

Module 4

BMPF7013

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**Exploring Critical Issues Surrounding Accents and Diction Decisions within
Contemporary Choral Settings**

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Table of Contents

Component 1:

Introduction	 3 - 5
Planned Programme of Study	 5 - 10
Critical Reflection	 11 - 14

Component 2:

Literature Review	
Introduction	15
Genre Authenticity	 16 - 18
Sonority of Sound	 18 - 19
Stakeholder Acknowledgement	 20 - 21
Decentring Listening	 21 - 22
Artistic Vision	 22 - 23
Conclusion	 23 - 24
Reference List	 25 - 27

Component 1:

Introduction and Rationale

As a Canadian choral conductor of a contemporary British choir, I have repeatedly experienced complex issues surrounding both the rationale and teaching of diction choices within repertoire. My choir is an SATB non-auditioned community choir that combines music reading with aural practice recordings, performing music to a high standard. Tuning, blend, balance, and timbre quality are crafted by the choir through well-known choral singing techniques such as monothongisation, vowel modification (for higher pitches), and consonant reduction (Deme, 2014; Dromey, *et al.*, 2010). These articulatory and vowel shaping tools are used in diverse ways, depending on the specific song we are learning and the sound we are trying to achieve.

As the conductor, I have found that our varied contemporary repertoire choices, as opposed to singing music from solely the classical choral tradition (Ellis, 2019; Wilson, 2016), has created an added layer of complexity with regards to diction decisions. Furthermore, I have struggled to confidently justify and communicate these requirements to choir members. When approaching different genres within choral music, there is a well-documented problem whereby the diction requirements of a non-classical genre are often in opposition to those thought of as best-practice in traditional choral singing (Marshall, *et al.*, 2024). To the best of my knowledge, there is currently no pedagogical framework for approaching diction decisions within the complexity of a contemporary choral setting.

In addition to the varied repertoire choices of the choir, I believe my positionality as a conductor who has lived half their life in Canada, and the other half in the UK, has opened a door to exploring the effects of accent on diction decision making (Goundar, 2025). Before immigrating to the UK, I spoke with a General American (GA) accent. However, after living in the Southwest of the UK for the past two decades, I have noticed my accent morph into a hybrid of GA and aspects of Southern Standard British English (SSBE) (Rogers, 2013). I am often asked if I come from Northern Ireland, and have observed that alongside my accent, I have also adopted British phrases, words, and stresses regularly in my speech. I am accustomed to making choices about the strength and delivery of my accent, depending on the situation I am in.

Immigrating to the UK not only affected my accent (over time), but also my educational experience. I completed half of my Undergraduate Music degree in Canada, and the other half in the UK. This trans-Atlantic education provided a multi-faceted foundation with regards

to choral music diction through being exposed to two different institutional and cultural lenses. This background has forced me to be flexible and adaptable with regards to diction choices, often making conscious adjustments to my natural diction preferences to blend appropriately with the choir. Furthermore, my positionality has fostered a curiosity and demand for specificity with regards to accent and phonetic decisions throughout my career.

Beyond making strategic adjustments to my own sound, this 'dual nationality' accent perspective has provided me with a unique lens to view phonetic possibilities, especially within contemporary multi-genre repertoire. I often trust my 'gut feeling' with regards to specific diction and phonetic choices and regularly ask for the choir to make pronunciation adjustments. For example, to take on American accent qualities in specific genres such as pop and rock. Despite being confident in demanding genre-informed choral diction, I have often wondered why certain choices feel more authentic than others, and whether my interpretive choices sit within any existing framework or pedagogical approach. I am aware it is also possible that my choices sit in opposition to best practice, and for that reason I am equally curious.

Genres sung by the choir include folk, rock, pop, sea shanty, classical, a Capella, jazz, gospel, country, and musical theatre, to name but a few! This stylistic choice is my preference, and anecdotally, could be the result of my experiences singing in similar choirs growing up in Canada. Despite four years of undergraduate classical singing and choral training, I have always preferred the multi-genre repertoire sung within my high school concert and jazz choirs. The positive feedback from our audiences, and the growth of the choir to an enrolment of over 50 members, infers that this approach is appreciated beyond the confines of the conductor's podium. Despite the choir's successes, I continue to seek clarity as to why I make different diction decisions in each song. Furthermore, I would like to better understand how to confidently express to choir members my reasoning for these decisions. I am aware that my anecdotal experiences as an insider researcher have given me a pre-existing belief that there is worth in exploring the relationship between accents and genre (Goundar, 2025), and therefore will ensure this bias is mitigated (as best as possible) through the methodological approach and structure of my literature review on this topic (Walliman, 2005).

When considering how to approach my question surrounding diction choices within contemporary choirs, I identified that despite my competence and advanced knowledge in the key principles of choral sound, and my unique lived experience with both GA and SSBE accents, my technical expertise surrounding accents and phonetics was rusty in some ways (e.g. IPA) and in others, lacking. This gap in knowledge made it difficult to understand the literature, rationalise my decisions, and created obstacles in teaching diction to choir

members. It is for this reason, that I chose to pursue a Level One ITOL certification in Accents and Phonetics prior to undertaking a literature review on this topic. With enhanced technical knowledge of acoustic, auditory, and articulatory phonetics (Roach, 2009; Rogers, 2000) as well as a deeper understanding of their practical applications, my professional practice will benefit from clarity and consistency in how diction decisions are being made, as well as the technical skills to convey the ever changing diction demands to the members of my contemporary choir.

