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**Italian Musical Effects and Authentic Phonetics:
Effective lyric diction in *Crude furie* by Handel**

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Abstract

Italian is the most commonly used language in the repertory of Western classical vocal music. Italian vocal music spreads globally and is a compulsory genre of music for classical vocal studies all around the globe including in Malaysia. This study investigates the effective lyric diction of Italian, including surveying the musical effects caused by the language and its authentic phonetics, in an attempt to discover ways for singers to communicate the language effectively in singing. A detailed analysis of the opera aria *Crude furie* by composer George Fredrich Handel will be carried out to apply those ideas into practice.

Keywords: lyric diction, Italian diction, vocal arts, opera

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1.0 Introduction

While music transcends borders, singing is limited by language. Languages define boundaries, not just impart distinctive flavours. They also provide a backdrop of literature and culture. For musicologists, especially singers, the knowledge of languages opens doors to the stage and personal development. However, effective lyric diction in music is essential for the audience to grasp its context. Lyric diction refers to the study of the pronunciation of a particular language in the context of singing. If a song's text is not clear, the audience will find the song nonsensical. Although singing occasionally employs nonsense words or vocables, most singing employ text conveying a narrative or poetic text (Johnson et al., 2014). Thus, the study of lyric diction becomes an important feat for a singer to convey and communicate the text effectively in performance.

The opera, the oratorio, and the repertoire of art songs can include the following languages: Italian, French, German, Russian, English, Spanish, Czech, and other less commonly spoken languages. Mastery of lyric diction enables singers to perform these repertoires without speaking the languages they are singing. This is certainly true for Italian. Although singing in Italian is common among classical musicians, the systematic tools and ways of how singers can communicate the language effectively are not commonly known and taught.

Therefore, two main research questions prompted the initiation of this study. Firstly, what are the effective ways of practising Italian lyric diction? Secondly, how does effective lyric diction be applied in *Crude furie* by George Fredrich Handel? These research questions lead to the two main objectives of this research, namely to discover effective ways to practice Italian lyric diction and to study the application of effective lyric diction in *Crude furie* by George Fredrich Handel.

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2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

The International Phonetic Association was founded in 1886 and created a system of notating human sound using a one-symbol to one-sound ratio. This alphabet is called the International Phonetic Alphabet or IPA (Leigh, S.A. 2016). It is an effort to standardise spoken sounds into consistent alphabets, which worked to make it accessible to non-linguist singers. To pronounce and sing foreign words accurately, students learn the IPA in lyric diction classes (Mahaney, C. L. 2006). David Adams (1999) in his staple diction book, "Handbook of Diction for Singers", clarifies that the Italian language is challenging to speak and sing well and emphasised that the singer must have a thorough knowledge of the IPA to be a successful singer and communicator.

2.2 Italian language

Many believe that the Italian language lends itself more beautifully to singing than any other language. In his book, Adler (1965) mentioned a few times that as suggested by its use of only seven vowels, the comparative simplicity of Italian makes it the easiest language to sing. He also added that it would be the first language to be discussed, and its vowels will form the basis for those of all other languages with which singers should be familiar, at least phonetically. It is not assumed that all native Italians have excellent speech habits. As is the case in any country, the Italian language is influenced by regional dialects that influence speech patterns. This can be supported by Lehmann (1993), who mentioned how easy it is for the Italians, who by nature have gained the facilities for singing through the characteristics of their first language.

2.3 Italian diction and musical effects

Kurt Adler (1965) stated that the science of producing and pronouncing sounds is called phonetics; the enunciation of words and sentences synthesised from sounds is called diction. In particular, Italian diction creates musical effects, which is said to be a "language built to be sung" by Matteo Dalle Fratte (2018). The concept of the three musical effects is revolutionary and monumental to the effective lyric diction that one wants to achieve while singing in Italian. In the book "Vocal Wisdom: Maxims of Giovanni Battista Lamperti", the author mentions never separating diction from singing, not even in thought (Lamperti, 1973). He expressed particularly strong opinions on the subject and added that if one thinks 'good diction' is an enemy of 'good tone production', then one is on the wrong track.

