

A  
SINGER'S MANUAL  
OF  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE DICTIONS

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Sixth Edition: Updated 2012

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Chapter entitled *Russian Diction*

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# Preface to The Sixth Edition

A revised and expanded sixth version of *A Singer's Manual of Foreign Language Dictions* is available, once again. This edition is in a larger format with new easy to read fonts. In all, rules for the pronunciation of seven languages are presented and, as in past editions, all based upon knowledge of the International Phonetic Alphabet. It is intended to be a guide for the voice student, the studio voice teacher and the professional singer.

The materials found within the following pages have been collected, arranged and rearranged over a period of several years of constant use in diction classes specifically oriented for singers.

Throughout the text, the International Phonetic Alphabet is the common denominator. It should thus be self-evident that the alphabet must be completely mastered. No graphic portrayal of a language, or indeed of singing itself, no matter how finely drawn, can adequately describe sound, for it must be heard to be qualified and quantified within the mind.

The manual, therefore, makes no pretense at eliminating the necessity of additional outside assistance in learning foreign dictions—assistance which ordinarily comes from a capable voice teacher or language coach, who first produces the sounds for the student to imitate, and then offers correction, if necessary, on the student's language attempts. Rather, the manual is an organized collection of rules governing the pronunciation of foreign languages using a universally accepted phonetic scheme, and is intended to be used in the voice studio or in diction classes as an adjunct to the process of learning new sounds orally as well as aurally. It does not intentionally omit any known rules.

# 2

## Roman Church Latin

At one time or another, almost all singers are called upon to sing Roman Church Latin. Differences of opinion concerning the correct pronunciation are legion. The rules given below are those set forth by the Roman Church. They are, in fact, an expansion of the rules found in the preface of the Liber Usualis. Please note, they are not applicable to Anglican Latin, nor to what is called academic Latin.

### VOWELS

- a The letter **a** is always pronounced [ɑ].
- |         |           |
|---------|-----------|
| pax     | paks      |
| peccata | pɛ-`ka-ta |
| anima   | `a-ni-ma  |
- e The letter **e** is always pronounced [ɛ]. It is never [e], nor is it ever diphthongal. It should be patterned after the Italian, German or French open e, which is to say, very bright and well forward in the mouth.
- |          |              |
|----------|--------------|
| eleison  | ɛ-lei-`sɔn   |
| miserere | mi-sɛ-`rɛ-rɛ |
| Deus     | `dɛ-us       |
- i The letter **i** is always pronounced [i]. It is never [ɪ]!
- |       |          |
|-------|----------|
| in    | in       |
| filii | `fi-li-i |
| quid  | kwid     |
- o The letter **o** is always pronounced [ɔ]. It is never [o], nor is it ever diphthongal. Like the letter e, its color should be patterned after its European counterpart, very bright and well forward in the mouth.
- |        |           |
|--------|-----------|
| Domine | `dɔ-mi-ne |
| Deo    | `dɛ-ɔ     |
| olim   | `ɔ-lim    |

# 4

## German Diction

The singer will be considerably relieved to find that German is a language of order. Rules are rules, and one abides by them with relatively few exceptions.

The many aspirate sounds, plus the uvular *r* heard in conversational German, often give rise to the misconceived idea that it is a guttural language. This is indeed unfortunate and, for the singer, a dangerous attitude. Such an approach can be disastrous to good vocal production, and, further, it will not lead to good German diction.

Beyond any doubt, the purest form of the language is what is called *Bühnendeutsch*, or “stage German.” It is this version of the language which every aspiring German actor must acquire, as well as anyone wishing to participate on the performance side of radio or television. *Bühnendeutsch* is exactly the same pronunciation whether learned in Berlin, München, Zürich or Wien. The rules contained herein are those for stage German.

### VOWELS

There are six vowel letters: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* and *y*, plus three modifications brought about by the use of the umlaut: *ä*, *ö* and *ü*. Each vowel has two sounds: open and closed (with three sounds for the vowels *e* and *y*).

Before embarking on an individual study of the vowels, it would be wise to learn a few general rules which govern the open or closed colorings.

