

*Mäßig.*



1. Du hol - de Kunst, in  
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# JOURNAL

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# SINGING

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Leslie De'Ath, Associate Editor

# The Voice and Diction Connection: A Diction Instructor's Approach to Voice Pedagogy

Cheri Montgomery



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**T**EXT AND TONE UNITE when the voice is nurtured as a phonetic instrument. Optimal vowel space combined with an energized and released articulatory apparatus gives the voice freedom to flourish. The following discussion provides an innovative pedagogic approach that utilizes articulatory awareness as its foundation. Voice pedagogy is incorporated with diction to include the topics of posture, release of interfering muscular tension, anatomy and physiology, breath control, breath support, vocal resonance and projection, legato, onsets, range extension, and flexibility.

## POSTURE AND TENSION AWARENESS

A student's capacity to discover a vibrant tone and clarity of articulation is reliant upon achieving an upright, expansive posture while releasing interfering muscular tension. These concepts are fundamental for voice and diction study. This modified version of Ware's "Rag Doll Stretch" incorporates multiple concepts in one simple assignment:<sup>1</sup>

1. Bend at the waist and swing the arms. Notice the fall-away feeling in the shoulders.
2. Stretch the arms upward. Maintain the position of the sternum while releasing and lowering the arms.
3. Repeat the fall-away feeling while standing upright by releasing muscles in the shoulders, neck, tongue, and jaw.

The lips and tongue are very busy in the singer's mouth. A released vocal apparatus is apt to facilitate energized diction since the throat is open, free, and relatively still. Consonants provide useful diagnostic tools that can be used to identify and solve issues related to tension in the neck, tongue, lips, and jaw.

**Neck Tension.** Pressed contact between the articulators leads to neck tension. Observe the bilabial point of articulation to monitor the degree of tension in a voice. For example, form [b] with tightly pressed lips. Touch the sides of the throat beneath the chin and feel how the neck muscles tighten in response. Consonant remedy: sustain an [m] with the lips barely touching. Do not form [m] with the lips turned inward. The lips tingle when light contact is achieved.

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**Tongue Base Tension.** Tension at the base of the tongue can be released by creating exercises that engage both the back and front of the tongue. Alternate between dental and velar consonants. Substantial movement of the tongue base can also be accomplished by alternating between prepalatal [ɲ] and bright [a]. Release the jaw and observe the articulations. Light contact between the tongue arch and palate enhances flexibility.

**Tongue Tip Laziness.** A lack of flexibility at the tongue tip can be resolved with exercises that employ dental consonants. A quick flip of the tongue is required for the articulation of [d], [n], [t], [l], and [r]. Alternate between the dentals and [a] to release the tongue tip from the jaw.

**Lip Tension.** Alternate between the bilabial and dental consonants to release lip tension. Observe the articulations. Light contact promotes energized enunciation. An exercise by Barbara Honn incorporates bilabial and dental consonants.<sup>2</sup>



## ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY

Students must learn to identify the differences between the singer's mouth and the speaker's mouth. Only then can they be cognizant of those articulatory movements that are unique to singing. Tasks can be simplified by pointing out that "practice" may be executed without phonation. The goal is to isolate, identify, and release muscles when an articulatory action introduces unnecessary muscular tension.

**Formation of [i].** All vowels should be sung with a released jaw. The articulators are free to move about when the jaw is disengaged from the singing process. The speaker's mouth position is very different from that of a singer. For example, the [i] for speech is formed with the lips spread and with very little space between the molars. The [i] for singing requires more space. It must be formed with a forward arch of the tongue and a released position of the jaw (Figure 1).