Within this module of my MA in Vocal Pedagogy, I aim to better understand the role of accents and phonetics in choral diction and potentially justify the development of a new 'accent aware' pedagogical framework in future MA assignments. Such a framework would benefit my conducting practice in terms of rationale, uniformity, and justification with regards to decision-making when teaching repertoire. Furthermore, it could be shared with other conductors, hopefully adding value with regards to best practice procedures for contemporary choral singing in the UK, which is currently under-researched, due to being viewed as a 'less prestige' form of choral music (Milroy, 2001; Sackett, 1979).

Planned Programme of Study

AIMS

- To increase technical knowledge of accents and phonetics to a Level One ITOL standard.
- To use this technical knowledge to explore current themes and issues surrounding accents and phonetics within the choral conducting profession.
- To apply these insights critically to my own practice, to better understand how my own diction decisions sit within the literature.
- To potentially justify the creation of a new 'accent aware' diction framework in future studies, transforming best practice procedures within contemporary choral conducting literature.

OBJECTIVES

- Attend the Level 1: Accents and Phonetics course through The Voice Study Centre.
- Synthesise all recommended study materials and receive ITOL certification in Level 1: Accents and Phonetics.

- Obtain a firm grasp of master's Level literature review methodologies and choose an appropriate methodology for this assignment.
- Conduct a narrative literature review, using a hermeneutic methodology, on accents and phonetics within the field of contemporary choral conducting, ensuring I am abreast of current themes and issues critical within this field.
- To conduct a critical reflection on the learning journey, focusing specifically on how this module has transformed my professional development and practice, highlighting next steps in my professional development.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To achieve ITOL certification in Level 1: Accents and Phonetics
- To begin the process of developing expertise in the specialism of Accents and Phonetics within Choral Conducting, ensuring I am abreast of all major themes and issues on this topic.
- To gain critical master's level research skills, specifically with regards to literature reviews and methodological approaches.
- To critically reflect on how my own 'best practice' and approach to choral diction has transformed throughout the process of specialising in accents and phonetics for choral conducting.

ACTIVITIES AND TIMELINE

Task	Timeline	Assessment Criteria	Resources
Attend and Complete Course, <i>Certificate in Level One Accents and Phonetics</i> with Voice Study Centre as first phase of learning.	January 29 th – March 28 th , 2025 Certification Verified on April 11 th , 2025	ITOL Assessment. Multiple Choice Quiz covering Articulatory, Acoustic, and Auditory Phonetics 1 hour Lesson Plan, teaching an accent to an Undergraduate Acting Class with IPA knowledge	8, 2 hour lectures PowerPoint presentations Key Reading Materials and recommended textbooks.

Research Literature Review Methodologies and plan a Programme of Study as second phase of learning.	February 24th – March 31st, 2025	Module 4 Assignment	Lecture Recommended Reading
Conduct Narrative Literature Review using Hermeneutic Methodology	April 1 st – May 8 th , 2025	Personal Assessment of literature saturation having been reached.	Lecture Recommended Reading
Write Critical Reflection	May 8 th – May 15 th , 2025	Module 4 Assignment	Lecture Recommended Reading
Synthesise All Module 4 Components in DRAFT SUBMISSION	May 15 th – June 15 th , 2025	Module 4 Assignment	Voice Study Centre Guidelines on DRAFT submissions
Prepare FINAL SUBMISSION of Module 4	June 16 th – July 1 st , 2025	Module 4 Assignment	Draft notes from Module 4 Tutor

METHODOLOGY

As noted by Winter (2023, p. 132), the process of producing a literature review is ‘integral to fusing interdisciplinary worlds and bridging the gap between practical relevance and academic rigor’. As a practice-based researcher, this is especially relevant, as a literature review provides the structure and transparency required to gain real insights into the technical workings of accents and phonetics, and how they impact diction choices within contemporary choral repertoire. A literature review that is methodologically secure, will ensure that it does exactly what it sets out to do, and achieves the goals set out by the researcher (Mullins and Kiley, 2002, p. 375).

When approaching a methodological framework, options were scrutinised for their adherence to the researcher’s pragmatic paradigm (Winter, 2023). Within, a ‘what works best’ approach, the question is held at the centre of the decision-making process. For this reason, a narrative literature review, adhering to a hermeneutic framework, has been adopted. This is specifically due to its ability to explore and uncover critical issues surrounding a topic within a short timescale (Winter, 2023). When considering the limitations of both time and resources when completing this assignment, grey literature, despite its

added value often outweighing its challenges (Adams *et al.*, 2016), has been excluded. The fact that there are extra hurdles to jump through in terms of both justifying its inclusion and managing its validity means that it cannot be included in this assignment (Lawrence *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, grey literature is not pragmatically relevant to the question being addressed, due to the question being rooted in critical issues found in academic literature.

Within the framework of a narrative literature review, using white literature sources (Grant *et al.*, 2009), a hermeneutic approach was chosen as the central framework for both research and writing methodologies, it facilitates the organisation of the literature into emerging themes and concepts, as well ensuring the question can be revisited and adapted as new information emerges (Onwuegbuzie and Daniel, 20025, p. 2). Because the research question is based around gaining a critical understanding of the key issues surrounding accents within contemporary choral settings, this hermeneutic narrative review framework stood out as the most logical and useful choice.

