags</i>	фляги = <i>flasks</i>
банка = <i>jar</i>	Ванька = <i>Johnny</i>

Palatized consonants exist to a lesser degree in the English language as well. Contrast the difference between the British pronunciations (palatized) of the initial consonants in *new*, *tune*, *dew* with the American approach (unpalatized) to the same words. The American will pronounce the vowels in *new*, *tune*, and *dew* to sound approximately like *noon*, *tool*, *do*. In Russian the contrast is somewhat stronger and the method of palatization somewhat different.<sup>52</sup>

Palatization is the releasing of a consonant in the palate, and is accomplished by arching the tongue up into the palate and “squeezing” the consonant sound down from above. Furthermore, the place of palatization is exactly where the vowel sound /i/ is

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<sup>51</sup> Richter, ix.

<sup>52</sup> Stilman, 12.

formed in the buccal cavity and can be characterized as an “/i/-coloring” of the consonant.<sup>53</sup> This “/i/-coloring” is obvious in the British pronunciations discussed in the previous paragraph; the addition of the /i/ before the principle vowel is what “palatizes” the preceding consonant. It is interesting to note as well that these initial consonants (*new*, *tune*, *dew*) are all considered to be dentalized consonants.

The concept of palatal release can be seen also in the English word *nitrate*. The first /t/ is released in the palate, or palatized; the second is not. Compare this with the phrase *night rate*; here the first /t/ is unpalatized, while the second, final /t/ is palatized.<sup>54</sup> The speaker must be careful not to emphasize the English tendency towards /t/ aspiration, but instead approximate a dentalized /t/ in the above examples. The American singer must also be careful not to over enunciate, as choral singers are often asked to do, the final Russian **ть**. This soft /t/ ends most Russian verb infinitives and therefore occurs frequently in poetry for vocal music. Overemphasis will result in a stylized, disconnected phonation completely divorced from authentic Russian diction.

American singers should likewise never substitute consonants with a sibilant release for palatized consonants, turning a palatized /t/ into /ts/ or a palatized /d/ into /dz/. The substitution of a hard consonant with an English **y** sound is even worse, as discussed previously in the section on the Russian vowel **я**, so that a palatized /s/ becomes /s/ + ya. These mispronunciations result most frequently when a singer works from a transliteration rather than a transcription, and they strike the Russian ear as extremely un-Russian and very ugly.<sup>55</sup>

How is a singer to know whether a consonant is palatized or not? Soft consonants are formed when followed by either a softening vowel (**я, е, и, ё, ю**) or by the symbol **ь**, the “soft sign” or *мягкий знак*.<sup>56</sup> The **и** vowel is not an iotated consonant, so it is not a true soft consonant; its “hard” equivalent is **ы**. Nonetheless, consonants that precede it are always palatized, or softened, so it is included in the list of softening vowels above.

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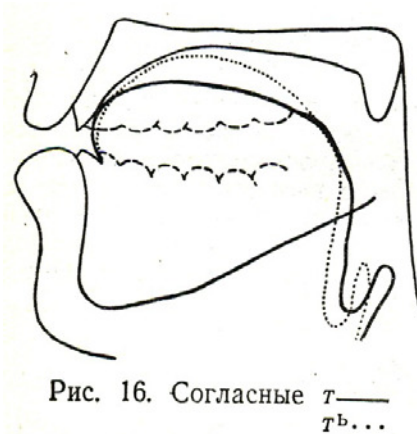
<sup>53</sup> Richter, ix.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Stilman, 13.

The articulation of palatized consonants takes place toward the front of the hard palate, in the same tongue position as the /i/ vowel, as mentioned before. The difference between palatized and unpalatized consonants is particularly strong and noticeable with the dentalized consonants **д**, **т**, **н**, and **л**. When palatized these consonants are articulated by raising the tongue toward the front of the palate, similar to the Italian forward tongue position of a dentalized consonant; the difference is that the Russian singer lowers the tip of the tongue and touches the back of the *bottom* teeth and not the upper. Fig 10 below illustrates the Russian tongue positions for both a palatized and unpalatized /t/.



Solid line represents unpalatized /t/, dotted line a palatized /t/

### **Tongue Position for Palatized and Unpalatized T**

FIGURE 10<sup>57</sup>

The sung sound of the Russian palatized and Italian dentalized /t/ is very similar. A simple but helpful exercise for the American singer is to lightly articulate the following syllables (transcribed in IPA below) with the tongue in the forward Italian position, the tip of the tongue gently touching the back of the *upper* front teeth. Then try the same exercise with the tongue forward and gently touching the back of the *lower* front teeth, in the Russian position. The exercise should be sung on one breath.

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<sup>57</sup> Briygunov, 86.



### Musical Exercise for Russian τ Articulation

FIGURE 11

Russian palatization will sound most natural when sung with a raised velum, or soft palate. In the above exercise the tendency exists to allow the velum to lower in the attempt to keep the tongue forward, resulting in hypernasality. The velum serves to separate the nasal cavities from the mouth; in its lowest position, the nasal and oral cavities are directly connected and the sound goes straight from the larynx into the nose.<sup>58</sup> It is important that the singer develop the ability to leave the tongue in a forward reference position naturally, even when some tension is required to form the required phoneme. For example, the vowel /i/ in the above vocal exercise requires moderate tension in the tongue muscles. The singer must be careful not to tighten the vowel sound too much or let the tongue become rigid and inflexible. Excess tongue tension will always manifest itself in tone production and quality, and nothing disturbs good diction as much as a stiff, sluggish, or lazy tongue.<sup>59</sup>

In Russian a consonant is often palatized when it is followed by a palatal consonant. In the word **индюк** (*male turkey*) the **д** is palatized by the softening vowel **ю**; this soft **д** in turn palatizes the preceding **н**. Other examples of this occurrence can be seen in the following Russian words:<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Marilee David, *The New Vocal Pedagogy* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002), 79.

