

English Transcriptions

Recommended diction texts

Handbook of the International Phonetic Association. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Johnston, Amanda. *English and German Diction for Singers: A Comparative Approach*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2011.

LaBouff, Kathryn. *Singing and Communicating in English*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Marshall, Madeleine. *The Singer's Manual of English Diction*. New York: G. Schirmer, 1953.

Skinner, Edith, Timothy Monich, and Lilene Mansell. *Speak with Distinction*. New York, NY: Applause Theatre Book, 1990.

Pronunciation dictionaries with IPA

Jones, Daniel. *An Outline of English Phonetics*, 9th ed. Cambridge: W. Hefter & Sons, Ltd, 1962.

_____. *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary*, 18th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Kenyon, John S., and Thomas A. Knott. *A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1953.

Silverstein, Bernard. *NTC's Dictionary of American English Pronunciation*. Lincolnwood, Ill., USA: National Textbook, 1994.

Online English pronunciation with IPA

Cambridge Dictionary Online. <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>. British and American pronunciation.

The English Accent for Singing

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcriptions found on IPA Source corresponds to what is known as Mid-Atlantic (MA) pronunciation. MA is a neutral pronunciation incorporating some aspects of both British Received Pronunciation and General American speech. Standardized for the stage in 1942 by Edith Skinner in her book *Speak with Distinction*, the accent was adjusted for the singer by Madeleine Marshall in *The Singer's Manual of English Diction* published in 1953.

British Received Pronunciation (RP), also called public-school or BBC accent, was taught in the English elite public preparatory schools and was used by graduates of Oxford and Cambridge. The term *received* originates from the phrase "received in the best society."

In 1926, Daniel Jones codified RP in the *English Pronouncing Dictionary* and it was adopted by the BBC as the broadcast standard through the 1970s. Today less than 3% of the British public speaks RP and most broadcasters use a neutralized version of their own regional accents.

General American (GA) pronunciation differs from RP in the use of certain vowel colors and a general lax quality of the consonants.

Characteristics of the MA pronunciation

1. Most of the vowel sounds for MA are derived from GA and draws its consonant qualities from RP.
2. MA uses the [ʌ] for words with –wh spellings: *where* [mɛɹ̩], *what* [mʌt], and *why* [maɪ].
3. The liquid –u is used at all times: *tune* [tjun], *hue* [hju], *interlude* ['ɪn.tɛ.ljud]
4. Final –y as in *fury* will be pronounced [i] as in RP.
5. In texts from the British Isles, three pronunciations of the consonant –r are found: the trilled [r], the flapped [ɾ], and the retroflex [ɻ]. Texts from North America use only the retroflex [ɻ].
6. When heard as a vowel, spellings using the –r will be pronounced as a reduced R-colored vowel. Since there is no standardized IPA symbol for this sound in MA, IPA Source borrows the turned A [ɐ] from German for these transcriptions.

English Phonemes

Vowel Sounds

Not surprisingly, the vowel sounds of GA and RP are quite similar.

RP		GA		MA	
[i]	ski [ski:]	[i]	ski [ski]	[i]	ski [ski]
[ɪ]	hit [hɪt]	[ɪ]	hit [hɪt]	[ɪ]	hit [hɪt]
[e]	bed [bed]	[ɛ]	bed [bɛd]	[ɛ]	bed [bɛd]
[æ]	cat [kæt]	[æ]	cat [kæt]	[æ]	cat [kæt]
[ɑ]	daft [dɑ:ft]	[ɑ]	on [ɑn]	[ɑ]	on [ɑn]
[ɔ]	all [ɔ:l]	[ɔ]	all [ɔ] or [ɑ]	[ɔ]	all [ɔ]
[o]	obey [o.'beɪ]	[o]	obey [o.'beɪ]	[o]	obey [o.'beɪ]
[ʊ]	put [pʊt]	[ʊ]	put [pʊt]	[ʊ]	put [pʊt]
[u]	too [tu:]	[u]	too [tu]	[u]	too [tu]
[ɜ]	turn [tɜ:n]	[ɜ]	turn [tɜ-n]	[ɜ]	turn [tɜn]
[ə]	father ['fɑ:ð.ə]	[ə]	father ['fɑð.ə]	[ɐ]	father ['fɑð.ɐ]

In RP, the vowels [i ɑ ɔ ʊ ɜ] are considered tense vowels and are given the symbol of elongation in the stressed position—*easy* ['i:zi], *good* [gʊ:d], etc. GA does not make this distinction in transcription. Since MA adopts most of its vowels from GA, the symbol of elongation [:] will only be used in this text to indicate the long vowel in diphthongs.

