

Module 5  
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**How can diction pedagogy support both classical and popular choral genres,  
ensuring it is inclusive to all accents and performed authentically?**

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## **How can diction pedagogy support both classical and popular choral genres, ensuring it is inclusive to all accents and performed authentically?**

### **Component 1:**

#### **Introduction and Rationale**

Working as a contemporary choral conductor in the UK, having immigrated from Canada 20 years ago, I am constantly assessing the diction choices that I make to ensure a unified choral sound with accurate tuning and good tone quality (Davids and LaTour, 2021). Frequently, I adjust my own natural diction choices developed during university studies in Canada. These adjustments are made because my vowel and consonant choices, despite classical choral training, are often unmatched (usually too bright) to the choral sound presented in practice. I am acutely aware of my 'otherness' when singing within the British classical choral tradition, which is deeply rooted in what used to be called Received Pronunciation (RP), but has recently evolved to become Southern Standard British English (SSBE) (Marshall, *et al.*, 2024; Potter, 1998). Anecdotally, I am also conscious of choir members who regularly make minor adjustments to their diction due to their own British-based accent being 'othered' as well (e.g. Essex, Scottish) (Oram, 2019). Despite clarity in diction being one of the most important aspects of choral singing (Jordan, 1996), to my knowledge, there is currently no pedagogical framework for addressing diverse speaking accents in the choral rehearsal, nor is there a documented understanding or acknowledgement of how different genres of choral music have unique entrenched relationships with specific regional English accents, based on where the genre originally developed (Potter, 1998; Milroy, 2001; Coupland 2011). It is for this reason; I intend to use this artefact to fill a gap in existing pedagogies. Current diction frameworks assume classical contexts and a 'neutral' choral accent, however contemporary choirs need frameworks that honour both genre and regional diversity (Fisher, 1991; LaBouff, 2008).

Due to the varied repertoire that my choir sings, I have observed that many songs from contemporary genres (Pop, Rock, Folk, etc) sound more authentic when diction choices are made in line with the English accent most authentically related to the song and original performance; this is often my own accent, a version of General American (GA). This pedagogical impulse is in opposition to uniformly adopting SSBE, which is the traditional best practice used within the British choral tradition (Milroy, 2001). Recently, I explored this

concept within my professional practice, by teaching and performing songs using both GA and Southern American (SA) diction frameworks as guidelines where I felt it improved authenticity. Informal feedback, with regards to genre authenticity, learning process, and enjoyment, was extremely positive; despite being acknowledged as stepping outside of normal procedure. This suggests there is a rationale for developing an artefact to increase clarity surrounding diction decisions made by conductors of contemporary choirs, especially those that sing in a variety of modern genres such as pop and rock.

This artefact can be further justified due to the massive increase in non-auditioned choirs singing in genres such as rock, pop, folk, and show tunes throughout the UK in the two last decades (Ward-Steinman, P.M., 2017; Natural Voice Network, 2025). As outlined by Liz Garnett (2017), many people choose to join rock and pop choirs based on the presumed elitist attitudes and exclusionary nature of traditional choirs, i.e. 'sounding posh' and needing to read music as cultural assumptions (p. 137). Many of these assumptions are broadly accurate, as traditional choirs have developed alongside the needs of the church, and music literacy was a skill set only available to those privately educated (Garnett, 2017). Due to the massive increase in enrolment within these historically 'non-academic' choral genres, it is fitting that choral pedagogy expands to provide diction frameworks that support this growing trend (Abrahams, 2017; Garnett, 2017). Furthermore, since the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, there is increased sensitivity and awareness of the role accents can play in social discrimination and inequalities (Oram, 2019; Oram 2021). This artefact could potentially provide needed structure and support for choir leaders in this emergent choral setting, providing an updated and relevant diction framework. In line with new critical pedagogy methodologies, this artefact would hold genre authenticity and accent inclusivity at the heart of the diction decision making process (Abrahams, 2017).

I intend to create a simple pedagogical framework that can be presented as a single PDF page. It aims to be a practical reference for choral conductors to use when planning diction choices in their repertoire, including diction features for pop choral music. The design of this artefact will take into consideration the practical needs of working choir conductors that have potentially received little to no formal training in preparing diction for choral scores. For this reason, it will not use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which is known to be a barrier for those who have not studied diction formally (Roach, 2009). It will aim to use accessible language, and to define key terms. This framework will bring together academic research alongside both professional insights and unique positionality to create a diction framework for contemporary choirs that moves beyond the outdated concepts of SSBE being a prestigious 'neutral accent' for all to work towards (Jordan, 1996; Goundar, 2025; Milroy, 2011). Instead, this artefact will provide a clear process for planning choral diction

choices, whereby each choir members' own accent will be acknowledged, and the target diction for each piece of music will be chosen based on an individual songs' genre and authenticity needs, celebrating the variety of accents that belong within the modern choral landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Planned Programme of Study**

### **Theoretical Influences**

To develop an accent informed diction framework for choral pedagogy, existing best practice frameworks must be revitalised and refreshed to incorporate relevant core knowledge in three key areas: regional English accents and phonetics, accent inclusivity within the arts, and genre authenticity. These knowledge areas, and their relevance to developing this artefact, were discovered during the process of researching and writing a rapid scoping literature review using a pragmatic hermeneutic approach in previous MA studies (Truman-Williams, 2025; Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

Having studied and received an ITOL certification in Level One: Accents and Phonetics in 2025, the main core textbook titled 'Accents of English 1: An Introduction' by J.C. Wells has been chosen to facilitate the linguistic aspects of artefact development (Wells, 1982). Not only does this text outline the fundamental technical concepts used in teaching accents and linguistics, but it also provides practical tools beyond IPA, such as lexical sets for teaching the differences between different English accents (Wells, 1982). Due to the target audience of this artefact being choir leaders with potentially limited formal choral music training, this technical text will need to be adapted to ensure knowledge accessibility and artefact usefulness within its core demographic of pop and rock choir leaders (Nelson, 2022).

