

LYRIC DICTION

IPA Quick Reference for Singers

International Phonetic Alphabet — English, Italian, German, French, Spanish & Church Latin

How to read this chart: Each row = one IPA symbol. Columns show example words with common spellings in parentheses. — = sound does not occur in that language.

PURE VOWELS (MONOPHTHONGS)						
IPA	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	LATIN
[i]	"see"	vino (i)	Liebe (ie, i)	vie (i)	sí (i)	Dominus (i)
[e]	"say" (no glide)	bene (e)	See (ee, e)	allé (é, er, ez)	mes (e)	Deus (e)
[ɛ]	"bed"	bello (è)	Bett (e, ä)	fête (e, è, ai)	—	—
[a]	"father"	casa (a)	Mann (a)	patte (a)	casa (a)	pater (a)
[ɑ]	"far" (open)	—	—	pâte (â)	—	—
[o]	"go" (no glide)	sole (o)	so (o)	beau (o, au, eau)	no (o)	Domino (o)
[ɔ]	"caught"	cosa (ò)	Gott (o)	mort (o)	—	—
[u]	"moon"	luna (u)	gut (u)	tout (ou)	luna (u)	unum (u)
[ʊ]	"book"	—	und (u, short)	—	—	—
[ə]	"sofa" (schwa)	—	bitte (e, unstressed)	le (e, mute)	—	—
FRONT ROUNDED VOWELS (GERMAN & FRENCH)						
IPA	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	LATIN
[y]	—	—	über (ü)	lune (u)	—	—
[ø]	—	—	schön (ö)	feu (eu, œu)	—	—
[œ]	—	—	können (ö)	cœur (œ, eu)	—	—
NASAL VOWELS (FRENCH)						
IPA	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	LATIN
[ã]	—	—	—	vent (an, en, em)	—	—
[ɛ̃]	—	—	—	vin (in, ain, ein)	—	—
[ɔ̃]	—	—	—	bon (on, om)	—	—
[œ̃]	—	—	—	un (un, um)	—	—
DIPHTHONGS						
IPA	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	LATIN
[aɪ]	"my"	mai (ai)	mein (ei, ai)	—	hay (ai)	laete (ae)
[aʊ]	"now"	causa (au)	Haus (au)	—	auto (au)	—
[eɪ]	"day"	—	—	—	rey (ei)	—
[ɔɪ]	"boy"	poi (oi)	neu (eu, äu)	—	hoy (oy)	—
[oʊ]	"go" (Am.)	—	—	—	—	—

KEY VOWEL PRINCIPLES

- **Italian & Latin:** Pure vowels only. No diphthongization, no schwa. Every vowel fully formed regardless of stress.
- **German:** Long vowels are pure and closed; short vowels are open. Front rounded [ø y œ]: round lips for [u], tongue position for [e/i].
- **French:** Nasal vowels lower the velum — never add [n] or [m] after them. Schwa [ə] is lightly rounded. Front rounded vowels essential.
- **English:** Most "pure" vowels diphthongize in speech. In classical singing, minimize the off-glide on [eɪ] and [oʊ].
- **Spanish:** Only 5 vowels [a e i o u] — the simplest system. No open/closed distinction. All vowels bright and forward.

COMMON DIACRITICS & MODIFIERS

[̃] nasalized [:] lengthened [] syllabic consonant ['] primary stress [,] secondary stress
 [_] dental [h] aspirated [,] voiceless [·] half-long [.] syllable break

Example: Italian "notte" = [ˈnɔtːtɛ] German "Bitte" = [ˈbɪtə] French "bon" = [bɔ̃]

STOPS (PLOSIVES)

IPA	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	LATIN
[p]	"pen"	pane	Paar (aspirated)	pas	pan	pater
[b]	"bat"	bene	Ball	bon	bien	bonus
[t]	"top"	tutto (dental)	Tag (aspirated)	tout (dental)	todo (dental)	terra (dental)
[d]	"day"	dove (dental)	dann	de (dental)	donde (dental)	Deus (dental)
[k]	"cat"	casa	kalt (aspirated)	car	casa	cor
[g]	"go"	gatto	gut	gare	gato	gratis