The methodology is further grounded into Cooper's Taxonomy of Literature Reviews (Randolph, 2009). This framework adds rigor and ensures that the characteristics of the review remain clear and present throughout hermeneutic iterations (Randolph, 2009). Below is a table, reflective of Cooper's Taxonomy of Literature Reviews, and the characteristics this research assignment follows:

Table 1: Cooper's Taxonomy of Literature Reviews and Module 4 Framework

Focus	Research Outcomes
Goal	Identification of Central Issues
Perspective	Espousal Position
Coverage	Central or Pivotal
Organisation	Conceptual
Audience	Specialised Scholars

Research outcomes is the focus for this master's module assignment. By choosing research outcomes, the literature review is a synthesis of information, focusing on findings and drawing conclusions from the literature (Randolph, 2009, p.2). As a practice-based researcher, this has the added benefit of ensuring the outcome is relevant to work as a choral conductor and interests in the practical applications of accents and phonetics (Winter, 2023).

The goal of identifying central issues surrounding the question is ideal, as it allows for learning objectives to be considered, and is an obvious choice for working within a hermeneutic framework, allowing for the goal to be achieved by continuous engagement with

the literature 'during which increased understanding' of the central issues can be developed (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, p. 257). Given the question's aim of gaining a broad understanding on the central themes and issues surrounding accents, diction, and contemporary choral repertoire, being able to organise knowledge into central issues helps achieve targeted learning goals and objectives.

With regards to perspective, the researcher's role as an insider researcher is taken into strong consideration, and therefore an espousal perspective is the ideal choice (Goundar, 2025). Having this opportunity to acknowledge the researcher's unique positionality as a choral conductor with dual Canadian and British accent and music education experiences, allows for a strong positionality statement within the introduction and rationale of this assignment. By adhering to an espousal perspective, the researcher can acknowledge their biases as an insider researcher, and the impact this may potentially have on the research outcome (Goundar, 2025). To mitigate bias, within the search for relevant literature, the extra step of seeking out literature that goes against pre-conceived beliefs surrounding accents has been taken.

Because of time constraints, the coverage of this literature review is not exhaustive. Instead, within the pragmatic paradigm, strategies of snowballing, pearl growing, and citation chaining are used to aide in finding the most relevant literature (Boell and Cece-Kecmanovic, 2010, p. 139). Specifically, articles by Marshall *et al.* (2024) and Gibson (2023) were selected for pearl growing. Their selection was due to both their relevancy to the question, as well as their recent publishing dates and extensive citations and summaries of previous white literature relevant to the research question.

Because these research strategies are centred around dialogue between texts, they are compatible with the hermeneutic framework (Winter, 2023). By committing to hermeneutic structures and strategies, continuous engagement with emerging themes and topics allows for the natural organisation (and reorganisation) of knowledge conceptually into main themes and issues throughout the research process (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, p. 257). Furthermore, these strategies provide clear indicators as to when saturation point is reached, helping to gauge when to step out of the hermeneutic search cycle and move into the writing phase of this assignment (Boell and Cece-Kecmanovic, 2014).

The final category of Cooper's Taxonomy of Literature reviews is audience. Given the nature of this being a university assignment, it is logical to choose specialised scholars on the basis that those reading this research paper will be affiliated with The Voice Study Centre, and therefore, should have reasonable knowledge of singing and/or diction (Randolph, 2009).

Throughout the research process, being anchored in a pragmatic paradigm, alongside a narrative hermeneutic literature review framework, and incorporating a structure following

Copper's Taxonomy of Literature Review, this module can be executed with rigor and bias mitigation. Furthermore, working within a conceptual framework fosters deep engagement with questioning and critical analysis, 'unleashing' the researcher's imagination and fostering new scholastic discoveries (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, p.258). It allows for the researcher to create a framework with which to view the literature and to gain revelatory insights into relevant practice-based diction approaches when conducting contemporary choirs.

Critical Reflection

As mentioned by Finlay (2008, p.2), the art of reflective practice is the bedrock of professional identity, it allows you to be descriptive, and non-judgemental (Finlay, 2008). As a practice-based researcher seeking new knowledge and skills, the reflective process

provides an opportunity to consider how my research is impacting and developing my professional identity (Winter, 2023). Furthermore, it will ensure this identity is aligned with my career goals and ambitions.

When choosing a reflective model, I researched various options that has been signposted within the literature (Finlay, 2008; Schön, 1983; Dewey, 1933; Gibbs, 1988) and decided to use Gibbs's reflective model due to its pragmatic approach and relevancy to the learning process undertaken in Module 4. In other words, it was clear and concise with practical benefits to learning. Furthermore, it is aligned with Schön's concept of 'reflection in-action' and 'reflection on-action' (Schön, 1983). Working within a hermeneutic methodological approach, I went through countless cycles of in-action and on-action reflection throughout the research and writing process, and believe using Gibb's reflective model will allow me to step even further outside the process, and gain on-action insights critical to my professional development (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014; Schön, 1983; Gibbs, 1988).

Description – What happened?

Having focused the first three modules of my MA in vocal pedagogy on both nutritional strategies for singers and music literacy within community choirs, I had started to feel lost and unsure as to how to approach the final three modules of my MA. I wanted to choose a specialism for module 4 that was aligned with my professional practice as a choral conductor and positively utilised my positionality as a Canadian choral conductor living and working in Britian (Goundar, 2025).

Concurrently, I registered for the ITOL Level 1 Certification in Accents and Phonetics course, due to its relevancy to my work and was surprised to find that one of the lecturers was, in fact, also my module tutor. Once I began to engage with the course materials and speak with my tutor in private tutorials, it became increasingly obvious that accents and phonetics within contemporary choral settings was the perfect specialism for me, given I was already dealing with this issue regularly. I could visualise the practical applications of this knowledge within my choirs. Therefore, I set specific goals and objectives for module 4, to insure I was both increasing my technical abilities alongside key academic writing and researching skills.

Feelings – What were you thinking and feeling?

