

Setting Text in English to Music

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Setting an English text to music is a crucial skill for many composers, arrangers and songwriters. A few basic considerations exist that will help you to communicate your chosen text more clearly. Many of these considerations will also prove helpful in languages other than English.

I. Patterns of Stress and Meter

A. Pronunciation of any multisyllabic English word includes both stressed and unstressed syllables. Unlike other languages, for example, Spanish, there are no hard and fast rules about the placement of stress in spoken English, but each word has a “correct” pattern of stress. Consider:

a-poth-e-car-y

ho-mo-gen-e-ous

ho-mo-ge-nize

While in some languages, such as German, the lexical root is nearly always a stressed syllable, this is clearly not the case in English as shown above.

The musical implication of this fact is that setting an English text requires a very clear understanding of both the stress patterns of the text and the metrical patterns of the music. These should generally occur in such a way as to reinforce each other. Stressed syllables should be musically accented in some way, if not in multiple ways.

When developing the melody for your text, consider the following types of accent:

1. Metric accent—the most common and most clearly understood in tonal music. By placing a word or syllable on the strong beat of a measure in relation to other words, we highlight its importance. Alternatively, a syncopated rhythm can highlight the importance of a word.
2. Agogic accent—creating emphasis on a note (and thus a syllable) by making it longer
3. Dynamic accent—emphasizing a syllable by singing it louder
4. Melodic accent—two main types

- a. Contour—placing a syllable on a pitch higher or lower than surrounding pitches
- b. Melisma—extending a syllable by singing its vowel over more than one pitch

A useful first step for a bland, but effective, setting of text is to ensure that stressed syllables fall on the downbeat while other syllables fill in the spaces.

Exercise: Choose a verse from the Bible or several lines from Shakespeare and set them in a strict 4/4 meter. Make a second setting of the same text in 6/8.

B. Having determined the stress patterns of individual words, the composer must now turn to phrases and clauses to determine how those words interact with each other when they are placed in close proximity.

English, unlike, for example, Chinese, is a non-tonal language that relies on vocal stress (dynamic and agogic accent, to the musician) to indicate the relative importance of individual words. Consider the following two phrases:

How *kind* of you to let me come.

How kind of *you* to let me come.

The change of meaning is subtle and has implications that a native speaker would immediately comprehend. A composer with an understanding of these implications can either thwart or support the poet's intent, turning earnestness into sarcasm, and even love into hate. In the first version of the sentence above, the speaker seems genuinely grateful to the person being addressed. Anyone hearing the second version, however, would realize that the person being addressed and the person at whom the comment is directed are not the same person.

Like individual words, small groups of words have patterns of stress and accent and should be considered for the same forms of accent.

English (or many languages) would cease to function without a few very common "particles" of speech (pronouns, articles, prepositions, conjunctions and the like), but these little words don't carry enough meaning in themselves to be worthy of accent. In a musical setting, try to squeeze these words in ahead of a downbeat and save the accented positions for nouns, verbs and adjectives.

Exercise: Choose a selection of prose from USA Today or another newspaper. Find the most important words and create a musical setting in 4/4 time, always placing the important words at the beginning of the measure. Create a second setting in 9/8 time.

II. Text and Pitch

A. As stated before, English is a non-tonal language, that is, the meaning of a word taken out of context is not affected by the rise and fall of the pitch of the speaker's voice. However, a change of pitch may have implications, as when a speaker's voice rises at the end of an interrogatory statement.

A composer should be aware that most professionally-trained singers practice a technique known as *vowel modification* in the high and low ends of their voice. Thus, any vowel for a female singer in her high range tends toward the front of the voice and leans toward the pure vowel [a]. It is always a good idea for a composer to work with the intended singer of his or her songs to deal with matters of range and pronunciation.

On the flip side of the coin, amateur singers may not possess the technical knowledge or bodily fortitude to correctly perform in the extreme ranges. If the intended performer falls into this category, adhere to the rule that it is always best to write a vocal line that can be sung beautifully. A line that cannot be sung well by the singer at hand will result in a poor perception on the part of the audience and a singer who may not be willing to collaborate with you in the future.

B. The most dangerous vowel in English is the central vowel, [ə], (the first and last syllables of the word *banana*. Because of the peculiar history of the English language and its tendency to borrow words from nearly any source, the correct pronunciations of more than half the words in English include this sound. From the point of view of a singer, the central vowel is ugly, undefined and unpleasant and does not show the clarity or depth of a voice. A composer cannot avoid texts with [ə], but can minimize its impact. This vowel should not be set on a long note, or a melisma, and try to keep it away from important musical moments. In particular, the word *the* is a word that should never be emphasized.

C. The liquid [r] is a problem in setting English. [r] is a true consonant and does not carry pitch, unlike [m], [n] and [ŋ], all of which may be sustained, albeit at a quiet dynamic. When [r] appears in the middle of a word, it can generally be “flipped,” that is, pronounced as a Spanish or Italian *r* (as in *aroma*). When [r] is part of a blend at the end of a word, the vowel preceding it is often modified to [ə] (as in the British or East Coast pronunciation of *word*). Be aware of this problem. The liquid [l] (as in *hold*) poses a similar, but not nearly as serious problem.

Exercise: Set the list of “helping verbs” to music, avoiding undue emphasis on [ə] and [r].

