Pronunciation Issues Within Twentieth Century French Music

By

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Pronunciation issues within Twentieth Century French Music

Within the tradition of French vocal music, precise pronunciation is an issue which has for centuries been a topic of debate and study, particularly with regard to stylized differentiations from daily spoken French. Changes in both sung and spoken French over time raise important issues with regard to performance practice for singers. At what point should a performer aim for the pronunciation of the original composer, versus that of the modern audience, and what would help the singer with this decision? In addition, one needs to examine the intentions that can be derived from the composition in question about pronunciation issues, especially when we can often assume a difference between the composer's daily speech, and the pronunciation of singing during his or her lifetime.

A distinctly French style of singing has been a formalized artistic style for hundreds of years, with myriad evolutions during that time. The French language itself is difficult to frame within precise boundaries, both in terms of historical time (such as the precise time when Vulgar Latin in Gaul became Early French), and in terms of geographic demarcation (considering the linguistic fluidity of the Romance Language borders). Both the spoken and sung word are subject to many linguistic factors. Among these are socio-economic status, leading to what many linguists refer to as dialects with varying amounts of 'prestige',[1] and social context, reflected in 'register'.

Within this paper, the terms 'prestige' and 'register' are often used, and while they are related terms, a more precise sociolinguistic definition of each is warranted:

1 Ralph Fasold, *The Sociolinguistics of Society* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 158-159.

Prestige: When comparing dialects of a language, often some dialects are considered to be more 'prestigious' than others, and this is a fairly immutable characteristic for a speaker. An example within English would be to compare an Oxford British accent to a southern Appalachian accent. Both carry myriad presumptions for listeners about the socio-economic status of the speaker.

Register: When comparing speech patterns of an individual speaker which change depending on the formality of a social context, one says a speaker is moving through various registers of speech. An example in English would be care in using the '-ing' ending instead of '-in' (such as 'hangin'), or avoiding ending a sentence with a preposition when giving a presentation to coworkers, but shifting naturally to such constructions when speaking with close family members.

Admittedly, the border between these two terms is a gray area; defining exactly when a speaker is actually shifting to a dialect with a different level of prestige, as opposed to a large register shift is as much an art as it is a science. We will examine both issues in this paper. The period of French vocal music under the purview of our discussion is from the seventeenth century to the present day. During this time, the French language itself has steadily shifted, and the codified expectations for public performances of singing slowly became more removed from daily speech patterns.

While a slow process, this shift, by the beginning of the twentieth century left many separations between the French language and its classically sung version, to the point that the sung version was no longer simply a high-register version of a high-prestige dialect, but rather presented elements which had completed disappeared from spoken patterns.

Additionally, the concept of underlying versus surface representation of a phoneme is another linguistic concept which is discussed in this paper, the difference effectively being that surface representation is what is *actually* said, whereas the underlying form is the subconscious basic information about that sound, and closer to what one *thinks* is being said. An example in English is to compare the words 'latter' and 'ladder'. In the underlying version of the two words, one uses 't' and the other uses 'd', whereas in the surface form, both are pronounced identically.

Maurice Ravel's *Histoires Naturelles,* premiered in 1906, was a watershed in changing long-established traditions. Much to the shock of his audience, Ravel ignored elements of register and prestige that would previously have been de rigueur. Despite the initially rocky reception, Ravel set into motion a new concept of setting French text to music which then became a parallel style to the more traditional ways within the twentieth and twenty first centuries. The purpose of this paper is to explore the differences between these styles, and to make recommendations for singers on how to handle some of these changes when performing music written from 1906 onward.

E Muet

E Instable, E Caduc, E Féminin

One of the great differences between modern spoken French and what is considered to be the standard pronunciation for much of French art music is how to deal with the so-called *mute e*s. To best understand the current situation, it is important to understand the history of how this sound and its orthographical representation came into existence in the first place. Unlike the *e* at the end of many English words (e.g. bike, cape), these mute *e*s are not completely silent, and have been the subject of much debate about whether there is still an underlying vowel[2] present for native French speakers or not.

This *e* has many common names (muet, instable, féminin, etc.), and the one that perhaps demonstrates its true essence is *e caduc,* with *caduc* being the term for leaves on a deciduous tree: leaves which are sometimes present, sometimes not, depending on the season. Even in the most low-register modern French speech patterns, we still find evidence that it is present in some underlying structures, and in the right circumstances, is pronounced. [3]

Without a doubt, the orthographic feminine marker 'e' present in many French words is derived from the Latin feminine marker ending [a], which has over centuries decayed to varying extents within the Romance-speaking world, but especially within the Gallo-Romance subdivision.

2 For an explanation of underlying vs. surface form, see the introduction.
3 Shane, Stanford. *French Phonology and Morphology.* Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1968. 9-13.

'Door', from Latin to Modern French

(latin) p*orta* [pɔrta] > (Classical French) *porte* [pɔʁtə][4] > (modern French) *porte* [pɔʁt]

Changes for the vowel in question: [a] > [ə] > [∅](null)

This decay could cause some confusion about gender marking, as the traditional feminine gender marking ([a] or [ə]) has now been deleted, but because this transition corresponded with a greater deletion for masculine words, including apocope of final consonants, auditory clarity between genders has been sustained.

'Good', in both unmarked (masculine) and marked feminine

(latin) *bonus (Adjective, masculine)* [bonus] > (intermediary stage) [bon] > (french) [*bõ*]

(latin) *bona (Adjective, feminine)* [bona] > (Classical fr.) *bonne* [bɔnə] > (Modern fr.) *bonne* [bɔn]

Within Romance languages, marking for gender is not a case of marking for either masculine or feminine, but rather a word is simply assumed to be masculine, unless actively marked by a morphological feature (such as [a]) as feminine. This creates some complex issues of morphological marking, and thus why textbooks usually assign things as 'masculine' or 'feminine', while research has proven that the Romance-speaking brain doesn't categorize nouns in that way.[5] (The same is true for number, where pluralization must be marked, but without a marker, the word is simply assumed to be singular by default.)

4 The exact International Phonetic Association (IPA) symbol to use for the sound in question in French is in dispute, and many use [œ] instead.

5 Alkire, Ti. *Romance Languages: A Historical Introduction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 195-196.

