



The Sounds of Brazilian Portuguese and the Main Pitfalls for Non-native Singers

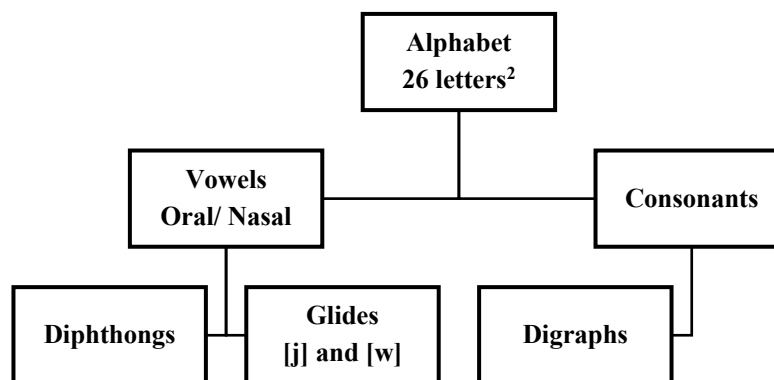
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Introduction

After performing concerts with Brazilian repertoire, people often approach me and say, "This music is so beautiful! Portuguese is a bit like Spanish but different. It sounds like Italian but also a bit like French." Some people even say that Portuguese sounds like Russian. These comments are frequently followed by the question, "Do you think I can sing it?" The music captivates audiences, but the language intimidates them. Brazil has a rich and diverse culture reflected in its vocal music, which remains relatively unknown beyond the works of Heitor Villa-Lobos and perhaps Jayme Ovalle and Ernani Braga. Part of this unfamiliarity is due to the perception that Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is a difficult and inaccessible language.

This is an introduction to BP diction, focusing on some of the sounds of the language while highlighting a few of the most common pitfalls for non-native singers. Phonetic transcriptions will be based on the standard pronunciation rules suggested by the official IPA.¹ Dialects and regional accents will be omitted.

The Basics



In BP, there are five vowels with fifteen phonetic sounds. They can be open or closed, oral or nasal. There is no schwa [ə] in sung Portuguese.³

VOWEL	IPA
a	[a] [ɐ] [ã]
e	[e] [ɛ] [ê]
i	[i] [ĩ] [I]
o	[o] [ɔ] [ô] [ɒ]
u	[u] [ũ]

The Main Pitfalls

Below is a list of some of the most common challenges encountered by non-native singers.

I. The insertion vowel [ɪ]

The extra vowel or epenthetic [ɪ] is one of the main challenges for non-native speakers. The insertion of an extra sound into a word is called epenthesis. It is used to make syllable structures easier to pronounce. The epenthesis is considered a pitfall because it is never written in and is practically imperceptible to the ear. It appears:

In consonant combinations or clusters

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>submeter</i>	[su.bi.me.'ter]	to submit

Often preceding the fricative consonant at the end of words

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>dez</i>	[dɛ:ɪs]	ten
<i>três</i>	[trɛ:ɪs]	three



Between two consonants in different syllables in foreign words

WORD	IPA
<i>zigzag</i>	[zi.gɪ 'za.gɪ]

In the combination of the vowel /e/ + /m/ or /n/. Pronounced as the diphthong [ɛ̃:i]. Both vowels are nasalized.

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>bem</i>	[bɛ̃:i]	well/ good

II. Nasal Vowels

There are five nasal vowel sounds in BP: [ɛ̃], [ẽ], [ĩ], [õ], and [ũ]. There are no open nasal vowels. A vowel becomes nasalized:

When a tilde (diacritical mark) is added above it (only on vowels /a/ and /o/)

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>maçã</i>	[ma.'sɛ̃]	apple

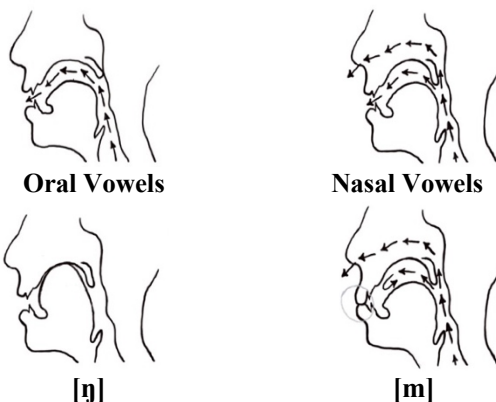
When followed by the letters /m/ or /n/

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>campo</i>	['kɛ̃.pu]	field
<i>fenda</i>	['fɛ̃.dɐ]	slit
<i>sim</i>	[sĩ]	tuna
<i>onda</i>	['õ.dɐ]	wave

How to produce these sounds?

