

VOWELS AS TONAL RESOURCE IN PHONETIC CHANT COMPOSITION

Sean Patrick Ignatius Tartaglia

Though it is important for a musical exposition of a text to express some sort of symbolic expression of the text—meaning and drama—a phonetic view of the text can free one from the dangers of an endless, insubstantial melodic line that might cheapen the expressivity of melodic ingenuity. In some sense, in a long text, a phonetic expression paired with symbolistically derived melodicism frees the listener from total tedium and also allows for a proper expression of the meaning of the text.

In the works I have written thus far, I have developed several manners of interpreting a text symbolically. My neumatic forms of notation evolved to deal with the equivalent and relative pitches of my theoretical arguments, but they both applied to sung, not necessarily intoned pitches. *The Consolation of Poverty* was rather close, but the appearance of melisma, sung, approaches something more symbolic than phonetic, and it really represents a development of the adiaستمatic notation already put into place. Rather, the aspect of it that was an affront to my proposed notions of corporeality was the presumption that I could to force an untrained singer to act as if he were like the cantor, who possesses the training of a musician and therefore has the frame of reference to consciously intone microtonal shifts that are symbolic artifice as opposed to phonetic realities; therefore, to provide such ideas of tones of varying size as abstract and symbolic ideas instead of concrete and phonetic ones to those without any training was incorrect. To better close the gap between the spheres of purity, the spheres of the musician and audience, the untrained must inhabit a world of their own that is shown to be the same as that of others.

Yet, this leads me to a wall, for even the most basic solfege, as I came to realize in composing *The Consolation of Poverty*, is essentially beyond the capabilities of an untrained singer. Solmization is not difficult to learn, one could easily learn to sight sing the basic hexachord within a month and sight read Gregorian chant at the most basic level with little problem; however, the problem is that, even with the most simplified neumes identifying movement up and down a tone, this assumes the ability to differentiate those tones, which most laymen do not possess.

My limited study of *Độc Kinh*—the term for the Vietnamese

manner of cantillation, which is not chant, but the result of the tonal qualities of the Vietnamese language—became the source for my solution. Because I never fully followed Partch's example, I never truly expressed any interest in intoned speaking. Different from *sprechstimme*, which are tone sung as if speaking, Partch's intonational ideas, as expressed in his early adapted viola accompanied monophony, are words spoken as if sung; thus, the quality of the music is not determined by an abstract, exterior purpose, but the expression of the word alone.

I never expressed interest in Partch's intonation as a compositional fact only because I disagreed with his attempt to translate the tonal qualities of Chinese language into English, as I thought it was ridiculous to attempt to do to a language what it did not develop. However, I must admit I missed the point entirely. Partch was attempting to reveal the tonal qualities of language itself, even those that are considered non-tonal, such as English. Despite linguistic distinctions, all languages, not only those overtly tonal, have the potential for melodicism without needing assigned tones; consequently, I can say with certainty that the answer to the problems encountered thus far is to make use of these phonetic aspects as opposed to assigning abstract values to words.

My argument is simple: vowels possess inherent tonal qualities, thus they can be understood as pitch gradations, certainly different from those in tonal languages, but distinct from one another in such a way that they can create melodic contour *without singing*.

The tonal quality of a vowel is lower the closer it is to an open-back combination, and higher the closer it is to a close-front combination; thus, if one follows the IPA vowel height chart (Fig. 1), one can see, at the very least, our English vowels express varying levels of height, with fine gradations between the most extreme values that one might not notice.

For example, between a and e, what I would consider the distance of a tone, there are three gradations that could be considered microtones, but do not generally appear in English in such a way that native English speakers could express them unconsciously; likewise, in the distance between i and u and e and o appears as if less a tone if compared to the tone difference between i and e and u and o, which appear closer to a tone, again with slight gradations between them that are not consciously expressed in English.

