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# Defining the Schwa for English, German, French, and Russian Lyric Diction

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**M**ANY ENGAGING DICTION CONVERSATIONS grow out of students' questions. One day, a seemingly simple question was met with laughter from others around the classroom. "What is the schwa?," the student asked. "That is a great question!," I replied. A general description of the schwa was provided. A detailed response would have required answering additional questions:

1. Why is the schwa important to singers?
2. What sound does the schwa represent?
3. Why is there confusion regarding the schwa?

Answers to these questions did not come quickly (12 years have passed). The following discussion provides an audio-based solution to my inquisitive student's question. Scan the QR codes throughout the article to hear spoken and sung examples of the schwa. Visit [bit.ly/36e6HdE](http://bit.ly/36e6HdE) to access all examples.

## A GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE SCHWA

The schwa [ə] is a symbol that represents an undefined vowel sound in an unstressed syllable. It is also called the obscured vowel or vowel murmur. The schwa does not represent a universal sound. Specified languages possess unique pronunciations of the schwa: the English schwa has ten pronunciations, the German schwa has two pronunciations, the Russian schwa has five pronunciations, and the French schwa maintains one pronunciation for lyric diction. The schwa does not exist in Italian, Latin, or Spanish.

## Why Is the Schwa Important to Singers?

There are three reasons why the schwa is important to singers. 1) The unstressed nature of the schwa provides shape and direction to the musical phrase. 2) Composers often set the schwa on a sustained note. 3) Vowel clarity and distinction are necessary for the lovely singing of every syllable, regardless of stress. The schwa does not possess these qualities in speech. The spoken form is abbreviated, reduced, or even dropped.

The International Phonetic Alphabet was not designed for singers. The IPA was created by phoneticians for language study as it applies to speech. Singers adopted the IPA for lyric diction. Adjustments to the IPA must be made to accommodate the oral space required for singing; to accommodate the sustained vowel line; and to specify the pronunciation of vowels in unstressed

syllables that would have been dropped or indicated with a schwa in standard dictionary transcription (dictionary transcription reflects the spoken form of a language).

### What Sound Does the Schwa Represent?

The schwa represents many sounds, but the symbol itself does not indicate any particular sound. What is the purpose of an IPA symbol without a specific sound? A symbol that represents an unidentified vowel sound is needed to complete the syllable. It is a placeholder. These vowels are typically open. They may be a reduced or weakened version of a known vowel, they may be mixed with other open vowels, or they may be mutational with a pronunciation that is dependent on stress or duration.

In short, the schwa is intended for speech. An advanced study of lyric diction would involve replacing each schwa with a specific vowel symbol. Defining the schwa is based on spelling. The rationale for organizing schwa rules according to spelling is as follows: If the spellings of languages can be trusted to establish transcription rules, then the spellings of languages should be trusted to define the pronunciation of the schwa.

### Schwa Research for This Discussion

A database of transcribed words was created for each language. Computer search functions were applied to organize the spellings of words with schwa transcriptions. Sung and spoken audio clips were used to verify spellings that create unique categories. Rules established from the schwa research are organized by language in this article. Note: symbols in parentheses indicate the defined schwa.

## THE ENGLISH SCHWA

The English schwa is a reduced (or weakened) version of [ɪ], [ɛ], [ʊ], [u], [ɔ], [o], [ʌ], [ɑ], [æ], or [ɜ]. Defining the schwa is based on spelling and duration of the note. The following spellings apply to unstressed syllables.

### Front vowel pronunciation of the schwa

1. Final *es* and *ent* are [ɛ]:

sweetness ['switn(ɛ)s]  
moment ['moum(ɛ)nt]



2. Final *en*, *et*, *eth*, *ed*, and *ence* may be [ɛ] or [ɪ]. The pronunciation is [ɛ] when set on a sustained note. The pronunciation is [ɪ] when spoken or set on a short note.

heaven ['hev(ɛ/ɪ)n]  
secret ['sɪkɪ(ɛ/ɪ)t]  
sayeth ['sɛɪ(ɛ/ɪ)θ]  
faded ['fɛɪd(ɛ/ɪ)d]  
absence ['ʔæbs(ɛ/ɪ)ns]



### Central vowel pronunciation of the schwa

3. Vowel + *r* is [ʌ] for lyric diction (see points 9 and 10):

whisper ['wɪsp(ʌ)]  
lover ['lʌv(ʌ)]  
silver ['sɪlv(ʌ)]



4. Final syllable *u* and *o* are [ʌ]:

wondrous ['wʌndɪ(ʌ)s]  
reason ['ɪz(ʌ)n]



Note: medial syllable *u* and some final syllable *u* are [u] for lyric diction (pronunciation is [ʌ] for speech):

fortune ['fɔʃt(u/ʌ)n]  
cherubim ['tʃɛr(u/ʌ)bɪm]



Note: medial syllable *o* is [ɔ] for lyric diction (pronunciation is [ɔ] when the *o* is followed by an inter-vocalic *r*):

harmony ['ham(o)nɪ]  
memory ['mɛm(ɔ)rɪ]