A good starting point is to bring awareness of how to produce oral and nasal vowels. Start with an oral vowel. Pronounce it while paying close attention to the air passing through the oral

cavity. To add nasality, imagine adding a consonants /m/ or /n/ to the sound. This will result in a slight "lifting sensation" in the soft palate as if you were yawning. However, the soft palate (velum) lowers, allowing some of the air to pass through the nasal cavity, causing the sound to become nasalized. The air will pass through both oral and nasal cavities. Practice changing from one sound to the other. There is no closing of the lips or tap of the tongue at the end of the articulation of the /m/ or /n/.



In Practice!

The examples below illustrate the combination **vowel + /m/** and the epenthesis.

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>vem</i>	[vẽ:i]	come
vein (English)	[ve:m]	-



Try it!

1. Start by saying the English word vein [veɪn]; say it slowly while paying close attention to how the [e] moves towards the [ɪ] sound
2. Add the nasal sound [ẽ]:
 - start with the [e] then think of the consonant /m/ or /n/ to add the nasality
 - add the [ɪ]
 - move from one sound to the other [ẽ] > [ɪ]
3. Finally, try the Brazilian word *vem* [vẽ:i]. Remember that the combination /e/ +/m/ is pronounced as the falling diphthong [ẽ:i]. The first vowel of the diphthong is longer. Both vowels are nasalized
4. There is no closing of the lips at the end of the articulation of the /n/ which moves towards a [ŋ] without a full articulation of the sound. The sides of the tongue lightly touch the molars as if to say the /ng/ sound. In the English word vein the /n/ at the end of the word is fully articulated
5. Move slowly from one word to the next until becoming comfortable with the articulation of these sounds

vein > vem

III. Nasal Diphthong /ãõ/

The nasal diphthong /ãõ/ is probably the sound most feared by for non-native speakers. It is pronounced as the nasal diphthong [ẽ:õ], but it can also be heard as the glide [ẽ:w]. The first vowel should be longer, and both vowels should be nasalized.

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>coração</i>	[ko.ra.'sẽ:õ]	heart
<i>não</i>	[nẽ:õ]	no



Try it!

1. The closest sound to [ẽ] would be the French nasal as in the word *enfant* [ãfã] (child)
2. For the [ẽ]
 - Start with the oral vowel [a]
 - Then think of the consonant /m/ to add the nasality
 - move from one sound to the other [a] > [ẽ]
3. Add the /u/ [õ]
4. Practice moving from one sound to the other [ẽ] > [õ]
5. Try [ẽ:õ]; the first vowel sound should be longer
6. There is no closing of the lips at the end of the articulation of the [õ] sound

IV. Final /m/ or /n/

There is no closing of the lips at the end of the articulation of the consonants /m/ or /n/ in the final position. The sides of the tongue lightly touch the upper molars moving towards an [ŋ] as in the English word sing without fully articulating this sound. The air passes through both nasal and oral cavities.

V. Special cases

Vowels

/e/ sounds like [ɪ]

In monosyllabic words

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>que</i>	[kɪ]	that

/o/ sounds like [õ]

In monosyllabic words

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>do</i>	[dõ]	of



When unstressed at the end of words

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>menino</i>	[me.'ni.nõ] ⁴	boy

Consonants

/t/ sounds like [t]

Before vowels /a/, /e/, /o/, and /u/

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>teto</i>	['tɛ.to]	ceiling

/t/ sounds like [tʃ]

Before vowel /i/

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>tia</i>	[tʃi:ɐ]	aunt

Before unstressed /e/

Followed by /e/ in monosyllabic words

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>gente</i>	['ʒɛ.tʃi]	people
<i>teatro</i>	[tʃi.'a.trɔ]	theater
<i>de</i>	[dʒi]	of
<i>te</i>	[[tʃi]]	you

/d/ sounds like [d]

Before vowels /a/, /e/, /o/, and /u/

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>dado</i>	['da.dɔ]	dice

/d/ sounds like [dʒ]

Before /i/

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>dia</i>	[dʒi:ɐ]	day

The consonant /r/ - when in doubt, roll it lightly!