3.0 Methodology

To understand the ways of effective lyric diction in Italian, and how to apply it to *Crude furie*, a qualitative research method is used. This is done through two main methods: literature analysis and music analysis.

3.1 Literature analysis

Documents, journals, articles, and other literature regarding lyric diction in Italian will be analysed to systemise the ways of practising effective lyric diction in Italian. The data acquired will be used to form concepts of effective lyric diction, in an attempt to understand and achieve the first research objective.

3.2 Music analysis

According to music theorist Ian Bent, music analysis "is the means of answering the question directly 'How does it work?'" (Bent, I. 1987). In this study, the vocal score of *Crude furie* by Handel will be used for the analysis. This particular aria is chosen because of its energetic nature, which accentuates the importance of effective lyric diction in its performance. The analysis will be carried out in two main areas: text and music. In analysing text, an attempt will be made to categorise and systematically approach the text in the context of lyric diction, and its effects on the articulation they impose. When analysing the music, it will be combined with the textual analysis and their musical effects to develop principles of applying effective lyric diction to this aria.

4.0 Findings and discussion through literature analysis

Through the literature analysis, several areas regarding Italian lyric diction are found and arranged. These are the important concepts that authors, phoneticians, and researchers have mentioned and elaborated which shows their importance in the study of lyric diction in Italian.

4.1 Syllabification

Syllabification is essential to determine the relative length of vowel and consonant sounds. Italian employs an open syllabification system, which means the words end with vowels instead of consonants.

4.2 Italian word stress

Word stress pattern, or syllabic stress, is an essential part of Italian phonetics that should not be ignored. However, word stress isn't always clear in musical contexts. Syllables that are stressed are marked with a symbol that signifies their stress in the IPA. The stress in most Italian words with two or more syllables is on the penultimate (second-to-last) syllable, as in *croce* and *delizia*. That said, the

antepenultimate (third-to-last) syllable is stressed in a large number of words. Because of this, unfamiliar words should be checked in a reliable dictionary.

4.3 Vowels

Numerous classifications exist for vowels. The simplest way to categorise them is to divide them into the front, back, and middle according to the tongue and lip positions. Italian contains seven vowel sounds and five vowel letters. Open and closed [e] and [o] vowels are only used in speech and these specific variations do not apply to singing. Italian singing is lovely because of the dynamic expressions, variety of vowel colours, and *chiaroscuro* singing without affecting our understanding of the language.

A glide is a short vowel sound within the same syllable that gives a longer vowel sound. 'Semi-consonant' and 'semi-vowel' have the same meaning as 'glide'. Glides lead up to the main vowel which is longer and stronger. The glide is short and weak, which tends to sound like a consonant.

A diphthong occurs when two vowel sounds appear in the same syllable. They are diphthongs if they all belong to the same syllable. These diphthongs are formed by clearly pronouncing each vowel separately without linking them together. Diphthongs must be spelt with two vowels since Italian vowels have always been pure. When a diphthong occurs in a stressed syllable, one vowel sound is longer than the other, referred to as a syllabic sound. The first vowel is usually syllabic, whereas the second vowel is not always. The syllable vowel is stressed, and syllabification rules control the vowel length. Both vowel sounds are short and equal when the diphthong occurs in an unstressed syllable.

Triphthongs occur when three consecutive vowels appear in a single syllable. Each vowel must be pronounced clearly and separately but with *legato*. Musical accents must be consistent with phonetic stress. The accentuated vowel receives the longer part of the note.

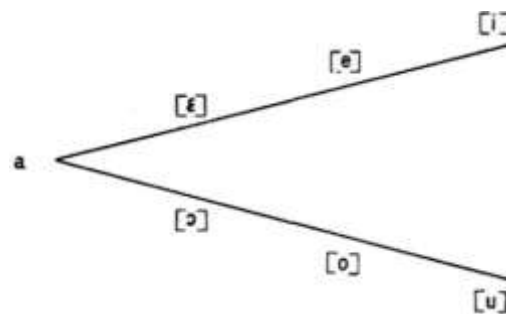


Fig. 1: The seven Italian vowels
(Source: Adler)

4.4 Consonants

The essential part of idiomatic Italian singing is in its consonants. The consonants are created by obstructing the free flow of the air stream, deflecting, or interrupting it. There are many possible classification systems for consonants. There are four essential points to remember about Italian consonants. First, Italian makes an apparent distinction between single and double consonants. Second, consonants, especially *b*, *d*, *p* and *t*, must be unaspirated, and the sound *k* releases far less air than in English. Moreover, consonants should be articulated as far forward as possible, especially *d*, *f*, and *s*. Lastly, It is vital to master the two *r* sounds: the tongue flip and roll. Certain consonant letters in Italian have a fixed sound and are denoted by the same IPA symbols as in English.