This arrangement has meant that masculine nouns in French were free to delete not only the original ending vowel from Latin, but often also the final consonant before it, having no specific need to mark their gender. This is in contrast to the feminine words, where phonological elements are needed to morphologically mark the gender. Thus, while the vowel [a] may decay to [ə], complete deletion is only possible within the context of a language where non-gendered (read: masculine) words have undergone an additional deletion of their final consonant, therefore avoiding the two forms being phonologically identical.

And, in fact, this is the situation for modern French, where numerous masculine nouns have written final consonants which are never pronounced, (*chat, loup, tabac, etc)* causing misspellings amongst grade-school French children, and embarrassing moments for many tourists. This aspect of French is something that distinguishes it from many other popular Romance Languages (e.g. Spanish and Italian) as being orthographically more complex.

In addition to the *e* that is found at the end of many feminine words, the issues raised here also pertain to words in which intermediary unstressed schwas have been deleted. Some examples are *appe**l**er*[6]*, f**ai**sait,* and maint**e**nant; in modern French speech, even prestigious speech, it is common for these to be entirely deleted.

Appeler [aple] (standard French), [apəle] (stylized sung French)

Faisait [fze] (standard French), [fəzɛ][7] (stylized sung French)

Maintenant [mɛ̃tnɑ̃]/[mɛʔnɑ̃] (standard French), [mɛ̃tənɑ̃] (stylized sung French)

6 Posner, Rebecca. *Linguistic Change in French.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1997. 77.

7 The alternation of the final vowel between [e] and [ɛ] discussed in the chapter on the *Loi de Position.*

In both of these positions (word-final, and word-intermediary), an additional change that is represented by this shift is one dealing with movement of syllable boundaries, which in turn affect matters including voicing and stress. For more information on this, see the chapter on devoicing.

We can be sure that there was a period of time in which these final *e*s were in fact spoken, although research estimates that by the time of the French Revolution[8] (1787-1799), almost complete deletion in regular speech was common-place, with the revolution itself conceivably affecting the register of speech that many French people may have seen as a wise choice, wanting to both demonstrate an egalitarian ideal, and to avoid in any way sounding too prestigious. A highly educated speech pattern was a sign of being a member of the upper class, many of whom were being sent to the guillotines. Even centuries before the revolution (such as in 1530[9]), we have evidence that there were speakers who completely dropped the feminine *e*, with that speech pattern being seen as "vulgar",[10] although we can assume that it was widespread enough within some geographical areas to note mention in manuals on how to speak French 'correctly' for the day.

As far as singing is concerned, a clear example of a case of deletion of the vowels in question would be modern pop, or even cabaret songs from the twentieth century. While the type of art music we find written before the twentieth century always provides a specific placement for the 'deletable' syllable, music which is ostensibly closer to normal speech, such as pop songs, do not.

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8 Posner, Rebecca. *Linguistic Change in French.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1997. 266.
9 Posner, Rebecca. *Linguistic Change in French.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1997. 266.
10 Rosenthal, Olivia. *À haute voix: Diction et pronociation aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles.* Paris: Klincksieck. 1998. 194-206.

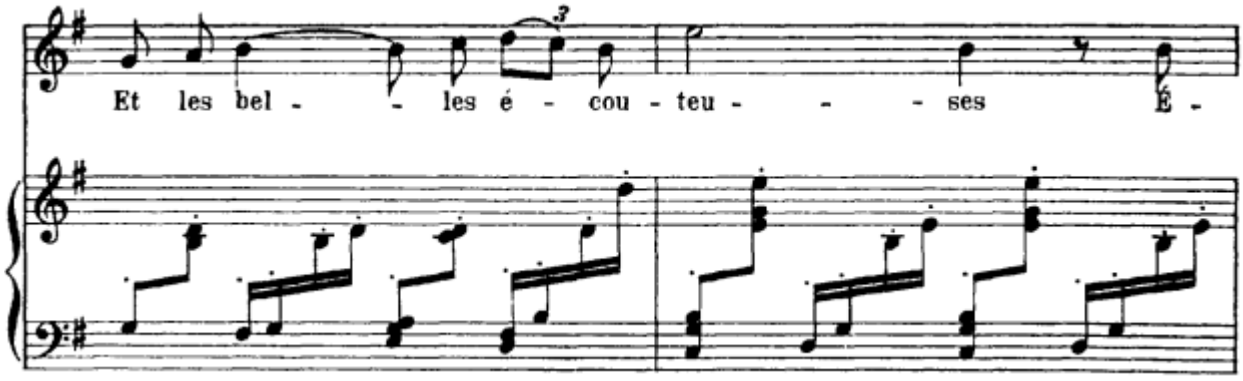
"Les Gam's" - *Il a le truc* 1963[11]

Il me fait faire ce dont j'n'ai pas envie (9 syllables in total, as performed)

Il me fait faire ce dont je n'ai pas envi-e (13 syllables, for a hypothetical classical setting)

The above example shows just how different a more classical setting of text can be from a modern setting, with huge implications for composers, as the number and length of syllables within a line of text is a major artistic deciding factor in creating a musical text setting.

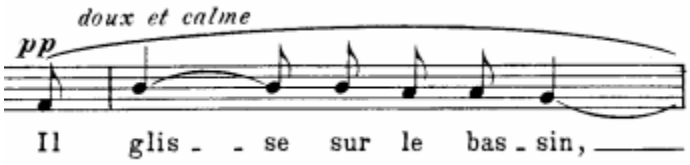
Within French music written pre-1906, the deletable syllables in question were always set, with the tradition being incredibly strong. The following example, from Gabriel Fauré's *Mandoline* (1891), and clearly shows full use of the 'E Muet' set as complete syllables.



The syllables in question here are 'bell**es**' and écouteus**es**', and while they both have smaller amounts of time than the previous, more stressed syllable within their word, to attempt to sing the lines without these syllables would make incomplete the melody which was written. This sort of setting is the expectation for composers from the time period of Jean Baptiste Lully through the early twentieth century.

11 "Il a le truc" Les Gams. 1963.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnG6Cr8-_1w

With the premiere of Maurice Ravel's *Histoires Naturelles* in 1906, dramatic changes were set into motion. And while the linguistic change had taken place hundreds of years earlier, it clearly took longer for high society to accept it as the norm for performances of song. The third movement, *Le Cygne,* or 'The Swan' demonstrated Ravel's fluid ability to change between styles depending on the emotional affect he was depicting. Below is the opening text for this movement:

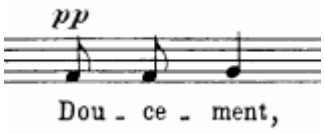


While it might be a small written change, the tie between the two notes on the word *glisse* represents a monumental shift, and one which caused music critics of the time to walk out of the performance and reprimand Ravel publicly for writing in such a fashion. This was especially ironic, as those same critics almost certainly pronounced their daily conversations in that same way. The tie in question demonstrates that while Ravel was nodding toward tradition in giving the second half of the word another note, he did not intend for the [ə] to actually be pronounced.