#### *Closed vowels occur:*

1. When final in the accented syllable, and when a single consonant begins the following syllable.

|         |          |
|---------|----------|
| Bibel   | `bi-bəl  |
| geben   | `ge-bən  |
| laden   | `la-dən  |
| loben   | `lo-bən  |
| Jugend  | `ju-gənt |
| typisch | `ty-pɪʃ  |



# 7

## Russian Diction

It is readily apparent from the wide performance of Russian instrumental repertoire that the musical contribution of Russian composers is vast and significant, particularly in the Romantic and Contemporary periods. One can hardly imagine a major orchestral season without the inclusion of works by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, Stravinsky or Shostakovich. Yet, many of these composers were prolific song (romance) writers as well. The Russian language, however, has remained elusive to American singers, primarily due to its use of an alphabet totally different from our own. As a result, a wealth of beautiful Russian song literature has been virtually ignored in America, except in translation.

The initial hurdle of becoming familiar with the Russian (Cyrillic) alphabet is a relatively simple one to overcome. It involves the rather elementary process of associating sounds with symbols. English speaking singers can learn to articulate skillfully even those vowel and consonant sounds which are uniquely Russian, by diligent practice and by careful listening to recordings of native singers. The primary difficulty in mastering Russian diction arises from the fact that it is a highly inflected language and has many rules governing its pronunciation. There is a good deal of order to these rules, however, and even the exceptions are often rules in themselves, following definite patterns.

A few new IPA symbols must also be learned. These will be presented in the chapter as the new sounds arise for discussion.

To give the best possible rendering of a Russian romance, the singer must have a complete understanding of the text as well as accurate diction. Of all the languages studied in this manual, Russian is probably the least likely for singers to have studied grammatically. Therefore, to facilitate understanding, many of the word examples used in this chapter have been taken directly from song texts (which accounts for some of the verbs not given in the infinitive form). Translations have also been added.

Before studying detailed descriptions of the sound of each Russian letter, it would be best to take an overview of the entire alphabet and look at some general rules of pronunciation.

(See illustration on the following page.)

# 8

## Hebrew Diction

For many singers, being a paid soloist or choir member in a church or synagogue is a way of life. In fact, some even hold down two positions simultaneously, Sunday mornings in either a Protestant or Roman Catholic service, and Friday evening in a synagogue.

When a singer joins a choir in a synagogue, it is immediately apparent that yet another language must be studied, for nearly all the vocal music in the synagogue is sung in Hebrew. Hebrew is written in an alphabet uniquely its own, and is read from right to left. Western music is written, of course, to be read from left to right, therefore, a compromise must be made in order to allow Hebrew to be set to our form of musical notation. That compromise comes in the form of a transliteration of the Hebrew into our modern European alphabet. Difficulties do not end there, however, for the non-Hebrew-speaking singer. Transliterations are invariably done by the composer or the arranger, and not all people agree on how to represent speech sounds on paper phonetically or graphically.

There is still another reason for difficulties, and it is rather complex. In the western world, there are two forms of the language, Sephardic and Ashkenazic Hebrew, each having its own scheme of pronunciation. The Sephardic Jews came originally from the Iberian Peninsula, and when they were expelled from Spain during the Inquisition in 1492, they moved to western Europe, France, Italy, Belgium, to northern Africa, to Turkey, and to the Holy Land. In terms of total Jewish population, the Sephardic Jews are smaller in number. Ashkenazic Jews are considerably larger in number—a vast group found in central Europe and as far east as Russia, and whose language is deeply rooted in the Germanic and Slavic countries. This is the group which emigrated to America by thousands around the turn of the twentieth century, settling usually in urban areas along the east coast. It is from the Ashkenazic Jews that we have reform movements within the religious service, for example, the addition of a mixed four-voice choir singing composed music, with instrumental (organ) accompaniment. They have also given us composers like Lezar Slonimsky, Ernst Bloch, Heinrich Shalit and others, writing music specifically for the synagogue. Their transliterations of Hebrew, needless to say, follow rules for pronouncing Ashkenazic Hebrew.

In 1948, when the state of Israel was created, Sephardic Hebrew was adopted as the official language. Almost immediately, synagogues in America began to change from what had been nearly totally Ashkenazic Hebrew, to the “modern” Sephardic Hebrew. Differences in pronunciation are not vast, nor are they profound, but it