<sup>59</sup> McKinney, 154.

<sup>60</sup> Stilman, 15-16.



TABLE 6

**Palatization of the First Consonant by the Second Consonant**

<b>ЗОНТИК</b>	<i>umbrella</i>	н is soft before soft т
<b>КОСТЬ</b>	<i>bone</i>	с is soft before soft т
<b>ОН СЕРДИТСЯ</b>	<i>he is angry</i>	р is soft before soft д
<b>ЗАДНИЙ</b>	<i>rear (adj.)</i>	д is soft before soft н
<b>СОТНЯ</b>	<i>a hundred</i>	т is soft before soft н
<b>БАСНЯ</b>	<i>fable</i>	с is soft before soft н
<b>ЕСЛИ</b>	<i>if</i>	с is soft before soft л

Ward turns this double-consonant palatization phenomenon into a “rule” by stating that when “т, д, н, с, or з combine with т, д, н, с, or з and the second letter denotes a soft consonant, then so does the first.”<sup>61</sup> He uses the term “regressive softening” to indicate that the softness of one consonant passes back or regresses to a preceding consonant, and points out that all native Russian speakers use regressive softening to some extent but many details of the practice vary from speaker to speaker based on regional preferences.<sup>62</sup>

**Articulation of л, ль**

In all palatized consonants there are two essential articulations occurring simultaneously. The first articulation makes the consonant recognizable; the other gives to the sound a “soft,” “clear” or palatized quality.<sup>63</sup> This quality, as discussed before, is the result of raising the front of the tongue so that its upper surface is close to the hard palate. Most American English speakers do this naturally when beginning the words *league* or *liquid*. If the speaker lingers on the /l/ somewhat a slight but noticeable lateral lip spreading occurs. It is helpful to imperceptibly exaggerate this spreading in the early stages of learning Russian palatization, and especially before the Russian palatized **ль** (/l/). English speakers are more aware of Russian palatization before the hard vowel

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<sup>61</sup> Ward, 63.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>63</sup> Boyanus, 14.

sounds of /a/, /o/, and /u/. When the palatization occurs before the softer vowel sounds, particularly /i/, it is less noticeable to American ears, as in *league*. Indeed, the American singer is not even aware that the /l/ is palatized. This difficulty in readily differentiating between English and Russian palatization may explain why American singers overemphasize the /j/ glide of the letter я so frequently in Russian.

Most English-speaking singers of Russian have difficulty with both the formation and the usage of the hard (unpalatized) and soft (palatized) Russian /l/ sounds. The hard Russian /l/ is not very far from the Midwestern American pronunciation; the chief difference is found in the formation of the sound. The American /l/ is generally produced with the tip of the tongue pressed hard against the alveolar ridge, causing reciprocal tension in the stylo-glossus muscles imbedded in the jaw. Russian native speakers tend not to press the tongue so hard against the alveolar ridge, letting the consonant instead be slightly more forward in placement.

Wall provides four allophones of /l/ in her IPA book. These are summarized in the table below:<sup>64</sup>

TABLE 7

**Four American English Allophones of /l/**

clear /l/	<i>leap, lit, late, let</i>	<b>tongue tip touching teeth; used before forward vowels and diphthongs</b>
dark /l/	<i>full, help, challenge, truly</i>	tongue tip touching higher on alveolar ridge; used at ends or middle of words
dental /l/	<i>wealth, stealth, health</i>	tongue tip on or between teeth; used preceding <i>th</i>
syllabized /l/	<i>little, bottle, table, syllable</i>	tongue tip touching teeth; used in words with final <i>le</i> , does not produce freely vibrating tone so in singing these words an /ə/ must be added

<sup>64</sup> Wall, *International Phonetic Alphabet*, 183.

This table summarizes clearly the procedures Americans use in speaking and singing the /l/ sound and conveniently provides a point of comparison for the two Russian /l/ allophones.

The publications of four separate authorities on Russian diction were consulted in regards to pronouncing the Russian /l/; each is radically different in attempting to describe the various soft and hard /l/ sounds. Most surprising is that the most recent publication, Piatak and Avrashov’s *Russian Songs and Arias*, fails to give any guidelines for tongue position, preferring instead to offer generalized rules for whether the /l/ is or is not palatized.<sup>65</sup> Leon Stilman merely says that the hard variety of л is close to the l in *silk* or *belt*. The difference is that “the Russian sound is formed with the tip of the tongue slightly protruding between the teeth.”<sup>66</sup> This hard л sound would be heard in the Russian words **дал, кол, мыл, and лук.**

British professor Dennis Ward’s method to achieve the proper Russian /l/ formation is quite detailed. He directs the speaker/singer to form any /l/ allophone in the following manner: “the tip of the tongue is placed against the teeth-ridge, a space being left between the gums (or teeth) and the edge of the tongue on either side; the vocal cords vibrate, producing ‘voice,’ and the stream of sound passes through the gaps between gums and tongue.”<sup>67</sup> He describes an elaborate exercise to obtain the dark, or hard, Russian /l/ sound, instructing that as long as the space is left and the tip of the tongue is held against the teeth-ridge, the main body of the tongue can adopt any vowel position while /l/ is being formed. By making a prolonged /l/ sound and combining it in turn with the resonances of the Russian vowels *at the same time* one may achieve the proper dark Russian /l/. He advises English speakers to intone one long /l/, keeping the tongue tip against the teeth ridge and allowing the main body of the tongue to glide through the positions of the various vowels, as illustrated here:<sup>68</sup>

**И . . . Э . . . а . . . О . . . у . . . Ы . . .**  
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<sup>65</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Stilman, 5-6.