5. Final *a* is [ʌ]. Final *a* in words of foreign origin are [ɑ]:

English words are [ʌ]:

sofa ['soʊf(ʌ)]  
idea ['ɪɑ'di(ʌ)]



Words borrowed from Latin and Italian are [ɑ]:

Gloria ['glɔɪ(ə)]  
opera ['ɒpɪ(ə)]



6. Spelling *a* + consonant is midway between [æ] and [ɪ] (pronunciation is [ɪ] when spoken or set on a short note):

distant ['dɪst(æ/ɪ)nt]  
mountain ['maʊnt(æ/ɪ)n]  
image ['ɪm(æ/ɪ)dʒ]



Note: final *land* is between [æ] and [ʌ] (pronunciation is closer to [ʌ] when spoken or set on a short note):

island ['ɪlənd]



### Back vowel pronunciation of the schwa

7. Vowel + *l* is [ʊ]:

angel ['ʒeɪndʒ(ʊ)l]  
crystal ['krɪst(ʊ)l]  
humble ['hʌmb(ʊ)l]



8. Final *il* is [ʊ] (pronunciation is [ɪ] when set on a sustained note):

evil ['ɪv(ʊ)l]  
tranquil ['træŋkw(ʊ)l]  
devil ['dɛv(ʊ)l]



9. Spellings *ur* and *ward* are [ʊ] (pronunciation is closer to [ʌ] when spoken or set on a short note):

nature ['neɪtʃ(ʊ/ʌ)]  
forward ['fɔw(ʊ/ʌ)d]



10. Final syllable *or* is [ɔ] (pronunciation is [ʌ] or [ə] when spoken; it is [ʌ] when set on a short note):

Savior ['seɪv(ɔ/ʌ)]  
comfort ['kʌmf(ɔ/ʌ)t]  
color ['kʌl(ɔ/ʌ)]



Unstressed words within the phrase have a weak and strong form. Pronunciation of these words is determined by stress and duration of the note. Observe the various pronunciations of the following words:

1. The word *am*: strong [æm]/weak [ʌm]

Am I welcome? How am I doing?  
[ʔæm aɪ 'welk(ʌ)m] [haʊ ʌm aɪ 'duɪŋ]



2. The word *has*: strong [hæz]/weak [hʌz]

All that he has, is lost. Night has come.  
[ʔɔl ðæt hi hæz ɪz lɔst] [naɪt hʌz kʌm]

3. The word *that*: strong [ðæt]/weak [ðʌt]

Enough of that! Think not that I forget.  
[ʔɪ'naʃ əv ðæt] [θɪŋk nɔt ðʌt aɪ f(ə)'ɡet]

4. The word *to*: strong [tu]/weak [tʌ]

Sway to and fro. We dance from dawn to dusk.  
[swɛɪ tu ænd frʊ] [wi dɑns frɔm dɔn tʌ dʌsk]

5. The word *can*: strong [kæn]/weak [kʌn]

Sing, if you can. Who can tell?  
[sɪŋ ɪf ju kæn] [hu kʌn tel]

6. The word *had*: strong [hæd]/weak [hʌd]

She gave what she had. If we had known.  
[ʃi geɪv wʌt ʃi hæd] [ɪf wi hʌd nəʊn]

7. The word *them*: strong [ðem]/weak [ðʌm]

In them my hopes do carry. Let them sing!  
[ɪn ðem maɪ hoʊps du 'kæɪɪ] [let ðʌm sɪŋ]

8. The word *was*: strong [wʌz]/weak [wʌz]

Blind though I was, my aim was sure.  
[blaɪnd ðʊ ə wʌz] [maɪ ʔeɪm wʌz ʃʊ(ʌ)]

### The English schwa in initial syllables

Initial unstressed syllables may be transcribed with an [ɪ], [ʌ], [ɜ], [ɔ], [o], or [ʊ] vowel.<sup>1</sup>

1. Spelling *e* is [ɪ]:

belief [b(ɪ)'lɪf]  
depend [d(ɪ)'pend]  
presume [pɪ(ɪ)'zju:m]



2. Spellings *a*, *u*, *con*, and *com* are [ʌ]:

agree [ʔ(ʌ)'gri]  
 uplifting [ʔ(ʌ)p'lɪftɪŋ]  
 concern [k(ʌ)n'sɜ:n]  
 compete [k(ʌ)m'pɪt]



3. Spellings *sur* and *per* are [ɜ] (these spellings may be pronounced as [ʊ] for lyric diction):

survive [s(ɜ)'vaɪv]  
 perceive [p(ɜ)'sɪv]  
 perfection [p(ɜ)'fɛkʃ(ʌ)n]



4. Spelling *or* is [ɔ] for lyric diction (pronunciation is [ɜ] for speech):

forget [f(ɔ)'gɛt]  
 forgive [f(ɔ)'gɪv]  
 horizon [h(ɔ)'raɪz(ʌ)n]



Note: other unstressed *o* are [o].