Throughout the learning process, I have developed a sense of pride in my MA in Vocal Pedagogy achievements thus far, and my confidence in applying new technical skills within my professional practice have skyrocketed. Furthermore, throughout the process of

researching and writing the literature review, I noticed that feelings of anxiety around structure and methodologies were replaced with confidence. Developing my research skills has positively impacted not only the writing of module 4, but also the planning and structural phases of this assignment. At first, I felt a scoping review would be ideal, as it not only identifies key concepts and ‘analyses knowledge gaps’, but it is often thought of as an ideal framework for developing the first stage of an evidence base (Winter, 2023, p. 145). However, after considering the monumental task of structuring and executing a search within a designed Rubric and exclusion/inclusion criteria, I decided that the time constraints of this module did not allow for this to be a viable option (Grant *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, I decided that grey literature would also be excluded for similar time-bound reasons. Having the knowledge base to consider my methodological framework aided in making confident decisions throughout this process. Looking back on this module, there is relief with regards to the development of my academic skills, and excitement with regards to how these technical abilities will positively impact my ability to work as a practice-based insider researcher going forward.

Evaluation – What was good and bad about the experience?

Learning about accents and phonetics and asking questions with regards to its relevancy in contemporary choral conducting was a fantastic experience and practical learning opportunity. As described by Schön (1983, P.68), I initially felt puzzlement and confusion in a situation that I felt was unique. However, by the end of my research, exploring key issues and themes on this topic evolved into an espousal opinion and future research plans (Winter, 2021). Through engagement with the literature, my learning and teaching philosophies have transformed to include hermeneutic approaches (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). This discovery and application of hermeneutics has also transformed my day-to-day teaching. For example, It is because of working within a hermeneutic framework, that I have been able to assess each piece of music in my choirs’ repertoire as both a unique entity and then compare it to the whole concert programme and overall choral sound. Furthermore, I now hold contemporary choral repertoire to a higher standard of diction, expecting each song to be scrutinised for genre authenticity (Potter, 1998). The concept of genre authenticity has allowed me to engage the choir with the accent changes we are making in some of our pieces. I am currently in the in-action phase of how this learning is transforming my ability to confidently make decisions and instruct my choir with regards to accents and phonetics, and I am excited to observe the result when we perform these accent aware pieces in the concert hall (Schön, 1983).

Analysis – What sense can you make of the situation?

One of the challenges within this experience was managing how much technical knowledge was required before moving onto the literature review phase. The ITOL certification in Accents and Phonetics Level One was an excellent foundation, alongside reading the recommend course materials (Wells, 1982). However, I am still lacking basic knowledge of how to reproduce and teach the accents associated with contemporary music genres, due to the ITOL course being geared towards acting coaches and not choral conductors.

By engaging in the technical learning of accents and phonetics, despite this being an ongoing process, my ability to communicate with choir members and make quick in-action decisions during rehearsals has increased dramatically (Wells, 1982; Rogers, 2000; Roach, 2009; Schön, 1983). Furthermore, reading the literature via a hermeneutic lens opened doors to various aspects of accents and phonetics issues I may not have come across using a scoping review strategy, or similar rubric-based approach (Grant *et al.*, 2009).

I am currently in the final stages of preparing for a large concert with my choir. Our regular rehearsals have been happening concurrently with Module 4, and I have noticed changes in my approach and delivery of learning for certain songs; specifically, songs requiring General American and Southern American accent approaches. I have a clearer, although still not fully realised, vision of how I want the music to sound and can justify my approach with more, but not complete, confidence whilst demanding more specificity in terms of diction work.

Conclusions – What else could you have done?

All aims and objectives that were set for this learning module were achieved. Although more technical expertise is desired in accents and phonetics, the ITOL certification earned in March provided a solid foundation for which to conduct the literature review process. By exploring the main themes and issues on this topic, the key concept of genre authenticity was discovered, alongside a revelation that there is a real need for accent awareness within contemporary choral settings (Potter, 1998). Furthermore, this process highlighted Oram's landmark work on decentring listening and its potential to change the way postgraduate institutions teach contemporary choral singing and conducting (Oram, 2021).

Finally, by engaging fully with the lectures and key readings provided by The Voice Study Centre, I was able to increase my practical research and writing skills, specifically within the areas of research methodologies, hermeneutics, grey literature, literature review classifications, positionality, and meta discourse (Randolph, 2009, Grant *et al.*, 2009; Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010; Goundar, 2025; Onwuegbuzie and Daniel, 2005; Adams *et*

al., 2017; Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014; Winter, 2023; Lawrence *et al.*, 2014), Kiley, 2002; Hyland, 2017).

Action Plan – if it arose again, what would you do?

From a professional standpoint, I can now see relevancy in continuing my learning in accents and phonetics. I am interested in pursuing more qualifications on this topic, so that I may develop an accent aware pedagogical framework for contemporary choral conductors. Going forward, I have set the following goals for my professional development:

- Attend ITOL level 2 Certification Accents and Phonetics Course.
- Use Module 5 to create an Accent Aware Pedagogical Tool for Contemporary Choral Conductors
- Continue to use new knowledge of this topic within choral rehearsals – identifying songs that require accent work for genre authenticity

Component 2: Literature Review

Exploring Critical Issues Surrounding Accents and Diction Decisions within Contemporary Choral Settings

Introduction

Choral Conductors are 'gatekeepers of language' (Wilson, 2016, p.28) and they have both an opportunity, and perhaps a responsibility, to include accent awareness within their pedagogical framework when making diction decisions. It has already been well-documented that the traditional choral sound, stemming from the British choral tradition, is modelled after what used to be known as Received Pronunciation (RP) and is now known as Southern Standard British English (SSBE) (Marshall *et al.*, 2024; Coupland, 2011; Wilson, 2016; Gibson, 2023). Refined and exported throughout the western world by King's College in Cambridge throughout the early 20th century, this SSBE diction framework is seen as 'the epitome of sacred musical performance' and is deeply rooted in an accent associated with prestige and classism (Radloff, 2022). Although the classical choral sound has had more time to develop a set of rules and practices with regards to diction making decisions (Potter, 1998), contemporary choirs born out of the 20th century, on the other hand, are struggling to agree on a consistent framework (Marshall *et al.*, 2024).