D. Annoyingly, many words in English have alternate pronunciations. A composer must learn the rules for them and know what to expect (many of the variations are regional in nature). Some examples:

licorice: [lɪkəˈrɪs] or [lɪkəˈrɪʃ]
the: [θə] before consonants and [ði] before vowels

tomato: either [e] or [a] on the middle syllable

The question of dialect is important as well—it may appropriate to set a text by Georgian Sidney Lanier differently than a text by New Yorker Walt Whitman. This is to say nothing of the differences between American English, Black English, British English, etc. Into this same category fall the changes wrought on the language by history. English has undergone major changes in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation over the last thousand years, and the composer must be aware of these if you wish to set text by Chaucer, Shakespeare or even Donne. Working with Old English and certain forms of Middle English is equivalent to working with a foreign language.

Exercise: Find a text with multiple possible pronunciations and set it twice, first with one set of pronunciations, then with the other set, making adjustments accordingly.

III. Creating Music with Text—A Suggested Process

The process below has proved successful in the creation of vocal music in English on numerous occasions for this author. You may find that all or some of none of it works for you. Music with text is a partnership, and one element continuously informs the other.

1. Choose a text that is:

- a. Meaningful
- b. Pronounceable
- c. Musical
- d. Publishable

This last is important. A composer may write the best song cycle or choral composition in history, but no one will ever know if the author of the text does not grant permission for performance. There are three possibilities for this:

1. Set only text that is in the public domain, that is, which is not protected by copyright. In the United States, this means that the author has been dead for seventy years.
2. Secure permission to set text from the author or her or his estate *before* composing. This may be as simple as writing a letter or email and asking, or it may be more complex. It may be impossible, as in the case of Robert Frost, whose estate generally denies permission to all composers seeking to set his poetry to music. Most authors can be contacted through their publishers.

3. Obtain a text written specifically for the piece being composed. Many composers have been their own librettists (Richard Wagner), and many have had incredibly productive relationships with poets and librettists (Samuel Barber and Wallace Stevens, Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte).

2. Prepare the text for use in a composition.

- a. Consider which portions of the text are to be cut, repeated or altered
- b. Learn the definitions and correct pronunciations of all the words
- c. Prepare a copy of the text in a word processing program that is double-spaced and fully hyphenated

Do not try to guess about the hyphenation of multi-syllable words. Use a dictionary to check all words of more than one syllable.

- d. Determine which syllables will be accented and what words are the most important words in the text
- e. Analyze the text for its deeper meaning

Who is the speaker? Whom is being spoken to? What is their history together? What are their backstories? What will your music help to convey that the words alone don't say?

3. Experiment with varying rhythmic, metric and melodic fragments. Consider writing only the rhythm of the words at first. Try to emulate speech as much as possible.

An important decision is often whether to align the poetic meter with the musical meter. While much English poetry is highly metric in both its appeal and its structure (“Whose *woods* these *are* I *do* not *know*...”), there is much that is not (“Something there is that doesn't love a wall...”). The decision about meter is a stylistic one, and may hinge on the underlying textual analysis. It is often refreshing to set a very metric poet (such as Emily Dickinson) in a style of rhythm that is not in any way monotonous (see Copland's *Emily Dickinson Songs*). On the other hand, coherence may be brought to a prose or non-metric text through the use of recurring rhythms (as in Britten's *Choral Dances* from *Gloriana*).

4. Don't forget the potentials of rhythmic variety, melisma and repetition of key words or phrases.

A syllabic setting that marches straight through the text from beginning to end often begins to seem more like a recitation than a song. Avoid using a single technique through an entire text, if the text is much longer than just a few lines.

5. Don't shy away from awkward vocal moments if they express the text, but find ways to allow the accompaniment to help the singer to accomplish these by providing pitches, metrical support and text painting that helps to deepen the mood. Be certain that the accompaniment does not overpower the voice or voices. Allow time for the singer and audience to recover after a very dramatic moment by using interludes and codas as needed.
6. Sing through all vocal parts so that if you choose to write awkwardly, you are at least aware of the awkwardness. Do not write vocal music that frustrates without reward.

IV. Setting Foreign Languages

A composer should feel some discomfort about setting a text in a language in which he or she is not fluent. Much the same guidelines apply, but a composer in this situation should spend as much time as possible trying to understand the cadence and structure of the language, and how that language conveys both connotative and denotative meaning.

For the Romance and Germanic languages, many of the same techniques will be useful. Latin, Spanish, Italian and German all have fairly simple rules about stress, and if the vocabulary can be mastered, intuitions about textual analysis may often prove correct. Hebrew has relatively simple systems of stress and pronunciation, but also a deep system of metaphor and simile. French can be extremely difficult for the non-native speaker because of its pronunciation. Tonal languages, such as Mandarin Chinese would be nearly impossible to set using only a dictionary.

For languages that use non-Latin alphabets or extensive diacritical marks (such as Russian, Czech or Japanese), it is crucial to provide a phonetic transcription beneath the text in the original language. The International Phonetic Alphabet is useful for this purpose, but if a piece is intended for amateurs, a transcription that employs the vernacular alphabet exclusive (e.g., the Latin alphabet for American schoolchildren) may be preferable.

In conclusion, text-setting can make or break a song, choral piece or other vocal music. One need only compare the nearly flawless text-setting of popular song with the less-than-perfect setting of the second and third verses of many 19th-century American hymns to see the difference. The composer must strive for both musical and textual clarity.