<sup>67</sup> Ward, 46.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 47.

This is actually quite an unusual exercise, in that it is far from comfortable, but does result in the distinctively dark Russian /l/ sound. Once this is practiced satisfactorily he advises the singer to make a series of separate phonemes beginning with /l/, such as **ле, ла, ли, лу, ло, лы.**<sup>69</sup> The singer's goal is to achieve the Russian /l/ sound without adding tension to the stylo-glossus muscles of the jaw.

Ward has a similarly elaborate exercise to induce the Russian soft, or palatized, /l/. He suggests the nearest corresponding sound in English is to be heard in the word *million*, and that the Russian way of releasing the tongue while still retaining the lateral gap and the contact of the tongue's tip against the teeth ridge is what distinguishes the two sounds. The end result of Ward's ensuing exercise struck this author as very similar to the Italian pronunciation of the word *gli*, in that the combination of the /l/ sound with a /j/ glide is the sound one is trying to achieve in both languages. Ward suggests making the /l/, prolonging it, and then adding the beginning of the word *yield*.<sup>70</sup>

American professor Laurence Richter's guideline for the Russian /l/ is less meticulous and more prosaic. He considers the hard л to be much harder even than the English final dark l, and claims that it is one of the most common giveaways of the American English singer. He writes that hard Russian л is pronounced with the tongue in the same contour as in English r as heard in the words *earn* or *earth*. A good exercise, he suggests, is to say *grrr*, holding everything in place except the tip of the tongue which then moves forward only far enough to make dental contact. Once achieved, say *girl* with the l in the throat, as if gargling with it, and hold onto it as long as the breath allows.<sup>71</sup> Richter eschews the "continental" /l/, claiming it sounds "comically wrong to the Russian ear."<sup>72</sup>

Russian professor of linguistics E. A. Briygunov also considers the difficult consonant and provides a lateral-view figure contrasting the tongue positions of the palatized and non-palatized л.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>71</sup> Richter, x.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

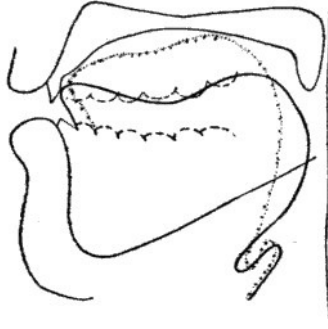


Рис. 15. Согласные л —  
л'...

### Tongue Position for Palatized and Unpalatized л

FIGURE 12<sup>73</sup>

Briygunov writes that some Russian teachers of foreign students think that it is difficult for these students to articulate the hard /l/, but this opinion can be explained by the fact that the teachers are allowing the students to substitute the “European” or Continental /l/ in place of the soft /l/. Consequently they have difficulty grasping the hard /l/ by not fully understanding the correct Russian formation of the soft /l/.<sup>74</sup>

### Articulation of ж, ц, ч, ш and щ

These five consonants are usually rendered in English by digraphs, a combination of two letters, although their orthography is not consistent. For example, the Russian character ш takes the IPA symbol /ʃ/; in English that sound can be spelled *sh* in *ship*, *s* in *sure*, *ss* in *Russian*, *c* in *facial*, *sc* in *luscious*, *x* in *anxious*, or *t* in *diction*.<sup>75</sup> The Russian sound is much harder than the corresponding English sound, however. Instead of being raised toward the hard palate as in the English articulation, the “tongue is flat and spread, with its blade slightly curved back,” in a position similar to the American English *r*.<sup>76</sup> This results in a “darker, “ more rounded /ʃ/ sound, and demands much less tension in the stylo-glossus muscles than the more narrowly-formed American English counterpart. The

<sup>73</sup> Briygunov, 78

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. “Некоторые преподаватели считают, что трудным для иностранцев является лишь твердое л. Такое мнение объясняется тем, что эти преподаватели мирятся с полумягким, так называемым средним, или «европейским», л на месте мягкого”.

<sup>75</sup> Stilman, 17.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

singer must be careful not to let the tongue stay in the pulled-back position, but must be able to rapidly release any tongue tension before the vowel following **ш**.

Closely related to the buccal formation of **ш** is the letter **ж**. The sound of **ж** is simply a voiced version of **ш**, which in IPA would be written /ʒ/. It is a sound often heard in English, and also demonstrates variant orthography; it can be spelled with *s* as in *vision*, with *z* as in *azure* or *seizure*, and with *g* as in *prestige* or *rouge*. The voiced /ʒ/ is formed exactly like the unvoiced /ʃ/ in Russian and should present no special problems to the American singer as long as the fricative sounds are not allowed to over-darken the color the vowel following. Like the **ш**, the Russian **ж** is pronounced slightly harder than the English /ʒ/.

