

French Transcriptions & Translations

The *International Phonetic Alphabet* transcriptions used in the French poetry texts contained on this site, are derived from the pronunciation suggested in the *Nouveau Petit Robert* on CD-ROM. Translations were made with the use of the *La Petit Robert*, the *WordAce Talking Translation Dictionary* from Transparent Language (no longer available) and the Oxford *Pop-up French Dictionary* for the PC. I have consulted several English translations of the poems, including those found in *The Interpretation of French Song*¹, *A French Song Companion*², on-line resources, CD inserts, and other reference. In the end, however, both the IPA transcriptions and word-for-word translations are my own.

French Transcriptions. I have chosen to follow the pronunciation suggested in the *Nouveau Petit Robert*, one of the most respected French language dictionaries. Singing in French however, does require some adjustment to the normal spoken pronunciation. Those deviations from the dictionary pronunciation adopted here for singing are noted below.

Pronunciation of the mute *-e*. The most obvious deviation from the standard spoken pronunciation for singers of “classical” song literature is the use of *schwa* [ə] in place of the normally silent *mute -e*. Thomas Grubb in *Singing in French*³ notes that the pronunciation of the French *mute -e* is more akin to the [œ] than the American or German *schwa* [ə]. Robert Gartside, in his excellent transcriptions of Fauré⁴ and Ravel⁵, uses the [œ] exclusively. While the sound [œ] is the appropriate sound of French neutral vowel, I will follow the recommendation of Professor Grubb and use of the [ə] in order to conform to standard usage. It must be remembered that although the symbol for the *schwa* is used, the singer should not let the resonance fall back into a dark American “*uh*” while singing the French *schwa*.

impureté	spoken [ɛ.pyʁ.te]	sung	[ɛ.py.rœ.te] or [ɛ.py.rə.te]
courtes vestes	spoken [kurt vɛst]	sung	[kur.tœ vɛs.tœ] or [kur.tə vɛs.tə]

Use of the Primary Stress Mark. Nico Castel makes use of the Primary Stress Mark in his libretto transcriptions. Although the stress mark does show forward movement and de-emphasizes the final *mute -e*, I will refrain from its use in these texts. Unlike English, French is a language without a noticeable stress pattern in individual words and it is my belief that giving an indication of a stress will only entice the non-native singer to return to his or her native strong/light stressing patterns.

The French *-r*. The velar [ʀ] of the spoken language is replaced in this text with the single, tapped [r]. This is not to imply that the *-r* is never heard in its trilled form [r]. I have chosen to use the symbol for the tapped *-r* in order to minimize any over emphasis of the trilled *-r* by the English speaking native. It is interesting to note that there is a trend for French speaking singers to use the spoken [ʀ] in art song and some opera. While noting this trend, I will use the single, tapped [r] in this publication.

¹ Bernac, Pierre. 1978. *The interpretation of French Song*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

² Johnson, Graham. 2000. *A French Song Companion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Grubb, Thomas. 1979. *Singing in French: A Manual of French Diction and French Vocal Repertoire*. New York: Schirmer Books.

⁴ Gartside, Robert. 1996. *Interpreting the Songs of Gabriel Fauré*. Geneseo, NY: Leyerle Publications.

⁵ Gartside, Robert. 1992. *Interpreting the Songs of Maurice Ravel*. Geneseo, NY: Leyerle Publications.

Vowel harmonization. Vowel harmonization requires that the open [ɛ] and [œ] will be pronounced as the closed [e] and [ø] when followed by a closed vowel in the same or neighboring words. Example: aimer = [e.me]; heureux = [ø.rø]

French monosyllables. Spoken pronunciation calls for the use of the closed [e] in for the French monosyllables ending in *-es*. In singing, it is accepted practice to pronounce these words with the open [ɛ] as in *mes* [mɛ], *ces* [sɛ], *des* [dɛ], *les* [lɛ], etc. For the purpose of vowel harmony the monosyllables will occasionally be pronounced as closed vowels as in *et les étoiles* [e le. ze.twa.lə]. This occurs when the a monosyllable precedes a syllable with a closed central vowel [i e ø y u o]. It should also be remembered that both the [e] and [ɛ] are more closed in French than in English and therefore care should be taken not too spread the pronunciation of either vowel when singing in French. For a detailed discussion of this usage, please consult Thomas Grubb, *Singing in French*, page 139.

Alternate transcription methods for the nasals. Finding an acceptable transcription method for the French nasals is no easy task. Here are the recommendations from a few of the experts

	<i>Le Robert</i>	Bernac	Castel	Gartside	Grubb	Sheil
fin	[fɛ̃]	[fɛ̃]	[fɛ̃]	[fæ̃]	[fɛ̃]	[fɛ̃]
un	[œ̃]	[œ̃]	[œ̃]	[ʌ̃]	[œ̃]	[œ̃]
lent	[lɑ̃]	[lɑ̃]	[lɑ̃]	[lõ]	[lɑ̃]	[lɑ̃]
mon	[mõ]	[mõ]	[mõ]	[mõ]	[mõ]	[mõ]

[ɛ̃] and [æ̃] as in *fin*. Although there is a great deal of consensus among the experts with the usage of the [ɛ̃], as anyone who has taught French diction to American students will attest, working from the [ɛ] does not always meet with immediate success. Robert Gartside’s usage of the [æ̃] is highly recommended as the appropriate sound can be quickly captured through the nasalization of English words such as *ant* and *plan*—without the final *-n*, of course! Although I personally endorse the usage of the [æ̃] for American students, these texts will use the standard [ɛ̃] for the sake of conformity with accepted practice.

