

# ***Finding Unison in the Vowels: The Hope and Blessing of Whitsun***

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It was a pleasure to read Reg Down's thoughtful article last autumn on the vowels and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), spurring us to give the vowels further consideration. During my writing of the introductory chapters for *The Speech Sound Etudes, Vol. I*, I investigated the IPA for ways of notating the differences and relationships between vowel sounds clearly. Like Reg Down, I found that the IPA goes beyond my needs in speech-work and eurythmy. So, what to do? In dictionaries, pronunciations are not generally given for regional or class-based accents (we all have accents); and in the end, the great diversity of accents in English underscored my starting point in my work with the sounds and their gesture-impulses: I must begin with and stay true to my direct experience of the sounds themselves, however it is that I speak them. How I then notate them is a clerical matter, external to the absolute relationship between each sound and its innate gesture-impulse. By making notations, I am making the differences between sounds and between gestures clear to myself. And this clarity helps me to bring these to other people, too, in direct exchanges, not by what's on paper but by the clarity of the sound I actually utter and the gesture that actually belongs to it. It is here that we meet. This then transcends the problem of two people believing they are producing the proper IPA sound, while nevertheless producing somewhat different sounds. The actual sound governs, not the marking.

Unlike in some languages, in English our letter forms don't always stand for a single sound – hardly! With vowels, the discrepancies are the outcome of the pronunciation revolution that came about during what is called The Great Vowel Shift,\* which occurred in England from the time of Chaucer's *Canterbury pilgrimages* in the 14th century until about the 18th century. People became more mobile and pronunciations mingled (and mental life woke up, too). We can't rely on spellings to tell us our soundings as can be done in many other languages. In English we are obliged to transcend spelling! But for speech-work and eurythmy, I've had to find *simple and direct* means for marking soundings right in my manuscripts, since my purpose in rehearsal is to reveal the music of the vowel sounds, the assonant repetitions and vowel-moods, regardless of spelling. I find that the IPA symbols are not useful for this, so I want to share what I've come to. \*(See Jürgen Handke's YouTube presentation, "PHY117 – The Great Vowel Shift," to hear the

brightening and diphthongization of the vowels; it was posted on December 7, 2012.)

While some dictionaries use the letters, 'ah,' to indicate the most open vowel – as sounded in 'father' – at least two popular American English dictionaries indicate it with the diacritic, 'ä.' But since this double-dot marking is used in German to indicate a sound that is close to our English *ä* – which we often mark with this tiny bowl-curve above the letter – as in 'sat,' I am introducing the use of a tiny open angle resembling the gesture for *a* (ah) in eurythmy: *ǎ*.

You will see in my list of markings below, that I have split the vowels into three groups, which may be new to many of you. In her fine book, *Uncovering the Voice*, the singer, Valborg Werbeck-Svärdström, gave me the key to opening my speaking, hearing and understanding to the natural relationships that exist between the vowels. In Chapter 6, about two-thirds in, she presented three sets of vowel sounds that "flow one from the next" and move between back and front. As a result of working with these three sets, my grasp of them in English is:

(soundings further below) (Werbeck-Svärdström: )

- 1) *ǎ* ô o u plus *ou* (A, *Å* – 'awe,' O, U)
- 2) *ö* *ǎ* è é *ī* i plus *āi* oi (A, *Ä* – 'sat,' E – 'ay,' I – 'ee')
- 3) *ū* *ōō* *û* plus *iu* ui (A, *Ö*, *Ü*, Y – very focussed *ü*)

What I experience is as she said: the first set I would describe as having a middle, full placement and quality; the second a broader, brighter quality; and the third a darker, taller, darker quality. Though I am not focussing on the skeleton and muscles, I agree with her that in the third set, "the lower jaw and its muscles play a much greater role."

So, for my American English, as I speak it, I've settled on these diacritical expedencies for the three sets:

- 1) *ǎ* = swan  
*ô* or *â* = thought, saw  
*ō* = bone  
*ū* or *ōō* = dune, snoop  
*ou* or *ow* = out, cow
- 2) *ö* = cot  
*ǎ* = sat  
*è* = web (diacritic adapted from French)  
*é* or *á* = they, fade (diacritic adapted from French)  
*ī* or *ÿ* = sit, hymn  
*ē* or plain *i* or plain *y* = breed, thief, easy  
*ī* or *ÿ* or *āi* = like, by, haiku
- 3) *ū* = run, sublime (first syllable as unstressed *ū/ə*)  
*ōō* = foot (place this same bowl crescent over u, o or ou)  
= push, wolf, bouillon  
*û* = spur (place this same small circle over *i*, *è*, *éa*, *ô* or *ÿ*)  
= bird, her, earth, work, myrrh (Note: the *û* is always followed by R in English)  
*ēu* or *ēw* = iu – feud, ewe  
*we* or *ue* or *whe* = ui\* – sweet, queen, wheat

