
Russian Lyric Diction

A contemporary American singer is expected to be at ease with Italian, German, French, and of course, his native English. Yet Russian, with its rich operatic and art-song tradition still strikes fear into the hearts of both singers and coaches. The reasons for this are many. Not the least of these is cultural—the decades of the Cold War and the overall foreignness of the language often arouse a caricature image of Russian. Of course another major reason is the Cyrillic alphabet. Third reason is that Russian repertoire is often perceived as being either overwhelmingly nationalistic or excessively dramatic to be suited to a young singer. This manual attempts to break down all these myths.

In the opinion of the author Russian must be approached systematically, with the same care given to other singing languages. Mere approximations are simply not sufficient.

A fundamental question of what is proper *Lyric Diction* must be discussed in some detail. The old masters of *bel canto* taught to sing the way one speaks (*si canta come si parla*). This principle refers to the idea that one should sing with the same ease with which one speaks; yet in every language there is a tradition of theatrical/singing diction in which articulation deviates substantially from colloquial speech. In England, singing diction is based upon the *English Received*, in German *Hochdeutsch* (*high German*), in French *le style soutenu* (*sustained style*). Theatrical speech is generally purged of regionalisms and is distinguished by clear precise articulation.

For historical and political reasons, Russian stage diction developed from the speech patterns of the Moscow dialect. Muscovite is certainly not the oldest Slavic dialect, but because of Moscow's rise to power as the center of the Russian Empire, its dialect slowly came to be regarded as standard Russian.

In Russian, it must be noted that there are some aspects of stage pronunciation that are imprecise—gray areas where variation is both possible and acceptable.

Many editions of Russian art songs available in the United States use English transliterations. Unfortunately, these editions provide mere approximations. The International Phonetic Alphabet allows for much more precision in the transcription and therefore is used throughout this manual. A singer or coach familiar with the IPA will need to learn only a few symbols specific to the Russian phonetic system. A musician approaching the Russian repertoire should already be familiar with other singing languages. In order to demonstrate certain similarities and differences between specific Russian sounds and their counterparts in other European languages, this guide makes frequent references to Italian, German, French, and English.

Russian sounds “more foreign” to English speakers than other languages, causing singers to approach it with fear. But listen to a fine singer singing the Russian repertoire. Even if one doesn’t understand the language, the passion, warmth, sensuality and extremes of sorrow and exuberance that distinguish Russian culture are evident in the nature of its sounds. Be moved and motivated by that, and toss the fear aside.

When you approach Russian treat it with the same respect you treat other singing languages!

Approach the language with an analytical mind, understand how it works, do not be satisfied with mere approximations!

Do not invent your own sounds!

Remember, in Russian (as well as in any language) a minute variation in the pronunciation can drastically alter the meaning of a word!



Chapter I

The Sounds of Russian

This chapter presents a general overview of the phonetic theory in accordance with the Handbook of the International Phonetic Association (Cambridge University Press, 1999), and its specific application to Russian.

After learning how to properly form individual sounds you will be able to read the phonetic transcriptions. However, it must be understood that in the study of any language, phonetic transcriptions are only temporary tools. A well-educated singer should eventually read the language in its authentic form and only use phonetic transcriptions for occasional clarification.

There is some confusion in the literature regarding the terms “close” versus “closed” in reference to vowels. The Handbook of the IPA refers to the “close” vowels, describing the tongue as being close to the palate. Yet most manuals on singing diction refer to the “closed” and “open” vowels. In order to avoid confusion the official IPA terminology is used throughout this manual.

The Vowel Sounds

Vowels are the sounds that are produced with an open vocal tract, without built up of pressure at any point above the glottis. In other words, these sounds are produced without any interruption of the air flow. A vowel forms the nucleolus of any given syllable.

The Pure Vowels versus Diphthongs

A pure vowel is produced without significant movement of articulating organs. A diphthong is a combination of two vowel sounds smoothly connected within a syllable. Most syllables in English contain diphthongs. By contrast, in Russian, most syllables contain *relatively* pure vowels.

Classification of the Vowel Sounds

A renowned British linguist Daniel Jones (the prototype of the fictional character Henry Higgins in Bernard Shaw’s “Pygmalion”) created a system of vowel classification that separates them according to *height* (vertical dimension), *backness* (horizontal dimension) and *roundedness* (lip position).

Height refers to the vertical position of the tongue relative to either the roof of the mouth or the aperture of the jaw. There is a slight discrepancy in terms, however—the original Jones’s classification referred to the *high* versus the *low* vowels. According to this terminology, the vowel [i] is classified as being the highest vowel possible and the vowel [ɑ] as the lowest. A more contemporary usage of the International Phonetic Association prefers the terminology of the *close* versus the *open* vowels.

Backness refers to the position of the tongue during the articulation of a vowel relative to the back of the mouth. The vowel [u] is referred to as being the farthest back and the vowel [i] as the farthest front.

Roundness refers to the degree of the lip-rounding. The vowel [u] is the most rounded and the vowel [i] the least.

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A common mistake for a singer beginning to sing in Russian is to invent his or her own new vowels. In fact, most Russian vowels closely resemble Italian.

American singers tend to be confused by the symbol [ɔ]. One often hears this vowel sung too open, as in the English word “on.” An authentic pronunciation is more rounded but not as closed as in the German word “Sohn.”

As a general rule, avoid diphthongs, unless specifically spelled out.

*Since the meaning of the word does not change if either the open or the close form is used, the degree of openness of **e** is ultimately determined by vocal comfort.*

An allophone is a variant within a sound (phoneme) in a particular language. In Russian the sounds [i] and [ɨ] as well as [ɛ] and [e] could be considered allophones of each other.

According to John Moriarty, author of Diction (E. C. Schirmer, 1975) a Schwa is not a sound but a concept—a neutral relaxed vowel. It is present in many languages, yet the exact sound of Schwa differs from language to language

- [ɑ] – open back unrounded vowel as in Italian *padre*
- [ɔ] – open mid-back rounded vowel, approximates its Italian counterpart as in *occhi*. In all native Russian words this vowel only occurs in a stressed position. In the speech of the native speakers a very slight [ʷ] glide could be observed at the onset of this vowel. In fact, this slight [ʷ] is often a giveaway of a Russian accent when Russian singers perform in Italian.
- [u] – close back rounded vowel as in Italian *tu*
- [ɛ] – open mid-front unrounded vowel as in Italian *bella*
- [e] – close mid-front unrounded vowel as in Italian *vero*. In Russian, the difference between the open and closed form of **e** is practical rather than grammatical. The **e** is naturally slightly more closed before [j], [i], or a *soft consonant* (see page 10) and more open in any other position.
- [i] – close front unrounded vowel as in Italian *pizza*
- [ɨ] – close central unrounded vowel, in the Russian phonetic theory considered to be an *allophone* of [i]. The tip of the tongue is on or close to the bottom teeth. The front of the tongue is in the position of [i], the back of the tongue is moved slightly forward. Though this vowel is a close relative of English [ɪ] as in *inn*, its exact equivalent does not occur in any Western European language. A similar vowel, however, is found in Turkish and Korean. In Russian this sound occurs only after a *hard consonant* (see page 10).
- [ə] – a neutral relaxed unrounded vowel. In Russian singing diction the use of the true *schwa* is usually avoided. There are several shadings of this sound in conversational Russian. However, most vowels that are reduced to a *schwa* in speech must be sung as a slightly weakened [ɑ]. In this edition the *weakened a* is indicated by a smaller symbol [ɑ̣] versus [ɑ].

Semivowel Sound [j]

- [j] – *yot* or a *j-glide* as in English *yes*. In Russian the *yot* has a different degree of intensity depending upon its position within a word. Its fricative quality is strongest when initial or interjected between a consonant and a vowel. Its intensity is slightly weaker between two vowels. When the *j-glide* ends a syllable its duration is very short. In fact, in Russian phonetic theory the *yot* is described as a voiced fricative consonant.

The official IPA table distinguishes between the symbols [j] and [j̥] with the later referring to a more fricative sound. In order to avoid overly complicating the transcription process, the symbol [j̥] is not used in this manual.

The Consonant Sounds

In the production of the consonant sounds the breath channel closes at one or more points.

Consonant sounds are classified according to (1.) the place of the obstruction of the outgoing breath, (2.) the forming of the obstruction, and (3.) the work of the vocal cords.

1. Consonant sounds are classified according to the place of the obstruction of the outgoing breath as:

Unlike vowels, there is very little difference in Russian between the everyday and the singing styles of pronunciation of consonants.

Labial—articulated with lips

- **Bilabial** [b p m]
In the production of these consonant sounds the obstruction is formed by pressing the upper and lower lips together.
- **Labio-dental** [v f]
In the pronunciation of these consonant sounds the air passes between the lower lip and the upper teeth.

Coronal—articulated with the flexible front part of the tongue

- **Dental** [d t L]
In order to produce these consonant sounds, the tip of the tongue is pressed against the upper teeth.
- **Alveolar** [r l]
The tongue is close or against the alveolar ridge.
- **Palato-alveolar** [ʒ ʃ]
The tip and of the tongue is pressed against the lower teeth, the mid-tongue is against or close to the back of the alveolar ridge.

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Every consonant sound in Russian can be palatalized. The palatalized of “softened” consonants are pronounced with the body of the tongue raised toward the hard palate.

Do not aspirate plosive consonants in Russian as you would in English.

The trilled ‘r’ resembles Italian.

Dorsal—articulated with the mid-body of the tongue (dorsum)

- **Palatal** [j ç j] + the palatalized consonants
Articulated with the body of the tongue raised against the hard palate.
- **Velar** (back-palatal) [g k x ɣ]
The obstruction is formed between the back of the tongue and the soft palate.

2. Consonant sounds are classified according to the forming of the obstruction as:

- **Nasal** [m] [n]
Produced with a lowered soft palate allowing air to escape freely through the nose.
- **Plosive** [b] [p] [d] [t] [g] [k]
Formed by bringing the articulating organs (the lips, the teeth, the tongue, and the palate) close together. When the obstruction is removed the air releases with a plosion. The plosives cannot be prolonged.
- **Fricative** [v] [f] [z] [s] [ʒ] [ʃ] [ʝ] [ç] [ʁ] [x]
Formed by bringing the articulating organs close together, leaving a narrow passage for the outgoing air. When the air passes through the passage, it produces friction against the edges of the articulating organs. The fricatives can be sustained.
- **Affricative** [tʃ] [dʒ] [ts] [dz]
A combination of a plosive and a fricative.
- **Approximants** [j] [l]
The sounds in between vowels and consonants. They are produced by a narrowing of the vocal tract, but leave enough space for air to flow without much audible turbulence.
- **Trilled** [r]
Produced by vibrations between the tip of the tongue and the alveolar ridge.
- **Sonorant** consonants are produced without turbulent airflow in the vocal tract. Nasals, trills, and approximants are considered sonorant.

The Consonant Letters

3. Consonant sounds, which involve movement of the vocal cords, are called **voiced**, and those, which do not, are called **voiceless**. According to this characteristic, all plosive, fricative, and affricative sounds can be paired. All sonorant consonants [m] [n] [r] [L] are voiced and do not have voiceless equivalents.