The highly regarded research and transformative reshaping of pedagogy with regards to accent inclusivity and equality in UK drama schools has recently been spearheaded by Daron Oram (Oram 2019; Oram 2021). His groundbreaking research in this related field is a clear theoretical influence and inspiration with regards to rethinking how accents and diction choices can be potentially transformed within choral pedagogy. There are practical differences between the realities of acting and choral singing, most especially the differences between solo speech and group singing, however, his theories remain a strong influence

and inspiration for scrutinising current best-practice and potentially updating and transforming accent approaches within the parameters of choral music (Abrahams, 2017).

Bringing together the technical and cultural influences of Wells and Oram, is the in-depth historical analysis of accents in the development of musical genres, so clearly articulated by John Potter in 'Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology' (Potter, 1998). Potter's theories on genre authenticity are grounded in academic rigour and have been cited in recent journal articles around the use of SSBE in traditional choral music, certain strains of SA in rock & roll and country music, and GA in pop music specifically (Marshall *et al.*, 2024; Gibson, 2017; Wilson 2016). Potter's work, and those inspired by him to continue research on this topic, outline the core relationships between specific contemporary genres and the need for this modern choral music to be performed within a specific regional accent to be deemed authentic by the listener (Potter, 1998). Although it is already common practice for solo singers to assume accents in genre specific songs (Gibson, 2017), the intention of this artefact is to modernise choral pedagogy diction practices to suit the practical needs of choral groups singing in these modern genres, taking into account the complexities of text comprehension, blend and tone quality (Ward-Steinman, P.M., 2017).

### **Best Practice Influences**

When choosing the core texts for best practice influences, grey literature was selected that met specific inclusion/exclusion criteria (Adams *et al.*, 2017). All texts were required to be on the reading lists for internationally regarded MA in Choral Conducting programmes.

Accessing the reading lists to MA Conducting programmes was difficult, and therefore, following a pragmatic approach, ChatGPT was used to help search university websites and suggest a reading list. Due to the complexity of verifying the list provided by such a new and unregulated tool, further checks were implemented to ensure rigour within textbook choices (Qureshi, *et al.*, 2023). It is for this reason, that each suggested textbook also had to meet additional criteria. To ensure academic rigour, each text was required to be reviewed in a published journal article, enhancing its credentials. Furthermore, they were required to be available for purchase on Amazon, to ensure widespread availability. By following the above procedure, the benefits of searching thousands of web pages for information often buried on subpages within university departments was able to be synthesised efficiently, with additional checks ensuring each text is academically lauded (Qureshi, *et al.*, 20234).

Alongside this inclusion/exclusion rubric, an additional allowance for inclusion was made using the hermeneutic approach of chaining/pearling (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Throughout the process of reading the identified core choral pedagogy textbooks, specific

reference was made within these texts to additional textbooks written specifically on the topic of choral diction pedagogy. It was therefore logical to expand the scope of best-practice to include these texts as well. This inclusion/exclusion criteria ensured that the knowledge presented in these texts is currently pedagogical best practice within the context of training choral conductors within a university or conservatoire environment.

The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy is a collection of essays tackling the modern issues surrounding choral conducting. Its main aim is to reflect on historical and current pedagogical discourse and to offer potential solutions for pedagogical transformation. Its main essay themes are based on challenging traditions, world perspectives, teaching diverse populations, and promoting inclusivity in choral communities (Abrahams & Head, 2017). This text has highlighted both the lack of accent awareness in current pedagogy, and the need to transform pedagogical practices for emerging diversity within both choral communities and sung repertoire (Garnett, 2017; Abrahams, & Head, 2017).

Vocational textbooks chosen as best-practice influences include 'The Art & Science of the Choral Rehearsal' by Sharon J Paul (2020), 'Vocal Technique' by Julia Davids & Stephen LaTour (2021), and 'Evoking Sound' by James Jordan (1996). All deliver practical approaches, frameworks, and exercises for planning and teaching within the choral rehearsal. Each will be scrutinised for relevant diction best-practice and frameworks for supporting artefact development. Using thematic analysis, the key words of 'Diction', 'Accent', 'Vowel', 'Consonant', and 'Phonetics' will be used to find information specifically relevant to developing this artefact within broad conducting textbooks (Adams, *et al.*, 2017).

## **Methodological Influences**

All methodological influences used in the creation of this artefact sit under the umbrella of pragmatism. As an epistemological paradigm, it is a blending and acceptance of both constructivism and positivism with a 'what works best' practical approach (Walliman, 2005). More specifically, a hermeneutic approach will be adopted, with its ever-evolving cycles of research, reflection, and adaption (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010). This works particularly well in the context of a rapid scoping literature review and artefact development (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014; Winter, 2023).

Alongside the use of hermeneutics within a pragmatic approach, the practical nature of practice-based research requires an acknowledgement of the researcher's unique status and positionality as an insider-researcher (Winter, 2023; Goundar, 2025). To ensure the methodological robustness required for executing this type of research and artefact

development, Nelson's trio of 'know that', 'know how', and 'know what' will be used specifically for artefact development and reflection in component 2 (Nelson, 2022). This 'practice as research' methodology will aid in providing specific spaces for the many roles the researcher plays in artefact creation (Nelson, 2022).

Finally, as part of the critical reflection, Kolb's Cycle will be adopted (Kolb, 2015). This will allow for a fluid relationship between gaining knowledge from component 1 and applying it practically towards component 2 (Kolb, 2015). Kolb's framework of concrete experience, reflection observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation have similarities to Nelson's Trio, and because of this, is an ideal springboard to launch into artefact creation and component 2. For example, both methodologies focus on the transformation of experiences into new knowledge (Nelson, 2022; Kolb 2015). By utilising both Kolb's and Nelson's reflective and practice-based frameworks, the aims and objectives of this artefact development will be achieved alongside professional development goals and key learning outcomes for this module.

## AIMS

- To critically evaluate existing diction frameworks and synthesise insights from linguistics, drama pedagogy, and choral practice into a new pedagogical tool.
- To ensure my technical knowledge surrounding diction best-practices are at an MA in Choral Conducting Standard.
- To build upon this technical knowledge, by incorporating concepts of accent inclusivity and genre authenticity to create an updated and accessible diction pedagogy that supports choral conductors working in contemporary genres.
- To potentially justify a qualitative research project, whereby this artefact can be tested, and data as to its relevancy and usefulness for choral conductors can potentially be discovered, alongside other potential insights currently unknown.