5. Spelling *ful* is [ʊ]:

fulfill [f(ʊ)'fɪl]



Observe the sung pronunciation of the schwa in the following example:

“All Things Bright and Beautiful”  
 Composer: John Rutter  
 Poet: Cecil Francis Alexander  
 Performed by: The Cambridge Singers



CHORUS

*All things bright and beautiful,*  
 [ʔɔl θɪŋz braɪt ænd 'bjutɪf(ʊ)l]  
*All creatures great and small,*  
 [ʔɔl 'kri:tʃ(ʊ/ʌ)z grɛɪt ænd smɔl]  
*All things wise and wonderful,*  
 [ʔɔl θɪŋz waɪz ænd 'wʌnd(ʌ)f(ʊ)l]  
*The Lord God made them all.*  
 [ðʌ lɔd gad meɪd ðɛm ʔɔl]

1. *Each little flower that opens,*  
 [ɪtʃ 'lɪt(ʊ)l flʌʊ(ʌ) ðæt ʔoʊp(ɛ/ɪ)nz]  
*Each little bird that sings,*  
 [ɪtʃ 'lɪt(ʊ)l bɜd ðæt sɪŋz]

*He made their glowing colors,*  
 [hi meɪd ðɛ(ʌ) 'glouɪŋ 'kʌl(ɔ/ʌ)z]  
*He made their tiny wings.*  
 [hi meɪd ðɛ(ʌ) 'taɪni wɪŋz]

2. *The purple-headed mountain,*  
 [ðʌ 'pɜp(ʊ)l 'hɛd(ɛ/ɪ)d 'maʊnt(æ/ɪ)n]  
*The river running by,*  
 [ðʌ 'rɪv(ʌ) 'rʌnɪŋ baɪ]  
*The sunset and the morning,*  
 [ðʌ 'sʌnset (æ/ʌ)nd ðʌ 'mɔɹnɪŋ]  
*That brightens up the sky.*  
 [ðæt 'braɪt(ɛ/ɪ)nz ʌp ðʌ skaɪ]

3. *The cold wind in the winter,*  
 [ðʌ kəʊld wɪnd ɪn ðʌ 'wɪnt(ʌ)]  
*The pleasant summer sun,*  
 [ðʌ 'plez(æ/ɪ)nt 'sʌm(ʌ) sʌn]  
*The ripe fruits in the garden,*  
 [ðʌ raɪp frʊts ɪn ðʌ 'gʌd(ɛ/ɪ)n]  
*He made them every one.*  
 [hi meɪd ðɛm ʔev.ɪ wʌn]

4. *He gave us eyes to see them,*  
 [hi geɪv ʌs ʔaɪz tu si ðɛm]  
*And lips that we might tell*  
 [(æ/ʌ)nd lɪps ðæt wi maɪt tɛl]  
*How great is God Almighty,*  
 [haʊ grɛɪt ɪz gad ʔɔl'maɪtɪ]  
*Who has made all things well.*  
 [hu hæz meɪd ʔɔl θɪŋz wɛl]

THE GERMAN SCHWA

The German schwa is a reduced version of the open [ʊ] or [ɛ] vowel. Note that the pronunciation of a German [ʊ] is more closed than the English pronunciation of the same symbol – the IPA must be redefined for each language. For example, the German [ʊ] is closer to an [u] sound: *und* [ʔʊnt] and *Duft* [dʊft].

The pronunciation of specified German schwa spellings is a weakened version of the German [ʊ] vowel. This weakened vowel sound is similar to the English [ʊ] of *look*. Defining the schwa is based on spelling.

1. Unstressed *e* is [ʊ] when final in the word or element (the schwa is often dropped in speech):

meine ['maen(ʊ)]  
 Liebe ['li:b(ʊ)]  
 gegeben [g(ʊ)'ge:b(ɛ)n]



2. Unstressed *e* is [ʊ] when followed by a vowel *r*. The [ɤ] symbol is preferred for lyric diction. This selection agrees with Odom and Siebs 1969.<sup>2</sup> The [ɐ] symbol, applied in current dictionary transcription, represents spoken pronunciation. Sustaining an *r*-colored vowel, as implied by the [ɐ] symbol, would be undesirable for a sustained tone.

Sung/spoken pronunciation:

Lieder ['li:d(ʊ)ɤ]/['li:ɖɐ]  
wandern ['vand(ʊ)ɤn]/['vandɐn]



3. Unstressed *e* is [ɛ] for all other spellings:

findet ['fɪnd(ɛ)t]  
Engel ['ʔɛŋ(ɛ)l]



Observe the sung pronunciation of the schwa:

“Die Mainacht,” op. 43, no. 2  
Composer: Johannes Brahms  
Poet: Ludwig Christoph Heinrich Hölty  
Performed by: Ingeborg Hallstein



Wann der silberne Mond  
[vann de:ɤ 'zɪlb(ʊ)ɤn(ʊ) mo:nɪt]

durch die Gesträuche blinkt,  
[dʊrç di: g(ʊ)'ʃtrɔøç(ʊ) bliŋkt]

Und sein schlummerndes Licht  
[ʔont zaen 'ʃlʊmm(ʊ)ɤnd(ɛ)s lɪçt]

über den Rasen streut,  
['ʔy:b(ʊ)ɤ de:n 'ra:z(ɛ)n ʃtrɔt]