Voiced and Voiceless Consonant Sounds:

Voiced	b	g	d	v	z	ʒ	ʎ	dz	dʒ
Voiceless	p	k	t	f	s	ʃ	x	ts	tʃ

This simplified IPA table includes only the consonant sounds present in Russian. When the consonants appear in pairs, the symbol to the left represents a voiced consonant:

		Labial		Coronal			Dorsal	
		Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar
	Plosive	b p		d t				g k
	Fricative		v f		z s	ʒ ʃ	ʎ ç	ʎ x
Sonorant	Approximant			L	l̥		j	
	Trill				r			
	Nasal	m		n				

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Hard and Soft Consonants

It is important to understand how to form the palatalized consonants, rather than simply interjecting a j-glide between a consonant and a vowel.

A characteristic quality of the Slavic languages is the presence of *soft* or *palatalized* consonants. The term *palatalization* describes a secondary articulation by which the body of the tongue (dorsum) is raised toward the hard palate during the articulation of the consonant. All Russian consonant can be palatalized. In the phonetic transcription a soft consonant is indicated by a [] below the letter.

Hard	t	d	s	z	p	b	f	v	l	r	m	n	k	g	x	ʃ	ʒ
Soft	t̟	d̟	s̟	z̟	p̟	b̟	f̟	v̟	l̟	r̟	m̟	n̟	k̟	g̟	ç	ʃ̟	ʒ̟

There is a slight discrepancy between various IPA practices. An older version of transcription used [] below a letter to represent palatalization. A more contemporary practice involves a hanging j-glide following a letter, for example [t̟]. It is this author's preference to use the older method.

There are many words in Russian where the meaning depends entirely upon the hard or soft quality of the consonant:

Hard

угол [ˈugɔl] – corner
мат [ˈmat] – checkmate
цеп [ˈtɕɐp] – flail
ел [ˈjɛl] – he ate

Soft

уголь [ˈugɔɫ̟] – coal
мать [ˈmat̟] – mother
цепь [ˈtɕɐp̟] – chain
ель [ˈjɛɫ̟] – spruce tree

Hard Consonant Sounds

The hard consonant sounds [b], [p], [d], [t], [z], [s], [v], [f], [g], [k], [m], [n], [ts], [dz], and [ʃ] are close to their Italian counterparts.

- [ʃ] – like English *sh*
- [z] – similar to the sound of the letter *s* in word *pleasure*.
- [x] – similar to German *ch* as in *Bach* but slightly less harsh.
- [ɣ] – voiced form of [x] similar to *g* in Spanish *Miguel*. In standard Russian it occurs only as a result of *consonant assimilation* (see page 31) as a voiced form of the letter *x*. In certain Russian dialects, however, this sound replaces the plosive sound [g]. It can be used in this way in certain character roles, such as the defrocked monk, Varlaam, in *Boris Godunov*.
- [ts] – pronounced like a *z* in the German word *zeit*. There is no soft equivalent to this consonant.
- [dz] – as in Italian *zelo*. Occurs only as a result of consonant assimilation.
- [r] – in speech it is usually flipped. It can be rolled in singing for added articulation. In Russian there is never a spelled double *r*. Unlike Italian, however, even a single intervocalic *r* can be rolled for dramatic emphasis.
- [l̪] – the tip of the tongue touches the tip of the upper teeth; the center of the tongue is slightly lowered. Among European languages the hard *l* is unique to Slavic dialects. American singers often wrongly imitate this sound by placing the tip of the tongue far back on the hard palate as in the word *cold*. In reality the tip of the tongue must be almost as far forward as in the production of the English *th* sound, as in the word *that* [ðæt]. Try not to double or thicken the intervocalic or initial hard [l̪]; it produces a dull, swallowed sound. This edition uses the phonetic symbol [l̪] to differentiate this sound from the Italian [l], which in fact is closer to the Russian soft [lʲ].

Do not aspirate hard plosive consonants in Russian.

Do not replace the [x] with the [k]. Both sounds originate in the velum, yet [k] is a plosive and [x] is a fricative.

The rolled 'r' can be used for dramatic expression.

The hard 'l' can be learned by placing the tongue in the 'th' position.

An exercise for learning the soft consonants:

Intone the vowel [i], then say a [z] while keeping the tongue in the position of [i]. Try to blend [i] directly into [z]. Repeat that smoothly several times [iz̩iz̩iz̩]. When you feel that you have mastered the pronunciation of the soft [z̩] try to pronounce it followed by other vowel sounds [z̩e z̩a z̩ɔ z̩u]. Notice that the j-glide is, in a sense, blended into the consonant and not interjected between the consonant and a vowel.

In combinations [t̩ŋ] and [d̩ŋ], the soft [t̩] and [d̩] are not exploded but realized as one articulation with the soft [ŋ]. That is the tip of the tongue touches the lower teeth, but the air is directed into the nasal cavity instead of escaping with a plosion between the middle of the tongue and the hard palate.

The soft ‘l’ is often challenging for the non-Russian singers.

Palatalized or *Soft* Consonants

The sole difference between [s], [z], [f], [v], [p], [b], [m], [ʃ], [ʒ], and their soft counterparts is the position of the middle of the tongue. In the production of the hard forms of these consonants, the tip of the tongue is pressed against or brought close to the lower teeth, while the middle of the tongue lies flat in the position of the phonetic [ɑ]. To produce their soft equivalents, the middle of the tongue rises toward the front of the hard palate in the position of the phonetic [i].

- As in Italian, the hard [n] is pronounced with the tip of the tongue touching the upper teeth. In the production of its soft counterpart, the tip of the tongue touches the lower teeth and the center of the tongue is pressed firmly against the hard palate. A similar sound occurs in the Italian word *gnocchi* [ˈɲɔkki]. The principal difference between the Russian [ŋ] and the Italian [ɲ] is in their durations. In Italian the *gn* must always be pronounced as a doubled consonant, while the Russian soft [ŋ] can be rather short.
- The tongue position for the soft [d̩] and [t̩] is similar to the soft [ŋ]. The tip of the tongue touches the lower teeth; the middle of the tongue is pressed against the hard palate. The air escapes between the mid-tongue and the hard palate.
- The Russian soft [l̩] is closer to its Italian counterpart than the hard [L]. The tip of the tongue touches the upper teeth; the front of the tongue is pressed against the front of the hard palate.
- While producing the soft [ʃ] the tongue position is similar to the soft [l̩]. To learn this sound, try to roll the [r] through the [i].
- The soft equivalent of [ʃ] – [ʃ̩] is almost always doubled. Its voiced counterpart [ʒ̩] occurs extremely rarely.
- The soft velar consonants [k̩], [g̩], and [ç̩] are not as independent as other soft consonants. They can only occur before the front vowels [i], [e], and [ɛ].

- [ç] – the soft counterpart to [x] is similar to the German *ichlaut* as in *nicht*.
- [tʃ] – sounds similar to **ch** in the English word *chair*. It is considered to be always soft.
- [dʒ] - pronounced as **j** in the English word *jelly*. In Russian this sound can only occur as a result of consonant assimilation.

Chapter II Reading Russian

The Cyrillic Alphabet

As mentioned previously, the phonetic transcription should only be used as a temporary tool for the study of language. An educated singer should learn how to read the languages in their original alphabets and use the IPA only for clarification.

Developed by Christian missionaries in the ninth century AD, the Cyrillic alphabet was based on the Greek twenty-six-letter system. It takes its name from Saint Cyril (827–869 AD), who is credited with its creation. The original writing system underwent numerous changes, and after a series of reforms became the thirty-three letter, contemporary Russian alphabet. The reforms of 1918, designed to simplify spelling for the benefit of the masses, discontinued the use of the letters **Ѣ**, **ѣ**, and **Ѥѥ**. Many publications available in the United States (most notably, the popular *Boosey and Hawkes* collection of Rachmaninoff Songs) are reprints of older editions or were published in the West according to the pre-revolutionary standards. For the purposes of pronunciation **Ѣ** equals **Ии**, **ѣ** equals **е** and **Ѥѥ** equals **Фф**.

Notice the similarities between some letters of the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. If you are familiar with the Greek, you will observe some similarities as well.

Аа	[ɑ]	Ии	[i]	Сс	[ɛs]	Ъ	the <i>hard</i> sign
Бб	[bɛ]	Йй	[j]	Тт	[tɛ]	Ы	[ɨ]
Вв	[vɛ]	Кк	[kɑ]	Уу	[u]	Ь	the <i>soft</i> sign
Гг	[gɛ]	Лл	[ɛl]	Фф	[ɛf]	Ээ	[ɛ]
Дд	[dɛ]	Мм	[ɛm]	Хх	[xɑ]	Юю	[ju]
Ее	[jɛ]	Нн	[ɛn]	Цц	[tɛ]	Яя	[ja]
Ёё	[jɔ]	Оо	[ɔ]	Чч	[tʃɛ]		
Жж	[ʒɛ]	Пп	[pɛ]	Шш	[ʃɑ]		
Зз	[zɛ]	Рр	[ɛr]	Щщ	[ʃɑ]		

Syllabification

In Russian a vowel forms the nucleus of a syllable. For the purposes of the syllabification Russian does not have diphthongs. Each syllable can be said to have only a single vowel. In other words, a Russian word has as many syllables as it does vowels.

The syllables can be open (ending on a vowel), or closed (ending on a consonant).

Follow these rules in order to divide words into syllables:

1. Always divide between two vowel letters:

мо-я [mɑ 'jɑ] **по-эт** [pɔ 'ɛt] **е-ё** [je 'jɔ]

2. A single consonant between two vowels belongs to the second syllable:

по-ля-на [pɑ 'lʲɑ nɑ] **не-бо** [nʲɛ bɑ] **лю-бовь** [lʲu 'bɔʃ]

3. From the point of view of the phonetic theory most Russian non-final syllables are open—that is to say they end on a vowel. Consequently, two or more consonants between syllables belong to the second syllable:

пу-шка [pʲu ʃkɑ] **и-зба** [i' zba] **во-лна** [vɑ 'lnɑ]

4. If the semivowel letter **й** follows a vowel it belongs to the first syllable:

бой-ка [bɔj kɑ] **вой-на** [vɔj 'nɑ] **май-ка** [mɑj kɑ]

5. In combinations where the first consonant is a sonorant and the following is a fricative or plosive the sonorant belongs to the first syllable:

консул [kɔn sʊl] **Волга** [vɔl gɑ] **столбик** [stɔl bʲɪk]

The syllabification in print does not always correspond to the rules on the left. For example, the printed syllabification usually separates syllables between two consonants. From the point of view of a singer these differences have only theoretical significance.

The concept of vowel reduction is a relatively modern phenomenon of the Moscow dialect. It is not present in the Church Slavonic, or in most other Slavic dialects and languages.

Stress and Vowel Reduction

The rhythmic structure of Russian speech is based upon the contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables. Though all Russian vowels are relatively short, the vowels in stressed syllables are pronounced slightly longer and with a higher degree of articulation, while the unstressed syllables are pronounced shorter and with less clarity. Unlike English or German, however, the length of a stressed syllable in Russian does not affect the meaning of the word.

Russian has no diphthongs; there can be only one vowel per syllable, and only one stress per word. In unstressed syllables certain vowels change their quality as well as their length. This phenomenon is called *vowel reduction*. Many Russian words have multiple syllables. Although the stress can fall on any syllable, composers usually help singers by setting the stressed syllables on the strong beats. In this book the stress is indicated by a ['] before the stressed syllable.