This literature review aims to synthesise what is currently understood about accents and phonetics' role with regards to diction decisions within contemporary choirs. To begin, the historical background of key musical genres will be discussed, with specific reference to the role accents have played in their evolution (Potter, 1998). The central issues of genre authenticity, sonority of sound, stakeholder acknowledgement, decentring listening, and artistic vision will all be discussed with specific mention of the theoretical construct of 'responsive vs. Initiative' intentions as outlined by Bell (2001) and used by Gibson (2023). Finally, this paper seeks to look forwards; it aims to critically evaluate the potential impact an accent aware pedagogical framework may have within the professional practice of contemporary choral conductors and provide rationale for further research on this emerging topic.

Genre Authenticity

The classical choral tradition, although sung throughout the western world, is deeply situated within the 'prestige' diction framework of SSBE (Marshall *et al.*, 2024). So intertwined are SSBE and classical choral singing, that Marshall *et al.* (2024) recently observed a transformation, whereby vowel sounds have become 'less fronted' in both SSBE and

classical choral singing over the last century, in tandem with one another. So entrenched is this choral genre to the diction demands of this accent, that taking on these pronunciation characteristics is seen as the classical choral 'neutral' and 'standard', despite being the primary accent for only a minority within British society (Oram, 2021, p.9).

It may be surprising to consider that classical choral music is not the only singing genre that has such entrenched accent roots (Coupland, 2011); although classical choral traditions have had centuries to develop their diction standardisations, within mere decades, contemporary singing (not choral) genres have set their own diction standards. Recent studies on genre and singing (there are very few specifically about choral singing) indicate that part of the complexity related to diction choices is due to each genre's assimilation of various English-speaking accents (Marshall, et al., 2024; Duncan, 2016; Gibson, 2023; Wilson, 2016), and therefore adherence to an accent is subconsciously demanded by the listener should the performer desire authenticity (Potter, 1998).

It has been noted time and time again (Coupland, 2011; Mashall *et al.*, 2024; Milroy, 2001; Beal, 2009; Duncan, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Gibson, 2023; O'Hanlon, 2006) that the groundbreaking work of Trudgill (1983) and Simpson (1999) brought to light how the general American (GA) accent has influenced and shaped the development of 'pop song' diction. Like SSBE in classical choral music, singers of English language pop songs from all over the world have followed in the footsteps of The Beatles, by using the 'USA 5' lexical model of GA pronunciation to sound authentic within this genre - this is especially true when their speaking accent, like the Beatles, is somatically different (Simpon, 1999; Coupland, 2011; Oram 2021). As noted by Milroy (2001), there are similarities between the use of SSBE in classical choral music, and GA in pop music; both accents are considered 'prestige' accents within their country and globally (Milroy, 2001). Although these adherences to GA have been noted by many linguistic researchers in recent years (O'Hanlon, 2006; Duncan, 2016; Gibson, 2023), it is crucial to acknowledge that it is not currently understood whether this adherence is a conscious or subconscious decision, or whether the performers are even aware of the accent and genre associations. More research is needed to better understand the rationale behind the diction choices singers make.

Another example of the relationship between accent and genre is that of the Southern American (SA) accent, and its influence on the development of rock & roll. Like the use of GA within pop, it is known to evoke genre authenticity or 'buy in' with its audience, as emulated by the Rolling Stones in their earlier career (Sackett, 1979). Rock & roll's reliance on certain lexical sets (e.g. 'honay' instead of 'honey') from SA is likely due to its evolution from southern gospel and rhythm & blues genres (Sackett, 1979; Gibson, 2023). Country music also demands the use of a SA accent; however, not the same one (Wells, 1982).

There are many different regional SA accents, all with their own unique characteristics (Wells, 1982). An excellent example of differences would be whether the accent is rhotic or non-rhotic, which is a classification describing whether the 'r' at the end of a word is pronounced or not (Wells, 1982). Country music has its roots in Texas and its neighbouring states, and therefore uses rhoticity, whilst rock & roll emerged from the region surrounding Tennessee and New Orleans, where the accent is non-rhotic (Wells, 1982; Potter, 1998). Both musical genres use SA accents, but because they developed within different regions of the southern United States, they have taken on the characteristics of those region's accents.

This developmental cross-pollination between different American accents and contemporary English-speaking musical genres has subsequently led to a continued 'creative interplay' between them (Coupland, 2011). Because of these often-blurred genre lines (a great example being Taylor Swift, who started her career as a country singer, and gradually transitioned to pop music), it makes it extremely challenging to adhere to strict classifications within contemporary music, and exploring this phenomenon is not possible within the confines of this paper (Coupland, 2011). With regards to accent and phonetics' role in the perception of a song's genre, scholars generally agree that authenticity is subjective to the audience; it is socially constructed by the audience's perception regardless of the performer's intention (Duncan, 2016; Potter, 1998; Gibson, 2023). In other words, it is not always possible to explicitly categorise a song into a genre, however, a listener (audience) may hear accent qualities they strongly associate with a specific contemporary genre, and these lexical sets may be a subconscious factor as to whether a song is deemed authentically within a genre or not (Potter, 1998). This concept of contemporary genre authenticity is pertinent to contemporary choirs because diction decisions may need to be altered, and different lexical sets adhered to, in each song. This is especially true if the choir is seeking genre authenticity within their audience.

