**Introduction to Norwegian Pronunciation**

Norwegian is a fluid language. To speak and understand it when traveling through Norway, or across time -- as many texts are up to two hundred years old -- one must harbor a flexible ear and an understanding of the possible variants. This can make learning to sing in Norwegian daunting to someone who has no previous familiarity with the language. However, it is a very beautiful and musical language and flows particularly well when sung. Despite all the challenges, the vast treasure trove of Norwegian repertoire is full of beautiful gems and is worth exploring and sharing.

Norwegian as a unified written language is relatively young, compared to other European languages. Only in the mid-nineteenth century was it organized and officially recognized as Norwegian, rather than Danish. Norway has two official languages: *Bokmål,* derived from Danish and spoken primarily in Oslo, and *Nynorsk,* compiled in the mid-nineteenth century and derived from and spoken by the mostly rural people of Norway. Along with those, dialects vary from town to town; understanding people from the other side of the country can be amusing. In addition, most of the texts one encounters in song are at least 150 years old, and are either closer to Danish (or actually in Danish), utilize archaic spellings and words, or are dialects that are unique only to a small region.

One way to help shape one's ear and approach learning these songs is to listen to recordings of other singers. This is quite helpful, but one must keep a few things in mind. First, focusing listening on Norwegian singers is imperative, as many non-Norwegians (Swedes are particularly guilty!) taint the Norwegian language with aspects of their own language, depleting the texts of their authentic Norwegian sounds. Second, even with Norwegian singers, variations occur all the time. This is where the fluid aspect of the language is most apparent. Some singers choose to sing in a more conservative, traditional pronunciation, while others have updated the language to more closely represent the current spoken language, dialects included. While they may be different, they are, in fact, all correct. One may also find a native speaker with whom to coach, but ten different Norwegians may give ten different pronunciations for the same word, depending on their dialect. Unless they are singers and understand the intricacies of singing diction it may be difficult to apply their advice directly to the music. All of this can lead to some confusion. Because of this, the texts included in this Norwegian section use a more current pronunciation, providing a consistent base from which to learn.

Another difficulty arises when singing texts by Danish poets set by Norwegian composers. There are two schools of thought, and both have excellent arguments for their point of view. One argument is to sing Danish texts in Danish. However, many Norwegian singers choose to adapt them to be sung in Norwegian. This approach makes sense to do. When the poems were written more than a century ago, the two languages were practically the same language, at least in written form. Up until the twentieth century, most poets, artists and musicians had to leave Norway to pursue their education, and many spent a considerable amount of time in Denmark resulting in a lot of overlap in combined art forms, such as art song. One may choose to sing those texts in either language without fear of being wrong. The necessary foundation for both is provided.

With this background one can now explore pronunciation, sound by sound. Since it is too much to descend into specific dialects and *Nynorsk,* the following covers the basics of *Bokmål.* IPA is provided for the songs in dialect. In the list below, there are more variants of each vowel than are typically provided. The differences are not great, but enough that the extra scrutiny will provide a better understanding and clearer, more accurate diction.