здравствуйте [ˈzdrastvujtɕ]

ненаглядный [nɛnɐˈgɫadnɨj]

головоломка [gɔlɔvɐˈlɔmkɐ]

бабушка [ˈbabuʃkɐ]

беспощадной [bɛspɔˈʃadnɔj]

крысолов [krɨsɐˈlɔf]

The Concept of Stress within a Phrase

Beyond the stress of the individual word there is a larger concept of stress that affects the phrase and the sentence as a whole. Understanding shaping of a phrase is crucial for expressive singing. Without clear direction of the musical line even the most beautiful melody can sound choppy and mechanical. This is especially true in the works of Russian romantic composers. Tchaikovsky, for example, often sets long phrases in even eighth notes. Without a slight prolongation of the important syllables, this kind of musical setting can be exceedingly boring. The Italian expression that “no two eighth notes are equal” is true for Russian as well. A careful decision with the help of an informed coach must be made on what word and syllable in a phrase must be emphasized. For more information on this subject read *Importance of Word and Phrase Stresses* (p. 51)

In conversational Russian phrasal stress and intonation are critical. For example, interrogative and exclamatory sentences are often expressed by intonation alone.

Eugene’s Aria from P. I. Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*:

Andante non troppo (♩ = 80)

Ког-да бы жизнь до-маш-ним кру-гом я о-гра-ни-чить за-хо-тел,
 kag-'da bi 'ziʒŋ da-'maʃ-'nim 'kru-gam ja a-gra-'ni-tʃiʃ za-xa-'tɛl

Ког-да б мне быть от-пом, суп-ру-гом при-ят-ный жре-бий по-ве-лел,
 kag-'da b mɲe 'biʃ at-'tsɔm sup-'ru-gam pɹi-'jat-nij 'ʒɹe-bij pa-ʋe-lɛl

То, вер-но б, кро-ме вас од-ной, не-вес - ты не ис-кал и-ной.
 tɔ vɛr-na p 'krɔ-mɛ 'vas ad-'noj ɲe-'ʋes - ti ɲe is-'kaɫ i-'noj

mf *pp*

Vowel Letters

There are ten vowel letters in the contemporary Russian alphabet. They can be divided into two categories: *non-palatalizing* and *palatalizing*.

Non-palatalizing Vowel Letters		Palatalizing Vowel Letters	
Аа	[ɑ]	Яя	[jɑ]
Оо	[ɔ]	Ёё	[jɔ]
Уу	[u]	Юю	[ju]
Ээ	[ɛ]	Ее	[jɛ]
Ы	[ɨ]	Ии	[i]

In the table above, the vowel sounds of the corresponding letters are the same (except for **ы** and **Ии**). The palatalizing vowel letters cause softening of the preceding consonants; the non-palatalizing vowel letters do not. Vowel letters **Яя**, **Ёё**, **Юю**, and **Ее** have a *yot* [j] in their names and referred to in this manual as *j-glide vowel letters*.

Pronounce the *j-glide* only when a *j-glide vowel letter* is:

1. Initial **яблоко** [ˈjablɔkɑ]
2. Preceded by a vowel **боец** [bɔˈjɛts]
3. Preceded by a hard or soft sign (ь, ъ) **льётся** [ˈlʲjɛtːsɑ]

Non-palatalizing Vowel Letters

Уу

The letter **Уу** is always pronounced as [u].

наука [naˈuka]

утёс [uˈtɕs]

паутина [paʊˈtina]

*Do not palatalize consonants before [u] unless specifically spelled out! To a Russian ear, American singers tend to soften consonants, particularly [n], before a [u] because this phenomenon occurs to a certain degree in English in words such as **new**.*

Ээ

The letter **Ээ** sounds open [ɛ] before a hard consonant and close [e] before a soft one or [j].

Open [ɛ]

Close [e]

эпоха [ɛˈpɔxa]

этикет [eʃiˈkɛt]

поэт [pɔˈɛt]

эй! [ej]

этот [ˈɛtat]

эти [ˈeʃi]

The letter Ээ is relatively rare in Russian. The letter Ee occurs much more frequently.

Ы

The letter **ы** only occurs after a consonant. Therefore, there is never an upper case **ы**. This letter is always pronounced as [ɨ].

мечты [mɛʃˈtɨ]

пыл [pɨl]

бывало [bɨˈvaɫa]

унылый [uˈnɨlɨj]

вы [vɨ]

ты [tɨ]

American singers tend to invent their own vowels in order to avoid singing a true ‘ы’. One must remember that ‘ы’ is not a diphthong but an unrounded tongue vowel similar to English [ɪ] as in ‘king’.

Aa and Oo

The letters **a** and **o** both follow the same rules. They are pronounced as [a] and [ɔ] respectively when stressed.

камень	[ˈkɑmɛŋ]	кот	[kɔt]
ангел	[ˈɑngɛL]	острый	[ˈɔstrij]

Never sing an [ɔ] in an unstressed syllable in Russian! The only exceptions are certain words of □ the foreign origin.

Both the unstressed **a** and **o** sound as [a] when in an absolute initial position or in the syllable directly preceding the stress.

адмирал	[ɑdʒmʲiˈrɑL]	определение	[ɑpɾɛdɛˈlʲɛɲijɛ]
облака	[ɑblɑˈkɑ]	подвал	[pɑdˈvɑL]
король	[kɑˈrɔʃ]	скажи	[skɑˈʒʲ]

*In some manuals on Russian diction the sound of the unstressed **a** and **o** is indicated as a schwa. In practice, however, this sound remains so close to [a] that describing it as [ə] only confuses singers. In this manual, the weakened [a] is indicated by a slightly smaller symbol [ɑ].*

Both **a** and **o** sound as a slightly weakened or darkened [a] in any other unstressed position.

красота	[krɑsɑˈtɑ]	поговари	[pɑgɑvɑˈrʲi]
долго	[ˈdɔLgɑ]	хорошо	[xɑrɑˈʃɔ]
вьюга	[ˈvʲjugɑ]	корова	[kɑˈrɔvɑ]

Variations in Dialects

In modern standard Russian the spelled letter **о** in an unstressed position cannot ever produce the sound [ɔ]. A few exceptions are some foreign words, such as **ПОЭТ** [pɔ'et]—*a poet*, **КОТИЛЬОН** [kɔtɨl'jɔn]—*cotillon* (a dance of the French origin mentioned in *Eugene Onegin*), or **КОРСЕТ** [kɔr'set]—*a corset*. However, pronouncing all unstressed **о**'s as [ɔ]'s is standard in Church Slavonic. In everyday speech, pronouncing the unstressed **о**'s as [ɔ]'s is perceived as a sign of a rural accent common to some parts of northern Russia, the Volga region, and Ukraine. You can hear this pronunciation in numerous early recordings of such singers as Chaliapin, who came from the Volga Valley region. This practice is all but gone now. In fact, later in his career, even the great Chaliapin himself had to make a conscious effort to adjust his pronunciation to the Moscow norm.

Sometimes, rounding the unstressed **о**'s can be used to produce an effect, suggesting rustic or archaic. In opera repertoire this pronunciation is appropriate for some character roles such as Yurodivy (Simpleton) or the defrocked monk, Varlaam, in *Boris Godunov*. In the song literature, its use is imaginable in some works of the *Mighty Five*, dealing with peasantry, such as in the song cycle *The Nursery* of Mussorgsky. A singer needs to remember, however, that this pronunciation must be used as an effect, only, and be applied tastefully.

Palatalizing Vowel Letters

In pronunciation of letters **я, е, ё, и, ю** the j-glide is articulated when **я, е, ё, и, ю** are:

Initial

я	[ja]
Евгений	[jɛj'gɛnʲij]
ёлка	[ʲɔlkɑ]
юный	[ʲjunʲij]

The quality of the intervocalic j-glide is slightly less fricative than when that sound is interjected between a consonant and a vowel. The precise IPA symbols are [j] versus [j̟]. In the opinion of the author, introducing this distinction into transcription is unnecessary.

After another vowel

поехали	[pɔ'jɛxɑɫʲi]
моё	[mɔ'jɔ]
бояться	[bɔ'jatʲsɑ]

After a hard or a soft sign (ъ, ь)

въезд	[vjɛst]
вьюн	[vjun]
льётся	[lʲjɛtʲsɑ]

When a j-glide vowel is preceded by a consonant, the [j] is not pronounced, but the preceding consonant (except for **ж, ш, ц**) is palatalized.

Palatalized

песнь	[pɛɕɲ]
Митюха	[mʲi'ɫuxɑ]
память	[pɑmʲɑɫʲ]

Not palatalized

шептать	[ɕɛp'tɑɫʲ]
цепь	[tɕɛpʲ]
жестокий	[ʒɛ'stɔkʲij]

Юю

The letter **Юю** is pronounced [u] when it follows a consonant, and as [ju] in any other position.

любовь	[lʊ'bɔf]	юродивый	[ju'rɔɖivij]
Людмила	[lʊɖ'milɐ]	юность	['junɔst]
лются	['lʊt:sɐ]	Июнь	[i'juɲ]

Яя

In a stressed syllable the letter **Яя** is pronounced [a] when it follows a consonant, and as [ja] in any other position.

поляна	[pɔ'lanɐ]	яблоко	['jablɔkɐ]
мята	['mʌtɐ]	яр	[jar]
необъятный	[nɛɔb'jatnʲij]	ямб	[jamb]

In speech the sound of this letter in the unstressed syllables is reduced to [i]. However, in singing it sounds more like a reduced [a], [e] or [ɛ].

ямщик	[jam'ʃik] or [jem'ʃik]
грядущий	[grɔ'duʃij] or [grɛ'duʃij]
Грязной	[grɔz'nɔj] or [jesna'vidɛts]

When in the unstressed final syllable **я** is always pronounced as a reduced [a]. Verbal reflexive endings **тся** and **ться** must always be pronounced hard with a slight hesitation on [t] as [t:sɐ].

бьётся	[bʲjɔt:sɐ]	пугаться	[pu'gat:sɐ]
лётся	[lʲjɔt:sɐ]	подняться	[pɔɖ'nʌt:sɐ]

Among native Russian singers there is no clear consistency in the pronunciation of 'я' in the unstressed position. It truly belongs to the gray area of language, where variation is both possible and acceptable.

*Note: unlike Italian, French, or German, in Russian, the difference between the open and the closed form of e is practical, rather than grammatical. The natural adjustment of the e and э occurs as a result of vowel-consonant agreement. A word in which an open vowel is sung instead of a closed one may not sound quite natural, but its meaning will not be affected. Therefore, the rules presented here are only an outline. It must be emphasized that it is always the singer's choice to modify these vowels, as it seems fit **vocally**.*

As with the unstressed Яя there is much variation in the pronunciation of Ee in the unstressed position. Some singers follow the allegro speech patterns, yet others never reduce this vowel. In addition, it is beneficial to observe the speed of a given piece. In general, the shorter the note is, the more reduction there is in the unstressed vowels.

Ее

The sound of the letter **e** is naturally adjusted to accommodate what follows it. It sounds more open before a hard consonant and more close before a soft one, [j], or [i].

Open [ɛ]

нет [nɛt]
мне [mnɛ]
ехали [ˈjɛxɑjɪ]
шест [ʃɛst]

Close [e]

день [ɕɛɲ]
песнь [pɛʂɲ]
скорей [skaˈɾej]
шесть [ʃɛʂt]

In speech the sound of this letter in the **unstressed position** is reduced to [i] or [ɪ]. However, in singing it should retain more of its **e** quality. Apply the same rule to singing unstressed **e** as you would for the stressed ones.