The letter **щ** (/ʃtʃ/) almost always causes problems for American singers. English has no direct equivalent to this sound within a particular digraph, or even in a particular word, however it may be spelled. English does, though, have the sound represented by **щ** in consonants that collide in two separate words. In English transliterations of Russian songs the sound is usually spelled *shch*, and American singers often are taught to sing the sound as in *fresh cheese*. The problem is that this only works when the speaker pronounces the two words as *one* word; if there is the slightest pause to re-enunciate the *ch* the resulting sound is not authentically Russian. American singers are so diction-conscious that over-enunciation is almost always the result, and it occurs when the singer rearticulates the hard /tʃ/ of *cheese* in his sincere desire to articulate the difference between **ш** and **щ**. A simple cure would be to speak the phrase *fresh cheese*, first emphasizing the /tʃ/ element, as if saying *fresh CHEESE*, then shifting emphasis to the /ʃ/ element of the sound, as in *freSH cheese*. The student should then sing *fresh cheese* on a descending diatonic scale, being careful not to over-enunciate or in any way call attention to the /tʃ/, until the resulting consonant feels comfortable and natural.

The unique sound of the letter **щ**, which could be represented by the IPA symbols /ʃtʃ/, often is represented orthographically by the combination of **чч** and **щч**. A complication for the American singer arises in that Russian regional inflection varies. In some parts of Russia **щ** is pronounced as *shsh*, as in *fresh sheets*,<sup>77</sup> which makes it

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 19.

comparable to the training American singers are given to achieve an Italian double consonant. The Italian double consonant similarity ends there, however. The “stop” required for the well-executed Italian “addio” must be completely eliminated in Russian; only the lengthening of time required to sustain the consonant is analogous. Ward states that a larger portion of the front of the tongue is raised towards the hard palate in forming both the **ш** and the **ж** than in the corresponding English sounds /ʃ/ and /ʒ/. He supports the observation made above, that American singers tend to over-enunciate the /tʃ/ part when articulating **ш**, by saying that the closure formed by the front of the tongue against the hard palate at the beginning of the /tʃ/ element is “very weak” when heard in native Russian singers.<sup>78</sup>

Piatak and Avrashov write that the pronunciation of the letter **ш** in a Russian song depends on the date the poem was written in addition to the region of the former Soviet Union in which the poet resided. The songs of Prokofiev and other 20<sup>th</sup> century composers take the generally accepted modern pronunciation of an elongated /ʃ/ with the middle part of the tongue raised towards the hard palate. However, most of the songs likely to be sung by American singers will have been written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; for that era, the correct sound is /ʃtʃ/ since 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry predates the general acceptance of the current sound. This /ʃtʃ/ cluster is also the standard pronunciation in St. Petersburg.<sup>79</sup>

The letter **ш** is always pronounced /ts/ and the letter **щ** is always pronounced /tʃ/. Differences arise in that the former (**ш**) is always hard and never palatized, whereas the latter (**щ**) is always soft and treated as a palatal variant.<sup>80</sup>

A few miscellaneous deviations of pronunciation from spelling occur in Russian lyrics that concern the American singer. The first is the word **что**, both a subject meaning *what* and a relative pronoun meaning *that*. Its grammatical usage parallels the English *that* and the German *das*, although the meanings differ. Despite the fact that the first letter is **ч** (/tʃ/), the word is always pronounced with /ʃ/ as the beginning sound: **что** = /ʃto/. The same shift from /tʃ/ to /ʃ/ happens in the common word **конечно**, which means “of course.” Its IPA spelling would be /kan'jɛʃna/.

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<sup>78</sup> Ward, 44.

<sup>79</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 18.

<sup>80</sup> Stilman, 18-19.

Another spelling-pronunciation anomaly occurs in the letter **r** being pronounced /v/. Because the words where this often appears are very frequent in Russian, the American singer is bound to encounter them frequently. The word **ero**, which means *him* or *his*, is a prime example. The correct pronunciation is /jɪ'vo/. Similar are the words which contain **-ero** and **-oro** medially or as endings: **моего** **страшего** брата (*my older brother*); **сегодня** (*today*); **ничего** (*nothing*).

### Consonant and vocalic assimilation

As in German, Russian final consonants are unvoiced, so that words ending in a voiced consonant are pronounced with a final voiceless consonant. In German this concept is evident in the voicing or unvoicing of /b/, /d/, and /g/. In initial or medial positions these three consonants are voiced; in final position of the word or word part, however, they are pronounced like their unvoiced counterparts /p/, /t/, and /k/.<sup>81</sup> This extends to include combinations of **-bt** and **-gd** when they are final, as illustrated below:

TABLE 8

#### Consonant Assimilations of /b/, /d/, and /g/

German	
<i>Spelled</i>	<i>Pronounced</i>
Tod	/tot/
Weg	/vek/
gibt	/gipt/
erfolgreich	/ɛrfɔlkraɪç/
abfahren	/apfərən/

Russian	
<i>Spelled</i>	<i>Pronounced</i>
раб	/rab/
род	/rod/
друг	/druk/

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 142.