FRICATIVES

IPA	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	LATIN
[f]	"fan"	fare	frei	faire	fuego	fides
[v]	"van"	vino	Wasser (w)	voir (v)	—	vivere (v)
[s]	"sun"	sole	so	sa	sol	sanctus
[z]	"zoo"	rosa (s betw. v.)	Sonne (s init.)	rose (s betw. v.)	—	—
[ʃ]	"ship"	scena (sc+e/i)	Schule (sch)	chanter (ch)	—	—
[ʒ]	"measure"	—	—	je (j, ge/gi)	—	—
[ç]	"hue"	—	ich (ch after front v.)	—	—	—
[x]	Scot. "loch"	—	Bach (ch after back v.)	—	ojo (j, g+e/i)	—
[θ]	"thin"	—	—	—	caza (z, c+e/i)	—
[h]	"hat"	—	Hand (h)	— (h silent)	— (h silent)	— (h silent)

NASALS

IPA	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	LATIN
[m]	"man"	mare	Mann	moi	mar	mater
[n]	"no"	notte	nein	non	no	non
[ɲ]	"canyon"	bagno (gn)	—	montagne (gn)	año (ñ)	—
[ŋ]	"sing"	—	lang (ng)	—	—	—

LIQUIDS & GLIDES

IPA	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	LATIN
[l]	"let"	luna (clear, dental)	Lied (clear/dark)	la (clear)	luna (dental)	luna (clear, dental)
[ʎ]	—	figlio (gl+i)	—	—	llama (ll, reg.)	—
[r]	— (trill)	caro (flipped/trilled)	rot (varies)	—	perro (rr, trill)	—
[ɾ]	— (flip)	cara (single r)	—	—	pero (single r)	—
[ʁ]	—	—	—	rouge (r, uvular)	—	—
[w]	"wet"	uomo (u+vowel)	—	oui (ou+vowel)	bueno (u+vowel)	—
[j]	"yes"	ieri (i+vowel)	ja (j)	yeux (y, i+vowel)	—	—

AFFRICATES

IPA	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	LATIN
[tʃ]	"church"	cena (c+e/i)	deutsch (tsch)	—	mucho (ch)	caelum (c+e/i)
[dʒ]	"judge"	giorno (g+e/i)	—	—	—	—
[ts]	"cats"	forza (z, zz)	zu (z, tz)	—	—	—
[dz]	"adze"	zero (z, voiced)	—	—	—	—

KEY CONSONANT PRINCIPLES

- **Italian:** Dental [t d n l]. Double consonants (gemination) are longer/more energized. Every letter sounds — no silent consonants.
- **German:** Aspirate initial [p t k]. Ich-Laut [ç] after front vowels/consonants; ach-Laut [x] after back vowels. Glottal onsets before stressed initial vowels.
- **French:** Uvular [ʁ] (never trilled [r]). Silent final consonants except C-R-F-L ("CareFuL"). Liaison links final consonant to next word's vowel.
- **Spanish:** Trilled [r] (rr, initial r) vs. flipped [ɾ] (single r between vowels). Ñ = [ɲ]. B/V distinction is minimal. Dental [t d n l].
- **Latin:** Church (Italianate) pronunciation: C/G soft before E/I. "Gn" = [ɲ]. No silent letters. V = [v]. Stress typically penultimate.

COMMON TRANSCRIPTION MISTAKES TO AVOID

- **Diphthongizing pure vowels:** Italian [o] is NOT English [oo]. Keep [e] and [o] pure in Italian, German, and Latin. No off-glide.
- **Adding [ɲ]/[m] to French nasals:** [ɔ̃] in "bon" has NO [n] sound. The nasality is in the vowel itself. Lower the velum, don't close the nasal port.
- **English R in foreign languages:** Never use English [ɹ] in Italian, German, French, or Spanish. Each language has its own R: flipped, trilled, or uvular.
- **Ignoring double consonants:** Italian "notte" vs. "note" — the double [t:] changes meaning. Hold the consonant longer; don't skip it.
- **Confusing [ç] and [x]:** German "ich" [ç] (front, soft) vs. "Bach" [x] (back, guttural). The preceding vowel determines which one.

- **Schwas where they don't belong:** Italian and Spanish have no schwa. Every unstressed vowel keeps its full quality. "Maria" = [ma'ri.a], not [mə'ri.ə].