The letter /r/ is not considered a pitfall but can be confusing due to different pronunciations. The standard diction rules suggest that the /r/ should be:

[r]

A simple flap in consonant clusters and intervocalic position

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>arara</i>	[a.'rare]	arara
<i>Brasil</i>	[bra.'ziɔ]	

[χ]⁵ or [r]

At the beginning of a words

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>rua</i>	['χu,ɐ] or ['ru,ɐ]	street



At the end of a word or syllable

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>morte</i>	['mɔχ.tʃi] or ['mɔr.tʃi]	death
<i>amor</i>	[a.'mɔχ] or [a.'mɔr]	love

Digraph /rr/

WORD	IPA	TRANSLATION
<i>carro</i>	['ka.χɔ] or ['ka.rɔ]	car

Once a choice of pronunciation is made, it must be consistent throughout the piece.

The rolled /r/ must never be exaggerated; its articulation should be light to avoid sounding like Italian. Using the rolled /r/ may be easier for non-native speakers. So when in doubt, "just roll it lightly!"

In Practice: listening exercise!

For this exercise, I selected two recordings of the song *Azulão* by Jayme Ovalle (1894-1955) with text by Manuel Bandeira (1886–1968). *Azulão* is a *modinha*, a love song sung by a heartbroken boy from the arid part of Brazil called *sertão*. With beautiful melodic lines, sentimental lyrics about love and longing, and simple accompaniment, *modinha* was one of the main musical styles in 19th-century Brazil.

We will be analyzing the following musical excerpt:

Diz que sem ela o ser-tão não é mais ser-tão.

The standard IPA transcription

Text: *Diz que sem e-la o ser-tão não é mais ser-tão*

IPA: dʒis kɪ sɛ:i 'ɛ.la:ɔ ser.'tɛ:ɔ nɛ:ɔ ɛ ma:ɪs ser.'tɛ:ɔ (without elision)

dʒis kɪ sɛ:i 'jɛ.la:ɔ ser.'tɛ:ɔ nɛ:ɔ ɛ ma:i ser.'tɛ:ɔ (with elision)

dʒiʃ kɪ sɛ:i 'jɛ.la:ɔ seχ.'tɛ:ɔ nɛ:ɔ ɛ ma:i seχ.'tɛ:ɔ (Rio de Janeiro or *carioca* accent)

Challenges presented by the text

This excerpt presents the following challenges for non-native speakers:

1. The final /e/ sounds like [ɪ] in the monosyllabic word *que* [kɪ] (that)
2. There are two choices of pronunciation for the elision of words *ela* + *o*:
 - diphthong [ɛ.la:ɔ]
 - contraction *ela* + *o* [ɛ.lɔ]. The monosyllabic *o* (the) is pronounced [ɔ]

3. There are two pronunciation choices for the words *sem ela*
 - the elision - the combination of the final /m/ with the following word starting with a vowel will produce the digraph /nh/ [ɲ]. [sɛ:i 'ɲɛ.la]
 - in separate words [sɛ:i 'ɛ.la]. There is no closing of the lips on the final /m/
4. The falling diphthong /ão/ [ẽ:ɔ] in *sertão* and *não*. There is no full closure of the lips at the end of the diphthong

With these points in mind, I invite you to listen to the following examples while paying close attention to the performer's diction.