**Guide to Norwegian Pronunciation**

## Vowels

| IPA | Norwegian | English | Comment |
|---|---|---|---|
| i: | time, tid, hvile, sine | tea, seen | |
| i | de, i | deep | |
| ɪ | farlig, indtil, din, sin, hit, vift, ringe | curling, sin, hit, ring | |
| e: | ene, beder, leker, hele | bait, lake | not as closed as German |
| e | med, en, det, ned | main, day, nay | |
| ɛ | enno, den, elsker, et, neste | end, den, elf | |
| æ: | være | vat | |
| æ | der, her, er, hjerte, hver, stjerne | dad, had | |
| ɑ: | hav, glad, dale, svane | doll, swan | dark and rounded |
| ɑ | klap, natt, danse, var, han | clop, not | |
| o: | våren, sove, våte, både | sofa, vote, boat | quite round |
| o | dog, og, små, på, å | mole, oh | |
| ɔ | oss, komme, som, for, hos, opp | for | |
| u: | solen, tone, store, skogen, slog, god | pool, tu (*it.*) | pure like Italian |
| u | gror, mot, hvor | poor | |
| ʊ | tung | full | |
| ə | hvite, våren, vender, tonende | bitte (*gr.*) | closer to unstressed [ɛ] |
| ø: | møte, drøm, dø, kjøle, kløver | foot | protruded lips |
| ø | bøn, løn | burn | protruded lips |
| œ | drømme, bølge, første, løft, sjølv | sœur (*fr.*) | protruded lips |
| ʉ: | gud, suse, tusen, lur | like German [y:] but leaning toward [u:] | |
| ʉ | du, nu, hun, skum, kun, fugle | like German [y] but leaning toward [u] | |
| ʉ̞ | duft, under, stund, husker, stumme | like German [ʏ] but leaning toward [ʊ] | |
| y: | lyse, dyp | [i:] but with protruded lips | |
| y | by | [i] but with protruded lips | |
| ʏ | styrke, lykke, kyss, synge, tyst | [ɪ] but with protruded lips | |
| æi | jeg, deg, ej, deilig, vei, feil | | |
| œʏ | høy, fløite, øjne, løgne | | |
| ɑɪ | mai | my | |
| ɔʏ | oi | boy | |
| æʉ | auga, tause | | |

**Vowel sounds common to other languages**

**[i:], [i] and [ɪ]**
These are pronounced in much the same manner as in English. The [i:] is present primarily on a stressed vowel, followed by a single consonant, and typically in words with more than one syllable, as in the word "sine," [si:nə]. The [i] appears on less important words and syllables, as in "de," [di], and [ɪ] is found when followed by two or more consonants, in common words, or followed by [ŋ] or a silent "g" or "d," as in the words "indtil," [ɪntɪl], "din," [dɪn], "deilig," [dɛilɪ] and "ringe," [rɪŋə].

**[e:], [e] and [ɛ]**
Pronounced as in English, but without the English diphthong, and not as closed as in German. As above, [e:] is pronounced on a stressed vowel, followed by a single consonant and typically in words with more than one syllable, as in "leker," [le:kər]. The [e] appears on less important words and syllables spelled with "e," and when spelled with a stressed "æ" as in the words "det," [de] and the archaic spelling of the word "glæde," [gledə]. The [ɛ] is followed by two or more consonants, in common words or unstressed syllables spelled with either an "e" or "æ," for example, the word "neste," [nɛstə]. Old spellings often utilize "æ" in place of "e" or vice versa.

**[æ:] and [æ]**
Pronounced as in English "dad" or "vat." Very open and wide, slightly lifted. The [æ:] is used when spelled "æ" and is stressed, such as "være," [væ:rə]. In many words spelled "e" followed by an "r" [æ] is used, like "der," [dær]. Take note of archaic spellings that switch "æ" and "e."

**[ɑ:] and [ɑ]**
Dark and slightly rounded but not quite [ɔ], much like "doll" in English and are spelled "a." They follow the same rules regarding long and short versions of the vowels above.

**[o:], [o] and [ɔ]**
Very round, much like a "Minnesota O," and not as closed as the German counterpart. The [o:] is spelled with "o" on a stressed vowel followed by a single consonant in words containing multiple syllables. The [o], when spelled with "o," is used on unstressed syllables, is followed by multiple consonants or is in small, common words. Both [o:] and [o] also represent words spelled with "å" or "aa" which indicate the same letter and sound. The [ɔ] is used when followed by "r" or "m" and often in smaller, less important words. In archaic spellings "o" and "u" are often interchanged, but usually pronounced as spelled. Examples are "sove," [so:və], "dog," [dog], "våren," [vo:rən] and "for" [fɔr].

**[u:], [u] and [ʊ]**
Very pure, forward sound formed by protruding one's lips quite forward, as in the Italian word "tu," [tu]. The [u:] and [u] are always spelled with "o." Notice that "o" can be pronounced [o] or [u], so take extra care to identify which sound to use. The [ʊ] is slightly more open and appears when followed by [ŋ] in some instances, such as the word "tung" [tʊŋ].