For vowel sounds for which diacritic marks can't serve (as for *ui*), I italicize with slant marks as an alert before and after the letter(s) in question, e.g., /a/mid, m/u/te, or I write the actual sound above the written vowel. \*(As we know, Rudolf Steiner pointed out this *ū*-like English vowel, as in 'sweet' – see the footnote in Lect. 7 about two-thirds in, in *Eurythmy as Visible Speech, EVSp*. I sense the *u* of the *W* being kept so forward by the *i* (ee) that follows, it can easily move toward *ū* and leave the *W* incompletely fulfilled.)

You might notice that I acknowledge three open sounds at the back (as did Werberk-Svärdström), two *e* sounds and two *i* sounds, but not two *ū* sounds. The pair, *è* and *é*, are commonly referred to as simply 'short' and 'long'; but I have always found them to be different sounds, though closely-related. And I find that the so-called short *ī* (as in 'sit') and long *i* (ee) are likewise different sounds, though closely-related. However, with short-duration and longer-duration *ū* I find no difference in sound, only in duration. For example, short and then long *ū* both sound in the words, 'adjust' and 'among.' And here is one of my etudes for this vowel: "Puck's lush runs flood the dusk, rush from hummock t' hut. Hush!"\* I feel something gentler and more personal in *ū* than in the open vowel *a* (ah); and it is also not perky or bright like the open vowel *ō*. I find that the only difference between *ū* and many instances of *ə* (as in 'the') is that *ə* is often *unstressed* and *short*. \*(This is one of my assonance etude-studies for *ū/ə*. In assonance the same vowel is repeated; in alliteration a consonant is repeated)

But why might we conclude that short *ū* or *ə* involves bright yellow in any way, as Reg Down suggested? Since I find that all three colors – Movement, Feeling and Character – in a given gesture-impulse are present instantly no matter what color they are, I would like to report that what I find to be bright yellow when I speak and work with short-duration *ū*, is only my inner agility, the quickness that my consciousness must have if I am to succeed in expressing a short-duration vowel of *any kind*: I must be lightning quick in tuning myself to its inner gesture-nature, and equally quick in my abandonment of this to tune my consciousness to the following sound's gesture-nature. *My quickness or slowness of inner activity is not necessarily the same 'color' as any of the colors belonging to a given gesture-impulse.*

What I've found is that I must always work to detect the source or sources of the feeling-perceptions that I receive. What is it about the *ū* (as in 'fun') that might seem to want "an uncomfortable jerk of the back," as Reg Down reported from Molly von Heider in his article? And for the schwa, *ə* (as in 'the' – see more on the variety in the schwa below), he reported that one would make "a slight, loose, flick of the hand(s), arm(s), shoulder(s), elbow(s) or head." It is not my purpose to discomfort anyone by bringing this question. My mission is to get to the heart of these matters so that we can meet each other in truth and smooth our 'entangled veils' –

as Reg Down described it so well. With the schwa, one factor is its shortness: I can mistake the inner challenge of giving quick expression to short-duration vowels as belonging to the sound rather than to myself. Just think of it in the context of music: singers and instrumentalists don't intone short notes with a little kick (unless they are marked 'staccato,' but perhaps not even then). That would never do!

Another factor is that when we speak a word that begins with a vowel, unless we deliberately breathe out a subtle *H* before it, *we do in fact make a consonantal sound at our larynx*: we make a glottal stop or what I call the '*glottal stop T*' – such as the *T* in 'catnip.' In this word, it would require special and unusual effort to form the *T* at the teeth. This *glottal T* that precedes the vowel in 'adjust' and 'among' inserts a consonantal element that tends to escape our ears and our differentiation process. One day, I even heard an Irish writer speak, who made free use of this glottal sound for the *T* in words, even for the *T* at the beginning of some words! It gives a pertness or abruptness to the speech. And I have gladly, gently, acknowledged its voice in my work with Emily Dickinson's poem, 'A Bird Came Down the Walk.' I use a tiny superscript *t* to notate it before the vowel or the *T*, as in line 2 of the poem: "... <sup>t</sup>It did no<sup>t</sup> know <sup>t</sup>I saw...."

So there's something right in feeling an urge to insert a consonantal activity, a jerk or flick, along with the short-duration *ū*, especially for our indefinite article, 'a,' which stands alone as a single word, and for words that begin with the letter 'a.' And I believe that the jerk or flick that we attribute to it is due to this consonantal activity of the *glottal T*. But even in this *glottal T*, I do not find a sudden flicking movement.