First Example

Performer: American soprano, Arleen Auger

🔊 **Link:** <https://youtu.be/3ENObNHteLY> (excerpt starting at 0:25)

The IPA comparison

Text: *Diz que sem e-la o ser-tão não é mais ser- tão*

IPA: dʒis kɪ sɛ:i 'ɲɛ.la:ɔ ser.'tẽ:ɔ nẽ:ɔ ɛ ma:i ser.'tẽ:ɔ (correct IPA)

dʒis ke se nɛ la:ɔ ser ta:ɔ na:ɔ ɛ ma:i ser ta:ɔ (singer's pronunciation)

Notes

1. The nasal diphthong [ẽ:ɔ] in *não* and *sertão* is not nasalized enough. It sounds like the oral diphthong [a:ɔ]
2. The monosyllabic word *que* is sung [ke] when it should be [kɪ]
3. The soprano sings a /n/ instead of a [ɲ] when eliding the words *sem ela*
4. Combination /e+/m/ should be pronounced at the nasal diphthong [ẽ:i]

These comments are highlighted in the phonetic transcription of the singer's pronunciation.

Second Example

Performer: Spanish soprano Victoria de los Ángeles. Orchestral accompaniment.

🔊 **Link:** https://youtu.be/QY_yLrLC_PA (excerpt starting at 0:32)

The IPA comparison

Text: *Diz que sem e-la o ser-tão não é mais ser- tão*

IPA: dʒis kɪ sɛ:i 'ɲɛ.la:ɔ ser.'tẽ:ɔ nẽ:ɔ ɛ ma:i ser.'tẽ:ɔ (correct IPA)

dʒis ke ze 'mɛ la:ɔ zer tẽ:ɔ no nɛ ma:i zer tẽ:ɔ (singer's pronunciation)

Notes

1. The monosyllabic word *que* is sung [ke] when it should be [ki]
2. She chose to do the elision, but not correctly. She combined the final /m/ with the vowel at the beginning of the following word [ze 'mɛ.la]. Instead, it should be the sound [ɲ]. A performer may choose not to do the elision but must keep in mind that the lips do not close when pronouncing the consonant /m/ at the end of words
3. The nasal diphthong [ɐ̃:ɔ] in *não* is pronounced [no]. It is not nasalized
4. The soprano sang the /s/ in *sem* and *sertão* as a [z]. The /s/ in the initial position is always [s]. It is only pronounced [z] in an intervocalic position

These comments are highlighted in the phonetic transcription of the singer's pronunciation.

Listen to the audio examples of the same excerpt spoken and sung by a native speaker using the [r] and [ʁ] sounds.

Text: *Diz que sem e-la o ser-tão não é mais ser-tão*

IPA: dʒis ki sɛ̃:ɪ 'ɲɛ.la:ɔ ser.'tẽ:ɔ nɛ̃:ɔ ɛ ma:i ser.'tẽ:ɔ (standard)

dʒiʃ ki sɛ̃:ɪ 'ɲɛ.la:ɔ seʁ.'tẽ:ɔ nɛ̃:ɔ ɛ ma:i seʁ.'tẽ:ɔ (Rio de Janeiro or carioca accent)



Conclusion

As a native Portuguese speaker and professional singer, one of my goals is to demystify the idea that BP is an unapproachable language and to make it more accessible to those who want to sing in it. I believe this brief overview of the sounds and common pitfalls of the language is a great starting point for anyone wishing to explore Brazil's beautiful music.

Obrigada!
[o.bri.'ga.dɐ]
(thank you)

Notes

1. The Fourth Brazil Vocal Encounter was held in Brazil in 2005 to promote a discussion about the main aspects of pronunciation and phonetic symbols for singing classical music in BP. A group of Brazilian singers (from 17 of the country's 24 states) and international singers, voice pedagogues, phoneticians, and other voice professionals proposed a phonetic table based on the IPA and a neutral Portuguese pronunciation, avoiding regionalisms and accents. Each symbol was extensively debated and voted on. The table was revised in 2007 and published in 2008, in English, in the *Journal of Singing* under the title *Brazilian Portuguese: Lyric Diction Norms*.
2. In 1990, an agreement was reached between the Portuguese-speaking countries to create a standard orthography for the Portuguese language. Spellings were standardized, and silent consonants and some accents were removed. The 23 letters alphabet incorporated the letters /k/, /w/, and /y/, which were already in use. The new spelling went into effect in Brazil and Portugal in 2009.
3. /a/ unstressed at the end of words is always [ɐ].
4. Sometimes /e/ is pronounced [ɪ] at the end of a syllable in the pretonic position. *menino* [mi. 'ni.no] (boy).
5. This pronunciation is frequently used and is known as the Rio de Janeiro or carioca /r/.

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