Боже [ˈbɔʒɛ]
Евгений [jɛjˈgɛɲij]
цена [tsɛˈna]
кажется [ˈkazɛtːsa]

Within a phrase:

красивые деревья [kraˈʂivɨje_ɕɛˈɾɛjja]
поместье наше [paˈmɛʂtʲɛ_ˈnaɕɛ]

Ёё

The letter ё is always stressed, and its vowel sound is always [ɔ].

ёлка	[ˈjɔlkɑ]
её	[jeˈjɔ]
подъём	[pɔdˈjɔm]
жёлтый	[ˈʒɔltɨj]

The difficulty for a non-Russian singer in regard to this letter is that in ninety percent of the available scores, the dieresis over ё is omitted. It is presumed that a native speaker can recognize the words with ё at sight. This leaves a non-Russian singer checking in a dictionary for every stressed е. The dictionary, however, may not always be helpful to someone unfamiliar with Russian grammar. To further complicate matters, the letter ё is a relative newcomer to the Russian alphabet. It is never used in Church Slavonic. In certain works of early nineteenth-century poetry the choice between е and ё is purely a question of style.

In this example from Lermontov's 1841 poem *The Demon* (used by Anton Rubinstein in his famous opera) е in the word **надзвездные** can be pronounced either [ɛ] or [ɔ]. There are multiple recordings of this piece and the pronunciation varies from singer to singer:

ʃeˈbɑ ja ˈvɔɫnɨj ˈsɨn eˈfɨrɑ
Тебя я вольный сын эфира,

vɔzˈmu v ˌnɑdˈzʲɔzdɨnɨje krɑˈjɑ
возьму в надзвездные края,

i ˈbuɕɛʃ ˈtɨ tsaˈrɨtsej ˈmɨrɑ
и будешь ты царицей мира,

pɑˈdruga ˈvɛtʃnɑjɑ mɑˈjɑ
подруга вечная моя!

(I, a free son of the air, will take you in the land above the stars, and you will become the queen of the world, and my eternal companion!)

Ии

The letter **Ии** sounds as [i] whenever the preceding consonant can be palatalized.

мир	[mʲir]
источник	[is'tɔtʃɲik]
молитва	[mɔ'litvɔ]

When it follows consonants that cannot be palatalized, such as **ж, ш, ц**, it is pronounced as [ɨ].

жизнь	[ʒizɲ]	шип	[ʃip]	цирк	[tsirk]
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It is also pronounced as [ɨ] when initial and preceded by a hard consonant in a previous word.

он идёт	[ɔn_ɨ'dɔt]
с искрой	[s_ɨ'skrɔj]
клён и дуб	[kɨɔn_ɨ dup]

Йй

*The letter **Йй** usually occurs in combinations **ай, яй, ей, эй, ей, ой, уй, ый, ий**. Some manuals refer to these combinations as diphthongs, others analyze them as single vowels followed by a fricative consonant.*

When the letter **й** ends a syllable, it has the tension and the duration of a consonant. It is not quite a full vowel [i], but rather its short fricative form [j]. It has more friction than a similar sound at the end of the English word *boy*.

какой	[kɔ'kɔj]
синий	['ʃinij]
пёстрый	['pɔstrij]
печальной	[pɛ'tʃɔɫnɔj]

The letter **й** is pronounced as a j-glide when it precedes a vowel. In Russian, only words of foreign origin use **й** in this way.

Нью Йорк	[ɲju 'jɔrk]
йога	['jɔgɔ]
йота	['jɔtɔ]

Unstressed Ending **ий**

The unstressed ending **ий** after **к, г** and **х** is pronounced as [aj] or [ij].

Русский	[ˈruskaj] or [ˈruskij]
долгий	[ˈdɔlgaj] or [ˈdɔlgij]
тихий	[ˈtixaj] or [ˈtixij]

In contemporary practice, one often hears this ending both sung and spoken as [ij]. It is a perfectly acceptable pronunciation. In certain works of poetry, however, the [aj] pronunciation is a must in order to maintain a rhyme.

Here is an example from *Ruslan and Ludmila*. The rhyming endings are **ой** and **ий**.

ɕɛˈlɑ dɑvˈnɔ mʲiˈnʊfʲɪj_ˈdɲej pɚɛˈdɑɲjɑ stɑɪˈnʲi glʊˈbɔkɑj
Дела давно минувших дней, преданья старины глубокой...
 The deeds of long-passed days, the legends of old age ancient...
 (The deeds of days long-passed, the legends of ancient times...)

pɑˈslʊfɑjɛm jɛˈvɔ rɛˈtɕej zɑˈʲɪɖɛn ˈdɑr pɛfˈtsɑ vʲɪˈsɔkɑj
Послушаем его речей! Завиден дар певца высокий.
 Let's hear his words! Envidable is the gift of a singer exalted.
 (Let us listen to his words! Envidable is the exalted gift of a singer.)

Consonant Letters

There are twenty consonant letters in the contemporary Russian alphabet. Twelve of them can be paired as voiced and voiceless variants of the same sounds.

Voiced Consonant Letters		Voiceless Consonant Letters	
Бб	[bɛ]	Пп	[pɛ]
Вв	[vɛ]	Фф	[ɸɛ]
Гг	[gɛ]	Кк	[kɑ]
Дд	[dɛ]	Тт	[tɛ]
Жж	[ʒɛ]	Шш	[ʃɑ]
Зз	[zɛ]	Сс	[sɛ]

Among the remaining consonant letters, **Лл**, **Мм**, **Нн**, and **Рр** are voiced; the letters **Хх**, **Цц**, **Чч**, and **Щщ** are voiceless.

Consonant Assimilation

Consonant assimilation describes the principle that certain consonants change their quality, depending on the consonants that follow them. This phenomenon occurs in many languages: for example, in Italian the letter *n* is pronounced as [m] before *p*, *b*, and *m*. Thus the title of Verdi's opera *Un ballo in maschera* is pronounced as [um_ 'ballo im_ 'maskɛrɑ]. In order to produce a smooth legato line in Russian, the consonants must be assimilated. Thus voiceless consonant letters usually take on a voiced quality when followed by voiced consonants; and hard consonant letters assume a soft quality when followed by soft consonants.

Voiced and Voiceless

The consonants **б, в, г, д, ж, з** become voiceless when they end a word or precede another voiceless consonant.

народ	[nɑ'rot]	хлеб	[x ɛp]
зов	[zɔf]	ложь	[Lɔʃ]
подкова	[pat'kɔvɑ]	обсурд	[ɑp'surt]
Кавказ	[kaf'kas]	воз	[vɔs]

A singer familiar with German will recognize a similar phenomenon:

Mond [mont]	und [unt]
Weg [vek]	hab [hap]

When the above consonants precede a vowel or **any voiced consonant** in the same word they retain their voiced quality.

обнять	[ɑb'ɲɑtʃ]	огромный	[ɑ'grɔmɲij]
бездельник	[bɛz'dɛ ɲɪk]	обрыв	[ɑb'rif]

The consonants **п, к, т, с, ш, х, ц, ч** are voiced when followed by a voiced **б, г, д, ж, з**.

к дереву	[g_ɖɛʃɛvu]
сделать	[zɖɛLɑtʃ]
отбежать	[ɑɖbɛ'zɑtʃ]
ах да!	[ɑx_ 'dɑ]
конец года	[kɑ'nɛdz_ 'gɔdɑ]
наш город	[nɑʒ_ 'gɔrat]

There is considerable variation among native speakers in regard to this rule. Some manuals actually recommend always unvoicing the final consonants, regardless of what follows them (like in German). In practice, the question of voicing of the final consonants often depends on the speed of a given piece.

Consonant Assimilation within a Phrase

The question of whether the final consonant should be sung voiced or voiceless must be understood in the context of a phrase. If the consonants **б, в, г, д, ж,** or **з** end a word, but the next word in a phrase begins with a voiced consonant **б, г, д, ж,** or **з,** a voiced consonant will retain its quality.

P. I. Tchaikovsky, Lensky's Aria (*Eugene Onegin*):

бл̩е̩с̩н̩ѐ̩т̩_за̩'у̩тра̩_луд̩з̩_д̩е̩н̩н̩и̩ц̩ы̩

Блеснёт завтра луч денницы

Sergey Rachmaninoff, Aleko's Cavatina (*Aleko*):

я̩_б̩ез̩_за̩'бот̩_б̩ез̩_со̩жа̩ле̩н̩ь̩я̩

Я без забот, без сожаленья

If the letter **в** is followed by voiced **б, г, д, ж** or **з** the consonant preceding **в** is voiced. These examples are rather infrequent.

к вдове [g_vda'vɛ]

будет в доме ['buɖɛd_v'dɔmɛ]

провидит взор [pra'viɖid'_vzɔr]

“С” before a Voiced Consonant

Attention! Voicing the ‘s’ in the wrong places is a very common mistake of the American singers.

Singers familiar with Italian know that in that language the letter **s** is voiced before any voiced consonant including **l, m, n,** and **v.** Examples include *smagno, svellare,* and *sleale.* A singer must remember that in Russian the letter **с** only sounds as [z] before a voiced **б, г, д,** or **з,** and never before **н, л,** or **м.**

Voiced ‘с’
сделка [zɖɛLka]

с быстротой [z_bistra'tɔj]

с горя [z_gɔɾa]

Voiceless ‘с’
снег [ʂnɛk]

смотри [smɔtr]

слеза [ʂlɛ'za]

Hard and Soft

All consonants except **ж, ш, ц, щ,** and **ч** have two forms, hard and soft. The consonants **ж, ш,** and **ц** are always hard and the consonants **щ** and **ч** are always soft.

As a general rule a consonant is *soft* when:

1. It is followed by a palatalizing vowel letter (**я, е, ё, ю** or **и**).

люблю [lʊbʲlʊ]	небо [nʲɛbɔ]	нива [nʲivɔ]
листва [lʲistʲvɔ]	клён [kʲɔn]	лес [lʲɛs]

2. It is followed by a soft sign **ь**.

метель [mʲɛʲtʲɛlʲ]	камень [kʲamʲɛnʲ]
вьюга [vʲjugɔ]	боль [bɔlʲ]
мать [matʲ]	словарь [slɔvʲarʲ]
доверьтесь [dɔvʲɛrʲtʲɛsʲ]	степь [stʲɛpʲ]

3. Most consonants are softened before other soft consonants.¹

песнь [pʲɛsʲnʲ]	жизнь [ʒʲizʲnʲ]
кончина [kɔnʲtʲʃʲinɔ]	жесть [ʒʲɛstʲ]
Людмила [lʲudʲmʲilɔ]	дни [dnʲi]

A gradual weakening of this third principle of softening has occurred during the past hundred years. As a general rule, this book follows the nineteenth-century rules of softening. In modern practice, however, one hears both the assimilated and non-assimilated pronunciation. Though the rules of consonant assimilation in regard to softening are rather complex, the following simplified principles can be derived:

- The letters **с, з,** and **н** are usually palatalized before other soft consonants.
- The letters **д** and **т** are usually softened before other soft consonants. In combinations [tʲnʲ] and [dʲnʲ], however, the soft [tʲ] and [dʲ] are not exploded but realized as one articulation.
- The softening is far less evident but is still preferable in **м, п, б,** and **в**.
- Usually, velar consonants **к, г,** and **х** are not softened before other soft consonants.
- **р** can be pronounced either soft or hard. In contemporary practice it usually remains hard.
- **л** is never softened before a soft consonant.

¹ This rule is discussed in more detail on page 42.

Certain Irregular Consonant Letters

Sound of the Letter Гг

The letter **г** usually sounds as [g] when followed by a vowel or a voiced consonant. It sounds as [k] when final or followed by a voiceless consonant.

