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## Diction in Context: Singing in English, Italian, German, and French

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*Diction in Context: Singing in English, Italian, German, and French* (First Edition by Brenda Smith, San Diego, CA, Plural Publishing, 2021, 345 pp., U.S. \$79.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781635501209), written by Brenda Smith and published by Plural Publishing, is the most recent publication to emerge in the field of lyric diction. Aimed at the beginning student of singing in a conservatory setting, the book addresses all aspects of language and diction pertaining to the four “basic” singing languages: English, Italian, German, and French, but distinguishes itself from previous singing diction texts by its focus on text interpretation and meaning.

Based on Smith’s thirty years of singing diction teaching experience, the text is structured as a one-year training program, comprising two semesters of two languages each: English and Italian in the first semester, and German and French in the second. The intensity of this study plan speaks to the time and importance allocated to language and diction learning in the American conservatory, seemingly in sharp contrast to the equivalent Australian experience. I read Smith’s “Message to Teachers” with a sense of awe and not a little envy, impressed that “8 weeks of classes with three classes weekly” (Smith, 2021, xvi) could be dedicated to each language per semester. Were an Australian teacher of diction to use this book as a study design, whether in a private or an institutional context, it would more likely represent a longer period of training, though of course one-one-one delivery would progress at a faster rate than the classroom setting.

*Diction in Context* combines all the elements of singing diction pedagogy inherited from its predecessors - pronunciation and speech sounds, grammar and parts of speech, biographical, historical and literary contexts and text interpretation - but presents these elements in a way that

places greater emphasis on meaning and interpretation. The luxury that Smith enjoys to dedicate significant time and space to the expressive aspects of lyric diction is partly predicated on her personal philosophical and pedagogical approach, and partly on the many resources, especially online resources, that have accumulated since singing diction was first enshrined in formal texts of the 1970s and 1980s such as Evalina Colorni’s *Singers Italian*, Thomas Grubb’s *Singing in French* and William Odom’s *German for Singers*. Smith recognises these resources in a fulsome reference list at the end the book and the publishers add to this digital database through a dedicated website.

The first chapter sets out Smith’s overall framework for language study, introducing the student to six main areas of skill acquisition: 1) meaning comprehension, requiring an understanding of both form and content; 2) pronunciation, for which the book’s primary tool is the International Phonetic Alphabet; 3) articulation, the physical formation of vowels and consonants; 4) enunciation, an intentional, emphatic form of articulation; 5) punctuation as an organising mechanism for creating meaning and 6) cultural context. The two areas which bookend this list - meaning and context - are familiar to the student of lyric poetry from interpretational, biographical and historical analyses by, for example, Bernac (1970), Bathori (1998) and Johnson and Stokes (2002) in French and Fischer-Dieskau (1976) and Johnson (2014) in German. The uniqueness of Smith’s book lies in the primacy given to these meaning and contextual elements in a diction text, and in the skill with which she combines them with a more traditional approach to the authentic formation of speech sounds. The introductory first chapter encapsulates this approach, with only 4 pages devoted to the mechanics of speech production but nearly 20

devoted to poetic interpretation and close reading.

The Introduction is followed by discussions of each of the four languages in dedicated chapters whose structure adheres to a standard pattern. First, the speech sounds of the language are introduced. Next, elements of grammar relating to that language are explored. Representative, age- and level appropriate texts from the vocal literature in that language are then presented, in chronological order, with their historical and philosophical contexts. These serve as an additional resource for both teacher and student. To align with the collegiate course design that is the basis for this text, two presentations are built into the program. The first occurs midway through the course, is ungraded and acts as a rehearsal for the final, graded version. The student is asked to select from a repertoire list of around 25 songs or early arias in the language, and to prepare an oral presentation, an IPA transcription, a translation, a poetic reading and a sung performance.

The formalisation of the assessment component is another demonstration of the way in which Smith has both learned from and expanded upon the work of her predecessors. Discussion questions and learning tasks built into the text are presented in a workbook format that surely draws some of its inspiration from Cheri Montgomery's lyric diction workbooks (2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2019a, 2019b), which are themselves an application of the standard textbook rules defined by such diction luminaries as Colorni, Odom, Moriarty and Grubb (<https://www.stmpublishers.com>).

I began this review by identifying one of the singular features of this new lyric diction text. Borrowing techniques from the field of literary analysis, including comprehension, contextualisation and close reading, places expression and meaning at the forefront of the singing diction student's mind, illuminating and invigorating what can otherwise be quite a dry subject. The book's other impressive features - the uniting of all the major elements of diction and interpretation, the recognition and provision of online and other resources, the course design and the inclusion of learning and assessment tasks - all lead me to place it high on the list of highly recommended lyric diction texts. One feature, however, stands out above the rest for its uniqueness, necessity and

timeliness: the use of guided comparative listening tasks. In a loud, overwhelmingly visual world, whose busy pace may be said to encourage casual and cursory relationships with all things, including vocal literature and performance, the ability to listen attentively and critically is an art and a craft, rather than a habit. Smith acknowledges this by including comparative listening tasks for every language, naming individual singers and pianists, and citing actual commercial recordings. As Smith says in her "Message to Teachers", "perfect diction is grounded in the careful imitation of exquisite models" (Smith, 2021, xvii). Far from advocating a monkey-hear, monkey-do approach, Smith's use of the words "careful" and "exquisite" represent the intelligent reinstatement of active listening as a skill to be developed and honed.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Lyric mezzo-soprano **Linda Barcan** trained at the Conservatorium of Newcastle, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). Following professional engagements in France and intense study in Germany, Linda returned to Australia to perform for many years with Opera Australia in Sydney and Melbourne. Linda's affinity for 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century opera led to appearances in *Christina's World* (Sydney Chamber Opera), *Abelard and Heloise* (Opera Hunter), *Pecan Summer* (Short Black Opera) and *The Emperor of Atlantis* (Lost & Found Opera). A specialist in art song - specifically in French mélodie and German lieder - Linda has been coached by Graham Johnson and David Harper amongst others, and has performed in recital for companies, festivals and art song societies in Australia, France, Germany and Asia, frequently appearing in French cultural and diplomatic circles. Linda is currently Lecturer in Music (Voice) at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, where she is also completing her PhD.