Like all vowels, the short-duration *ū/ə* only intones: it does not form like a consonant does. It is the singing nature of vowels that corresponds with the degrees of the tonal scale. And further, in the spirit of sharing and of nurturing the good, if I use my head to flick or nod with the short-duration *ū/ə*, I feel that I mark that syllabic beat with this flick. It is then like my head's acknowledgment of conjunctions: 'and,' 'so.' Is that what I want to express? No: I want to bestir myself to meet the challenge of giving real-time gesture-expression to the short-duration intoning of the vowel *ū/ə*, just as I would for the short-duration *ō* in 'odiferous,' the *ā* in 'Swahili,' the *ī* in 'isosceles,' and the *è* in 'embark.' I need only be inwardly agile – and determined!

As an aside, I want to say that I realize that it might seem ungiving of me to share no real indication here of my experience of the gesture for this *glottal T* sound, or for the *ū/ə*. In my book, I also do not lay out how-to formulas for the gestures, though I discuss every sound that is voiced in the fifty-seven sets of etudes, including this *glottal T* – e.g., "That pet cat, it might eat a lot! Drat!"\* Instead, I ask

the sounds themselves to tell their story in the etudes; and in the APPENDIX I set a *direction of inquiry* for each gesture-impulse and use the words themselves as the medium for my descriptions of the nature of each impulse. The impulses must come from within. I bring this same spirit to Rudolf Steiner's Figure drawings. They serve me by corroborating – or not – my independent research; and they give me prompts for that work: do I feel this color in this configuration or place in my own inner experience when I speak this sound? My intelligence doesn't guide me to interpret them prescriptively or to move 'as if' I had the experiences. It is the reverse: I bring the gesture-impulses that have awakened in me through doing the speech-work to the Figures. Gradually my silent movement can become as sure as my audible speech, transcending semblances entirely. This path requires patience, but it bears real fruits. \*(One needs to speak lines such as this one normally, not deliberately pronouncing the **T** by forcing it forward to the teeth here. Then one can experience that the short **ī** in the word, 'it,' is framed by the **glottal T** before and after! The only way to avoid this subtle sound before the vowel – as singers know – is to gently exhale a little **H**.)

But back to my main discussion.... What about this 'ə' symbol, the schwa? In the *American Heritage Dictionary's* "Guide to the Dictionary," the schwa is identified as the weakest-stressed vowel value, not as a specific vowel sound. This schwa sound can vary depending upon which vowel is reduced to the weak stress condition. Its apparent etymology appears to be 'to even out.' We can hear how these weakened-stress vowels even out by slipping toward a neutral sound. Nevertheless, the weak vowel sound in 'profess' is not quite the same as the weak vowel sound in 'believe.' With ever-increasing perceptive sensitivity and artistic ability, we can deal with these nuances in our expression. And isn't it the shorter and longer intoning of vowels that governs the rhythmic short-long aspect of poetic meters, as distinct from the light-heavy aspect promoted by the consonants? Through achieving real agility in changing our inward gesture-consciousness, we can bring the syllabic rhythms of both the short-long and the light-heavy aspects into the stream of our revelation of the Word. The result is truly rhythmic speech made visible, 'eu-rhythmy.' Some of you know how much I rely on the rod exercises for the cultivation of this inward agility, from reading about my approach to them in my autumn 2015 *EANA Newsletter* article.

In my book I also share how I note both light-heavy and short-long rhythms: I use the superscripts <sup>˘</sup> and <sup>\*</sup> for light and heavy, e.g., <sup>˘</sup>xcavern; and I add superscript dashes and dots for long values and dotted rhythms (as in music), e.g., <sup>˘</sup>x–abound, <sup>x˙</sup>xmystery. I mark rhythms only as I need to.

It is through speech-work that the dramatic contrast between vowels and consonants has come clear to me. The

vowels are formative by merit of their singing, intoning resonance – singing from the very start to the very finish – while the consonants are formative through their shaping activity: building, dispersing, stopping, undulating, rotating. It was quite a surprise to find out how lacking in depth my experience was of such a seemingly self-evident sound as **a** (ah) – a sound I had spoken for a lifetime already! I hadn't actually gotten beneath the surface of this primary vowel sound. This is even more so the case with subtler sounds like **ō** (awe), or like **ō** (as in cot) which is usually hemmed in by consonants. No longer can I be tempted to treat the vowels as I used to, when I kept my arms narrow during consonant movements to suggest the **u** sound in a word, or wide to suggest the **a** in a word, and so on. And I realize that expressing the actual succession of the sounds is a completely different matter than coloring a line or a whole poem with the mood of a specific vowel, as Rudolf Steiner discussed at the end of Lecture 4 in *EVSp*.