**[ə]**
The Schwa is found in places as it would be in German, like "bitte," [bɪtə̲]. However, the pronunciation is slightly different. Whereas the German Schwa tends toward an unstressed [œ], Norwegian is closer to [ɛ]. It is always on unstressed syllables and often ending the word. When listening to Norwegians, one may notice that many long vowels, like [e] and [i], are followed by a slight Schwa before reaching the consonant. One may recognize this phenomenon, but imitating it is not recommended for singing.

**Vowel sounds unique to Norwegian**

**[øː], [ø] and [œ]**
The [ø] in Norwegian is very forward and much more open than its counterparts in German and French. One must protrude one's lips forward, extending them as far as possible and then open them outward, making as wide a square with your lips as possible, exposing your front teeth. One must take this significantly past one's comfort zone! The [œ] is a more open form of the same sound and follows the same rules as the vowels above. Words include "møte," [møːtə], "løn," [løn] and "løft," [lœft].

**[ʉː], [ʉ] and [ʊ̟]**
German and French have one mixed vowel combining [u] and [i], producing [y]. Norwegian has two, one on either side of the the German and French [y], and each leaning more toward the [u] or [i]. To properly pronounce [ʉ] one may start with the German [y] and color more toward [u]. Or, one may start with a nice, pure [u] and tighten your lips slightly as if creating an embouchure for playing the flute, infusing it slightly with [i]. Used frequently, [ʉː] is found in stressed syllables, followed by a single consonant, and typically in words with more than one syllable. The [ʉ] appears on less important words and syllables and in small, commonly used words, and [ʊ̟], a slightly more open form of the vowel, is followed by two or more consonants. Examples are "suse," [sʉːsə], "du," [dʉ] and "duft," [dʊ̟ft].

**[yː], [y] and [ʏ]**
The Norwegian [y] is the most difficult vowel to explain without face to face demonstration and feedback. To an untrained ear, it is nearly indiscernible from [i], but without proper pronunciation meaning can be mixed up easily. A mixed vowel, it begins with the [i] but one must protrude the lips as is done with [ø], described above. Long and short versions of the vowel follow the same rules as [ʉ].

**Diphthongs**

**[æi]**
Perhaps the most commonly used diphthong, [æi] appears in many personal pronouns and other, often used, small words, thus it is important to understand the proper pronunciation for it. It is usually spelled "eg" in modern *Bokmål*, and "ig" in archaic spellings, as in the word "deg" or "dig," [dɛi] but also "ei" or "ej." Note that "eg" in *Nynorsk* is pronounced [eg].

**[œʏ]**
Spelled "øi" or "øy," the [ʏ] prolongs the roundness of the [œ] through the diphthong. Keep the lips in the same protruded position and let the tongue change the vowel through the diphthong.

**[ɑɪ] and [ɔʏ]**
Mostly represented in words that have been adapted from other languages to Norwegian, [ɑɪ] is generally spelled "ai" or "aj" and [ɔʏ] is spelled "oi," "oj" or "oy." Pay special attention that your [ɑ] remains dark and the roundness of the [ɔ] continues through the [ʏ].

**[æʉ]**
The most complicated diphthong, [æʉ] can be difficult for a non-Norwegian speaker to master. It's important that each of the vowels, which seem to be on quite opposite sides of the spectrum, maintain their unique sounds yet still have a smooth transition between them. The [ʉ] should occupy the same lifted space in which the [æ] began. It is spelled "au."