горе	[ˈgɔɾɐ]	гибель	[ˈgʲɪbɐl]	погром	[pɔgˈrɔm]
друг	[druk]	мог	[mɔk]	порог	[pɔˈrɔk]

When **г** is followed by **к** or **ч** in the same word it must be pronounced as [x].

легко	[ˈlɛxˈkɔ]	легче	[ˈlɛxʲtɕɐ]	мягкая	[ˈmʲaxkajɐ]
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It also sounds as [x] in the word **Бог** [bɔx].

*The rule regarding the suffixes **его, ого, аго** does not apply to Church Slavonic:*

но izˈbavʲi nas ɔt luˈkavago
Но избави насъ отъ лукаваго.
But deliver us from evil.
(*The Lord's Prayer*)

When **г** is a part of suffixes **его, ого, аго** it is pronounced as [v].

старого	[ˈstaravɐ]	последнего	[pɔsˈlɛdˈnʲɛvɐ]
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г sounds as [v] also when part of these short words:

чего	[tɕɐˈvɔ]	сего	[sɐˈvɔ]	его	[jɐˈvɔ]	всего	[fsvɐˈvɔ]
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Гг sounds as velar fricative [ɣ] in exclamations such as **ага!** [aˈɣa].

As a rule, it should never be pronounced as [ɣ] in any other cases. It is a sound associated with the southern Russian and Ukrainian dialects and is not used in the contemporary stage articulation. It can be used, however, as an effect in certain character roles.

Sound of the Letter Чч

The letter **ч** sounds as [tʃ] in most cases. It sounds as [ʃ] only in words derived from the word **что** (what).

ч sounds as [tʃ]	ч sounds as [ʃ]
чтение [tʃtʃɛnʲjɛ]	что [ʃtɔ]
чёрт [ʲtʃɔrt]	чтобы [ʲʃtɔbʲi]
начало [nɑˈtʃɑlɑ]	ничто [nʲiˈʃtɔ]

In the Moscow dialect the letter **ч** sounds as [ʃ] in the word **скучно** [ˈskʊʃnɑ].

Sound of the Letter Щщ

The sound of the letter **щ** underwent a certain transformation during the last century. It is an historic fact that in the 1800's this letter was pronounced as a combination of the soft sounds [ʃ] and [tʃ], that is [ʃtʃ]. The contemporary Moscow dialect norm, however, is to pronounce **щ** as an elongated palatalized form of [ʃ], that is [ʃʃ]. You can still hear a [ʃtʃ] in the speech of some educated Petersburgians or the Russian émigrés in America and Western Europe. Because the [ʃtʃ] pronunciation sounds rather unnatural to most Russians, it is recommended that this letter be pronounced the modern way.

	щётка	щелкунчик	ямщик
Historical Pronunciation	[ʲʃtʃɔtkɑ]	[ʲʃtʃɛlˈkʊnʲtʃʲɪk]	[jamˈʃtʃʲɪk]
Contemporary Pronunciation	[ʲʃɔtkɑ]	[ʃɛlˈkʊnʲʃʲɪk]	[jamˈʃʲɪk]

Certain Combinations of Consonants

сч and жч

The combinations **сч** and **жч** sound like the letter **щ**.

счастье	[ˈʃaʂtʲɐ]
исчастье	[iˈʃʃaʂtʲɐ]
мужчина	[muˈʃʃina]

зж, сж, and жж

The combinations **зж** and **сж** sound as hard [z:] at the conjunction of a preposition or a prefix with a root of a word.

с жертвой	[z_ˈzertvɔj]
зжалься	[ˈz:alʂa]
безжалостный	[bɛˈz:alɔsnɨj]

The **жж** and **жж** sound as long soft [z:] when part of the root of the word. These cases are extremely infrequent.

[ˈtʃu padʲɛˈz:ajɐt ˈktɔ_tɐ]

Чу! Подъезжает кто-то! (*Eugene Onegin, Act I*)

вожжи	[ˈvɔz:i]
жужжать	[zɯˈz:atʲ]
позже	[ˈpɔz:ɛ]

Verbal Ending **ся**

The letter **с** in the verbal ending **ся** is pronounced soft when preceded by **и** or **ь**. Otherwise it can be pronounced either hard or soft, but the hard pronunciation is preferable.

Soft **с**

останься [a'staŋʂa]
зжалься [ʒ:aʂa]
поднялись [paɗ'ŋaʎiʂa]

Hard **с**

сражался [sra'zaɫsa]
увидимся [u'viɗimsa]
заврался [za'vraɫsa]

Verbal endings **тся** and **ться** must always be pronounced hard with a slight hesitation on [t] as [t:sa].

молится [mɔlit:sa]
драться [drat:sa]
стараться [sta'rat:sa]

Use of the Hard Sign ъ

In contemporary Russian the hard sign is used rather rarely. It only occurs at the conjunction of certain prefixes with roots beginning with a j-glide vowel.

въезд	[vjest]
подъём	[pad'jom]
объявление	[abjaj'leņijɛ]

The use of ъ was much more common before the reforms of 1918. This symbol was placed after every final hard consonant.

другъ	[druk]
воздухъ	['vɔzdux]
въ море	[v_ 'mɔrɛ]

Doubled Consonants

The doubled consonants are strongest when they occur at the juncture of two words or two elements of a word, such as a prefix and a root.

The doubled consonants are important for correct articulation.

подделка	[pɑdˈdɛlka]
в вашем доме	[v_ˈvaʃɛm ˈdɔmɛ]
оббить	[abˈbʲitʲ]

The doubled consonants are usually pronounced as single when followed by other consonants.

Русский	[ˈruskaj]
рассказывай	[raˈskazivaj]

Double **нн** within a suffix can be pronounced either double or single. In singing, however, the doubled pronunciation is preferable.

закалённый	[zakɑˈlɔnnij]
балованный	[baˈlɔvannij]

Single consonants can be doubled for dramatic reasons. It is especially true for [r].

Use the consonants for dramatic emphasis.

но 'bbɔʒɛ kak ɪgˈrrrajut ˈstrrraʃtʲi maˈjej paˈslʊʃnaju duˈʃɔj
Но, боже, как играют страсти моей послушною душой!
 But, God, how play passions with my susceptible soul!
 (But, God! How the passions play with my susceptible soul!)

S. Rachmaninoff, *Aleko*

Russian is a very structured language. Of course the rules are plentiful, yet once the rules are memorized, they could be used reliably to determine the correct pronunciation. Nevertheless, the few exceptions on the right should not be ignored!

Common Exceptions and Irregularities

The letter **в** is silent as first in the combination **вств**.

чувство [ˈtʃustva] **здравствуйте** [ˈzdrastvujtɕe]

The letter **л** is silent in the noun **солнце** [ˈsɔntɕe] - (sun). The same letter is pronounced, however, in the adjective derived from the same root **солнечный** [ˈsɔlnetɕnij] - (sunny).

The letter **д** is silent in the combination **здн**.

поздно [ˈpɔzna] **праздник** [ˈprazɲik]

The letter **т** is silent in the combinations **стн** and **стл**.

страстно [ˈstrasna] **счастливый** [ˈʃastˈlivij]

In certain foreign words consonants are not softened before palatalizing vowels.

Гименей [gimɛnɛj]

Земфира [zɛmˈʃira]

корсет [kɔrˈset]

Everyday Speech Patterns and Variations in Common Singing Practice

Russian standard singing diction is based on the speech patterns of the Moscow dialect. Moscow is not the oldest of Russian cities. The first mention of its existence dates only from 1147 AD, while other cities such as Kiev, date from at least 600 years earlier. Moscow became politically and culturally dominant in the 15th century. Because of Moscow's prominent position its dialect became the foundation of Russian literary language, and hence, its speech patterns became the standard for singing pronunciation. Although in the eighteenth century the administrative capital was moved to the newly built Saint Petersburg, the dialects of these two cities, though distinct, remained very similar.

In Russian there is a distinct difference between the conversational or *low* style and the elevated *high* literary style of pronunciation. The principal distinction between them is in the quality of the unstressed vowels. In the low style the unstressed vowels become very short and weakened or *reduced*. In the elevated style the vowel reduction occurs much less. Some editions dealing with Russian lyric diction available in this country are based on the phonetic manuals designed for the study of the everyday speech patterns. Paradoxically, the adherence to the speech patterns or the low style, although correct in the spoken pronunciation, sounds quite unnatural when sung. In singing, it is much more advisable to follow the principles of the high style of diction. Nevertheless, a certain adjustment toward the speech norms is not always incorrect and can be used effectively in fast, speech-like passages.

Unstressed Vowels *a* and *o*

In speech, the sounds of letters **a**, **o**, and **я** are much reduced when they occur in the unstressed positions. Both **o** and **a** sound as [a] in the first pretonic syllable (the syllable that comes immediately before the stress), and as a schwa anywhere else. In singing, however, the difference is much less noticeable. A certain weakening of the [a] toward schwa is acceptable when it is set of short notes.

	In speech	In singing
красота	[krəsə'ta]	[krasə'ta]
пуговица	[ˈpugəvʲitsə]	[ˈpugəvʲitsa]
хорошо	[xərə'ʃɔ]	[xarə'ʃɔ]
городовой	[gərədə'vɔj]	[garədə'vɔj]
полка	[ˈpɔlkə]	[ˈpɔlkə]

The sound of the letter **a** is somewhat obscured when it follows **ч**, **щ**, **ш**, and **ж** in the syllable immediately preceding the stress. In everyday speech it is reduced to [i] when **a** follows **ч** or **щ**; and to [ɨ] when it follows **ш**, **ц**, or **ж**. In singing, however, this sound can be closer to [a], [ɛ] or [e].

	In speech	In singing
часы	[tʃi'si]	[tʃa'si] or [tʃe'si]
чалма	[tʃiL'ma]	[tʃaL'ma] or [tʃɛL'ma]
пощади	[pəʃi'di]	[paʃa'di] or [paʃe'di]
пожалей	[pəʒi'lej]	[paʒa'lej] or [paʒe'lej]

Unstressed Vowel я

As with an unstressed **а** following soft consonants **ч** and **щ**, there is some variation in the pronunciation of the unstressed letter **я**. In speech, the pre-stressed **я** is reduced to [i] or [e]. A certain variation also occurs in singing practice. Here is a famous example from *Eugene Onegin*. The vowels in parentheses are optional variants.

ftɔ	'dɛŋ	[i][ɛ]	gɤ(ɑ)'duʃij	mɤɛ	gɑ'tɔɣit
Что	день		грядущий	мне	готовит?
What	the day		coming	to me	prepares

(What does the coming day prepare for me?)

P. I. Tchaikovsky, *Lensky's Aria*

Unstressed Letter е

In the conversational style of the Moscow dialect, the internal or initial unstressed letter **е** sounds like the spelled letter **и**. That is, it sounds as [i] in most cases and as [ɨ] when preceded by **ш**, **ж**, or **ц**. In the final position this letter sounds more like a schwa. According to the norms of the elevated style, however, the 'e' quality of the letter **е** must be preserved even when it occurs in the unstressed position. The general principle is that **е** sounds more closed before a palatalized consonant and more open anywhere else. More of a reduction toward [i] is acceptable only in very fast or recitative passages. It must be admitted, however, that there is much variation in contemporary singing practice.