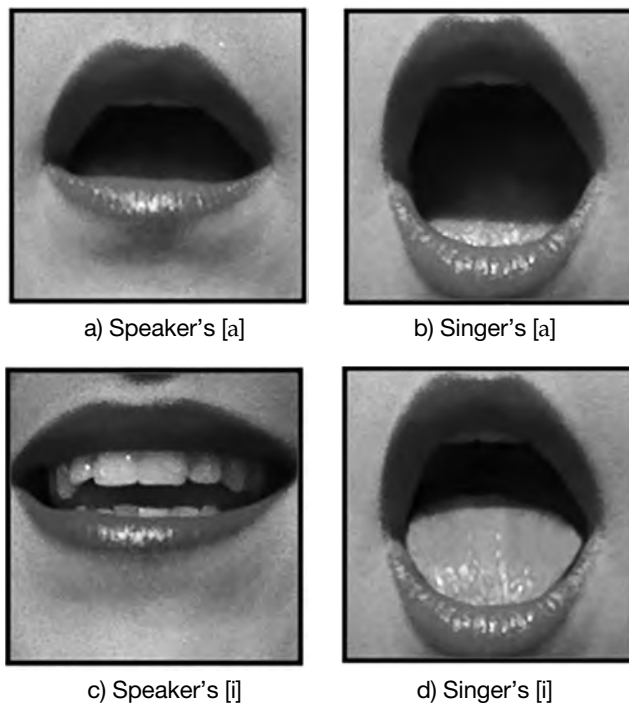


Figure 1. The speaker's mouth vs. the singer's mouth.

**Tongue Push-Ups.** Tongue arch exercises are designed to reprogram the speech muscles in preparation for singing.

1. Release the jaw for [a]. The tongue lies low and flat on the floor of the mouth while the tongue tip contacts the lower front teeth. The lips are neither rounded nor spread (Figure 1b).
2. Form [i] by arching the tongue forward. The sides of the tongue contact the length of the upper molars extending to the eye-teeth. Do not spread the lips nor alter the position of the jaw (Figure 1d).
3. Check for accuracy by whispering an [i] vowel. Record the sound to ensure that it is actually an [i] and not an [ɪ] sound. If vowel clarity is lacking, enunciate [i] with a [j] tongue arch. Note: [ɲ] and [ʌ] are examples of consonants with the most forward tongue arch.
4. Alternate between the [a] and [i] formation by means of tongue movement only. Maintain the [a] lip and jaw position.

"Good diction is the result of flexibility of the tongue and the lip and the independent action of the tongue from the jaw."<sup>3</sup>

**Consonant Remedy for the Jutting Chin.** Some singers do not find a natural release of the jaw when forming vowels. Here is a consonant remedy for the jutting chin: form a dental [d] and lower the jaw. The chin will release down instead of jut forward with the tongue in this position. Release and lower the tongue without altering the jaw position. Note: the tongue tip touches the lower front teeth for the enunciation of all vowels (except [ʒ]).

**Introducing Additional Vowels.** Clarity of diction is evidence of vocal efficiency. If tone lacks vibrancy, diction will suffer as well. Vowel clarity and distinction enhance the tone. Closed vowels are easier to focus (clarify). A focused vowel has the potential to become vibrant when sung in the height of the resonant space. Singing starts with pharyngeal space. Vowel formation follows, but never at the expense of space.

The beauty of the closed front [i] formation is that it brings the bulk of the tongue forward (opening the pharyngeal space). It may feel awkward, but it is not strenuous to front the tongue. The beauty of the closed back [u] formation is that it brings the lips forward. It may feel extreme, but a forward rounding of the lips focuses and projects the tone. Vowel migration allows the singer to benefit from closed vowels. For example, a breathy [ɛ] can be clarified by singing [ɛ] with an [i] tongue in the [a] space.

**Tongue Arch Awareness Exercise.** The tongue arch is more active in a singer's mouth. It is important to feel the arch as it moves through a sequence of vowels. This is easily experienced by forming all vowels in a closed lip position with air flowing through the nose. For example, hum a cat's meow [mieɛjæɑɔuɰw].

**Formation of Rounded Vowels.** Closed back [u] provides the fundamental shape for rounded vowels. Singers must find a natural rounding that is neither weak nor overly tense in formation. A forward rounding of the lips initiated by the cheek muscles is required (Figure 2).

**Exercise for Additional Vowels.** Mastery of closed [i] and [u] prepares the student for additional vowel study. Enunciation of closed [e] is not possible without finding the sufficient tongue fronting of [i]. Likewise, enunciation of closed [o] is not possible without finding