## Consonants

| IPA | Norwegian | English | Comment |
|---|---|---|---|
| b | beste, både | best, both | |
| d | der, under* | dad, under | *sometimes so gently spoken it becomes more of an implied color in the word |
| f | føten, treffe | foot, draft | |
| g | glede, dog, og* | glade, gone | *often times optional |
| h | her, hav, huske | hair, have, husk | |
| j | jeg, hjerte, gynge, lilje | yes, few | |
| k | elsk, kveld, lykke | elk, lick, kiss | |
| l | sol, lyse, deilig | soul, lease, dialing | light and frontal |
| m | meg, drøm, som | my, drum, some | |
| n | nå, hun, våren | no, hand, wren | |
| p | prinse, dyp, opp | prince, deep, up | |
| r | våren, går, fra | wren, gore, from | when sung usually flipped, can be rolled for effect |
| s | sang, som, blese | song, some, bless | |
| t | tid, natt, atter | tea, not, tutto (*it.*) | softer than English, but not quite as dental as Italian |
| v | av, hvor, hav | of/off, lever, have | very little voice and often blends with [f] |
| ŋ | syng, lang, ingen | sing, long, ringing | |
| ʃ | slut, kyss, skygge, ellers, første, kanskje, sjå, kjerte | shade, rash | there is a lot of dialectical variation in pronunciation of [ʃ] and [tʃ], ranging from [ʃ] to [ç] to [tʃ] , but for consistency, a gentler form of the English version is acceptable |
| tʃ | tjerne, kyske | chair, chess | |

**[b]**
The plosive [b] is pronounced and spelled as in English, except occasionally when followed by an "s," "b" becomes [p].

**[d]**
The plosive [d] is generally pronounced and spelled like English, but archaic spellings can be confusing, as many of them are now spelled with a "t" instead and pronounced [t]. When "d" is placed after "l" or "n" it becomes less of its own consonant and more of a coloring of the previous consonant, giving the effect of a double consonant, [l:l] or [n:n], as in the word "under," [ʉndər], almost [un:nər]. Note that "d" at the end of a word following "i" is silent, as in "tid," [ti:].

**[f]**
The fricative [f] is the same as English, except occasionally it is spelled with a "v" followed by as "s".

**[g]**
Usually the same as in English, the plosive [g] is spelled "g." Archaic spellings may interchange "g" and "k." The "g" at the end of a word following "i" is silent as in "deilig," [dɛilɪ]. Also, "g" can be optional at the end of some words, and is usually dropped, as in the word "og," [o] or [og]. When placed between two vowels "g" can be dropped or turned into a [j] glide as in "lønlige," [lønlɪə]. When followed by "l," "g" is optional, depending on dialect, as in the word "fugl," [fʉl].

**[h]**
The fricative [h] is the same as English. However, "h" at the beginning of a word followed by a consonant is silent as in the words "hvor," [vur] and "hjerte" [jærte].

**[j]**
The [j] glide is spelled "j" or "gi." It can also be spelled "gj" or "hj" where the "g" and "h" are silent. In archaic spellings, "j" frequently replaces the modern "i" in the middle or end of words. The "j" is also involved in the [ʃ] consonant and I will touch on that aspect below.

**[k]**
The plosive [k] is the same as English. It is generally spelled "k" but can be spelled with a "g" in old spellings and when followed by an "s" or a "t" as in the words "slags," [ ʃlaks] and "lagt," [lɑkt]. In occasional foreign words that have been adapted it may be spelled with a "c" or "q."

**[l]**
The lateral [l], spelled "l," like German utilizes the tip of the tongue behind the top front teeth.

**[m] and [n]**
The nasals [m] and [n] are the same as English, except that when "g" or "k" follow "n," it becomes [ŋ].

**[p]**
The plosive [p] is gentler than in English and is spelled "p." Also, "b" followed by "s" can become [ps].

**[r]**
The [r] is usually flipped, and occasionally rolled for effect. Norwegian speakers regularly use a retroflex when "r" is placed before "l," "d," "n" or "t." This is good to be aware of when listening to Norwegian singers, but it is not recommended for non-Norwegians nor is it necessary for good diction. Also one should be aware that some dialects utilize a guttural "r," which is not recommend for singing.

**[s]**
The fricative [s] is like English and spelled "s." The "s" can affect a voiced consonant before it, causing it to become unvoiced. The "s" is never voiced. In adapted foreign words, [s] can be spelled with a "c."