[œ̃] and [ʌ̃] as in *un*. Gartside’s usage of the [ʌ̃] is also eminently practical. The mixed vowel [œ̃] is a difficult one for the American tongue to master and it makes perfect sense to use the more common neutral [ʌ̃] although I would add that it must be pronounced with rounding of the lips. This text will use the standard [œ̃].

[ɑ̃] and [õ] as in *lent*. Again, although there is a great deal of unanimity in the usage of the [ɑ̃] in French transcriptions, Gartside recommends the more open rounded [õ]. Grubb uses the [ɑ̃] in his transcriptions but also notes the “Dark *a* nasal is slightly more rounded than the basic [ɑ], approaching “aw” or [ɔ].” There is an IPA symbol that exactly fulfils the definition of a rounded [ɑ] and that is the [ɔ̞]. In the lively discussions among phoneticians on such minutia, it is interesting to note that no one has proposed the use of the [õ] nasal. The reality of singing with its vowel modification and desire for a homogenous sound makes these differences too subtle for normal usage. In these texts, I will use the standard [ɑ̃] with the admonition that the lips are indeed more active and rounded then for the lax [ɑ].

[õ] or [õ̃] as in mon. *Le Robert* and *Sheil* prefer the use of the open [õ] to the [õ̃]—Grubb however warns against its use. Although one may hear the use of the open [õ] in the spoken language, it is my opinion that the closed [õ̃] allows for a greater contrast between the [ã] and the [õ] in singing.

Sound examples. The following listening examples of French natives will help train your ear for the nasals. Click on the blue links below for short excerpts in the .mp3 format.

[La Chevelure](#) from *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) by Charles Baudelaire spoken by the actor Jean Desailly. (The nasals have been highlighted in red.)

La langoureuse Asie et la brûlante Afrique,
 Tout un monde lointain, absent, presque défunt,
 Vit dans tes profondeurs, forêt aromatique!
 Comme d'autres esprits voguent sur la musique,
 Le mien, ô mon amour! nage sur ton parfum.

[La manoir de Rosamonde](#) (Bonnières/Duparc) Charles Panzéra, baritone

sans découvrir le bleu manoir de Rosamonde.
 [sã de.kuv.rir læ blø ma.nwar dɛ ro.za.mõ.dɛ]

[Chanson du pêcheur](#) (Gautier/Fauré) Gerard Souzay, baritone

Sous la tombe elle emporte Mon âme et mes amours.
 [su la tõ. bæ. lã.pɔr.tɛ mõ. na. me mɛ. za.mur]

[Romance](#) (Bourget/Debussy) Mady Mesplé, soprano

de ta pensée, Où donc les vents l'ont-ils chassée,
 [dɛ ta pã.se u dõ læ vã lõ. til ʃa.se]

Word linking. Much of the beauty of the French language comes from its smooth flow that is a product of the lack of stressed syllables and the linking of words together. To the untrained ear the language sounds as if there are no clear breaks, no division of phrases or words. The melting of one word into the next is the hallmark of the French language. This flow is achieved by means of three linking devices.

1. *Liaison* [li.ɛ.zõ] is the pronunciation of a normally silent final consonant at the end of a word with a following word that begins with a vowel or a mute *-h*.

après_un [a.pɛ. zœ] (after a) ton_âme [tõ. a.mə] (your soul)
 les_oiseaux [lɛ. zwa.zo] (the birds) revient_un [rø.vjɛ. tœ] (returns a)

2. *Elision* [ɛ.'li.zən] is the omission of a final, unstressed *-e* in a word that is followed by a word beginning with a vowel or a mute *-h*.

Elle_est [ɛ. læ] (she is) une_heure [y. nœ.rø] (an hour)
 âme_en [a. mã] (soul in) rose_et [ro. ze] (rose and)

Normal linking occurs when a final voiced consonant precedes a word beginning with a vowel or a consonant.

Il_{est} [i. lɛ] (he is) cœur_{dort} un_{clair} de [kœ. rɔ̃. rœ̃ klɛ. rɔ̃]
un_{enfant} [œ̃. nɑ̃.fɑ̃] (a child) bien_{aimée} [bjɛ. nɛ.e.ə] (well loved)

Liaison and elision occur more frequently in singing than in speech. Deciding when to link two words is a complex subject that requires a great deal of understanding of the language and its grammar. For this reason it is always best to check a reliable source for the *sung* language or a recording of a prominent French singer to help guide your decisions. Easily the best and most accepted source for proper linking is *The Interpretation of French Song*⁶ by Pierre Bernac. For a complete discussion of this complex matter, consult Thomas Grubb's *Singing in French*.

I have consulted a number of sources for the linking recommended in this text including the above named texts. Additionally, I have listened closely to recordings of French speaking singers and followed their example wherever possible.

Special marks.

| no break or liaison – found only in written language.

paisible |et frais [pɛ.zi.blə e frɛ] not [pɛ.zi.blə. zɛ frɛ]
pâlissait |au fond [pa.li.sɛ o fɔ̃] not [pa.li.sɛ. to fɔ̃]

[.] The IPA syllable dot. Although not commonly found in other texts, the IPA syllable dot is used throughout this site. French syllables are separated according to their orthographic spelling except for the consonant of the liaison or elision which is moved to the beginning of the next syllable.

tué loyal et droit
[ty.e lwa.ja. le drwa]

˘ liaison or elision over the end of a line of text.

Des trous à son pourpoint vermeil,[˘]
[de tru. za sɔ̃ pur.pwɛ̃ vɛr.mɛ.]

Un chevalier va par la brune,
[jœ̃ ʃə.va.je va par la bry.nə]

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⁶ Bernac, Pierre. *The Interpretation of French Song*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1978. ISBN: 0393008789.