## OBJECTIVES

- Attend all lectures and read key materials on creating an artefact within Module 5 of MA studies.
- Obtain a firm grasp of master's Level artefact development and practice-based methodologies and choose an appropriate methodology for this assignment.
- Conduct a narrative literature review, using a hermeneutic methodology, on MA Choral Conducting Best Practice, specifically within the field of diction studies, ensuring I have a solid and informed knowledge base of current themes and issues critical within this field.
- To conduct a critical reflection using Kolb's Framework, focusing specifically on how Component 1 has prepared and influenced the design of a relevant practice-based tool, and to use this reflection as a springboard into Component 2 of Module 5
- To create a practice-based artefact, using the framework provided by Robin Nelson (2022), to improve the availability of accessible diction tools for working contemporary choral conductors singing in popular genres.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To deepen my understanding and ability to execute master's Level practice-based research. Specifically; reflective practice, literature review methodologies, positionality, use of grey literature, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and artefact development.
- To obtain new knowledge of Kolb's and Nelson's reflective and practice-based frameworks, so that I may utilise them in the design of an artefact with competence.
- To continue the process of developing expertise in the specialism of accents and diction within contemporary choral conducting, ensuring I understand all dominant themes and critical issues on this topic.
- To critically reflect, within a structured framework, on how Module 5 has potentially transformed my approach to diction within my conducting practice, and how this artefact can be used to further both my MA studies and provide deep insights into my professional practice going forward.

## ACTIVITIES AND TIMELINE

| Task                                                           | Timeline                                            | Assessment Criteria                                                               | Resources                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Attend all M5 Lectures                                         | July 21 <sup>st</sup> – Oct 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2025 | Record insights in reflective journal throughout M5 lecture progression.          | Canvas                                                                                  |
| Develop Project Timeline and outline Methodological Procedures | Sept 1 <sup>st</sup> – Sept 21 <sup>st</sup> , 2025 |                                                                                   | M5 Lecture Notes and Assignment Details on Canvas                                       |
| Conduct initial research into artefact, in preparation for C1  | July 21 <sup>st</sup> – Sept 30 <sup>th</sup> 2025  | Follow outlined Methodological Procedures                                         | M5 assignment for outline, Online Library and relevant purchased books for research.    |
| Write C1 draft                                                 | Sept 21 <sup>st</sup> – Nov 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2025  | Reach word count, having achieved all C1 aims, objectives, and learning outcomes. | All M5 learning resources outlined above.                                               |
| Begin Artefact Design                                          | Oct 15 <sup>th</sup> – Nov 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2025  | Follow Nelson's Trio Framework                                                    | Lecture Notes<br><br>Practice as Research in The Arts and Beyond (2022) by Robin Nelson |
| Write C2 Draft                                                 | Nov 1 <sup>st</sup> – Nov 30 <sup>th</sup> , 2025   | Reach word count, having achieved all C2 aims, objectives, and learning outcomes. | All M5 learning resources outlined above.                                               |
| Review and Complete Artefact Design                            | Nov 21 <sup>st</sup> – Nov 30 <sup>th</sup> , 2025  | Ensure Artefact has incorporated all aims, objectives, and learning outcomes.     | All M5 learning resources outlined above.                                               |

|                                     |                                                   |                                |  |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
|                                     |                                                   | Follow Nelson's Trio Framework |  |
| Hand in Draft M5                    | Dec 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2025                        | (based on ext.)                |  |
| Review Draft Notes and Revise Draft | Dec 5 <sup>th</sup> – Dec 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2025 | (based on ext.)                |  |
| Submit M5                           | Dec 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2025                       | (based on ext.)                |  |

### Critical Reflection

The ability to reflect on one's professional development, both 'in-action' and 'on action', is crucial to the successful achievement of ever-evolving professional aims, objectives, and desired learning outcomes within a practice-based research environment (Shön, 1983; Kolb, 2015). Critical reflection allows for specific space and time for assessing learning milestones and knowledge transformation outside of the day-to-day 'doing' of work. Without taking this time to reflect on the interaction between new (to the practitioner) knowledge and practical application, it becomes difficult to fully integrate practical insights into the development of new skills (Shön, 1983; Nelson 2022; Kolb 2015).

This critical reflection, using Kolb's Model (2015), will bring together concrete experiences, and allow space for reflective observation on how current best practice in choral diction differs from insights gained through personal and practical experiences (Kolb, 2015). Furthermore, these insights will be used as a springboard, to conceptualise the creation of an artefact that is the result of the merger of these practice-based insights with current best-practice methodologies from the literature. Finally, within active experimentation, the specifics with regards to selecting sources, creating methodologies, and a rationale for an inclusion/exclusion rubric and key search terms will be outlined. Kolb's reflective model will be used as a framework to prepare for artefact creation going forward into Component 2 of this module.

## Concrete Experience

Exploring accents and diction frameworks for contemporary choirs is a topic that arose through my own lived experience as a Canadian born and trained choral conductor, teaching a wide variety of music (including pop, classical, folk, rock, country, etc.) to British community choirs. Over time, it became increasingly apparent that certain songs lacked authenticity when sung using traditional British Choral frameworks that choir members were accustomed. In other words, they sounded too clinical, perhaps a bit tacky, and too posh! This is, of course, my own subjective professional opinion, which has been deeply guided and informed by my training and living in Canada. I began to experiment with using American diction frameworks in such songs, using my own natural diction choices as a guide. I observed a trend, in that it was songs rooted in traditional pop music genres that sounded more authentic using a GA accent approach.

Alongside these observations, I noticed that when the choir was learning classical repertoire, I found that many of my consonant and vowel choices were too bright and were not blending with the choir's natural classical diction choices. Despite my own classical choral training, I observed a difference in vowel choices that were linked specifically to differences in word pronunciations, leading to my sound being brighter. Therefore, I have learnt over time to alter my own classical singing diction, often darkening the vowel shapes, to suit the style of the British choral tradition.

