

Russian Diction Guide

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The Russian Alphabet

Since Russian is a phonetic language and IPA guides are rarely available, it is highly recommended that you learn the cyrillic alphabet. You will find many similarities between Russian and other languages with which you are familiar.

<u>Russian Letter</u>	<u>IPA</u>
А, а	[a]
Б, б	[b]
В, в	[v]
Г, г	[g]
Д, д	[d]
Е, е	[jɛ], [ɛ]
Ё, ё	[jɔ], [ɔ]
Ж, ж*	[ʒ]
З, з	[z]
И, и	[i]
Й, й	[j]
К, к	[k]
Л, л	[l]
М, м	[m]
Н, н	[n]
О, о	[ɔ]
П, п	[p]
Р, р	[r]
С, с	[s]
Т, т	[t]
У, у	[u]
Ф, ф	[f]
Х, х	[x]
Ц, ц*	[ts]
Ч, ч*	[tʃ]
Ш, ш*	[ʃ]
Щ, щ*	[ʃtʃ]--actually just soft ‘ш’
ь	soft sign-palatalizes preceding consonant
ъ	hard sign-no phonetic change in modern Russian
Ы, ы	[ɨ]
Э, э	[ɛ]
Ю, ю	[ju], [u]
Я, я	[ja], [a]

The Russian Vowels

- Pure [a] [ɛ] [i] [u]
- The Russian “o,” notated as either [o] or [ɔ] in IPA, is neither open nor closed--it is a dark, deeper sound (open [ɔ] in throat, closed [o] with lips)

The “Ы” Vowel

This vowel, notated as [ɨ], is in the [i]/[I] family of vowels. It is created farther back than [I]. When pronouncing this vowel, make sure that the sound stays relaxed and open--contrary to popular conception, this is the most open vowel in the [i] family; it is NOT a forced, guttural sound.

Unstressed ‘O’

In Russian, an unstressed “o” sounds like [a]. There is some debate among linguists as to the precise sound of an unstressed vowel. However, for singing, the use of [a] for unstressed ‘o’ has become standard.

Schwas and Diphthongs

There are none in Russian!!!

Some diction sources also state that there are cases when unstressed “E” or “Э” becomes [ə]. This is incorrect as it represents an informal manner of speaking that is not appropriate for singing.

The j-glide in Russian

- The Russian j-glide is a *fricative consonant*. In fact, calling it a “glide” is deceptive. Hear the difference between the English “boy” and Russian “бой” (transcribed as [boj] or [boj]). This difference is especially apparent in singing.
- [j] appears when written as Ё, or as notated by the vowels E, Ё, Ю, Я when these vowels are at the beginning of the word, or immediately following another vowel (for example my last name (Yankovskaya), is written in Russian as Янковская=[jankɔfskaja]. In rare cases, a hard sign [ъ] before one of these vowels also necessitates the j-glide [ex. объятие].

The Russian Consonants

- [r] is always rolled or flipped
- [x] is most similar to the German *ach-laut* but the position of the tongue is always the same, irregardless of the preceding vowel
- [t, d] are unaspirated unless palatalized
- In Russian, almost every consonant has two pronunciations--unpalatalized and palatalized versions (hard vs. soft).
- It is essential that the palatalized consonant does not sound like a j-glide! There are times (as in gerunds) that a j-glide is used in a similar circumstance, but with a different meaning. These should be very distinct sounds! (ex. плескание, vs. нет)