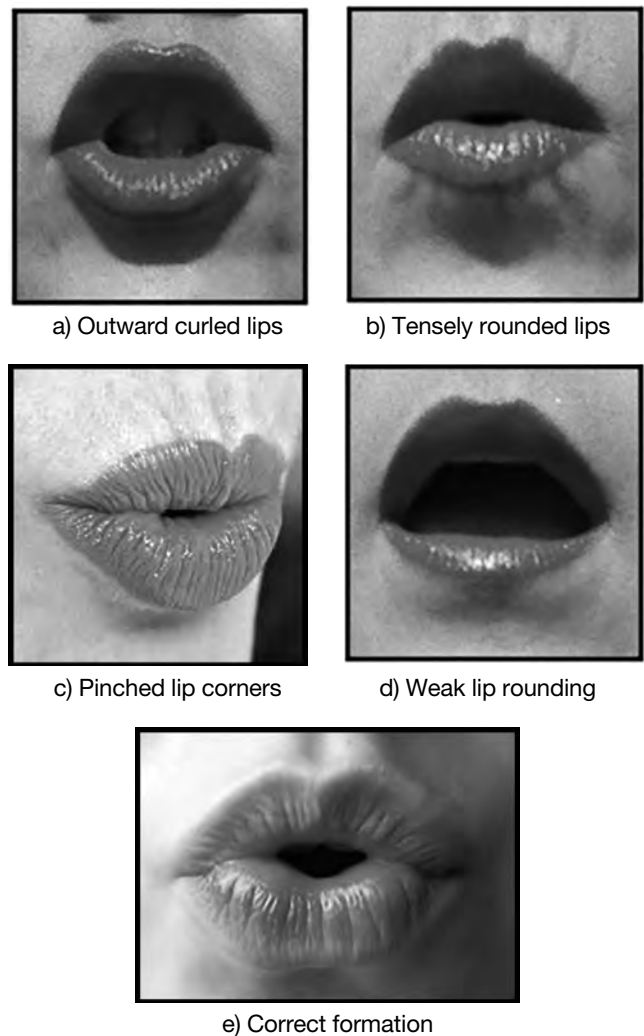


Figure 2. Incorrect and correct formation of [u].

the proper lip rounding of [u]. Tongue push-ups allow the singer to explore additional vowel formations while maintaining the space of [a]. Whisper the following sequences:

Front	Back	Mixed	Central
[a i a]	[a u a]	[a y a]	[a æ a]
[a ɪ a]	[a ʊ a]	[a ʏ a]	[a ɑ a]
[a e a]	[a o a]	[a ø a]	[a ʌ a]
[a ɛ a]	[a ɔ a]	[a œ a]	

Students may have a tone that is breathy, strident, or lacking in vibrancy, even though the vowel is accurately formed. For this reason, it is best to whisper the vowels while incorporating postural alignment, release of interfering muscular tension, and accurate vowel formation.

## PEDAGOGIC FUNCTION OF CONSONANTS

Vocalization can begin with consonant exercises. Consonants provide excellent tools for mastering breath control, discovering breath support, accomplishing legato, finding the proper onset of the vowel, extending the range, and enhancing the tone. Consonants with their corresponding pedagogic function are listed below.

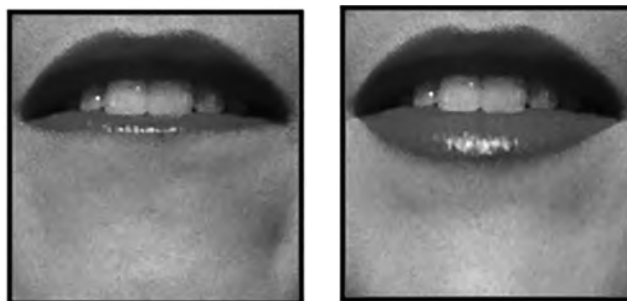
- Bilabial: neck tension awareness
- Dental: lazy tongue awareness
- Prepalatal: tongue tension awareness
- Glottal: onset issue awareness
- Voiceless fricatives: breath control
- Voiced fricatives: breath support
- Nasals: legato, flexibility
- Glides: legato, onsets, vowel formation
- Trills: multipurpose pedagogic tool

The following discussion addresses how consonants can be used to enhance vowel production. The consonant chart (Table 1, next page) demonstrates ways to simplify the articulatory process so that vowel space can remain unobstructed.

## BREATH CONTROL

**Lip Trills.** Lip trills are the perfect multitasking tool. They require a minimal amount of muscular involvement giving the singer the freedom to focus on posture, release of tension, breath control, and resonance. Lip trills make the singer feel as if the throat is by-passed altogether. The air (tone) feels as if it is directly connected to the mask. Imagine the pitch emanating from the lips instead of the throat. The lips should feel as if they are the source of the tone. Lip trill diagnostic: the sound of breathiness or of flapping lips indicates a heavy or pressed air flow. Form [i] just behind the trilling lips to focus the tone.