These initial observations led me to question why certain songs sound authentic in different accents, and whether pedagogical frameworks or teaching tools existed for choral music outside of classical academia. These topics were explored in Module 4, as a rapid scoping literature review, ideal for practice-based research with limited time and resources (Winter, 2023). It was discovered that choral diction, in general, has had very little research done outside of classical or recently 'world music' traditions (Abrahams, 2017). Within the limited research available, SSBE is known as the basis for English classical solo and choral diction across the world, and GA in solo English pop music (Wilson, 2016; Gibson, 2017). Furthermore, the concept of prestige (SSBE and GA) target accents being propagated as 'neutral' can be found across all levels of society, and work is already being accomplished within speech and drama schools to diversify and celebrate all accents as equal through the concept of 'de-centring listening'. (Wells, 1982; Oram, 2021, p. 11).

Having observed the lack of any pedagogical framework for choirs singing in popular music genres, as well as understanding the role genre authenticity can play in choosing an accent to base lyric diction on, it became a mission to create an artefact that would be useful to

choirs singing in modern genres looking for a clear framework to make diction decisions. This pedagogy would value each accent as equal, and diction choices would be made to elevate the authenticity of the song, as opposed to adhering to an outdated model of 'neutral' in classical lyric diction.

## **Reflection Observation**

Initial reading of Choral Pedagogy texts, which were identified as core literature for MA in Conducting Programmes in both the UK and America, identified that there is a rapidly changing choral landscape due to the massive rise in television singing contests and enrolment in rock/pop choirs (Garnett, 2017). Furthermore, despite the need for practical tools to assist choral conductors working within these emerging genres, the literature is still heavily entrenched with ideas of classical elitism and SSBE being a neutral accent choice, that all choral diction should be working towards as standard practice (Paul, 2020; LaBouff, 2008; Jordan, 1996; David & LaTour, 2021).

Interestingly, an emergent area of choral pedagogy, described as 'world music', has received a lot of attention in the last few decades (Stone, 2017). Specific details with regards to approaching pedagogy through the cultural lens of the piece's origins (i.e. learning from rote, inclusion of dance and movement throughout learning process) have been held and promoted as current best-practice for this genre (Stone, 2021; Abrahams, 2017). What appears absent in these pedagogical observations, is an awareness of the similarities between approaching music from different musical cultures outside of the classical western world, and those of contemporary genres with their own unique cultural demands. There is a need for music academia to allow the same intellectual space for popular music forms as it has recently afforded to 'world music' genres (Stone, 2017).

With regards to diction specifically, it was surprising how little was written or explained within the core conducting pedagogy texts. Mostly, it was alluded to as being at the discretion of the conductor to make choices that would highlight their artistic preferences for tone quality and text articulation (Jordan, 1996; Paul, 2020). Davids & LaTour (2021) stood out as having a specific section regarding vowels and consonant production in contemporary styles. They elicited a preference for brighter vowels and stronger consonants, as opposed to the darker tone quality and consonant reduction found in classical singing techniques (Davids & LaTour, 2021, p. 101). In this case, they were discussing singing technique as opposed to choral technique, and a choral conductor would still be left to wonder how to approach diction in group music making situations.

Overall, I was disappointed at the lack of choral diction guidelines found within these core texts, especially as any diction advice provided was geared either to the solo singer of contemporary music or towards the classical choral tradition, often labelling brighter vowel sounds as those found in amateur choirs that require training to improve their tone quality (Jordan, 1996, p. 287). Jordan did, however, recommend two core texts with regards to choral diction. These books have been ordered and will be read, assessed and assimilated into artefact development during the iterative process of Nelson's Trio (Nelson, 2022).

### **Abstract Conceptualisation**

Based on initial data, there is a need for choral diction guidelines to be created for choirs singing contemporary music. Any choir attempting to sing within popular genres would benefit from clarity and clear guidance with regards to vowel and consonant production, especially when tackling songs whereby specific accent choices are better aligned with the authenticity of the song. By reframing popular choral diction pedagogy to mirror the respect and authenticity awarded to both classical and 'world music' choral genres, this type of choral singing can begin to elevate its status and hopefully attract more research within this emerging field. To create a choral pedagogy framework that is fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is also clear, based on the works of Oram (2021), that popular music diction should ensure there is recognition of each participating voice; ensuring each unique accent is respected. The concepts of prestige and a 'neutral' choral accent could potentially become outdated with the added benefit of a much more varied and colourful tonal palette for directors, singers, and audience members to enjoy. It is for this purpose I propose the question; how can choral conductors approach diction pedagogy within popular music to ensure it is inclusive to all accents and performed authentically?

### **Active Experimentation**

To develop a new diction pedagogy for popular choral music, ensuring it is accessible to all choir leaders regardless of education and experience levels, I will explore the GA accent, and transform speech guidelines found in 'Accents of English 1' by Wells (1982) to incorporate universally accepted choral diction best practice found in the core texts identified through the inclusion/exclusion criteria and key search terms outlined in the methodology section of component 1.

Within my professional practice, I will attempt to use evolving iterations of this artefact to prepare diction and teach popular music to my choir (Nelson, 2022). This synergistic

relationship between designing, testing, reflecting, and refining will allow my unique positionality and practice-based expertise to aide in the creation of an artefact that is both academically robust and practically relevant to the choral conducting community, thus transforming my professional practice and strengthening my skills as a choral conductor (Nelson, 2022).

## **Component 2: Literature Review**

## **How can diction pedagogy support both classical and popular choral genres, ensuring it is inclusive to all accents and performed authentically?**

### **Introduction**

Choral Diction Pedagogy is currently outdated. It is holding onto best practice guidelines from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, whereby diction choices are made holding the archaic Received Pronunciation (RP), or its modern equivalent, Southern Standard British English (SSBE) in the highest regard (LaBouff, 2008; Marshall, 1953; Jordan 1996). Despite the ever-growing popularity of modern repertoire, such as pop, rock, and folk choirs, conductors have little guidance on how to make pronunciation choices to ensure authentic representation of the music (Ward-Steinman, 2017). Since the 1950's, Madeleine Marshall's book titled 'The Singer's Manual of English Diction' (1953) has been the main reference guide on conductor's bookshelves. The practical nature of this text has afforded its longevity, and it is still in use today. Despite Marshall's authority in English diction for singers, Kathryn Labouff published a new text in 2008, which delves more specifically into the mechanics of voice production alongside guidelines for singing texts of both British and American origin (2008). Although both are incredibly useful in terms of learning the basics of creating intelligible English text in song, neither are focused specifically on the issues of blend and tuning in choirs. Furthermore, both texts are written predominantly for classical works, and continue to support the concepts of a 'neutral' accent, which has been proven by many to be an outdated model of speech and accent classification (Oram, 2021; Milroy 2000, Gibson 2024; Marshall, 2024).