Interestingly, within that one movement especially, there are different ways that Ravel represents these linguistic changes, and they clearly have to do with choices of the register of speech that the performer should be imitating.

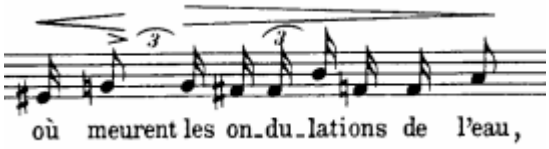
This next example, from later in the piece, is especially pertinent given the poetic context

of the piece. Up to that point, the poem had been an idyllic anthropomorphic description of a swan attempting to survive by consuming only the reflections of clouds. These descriptions switch back and forth between settings which are highly traditional, such as the word *doucement.*



As seen above, the middle syllable, which by 1906 was certainly deleted in normal speech ([dus.mɑ̃] vs. the more traditional [du.sə.mɑ̃]), was clearly given a note to itself, with no tie connected to another note. Within this portion of the poem, Ravel is evoking a much higher register speech, with the imagery of a slowly dying swan who lives for nothing but beauty.

Compare this to another, more chatty, portion of the poem, where a description of the water's surface gives us a telling moment of how Ravel heard the syllables within his head:

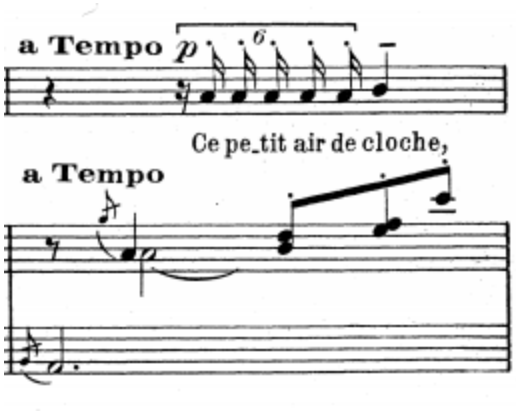


Within the word *meurent*, the second syllable in normal speech by this time was completely deleted, and despite the look of being potentially a nasal vowel, is only a schwa [ə][12] in traditional speech from antebellum France, and in traditional lyric diction. In many other places within Ravel's *Histoires Naturelles,* as well as in other composers' works from the period, when intending to simply delete a seemingly extra syllable, a nod to traditional pronunciation is given, by writing a note for the syllable in question, but then tying it to the previous syllable (as

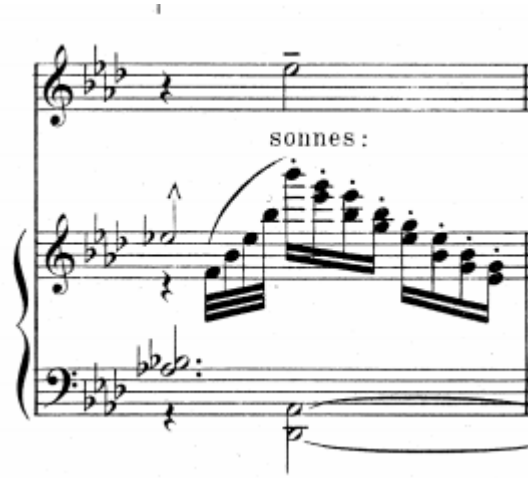
12 The presence of the 'nt' at the end of the third person plural form of verbs was added to French spelling to reflect the much older Latin verb ending. It does not represent any phonetic information actually present in a surface or underlying form of French pronunciation.

in the first example from this piece). This final example demonstrates Ravel completely deleting the syllable in the written form, with rhythmic consequences for the phrase, being one that is especially speech-like. Again, while these changes were common-place in speech, Ravel demonstrates mastery in switching between registers to exhibit shifts in the characterization.

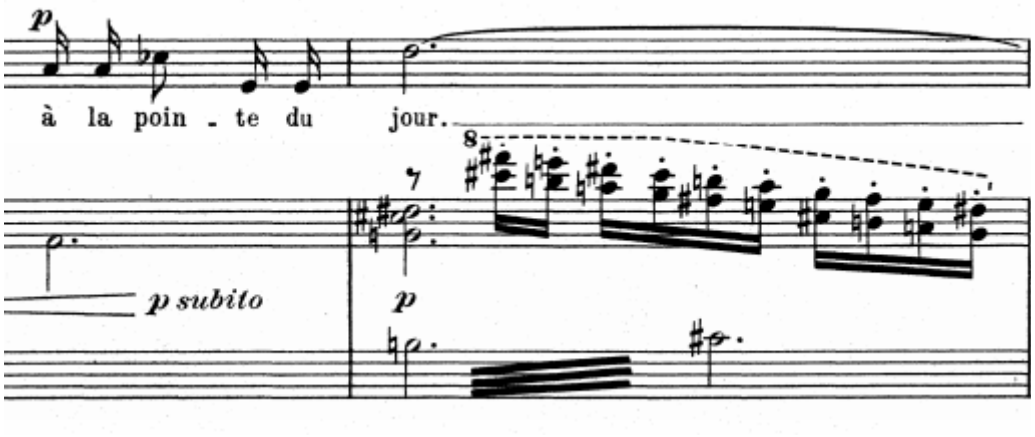
These shifts began to spread, despite initial widespread criticism, as is evident in André Caplet's 1920 composition *Cinq Ballades Française.* Below is the opening text within the first movement:



Here, 'cloche', which would have more traditionally been set with two syllables, is simply set as one, without Ravel's earlier tie demonstrating a connection to past compositional styles. The next example, also from the first movement, shows 'sonnes', set dramatically as the apex of a short phrase in the piano part, again set as a single note.