Und die Nachtigall flötet,  
[ʔont di: 'naxtɪgall 'flø:t(ɛ)t]

Wandl' ich traurig von Busch zu Busch.  
[vandl ɪç 'traurɪç fɔn buʃ tsu: buʃ]

Überhüllet von Laub girret ein Taubenpaar  
[ʔy:b(ʊ)ɤ'hyl(ɛ)t fɔn laop 'gɪrɪ(ɛ)t ʔaen 'taob(ɛ)npa:r]

Sein Entzücken mir vor; aber ich wende mich,  
[zaen ʔent'tsvkk(ɛ)n mi:ɤ fɔ:v ʔa:b(ʊ)ɤ ʔɪç 'vɛnd(ʊ) mɪç]

Suche dunklere Schatten,  
['zu:x(ʊ) 'dʊŋkl(ɛ)r(ʊ) 'ʃatt(ɛ)n]

Und die einsame Träne rinnt.  
[ʔont di: ʔaenzɑ:m(ʊ) 'trɛ:n(ʊ) rɪnnt]

Wann, o lächelndes Bild, welches wie Morgenrot  
[vann ʔo: 'lɛç(ɛ)lnd(ɛ)s bɪlt 'vɛlç(ɛ)s vi: 'mɔrg(ɛ)nrɔ:t]

Durch die Seele mir strahlt, find' ich auf Erden dich?  
[dʊrç di: 'ze:l(ʊ) mi:ɤ ʃtra:lt fɪnt(d) ʔɪç ʔaof ʔe:rd(ɛ)n dɪç]

Und die einsame Träne  
[ʔont di: ʔaenzɑ:m(ʊ) 'trɛ:n(ʊ)]

Bebt mir heißer die Wang herab!  
[be:pt mi:ɤ 'haess(ʊ)ɤ di: van ɛ'rɔp]

## THE FRENCH SCHWA

The French schwa is pronounced as an open mixed [œ] for lyric diction.<sup>3</sup> The schwa is often dropped in dictionary transcription (dictionary transcription reflects the spoken form of a language).

The following spellings apply to unstressed syllables.

1. Final *e* and *es* are [œ] (*es* exceptions apply):

le [l(œ)]  
âme [am(œ)]  
lèvres [levr(œ)]



2. Consonant + *e* + consonant + vowel is [œ]:

petite [p(œ)tit(œ)]  
chevelure [ʃ(œ)v(œ)lyr(œ)]



3. Spelling *fais* + vowel is [œ]:

faisait [f(œ)zɛ]  
faisons [f(œ)zɔ]



4. Spelling *ent* as a verb ending is [œ]:

passent [pas(œ)]  
viennent [vjɛn(œ)]



5. Spelling *re* as a prefix is [œ]:

regrets [r(œ)grɛ]  
refrain [r(œ)frɛ]



6. Exception words with [œ] pronunciation:

dessous [d(œ)su]  
 dessus [d(œ)sy]  
 monsieur [m(œ)sjø]  
 ressemble [r(œ)sābl(œ)]  
 secret [s(œ)krɛ]



Stressed and unstressed syllables are equally weighted in French. The English and German languages have a weighted accentuation of the stressed syllable. As a result, unstressed syllables have a deweighted quality. This practice should be avoided for spoken and sung French. In French, the only difference between stressed and unstressed syllables is vowel length. Non-native singers must be reminded not to lighten the schwa or any other unstressed vowel. French composers often set the schwa on a sustained note. When the schwa is set, it is as equally weighted as any other vowel. Examine the setting of the following text with a frequent occurrence of the schwa. Notice how often the composer sets the schwa on a sustained note. Observe how all vowels are sung with equal intensity.

“L’ombre des arbres,” from *Ariettes Oubliées*

Composer: Claude Debussy

Poet: Paul Verlaine

Performed by: Mary Garden and  
 Claude Debussy



L’ombre des arbres dans la rivière embrumée  
 [lōbr(œ) dez arbr(œ) dā la rivjɛr ābrɥmɛ(œ)]

Meurt comme de la fumée,  
 [mœr kœm(œ) d(œ) la fyɥmɛ(œ)]

Tandis qu’en l’air, parmi les ramures réelles,  
 [tādi kā lɛr parmi lɛ ramɥr(œ) rɛɛl(œ)]

Se plaignent les tourterelles.  
 [s(œ) plɛɲ(œ) lɛ turt(œ)rɛl(œ)]

Combien ô voyageur, ce paysage blême  
 [kōbjɛ̃ œ vwajazœr s(œ) peizaz(œ) blɛm(œ)]

Te mira blême toi-même,  
 [t(œ) mira blɛm(œ) twa mɛm(œ)]

Et que tristes pleuraient dans les hautes feuillées,  
 [e k(œ) trist(œ) plœrɛ dā lɛ ot(œ) fœjɛ(œ)]

Tes espérances noyées.  
 [tɛz ɛspɛrās(œ) nwajɛ(œ)]

## THE RUSSIAN SCHWA

Achieving precise transcription for Russian lyric diction is challenging since vowels in unstressed syllables are often reduced (or weakened). Unstressed и, е, у, ы, and ю weaken (by varying degrees) from the closed toward the open vowel form. Some reduced vowels are indicated with a schwa while others are indicated with a specific IPA symbol in standard dictionary transcription. Unstressed и is transcribed with an open [ɪ] in this article since it has the most obvious mutations. Dictionaries provide an open vowel transcription for unstressed и and у. The degrees of openness are unpredictable and less apparent for unstressed у, е, ы, and ю. Dictionaries simply transcribe the latter three as closed vowels.