Consonant unvoicing does not occur in Russian if it violates the even stronger phonological principle of consonant assimilation. The same is true in German. When two or more consonants are pronounced together without pause in Russian they must all be voiced, or they must all be voiceless. This is true whether the consonant pair occurs within the same syllable, over syllable boundaries, or even over word boundaries.<sup>82</sup>

TABLE 9

**Russian Paired Consonant Assimilation**

<i>Spelled</i>	<i>Pronounced</i>
водка	/votka/
просьба	/prozba/
раб дул	/rab dul/
род был	/rod bɪl/
друг жал	/drug ʒal/

If the musical or breath phrase is broken between these consonant assimilations, the singer must devoice the consonant as if the word stood alone. This assimilation phenomenon occurs in the diction of other languages as well, particularly where voiced and unvoiced consonants are paired. The second letter of the Italian word *sfigurare* is an unvoiced consonant; therefore, the first letter must also be unvoiced: /sfigurare/. The words *smanie*, *sbarra*, *sdegnare*, *sventura*, and *sgelo* all have voiced consonants as their second letter, requiring the initial *s* to become /z/.<sup>83</sup> Any beginning American singer who has ever tried to pronounce *svegliate* as /sveljate/ instead of /zveljate/ knows how difficult and awkward the incorrect pronunciation is to sing. The word simply “flows” better when pronounced with a pair of matching voiced consonants.

<sup>82</sup> Richter, xi.

<sup>83</sup> Wall, *Diction for Singers*, 88-89.

Vocalic assimilation principles are applied in a similar way. The rules of Russian orthography do not permit the **ы** vowel to be used after **ш** or **ж**; but the syllables written as **ши** or **жи** are always pronounced “шы” and “жы.” After the letter **ц**, **и** is written in words originating from another language and **ы** in native Russian words. Regardless of the spelling, the pronunciation is always “цы.” For example, the word for “machine” is машина; the original Russian word for “fathers” is отцы. In both words the underlined vowel is pronounced /i/. This pattern continues into words containing an unstressed **е**, normally pronounced **и**. Following **ш**, **ж**, or **ц** the **е** vowel is pronounced /i/. Examples of this rule are found in the words шептать, он пишет, жена, and центральный.<sup>84</sup> The underlined vowels in these words are never pronounced in the bright, forward Italianate /e/ sound that Russian uses before a palatized consonant or one of the front vowels. Because of the tongue position of the **ш**, **ж**, and **ц** consonants, the only tongue position possible for the subsequent vowel is a central one. Central vowels are formed with the highest part of the tongue occupying the central part of the mouth; if the **ш**, **ж**, and **ц** are properly formed, based on Stilman’s suggested tongue position of the American **ɹ**, then the Russian central vowel /i/ is the only vowel that can logically occur.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

## STRESS AND LENGTH

Syllabic stress in Russian is quite strong, yet only one syllable is stressed in each word. Very few of the secondary stresses that are common in English occur in Russian.<sup>85</sup> Unstressed syllables are shorter and less distinct than stressed syllables and, as discussed in the section on Russian vowels, some vowels change their value depending on whether or not they are stressed. Boyanus remarks on the general impression that “a Russian speaks much louder than an Englishman,” claiming that this is because “the stressed syllable is spoken much louder and the distribution of the speaker’s voice...is different from the English.”<sup>86</sup> He writes that there is a “fall of the voice” after the Russian stressed syllable, and that the post-stressed syllables are weak and often devoiced representing a marked contrast of loudness and strength with weak and sometimes unvoiced syllables.<sup>87</sup>

In English the sound distribution is more even, secondary stress is more common, the stressed syllable is generally not so loud, and post-stressed syllables are never as weak or voiceless as in Russian. The native English-speaker, when speaking (or singing) Russian almost always gives himself away when he speaks two- or three-syllable Russian words which end in a vowel and have stress on the penultimate syllable. The Englishman or American will give too much emphasis to the final syllable, whereas the Russian native speaker will say it very weakly, nearly voiceless. Even in the two-syllable Russian feminine names Ольга, Маша, and Катя, and in the commonly known thank-you спасибо, American speakers want to give equality to the weak syllable, destroying the Russian intonation and natural flow of the language.

Russian has no diacritical marks or accents to denote stress, with one exception. When the letter ё (/jo/) appears it is *always* stressed, no matter where it appears in a word: её (/jɛ'jo/); тёплой ('tjopləi); житьё (/ʒit'jo/). The letter ё only occurs in stressed

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<sup>85</sup> Stilman, 4.

<sup>86</sup> Boyanus, 74.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

syllables and only before a hard consonant. Problems arise in that it is common to find only half of the *ě* vowels printed correctly in a Russian song text, even if some of the words have been so marked.<sup>88</sup> A dictionary (or a native speaker) is the diligent singer's only recourse in these situations.

An interesting aspect of Russian stress is that the consonant connected to the stressed syllable will remain weak.<sup>89</sup> In English, strong syllables usually include a strong consonant. Compare the following Russian and English sound-alike words, noting how much more active the initial consonant is in the English word:

**шѐл** – *dole*                      **дом** – *Tom*                      **сон** – *shone*

This has a direct parallel to Russian poetry. Boyanus uses as an example Mayakovsky's poem *Что такое хорошо и что такое плохо* (*What is Good and What is Bad*) and points out the rhyming pairs used by the poet.<sup>90</sup> The right column is the IPA transcription.

TABLE 10

**Mayakovsky's Rhyming Pairs Illustrating Syllabic Stress**

пришѐл	pri'ʃol
хорошо	xəra'ʃo
загрохал	za'groxəl
плохо	'ploxə
свете	'svjete
детям	'djetjɪm
ночи	'hotʃi
очень	'otʃɪn
порошок	pəra'ʃok
хорошо	xəra'ʃo

<sup>88</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Boyanus, 74.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 75.

Table 10, cont.