Interestingly, not *all* syllables that would be counted as 'e muet' are deleted, as shown in this next example, again from the first movement:

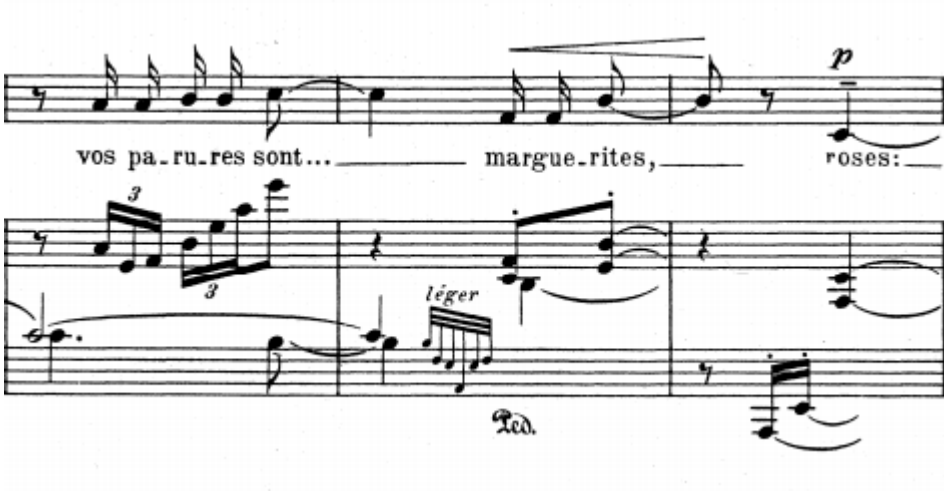


The second syllable of 'pointe' would certainly be a typical example of exactly the phenomenon we have been discussing, where the normal spoken version of the word in modern French has only one syllable: [pwẽt]. But here, we have a perfect example of a situation where even linguists discussing the regular speech patterns of native French speakers are not in total

agreement. The question is whether the syllable has been completely deleted from the underlying form of the word, and is simply added back in within some contexts, or is actually present in an underlying subconscious form of the word, and is often deleted within the context of another subconscious phonological rule.

What is clear in this example is that because a deletion of the [ə] at the end of *pointe* would cause the 't' of *pointe* and the 'd' of *du* to be part of a single consonant cluster, this cancels out the ability to delete the syllable. While such clusters can easily happen in English ('hotdog', where the 't' and 'd' are able to merge into one tautosyllabic consonant cluster), this is not within the bounds of consonant clusters allowed within the phonotactic constraints of French.

And again, we have another kind of exception:



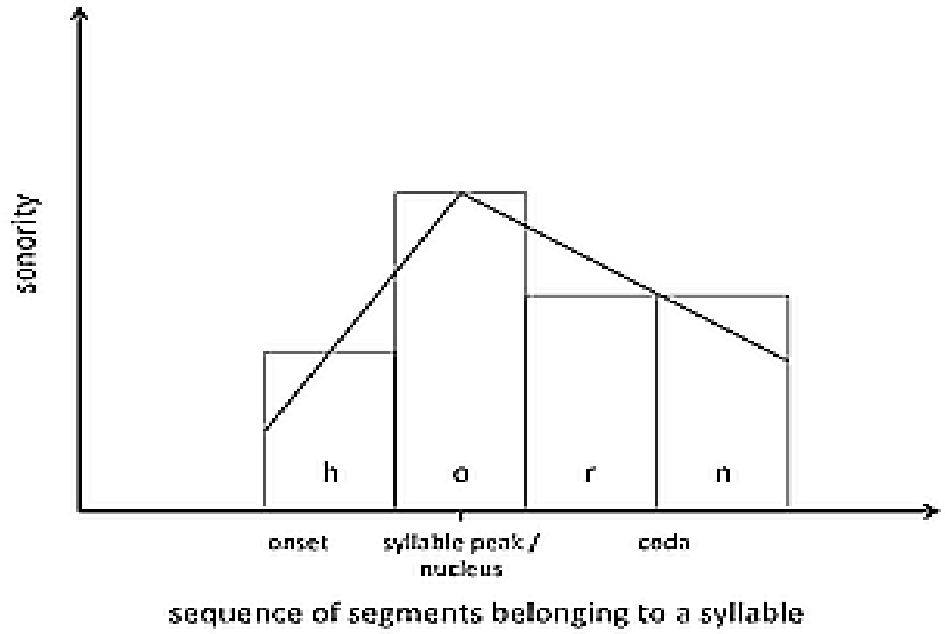
This excerpt from the third movement, shows an example in which the dramatic mood influenced the composer's decision. Notice that both *marguerites*, and *roses*, are set without the final syllable, but this is in contrast with *parures* where there are clearly three notes, for three syllables.

And while 'rs' as a cluster would be more plausible than 'td' within French (examples like "les cœu**r**s **s**ont" show us that [rs] may occur), Caplet chooses an even rhythm, evoking a gentler, and very high-registered enunciation of the text. This fits with the text, as it a delicate descrition of a cottage in the woods, and this line in particular describing how the cottage's jewel's (parures) are its flowers. So, we see that just as before where Ravel had used an interplay between styles of text setting to aid in depicting characterization, this trend continued to be used effectively.

In conclusion, it is not easy for someone who is not a native speaker of French to assimilate all of these poetic, artistic, and linguistic situations and quickly identify the cases in which is it proper to delete an *E muet.* However, it is an important factor in twentieth century French music, and should not be ignored. The sociolinguistic context being communicated by the composers is clearly integral to both the creation of the vocal line, as well as portraying the poetic meaning of the various pieces, and thus deserves our utmost attention.

Devoicing of Voiced Consonants due to Apocope and Syncope

Within human languages, syllables generally begin (and often end) with less sonorous characteristics, such as unvoiced stops (p, t, k, etc), or glottals (h), and move toward the sonorous peak of a vowel in the middle. This is referred to as the Sonority Sequencing Principle (SSP)[13], and is a standardized working linguistic structure throughout the world's languages, with only rare exceptions. Sonority is generally defined as the relative loudness of a sound. So, for singers, it may be easy to imagine that a vowel, such as [a], would be much more resonant than an unvoiced stop, such as [t].



Above is an illustration of this principle using the word “horn”. Of the four elements, the [h] is by far the least sonorous, with the 'o' [ɔ] being the most. This arrangement allows the

13 Michael Kenstowicz. *Phonology in Generative Grammar* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 254-255.

listener to discern just one syllable, as the graph only has one peak in sonority, whereas myriad other combinations would be either unpronounceable ([rhnɔ]), or would result in a secondary syllable being present by the creating of a second peak. Such a combination would be [nɔhr], with the 'h' sounded as written. Because the syllable peak would fall from 'o' down to 'h', but then rise again for the 'r', one would effectively hear two peaks, and thus two syllables.