English Diphthongs in MA

[aɪ]	night [naɪt]	[eɪ]	eight [eɪt]
[ɔɪ]	boy [bɔɪ]	[oʊ]	note [noʊt]
[aʊ]	down [daʊn]		

The non-syllabic [ɹ] is short by definition and does not require the addition of the symbol of elongation.

[ɑɹ]	are [ɑɹ]	[ɛɹ]	air [ɛɹ]
[ɪɹ]	fear [fɪɹ]	[ɔɹ]	for [fɔɹ]
[ʊɹ]	sure [sʊɹ]		

The two English triphthongs in MA

The two English triphthongs are created by adding the non-syllabic [ɹ] to the [ɑ:ɪ] and [a:ʊ] diphthongs. As a syllable may have only one central vowel, the first vowel of the series is lengthened and receives the symbol of elongation [ː].

[ɑ:ɪɹ]	fire [fɑ:ɪɹ]	choir [kwa:ɪɹ]	desire [dɪ.'za:ɪɹ]
[a:ʊɹ]	hour [a:ʊɹ]	power [pa:ʊɹ]	flower [fa:ʊɹ]

Occasionally, a composer will set a triphthong on two notes requiring a second syllable. Take care not to add the [j] or [w] glide before the final non-syllabic R-colored vowel.

fire ['fa:ɪ.ɹ] <i>not</i> ['fa:ɪ.jɹ]	choir ['kwa:ɪ.ɹ] <i>not</i> ['kwa:ɪ.jɹ]
hour ['a:ʊ.ɹ] <i>not</i> ['a:ʊ.wɹ]	power ['pa:ʊ.ɹ] <i>not</i> ['pa:ʊ.wɹ]

Consonant sounds in MA

The following symbols are identical to the letters of the English alphabet:

[b], [d], [f], [g], [h], [k], [l], [m], [n], [p], [s], [t], [v], [w], [z]

The following IPA symbols are used in English transcription for specific sounds found in the language.

[ŋ]	singing ['sɪŋ.ɪŋ], sink [sɪŋk]
[θ]	thin [θɪn], thought [θɔt]
[ð]	the [ðə], this [ðɪs]
[j]	yes [jɛs], you [ju]
[w]	when [wɛn], white [waɪt]
[ʒ]	vision ['vɪʒ.ən], azure ['æʒ.ʊɹ]
[ʃ]	shin [ʃɪn], she [ʃi]
[tʃ]	chin [tʃɪn], cheese [tʃi:z]
[dʒ]	joy [dʒɔ:ɪ], Jim [dʒɪm]
[ɹ] (retroflex)	red [ɹɛd], train [tɹeɪn]
[r] (flipped)	very ['vɛr.i], forever [fɔr.'ɛv.ɹ]
[r] (trilled)	rolling ['ro:ʊl.ɪŋ], ring [rɪŋ]

General guidelines for English transcriptions

Syllabification

IPA Source transcriptions include the IPA syllable dot [·]. Syllables are separated as they are found in the score following the standard syllabification rules of the language, not as one might recommend them for singing. For example, in a musical score the word *syllabification* is written

syl – lab – i – fi – ca – tion

and not as

sy – **lla** – **bi** – fi – ca – tion

IPA Source transcriptions use standard syllable division separating the syllable with the IPA syllable dot.

syl-lab-i-fi-ca-tion

[sɪ.ləb.i.fi.'keɪ.t̩.jən]

The glottal attack [ʔ]

English diction uses the glottal attack in four specific instances.

1. At the beginning of a word when the preceding word ends with the identical vowel.
 - a. the evening [ði 'ʔiv.nɪŋ]
2. When the connection of a final consonant will form unintentional words.
 - a. bright eyes [braɪt ʔaɪz] not "bright ties"
3. Before interjections.
 - a. A clean heart, oh God; [ʌ klin hɑ:ɪt ʔo:ʊ gɑd]
4. To set words apart in a list.
 - a. At home, on land, on sea! [æt ho:ʊm ʔən lænd ʔən si]

Other instances of the use of the glottal for the sake of clarity are left to the discretion of the singer.