To complicate things further, the original performing artists of contemporary western music are nationalistically diverse, often having completely different speaking accents to the specific accent associated with the genre they wish to adhere to. An example case study of this phenomena being Duncan's (2016) research into country superstar Keith Urban, who despite being Australian, sings with a strong Southern American (SA) accent. The relationship between a genre's accent roots and a performer's appropriation of an accent to gain authenticity can be linked to the well documented globalisation of English-speaking contemporary music that has taken place in the last 70 years (Trudgill, 1983; Coupland 2011; Duncan, 2016; Gibson, 2023). Balancing the push/pull dynamic between the diction demands of the contemporary genre and the expectations of delivering an authentic choral sound, and its roots in SSBE will need to be considered (Wilson, 2016, p28).

Sonority of Sound

Above all, a conductor's aim when making diction decisions is to create a 'unified sound' (Raybon, 2016). Stepping away from the lens of accent and genre, many of the articulatory adjustments made by choral singers are due to the demands of singing with a 'homogenous timbre', regardless of the genre the song belongs to (Deme, 2014, p. 523e19). Choirs aim for pure uniform vowels, due to the positive effect this has on blending sound and tuning (Powell, 1991, p.1). Gibson remarks, that singing technique holds sonority of sound above the needs of any accent, and that when 'adjustments are made to achieve this', the result is often a sound 'which resembles a different accent, due to the brightening of vowels, especially on higher pitches' (Gibson, 2023, p.475). There is, in fact, a 'sonority bias' towards GA diction, due to the brightness of American vowels (Gibson, 2023, p.491). In other words, what may appear to the audience as a conscious choice to adapt and change from one accent's lexical set to another, could actually be the result of elevating the need for sonority of sound to the highest priority.

This phenomenon is under researched, and subsequently there is a trend within emerging linguistics research, such as Yang's (2018) case study on Australian artist Lenka Kripac, whereby assumptions about diction decisions are made. Yang (2018) suggests that the perceived changes in Kripac's accent are due to her desire to 'make a statement' about identity or nationality, however, there is no evidence in the article to suggest Kripac's intentions or desire for specific timbre qualities were established. Linguistics researchers would benefit from engaging with musicologists when researching accents in song, due to the importance of scrutinising diction changes singers may make solely for the benefit of sonority of sound.

Within the classical choral tradition, it is accepted that vowels will often be modified; although this impacts an audience's ability to understand the words, the hierarchy of sound quality over perception of words and language remains (Deme, 2014; Ellis 2019). Applying vowel monothongisation (reducing complex vowel sounds into one pure vowel sound), is often due to the demands of singing as opposed to any desire to take on specific accent traits (Coupland, 2011, p. 575). With regards to contemporary genres of choral music, the desire for genre authenticity can, in certain situations, supersede the entrenched values of sound quality over diction, and at other times, it may not. This push/pull between sonority of sound and genre authenticity will ultimately be managed by the artistic vision of the conductor (Gibson, 2017). To the researcher's knowledge, there is no available literature regarding pedagogical frameworks for approaching diction decisions within contemporary choirs. This murky area of diction decision making would benefit from further research, and the

development of a framework to aide conductors in developing critical self-awareness with regards to their personal approach to balancing sonority of sound around genre demands.

Consonant reduction is another traditional technique employed by singers when aiming for sonority of sound (Coupland, 2011). This involves relegating consonants to secondary players, giving them less priority (in terms of time) over the vowels when sustaining pitches (Deme, 2014). Alongside this technique, consonants that are known to colour the vowels around them, will be pronounced with separated articulatory actions (Raybon, 2016). As Raybon explains, this involves dissociating vowels from the /l/ and /r/ and /w/ that follow behind them (2016, p.146). These strategies have the same goal, which is to showcase pure uniform vowels, aiding in quality tuning and timbre (Powell, 1991, p.3). With regards to genre authenticity, it is possible for conductors to utilise this strategy less, especially when aiming to bring out rhoticity (Wells, 1982). Furthermore, genres that require more speech-like qualities, for example musical theatre or hip-hop, will demand more actively involved consonant diction, superseding sonority of sound (O'Hanlon, 2006).

Regardless of articulatory adjustments, the realities of achieving a quality sound on higher sustained pitches require further modifications (Deme, 2014, p. 523e19; Bozeman, 2023). Tongue movement, jaw positioning, velum position, use of APN muscles, and larynx height are all adjusted to boost sound energy and maximise formant frequencies when singing (Powell, 1991; Bozeman, 2023). Therefore, when sustaining pitches within the upper register, there is potential for greater movement away from the norms of spoken voice (Gibson, 2023, p.492). Within a choral setting, multiple pitches are often being sung at the same time by different people, using a combination of upper and lower registers to create harmony. This means that individual choir members will be making bespoke adjustments to varying degrees simultaneously, so that the overall sound of the choir is unified. Conductors of contemporary choirs should recognise some diction decisions will be relevant to only certain sections of the choir, depending on their unique pitch and diction requirements, as well as their own accent.