Below is another example, using “pla” and “lpa” as theoretical orderings of the same sounds to result in either one, or two syllables.

This becomes an issue in French when syllables undergo apocope (deletion of sounds from the end of a word, such as the feminine endings, such as 'ami**e**'), or Syncope (deletion of word-interior sounds, such as 'maint**e**nant'), this can often change the where specific consonants stand with regard to their syllable.

Syllable structure itself is organized based on the Maximal Onset Principle. [14] This principle states that when dividing words into syllables, consonants are assigned as much as possible to the onset (beginning) of the following syllable, and assigned to the coda (end) of the previous syllable only when phonotactic constraints of the language in question make use as an onset untenable. Specifics of phonotactic constraints of many languages, including English can be

14 Michael Kenstowicz. *Phonology in Generative Grammar* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 258.

quite complex, but for native speakers of a language in question, they can test the ability for any combination to be syllable initial by simply asking themselves if such a consonant cluster could begin a word. If the combination does not feel natural when word-initial, then the cluster must be split into multiple syllables, rather than remaining together as as onset.

Here are some examples in English, with a period used to denote syllable separation:

Di.**p**lo.ma: Since 'pl' is able to begin syllables in English, **both** are assigned to the second syllable.

Pa**c**.ma**n**: since 'cm' can never begin a word or syllable in English (there are no English words beginning with [km]), but 'm' alone is, the 'c' is forced into the coda of the first syllable. And since there is no syllable following the 'n', it is also forced to be part of the coda of the second syllable.

Ru.**g**rat: Despite being a compound word, when said in fluid conversation, the Maximal Onset Principle still holds true, and thus the 'g' is put into the onset of the second syllable, since 'gr' is a combination which can begin words. (example: great)

For French, the question of demarcation of syllables comes into play quite often when dealing with apocope and syncope. In the more traditional fashion of French diction, words are pronounced more closely to how they are spelled, with the maximum number of syllables. Thus

difficult voicing problems are mostly taken care of due to the lack of complex consonant clusters in French. But, when dealing with deletion of syllables for modern speech and thus, for pieces of music written in that style, a different set of questions arises:

s*imple:* [sɛ̃.plə] (Traditional sung pronunciation) vs. [sɛ̃pl] (with commonly used apocope)

In the second portion of the above example, the problem arises when the 'pl' cluster is now in the first and only syllable of the word as a coda, rather than as part of the onset of the final syllable. With 'l' having significantly more sonority than 'p', keeping the voicing of the 'l' in place is to effectively maintain the sound of an additional syllable, which is exactly what is being avoided. The way to avoid this is by devoicing [l] to [l̥][15]. This reduction of voice (pitch) within the 'l' allows the sound to have almost no sonority, and makes it fit neatly into the bell curve of the syllable's sonority.

This comes into play within single words, and also in combinations of words, which can occur at the beginning, in the middle, or at the ends of the phrase.

être marié [ɛ.trə.ma.ri.e] (Traditional) vs. [ɛtr̥.ma.ri.e] (with commonly used apocope)

In the example above, both the 't' and the 'r' are forced to move from the onset of the second syllable in the first instance, to the coda of the first syllable in the second due to the deletion of the *e muet,* activating the Maximal Onset Principle. This is because neither 'trm-' nor 'rm-' may

15[x̥] is the IPA symbol for devoicing an otherwise voiced sound. An example of this in standard American English would be in the word 'please' [pl̥iz].

begin syllables in French. Due to 'r' being a liquid consonant, and thus very high on the scale of sonority, a 't' separating it from the nucleus (vowel) of its syllable means that it would violate the Sonority Sequencing Principle, and if kept voiced, it would still create an additional peak in sonority, and thus the sound of an additional syllable.

Again, the solution is to devoice the 'r' (as marked above), making it significantly less sonorous. The important thing to note in this example is the specific location of the syllable boundary. Were the 'r' within the same syllable with [ma] (not allowed by French phonotactic constraints), the 'r' would be able to remain voiced, because the 'm', being a nasal and therefore highly sonorous, would allow for the Sonority Sequencing Principle to not be broken by the presence of a voiced 'r'.

Therefore, the proposed linguistic rule for determining the potential devoicing of a voiced consonant neighboring a deleted schwas is:

[+Cons, +Voice] -> [-Voice] / $([+Syl][-Voice])___ ([-Voice][+Syl])$

A way to put this into prose is to say that any voiced consonant, if separated by an unvoiced consonant from the vowel *within the same syllable* must devoice (emphasis being important, as the previous example showed, where a voiced 'r', even when next to a voiced 'm', needed to devoice because of the syllable boundary).

Another interesting example of this is demonstrated in a modern pop French pop song *Chuis Bo*[16], or in higher prestige writing 'je suis beau'. The title itself shows an interesting

16 "Chuis Bo" - PZK, 2011.

process, all going on subconsciously within the minds of the speakers/singers.

'Je suis beau' [ʒə.sɥi.ˈbo] - Traditional French Pronunciation

Because of the common deletion of schwas in low prestige speech (which became commonplace after the French Revolution), the first syllable no longer exists independently, which results in:

*[17][ʒsɥi.ˈbo]

From here we have the voicing problem in violation of the Sonority Sequencing Principle. Given the proposed rule, the first consonant cannot remain voiced, as it cannot trace voicing to the vowel within its syllable. It then becomes:

*[ʃsɥi.ˈbo]

Almost there! The issue now is the [ʃ] and the [s] being immediately adjacent to one another within the same syllable. While possible to pronounce with much effort, the two quite similar sibilants can easily end up simply merging, and creating the final product:

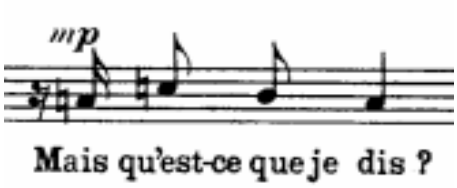
[ʃɥi.ˈbo]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eu-9OhZ8jYM&&feature=kp

17 *when seen before a phrase, within the field of linguistics, indicated passage that is somehow incorrect, incomplete, or unpronounceable.