Due to the lack of useful pedagogy for choral conductors singing outside of the classical domain, a new reference tool for choral diction is needed. Ideally, one that is suited to modern choral tastes, and recognises that choirs are made of many unique voices that are equally intelligible and hold value. The act of altering speech patterns in a choral setting should no longer be seen as adapting to a preferred 'neutral standard', but instead, as an act of acknowledging that a group of singers must sing to a uniform diction standard for clarity and tone quality. That standard must be anchored within the genre and needs of the song they are performing.

## **Know That**

The concepts of genre authenticity and de-centring listening have been embedded into the shaping of this artefact's overall design (Potter, 1998; Oram, 2019). To provide an updated practical tool for teaching choral diction pedagogy, Fisher's Articulatory Diction Development Method (ADDM) has been used as a base framework for delivering specific diction exercises within the choral warm-up environment (1991). The ADDM was chosen pragmatically, due to being the only academically cited teaching tool found in the literature that was created for application in the choral rehearsal. Although Fisher's exercises were originally designed to promote the use of the 'neutral' SSBE diction model, changes were made to the chosen syllabic structures of the figures to align with the needs of contemporary choirs without removing any of the embedded pedagogical principles such as removing nasalisation, consonant timings, and vowel uniformity (Fisher, 1991).

To navigate the philosophical differences between Fisher and this artefact, the text has been altered to align with a lexical set (bath) from Wells' text 'Accents of English: An Introduction' (1982, pp. 133-135), ensuring each progressive exercise introduces both a key concept in diction pedagogy, but also accent specific vowel and consonant diction options for both pop and classical choral genres. Due to time constraints, only the 'bath' lexical set has been adapted, however, Fisher's ADDM could be adapted for learning correct pronunciation for all the lexical sets relevant to singing in classical and pop choral genres; examples of these being 'lot', 'cloth', 'nurse', and 'goat' (Wells, 1982). Furthermore, there are many more modern choral genres that require different English accents to produce genre authenticity. Future choral pedagogy texts could adapt the ADDM to suit the Southern American (SA) accents found in country & western music, or the Scottish accent in a Scottish folksong. This artefact is both a solution to teaching choral diction authentically in either classical or pop songs, and a framework for future developments in this under researched field.

## **Genre Authenticity**

It has been well documented that certain musical genres (e.g. rock, pop, country, etc) have strong links with the regional accents from their original place of development (Potter, 1998; Milroy 2000, Marshall, 2024; Gibson, 2024). Specifically, best practice in choral diction, when singing classical choral music, is based on the English accent RP (now SSBE) (LaBouff, 2008; Marshall, 1953; Jordan, 1996). As Potter describes in his book on genre authenticity, 'almost all mainstream recordings of vocal music in English uses RP whatever the linguistic origin of the performers. This has the curious effect of causing even native American music to sound quasi-English in performance' (Potter, 1998, p. 65).

Alongside this phenomenon, many researchers have found the use of the General American (GA) accent to be used both throughout the United States and internationally by those singing and recording popular music (Gibson, 2024; Yang 2018; Milroy 2000). A famous example being The Beatles, whose accents have been traced throughout their career to be in line with GA originally, and then slowly transformed to their own Northern UK spoken accents in their later career (Milroy, 2000).

Despite research clearly outlining the strong relationship between popular music genres and the GA accent, choirs are currently left in the dark with how to deal with the push and pull between sounding authentically choral and simultaneously ensuring popular choral works sound authentic to the original music they emulate. This artefact aims to solve this problem, by acknowledging that choirs must wear 'different hats' when performing different musical genres. It will provide clear instruction to conductors, advocating for choirs to learn a different set of diction rules aligned with the GA accent for performing popular music and SSBE guidelines for more classical choral settings. By removing the concept of a neutral English accent, every singer in the choir can be seen as having to adapt their spoken voice in different ways at different times for different songs. This fosters equality and acceptance.

### **Decentring Listening**

Major speech and drama schools in the UK have already acknowledged that an evolution away from prestige accents being taught as standard practice is needed. This will ensure individuals entering schools for training in voice related careers are treated fairly and equitably (Oram, 2019). Furthermore, after the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, extensive work has been done across society to reflect upon what has always been done, and to make appropriate changes when the status quo is deemed to be founded upon racist ideologies or practices (Oram, 2021). Therefore, basing all choral music diction around SSBE diction, and aiming to rid singers of all accent regionalisms, is an outdated concept that 'others' many singers, and further privileges those from backgrounds where SSBE is their accent from birth (Marshall 1953; LaBouff, 2008, Potter, 1998).

To solve this problem, Oram's concept of decentring listening, whereby actors are taught diction using their own voice as best practice first and foremost, can be applied to choral pedagogy (Oram, 2021). It is an opportunity to create equality within the diverse landscape that is English accents, by allowing diction decisions to be made based on genre, on a case-by-case basis. This artefact aims to hold the vision and values of Oram's de-centring listening at the heart of its pedagogy. It aims to treat all choir members equally, and to foster an environment where choir members are taught that all accents are equally valuable.