The Russian schwa may be pronounced as [ʌ], [ɑ], [a], or [ɛ] for lyric diction. Unstressed я may be pronounced as an [æ] in speech. Defining the schwa is based on spelling. The following rules apply to unstressed syllables.

### The Russian schwa in the final syllable

1. Final a or o is [ɑ]:

снова ['snov(ɑ)]  
 мира ['miɾ(ɑ)]  
 только ['tol'k(ɑ)]  
 надо ['nad(ɑ)]



2. Final я is [a] for lyric diction (the spoken pronunciation of я is [æ]):

песня ['pies'nj(a)]  
 моря ['morj(a)]



3. [ɨ̯] + final я is [ɑ]:

мчатся ['mʧɛɨ̯s(ɑ)]/['mʧɛɛ̯s(ɑ)]  
 снится ['s'ɲ'ɨ̯s(ɑ)]  
 кажется ['kazɨ̯s(ɑ)]



4. Spelling a or o + final soft consonant(s) is [a]

делать ['dʲɛl(a)ʲ]  
 осталась [ɑ'stal(a)sʲ]  
 радость ['rad(a)sʲɨ̯]  
 молодость ['mol(ɑ)d(a)sʲɨ̯]



5. Spelling a or o + final hard consonant is [a]

сумрак ['sumr(a)k]

голос ['gol(a)s]



Observe the sung pronunciation of final schwa:

“Ни слова, о друг мой, ни вздоха”

Composer: César Cui

Poet: Moritz Gartman

Russian translation: Aleksey Pleshcheyev

Baritone: Konstantin Lisovsky

Ни слова, о друг мой, ни вздоха . . .  
[nʲi 'slov(a) o druk moj nʲi 'vzdox(a)]

Мы будем с тобой молчаливы . . .  
[mi 'budʲim s\_tə'boj m(ʌ)lfɕa/ɪ'lʲivi]

Ведь молча над камнем могильным  
[vʲetʲ 'molʲɕ(a) n(a/ʌ)t\_kamnʲim ma'gʲilʲnim]

Склоняются грустные ивы . . .  
[skla'nʲajʲɕs(a) 'grus(t)nije 'ivi]

И только, склонившись, читают,  
[i 'tolʲk(a) skla'nʲiʲɕsʲi' ʲɕɪ'tajʲut]

Как я в твоём взоре усталом,  
[kak ja f\_tvə'jəm 'vzorʲe u'stal(a)m]

Что были дни ясного счастья . . .  
[ʂto 'bilʲɪ dnʲi 'jasn(a)v(a) 'ɕasʲtʲj(a)]

Что этого счастья — не стало!  
[ʂto 'et(a)v(a) 'ɕasʲtʲj(a) nʲe 'stal(a)]

Что этого счастья — не стало!  
[ʂto 'et(a)v(a) 'ɕasʲtʲj(a) nʲe 'stal(a)]

Ни слова, о друг мой, ни вздоха . . .  
[nʲi 'slov(a) o druk moj nʲi 'vzdox(a)]

Мы будем с тобой молчаливы . . .  
[mi 'budʲim s\_tə'boj m(ʌ)lfɕa/ɪ'lʲivi]

Ведь молча над камнем могильным  
[vʲetʲ 'molʲɕ(a) n(a/ʌ)t\_kamnʲim ma'gʲilʲnim]

Склоняются грустные ивы . . .  
[skla'nʲajʲɕs(a) 'grus(t)nije 'ivi]

Склоняются грустные ивы . . .  
[skla'nʲajʲɕs(a) 'grus(t)nije 'ivi]

## The Russian schwa in medial positions

1. Spelling a or o + consonant before the stressed syllable is [ʌ]:

красота [kr(ʌ)sə'ta]

хороша [x(ʌ)rə'ʂa]



2. Spelling a or o + consonant after the stressed syllable is [a]:

звёздами ['zvʲəzd(a)mʲɪ]

ласковый ['lask(a)vʲij]



3. Spellings ал and ол are [ʌ]:

голубой [g(ʌ)lu'boj]

плакал ['plak(ʌ)l]

золотой [z(ʌ)lɒ'toj]

тополь ['top(ʌ)lʲ]



4. Final аю or ою is [a]:

думаю ['dum(a)jʌ]

порою ['por(a)jʌ]



5. Final ой is [a] for lyric diction (pronunciation may vary in speech):

улыбкой [u'lipk(a)j]

нежной ['nʲezn(a)j]



6. Spelling ай or ае is [a] for lyric diction (pronunciation may vary in speech):

слушай ['sluʂ(a)j]

падает ['pad(a)jit]



7. Spelling ое before the stressed syllable is [a]:

моего [m(a)jɪ'vo]

боевом [b(a)jɪ'vom]



8. Spelling ое after the stressed syllable is [ajɛ]:

бедное ['bʲedn(a)j(ɛ)]

робкое ['ropk(a)j(ɛ)]



9. Final ая is [aja] for lyric diction (the spoken pronunciation of я is [æ]):

добрая ['dobr(a)j(a)]  
скорбная ['skorb(n)j(a)]



10. Specified unstressed words are transcribed with a schwa. These words have two pronunciations. The stressed pronunciation is listed first.