Whether called a glottal attack, soft onset, or a reiteration of the vowel, the effect is the same; the previous word must end before the next vowel is pronounced.

[Listen](#) to William Warfield in *Across the Western Ocean* by Celius Dougherty. In addition to the use of the glottal before *ocean*, note the use of the trilled –r in this American folksong sung by an American singer.

The **R**ocky Mountains are my home,
Across the western ʔocean.

Alternate pronunciations

In Mid-Atlantic pronunciation, consonant sounds are generally borrowed from British Received Pronunciation. Standard pronunciation variants found in the Cambridge English Pronunciation Dictionary (CEPD) are given on IPA Source in italics. These variants are considered optional but should be seriously considered for the sake of clarity. Here are a few examples:

youngster ['jʊŋk.ste]

fancy ['fænt.si]

Southampton [sa:ʊθ.'hæmp.tən]

strength [stɹɛŋkθ]

length [lɛŋkθ]

senses ['sɛn.tɪz]

empty ['ɛmp.ti]

against [ə.'ɡɛntst]

beyond [bi.'jʌnd]

Often a word will have two different pronunciations, each equally valid. These variants are given in parentheses.

namelessness ['ne:ɪm.lə(ɛ)s.nə(ɛ)s]

estate [ɪ(ɛ)s.'te:ɪt]

enduring [ɪ(ɛ)n.'dʒʊr.ɪŋ]

tomorrow [tə(ʊ)'.mɑr.o:ʊ]

The prefix *to-* deserves special attention. Although correctly pronounced as [tə] in the words *tonight* [tə.'na:ɪt] and *together* [tə.'geð.ə], the prefix is most often sung as [tu].

"Ask-List Words" in RP

In *Speak with Distinction*, Edith Skinner used the term "Ask-List Words" to identify words spelled with an *-a* normally spoken with [æ] in GA that are pronounced with [ɑ] in RP. These words, such as *laugh* [lɑf], *chance* [tʃɑns], *pass* [pɑs], *grasp* [grɑs], and *rather* ['rɑð.ə], are not alternate pronunciations in RP but the only pronunciation. Except where rhyme makes its usage mandatory, British texts presented in MA transcriptions on IPA Source will be given the GA pronunciation with the RP pronunciation indicated below.

False Phillis, an old English air

and	proudly	passed	by,
[ænd	'pra:ʊd.li	pæst	ba:ɪ]
		^(RP) [pɑst]	

In general, it is recommended that singers of North American sing the MA pronunciation and British singers or those who have learned a British accent should use the RP pronunciation.

Strong and weak pronunciations

One of the most difficult aspects of singing English clearly, is the concept of strong and weak pronunciations. Especially in recitative and patter, the pure vowel sound of less important words will lose some of their integrity giving weight to the more important adverbs, verbs and nouns. For example, the preposition *to* is given as [tu] in the dictionary but may be spoken as [tə] in the phrase *I'm going to the store*. Although strong and weak pronunciations are given in the CEPD, it is impossible to transcribe these subtleties in the broad IPA transcriptions found on IPA Source as their use depends on the setting, tempo, and interpretation.

Singing the English -r

The English –r is found as both a consonant and as an R-colored vowel. The consonant is found in the initial position of a word and when preceding a vowel, including when found as the last consonant of a word preceding another word beginning with a vowel (rue, trend, tarry, **or_**any). The R-colored vowel is found when final before a pause or preceding another consonant (mother, burn).

The consonant –r

1. Trilled or rolled –r [r]
2. Flipped or single-tapped –r [ɾ]
3. Retroflex or burred –r [ɻ]

In music of North America uses only the retroflex –r . The flipped and the trilled –r are used in the music of the British Isles along with the retroflex -r. British oratorio and opera employ broader use of the flipped and trilled –r but always mixed with the retroflex –r.

Using the three forms of the –r consonant in music of the British Isles.

