



ROBERTS
WESLEYAN COLLEGE

THE “RULES” OF EXPRESSIVE SINGING

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- **Rule of the Breath:** Breathe in the shape of the first/next vowel you sing
- **Rule of Phrase Shape:** Most phrases begin softer within the dynamic, then *crescendo* before a *decrescendo* at the end of the phrase
- **Rule of Melodic Contour:** When the melody ascends, *crescendo*; when it descends, *decrescendo*
- **Rule of Dynamic Contrast:** When going from a softer dynamic to a louder one, think even louder than the dynamic written; when going from a louder dynamic to a softer one, think even softer than the dynamic written
- **Rule of Punctuation:** *Usually* add a beat-division-length rest wherever there is a mark of punctuation in the text to define phrasing; *always* look at the conductor for sustain or release gestures to make sure!
- **Rule of the Steady Beat:** Note values longer than the steady beat *crescendo* or *decrescendo* (*watch!*)
- **Rule of Word Stress:** Underline the most important words/syllables—emphasize the same syllables within words (micro) and words within phrases (macro) while singing as you would in speech
- **Rule of the Dot:** A rhythmic dot almost always indicates a momentary “swell”
- **Rule of Chiaroscuro:** The higher you sing, the more *oscuro* you must think (open/space); the lower you sing, the more *chiaro* you must think (focus/place)
- **Rule of Crossing the Passaggio:** As you ascend, create more space but don’t think louder unless it’s indicated
- **Rule of the Slur:** Implied tenuto on the first note of any two-note phrase (“sing, shut up!”)
- **Rule of Dissonances:** Lean into the dissonant notes (tension) and lift off resolutions (release)
- **Rule of the Diphthong:** Sustain the primary vowel; the second vowel sounds just before the next consonant or syllable
- **Rule of “R” Pollution:** Sustain the vowel before any *r* as if it weren’t there; let it color the vowel only at the last possible moment
- **Rule of the Consonant Onset:** Consonants are articulated before the beat, vowels are articulated on the beat (heel-to-floor exercise)
- **Rule of the Consonant Release:** Sound the consonant release on the next beat
- **Rule of the Shadow Vowel:** If the final consonant before a breath/rest is voiced, add a shadow vowel after it
- **Rule of the Vowel:** Make every vowel as long as possible; the consonant that follows should be as short as possible
- **Rule of the Final Syllable:** In no way accent “clip” or “slap” the final syllable of the phrase
- **Rule of the Glottal Stroke:** In English, if the word begins with a vowel and is lyrically important, initiate it with a gentle glottal onset
- **Rule of “The”:** If followed by a vowel, pronounce [ði] (“thee” earth); if followed by a consonant, pronounce [ðʌ] (“thuh” world)
- **Rule of Doubled Consonants:** If a word ends with the same consonant sound as the beginning of the next word, elide the two consonants into one (“not to” = [na.tu]) but if they are different sounds, clearly enunciate both (“not do” = [nat du])
- **Rule of Voicing:** In polyphonic music, “mic” the important motives and “shush” everything else
- **Rule of Unison:** Whenever the texture changes from harmony to unison, it automatically amplifies and brightens the sound, so sing slightly *softer* and considerably *richer*
- **Rules of Articulation:** Depends on the style period of the piece—consult Ruth Whitlock, *Choral Insights* (various editions, published by Neil A. Kjos Music Company) and Robert L. Garretson, *Choral Music: History, Style, and Performance Practice* (published by Prentice Hall)
- **Rule of the Director:** The director overrides any rule they decide! ☺