Here we see the expected low-register pronunciation of <je suis beau>, which is quite well orthographically represented by the title of the french pop song ‘Chuis bo’. While this might seem like an extreme example from a pop song published in 2012, there is a similar case of deletion of the only vowel in the word 'je' in Ravel's *Histoires Naturelles*, published in 1906!

From the ending of *Le Cygne:*



In a traditional setting, this phrase would require **six** syllables. ([mɛ.kɛ.sə.kə.ʒə.di]) But, as it is clearly set to only four fairly short notes, Ravel is obviously depicting a very low-register pronunciation such as this: [mɛ.kɛ.skəʒ.di] . Notice, because of the apocope, the third syllable now has grown in both its onset ('s' being added to the 'k'), as well as its coda ([ʒ]). In this case, a devoicing such as in the '*chuis bo'* example is not needed, as the [ʒ] is immediately adjacent to the vowel *within its syllable.* The neighboring 'd', while voiced, does not affect the voicing outcome, as with the example of *être marié,* as the syllable boundary between the two sounds prevents any influence.

Some researchers have noticed the propensity to devoice [ʁ], as noted in their transcriptions, although they either discuss only the possibility of it being a word-final issue

(although not fully explained)[18], or of it being an issue related to the voicing of surrounding consonants. [19] Strangely, neither source mentions the possibility of devoicing of [l], which would be a natural point to follow up on, as the two liquid consonants ('l', and 'r') so often act in concert within phonological systems. Interestingly, the more thorough exploration of this also found that in some cases word-final [ʁ], even when orthographically intervocalic, is also unvoiced (examples being *claire*, and *père*).

In conclusion, when dealing with French pieces where *e muet* is not always clearly set as a separate syllable, the time-range for this being 1906-to the present, including a higher likelihood the closer to present, one should be careful to devoice consonants, most commonly [l] and [r]/[ʁ], in accordance with its surroundings. These changes can be very slight, and would often be something that even a native speaker may not be able to accurately articulate, but the difference would certainly differentiate a fluent speaker from a non-fluent one.

18 Cecile Fougeron and Caroline Smith, "French: Illustrations of the IPA," *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 23 (2009): 73-76.

19 Jean Casagrande. *The Sound System of French* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1984),53-55.

Loi de Position

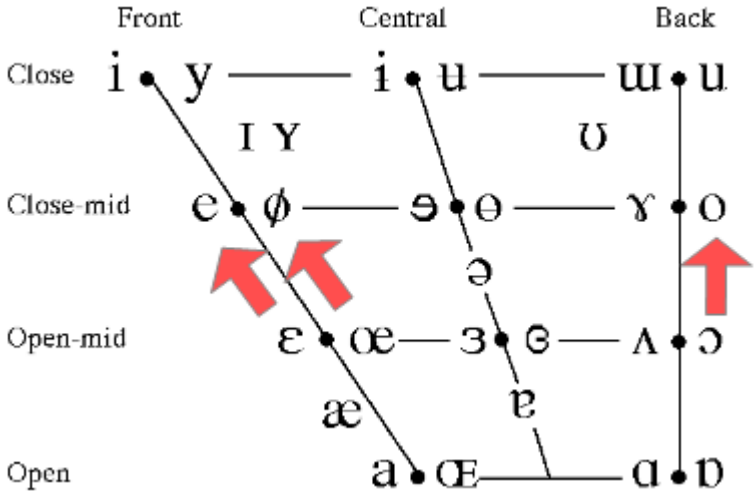
[ɛ] vs. [e] in final syllables

One difference between spoken French and traditional French lyric diction rules that can often confuse and even surprise students with significant experience with the French language is the treatment of [ɛ] vs. [e] in final open[20] syllables. Words like 'les', 'des', 'saurait' all end very clearly with [e] in modern standard French[21], but are often sung more open as [ɛ].[22]

This pronunciation issue, which has been noted by speakers of French as an issue of debate since the eighteenth century, [23] is know as the *Loi de Position,* or *Law of Position.* This law deals with pairings of similar mid-vowels, in which pronunciation is based on position in the word, usually with movement from an open-mid position([ɛ], [œ], and [ɔ])to a Close-mid position ([e], [ø], and [o]). In French, the last of these pairs ([ɔ] > [o]) seems to have completely shifted entirely a few hundred years ago, with the other two pairs still lingering behind in various degrees according to different speakers.

20 An open syllable is defined as a syllable without a coda, in other words, no consonants *in the same syllable* following the vowel.
21 Rebecca Posner, *Linguistic Change in French* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 277.
22 Thomas Grubb, *Singing in French: A Manual of French Diction and French Vocal Repertoire* (Belmont: Schirmer, 1979), 30.
23 Douglas Walker, *French Sound Structure* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2001), 55.

These pairs are: **[ɛ] > [e], [œ] > [ø],** and **[ɔ] > [o]**



The chart above shows the three pairs described, and plots their movement when dealing with open syllables (syllables ending without a pronounced consonant).

Singers familiar with traditional lyric diction rules will recognize patterns within these pairs fairly easily. The two pairs on the left side of the chart ([ɛ] > [e] and [œ] > [ø]), are cited often[24] as opportunities for vocalic harmonization, which is a situation in which an open vowel closes to 'harmonize' with a similar vowel immediately following it.

Some other notable relationships within these pairings deal with phonotactic constraints. For example, an open syllable[25] in French never ends with either [œ] or [ɔ], but instead always ends with the closed versions of those vowels: [ø] and [o], respectively. Examples are *feu* [fø] and *mot* [mo], noting that while *mot* has a written 't', that letter is silent, and thus does not affect the pronunciation.

The reverse is also true in some cases, where closed syllables (syllables *with* consonants

24 Thomas Grubb, *Singing in French: A Manual of French Diction and French Vocal Repertoire* (Belmont: Schirmer, 1979), 138-140.

25 For a more thorough discussion of syllable boundary, as influenced by the Maximal Onset Principle, see the chapter on devoicing.

following the vowel), that might otherwise be closed, are forced to be open when dealing with the [ɛ] > [e] pairing. Some examples are : *e̲spérer* [e̲spere] (which *should* close due to vocalic harmonization, but cannot due to the 's' being a part of the first syllable), and *préfe̲rer* [prefere] (infinitive) (when conjugated it becomes *Je préfère* [prefɛr], since the commonly-used deletion of the final vowel[26] forces the second vowel to open due to the 'r' moving into that syllable's coda). Notice that this change has been understood for long enough that it is orthographically denoted in the change from use of an accent aigu (é) to an accent grave (è) on the vowel in question.