It is difficult to give rules for choosing which of the three types of –r consonant to use. Often it comes down to a simple matter of taste and interpretation. Here are the few guidelines followed for texts found on this website. Please remember, since all texts presented on IPA Source are in the public domain, they predate 1923 and are therefore considered historic British pronunciation and will rely more heavily on the trilled and flipped –r.

1. In the poetry of the British Isles, the flipped [ɾ] is sung in all positions except:
 - a. in the unstressed syllable (mistress, ['mɪs.tɹəs], prevail [pɹɪ.'veɪ:l])
 - b. in the combinations of *tr-* (train [tɹeɪn]) and *dr-* (drain [dɹeɪn])
 - c. in the preposition *from* [fɹʌm].

Although the flipped [ɾ] is suggested for most occurrences of the –r in the stressed syllables, the retroflex [ɻ] can replace the flipped [ɾ] when clarity is not a concern. Do not allow the use of the flipped [ɾ] to unintentionally extend into the trilled [r].

2. The trilled [r] may be used sparingly in art song of a dramatic nature and occasionally in oratorio and opera. Care should be taken not to over-use the trilled –r as it will soon sound artificial.
3. The retroflex [ɻ] is often mistakenly called the American –r although it is the standard consonant pronunciation in all American and Canadian texts and in the texts of British Isles written after 1970. Examples: bread [bɹɛd], training ['tɹeɪn.ɪŋ], ream [ɹɪm].

Since there are no standardized rules for the pronunciation of MA, there will always be exceptions to these guideline. For example, according to the rules above, the words *drop* and *from*, should be pronounced with the retroflex –r as [dɹʌp] and [fɹʌm]. However, one will often hear them pronounced with the flipped [ɾ] and even trilled [r] by British singers.

[Alfred Deller](#) singing Purcell's *Music for a While*

Till the snakes drop, drop, drop from her head,
[tɪl ðə sneɪks dɹʌp dɹʌp dɹʌp fɹʌm he hɛd]

[Thomas Hampson](#) singing *An Old Song Re-sung* (Griffes) using the trilled, flipped and retroflex -r

Taste, clarity, and the avoidance of affectation should be your guide choosing the appropriate consonant pronunciation for the -r.

Poet or composer?

Choosing the appropriate -r pronunciation becomes more difficult when the poet is from one side of the Atlantic and the composer is from the other. For example, the text to *Dover Beach* was written by *Matthew Arnold* (1822-1888) [Br] in 1851 and the most familiar musical setting was made by *Samuel Barber* (1910-1981) [Am] in 1931. The text has a strong British theme and flavor but the setting is definitely American.

At IPA Source, the consonant -r is transcribed in all English texts according to the nationality of the *poet*. The nationality of the composer is indicated (where available) and the singer may decide which pronunciation to follow when given two choices.

The R-colored vowels

From the introduction of Cambridge English Pronunciation Dictionary (CEPD), 18th Edition

In phonetics, an R-colored or rhotic vowel (also called a vocalic R or a rhotacized vowel) is a vowel that is modified in a way that results in a lowering in frequency of the third formant. R-colored vowels can be articulated in various ways; the tip or blade of the tongue may be turned up during at least part of the articulation of the vowel (a retroflex articulation) or the back of the tongue may be bunched: in addition the vocal tract may often be constricted in the region of the epiglottis. In the International Phonetic Alphabet, an R-colored vowel is indicated by a modification placed to the right of the regular symbol for the vowel. For example, the IPA symbol for *schwa* is [ə], while the IPA symbol for an R-colored *schwa* is [ɚ].

In the spoken language

British Received Pronunciation (RP) stressed: [ɜ] unstressed: [ə]

General American (GA) (hooked -r) stressed: [ɝ] unstressed: [ɚ]

In the spoken language, the stressed R-colored vowel of English is heard in words such as *first* [fɜst] / [fɝst], *turn* [tɜn] / [tɝn], and *blur* [blɜ] / [blɝ]. The sound of the reversed epsilon [ɜ] is quite similar to that of the German mixed [ø] found in the word *schön* but with more openness of the jaw and far less rounding of the lips. The General American hooked reversed epsilon [ɝ] is similarly produced but with the tip of the tongue is retracted towards the hard palate giving the sound a strong R-coloration.