**[t]**
The plosive [t] is gentler and more dental than English. It is only slightly more aspirated than Italian. It is typically spelled "t" but archaic spellings regularly spelled it "d." There are many archaic words spelled "dt" that are now spelled "tt" and pronounced [t] such as "lidt," now spelled "litt," [lɪt]. Similarly, a "t" following a voiced consonant can cause that consonant to become unvoiced, "lagt," [lakt]. In nouns ending with the attached neutral definite article "-et" the [t] is frequently dropped, or barely pronounced. Note that in past tense verbs ending with "-et," it is quite clearly pronounced.

**[v]**
The fricative [v] is similar to its English counterpart, but is gentler and less voiced. It may become an [f], as when "v" is followed by an "s" as in "livs," [lifs].

**[z] and [w]**
There is NO fricative [z] or [w] glide in Norwegian!

**[ŋ]**
The nasal [ŋ] is spelled "ng" or "nk," [ŋk], and pronounced as in English.

**[ʃ] and [tʃ]**
Pronunciation varies on these sounds in particular from region to region and can include [ç], adding much complexity. However, for consistency this guide will discern only between the [ʃ] and [tʃ]. The fricative [ʃ] is spelled "kj," "ki," "ky," "kæ," "sj," "skj," "sky," "ske," "skø," and "ski." The pronunciation is similar to English but is placed a little further back in the mouth with the sides of the tongue touching the front molars. In modern *Bokmål,* and in the IPA for these songs, it can also be found when spelled "rs," [rʃ ]," or "sl," [ ʃl]. More traditional singers may leave these two out, opting for [rs] or [sl] instead. The similar fricative [tʃ] is also like English and is spelled "tj," "ky" and a few other similar letter combinations.

**Silent and optional consonants**
As mentioned above under each of the corresponding letters, "d," "g," and "h" are frequently silent. Both "d" and "g" are dropped at the end of words following an "i," as in the words "deilig," ['dɛilɪ] and "tid," [ti:], although one may occasionally hear the final "d" as optional. Additionally, "g" is frequently dropped as an option in three specific circumstances: between "i" or "e" and a final Schwa as in the word "hellige," [hɛl:lɪə], in the word "og," [o], and when followed by "l" as in the word "fugl," [fʉl]. When "h" begins a word followed by another consonant, it is also silent as in the words "hva," [vɑ] and "hjerte," [jærtə].

**Double consonants**
Although not as dramatic as double consonants in Italian, a double consonant in Norwegian plays a very important role. It occurs when any two consonants are placed next to each other. Not only does this slightly lengthen the consonants' sound, but it also affects the vowels preceding them, shortening and opening the vowel sound. Examples include "blomster," [blɔmstər] and "lette," [lɛt:tə]. Variations in archaic spellings occur, usually replacing one consonant with another, as in the case with "t" and "d," but sometimes the second consonant is missing entirely. In the IPA of the songs, the pronunciation has been updated based on current spellings of these words.

**Compound words**
Compound words are common in Norwegian, and each smaller word retains its own pronunciation within the larger word, such as in "sangrøst," [sɑŋrœst] or "sanktehansormen," [sɑŋktəhɑnsɔrmən].

**Definite articles**
Norwegian has a unique syntax which attaches definite articles to the end of the noun. For singular nouns they are "-en," "-et" and "-a" and for plural nouns "-ene." They are unstressed. In the neutral form, "-et," the "t" is dropped or barely spoken.

**Works Cited**

*A New Pocket-Dictionary of the English and Dano-Norwegian Languages.* Leipzig: Otto Holtzes Nachfolger, 1900.

Haugen, Einar. *Norwegian English Dictionary.* Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1965.

"IPA: Fullchart." *IPA: Fullchart.* Ed. Adrian P. Simpson. International Phonetic Association, 2005. Web. 2013.

Ophaug, Wencke. "Troubleshooting Norwegian Pronunciation in Classical Singing." *Journal of Singing* Vol. 69, No. 1 (September/October 2012), pp. 49-56.

Uris, Dorothy. *To Sing in English.* New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1971.