- The vowels E, Ě, И, Ю, Я and the soft sign (ь) make the preceding consonant soft or palatalized. In general, vowels come in soft-hard pairs, with one vowel in the pairing keeping the preceding consonant hard and the other making the preceding consonant soft:
 - А-Я
 - Э-Е
 - О-Ě
 - У-Ю
 - Ъ-И [slightly differing vowel sounds]
 - Ъ-Ь [hard and soft sign—no sound; change the quality of the surrounding letters]
 - The closest equivalent to a palatalized consonant familiar to most American speakers is the Spanish ñ vs n. In general, when a palatalized consonant is spoken, the position of the appropriate phonate (tongue, lips) is widened and relaxed.
- Palatalized consonants are usually notated with a comma after the symbol or “,” beneath the symbol as [v’] or [d̟]. The former can sometimes be confused with word stress, so it is preferred that the latter is used.
- *Exception:* the consonants Ц, and Ж are always hard. Ч is always soft. Ш and Щ are a written-out soft-hard pairing (these are marked with an “*” on the alphabet list). Note: ‘И’ following Ц, Ж or Ш turns into ‘Ь’

Assimilation of Voicing

- A voiced consonant at the end of a word turns into its unvoiced pair (ex. лев, любовь). However, the consonant remains voiced if immediately followed by a vowel or another voiced consonant (ex. под водой)
- A voiced consonant followed by an unvoiced consonant becomes unvoiced (ex. автомобиль)

Double Consonants

Russian double consonants should be approached in a similar way to German double consonants. In speaking, usually no difference is made between a single and double consonant. In singing, double consonants are often slightly brought out (although rarely as much as in Italian).

The Hard Sign, “Ъ”

- The hard sign, originally intended to make a consonant unpalatalized, is now rarely used and often has no real significance, as a consonant is assumed to be unpalatalized unless followed by a soft sign or one of the “softening” vowels (see above).
- The only case in which a hard sign has significance is if it is followed by one of the j-glide vowels (E, Ě, Ю, Я). See “The j-glide in Russian” above for details.

Word Stress

Word stress in Russian is of exceptional importance! A change of word stress can completely change the meaning of a word and make a text unintelligible. While word stress is usually written into the metric motion of the music, it is always recommended that you check word stresses with a fluent speaker of Russian.

Tenors beware!! Lensky’s aria is “Kudá, kudá,” NOT “kúda, kúda.”

Some arbitrary groupings to help in memorizing the Russian alphabet:

- Letters that look like Latin letters and are the same: А, Е, З, М, К, О, Т [note the j-glide possibility in front of “Е”]
- Letters that look like Latin letters but sounds different: В, Н, Р, С, У, Х [v, n, r, s, u, x]
- Letters that are borrowed from Greek: Б, Г, Д, И, Л, П, Ф [b, g, d, i, l, p, f]
- Letters that likely look unfamiliar: Ж, Ц, Ч, Ш, Щ, Ъ, Ы, Э, Ю, Я (mainly have origins in Greek and Semitic languages); [ʒ, ts, tʃ, ʃ, ʃtʃ, i, ε, ju/u, ja/a]

Russian Opera IPA Guides

- The most useful resource for Russian diction are the new opera libretti transcribed by Anton Belov for the Nico Castel series. Most other resources are misleading and often simply incorrect.

Russian Repertoire

There is an enormous amount of fantastic literature in Russian. Unfortunately, this music is rarely performed due to singers' and conductors' unfounded fear of the language.

Some Select Repertoire:

- Rachmaninoff romances (art songs)
- Tchaikovsky romances
- Songs and other vocal compositions by Gretchaninoff, Mussorgsky, Glinka, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Borodin, etc.

Widely-performed Operas:

- Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin*, *Pique-Dame*, *Iolanta*
- Glinka: *Ruslan and Liudmilla*, *A Life for the Tsar (Ivan Susanin)*
- Mussorgsky: *Boris Godunov*
- Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Snow Maiden*, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, *Kashchey the Immortal*, *The Golden Cockerel*, *Sadko*
- Borodin: *Prince Igor*, *Mlada*
- Stravinsky: *The Rake's Progress*, *The Nightingale*, *Renard*, *Oedipus Rex*
- Prokofiev: *The Love for Three Oranges*, *War and Peace*, *The Gambler*
- Shostakovich: *The Nose*, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*
- Rubinshteyn: *The Demon*
- Rachmaninoff: *Aleko*
- Shchedrin: *Dead Souls*