In the unstressed position, General American (GA) uses the R-colored *schwa* in words such as *water* ['wɑ.tɚ] and *perceive* [pə.'sɪv]. The color is essentially the same as with hooked reversed epsilon [ɝ] but the mouth is far less open and therefore much tighter in production. British Received pronunciation (RP) uses the R-less *schwa*—*water* ['wɑ.tə] and *perceive* [pə.'sɪv].

Using the General American R-colored vowels

Tastes have changed in the past 50 years. Whereas in the 1950's and 1960's one would hear use of the hooked American –r in both art song and opera, its use is now generally limited to American folksongs, spirituals, and other songs of a colloquial nature. Here are a few examples:

[George London](#) I wonder as I wander
[Cheryl Studer](#) The trees on the Mountain from *Susanna*
[Così fan tutte](#) (1952) Act one, scene one
Richard Tucker as Ferrando
Frank Guarrera as Guglielmo

For comparison, here is a contemporary recording of *Così fan tutti* from England using the flipped and rolled –r.

[Così fan tutte](#) (2008) Act one, scene one
Toby Spence as Ferrando
Christopher Maltman as Guglielmo

The American baritone Thomas Hampson, who generally sings in the Mid-Atlantic pronunciation, makes use of both the General American hooked –r and the "British" flipped and trilled –r. Listen to the following song and notice how he chooses to use the hooked –r for effect.

[The Boatmen's Dance](#) (Copland) the slightly R-colored vowels contrasted with the strong R-coloring

The stressed R-colored vowel in MA

The Mid-Atlantic pronunciation recommended for sung English is a neutral pronunciation using some of the qualities of both British and American pronunciation. Although we generally use American vowels for Mid-Atlantic pronunciation, for the MA stressed R-colored vowel, we use the British reversed epsilon [ɜ] in texts from both the British Isles and America. To produce this vowel, the tongue lies low in the mouth with a tip touching the inner surface of the lower teeth; the jaw is open and the lips are only slightly rounded. This vowel is very close to the sound of a relaxed German [ø].

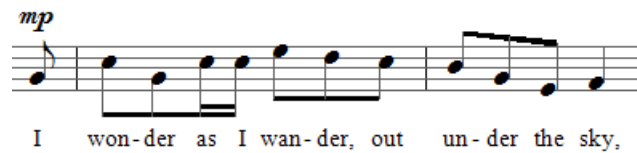
Examples:

learn	[lɜn]	bird	[bɜd]
her	[hɜ]	word	[wɜd]
journey	['dʒɜn.i]	burn	[bɜn]

The unstressed R-colored vowel

The choice of an IPA symbol for the unstressed R-colored vowel for singing is not as easy one. Singing is not speech. In speech, the unstressed –r vowel is of extremely short duration is usually represented with either the [ə̃] or [ə]. Unfortunately, the strongly R-colored retroflex [ə̃] found in American dictionaries is too closed for use in "classical" singing when the normally short sound is elongated to fit the musical notation. Likewise, the use of the R-less *schwa* [ə] of British Received Pronunciation, while perhaps a better choice, can also be unsatisfactory in MA as it lacks definition. In RP, both *wander* and *Wanda* are transcribed as ['wɒn.də]. Given the extended duration of unstressed vowels in singing, this can lead to confusion unless some R-coloration is added.

Let's look at the first line of the Appalachian Carol, *I wonder as I wonder*.



Here is the IPA transcription using General American pronunciation.

I **wonder** **as** **I** **wander** **out** **under** **the** **sky,**
[a:I 'wʌn.də æz a:I 'wʌn.də a:ʊt 'ʌn.də ðʌ ska:I]

[Listen](#) again to the recording of George London with the strong GA pronunciation.

Here is the same text in British Received Pronunciation with the *schwa*.

I **wonder** **as** **I** **wander** **out** **under** **the** **sky,**
[a:I 'wʌn.də æz a:I 'wɒn.də a:ʊt 'ʌn.də ðʌ ska:I]

[Listen](#) to a recording of the Cambridge Singers with practically no R-coloration.

[Listen](#) to a recording of Maureen Hegarty using a medium R-coloration.

The use R-less *schwa* is the pronunciation described as Mid-Atlantic by many authors including Madeleine Marshall and Edith Skinner. It is my feeling, however, that without a shading of R-coloring indicated in the transcription, the sound of the *schwa* is too neutral for singing.