Knowledge of this can be useful in composing music of relative pitches, in which the height of the first pitch, or vowel, will determine the resulting contour. For example, if we compose with a simple syllabic series:

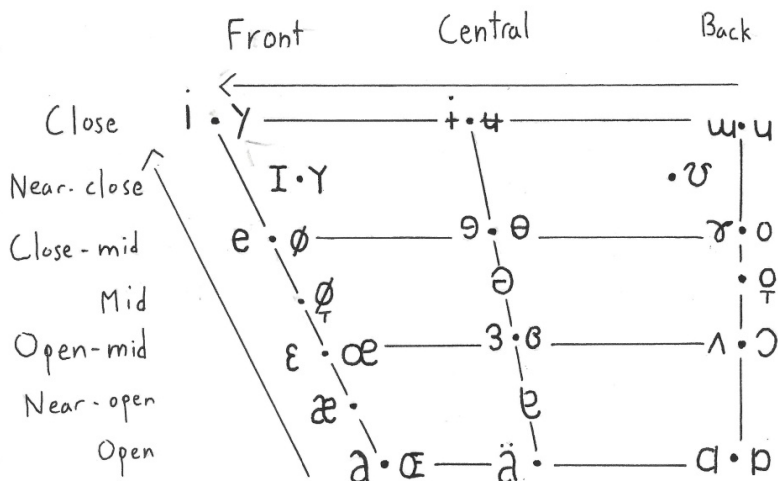


Fig 1. IPA Vowel chart

Ut, Re, Sol, Fa, Mi, Fa

and sing according to a Guidonian solmization, it would appear, written using my adiaستمatic notation, as so:



Fig 2. Contour according to solmization

However, if we ignore the sung values of these syllables in solmization, the spoken contour appears as so:



Fig 3. Contour according to spoken inflection

Knowing it would be helpful in understanding which phonetic inflection was being notated, I wrote in the IPA syllables for each, allowing one to understand their place in the vowel chart and how that alters melodic motion. In this example and the next I am notating neumes only for the sake of clarifying the implicit contour, and in practice it might be best not to use IPA syllables and neumes at the same time (or perhaps even use IPA syllables as the neumes themselves) as to not confuse the reader. Neumes are always sung, but text alone is always spoken, thus the notation must reflect this.

We can reorder these and find that the relative qualities of the vowel heights transform the contour of the line:

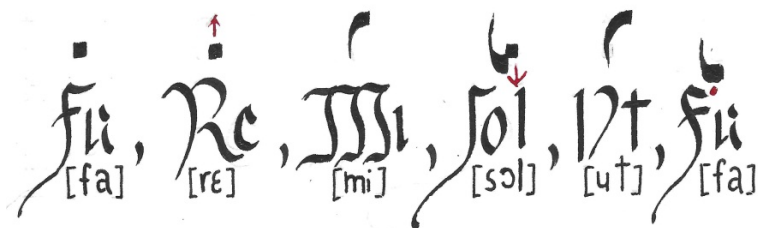


Fig 4. Contour according to spoken inflection

It is important to note that the relative pitch determines the distance between vowels, thus, in my interpretations of my expression of these vowel heights, the movement from a to e to i appears as steps of a tone or larger, and the movement from those to o and u are less than a tone. This might be up to the discretion of one who transcribes the vowel sounds they hear, but to me the sounds of e and o are differentiated by a slightly lower tone. That is why I made the choice of raising less than a tone from Ut to Re, and then lowering less than a tone for Re to Sol, for it appears to me that u, despite being higher than e, is still lower because it appears in the back of the mouth and thus *sounds lower*; likewise, in lowering a tone and less than a tone in the movement from Mi to Sol in the second line, it appears to me that, if o is slightly below e because it is located in the back of the mouth, then the distance between i and o can be better understood through the knowledge of it being slightly lower than e, which appears as if a tone lower than i.

The discrepancy among accents that cannot be accurately notated, only sounded out, is where the value of a relative notation, which aids in sounding the contour as opposed to providing it, as in modern notation, is of the greatest value. The interpreter and composer should be able to intonate these vowels in a similar manner, and the notation is there to remind them that e, i, u, and o, despite appearing

at similar heights on the chart, are not equivalent, determined by reason or argument, but determined by pure physicality; therefore, the phonetics are the music as opposed to being in service to the music, not a setting of an object, but the object itself as it expresses itself.