драчун	dra'tʃun
не хочу	nʲɪ xa'tʃu
ростом	'rostəm
просто	'prostə
заохав	za'oxəf
плохо	'ploxo

The rhyme scheme is very loosely based, not on spelling, nor on use of the same consonants, but on the strength and length of the strong syllable in each word. Knowing this can help a singer very much, particularly when he is trying to decide whether *все* is to be pronounced /vsjɛ/ or /vsjo/ and there is no dieresis to aid him. Boyanus suggests that this weak consonant in a closed syllable may be the result of the fact that Russian is essentially a language of open syllables (syllables ending in a vowel) and that the Russian speaker's habit is to stress the vowel only. This may be because in earlier stages of the language there were almost no closed syllables as can be seen from the use of the ъ and ь symbols, the so-called “hard” and “soft” signs.<sup>91</sup>

In Russian there are so many exceptions to the stress patterns that there seem to be no consistent rules. Some vowels change their pronunciation in relation to the consonants surrounding them or their position of stress. English, too, shares this characteristic: we say *geography* and *geographic*, and the *o* changes from /ɔ/ to /ə/.<sup>92</sup> Change in number or declension will also alter Russian pronunciation and shift stress. A good dictionary will certainly help, but often only the root will be given and variant forms may not be included.<sup>93</sup>

Russian has monotonic stress, as opposed to polytonic stress in which stresses with various pitches alter word meaning. Chinese or Lithuanian would be examples of languages which are highly dependent on polytonic stress. English examples of polytonic stress within a phrase might include the sentence, *Where are you going?* One could ask,

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>92</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 10.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

*Where are you going? Where are you going? Where are you going? or Where are you going?* with the syllabic stress of each question implying a different expected response. In Russian, variations in stress are dependent upon phonetic conditions and are connected with an entire sentence rather than an individual word, as in the English example above or in German. Variations of pitch in stress are not used to differentiate the sound structures of words and grammatical form—rhythm, intonation, and grammatical structure are not an essential part of word-stress, but serve rather to emphasize aspects of sentence meaning.<sup>94</sup>

In this same vein, length and brevity of Russian stressed vowels do not have a semantic function and do not change the meaning of the words as they often do in English. Putting the following word pairs into brief sentences (not simply speaking the words in isolation) will illustrate how much American English-speakers lengthen the vowel of the second of each pair.

TABLE 11

**Illustration of Vowel Length Altering Semantic Context in English**

<i>bit - beat</i>	Let's wait a <i>bit</i> – Give it one more <i>beat</i>
<i>mill - meal</i>	He went to the <i>mill</i> – I'm ready for a <i>meal</i>
<i>sit - seat</i>	Why don't you <i>sit</i> – Please take a <i>seat</i>

While the music itself can serve as a general guide in determining stress, care must be taken also to note any changes in spelling that might alter stress.<sup>95</sup> Composers such as Rachmaninov and Shostakovich were very good at using music to match the stress patterns of their lyrics; Stravinsky, on the other hand, frequently and deliberately set music contrary to the natural rhythm of the text.<sup>96</sup> Tchaikovsky's songs are quite beautiful and highly melodic, yet he was serving the spirit of music and not always the muse of poetry.

<sup>94</sup> Avanesov, 20.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 10.

As discussed earlier, the final unstressed syllable is often the weakest and is sometimes devoiced, or voiceless. The strongest of the unstressed syllables, the pretonic, is always the syllable immediately before the stressed one. It is most distinctly heard when it is an /a/ sound. All of the unstressed syllables before the tonic, or stressed, syllable are stronger than the syllable that follows the tonic. Boyanus uses a scale to denote the decreasing level of importance of syllabic stress within a word:

1. Stressed syllable—the loudest and the strongest.
2. Next strongest is the syllable immediately before the stress, the pretonic syllable.
3. Then comes the initial syllable or group of syllables.
4. Post-stressed syllables are weaker than the initial syllables.
5. Final syllable is the very weakest, sometimes devoiced, voiceless, or of a “glidal” character.<sup>97</sup>

In English, words which have two or more syllables before the primary stress generally have two stresses: *competition*; *corresondent*; *reminiscence*. If the English learner carries over into Russian his habit of double-stressing the longer words, the rhythm and intonation will be affected and the result is un-Russian. This tendency should be avoided particularly when singing; over-accenting the strong syllables can destroy a legato line as easily as over-enunciating the consonants.

### **Articulation of double, triple, and multiple consonants**

Very few double consonants appear in Russian. Only **вв**, **дд**, **зз**, **мм**, **нн**, **сс**, and **тт** naturally occur in Russian, and these infrequently. **кк** occasionally appears in words derived from some other language. The double /з/ sound is formed by the letters **зж** and **жз**. Most of these doubled consonants are simply elongated pronunciations of a single consonant, like the doubled **ll**, **mm**, or **nn** in Italian. There is never any stop and repetition of the consonant sound, though, as occurs in the Italian double **tt**, **dd**, or **pp**. A double **с** in Russian is sounded as a single /s/: *рассветать* = /rasvjɛ'tat/<sup>98</sup>

The articulation of two or three consonants clustered in a word poses no particular problems in articulation for the majority of American singers. After all, words with a high

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<sup>97</sup> Boyanus, 76.

<sup>98</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 17-18.

consonant count occur often in English and German. Consider the words *campstool*, *catchphrase*, and *birthplace*; or *Festschrift*, *Nachschlag*, and *Weltschmerz*. But many a singer freezes at the sight of four or more Cyrillic consonants clustered in a single word. The difference lies in the juxtaposition of the consonants, and the fact that common Russian consonant clusters simply do not trip off the American tongue as easily as *thpl*, *tchphr*, or *mpst* do. Russian words juxtapose /vzr/, /vm/, /mn/, and /stsv/, as in *взрастил*, *вместе*, *много*, and *расцвели*. These combinations are less familiar to American ears; nevertheless, with practice these unusual sounds become readily available to the American tongue.