In her excellent book *Singing and Communicating in English*¹, Kathryn LaBouff suggests that the sound of the unstressed vowel should be close to that of the [œ].

Many singers are very hesitant to use this [R-colored] vowel in their English repertoire. When produced correctly, it is a very beautiful vowel sound similar to the [œ] in French and the [ø] in German. Since it is part of the American Standard English pronunciation, it is very much an integral sound of the language and therefore should be used. The vowels [ɜ̣] / [ə̣] are the reduced r-colored variants used in RP and Mid-Atlantic dialects...

...It also helps to try singing [œ] which is the slightly more open French equivalent of these vowels.

[œ] [œ]

EXAMPLE Shall we gather by the river.

Here LaBouff recommends two non-standard symbols for the reduced R-colored vowels in the Mid-Atlantic pronunciation: the stressed [ɜ̣] and the unstressed [ə̣]. Unfortunately, these symbols can be easily confused with the Daniel Jones' symbols for the connecting -r in the Cambridge English Pronunciation Dictionary. See *The connecting -r* below.

¹ LaBouff, Kathryn. *Singing and Communicating in English: A Singer's Guide to English Diction*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

Using the [ɐ] in MA pronunciation

The turned A in English is used exactly as it is in German: both as a syllabic and non-syllabic vowel. In English and German, the syllabic [ɐ] is the central vowel of the syllable; the non-syllabic [ɐ̯] is used as the weak second vowel of the diphthong.

Syllabic [ɐ]

German		English	
Bruder	['bru:de]	brother	['brʌðe]
Mutter	['mu:te]	mother	['mʌðe]
Mutterland	['mu:te.lant]	motherland	['mʌðe.lænd]
		murmur	['mɜ:mə]
		worker	['wɜ:kə]
		persevere	[pə.sɪ.'vɪə]
		daughter	['dɔ:tə]
		suffering	['sʌf.ər.ɪŋ]

In the last example *suffering*, notice the use of the connecting –r joining the two vowels.

Non-syllabic [ɐ̯]

German		English	
ver-	[fɛɐ̯]	fair	[fɛɐ̯]
		for	[fɔɐ̯]
		where	[wɛɐ̯]
		northern	['nɔɐ̯.ðən]
		darkening	['dɑɐ̯k.nɪŋ]
		alarms	[ə.'lɑɐ̯mz]

Since the [ɐ̯] already indicates a short, weak off-glide, it is not necessary to use the symbol of elongation [:] after the first vowel of the diphthong.

Examples:

for	[fɔɐ̯] not [fɔ:ɐ̯]	where	[wɛɐ̯] not [wɛ:ɐ̯]
northern	['nɔɐ̯.ðən] not ['nɔ:ɐ̯.ðən]	darkening	['dɑɐ̯k.nɪŋ] not ['dɑ:ɐ̯k.nɪŋ]

The connecting -r

English allows for a connecting -r to be added when the syllabic [ɐ] is followed by a word or syllable beginning with a vowel. The non-syllabic short vowel of a diphthong [ɐ̯] can be replaced with the consonant [r] or [ɹ] when preceding a word or syllable beginning with a vowel. The Cambridge English Pronunciation Dictionary writes this possibility with a superscript –r following the *schwa* [ə^r]. In CEPD this does not indicate R-coloration but only the possibility of a connecting consonant.

The addition of the consonant after the syllabic [ɐ]

As a single word: never [ˈnev.ɐ]

Before a vowel: never a word [ˈnev.ɐr ʌ wɜd]

The replacement of the non-syllabic [ɐ] in the diphthong with the –r consonant.

As a single words: where [wɛɹ]

Before a vowel: where I go [wɛr a:I go:ʊ]

In the following example, the retroflex [ɹ] is used since the text is an American folk carol.

I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
[a:I ˈwʌn.dɛɹ æz a:I ˈwʌn.dɛɹ a:ʊt ˈʌn.də ðʌ ska:I]

The connecting –r is not mandatory. Depending on the phrasing, the –r may be dropped after *wander*.

I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
[a:I ˈwʌn.dɛ æz a:I ˈwʌn.dɛ a:ʊt ˈʌn.də ðʌ ska:I]

[Listen](#) to Barbra Streisand singing MA with the linking retroflex [ɹ].