Stakeholder Acknowledgement

It is perhaps stating the obvious that more than one person is involved in creating choral sound. It is truly a team effort! This means that standard language ideology that affects language choice in choral singing, will not be uniform amongst all stakeholders (Wilson, 2016, p. 28). Marshall *et al.* (2024) explain that for a choir to produce a 'choral accent', many influences come into play from social, linguistic, and musical domains. These include individual singer's accents, wider regional accent(s), choir directors' accent, genre/aesthetic

considerations, and sonority of individual speech/sound' (Marshall, *et al.*, 2024). An excellent example of the complexities individual stakeholders bring is provided:

'The problem with the 'ah' vowel, however, is that there is little to no agreement on what it is. Different singers will sing anything from the 'aw' of 'caught' to the 'ae' of 'cat' and call it 'ah'. Whatever sound you prefer, your singers must all agree on it if the chorus is going to sing in tune' (Powell, 1991, p.4).

As demonstrated above, each member of the choir, including the conductor, will have their own unique accent characteristics, and therefore, it stands to reason that diction adjustments will need to be made in different ways by different choir members to achieve a unified sound. When singing in the British choral tradition, these adjustments will be learnt over time by an individual person, perhaps through private tuition. They will develop their own set of diction adjustments, throughout their singing range, to ensure sonority of sound, based on the SSBE framework is achieved (Milroy, 2011). The issue, or opportunity, within a contemporary choral setting, is acknowledging that each song in the choir's repertoire will have its own unique diction requirements, due to its associations with genre authenticity alongside the desire for sonority of sound.

Furthermore, the conductor should also consider the 'silent' stakeholder, known as the composer or lyricist (Gibson, 2023). The lyricist's choice of language and own accent may have implications on rhythming intentions. It is possible, that regardless of genre authenticity and sonority of sound, the words at the ends of phrases must be transformed slightly to ensure they rhyme. Within contemporary music, it is often possible to listen to recordings of the song, to better understand the original intentions. The degree to which a conductor chooses to acknowledge the intentions of the composer/lyricist will be subjective, especially once other stakeholders' needs and abilities are considered. The literature is clear that there are multiple, often competing, factors to consider with regards to diction decisions in a contemporary choral setting, however, there is no agreed upon guidance or framework for conductors to manage these stakeholder complexities.

Each performing stakeholder in a contemporary choral setting must make diction adjustments from their own accent to varying degrees depending on how far the demands of the song drift from their own accent. This concept of accent awareness draws comparison with the needs of actors performing a variety of characters and roles. This leads to a rational line of enquiry, with regards to how accent training could have relevancy within the field of contemporary choral pedagogy. It is yet another example of where collaboration between linguists and musicologists would be advantageous for deepening understanding and creating informed pedagogy on this subject (Beal, 2009; Oram, 2019).

As stakeholders, choral singers have less autonomy than choral conductors, and it is the role of the choral conductor, despite a lack of existing framework, to have an artistic vision and to communicate this to the other stakeholders of choral sound (Wilson, 2016).

Decentring Listening

Beliefs surrounding language and accents are undergoing change (Oram, 2019; Oram 2021). As discussed previously, RP (now known as SSBE) is a 'prestige' accent, not only within British choral traditions, but also in the field of voice and acting work (Milroy, 2001; Oram 2019; Oram 2021). The concept of SSBE being a neutral accent choice is perpetuated in acting schools across Britain and the world, and its importance is justified by a rationale of being an accent of 'clarity' (although Oram debunks this myth in recent practice-based research) and its self-perpetuating industry relevance (Oram, 2021). This matters because:

'(Acting) training infers to somatically othered students that their existing sociolinguistic capital is of less value than the linguistic capital of those who conform to the somatic norm' (Oram, 2019, p. 286).

This means that those who have an accent different to what is considered 'normal' are being devalued. Because of the similarities between the use of SSBE in both British choral and acting traditions, it is worth mentioning this groundbreaking work of Oram (2019; 2021) and the concept of 'decentring listening' (Oram, 2021, p. 6). Oram breaks down and demystifies current methods of delivering accent training, suggesting a new standardised curriculum whereby no accent is given prestige treatment (Oram, 2021). Instead of 'somatically othering' a student that enters drama school with a different to SSBE accent, Oram's new curriculum is designed to put the actor's own voice at the centre of their learning, therefore removing any concept of a central 'neutral' accent (Oram, 2021, p. 22).

The outcome is not only transformative to the students' learning experience, but to acting and the audience experience itself. Oram (2021, p. 22) notes, that 'this approach helps to build cultural competence as part of an anti-discriminatory approach that seeks for multiplicities rather than standards and imposed correctness'. This is an exciting new approach to accents within the arts, and it is possible, that with future research and collaboration between linguistic and musicology researchers, some of the tenants of this approach could be implemented within choral training programmes. To do so would require a monumental rethinking of traditional Music School pedagogies, including an introspective analysis of how current pedagogical practices may aide in the discrimination of somatically othered students. Given the additional complexities that genre authenticity and sonority of sound principles bring, it would require critical analysis with regards to its purpose and

relevancy within choral music specifically. Despite these challenges, it is exciting to contemplate the transformation Oram's research could bring to contemporary choral music and the conceptualising of a conductor's artistic vision. This literature review outlines the clear relationship between accent work, and its relevancy within contemporary choral settings, and seeks to rationalise further research into how Oram's concept of decentring listening can be utilised to transform contemporary choral pedagogy, specifically diction decision frameworks, in the 21st century.