I find that only when I can reproduce a sound clearly with my own speech can I begin to lay hold of its true gesture-impulse. And like what Reg Down wrote, it's clear to me that we can only come into agreement collectively if we lay hold of the same gesture-impulses for the same sounds. To me, this means that each of us needs to begin by honing our ability to reproduce each sound accurately in our speech. Speaking and hearing each specific vowel clearly and purely in concerted, intentional poetic assonance has summoned and strengthened in me the experiences I always wished to have, that make perception of the objective gesture-impulses possible and ever easier. Do write these sentences of assonance for yourself, as Dr. Steiner first advised Lory to do! Always, the spoken sound needs to be met with its actual gesture-impulse moving within us. And if our speaker speaks a sound otherwise than we expect, we need to have become so attuned that we perceive the difference immediately, ready and able to speak that sound, reproduce it accurately and find the gesture for it, no matter how we would notate it.

We have the opportunity here of working toward the creation of the new higher group soul as human beings; and it is our achievement of unison in our experience of spiritual fact that enables this blessing to be bestowed upon us. This is the Whitsun experience. Rudolf Steiner gave a wonderfully clear and inspiring description of this at the end of his lecture in Cologne on June 7, 1908 (see *The Festivals and Their Meaning*, Whitsun section):

Already nowadays human beings are no longer held together by spiritual ties. Each one has their own opinion, their own religion; indeed, many see it as an ideal state of affairs that each should have their own opinion. But that is all wrong. If human beings make their opinions more inward, then they come to a

common opinion. It is a matter of inner experience, for example, that 3 times 3 makes 9, or that the three angles of a triangle make up 180 degrees. That is inner knowledge, and matters of inner knowledge need not be argued about. Of such a kind also are all spiritual truths. What is taught by Spiritual Science is discovered by MAN [the human being] through his\* inner powers; along the inward path MAN will be led to absolute agreement and unity. There cannot be two opinions about a fact without one of them being wrong.\*\* The ideal lies in the greatest possible inwardness of knowledge; that leads to peace and unity. ... In the past, humankind became free of the group-soul. Through spiritual-scientific knowledge humankind is now for the first time in the position to discover, with the utmost certainty of purpose, what will unite humankind again. When [human beings] unite together in a higher wisdom, then out of higher worlds there descends a group-soul once more. ... [when] hearts stream toward wisdom as the plants stream towards the sunlight ... we give a dwelling-place to the group-soul. \*(In Rudolf Steiner's work, 'MAN' and 'his' always refer to all human beings without respect to gender. \*\*(Note: it also appears possible for both to be wrong.)

And on the fiftieth day beginning with Easter, on Pentecost, Whitsunday,

... [the Apostles], aglow with a common feeling of fervent love and devotion, were met together for a common deed: Then the sign was given, the sign that could show MAN [the human being] with overwhelming power how in unity of soul [each] could provide a place for the incarnation of the common spirit. ... That is expressed when it is said that the Holy Spirit, the group-soul, sank down as it were into incarnation. ... The Easter event gave MAN [the human being] the power to develop these experiences; the Whitsun event is the fruit of this power's unfolding.

Precisely in our current time, it is more urgent and imperative than ever that we come to certainty about the human process of knowing – 'anthropo-sophy' – and through it to certainty in grasping the nature of our own being and of the cosmos; so that we are able to lay hold of objective facts and thereby restore our sanity and foster our fully-human development on earth. Eurythmy – harmonious, truthful movement – is a beautiful medium through which to make abundant use of the remarkable inner power granted us by the Easter event, through which we may devote ourselves to this soul-uniting Whitsun work.

**Whitsun Verse** by Rudolf Steiner, given in his Whitsuntide lectures at Vienna and Dornach, on May 6 and 22, 1915, found in *Verses and Meditations* and *The Festivals and their Meaning*. (Rendered in English by Kate Reese Hurd.)

Where senses' knowing ends,  
There stands for the first the portal,  
That opens up to soul-being  
The realities of life.  
The soul fashions the key,  
When she strengthens in herself  
In the struggle, with the world powers  
That on her own ground  
With human forces wage.  
When she through herself drives away  
The sleep, of the forces of knowledge  
Enveloped with spirit-night  
At her senses' boundaries.

Wo Sinneswissen endet,  
Da stehet erst die Pforte,  
Die Lebenswirklichkeiten  
Dem Seelensein eröffnet.  
Den Schlüssel schafft die Seele,  
Wenn sie in sich erstarrt  
Im Kampf, den Weltenmächte  
Auf ihrem eignen Grunde  
Mit Menschenkräfte führen;  
Wenn sie durch sich vertreibt  
Den Schlaf, der Wissenskräfte  
An ihren Sinnesgrenzen  
Mit Geistesnacht umhüllet.