**Voiceless Fricatives.** Voiceless fricatives connect the articulatory process with the air. Articulate an extended voiceless fricative [s], [f], [θ], or [ʃ] to test the consistency of the air flow. Light contact between the articulators is crucial. Inaccurate formation of *f* or *th* muffles the sound and results in an erratic flow of air.



a) Incorrect

b) Correct

Figure 3. Formation of *f*.



a) Incorrect

b) Correct

Figure 4. Formation of *th*.

**Formation of *f*.** Do not curl the lower lip inward for *f*. This would muffle the consonant sound (Figure 3a). A light articulation of *f* is achieved when the inside of the lower lip barely touches the outer ridge of the upper front teeth (Figure 3b).

**Formation of *th*.** The air is blocked when the tongue is placed behind the teeth for *th* (Figure 4a). The air is released when the tongue extends beyond the teeth and draws in during articulation (Figure 4b).

## BREATH SUPPORT

**Voiced Fricatives.** Breath support is required in order to articulate a voiced fricative consonant with vibrancy. The voiced fricatives provide a consonant cure for the high or noisy breath. For example, pronounce [ʹz ʹv ʹʒ ʹð] (ʹ = breath) and conceptualize connecting the onset of the tone with the lower abdomen. This procedure promotes a sensory awareness of the low support needed for singing.

**Breath Support Exercises.** Release the jaw, breathe in the space of [a], expand low for the inhalation, and sus-

TABLE 1. Consonant Chart.

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental			Alveolar			Prepalatal			Palatal	Velar	Glottal	
			EN	IT	GR	FR	EN	IT	GR	FR	EN				IT
Stop/Plosive															
voiced	b		d			d								g	
voiceless	p		t			t								k	ʔ
Fricative															
voiced		v	z		z	z				ʒ					
voiceless		f	s		s	s				ʃ				ç	h
Affricate															
voiced			dz							dʒ					
voiceless			ts					ts		tʃ					
Nasal															
voiced			n			n		n						ŋ	
Lateral															
voiced			l		l	l				ɫ					
Glide														ɥ	ENG/GR
voiced														j	j
Trill															
voiced			r/ɾ			ɾ		ɾ							
Retroflex															
voiced								ɻ							

Consonants outside of the center box may be articulated while the jaw is released and low. Explore an alternate articulatory formation for consonants inside the center box. These consonants may be articulated with the tongue arch instead of the tongue tip. As a general rule, any consonant (except *r*) can be articulated while the tongue tip contacts the lower front teeth. This option simplifies the articulatory process so that vowel space can remain unobstructed.

tain the consonants in the following sequence: [z 'v 'ʒ]. Maintain a consistent flow of vocalized tone and avoid pressed contact between the articulators. Constriction limits vibrancy and introduces tension into the neck. Incorporate a vowel into the exercise by singing [zi 'zi 'zi]. Place the tongue tip against the lower row of teeth for both sounds and engage the support with each articulation. Next, sing [zi—i—i]. Repeat the three support pulses while sustaining the vowel.

**Support Vibrato vs. Head Voice Vibrato.** The term “vibrato” may have a negative connotation. Some prefer to call it “vibrancy” or “spin.” Regardless of the name, it is merely a mechanism of the air that can be conceptualized in various resonating chambers (even low in the abdomen). The pulses of air (tone) can sound as if they emanate from the nose (nasal tone), the throat (breathy tone), or in the resonant space of any vowel. A student may possess a lovely vibrato but actualize it in the wrong way. A high breath will result in a breathy vibrato. When the mechanism is conceptualized in the diaphragm, the tone is “supported,” thus the term “support vibrato.” When the mechanism is conceptualized in the clarity of the vowel, the tone is focused, thus the term “head voice vibrato.” The optimal approach is to produce support and head voice vibrato simultaneously. The feeling is often described as a two-way pull.

## VOCAL RESONANCE AND PROJECTION

**Lip Trills.** Resonance cannot be fully explored until the singer is able to open the pharyngeal space and appropriately vibrate the vowel. Lip trills provide an excellent introductory exercise for exploring two key topics related to resonance and projection: 1) resonating chambers and 2) vibrancy of tone.