во [v(o/Λ)], до [d(a/Λ)], за [z(a/Λ)]  
ко [k(a/Λ)], на [n(a/Λ)], над [n(a/Λ)t]  
по [p(a/Λ)], под [p(a/Λ)t], про [pr(a/Λ)]  
со [s(a/Λ)], то [t(o/Λ)]

Observe the sung pronunciation of the schwa:

“Запад гаснет в дали бледно-розовой”

Composer: Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Poet: Aleksei Tolstoy

Tenor: Georgi Vinogradov



Запад гаснет в дали бледно-розовой,  
[z'ap(a)t 'gas'n'it v\_ 'dal'i 'bledn(a) 'roz(a)v(a)j]

звёзды небо усеяли чистое,  
[z'v'ezdi 'n'eb(a) u'seja'il'i 't'cist(a)j(ε)]

соловей свищет в роще берёзовой,  
[s(Λ)l(a)'v'ej 'svi'c'it v\_ 'ro'c'ε: b'i'r'ez(a)v(a)j]

и травую запахло душистою.  
[i tra'vojɐ za'paxl(a) du'šist(a)jɐ]

Знаю, что тебе в думушку вкралось,  
[znajɐ ŝto t'i'b'e v\_ 'dumu'šku 'fkral(a)s'(a)]

знаю сердца немолчные жалобы,  
[znajɐ 's'ert's(a) n'i' mol't'eni'je 'zal(a)bi]

не хочу я, чтоб ты притворялася  
[n'e xa't'c'ε: ja ŝtop ti pr'itv'a'ral'(a)s'(a)]

и к улыбке себя принуждала бы.  
[i k\_ u'l'ip'k'e s'i'b'a pr'i'nuz'dal(a)bi]

Твоё сердце болит безотрадное,  
[tva'jə 's'ert'si ba'l'it b'iz'a'tradn(a)j(ε)]

в нём не светит звезда ни единая -  
[v\_ n'əm n'e 'sv'et'it zv'iz'da ni' ji'd'in(a)j(a)]

плачь свободно, моя ненаглядная,  
[plaf'ε sva'bodn(a) m(a)'ja n'ina'gl'adn(a)j(a)]

пока песня звучит соловьиная,

[pa'ka 'p'ies'n'i(a) zvu't'c'it s(Λ)la'v'jin(a)j(a)]

соловьиная песня унылая,  
[s(Λ)la'v'jin(a)j(a) 'p'ies'n'i(a) u'n'il(a)j(a)]

что как жалоба катится слёзная,  
[ŝto kak 'zal(a)b(a) 'kat'it's(a) 'sl'ezn(a)j(a)]

плачь, душа моя, плачь, моя милая,  
[plaf'ε du'ša m(a)'ja 'plaf'ε m(a)'ja 'm'il(a)j(a)]

тебя небо лишь слушает звёздное!  
[t'i'b'a 'n'eb(a) li'ŝ 'slu'ŝ(a)jit 'zv'ezn(a)j(ε)]

“Острою секирой ранена берёза”

Composer: Aleksandr Gretchaninov

Poet: Aleksei Tolstoy

Tenor: Sergej Lemeshev



Острою секирой ранена берёза,  
['ostr(a)jɐ s'i'k'ir(a)j 'ran'ɪn(a) b'i'r'ez(a)]

По коре серебристой покатились слёзы;  
[p(a/Λ) ka'r'ie sr'i'br'ist(a)j p(Λ)ka't'il'is'i 'sl'ez'i]

Ты не плачь, берёза, бедная, не сетуй!  
[ti n'e plaf'ε b'i'r'ez(a) 'b'iedn(a)j(a) n'e 's'etuj]

Рана не смертельна, вылечится к лету,  
['ran(a) n'e sm'ir't'el'n(a) 'vil'it'c'it's(a) k\_ 'letu]

Будешь красоваться, листьями убрана . . .  
['bud'ɪŝ kr(Λ)sa'vaf's(a) 'li's't'j(a)m'i' ubr(a)n(a)]

Лишь больное сердце не залечит раны!  
[li'ŝ bal'noj(ε) 's'ert'si n'e za'l'et'c'it 'rani]

Observe a choral setting of the schwa:

“Ночевала тучка золотая”

Composer: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Poet: Mikhail Lermontov

Performed by: The Gnensins State  
Musical College



Ночевала тучка золотая  
[n(Λ)'t'c'ε'val(a) 'tuf'ek(a) z(Λ)la'taj(a)]