## **Articulatory Diction Development Method**

When researching current best-practice in choral diction pedagogy, there was one published set of relevant exercises available, despite allowing for grey literature within the inclusion/exclusion criteria (Adams, *et al.*, 2017; Fisher, 1991). To the researcher's knowledge, this is the only available set of exercises for choral diction development within the white and grey literature that met the inclusion/exclusion criteria of this artefact's methodology. Fisher's *Articulatory Diction Development Method* (ADDM) is unique from the diction pedagogies written by Marshall (1953) and LaBouff (2008), because it is a series of five progressive figures that aim to build a solid foundation in vowel and consonant specificity, ensuring choirs sing matching vowels, clear articulation, reduce nasality, and properly time consonant articulations (Fisher, 1991). Whilst other pedagogies are concerned with the solo singer achieving optimal tone and textual clarity, Fisher's guidance is focused on group uniformity of sound (although it does adhere to the concept of the neutral accent) (Fisher, 1991). Furthermore, it has been discovered, through active experimentation, that the figures can be adjusted and transformed to embed opportunities to practice both pop and classical diction tools. Pragmatically, it was chosen as a starting framework for this artefact due to its overall design of scaffolding relevant technical skills over a set of progressively complex figures, and with its synergistic pedagogical aim being uniformity and good diction technique. Finally, it proved easy to adjust the chosen words and sentences in the more complex figures to ensure Wells's Lexical Set 'bath' could be central to the phonetic structures, as a basis for exploring genre authenticity in both classical and pop choral music (Wells, 1982).

## **Accents of English**

Wells's concept of learning accents by grouping words that follow the same phonetic rules and creating lexical sets for comparing accents is still used today as core pedagogy in accent and phonetics courses (Roach, 2009; Wells, 1982). By taking lists of words that have already been categorised as having the same vowel qualities in SSBE and GA respectively, these can be embedded into the ADDM figures to ensure that vowels are uniform across each exercise, and that alongside learning choral diction technique, these practical exercises can provide choirs with an opportunity to focus on singing lines of words all in a popular music tone and then the same line with a classical tone.

In *Accents of English*, Wells explains that comparing SSBE and GA is the best place to begin when learning accents; this is because they are regarded as 'standard' and being perceived culturally as having 'inherent value' (Wells, 1982, p. 34). Unlike choral pedagogy books, even those written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Wells concedes that there is no validity to the 'inherent value' hypothesis (Wells, 1982, p. 35). He mentions many studies whereby the 'imposed norm' hypothesis has been proven to be more accurate for describing this phenomenon. He explains, that 'the prestige of a standard accent is merely a cultural accident' (Wells, 1982, p. 35). This further exemplifies the lack of communication and understanding between the fields of linguistics and music. This artefact can be seen as an opportunity for music pedagogy to engage with the research already available in the field of linguistics, and to attempt a choral diction pedagogy that acknowledges the 'imposed norm' hypothesis and attempts to align choral standards to those already being transformed within accents and phonetics.

## **Know How**

This artefact has evolved dramatically, both in its intended purpose and with regards to its overall structure. Component 1 highlighted the need for a diction framework that would be useful for leaders of pop and rock choirs with little musical training. However, as the research progressed, it became increasingly clear that there is a significant need for a transformation in choral diction practices within the lineage of current academic standards set by Marshall (1953) and LaBouff (2008). As outlined by *The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy*, there is an acknowledgement of the growing validity of popular choral music, however pedagogical practices have yet to provide a solution to this issue (Abrahams & Head, 2017).

As a practice-based researcher with extensive training and experience conducting both classical and popular music, it felt appropriate to use this positionality to create an artefact that would be inherently valuable to my own choirs (Goundar, 2025). Furthermore, it allowed for this artefact to focus solely on the practical application of warm-up exercises that could be delivered in the first ten minutes of a weekly rehearsal. Again, the original concept was to create an accessible framework for novice directors looking for guidance on singing in popular genres. Instead, through using reflective observation exemplified by Kolb and Nelson, it was discovered that jumping straight to practical exercises for my own choir would equally serve the needs of choral diction pedagogy and enhance my own professional practice (Kolb, 2015; Nelson 2022).

Utilising the methodology outlined in component 1, the continuous life cycle of a hermeneutic research approach meant that new discoveries were made within both white and grey literature throughout the creation of this artefact (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). A key point of discovery was the two main lyric diction textbooks used by choral conductors as best practice – ‘The Singer’s Manual of English Diction’ by Madeleine Marshall (1953) and ‘Singing and Communicating in English’ by Kathryn LaBouff (2008). Neither of these core texts came up during preliminary research into MA in Choral Conducting reading lists, however they were cited in the core texts (Jordan, 1996; Abrahams & Head, 2017). It was through these texts that it became apparent how behind choral diction pedagogy is with regards to equality of accents in society (Marshall, 1953; LaBouff, 2008). Furthermore, Fisher’s ADDM framework was the best fit for aiming to transform existing practice (1991). Although the original idea for the artefact was to keep the language accessible to those without training, the ADDM framework allowed for the practical application of these principles immediately into a useful tool that would benefit the choirs that I conduct. This worked well within the pragmatic ‘what works best’ approach unpinning the methodologies of this module (Winter, 2022; Nelson, 2022).

After considering the literature, my methodology, and the needs of my professional practice, artefact creation began by analysing Wells’ core text and choosing the best lexical set for showcasing vowel clarity with two distinct vowel sounds (‘ah’ like father and ‘a’ like cat), and exemplifying how a set of identical words could be pronounced differently depending on the genre being sung (Fisher, 1991; Wells, 1982). The ‘bath’ lexical set was chosen, due to it having not only clear differences between SSBE and GA accents, but also because the ‘a’ sound in this word set is found in many British regional accents. Anecdotally, the pronunciation of this lexical set is 50/50 in my own UK based choir. Choosing this lexical set aided in achieving the objective of transforming accent equality and respect within the choral setting. It practically facilitates the understanding of how different voices must adjust to suit the overall sound, and how depending on genre, who makes these adjustments may differ.

To produce the first iteration of this artefact, it was necessary to analyse each of Fisher’s five figures, and to discern what alterations would need to be made for it to solely demonstrate both the ‘ah’ and ‘a’ vowel sounds in the ‘bath’ lexical set without losing any of Fisher’s choral diction pedagogical tools already embedded (Wells, 1982; Fisher, 1991). Upon analysis, key observations were made. Without transforming Fisher’s exercises, it would be very confusing to choirs as to what diction would be required throughout the line. Often despite Fisher asking for clarity of production and placement of vowel and consonant sounds, the words chosen for the exercises left many confusing choices between bright and dark vowels, as well as whether to use rhoticity (pronouncing the ‘r’ sound) or not. For

Fisher's exercises to work in a modern choral rehearsal, they would need to be altered so that singers can focus solely on either making the 'ah' or 'a' sound in a series of identical figures. It was decided to retain Fisher's non-sensical syllables within the figure progressions, as they provide opportunities for singers to focus solely on specific vowel and consonant sounds without the added complexity of words associated with diction expectations. Furthermore, these types of syllables are already used in choral warm-ups as standard practice, so would be received as common practice by choir members. After producing hand-written exercises using only pure vowels, non-sensical syllables, and then actual words in the 'bath' lexical set, this iteration was used in choir practice.