Softening of Consonants before other Soft Consonants

According to the pronunciation norms of the nineteenth-century Moscow dialect, most consonants were softened before other soft consonants. In the course of the last one hundred years this softening has been slowly replaced by a less assimilated pronunciation. In modern practice the assimilated softening is most evident in dental **с**, **з**, and **н**, while **д** and **т** are usually pronounced hard. The softening of the remaining consonants is less noticeable and can be pronounced either way.

Russian linguist and coach V. I. Sadovnikov in his article on Russian singing diction *Orthoepy in Singing* (*Орфоэпия в пении*. Moscow, 1958) spends many pages trying to convince singers to soften certain consonants before other soft ones. Nevertheless, he admits that: “this softening belongs to the old Moscow dialect norms . . . In the speech of the modern generation the pronunciation without softening or with a reduced softening is quite widespread . . . At this time in history, we can observe a struggle between the new articulation norms and the tradition of the old Moscow dialect.” Over fifty years has passed since this article was first published and it seems that the new, less softened forms of articulation have overwhelmed the old ones.

A logical question arises – must the modern pronunciation be simply brought on stage, or should modern day singers adhere to the old, disappearing norms? The answer is probably a compromise. A certain gentle softening of the consonants must occur. If the consonants are produced in the same place, there is less obstruction for legato and more ease for the vocalic-consonant agreement. On the whole, the question of consonant assimilation has to do with the “gray area” of language, where variations are both possible and acceptable.

Unstressed Prepositions

The following prepositions are unstressed and should be pronounced as if connected to the following word:

без **без вас** [bɛz_ˈvas] **без тебя** [bɛs_ˈtɛˈbʲa]

близ **близ неба** [blʲiz_ˈnʲɛba]

во **во всём** [va_ˈfʂɔm]

до **до завтра** [da_ˈzaftra]

за **за вами** [za_ˈvamʲi]

из **из дерева** [iz_ˈdʲɛrɛva]

(из-за, из-под)

ко **ко мне** [ka_ˈmɲɛ]

на **на лад** [na_ˈlat]

над (надо) **над бездной** [nad_ˈbɛznɔj]

o (only when it is a preposition, not an exclamation):

о чём [a_ˈtʂɔm] but **О, Боже!** [ɔˈbɔʒɛ]

об (обо) **обо всём** [aba_ˈfʂɔm]

от (ото) **от двора** [ad_ˈdvaˈra]

по **по Питерской** [pa_ˈpʲitɛrskɔj]

под (подо) **под столом** [pat_ˈstaˈlɔm]

перед (перед) **перед ней** [pɾɛd_ˈnʲej]

про **про тот** [pra_ˈtɔt]

со **со страхом** [sa_ˈstraxam]

Single-Consonant Prepositions

The single-consonant prepositions **в**, **к** and **с** should be pronounced as if connected to the following word:

в огне	[v_og'ņe]
к вам	[k_'vam]
в страхе	[f_'straçe]
к острову	[k_'ɔstravu]
в городе	[v_'gɔraɖe]
к дереву	[g_'dɛrɛvu]
с ужасом	[s_'uʒasam]
с делом	[z_'dɛlam]
с шести	[ʃ_'ʃeʃti]
с жестокостью	[z_ʒe'stɔkaʃtju]

Reference Table

Letter	Position in a word	IPA	Examples	Remarks
Аа	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> stressed in the first pretonic syllable initial 	[a]	клад [ˈklat] канал [kaˈnal] Алексей [aɫɛkˈɕej]	In speech, sounds as [i] in the first pretonic syllable, following ч or ш : часы [tɕiˈsi]. In speech sounds as [i] in the first pretonic syllable following ж or ш and preceding a soft consonant: жалеть [ʒiˈletʲ].
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a weakened [a] in any other unstressed position 	[a]	карамель [karaˈmɛlʲ] мама [ˈmama]	
Бб	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel before a voiced hard consonant in the same word final <i>and</i> followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word 	[b]	банан [baˈnan] лобзать [ˈlabˈzətʲ] бросить [ˈbrɔɕitʲ] обжог [abˈʒɔk] чтоб дан [tɕɔb ˈdan]	Sometimes the particle бы is shortened to б . In that case, this letter is pronounced as [b] before voiced consonant and as [p] before unvoiced: [ˈjɕɕli_b_mɕɛ] если б мне [kaˈgda_p_tɪ] когда б ты
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel before a soft sign + vowel before a voiced soft consonant in the same word 	[bʲ]	побег [pɔˈbɛk] бьётся [ˈbʲjɔtːsa] люблю [lʲubʲˈlʲu] бледный [ˈblɛdnɪj]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> final <i>and</i> not followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word before a voiceless hard consonant 	[p]	гроб [ˈgrɔp] Глеб [ˈglɛp] обточить [ɔptaˈtɕitʲ]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> absolute final + soft sign before a voiceless soft consonant 	[pʲ]	скорбь [ˈskɔrpʲ] обсечь [ɔpˈɕɛtʲ]	
Вв	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel before a voiced hard consonant in the same word final <i>and</i> followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word 	[v]	волна [vaɫˈna] вы [vi] ровно [ˈrɔvna] власть [ˈvlasʲtʲ]	Preposition в (in) must be pronounced as a part of the following word: в вас [v ˈvas] в нём [v ˈnɔm] в путь [f ˈpuʲtʲ] в озере [v ˈɔzɛrɛ]
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel before a soft sign + vowel before a voiced soft consonant in the same word 	[vʲ]	ветер [ˈvɛtɛr] вьюга [vʲjuga] вместе [ˈvɕmɕɛtʲɛ]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> final <i>and</i> not followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word before a voiceless hard consonant 	[f]	ров [ˈrɔf] в такт [f ˈtakt] овца [ɔfˈtsa]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> final + soft sign before a voiceless soft consonant 	[fʲ]	любовь [lʲubɔʲfʲ] всегда [fʲɕɛˈgda]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> silent as the first letter in the cluster -вств- 	[]	чувства [ˈtɕustva]	

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Letter	Position in a word	IPA	Examples	Remarks
Гг	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel before a voiced hard consonant in the same word final <i>and</i> followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word 	[g]	<p>гусь [ˈguʂ]</p> <p>град [ˈgrat]</p> <p>Глеб [ˈglɛp]</p> <p>мог дать [mɔg_ˈdat]</p>	<p>In the Moscow dialect only the plosive г [g] is used. The fricative г [ɣ] is a characteristic quality of the southern Russian dialects. This sound can be used on stage to produce a particular effect.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before и or е 	[g,]	<p>герой [gɛˈroj]</p> <p>Онегин [aˈnɛɡʲɪn]</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> final <i>and</i> not followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word 	[k]	мог [ˈmɔk]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before к or ч in the same word in the word Бог (god) [bɔx] 	[x]	<p>мягкий [ˈmʲaxkʲɪj]</p> <p>легче [ˈlɛxʲtɕɛ]</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in suffixes его, ого 	[v]	<p>его [jɛˈvɔ]</p> <p>среднего [ˈʂɐdɕɛvɐ]</p>	
Дд	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel before a voiced hard consonant in the same word final <i>and</i> followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word 	[d]	<p>да [ˈda]</p> <p>подвох [padˈvɔx]</p> <p>поднос [padˈnɔs]</p> <p>[ˈɡɔrad_ʒɛˈlʲɔnʲɪj] город зелёный</p>	<p>The preposition под and перед must be pronounced as part of the following word:</p> <p>[pad_ˈdɛɣɛvam] под деревом</p> <p>[pɛɣɛd_ˈvamʲɪ] перед вами</p> <p>[pat_ˈstɔlɔm] под столом</p> <p>[pɛɣɛt_ˈtɛm kak] перед тем как</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel before a soft sign + vowel before a voiced soft consonant in the same word 	[dʲ]	<p>дети [ˈdɛtʲɪ]</p> <p>дьяк [ˈdʲjak]</p> <p>подвиг [ˈpɔdʲɪk]</p> <p>Днепр [dɕɛpr]</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> final <i>and</i> not followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word before a voiceless hard consonant 	[t]	<p>народ [nɔˈrɔt]</p> <p>склад [ˈsklat]</p> <p>подток [patˈtɔk]</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> final + soft sign before a voiceless soft consonant 	[tʲ]	<p>кладь [ˈklatʲ]</p> <p>подтекст [patˈtɛkst]</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> initial <i>or</i> preceded by a vowel <i>and</i> followed by a hard consonant or а, о, у preceded by a soft or hard sign <i>and</i> followed by a hard consonant or а, о, у 	[jɛ]	<p>Ероха [jɛˈrɔxɐ]</p> <p>езда [jɛzˈda]</p> <p>самые [ˈsamʲɪjɛ]</p> <p>изгнание [izˈgnanʲɪjɛ]</p> <p>подъехать [padˈjɛxatʲ]</p>	
Ее	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> initial <i>or</i> preceded by a vowel <i>and</i> followed by a soft consonant, и, or й preceded by a soft or hard sign <i>and</i> followed by a soft consonant, и, or й 	[jɛ]	<p>Евгений [jɛvˈɡɛnʲɪj]</p> <p>наездник [naˈjɛzɲɪk]</p> <p>поединок [pɔjɛˈdʲɪnok]</p> <p>съесть [ˈsʲjɛʂtʲ]</p> <p>её [jɛˈjɔ]</p>	<p>In speech е is reduced to [i] or [ɪ] in an unstressed position. In singing this pronunciation is acceptable in fast speech-like passages.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> after a consonant <i>and</i> followed by a hard consonant or а, о, у 	[ɛ]	<p>дева [ˈdɛva]</p> <p>Боже мой! [ˈbɔʒɛ mɔj]</p>	

Letter	Position in a word	IPA	Examples	Remarks
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> after a consonant <i>and</i> followed by a soft consonant, и, or й 	[e]	день ['dɛn] скорей [ska'ɾej]	
Ёё	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> initial or preceded by a vowel preceded by a soft or hard sign 	[jɔ]	ёлка ['jɔlka] подъём [pad'jɔm]	The dieresis over ё is often omitted.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> after a consonant 	[ɔ]	клён ['kɫɔn]	
Жж	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> followed by a vowel or a voiced consonant 	[ʒ]	жизнь [ʒizɲ] уж долго [uʒ_ 'dɔlgə]	The combination 'жж' within a root is pronounced as [ʒ;]: подъезжать [padʒe'ʒ;atʃ] позже ['pɔʒ;ɛ].
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> final <i>and</i> not followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word before a voiceless consonant 	[ʃ]	ёж ['jɔʃ] уж вы [uʃ_ 'vi] чужд ['tʃuʃt]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> doubled within a root 	[ʒ;]	вожжи ['vɔʒ;ɪ]	
Зз	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel before a voiced hard consonant in the same word stressed final <i>and</i> followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word 	[z]	позор [pa'zɔr] здравие ['zdɾavʲije] без вас [bɛz_ 'vas] [ʂ]ɛz_ z_ 'duba слез с дуба	The preposition без (without) is pronounced as a part of the following word: без вас [bɛz_ 'vas] без тебя [bɛz_ tɛ'ba] без жизни [bɛz_ 'ʒizɲi] без шапки [bɛʃ_ 'ʃapki].
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel before a soft sign + vowel before a voiced soft consonant in the same word 	[ʒ]	земля [zɛm'ɫja] змей ['zmij] безделье [bɛz'ɟɛljɛ]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> final <i>and</i> not followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з in the next word before a voiceless hard consonant 	[s]	воз [vɔs] без сожаленья [bɛs_ saʒa'leɲja]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> final + soft sign before a voiceless soft consonant 	[ʂ]	слезь! ['ʂɛʂ] из песни [iʂ_ 'pɛʂɲi]	
Ии	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> absolute initial after a vowel after a palatalized consonant 	[i]	икра [ik'ra] вонстину [va'iʂɫinu] синий ['ʂinij]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> after ж, ш or ц initial <i>and</i> preceded by a hard consonant in the previous word 	[i]	жизнь ['ʒizɲ] он идёт [ɔn_ i'dɔt] в игре [v_ ig'ɾɛ]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> as part of the endings кий, гий, or хий 	[ɑ] [i]	высокий [vɨ'sɔkaj] [iɲ] строгий ['strɔgaj] [iɲ] тихий ['tɨxaj] [iɲ]	
Йй	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> always 	[j]	йота ['jɔta] покой [pa'kɔj]	This letter is initial only in a few words of foreign origin.