На груди утёса-великана;  
[n(a/Λ) 'grud'i u't'εs(a) 'v'il'i'kan(a)]

Утром в путь она умчалась рано,  
['utr(a)m f\_ put' a'na um't'c'al(a)s' 'ran(a)]

По лазури весело играя.  
[p(a/Λ) la'zur'i 'v'es'il(a) r'graj(a)]

Но остался влажный след в морщине  
[no a'stals'(a) 'vlaznij sl'et v\_ mar'c'in'e]

Старого утёса Одиноко  
 ['star(a)v(a) u'tʲos(a) ad'i'nok(a)]

Он стоит; задумался глубоко,  
 [on 'stoit za'dum(Λ)lsʲ(a) glu'bok(a)]

И тихонько плачет он в пустыне . . .  
 [i tʲixonʲk(a) 'plafɕit on f\_pu'stin'e]

### WHY IS THERE CONFUSION REGARDING THE SCHWA?

Many lyric diction texts observe the International Phonetic Association's classification of vowels. The International Phonetic Alphabet was created by phoneticians for language study as it applies to spoken pronunciation. The schwa is a speech symbol. Singers adopted the IPA for lyric diction. The need for vowel clarification (including the schwa) is amplified when unstressed vowels are sustained.

The International Phonetic Association classifies the schwa as a mid-central vowel (Figure 1). This classification implies that the schwa maintains the same pronunciation (and formation) in all languages. While the schwa may be neutralized for speech, it is not identical in all languages. The official vowel chart does not leave room for various pronunciations of the schwa. It leads many to believe that the schwa has a universal sound.

The schwa should not be charted; in fact, it cannot be charted since it does not represent any one sound. The schwa is an undefined sound in an unstressed syllable. The schwa should be removed from the International Phonetic Association's vowel chart.

### CHARTING VOWEL SOUNDS IN UNSTRESSED SYLLABLES

In speech, the jaw is more active and the articulators less engaged. For singing, the jaw is released and the tongue and lips move with increased agility. Discovering precise formation of the defined schwa is augmented in the singer's mouth. Singers' heightened articulatory awareness amplifies the need for a new vowel chart. The charts in Figures 2 and 3 are designed for lyric diction. They are useful for speech as well. Two tongue heights are indicated, open and closed. A new category is added to describe slope of the tongue. Tongue slope is more apparent in the released jaw position required for

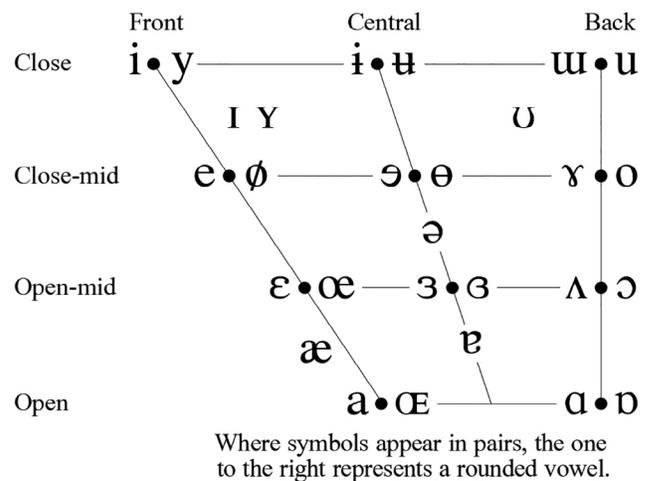


Figure 1. Official IPA vowel chart.

Peak of Arch	Front	Central	Back
<b>Slope</b>			
<b>Steep</b>			
Closed	[i]	[ɨ] [ʉ]	[u]
Open	[ɪ]		[ʊ]
<b>Moderate</b>			
Closed	[e]	[ə]	[o]
Open	[ɛ]		[ɔ]
<b>Mild</b>			
Open		[æ] [ɶ]	
Open		[a] [ɑ]	
<b>Flat</b>			
Open		[ʌ]	

Figure 2. Vowel chart for lyric diction.

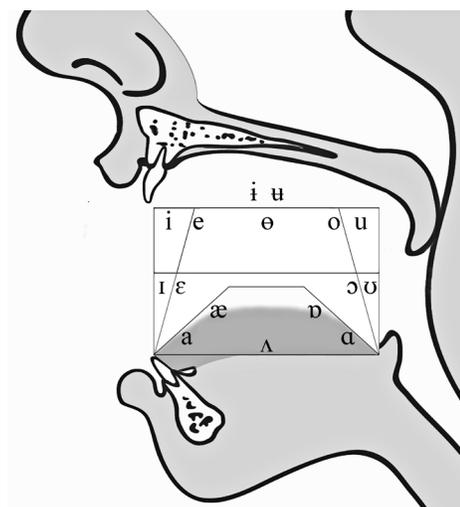


Figure 3. Tongue slope category on a side view of mouth.

singing. The slope or angle of the tongue may be compared to the pitch of a roof. A roof may be steep, moderately steep, mildly sloping, or flat. The tongue creates front and back slopes of varying degrees when forming vowels. The varying degrees of sloping change the shape of the vocal tract (resonating chamber). These formations distinguish one vowel from another. The slope (or angle) of the tongue gives vowels their unique color.