All sounds which are interpreted as speech are made by valvings of the larynx, the nasal port, the lips, and the tongue. By far, the latter has the most range of movement and serves as the main articulator.<sup>99</sup> The tongue's movement during speech or song involves going from one position to another, usually quite rapidly. The sequencing of these movements to achieve consonantal groups with vowels interspersed is a complex activity of the brain's speech centers. These muscle movements and the timing of the overlapping and blending of sounds which occur in normal word formation should never be considered in isolation. Instead they must be observed in the way they occur as a series of movements. For instance, in the word *campstool* there is a blending of three consonants. While the lips are still occluded for the /mp/ (with phonation at the larynx ceasing with the beginning of the /p/), the tip of the tongue rises for the /s/ and leaves a small anterior median opening for the escape of air. Finally the overlapping with the initial movement of the tongue for the forming of the /t/ occurs and the articulation is achieved.<sup>100</sup>

Consonant overlappings and blendings occur constantly in speech, and can also occur in song without distracting from the sung sound. If the sequencing and overlapping are thoroughly understood, it should be unnecessary for the singer to produce any extraneous articulator movements which could detract from the artistic communication of the poetry being sung.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Jean Westerman Gregg, "On Overlapping and Blending in Articulation," *Journal of Singing* 53 (May, 1997): 53.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*



That being said, the problem remains that the phoneme clusters unfamiliar to the ear and difficult for the tongue of the American singer must become easily articulated in order to sing authentic Russian song or opera. One of the very best ways to learn complicated consonant clusters is to break the colliding sounds apart, put vowels on either side of them, and rebuild them in small increments. It is extremely tricky for American singers to say properly the simple Russian word *мне* (/mnjɛ/), which means *me* and as such appears quite frequently in Russian poetry and libretti. The American tongue usually cannot resist slipping in an extra syllable, an almost inaudible vowel, between the /m/ and /n/, rendering the word /mə'njɛ/. This pronunciation is not only incorrect, but the error is compounded by the fact that, having added the /ə/, a one-syllable word is now turned into a two-syllable word and the singer feels that stress must be added to the second syllable!

If the singer repeatedly speaks the phrase “I’m never” until it flows easily, removes the “I” until it seems natural, then drops the last “-ver,” he can achieve the last step toward perfection by gently inserting a slight glide (/j/) as the tongue finishes the /n/. The proof of this process lies in the fact that American singers almost never have trouble pronouncing the phrase *со мной*, which means *with me*, because of the naturally occurring vowel before the /m/. The mind latches onto this and sees the phrase as two syllables, *со мной* (/səm' noi/) rather than the correct *со мной* /sə 'mnoi/ which is what the orthography dictates. It is perfectly acceptable to approach the phrase this way as long as the singer is careful not to inadvertently insert the pesky /ə/ between the /m/ and the /n/.

A similar aid to learning the **в**, or /v/, sound can be employed. The letter **в** when used alone is a preposition meaning *in, at, into, to, or for*. It is an extremely common preposition in Russian and frequently occurs at the beginning of a phrase; the Rachmaninov song *В молчаньи ночи тайной* is an example. Its IPA transcription would be /v mɐl 'tʃan ji 'no tʃi 'tai nɔi/. The first two sounds are the consonants /v+m/, an unlikely English combination unless one considers the phrase “I love Molly.” By gradually dropping the initial and final syllables of the English phrase, one can achieve isolation of the /v+m/ phoneme and work with it until it seems effortless. Many of the

Russian consonant clusters will need to be treated in a similar fashion. It is not difficult; it merely takes practice, as any new skill does. **В** also appears before a vast number of consonants in prefixes and roots of Russian words. In each instance in Table below, the singer should only vibrate the /v/ or /f/ sound lightly before articulating the consonant which follows. The first row shows words where the second consonant is voiced, which requires the **В** to also be voiced; the second row lists words where the second consonant is unvoiced and the **В** must take the sound of its unvoiced partner /f/.

TABLE 12

**Voiced and Unvoiced Consonants Preceded by В**

<b>В</b> pronounced /v/ before voiced consonant	ВГОНЯТЬ	ВДОВОЛЬ	ВЗЛЁТ	ВНОСИТЬ	ВМЕСТО
<b>В</b> pronounced /f/ before unvoiced consonant	ВКУС	ВПРАВДУ	ВСПЛЁСКИВАТЬ	ВЧЕРА	ВХОД

In the diction of any language, including Russian, the American singer must learn not only how to produce each sound, but also gain an understanding of and a skillful ability to juxtapose the sounds in a natural way. The listener's attention should never be diverted to the manner of articulation; true artistic singing conveys the thoughts and meanings of the poetry within a beautiful, legato line.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

## RUSSIAN ORTHOGRAPHY

A section on Russian orthography is included because many, if not most, of the lyrics of the Russian songs and operas American singers will sing were written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Soon after the 1917 Revolution Lenin decreed that all Russians should learn to read.