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Letter	Position in a word	IPA	Examples	Remarks
Кк	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel followed by any consonant, except voiced б, г, д, ж, or з 	[k]	камень ['kamɛŋ] к лицу [k_ɭi'tsu] окно [ak'nɔ]	Preposition к (to, toward) must be pronounced as part of the following word: к вам [k_ɭvam].
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before и or е 	[kʲ]	кисть ['kʲistʲ] Керч ['kɛrtʃ]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з 	[g]	к берегу [g_ɭ'βɛrɛgu] как здесь [kag_ɭ'zɔdɕɚ]	
Лл	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel or ь 	[lʲ]	Лель ['lʲɛlʲ] Ольга ['ɔlʲgɑ]	Л is never softened before another soft consonant: алчный ['alʲtʃnɨj].
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in all other positions 	[l]	ласка ['laskɑ] полки [pɔl'kʲi]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> silent in the word солнце 	[]	солнце ['sɔntɕɚ]	
Мм	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel or ь before most palatalized consonants 	[mʲ]	семь ['ʃɛmʲ] меня [mɛ'ɲɑ] империя [im'pɛrʲija]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in all other positions 	[m]	мать ['matʲ] дом ['dɔm]	
Нн	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel or ь before most palatalized consonants 	[ɲ]	пень ['pɛɲ] небо ['ɲɛbɑ] женщина ['ʒɛɲʃina]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in all other positions 	[n]	ночлег [nɔtʲ'lɛk]	
Оо	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> stressed 	[ɔ]	конь ['kɔɲ]	In modern Russian, this letter in the unstressed position produces [ɔ] only in certain foreign words.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in the first pretonic syllable initial and unstressed 	[ɑ]	победа [pɔ'βɛdɑ] облака [abɭɑ'ka]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a weakened [ɑ] in any other unstressed position 	[ɑ]	поговори [pɔgɔvɑ'ɹi] плоского ['plɔskɔvɑ]	
Пп	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel followed by any hard consonant, except voiced б, г, д, ж, or з 	[p]	упал [u'pɑɭ] плачь ['plɑtʃ]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel or ь before most palatalized consonants 	[pʲ]	песня ['pɛʃɲɑ] пьёт ['pʲjɔt]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> followed by voiced б, г, д, ж, or з 	[b]	[kɑrb_ɭ'zɑɹɛnɨj] камп жареный	
Рр	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel or ь 	[ɹʲ]	риск ['ɹisk] Тверь ['tʲvɛɹ]	Р can be rolled for emphasis.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in all other positions 	[r]	Русский ['ruskɔj] труд ['trud]	

Letter	Position in a word	IPA	Examples	Remarks
Сс	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel before a hard voiceless consonant or hard м, н, р, л, в absolute final 	[s]	совет [ˈsɔɣesʲt] Москва [masˈkva] срок [ˈsrɔk] бес [ˈbɛs]	The preposition с (with) is pronounced as a part of the following word. Certain combinations involving с are pronounced as: сж [ʒʒ], сш [ʃʃ], сч [ʃ]. Verbal endings: тся [tːsa], ться [tːsa], лся [lːsa], мся [msa], ся [sa] or [ʂa].
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel or ь before a voiceless soft consonant or soft м, н, р, л, в 	[ʂ]	посёлок [pɔˈsʲɔlɔk] песнь [ˈpɛʂɲ]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a voiced hard б, г, д, з 	[z]	сдача [ˈzɔdʲat͡ɕa] сговор [ˈzgɔvɔr]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a voiced soft б, г, д, з 	[ʒ]	сделать [ˈʒɛlʲat͡ɕ] сбежать [zʲɛˈʒat͡ɕ]	
Тт	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel before a hard voiceless consonant or hard м, н, р, л, в absolute final 	[t]	только [ˈtɔlkɔ] открыть [atˈkrʲit͡ɕ] тварь [ˈtvɑɾ] кот [kɔt]	The preposition от (from) must be pronounced as a part of the following word: от этого [at_ˈɛtɔva] от тебя [at_ʲɛˈbɔ] от деревни [ad_ɔˈdɛrʲɛvɲi]
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel or ь before a voiceless soft consonant or soft м, н, л, в 	[tʲ]	тетрадь [tɛˈtrɔt͡ɕ] ветвь [ˈvɛtʲf] отнять [atˈnʲat͡ɕ]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a voiced hard б, г, д, ж, з 	[d]	отдай [adˈdaj]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a voiced soft б, г, д, з 	[ɖ]	отбежать [adʲɛˈʒat͡ɕ]	
Уу	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> always 	[u]	утка [ˈutka] наука [naˈuka]	
Фф	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a non-palatalizing vowel final 	[f]	форель [faˈrɛlʲ] граф [ˈgrɔf]	This letter usually occurs in words of the foreign origin.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before a palatalizing vowel before a soft consonant 	[fʲ]	фильм [ˈfʲilʲm] нефть [ˈnɛftʲ]	
Хх	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in most cases 	[x]	хорошо [xɔraˈʂɔ]	Russian [x] is never as guttural as German <i>achlaut</i> .
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before и and е 	[ç]	хитрый [ˈçitrʲij]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before voiced б, г, д, ж, з 	[χ]	ах да! [aχ_ˈda]	
Цц	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in most cases 	[ts]	отец [aˈtɕɛts] цепь [ˈtɕɛpʲ]	This consonant is always hard.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before voiced б, г, д, ж, з 	[dʒ]	конец года конец [kɔˈnɛdʒ_ˈgɔda]	
Чч	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in most cases 	[tɕ]	честь [ˈtɕɛʂʲt͡ɕ] меч [ˈmɛtɕʲ]	This consonant is always soft.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> before voiced б, г, д, ж, з 	[dʒ]	луч денницы луч [ludʒ_ɔɛnˈnʲitsi]	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in word что, скучно 	[ʃ]	чтобы [ˈʃtɔbi]	
Шш	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in most cases 	[ʃ]	шапка [ˈʃɔpkɔ] шесть [ˈʃɛʂʲt͡ɕ]	This consonant is always hard.

Reading Russian

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Letter	Position in a word	IPA	Examples	Remarks
	• before voiced б, г, д, ж, з	[ʒ]	ваш дом [vaʒ_ 'dɔm] наш Бог [naʒ_ 'bɔx]	
Щщ	• always in contemporary Russian	[ʃ]	шепка ['ʃɛpkə]	This consonant is always soft.
	• archaic	[ʃʃ]	archaic ['ʃʃɛpkə]	
Ь	• The <i>hard sign</i> is a separation symbol that indicates that the j-glide in the following palatalizing vowel letter must be articulated.		подъём [pad'jɔm] [ɟ] объезд [ab'jɛst] [ɣ] объект [ab'jekt] [ɣ]	In the contemporary Russian this symbol is not very common. It was more widely used before the reforms of 1918.
Ы	• always	[ɨ]	ты [tɨ] пылкий ['pɨlkij]	Only occurs after a hard consonant.
Ь	• The <i>soft sign</i> indicates that the preceding consonant is soft, and the j-glide in the following palatalizing vowel letter must be articulated.		плакать ['plakətɕ] вьюн ['vjuɲ] лѣтсѧ ['lʲɛtːsɐ] соловьѧ [sɔlɔv'jɨ]	The consonants ж and ш are not softened by the soft sign.
Ээ	• before a soft consonant or й	[e]	эти ['eʲtɨ] эй! ['eɨ]	In speech this vowel letter is reduced to [i] in an unstressed position.
	• in all other positions	[ɛ]	поэт [pɔ'ɛt] этап [ɛ'tap]	
Юю	• initial, preceded by a vowel, ъ, ь	[ju]	Июль [i'juɫ] юг ['juk]	
	• preceded by a consonant	[u]	утюг [u'tuɕ]	
Яя	• stressed <i>and</i> initial, preceded by a vowel, soft or hard sign	[ja]	яркий ['jarkɨj] Ноябрь [na'jabɤr]	In speech this vowel letter is usually reduced to [i] in an unstressed position.
	• stressed <i>and</i> preceded by consonant	[a]	пять ['patɕ] мяч ['mʲatɕ]	
	• unstressed <i>and</i> initial, preceded by a vowel, soft or hard sign	[ja]	наяву [naʲa'vu] объявить [abʲa'vʲitɕ]	
	• unstressed <i>and</i> preceded by consonant	[a]	грядущий [grɨ'a'duʃij]	

Chapter III

Approaching Russian Text

Importance of Word and Phrase Stresses

Correct word and phrase stresses are essential to clear Russian diction. Misplaced stress within a word can render a word incomprehensible as well as alter the quality of certain vowel sounds. Unlike German, French or Italian, the rhythmic patterns of Russian speech are unpredictable and any syllable may be stressed.

Without fluent knowledge of Russian, a singer has three methods of determining correct word and phrase stresses:

1. Look up a word in a dictionary

This is the most cumbersome, yet most accurate method. Occasionally, the stress can shift to a different syllable if a word is not in its infinitive form. Rarely, a stress can also be misplaced to accommodate metrical structure of a poem.

2. Observe how the text has been set to music

The accented syllables will usually coincide with the downbeats. However, beware of polysyllabic words—there can be only a single stress per word in Russian, so an unstressed syllable occasionally falls on a strong beat.

3. Understand the metrical structure of poetry

Most Russian nineteenth-century poetry is based on the classical metric patterns such as *Iambic*, *Trochaic*, *Anapestic*, *Amphibrachic* and *Dactylic*.

Rhythmic Structure of Metrical Poetry

The idea of poetic meter arose already in ancient Greece and Rome. The classical meters, however, referred to the alternating patterns of short and long syllables regardless of stress. Russian is a strongly accented language. The predominant stress pattern of poetry in Russian, as in English, is accentual-syllabic. This method of poetic organization relies on counting numbers of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables.

There are two criteria that determine a poetic meter—the alternating pattern of strong and weak syllables within a *foot* (the smallest metrical unit of stressed and unstressed syllables) and the number of feet per line. The terms *Iambic*, *Trochaic*, *Anapestic*, *Amphibrachic* and *Dactylic* refer to the first criterion and the terms *Monometer*, *Dimeter*, *Trimeter*, *Tetrameter*, *Pentameter*, *Hexameter*, etc., refer to the second.

* /

Iamb [weak-strong]

This is a very common meter both in English and in Russian. In fact, the *iambic pentameter* is by far the most common meter in English poetry [*/| */| */| */| */|]:

* /| * /| * /|* /| * /
 Then let not winter's ragged hand deface,
 In thee thy summer, ere thou be distilled. . .