Steep vowels have a sharply sloped tongue position. The [i] and [ɪ] vowels have a steep slope, the [e] and [ɛ] vowels have a moderate slope, and the [æ] and [a] vowels have a mild sloping of the tongue toward the front of the mouth. The [u] and [ʊ] vowels have a steep slope, the [o] and [ɔ] vowels have a moderate slope, and the [ɒ] and [ɑ] vowels have a mild sloping of the tongue toward the back of the mouth. The [ʌ] vowel has no perceivable arch of the tongue. The tongue at rest and the [ʌ] formation are identical. Closed central vowels [ɨ], [ɥ], and [ə] are found in the Russian language. A high plateau in the middle of the tongue is formed for closed central vowels.

The tongue slope category can be tested by whispering the closed and open vowel pairs. Note that the tongue, as a group of eight muscles, is capable of maintaining a precise slope while the oral space is altered. The oral space may be increased by lifting the palate, lowering the jaw, or by forming a plateau in the middle of the tongue. Here is the process for testing the veracity of the tongue slope category.

1. Whisper an [i] vowel using the singer's formation. The [i] for singing is formed with a forward arching of the tongue (not by spreading the lips). The sides of the tongue contact the length of the upper molars.
2. Carefully maintain the [i] tongue formation while lowering the jaw.
3. Produce a whispered sound with this formation. An [ɪ] result would prove that closed and open vowel pairs share the same tongue slope. Space is the only distinguishing factor.
4. Replicate the exercise with the remaining vowel pairs: closed [e] < open [ɛ], closed [u] < open [ʊ], closed [o] < open [ɔ], closed [ɣ] < open [ɣ], closed [ø] < open [œ].

Acknowledging the origins of the IPA as a system created by phoneticians for language study, gives singers the freedom to rethink vowel classifications for

lyric diction. The study of articulatory phonetics fits comfortably within the singer's realm. Singers gravitate toward language study as it enhances vocal awareness. Technique is refined through the exploration of vowel and consonant formations found in multiple languages. An added benefit comes as singers dive into diction study—they discover how other disciplines overlap. Speech therapy, for example, intersects beautifully with lyric diction. Imagine using your singing voice every day to help others learn to read lips, form words, or regain vocal function.

## SUMMARY

Calling attention to the pronunciation of the schwa heightens singers' awareness of all vowels. The schwa has multiple pronunciations, many of which involve vowel mixing and vowel reduction. These vowel mutations are not easily defined with a specific IPA symbol – thus the schwa. The existence of the schwa underscores the fact that the IPA cannot perfectly describe all language sounds. The IPA does, however, provide a framework. It is a skeleton tool that helps singers define vowel formations and identify sounds for vowel mixing. These are vital elements of vocal exploration and awareness.

## Acknowledgement

Vita Koreneva, mezzo soprano and cofounder of Diction-Buddy, has been a tremendous help to me as Senior Editor of the *Russian Lyric Diction Workbook*. She serves as my authority for the pronunciation and translation of the Russian language. She was instrumental in helping me identify the precise pronunciations of the Russian schwa spellings in this article.

## NOTES

1. Madeleine Marshall, *The Singer's Manual of English Diction* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1946), 156–162.
2. William Odom, *German for Singers* (Hattiesburg, MS: Innovative Texts, 2021), 116–117.
3. Thomas Grubb, *Singing in French* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), 43–44.

Cheri Montgomery is a member of the voice faculty at the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University. She is author of the *Lyric Diction Workbook Series*. The series was designed for English, Italian, German, French,

Latin, Spanish, and Russian lyric diction courses. She authored two series for abbreviated diction courses and private and class voice. She is co-author of *Exploring Art Song Lyrics*, published by Oxford University Press. In her work with Oxford, she provided pronunciation and phonetic symbols for more than 750 Italian, German, and French art songs. Her method of transcription and choice of phonetic symbols are published in the appendix. Four of her workbooks have been adapted for braille readers.

Recent releases include the *Ukrainian Lyric Diction Guide* (a free resource), *A Sketchbook Atlas of the Vocal Tract*, the *Spanish Lyric Diction Workbook*, and the *Russian Lyric Diction Workbook*. Sample pages, listening lab, book reviews and free resources are available at [www.stmpublishers.com](http://www.stmpublishers.com).

Montgomery presented at the national level as keynote speaker and mentor voice teacher for the 2019 National Association of Teachers of Singing Summer Workshop. Other presentations include “A Beginner’s Guide to Russian Diction for Opera, a Strategic Approach to Discovering Proper Pronunciation” with Vita Koreneva at the 2022 National Opera Association’s National Conference, and “The Dynamic Classroom: Creating an Engaging Learning Environment for Voice Related Studies” at the 2014 NATS National Conference.

Performance credits include the operatic roles of Gilda (Verdi, *Rigoletto*) and the Shepherd Boy (Puccini, *Tosca*) with the Nashville Opera. Oratorio engagements include appearances with the Knoxville and Nashville Symphonies as soprano soloist for Handel’s *Messiah*.



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