This rule extends to include closed syllables using the [œ] > [ø] and [ɔ] > [o] pairings requiring the more open vowel ([œ] or [ɔ]), with the more closed versions ([ø] and [o]) blocked when a syllable has a coda.[27] Some examples are: *bonne* [bɔn] and *seule* [sœl][28].

The precise mechanics behind the *loi de position* are still in debate, and were first named and researched by linguists in the 1930s.[29] And with this seemingly twentieth century change, certain endings in French have now phonologically merged, so that many words which were previously audibly distinct , especially between verb tenses, are now audibly indistinguishable (e.g. *piquer / piquait / piquet / piquai / piqué / piquet* [pike]). To some extent, this change can be viewed as predictable, with the similar pairings having already made this shift, and it is simply the case that out of the three pairs, the one unrounded pair ([ɛ] > [e]) took the longest to fall into place, probably because of meaningful differences such as the morphological verb case markings (between future '-ai' and conditional '-ais').

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26 See chapter on *E muet.*

27 Rebecca Posner, *Linguistic Change in French* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 273-281.

28 Note that the apocope of *e muet* is important to create many of these situations of closed syllables, without which the syllable boundary would shift, ([bɔn] > [bɔ.nə]) creating open syllable for the first vowel.

29 Rebecca Posner, *Linguistic Change in French* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 276.

In conclusion, the question for singers then becomes how to identify the pieces in which one might replace [ɛ] with [e] in open syllables. Like the other issues discussed here, this isn't just about using a date of composition as the deciding factor, but also about using artistic reasoning to decide what kind of register the composer is intending for the setting of the poem, with more conversational settings being more prone to the change, especially for pieces written after the 1940s. This change had fully taken place in conversational French by the 1940's. Since that decade, the use of [ɛ] in open syllables would increasingly represent a character's use of an exceedingly high-registered, and even unnatural-sounding speech pattern.

Uvular vs. Flipped *R*

Another major difference between modern spoken French and stylized French for singing is the pronunciation of *r.* Similar to the nasal [œ̃], history shows that flipped *r* [r] in the past was standard, but at this point, other than among a small number of older Quebecois speakers[30], it has otherwise been completely replaced by [ʁ]. This shift, again, was already in place well before the French Revolution, but with the great social, and sociolinguistic changes which occurred during that upheaval, the final nail was placed in the coffin for any remnants of a flipped *r* within conversational French in France. While the specifics of the precise time when the general shift from [r] to [ʁ] took place are unclear, it is generally posited to have begun within the seventeenth century[31]. The absence of recordings from the time make it difficult to be precise, but it is during the latter part of this century that some manuals on proper pronunciation for the upper class (a constant French preoccupation) begin to mention the need to flip *r*s[32], a differentiation which would have been needless if there were not a widespread alternative.

The example of Quebecois speakers is an especially interesting and telling one, as the types of French found there are generally split into the categories of "Old" and "New".[33] These categories are delineated by region based on the time period of French colonization, depending on whether the settlers arrived before or after the French Revolution. What we have, in many ways, is the 'Old' dialect representing many of the older French pronunciations which have otherwise since gone out of style, with the 'New' being much more in line with what one might

30 Urban T. Holmes, JR. *A History of the French Language* (New York: Biblo, 1967), 137-138.
31 Rebecca Posner. *Linguistic Change in French* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 288.
32 Rosenthal, Olivia. *À haute voix: Diction et pronociation aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles.* Paris: Klincksieck. 1998. 194-206.
33 Claude Poirier. "Langue, Espace, Société: Les variétés du français en Amérique du Nord," *Francophone D'Amérique* 6 (1996): 203-207.

consider modern Parisian French. [34]

The question becomes: when might one sing with a uvular *r* ([ʁ])? While there is certainly a large gray area, it may help to begin by defining the cases on either end of the spectrum, where choices are more straight-forward, and work towards the murkier center.

For pieces which should be sung almost unquestionably with a rolled *r* [r], we have anything written in the early seventeenth century and before. While it isn't out of the question that lower-registered singing (non-formal settings) with a uvular *r* could have been going on before that point, most of the music we have today, which was recorded on paper, was written for social settings which would have required a register of speech which at that point would have always involved a rolled [r]. This can fairly easily be extended further in time to the French Revolution itself (1789-1799), when the educated and wealthy class, for whom the pieces we have were often written, clearly idealized rolling their *r*s [35](despite often not speaking that way themselves), and would have expected this choice in public displays of pronunciation.

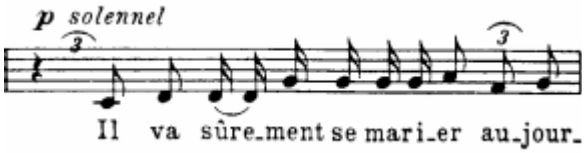
On the other end of the spectrum, we have pieces which should almost certainly be sung with uvular [ʁ]. The first class of these is easiest to determine due simply to the dissemination of modern recordings. Modern French pop music and cabaret songs are quite clearly within this category. Even as far as pieces such as *Je ne t'aime pas* (1934) by Kurt Weill, there seems to be an artistic consensus that such pieces are of a style much more similar to modern spoken French than the older style.

The more challenging questions revolve around pieces of art music (opera, art song, and vocal chamber music), written approximately between the Revolution and World War II. While

34 Among some 'Old' dialect speakers, one may even find [we] in place of [wa] for the pronunciation of *oi*, which is yet another example of a pronunciation which changed during the late eighteenth century.

35 Rosenthal, Olivia. *À haute voix: Diction et pronociation aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles.* Paris: Klincksieck. 1998. 194-206.

the thought of using 'artistic license' to decide is appealing, I believe that looking at the context of the type of setting the composer intended is of utmost importance. For example, in a piece like Ravel's *Histoires Naturelles*, where the text setting is extremely conversational (see chapter regarding *E Muet*), the composer's intent to find a more relaxed and familiar setting of the text suggests that in such pieces, this issue may be one to consider.