As long as there is such a thing in the country as illiteracy it is hard to talk about political education....The illiterate person stands outside politics. First it is necessary to teach him the alphabet. Without it there are only rumors, fairy tales, prejudices, but not politics.<sup>103</sup>

Lenin's reform of Russian spelling was only the most recent and the largest of reforms.<sup>104</sup> The first Russian spelling reformer was Peter the Great. Like other early unifiers of new nations, such as Charlemagne and Alfred, Peter sought vernacular literacy in order to promote national unity. Peter introduced his "civil script" in 1708, which eliminated several letters of the alphabet as well as all diacritical marks and accents (with the exception of Ѣ) from secular usage. This was the first time in nearly a thousand years that a distinction appeared between Russian as a secular language and Old Church Slavonic.<sup>105</sup>

Several miscellaneous adjustments were made on an ad-hoc basis throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the Russian literary language evolved to its modern and highly standardized form. These included the introduction of the letter ё and the gradual loss of the letter ѡ that had corresponded with the Greek upsilon (Υ) and the Latin y.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/wrussref.htm>, [accessed 26 July 2004], s.v. "Russian spelling reforms."

<sup>104</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.org>, [accessed 26 July 2004], s.v. "Reforms of Russian orthography."

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Even before Lenin came to power in 1917 the Russian Academy of Sciences had been pondering orthographic reforms of the language. As early as 1904 their plan was prepared and organized, and it was modified further in 1912. Consequently, the blueprint for reform was ready and available in 1917. As soon as the Bolsheviks seized power they ratified and imposed sweeping spelling decrees. The heroic literary campaign of 1917-1921 was comprised of 6- to 10-week courses for the illiterate urban masses, who were enduring intense conditions of famine and civil war throughout Russia. By the mid-1920s the orthographic reform was almost complete, and rules were in place that simplified spelling and eliminated surplus letters.<sup>107</sup>

On October 10, 1918, the following changes were decreed in Russian orthography:

1. The letters **ѣ**, **ѣ**, and **ѣ** were replaced by **е**, **е**, and **ѣ** respectively.
2. **ѣ** was eliminated at the ends of words, but kept in order to separate a hard consonant from a soft vowel in the middle of words.
3. **ѣ** in certain prefixes was changed to **е** before all voiceless consonants, including **ѣ**.<sup>108</sup>

The use of the letter **ѣ** is still retained in Ukrainian and other Cyrillic-based Slavic languages. The use of the letter *yat* (**ѣ**) and the inclusion of the “hard” sign at ends of words (**ѣ**) are the two changes that affect American singers the most. That it was retained without discussion in the Petrine reforms of 1708 indicates that the letter **ѣ** still marked a distinct sound. By the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the “father of modern Russian” Mikhail Lomonosov noted shortly before his death in 1765 that the sound of **ѣ** was barely distinguishable from that of the letter **е**. A century later (1878) the philologist Grot stated in his standard book *Русское правописание (Russian Orthography)* that in the common language there was no difference at all between their pronunciations. There is no way of knowing today exactly how the *yat* was pronounced, although it is claimed that in certain rustic regional dialects a degree of aural distinction currently is retained in syllables once denoted with **ѣ**.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., “Russian spelling reforms.”

<sup>108</sup> Piatak and Avrashov, 18.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., “Russian spelling reforms.”

Even students of modern Russian are confounded when they first encounter 19<sup>th</sup> century texts. The American singer dealing with 19<sup>th</sup> century texts must be aware that the ѣ may be sung as either e or ě, and the correct pronunciation can be verified in a Russian dictionary. Replacing the abolished letter with its substitute and ignoring the ъ at the ends of words is really all that is necessary.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mezzo-soprano Sherri Moore Weiler was born in Greenville, SC, and received both the BA and M.Ed degrees from Clemson University. She received the MM degree from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and the DM degree from Florida State University in 2004. Weiler has taught voice at Alaska Pacific University, University of Alaska Anchorage, Florida A&M University, Florida State University, and is currently Assistant Professor of Music at Shorter College in Rome, GA. She served as Director and Artistic Director of Anchorage Opera's Studio Theatre, a young artist program, from 2000-2002. Weiler has worked part-time as a non-licensed voice therapist in an otolaryngology office and has coached singers with the Air Force Band of the Pacific. Her professional publications include two articles accepted for publication in the *Journal of Singing* on the songs of Wagner and Berlioz; professional presentations include a lecture-recital tracing folk elements in Russian art song from 1850-1950 performed for both the Southern Chapter and the 47th annual national conference of the College Music Society in November 2004. Weiler was a featured chamber music performer at the 48th national conference of the National Association of Teachers of Singing in July 2004. She has also written articles for *Classical Singer* magazine.

As a performer Weiler was selected by Mstislav Rostropovich to sing the mezzo solo in Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* with the National Symphony in 1992 which helped instill a great love and appreciation for Russian vocal literature. For fourteen years Weiler coached Russian language and song literature with Svetlana Velichko, a graduate of and 29-year member of the piano faculty of the Moscow Conservatory. The two have a compact disc on the Centaur label, released in 2001, titled *Russia: Golden Century of Song*. Weiler has performed the Verdi *Requiem* with Jerome Hines, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with Erie Mills, and a Schubert bicentennial recital with John Wustman in 2000. She has appeared with the Florida State Opera, Anchorage Opera, Sacramento Opera, and Cleveland Opera companies in roles including Mrs. Grose (*The Turn of the Screw*), Iolanthe, Mercedes (*Carmen*), and the Mother in Menotti's two operas *The Consul* and *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. The artist has given recitals for Willamette University, Portland State University, Oregon Music Teachers' Association, Anchorage Opera, Anchorage Festival of Music, the University of Alaska Anchorage, Florida A&M University, and Shorter College.