The insights gained during professional practice were transformational, and by allowing space for critical reflection brought into focus specific next steps to be incorporated into future iterations of this artefact (Nelson, 2022). Firstly, despite wanting to run all the exercises in the warm-up, it was only possible to teach one figure within the time constraints of a warm-up session. Furthermore, it became obvious that the choral diction knowledge embedded within the figures needed to be taught separately, so that they could be refined and practiced before scaffolding on new layers of technique. For example, figure one focuses on the importance of producing matched vowel sounds and holding onto the integrity of those vowel shapes within the body when moving through consonant articulations that potentially could colour or weaken the shaping of the vowel afterward. By teaching the exercise through rote learning principles, it was clear that learning the proper production of both 'ah' and 'a' alongside memorising the sequence of consonants within figure 1 was complex enough for one session. By testing the artefact in practice, it allowed for adjustments to be made in terms of pacing the delivery of the materials. It is now clear that for a choir to practice and progress throughout the series of figures, they could potentially require a 5–10-week training window.

In early development, the focus was specifically on training accents in pop and classical genres, however the structure of the artefact was altered to give equal weighting to good choral technical development. By retaining the pedagogical tools provided by Fisher originally, it allows for academically vetted (published) choral pedagogy (for which there is very little!) to be updated and modernised to suit the needs of modern choirs, thus solving the proposed problem of how diction pedagogy can support both classical and pop genres, ensuring it is inclusive to all accents and performed authentically.

## **Know What**

### **What?**

Whilst attempting to solve the practical problems of making diction decisions within a multi-genre choral setting, it became progressively apparent that overall, there is a lack of diction pedagogy for choir directors to teach with, and what does exist is solely focused on the classical choral tradition with perhaps some insights and practical tools for singing 'world music' (Abrahams & Head, 2017). Although the original aim of this artefact was to create a teaching tool for pop and rock choral directors with little to no formal musical training, the iterative process of 'practice as research' gave space for critical reflection on the artefact's usefulness in my own practice. Its purpose transformed into one that would improve classical and pop music singing in my own choirs and concurrently work towards updating diction pedagogy beyond the existing best-practice lineage of Marshall and LaBouff (Nelson, 2022; Marshall, 1953; LaBouff, 2008).

The discovery of Fisher's existing ADDM series, and the lack of any other available practical tools, brought clarity to the purpose of this artefact. By working with the figures in my own rehearsals, the need for all choirs (not just professionals, but community choirs too!) to give space to improving basic choral diction techniques became apparent, highlighting a gap in my own pedagogical practices that needed to be filled. Although the expectation was to focus the artefact solely on the use of SSBE and GA accents in classical and pop genres, it ended up embedding many other technical lessons, such as how to shape each pure vowel sound, exact placement of consonants within the beat, reducing nasality, and keeping pure vowel shapes despite consonant interruption. Many of these concepts were tacit knowledge developed over my training and professional career, however through the process of practice as research, have transformed into explicit knowledge (Nelson, 2022).

The difference between the goals and objectives set within component 1, and the reality of practically applying new insights into my own practice has meant the overall purpose and audience, as well as the design of the artefact has transformed drastically from original inception. Although at times there was uncertainty as to how to progress through the hurdles within this module, having clearly articulated both the problem that needed solving as well as a robust methodological process meant I could make changes to the artefact with confidence. The resultant choral pedagogy has achieved more than what was originally set

out; it isn't translating existing knowledge into something for novice choral directors. Instead, it is updating current best practices within the literature to create new potential for popular choral music to gain respect and attention within the academic landscape, alongside fostering the values of accent equality and respect. This was an unexpected but wonderful outcome.

### **So What?**

This outcome matters, because choral conductors are predominantly trained within academic institutions (Abrahams & Head, 2017). Without updating current pedagogical frameworks, those currently seeking training in choral conducting will continue to be trained in outdated methods of 'neutral' accents and lack of any attention being paid to popular choral works. Furthermore, once an established best-practice is questioned within the literature, this could potentially spark of a wave of new interest and research into the topic, and perhaps even facilitate the much need cross-departmental collaboration between linguists and musicians, as highlighted in the literature review conducted in Module 4 (Truman-Williams, 2025).

From a practice-based perspective, this artefact will transform the way I structure and deliver warm-ups to my choirs and ensure that I am properly facilitating the development of solid technical skills within choir members. This exemplifies the practical applications of achieving one of the aims set within component 1. By ensuring my technical knowledge surrounding diction best-practices are at an MA in Choral Conducting Standard, I can improve the educational experiences, and in turn the quality of performance, for choir members.

### **Now What?**

The creation of this artefact is still in a preliminary stage, as initial experiences have proven it will take around five to ten weeks to teach each progressive figure to the choir, all whilst critically reflecting and gaining insights into best practice in both pedagogical structure and content accordingly. I intend to continue refining this artefact through the practice as research framework set by Nelson (2022) and anticipate its use to be transformative to my professional practice in many ways.

The impact will be felt primarily through the quality of sound I anticipate will be achievable both in classical and popular repertoire. The reasons for this are twofold. In the planning stages, I will be able to clearly define the genre of a song and scrutinise the words through

the lens of lexical sets to discern exactness in diction choices. From the onset of teaching, the level of rigour will be of a much higher standard than previously employed (largely based on trial and error). Furthermore, the warm-up exercises will provide opportunities within the rehearsal space for all choir members to improve their vowel formations, consonant placements, and to reduce nasality within their tone. All these choral skills will be developed alongside a solid understanding of how to employ a different set of diction rules to classical and popular music. These core pedagogical concepts, although often looked at sporadically in practice, have never been introduced in a way that is scaffolded and methodical, to ensure the building blocks of tone quality are learned in a logical progression.