- *Resonating chambers.* Does the lip trill feel as if it emanates from the sound of flapping lips, from a pitched articulation of the trill, from the throat, or from an area in the height of the yawn space? It is important to be aware of the feel of the lip trill’s resonating origin or origins.
- *Vibrancy of tone.* More than one pitch is needed in order to create a vibrant tone. The pitch moves in one of three ways: 1) on and around the primary note; 2) on and below the primary note; or 3) on and above the primary note.

**Lip Trill Exercise.** A lip trill that is centered on and above the primary note is optimal for finding a tone that is not heavy, pressed, or limited in range. This is accomplished in a two-part exercise. Step one, lip trill a 5-3-1-8-5-3-1 sequence. Explore the tones on and above the 5 and 8. The top note finds vibrancy when the concept of releasing the pitches is established. Step two, lip trill a 5-4-3-2-1 sequence. Explore the semitones between the pitches by sliding down on the sharp side of the tone. This helps the singer find a vibrato that is on and above the note instead of on and around the note, or worse yet, on and below the note.

**Nasal Exercise.** Nasal [ŋ] is an ideal tool for exploring spin. Mimic an intensely spinning and exclusively nasal tone on a five-note descending scale. This spin is a moveable mechanism of the air. It can occur in the height of the vowel space (optimal), in the nose (nasal tone), or in the throat (breathy or pressed tone). Replicate the spin mechanism on a central [a].

**Dental Consonants.** Dental consonants open the pharyngeal space by bringing the tongue forward. Any consonant or vowel that brings the tongue forward is beneficial for discovering the open space required for singing.

Consonant exercises are for exploration only. Consonants minimize the singing space—optimal resonance can occur only in the tall, open space that vowels provide. Consonant exercises are beneficial for tactile purposes. They can also serve as bad examples. When a student is unable to find the appropriate pharyngeal space, a consonant point of articulation can be used to describe the “where not to go” before optimal is discovered.

**Formation, Formation, Formation.** The central [a] formation is the fundamental space for all vowels. Discovering a resonant tone is reliant upon optimizing [a]. This is accomplished through vowel exploration. Each vowel classification has a corresponding pedagogic function: 1) central vowels: mouth space; 2) front vowels: pharyngeal space; 3) back vowels: projection of the tone.

Central vowels expand the oral cavity (the space is not limited by the tongue or lip formation), front vowels increase the pharyngeal space (the bulk of the tongue is forward), and back vowels project and focus the tone (the lips are forward and rounded). All vowels are useful

in helping the singer experience various areas of open space, but it is best to start with the closed vowels. Front [i] enhances pharyngeal space, back [u] enhances forward vibrancy, and the central vowels compel the singer to focus the tone without reliance upon tongue arch or lip rounding. All vowels hook into the same resonant core once [a] is optimized.

**Central Vowels.** Bright [a] is midway between dark [ɑ] and the [æ] vowel. Lift the cheeks with the fingers to provide a tactile aid for vowel formation. Bright [a] is useful for lightening the voice, central [ʌ] is useful for florid exercises, and the [æ] vowel is useful for opening the voice in the upper range.

## LEGATO AND ONSETS

**Nasal Consonants and Glides.** Nasal [ŋ] and the glides are excellent legato and onset tools. Singing remains uninterrupted when the voice can move in a space far from the mechanism of the glottal stop.

**Legato Exercise.** Sing a five-note descending scale on [ŋa], [ji], or [wu]. Explore sliding through as many semi-tones as possible. Do not move directly down. Sharp down. In other words, sing on the upper side of the slide throughout the descent. This makes one aware of separations that cause disruptions in the line.

Incorrect Slide	Correct Slide
5 ∨ [ŋa]	5 ↷ [ŋa]
4 ∨ [ŋa]	4 ↷ [ŋa]
3 ∨ [ŋa]	3 ↷ [ŋa]
2 ∨ [ŋa]	2 ↷ [ŋa]
1 [ŋa]	1 [ŋa]

Disruptions of the legato (clicks in the line) have three possible causes: 1) overshooting the descent; 2) articulating the tone with a glottal stop; or 3) articulating the tone with an [h] onset.

**Advanced Exercise.** It is crucial to pay attention to the voice between pitch changes. Slides help singers become aware of pitch articulations. Sing a five-note descending scale on [ja] articulating a sharpened slide on the semitones just above the actual landing pitch. Repeat on [ŋ] and maintain vibrato *during* the slide. Sing the scale on [a] without slides. The tones should pivot from pitch to pitch. Once legato is established, spin can exist in an

uninterrupted flow of sound with singular vibrancy throughout the scale.