In Italian, long consonants are incredibly long, resulting in articulation effects in speech and music. Long consonants are written as double consonants, within or between words, or as consonant groups, either within or between words, as in *mondo*. Moreover, long consonants appear in phrasal doublings, a phenomenon in which the following consonant is doubled after certain words, such as *a casa* [akkasa], and lastly, when producing the following consonant sounds: *gn*, *gl*, *sc* and *z*.

In Italian, short consonants are extremely short and should be thought of as quick and not interrupting the sounds of the following vowel. There are only two situations where short consonants are written out. One is in the middle of a word between vowels, like *sole*. The second is when the final consonant of a word joins the vowel that begins the next word, as in *un anno*.

4.5 The musical effects of the Italian language

While the beauty of the sound of the Italian language may seem to appear in the sound of its oral and pure vowels, the pattern of consonant sounds and the effects they produce when combined with vowels contribute to the language's unique musicality. The length of consonants conveys meaning in Italian. For instance, *mamma* with a long *m* means 'mother', whereas *m'ama* with a short *m* denotes 'he loves me'. Correct sequencing of long and short consonants is critical for conveying meaning, but also contributes to the language's distinctive phonetic pattern and musical rhythm. There are three distinct musical effects within this phonetic pattern: *tenuto*, *martellato*, and *staccato*.

4.5.1 The tenuto effect

This happens when a short consonant follows a vowel. Short consonants in Italian allow the preceding vowel to be as long as the note's entire length. At the start of the next note, the short consonant is shortened and pronounced quickly. The short consonant is so brief that there appears to be no break in the sequence between the two vowels. This is why it is called the *tenuto* effect, which means 'held'. A short consonant connects the first vowel sound to the subsequent vowel sound, which is sustained and smooth.

4.5.2 The martellato effect

The *martellato* effect occurs when a long sonorant consonant, such as long *l*, *m*, *n*, and *r*, follows a vowel, or when a long sibilant consonant, such as long *s* or *f*, follows a vowel. The word *martellato* translates as 'hammered'. Sonorant consonants are formed by a voiced sound and sung without interruption. At the same time, sibilant consonants are formed by a 'hissing' unvoiced sound with no interruption. Both of these categories of consonants create a hammer-like sound, which sustains and vibrates.

4.5.3 The staccato effect

This effect happens when a long stop consonant follows a vowel, such as *tutto*. *Staccato* is the most frequently used effect in Italian, and it contributes the most colour to the language's musicality. It is created simply by a stop consonant that creates an occlusion or a halt to the airflow. The stop consonant's onset cuts off the preceding vowel. The *staccato* effect is one of the simplest to recognise in Italian vocal music due to the distinct contrast between sound and silence.

5.0 Findings and discussion through music analysis

As mentioned, the music score of *Crude furie* will be used for this study. The first part is to analyse the text of *Crude furie* based on the findings of the effective ways of practising Italian lyric diction found above. The score used is *Crude furie*, from Handel: *Serse* (Xerxes), HWV 40 (Opera in 3 Acts), published by Bärenreiter in 2006 (ISBN: 9790006526987).