Throughout this process, it is possible that some choir members coming from trained backgrounds (e.g. previous choristers) may be hesitant to change the way they have always sung and may be deeply entrenched within the concept of the 'neutral' choral accent. However, having already taught two songs this past spring to the choir using GA and SA accent frameworks, the anecdotal evidence suggests even those with the most formal of choral training enjoy the challenge and results of singing modern music with an accent that is authentic to the genre. At times, I even had to request a little less rhoticity, as the SA accent began to morph into something closer to a Somerset accent! Overall, I believe that choir members enjoy playing with the more complex sonic palette offered within the updated ADDM framework.

Alongside these anticipated professional transformations, there is potential for this artefact to be expanded for more accents and genres within the popular choral landscape. Currently, it is only designed for learning one lexical set in SSBE and GA; the 'bath' set. There is potential for the figures to be reworked for a variety of lexical sets, ensuring that all the main differences in pronunciation between classical and pop choral tones are included. Looking further ahead, based on insights from Module 6, there is potential for this artefact to be a template for a handbook for choral diction, which would be a welcome transformation within the current choral diction lineage. This new text would be built on the value system of equality and respect for all accents and incorporate genre authenticity into the heart of choral diction pedagogy (Potter, 1998; Oram 2021). This would, in turn, transform my professional practice, as this expertise could potentially open new doors professionally, as a conducting mentor or other role in choral conducting training.

## **Conclusion**

The process of creating this artefact through practice as research methods has facilitated immense growth with regards to both academic knowledge and professional skills (Nelson, 2022). By using my own positionality as a Canadian trained choral conductor working in the UK, I was able to provide unique insights into the overlooked issue of teaching diction within modern choral settings (Abrahams & Head, 2017; Goundar, 2025). The methodologies used in this module have transformed my academic abilities to achieve competence in using hermeneutic principles, positionality, inclusion/exclusion rubrics, and grey literature within a grounded pragmatic approach. This academic toolkit will serve as a solid foundation for conducting qualitative research in module 6. As a working choral conductor, the training received within the core MA level choral pedagogy texts will enhance every aspect of my professional practice. Although this module demanded that specificity was given to diction, the library of information on beat patterns, exploring dynamics, choosing literature, conducting posture, among others will be read and infused into professional practice over many years to come. With regards to diction, there is potential to create a professional pathway whereby workshops and classes could be developed to teach diction pedagogy to other conductors, and this would open new avenues of work beyond the daily rehearsals and concerts of community choirs.

The question posed by this module, how can diction pedagogy support both classical and popular choral genres, ensuring it is inclusive to all accents and performed authentically, has been explored at depth in the creation of this artefact. To support both choral genres, it is important to acknowledge the accents associated with genre authenticity (SSBE and GA) and to treat each with equal weighting in terms of technical training. Furthermore, by using a series of figures progressively during warm-ups, there are practical opportunities for building knowledge of choral tone and diction principles using Wells' lexical sets as a framework for comparing the differences between the two genres. By acknowledging the uniqueness of every accent in the choir and accepting that adjustments to natural speech patterns will need to serve the genre of the song, the overall vision and values of respecting and celebrating the wide variety of English accents in society can be upheld. What has once been labelled as a problem, can be turned into a solution for modern day choirs.

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## Appendix

### Lexical Set – Bath

*Below is a series of diction exercises suitable for any choir aiming to pronounce words from the 'Bath' lexical set within either a classical or popular music sound. See a list of common words at the end of this exercise series.*

***In Classical Choral music, these words are pronounced with the IPA /a/ sound.***

***In Popular Choral music, these words are pronounced with the IPA /æ/ sound.***

**Figures 1-4** are designed to develop skills in uniform and accurate vowel formation, clear and rhythmically placed articulation of consonants, and reduction of nasality.

**Figure 5** builds off these skills, providing further context for WHY specificity is needed, showing how diction choices can change the meaning of the text we sing.

**All figures** provide opportunities to practice the vowel formation of /æ/ or /a/, depending on the genre being sung.

## Articulation and Vowel Nasalisation Exercise

Figure 1

Observe staccato markings. Keep notes separate.  
Try to move articulators only, maintaining mouth position  
for each vowel when producing consonants.  
Practice lines with each vowel choice. Option 1: æ Option 2: a



## 'l' and Consonant Articulation Exercise

Figure 2

Keep the vowel sound identical as you move from one syllable or word to another.  
Place ending consonants precisely on the last quaver/eighth note of the measure (the 'and' of beat 2)  
Option 1: æ (like 'bad') Option 2: a (like 'father')



## Phoneme, Word Environments and Rhythm Articulation

Figure 3

Keep the vowel sound identical as you move from one syllable or word to another.  
Place ending consonants precisely on the last quaver/eighth note of each beat (the 'and' of each beat)  
Option 1: æ (like 'bad') Option 2: a (like 'father')



# Phoneme, Word Environments and Rhythm Articulation

Figure 4

Keep the vowel sound identical as you move from one syllable or word to another.  
Place the final consonant of the first word in each pair  
precisely on the last semiquaver/sixteenth beat of the first pulse in each measure.

Option 1: æ (like 'bad') Option 2: a (like 'father')



## Word Pair and Group Environments Exercise

Figure 5

Articulate final consonants precisely on the last semiquaver/sixteenth of the beat/pulse.  
Begin at a slower tempo (60 bpm) and increase to no more than 110 bpm with fluency.

IPA has been suggested for both Classical and Popular Music Genres.  
Each sentence pair is a mixture of different vowels and consonants,  
and include both æ and a within each sentence.



IPA Clas: θæt      tɒl      lʌv      ju      sɪŋ      a      -      baʊt

IPA POP: θæt      tal      lav      ju      sɪŋ      a      -      baʊt

**That      all      of      you      sing      a      -      bout**

IPA Clas: θæt      ɔl      ʌv      ju      sɪŋ      a      -      baʊt

IPA POP: θæt      al      ʌv      ju      sɪŋ      a      -      baʊt

## **Common Lexical Set words – BATH**

Answer, ask, basket, bath, blast, branch, castle, chance, chant, class, clasp, contrast, craft, dance, demand, draft, grant, half, hassle, laugh, last, lather, master, mask, pass, past, path, plant, paster, rather, sample, savage, shaft, staff, task, vast.