Artistic Vision

The literature, frustratingly, does not provide direction or insight with regards to how a conductor can develop a choral sound outside of entrenched classical traditions (Marshall, *et al.*, 2024). Neither does it acknowledge or discuss the role accents may play in making diction decisions. Despite this, it is the artistic vision of the conductor that must steer the choir towards the goal of a unified choral sound (Marshall *et al.*, 2024; Milroy 2001; Raybon, 2016). As outlined throughout this paper, although there are many considerations to weigh when making diction decisions within contemporary choral music, it is up to the conductor to take the lead and navigate each song through their own pedagogical framework. Because this area is under researched and without a developed framework, choir members need this leadership to come from their directors' artistic vision (Marshall *et al.*, 2024).

As Wilson explains, there is a push/pull dynamic between meeting the demands of classical choral singing (SSBE diction and emphasis on sonority of sound) vs. contemporary genre authenticity (2016, p.28). Navigating opposing needs and making best-practice diction decisions will be decided through the conductor's stylistic preference. Using the framework of responsive and initiative styles could add intrinsic value to pedagogical diction practices. A responsive style 'is one which is appropriate and predictable', whereas an initiative style 'changes the communicative context in some way or reframes the interlocutors' identities or roles' (Gibson, 2023, p.474). Depending on the paradigmatic lens with which the conductor views the repertoire, their interpretation of this responsive/initiative framework may vary, creating different, yet justified, artistic visions (Walliman, 2009). Due to the current lack of guidance with regards best practice diction decisions within contemporary choirs, it is proposed that conductors would benefit from reflecting on where their artistic vision sits within this responsive/initiative spectrum. This matters because different diction decisions can be rationalised by a conductor when justified by their artistic intentions (Gibson, 2023).

A contemporary choral conductor that has been trained in accents and phonetics may have a more initiative artistic vision than others. For example, Ellis (2019, p.340) explains that 'in (the) current American choral culture of cross-over genres, and new composers that

embrace popular music idioms', there is an even greater necessity 'in performing a naturally prosodic singing style'. Because of Ellis's experiences of experimenting with accents and phonetics within contemporary genres, his research exemplifies an initiative style response to diction decision making. Gibson, on the other hand, believes that using GA in a pop song is a responsive style, as it has become the somatic norm for this genre. Although this may be true within a typical pop song, it could be argued that within the context of a contemporary choir (whereby SSBE is the norm), using a GA diction framework could be seen as initiative (Gibson, 2023).

For many scholars, accent awareness is not considered within the framework of their artistic vision. For example, Emmons and Chase (2006) assert the drawbacks of regional accents in a choral setting, as well as Kaplan (1985). Their artistic visions could be scrutinised as being firmly placed in the responsive style, deeply entrenched in the ideology of SSBE being a neutral and standard choice. There is limited literature on accent awareness within choral pedagogy, and further research into the opinions choral conductors have on accent awareness with regards to contemporary choral conducting would be highly valuable and ensure a greater variety of voices and opinions are heard.

Artistic vision, whether framed as responsive or initiative, or within the relationship between sonority of sound and genre authenticity; it will always require a strong sense of vision and values from the conductor. Further research exploring the development of an accent aware pedagogical framework, to aide conductors in the development of their own artistic vision, would add value and rigor within the field of contemporary choral conducting.

Conclusion

Conductors would benefit from an accent informed pedagogy (Ellis 2019, p.340). The nature of a conductor's role as a facilitator of large groups of people, from diverse geographic and ethnic backgrounds, means that without an awareness of accents and phonetics, their ability to deliver their artistic vision, whether responsive or initiative in style, will struggle to be fully realised within a contemporary choral setting.

Contemporary choirs sing music from a variety of genres, including pop, rock & roll, country, and classical. Each genre brings with it its own historical relationship to the regional accents where the genre first developed (Marshall *et al.*, 2024). Training in accents and phonetics, and the ability to articulate the lexical sets associated with these contemporary genres, could provide conductors with a useful pedagogical tool for implementing accent strategies into their diction decision making and teaching (Wells, 1982; Potter, 1998). Currently, there is very little literature on this subject, with many genres, including jazz, folk, and musical

theatre, receiving almost no attention by researchers (Potter, 1998; Marshall *et al.*, 2024). The contemporary choral community would benefit from deepening its understanding of accent and genre authenticity, and this literature review advocates for conductors to be trained in accent awareness as part of their professional development.

When navigating the push/pull dynamic between genre authenticity and sonority of sound, conductors that are accent aware, may look towards the groundbreaking work of Oram (2019; 2021) and his work on decentring listening. Using this as a launchpad, practice-based researchers may be able to rationalise research and development in line with the anti-discriminatory transformations taking place in acting schools within Britain. An accent aware pedagogical framework may be the first step in this process. This framework would push the boundaries of choral performance and potentially challenge standard diction practices that are entrenched in the prestige accent of SSBE (Oram, 2021).

Besides expanding on the work of Oram, this literature review has highlighted many opportunities for further research and collaborations between linguistics and musicology. One of the main issues presented, is the need for a better understanding of the intentions behind the diction decisions being made by singers and conductors, recognising the desire for sonority of sound. Many recent studies have completely sidestepped this qualitative approach, opting instead to interpret linguistic-based quantitative data and make assumptions in terms of the reasoning behind the performer's decisions (Duncan 2016; O'Hanlon, 2006; Yang 2018). There is currently no literature on contemporary choral diction, nor is there any qualitative studies on accent decision processes in music performance.

Beyond research recommendations, this literature review has shone a light on the unique opportunities contemporary choral conductors are presented with when approaching multi-genre repertoire. Having an accent aware pedagogical framework would provide a choral conductor with a vibrant and colourful artistic palate with which to make rationalised diction decisions, creating a unified choral sound for the 21st century.

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