*[36][il va syrəmɑ̃ sə marie oʒur] (Standardized sung French)

[il va syʁmɑ̃ sə maʁie oʒuʁ] (Modern spoken French)

Histoires Naturelles: I. Le Paon – Maurice Ravel, 1906

In the example above, the speech-like overall rhythm, and especially the tie between the two eighteenth notes above *sûre*, indicate that Ravel wasn't aiming for the older, codified style of pronouncing the otherwise unpronounced mute *e* when singing. And we know from the number of upset critics who saw the premiere of the work in 1907[37], that the main complaint was that it ended the separation between a more artistic pronunciation of French, and 'street' pronunciation, with Debussy even calling Ravel a talented 'trickster'.[38]

This change to a more conversational setting normally focuses on the question of the mute *e*s, quite reasonably because of the complexities of the phonological issues which abound surrounding their presence or absence. However, the other primary difference between spoken and sung French of the time was the question of the sound 'r'. Since Ravel was knowingly breaking new artistic ground by

36 Placing '*' before a statement is a common notation within the linguistic field for incorrect or suspect in some way

37 Nichols, or other, critical contemporary report.

38 Peter Kaminsky. *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press:

approaching a more speech-like syllabification, using [ʁ] would simply continue down the path of bringing the sung word closer to the spoken word.

A final argument that is often cited by some singers against the use of uvular [ʁ] in any cases is the lack of ability for the sound to carry over an orchestra. While it is true that [r] is more sonorous than [ʁ], there are plenty of other consonants (*p, t,* and *k,* for example) which are significantly lower on the scale of sonority, and these are not changed or avoided by singers in performances requiring high volume levels. And since French is a language in which consonants are generally very short occurrences between relatively long vowels (consonants are never doubled or lengthened)[39], the issue of decibel level of consonants holds less weight than it might in other languages such as English or German.

This question often boils down to artistic preferences, with the performer's choice being influenced as well by the audience for whom they are performing, the venue in which the performance occurs, and the circumstances. The important thing to note is that French singers themselves, when performing and recording both operas and art songs, do often perform with [ʁ], and that should be taken into account, as within France it is not seen as a faux pas. This is especially true the later the original date of composition, with baroque operas still almost always performed with [r], whereas late-romantic or modern pieces are most often performed with [ʁ].

Even when performing with [ʁ] instead of [r], it is still important to note that this consonant should be very lightly articulated, rather than being an overly lengthened or heavy consonant. This is not only to keep the [ʁ] from seeming too low-prestige, but also to keep it from being 'out of line' with the other consonants, which in French are never aspirated or

2011), 1-6.

39 Pierre Bernac. *The Interpretation of French Song* (New York: Norton, 1970), 11-23.

especially forceful. This concept also applies even when still performing with [r], as in French it should never be rolled multiple time, as would often be found in Italian speech, or dramatic German singing, but to do so in French is, again, seen as 'vulgar'[40].

In conclusion, while there is no precise delineation between when to use [r] vs. [ʁ], a singer should feel comfortable to experiment, especially with guidance from a knowledgeable instructor, when dealing with repertoire written in the twentieth century or later.

40 Pierre Bernac. *The Interpretation of French Song* (New York: Norton, 1970), 19.

Disappearance of the 'un' [œ̃] Nasal Vowel

In classical training in French diction for singers, particular stress is often put on understanding the four nasal vowels, [ɑ̃], [õ],[ɛ̃], and [œ̃]. (written versions of those would be *en/an, on, in,* and *un*, respectively.)

French Nasal Vowels (traditional)

	Front	Back
Rounded	[œ̃]	[õ]
Unrounded	[ɛ̃]	[ɑ̃]

This vowel system was maintained for centuries, and linguistically was fairly stable, as it gave each of the four possible combinations between vowels being either front/back, or rounded/unrounded. Thus, as the language had shifted into using nasal vowels in place of the combination of a vowel *and* a nasal consonant, each previously non-nasal vowel had four categories into which it could easily fit.

The difficulty with this is that the fourth nasal vowel listed above ([œ̃]) is one which is completely absent from modern French speech, with the exception of a relatively small number of older speakers in Quebec. Within France itself, the vowel [œ̃] has been simply replaced by [ɛ̃], with the phrase *un pin brun* now consisting of the same vowel throughout [ɛ̃ pɛ̃ bʀɛ̃], rather that the older pronunciation [œ̃ pɛ̃ bʀœ̃].

This shift is widespread to the point that even French 101 textbooks now cite the existence of only three nasal vowels[41]. However, it is still controversial in the world of sung

41 Jeannette Bragger and Donald Rice, *Allons-y!: Le français par étapes,* 2004. (Boston: Thomson), 137.

French. One finds acclaimed performers like Pierre Bernac calling such a shift 'vulgar'[42], while at the same time one hears very high-register speech (such as French presidential speeches), where this shift has clearly occurred.

One of the oddities around this shift is that it has happened much more recently than many of the other changes which we have been discussing, most of which have been in motion for at least three hundred years, whereas this shift seems to have materialized almost entirely within the second half of the twentieth century.[43] [44] So, while it is reasonable to think that many of the other changes discussed here would be things which some nineteenth and early twentieth century composers considered, this shift would not fall into that category. On the other hand, to native speakers born in the post-World War Two era, this speech pattern would be completely natural.

With the much more modern nature of this shift, especially when compared with the other shifts we are examining at this point, I would suggest only replacing [œ̃] with [ɛ̃] only in the most non-traditional of all possible situations. Examples of this would be if a piece were a new composition (written after 1970), or potentially if a singer is attempting to portray a sense that a character is highly uneducated or uncultured. I expect this shift to continue to change, and possibly within the time frame of another generational shift of performing singers in France, this may be a very different situation.

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42 Pierre Bernac. *The Interpretation of French Song* (New York: Norton, 1970), 16.
43 Douglas Walker. *French Sound Structure* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2001), 63-64.
44 Even further, some speakers also are beginning to merge [ɑ̃] and [ɔ̃] into a more general [ɔ̃], which takes the nasal system down to only two vowels, a back/rounded [ɔ̃], and a front/unrounded [ɛ̃]. This latter change, while certainly related (and possibly even an unavoidable conclusion of the loss of [œ̃] in daily speech), is not yet widespread enough to merit educated performance, although reëvaluation in another generation may be prudent.

Conclusion

While traditional French diction rules for singers are an important learning tool, these rules are not designed to take into account some of the situations in text setting from 1906 onward. These issues include syllables dropped in the text setting and determining the register of speech intended by the composer. The goal of this paper, and the accompanying guide, is to aid students of French lyric diction to be able to better master twentieth and twenty first century French pieces in such a way as to present an understanding of the sociolinguistic changes which have occurred over the last few centuries.

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