5.1 Text Analysis

According to the review of the literature, IPA transcription is critical. Lyric diction literature has embraced the IPA as a "system of nomenclature" and worked to make it accessible to singers who are not linguists. Only [e] and [o] are required for the IPA transcriptions of these vowels in this case, as the opening and closing of these vowels do not apply to sung Italian. Below is the transcription of *Crude furie* by the author:

<p>Crude furie degl'orridi abissi, [krude furje deʎʎorridi abissi]</p> <p>aspergetemi d'atro veleno! [asperdʒetemi d'atro veleno]</p> <p>Crolli il mondo, [krolli il mondo]</p> <p>e'l sole s'eclissi [el sole seklissi]</p> <p>a quest'ira che spira il mio seno [a kwestira ke spira il mi:o seno]</p>
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Fig. 2: IPA transcription of *Crude furie*

5.2 The Italian musical effects

According to the findings regarding effective lyric diction in Italian, the distinct length of consonants is a significant characteristic of the language. Hence, this information is applied in analysing the text of this aria. The long consonants are bolded in blue and the short consonants in yellow as shown. Note that the first consonants on *quest'ira* and *spira* are also bolded in blue. They are considered long consonants because of the phenomenon of phrasal doubling, as discussed above.

<p>Crude furie degl'orridi abissi, aspergetemi d'atro veleno! Crolli il mondo, e'l sole s'eclissi a quest'ira che spira il mio seno</p>

Fig. 3: Long and short consonants in *Crude furie*

From the first line of text, it is clear that the variety of the *tenuto* and *martellato* effects make the music colourful. The combination of short consonants which creates the *tenuto* effect, along with the long consonants which are sibilant, creating the *martellato* effect, explains to the practitioner of music the way of effectively applying lyric diction in this passage.



Fig. 4: Measures 8-10 from *Crude furie*

As annotated, the *tenuto* effects are marked in red, and the *martellato* effects in blue. This shows an interesting pattern, especially of the upbeats in 'de' and 'di-a' respectively, where a *tenuto* is not usually applied musically. A usual way of articulation would be to emphasise the downbeats, which in turn eliminates the *tenuto* of the upbeat. In this case, however, the text demands the upbeats to be sung with *tenuto* because of the short consonants. The application of the musical effects to the music will in turn change when multiple notes share a syllable that has a *martellato* effect, as observed in another occurrence of this line of text. The last note of the syllable 'bis' will take the *martellato* effect, no matter the value of the note. This preserves the effective communication of the text in singing, without sacrificing the integrity of the language.



Fig. 5: Measures 50-52 from *Crude furie*

In contrast, the final line of the text includes the *staccato* effect, prompted by the stop consonants. This creates a mixture of all three musical effects in this line. In addition to the annotation of the *tenuto* and *martellato* effects, the *staccato* effect is marked in green. It can be observed that the mixture of these three effects creates an even more interesting musical effect compared to the opening line. This shows how the text influences the music, and how singers can apply these musical effects to not only make the music interesting but also to communicate effectively the Italian text.



Fig. 6: Measures 66-68 from *Crude furie*

6.0 Conclusion

The data gathered through the literature analysis and music analysis provided a good foundation for determining the ways of effective lyric diction in Italian. Even though no interviews were conducted for this study, the data gathered from various sources was instrumental in answering the research questions. The information found through the literature analysis aided in providing many answers concerning the Italian language and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). With several examples from various books and references, more light is shed on the effective way of practising lyric diction.

Based on the music analysis of *Crude furie*, it is clear that one can improve and portray good diction without needing to know how to speak the language first. The rules of diction of the language are clear and consistent. One does not have to become an expert in linguistics to achieve native-like pronunciation. Nevertheless, the knowledge of critical aspects of the linguistic discipline and the use of the appropriate terminology as practised by phoneticians would undoubtedly create a bridge facilitating the exchange of knowledge and understanding between experts of the spoken language and the sung language.

As a whole, this research answered the core research questions regarding effective lyric diction and its application to music. This allows singers the freedom to express the text and communicate its meanings in a systematic and approachable way.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study explored the area of effective lyric diction and its application in singing, particularly in *Crude furie*. This helps establish a good understanding of the main principles guiding the effective communication of Italian texts in singing. Though the analysis is very specific to

Crude furie, the guiding principles can be used in other Italian repertoires such as operas, art songs and oratorios. Similarly, this study can also provide guidelines for similar research done on effective lyric diction in other languages such as German, French and others.

The study of lyric diction also branches off to the study of phonetics in linguistics. It is hoped that this study can guide phoneticians to more understanding of the application of speech sounds in a context other than speech itself.

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