**Onsets.** Legato and onset exercises share a few similarities. Glottal [ʔ] and [h] are incorrect onsets of the tone since they place the singer in danger of lingering in the throat. Glides provide a consonant remedy for the poor onset. Sing [ʔji ʔji ʔji]. Repeat the pattern but form the glide silently: [ʔji ʔji ʔji]. The same process is effective for back vowels. Round the lips and sing [ʔwu ʔwu ʔwu]. Repeat the pattern but form the glide silently and sing [ʔwu ʔwu ʔwu]. The [j] glide is a preferable onset for central vowels since the lip and jaw position can remain unaltered for both sounds.

## RANGE EXTENSION AND FLEXIBILITY

**Lip Trills.** Lip trills allow the singer to safely explore the range (as long as the trills are vibrant and free). Lip trill a 5-3-1-8-5-3-1 sequence. Remember to sing on and above for tones 5 and 8. Next, open to [a] using the following sequence:

5 – 8 – 5 – 3 – 1  
[i a]

Repeat the exercise by alternating between lip trills and vowels. Compare the muscular engagement of each sequence. The muscular involvement in the neck should feel the same for the lip trill as it does in the vowel sequence.

**Nasal Consonants.** Nasal consonants help singers discover flexibility. Three concepts are involved.

1) *Legato.* Breaks in the legato are the enemy of flexibility. Clicks in the line waste air and trip up the singer. Sing two sequences of 1-3-5-4-3-2-1 first on [ŋ] and then on [a]. This exercise serves as a legato review. Flexibility is difficult to achieve using consonants alone. The singer is ready for scales once the vowels are open, vibrant, and free from interfering muscular tension.

2) *Turnarounds.* A turnaround occurs when a scale reverses directions: 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1. Nasal consonants assist in moving the voice. Master the following turnarounds at varying speeds. Do not allow the nasal consonant to color the vowel:

5-6-5-4-5-4-3-4-3-2-3-2-1  
[no nu no nu no]





of a singer's mouth. Consonant articulation must be quick and light so that pharyngeal space can remain undisturbed. Do not anticipate a final consonant nor allow it to distort the vowel in any way.

**Lessons from the Choir.** The choral singing experience is an education in practicality. Choral singers intuitively know that certain sounds strain the voice, impede the choral blend, and are unfavorable when amplified en masse. For example, a choral group would be reluctant to sustain an *r*-colored schwa. This speech sound is typically replaced with a central [ʌ] vowel for short note values or an open back [ʊ] vowel for sustained tones. It would be vocally beneficial for soloists to observe this and other similar choral refinements.

### SUMMARY

Singers have been given a wealth of assistance within the words they sing. As lovers of song, it is our privilege to acknowledge and be sensitive to the presence of these gifts. Just as a composer indicates the interpretation of the text within a composition, the sounds of languages indicate the function of the voice within its apparatus. Vowels and consonants are the reliable tools of our trade. They are beneficial for training, building, and refining the voice.

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### NOTES

1. Clifton Ware, *Adventures in Singing: A Process for Exploring, Discovering, and Developing Vocal Potential*, 2nd edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 9.
2. Elizabeth Blades-Zeller, *A Spectrum of Voices* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 71.
3. *Ibid.*, 67.
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**Cheri Montgomery** is a member of the voice faculty at the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University. She provides postgraduate instruction to voice teachers, diction instructors, and vocal coaches in her Lyric Diction Workshop held each summer in Nashville. She is author of the *Lyric Diction Workbook Series*, which includes nine texts for English, Italian, Latin, German, and French diction. Recent publications include a new series written for the abbreviated diction study. She is co-author of *Exploring Art Song Lyrics* published by Oxford University Press (2012). Book reviews of all her texts are available at [www.stmpublishers.com](http://www.stmpublishers.com).

Performance credits include solo engagements with the Nashville and Knoxville Symphonies and operatic roles with the Nashville Opera. She was awarded full scholarships for graduate study at the University of Tennessee—Knoxville through the Grace Moore Graduate Scholarship and the Phi Mu Alpha Scholarship, and was a first place winner of regional NATS auditions.

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