William Shakespeare
 Sixth Sonnet

The *iamb* is very common in Russian poetry. The example below is in the *iambic tetrameter*. The first and third lines have the so-called *feminine endings* [*/*]. In the second line, notice that a weak syllable in the third foot has been substituted for a strong one. *Substitutions* are quite common in polysyllabic words.

* /| * /|* /| * / *
 f kra'yi ga'rit a'gɔŋ zɛ'lɔŋja
В крови горит огонь желанья,
 In blood burns the fire of desire,

The fire of desire burns in my
 blood,
 My soul is wounded by you,
 Kiss me, your kisses
 To me are sweeter than myrrh
 and wine.

* /| * /| **| * /
 du'ʃa ta'bɔj ujaʒy]ɛ'na
Душа тобой уязвлена;
 The soul by you is wounded,

lab'zaj mɛ'ŋa tva'i lab'zɔŋja
Лобзай меня, твои лобзанья
 Kiss me your kisses

mɛ 'slɔʃɛ 'mʲir:ra i ʲi'na
Мне слаще мирра и вина.
 To me sweeter than myrrh and wine.

Alexander Pushkin (After *The Song of Songs*)
 Set by:
 Mikhail Glinka
 Alexander Dargomyzhsky
 Alexander Glazunov and others

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/ *

Trochee [strong weak]

More often than not in English poetry *trochaic* meter involves *catalexis*—the abridgement of the final unstressed syllable:

/ * | / * | / * | /

Close my darling both your eyes,
Let your arms lie still at last . . .

Frederic Prokosch

Nocturne

Set by Samuel Barber

Trochaic meter is quite common in Russian poetry. In the following example first and third lines are in the true *trochaic tetrameter* and second and fourth use *catalexis*. Notice that in the second line a weak final syllable of the word **снежные** is substituted for a strong beat:

/ * | / * | / * | / *

'buʒa 'mgɫɔju 'neba 'krɔʒet
Буря мглою небо кроет,
Blizzard with gloom sky covers,

The blizzard covers the sky
with gloom,
Whirling vortexes of snow;
Sometimes it howls like a
beast,
Sometimes it cries like
a child. . .

/ * | / * | * | /
'vixri 'ʂnezniʒe kru'ta
Вихри снежные крутя;
Vortexes of snow whirling;

'to kag 'zʒeʃ a'na za'vɔʒet
То, как зверь, она завоет,
Sometimes like a beast it howls,

'to za'platʃet kag di'ta
То заплачет, как дитя...
Sometimes it cries like a child...

Alexander Pushkin

A Winter Evening

Set by Alexander Dargomyzhsky

Pauline Viardot-Garcia

Nikolai Medtner and others

On occasion, the rhythmic structure of a poem demands that an *unstressed preposition* (see p. 33) fall on a strong beat. In that case the stress of the following word could be misplaced. Here is an example from farther along in the above poem:

¹spɔj mɤne ¹pɛʂɤnu kak ʂi¹ɤitsa
Спой мне песню, как синица
Sing me a song, how a chickadee

¹tixa ¹za ¹maɾɛm ʒi¹la
Тихо за морем жила;
Quietly beyond the sea lived;

The trochaic meter demands that the phrasal stress fall on the unstressed preposition **за**. Because of that, the stress of the following word is also altered.

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* * /

Anapest [weak weak strong]

The ternary meters (anapestic, amphibrach and dactylic) are somewhat less common in both English and Russian.

A reader will no doubt be familiar with this example:

* * / | * * / | * * / | * * /

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse . . .

Clement Clarke Moore

And here is of course a more high-brow example:

* * / | * * / | * * / | * * /

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still!

Lord Byron

The Destruction of Sennacherib

Here is an example of a strict *anapestic trimeter* from Afanasy Fet:

* * / | * * / | * * /

ja tɛ'ʁɛ nʲɪʃɛ'ʋɔ nɛ ska'ʒu

Я тебе ничего не скажу

I to you nothing will say

I will say nothing to you
and will not trouble you
even a little,
and what I am silently
repeating

i tɛ'ʁa nɛ fstɕɛ'ʋɔʒu nʲɪ'ʃuʃ

и тебя не встревожу ничуть,

and you will not trouble even a little,

I will not dare to mention.

i a 'tɔm stɔ ja 'mɔɫʃa tɕɛr'ʒu

и о том, что я молча твержу,

and about what I am silently repeating,

nɛ ɕɛ'ʃuʃ nʲɪ za 'ʃtɔ nɔmɛk'nuʃ

не решусь ни за что намекнуть.

will not dare for any reason to mention.

Afanasy Fet

Set by Piotr Ilych Tchaikovsky
Sergey Rachmaninoff and others

* / *

Amphibrach [weak strong weak]

This meter is not that common in either Russian or English. Yet rare examples can be found in song literature. Notice that this example from William Blake is not in strict *amphibrachic trimeter* but truncates the final weak syllable (*catalexis*):

* / * | * / * | * /

I went to the Garden of Love,
and saw what I never had seen:
A chapel was built in the midst,
where I used to play on the green.

William Blake
The Garden of Love
Set by William Bolcom

In this example from Pushkin the first two lines are in strict *amphibrachic tetrameter* and the last two use *catalexis*. Notice that in the poetry in *ternary meters* (anapest, amphibrach and dactyl) figuring out the correct stresses is quite simple, since even in very long words *substitution* almost never occurs:

* / * | * / * | * / * | * / *
pa'ʂlednaja 'tuʃa raʂ'ʂejannaʂ 'buʃi

Последняя туча рассеянной бури!
The last cloud of dissipated storm!

* / * | * / * | * / * | * / *
ad'na ti ŋe'ʂɔʃsa pa 'jasnaʂ la'zuʃi

Одна ты несёшься по ясной лазури,
Alone you drift over bright blue sky,

* / * | * / * | * / * | * / (*)
ad'na ti na'vɔɕiʃ u'niʎuʂu 'ʃeŋ

Одна ты наводишь унылую тень,
Alone you bring a cheerless shadow,

* / * | * / * | * / * | * / (*)
ad'na ti pe'ʃalʂiʃ ʂi'kuʂuʃiʂ 'dɛŋ

Одна ты печалишь ликующий день.
Alone you make sad the triumphant day.

Alexander Pushkin
Set by Anton Rubinstein and Cesar Cui

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/ * *

Dactyl [strong weak weak]

Here is an example of strict *dactylic dimeter*:

/ * * | / * *

He, of his gentleness,
Thirsting and hungering
Walked in the Wilderness;
Soft words of grace he spoke
Unto lost desert-folk
That listened wondering.

Robert Graves

In the Wilderness

Set by Samuel Barber (*Despite and Still*)

In Russian *dactyl* is the most common of the three ternary meters. In this example first and third lines are in strict *dactylic trimeter* and the second the fourth use *cataplexies*:

/ * * | / * * | / * *

'ʂtɕɐjɐ i'du ja u'nɪlajɐ
Степью иду я унылою,
Over steppe walk I gloomy,

I walk over a gloomy steppe,
Not a flower is in sight,
No green tree grows there,
Where a nightingale could sing
from.

/ * * | / * * | / (* *)

'nɛt nɪ tɕvɛ'tɔʃkɐ nɪ 'nɛj
нет ни цветочка на ней;
not even a flower upon it;

'dɛʂɛftɕɐ 'nɛtu zɛ'lɔnɐvɐ
Деревца нету зелёного
little tree no green

'gdɛ bɪ mɔk 'ʂpɛʃ sɔlɐ'lɔvɛj
где бы мог спеть соловей.
where could sing a nightingale.

Aleksey Pleshcheyev

Over the Steppe

Set by Alexander Grechaninov

Systematic Analysis of a Poem

With all these rules to keep in mind it is better to develop a system for approaching a piece of Russian poetry.

As an example we will use this Pushkin's poem set by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Cesar Cui and Alexander Dargomyzhsky:

**Пустое вы сердечным ты
Она, обмолвись, заменила,
И все счастливые мечты
В душе влюблённой возбудила.**

**Пред ней задумчиво стою,
Свести очей с неё нет силы;
Я говорю ей: как вы милы!
А мыслю: как тебя люблю.**

The sequence should be as follows:

1. Syllabify—the music setting should help you in that regard.

**Пу-сто-е вы сер-деч-ным ты
О-на, об-мол-вись, за-ме-ни-ла...**

2. Figure out the word stresses and what poetic meter the text is in. Even without consulting a dictionary it will be clear from the musical setting that the poem is in the *iambic tetrameter* [*/| */| */| */|].

* /|* /| * /| * /|
Пу-сто-е вы сер-деч-ным ты

* /|* /| * (*)| * /| *
О-на, об-мол-вись, за-ме-ни-ла...

Applying the iambic pattern to the rest of the poem will give you most of the correct word stresses. Exceptions would be the words with more than three syllables, since in such words a weak syllable is often substituted for a strong one.

Figuring out the correct stress is especially important when the vowel letter in question is 'o'. Take line four as an example:

* / * / * ? * ? *
В ду-ше влюб-лён-ной воз-бу-ди-ла.

The word **возбудила** is four syllables long. According to the iambic structure, either the first or the third syllable could be stressed. This word should be looked up in the dictionary.

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3. Begin by identifying the vowels. The question that should be asked is whether the vowels are in their pure form or reduced. Of course, the most dangerous letter in this respect is the vowel 'o'. Remember that if you sing the unstressed 'o' as [ɔ] and not [ɑ], you are singing with a very recognizable regional accent!

u 'ɔ ε 'i ε 'e i 'i

Пу-сто-е вы сердеч-ным ты

ɑ 'ɑ ɑ 'ɔ ɑ ɑ e 'i ɑ

О-на, об-мол-вись, за-ме-ни-ла...

4. Ask yourselves whether the [j] is articulated in any of the palatalizing vowel letters. Remember that it will happen only when such a vowel is initial, preceded by another vowel or soft or hard sign. In the above example, the j-glide is only pronounced in the word **пустое** [pu'stɔjɛ].

5. Now you should proceed to the consonants.

Regarding the consonants you should ask yourselves two basic questions:

- a. Which consonants are softened and which are not?
- b. Which consonants are voiced and which are voiceless?

6. After you have figured out the qualities of the consonants, you can go back and fine-tune your vowels. Remember that 'e' is more closed before a soft consonant and 'и' becomes [i] when preceded by 'ж', 'ш', 'ц' or a hard consonant in a preceding word.

7. Check for common exceptions and irregularities outlined on page 38. Hopefully, at the end of the day, this is how your transcription will look like:

pu'stɔjɛ 'vi ʂɛr'dɛtʂnim 'ti

Пустое «Вы» сердечным «ты»

ɑ'na ab'mɔɫʲɔz zɑmɛ'nɪlɑ

Она, обмолвись, заменила.

i 'fʂe ʃɛʂ'livije mɛtʂ'ti

И все счастливые мечты

v du'ʃɛ vɫub'ɫɔnnɑj vɑzbu'dɪlɑ

В душе влюбленной возбудила,

ɤred_ 'nej za'dumtʃiva sta'ju
Пред ней задумчиво стою.

ʃve'ʃti a'tʃej ʃ ne'jɔ ɤet 'ʃili
Свести очей с нее нет силы.

ja gava'ʃu jej kak vi 'miLi
Я говорю ей: как вы милы,

a 'miʃlu kak t'e'ba ʃub'ʃu
А мыслю: как тебя люблю!

8. After the transcription is done your task is to find a good translation. Of course, this book gives you only the most superficial knowledge of Russian grammar, so to expect a student to make a translation by simply using a dictionary is unrealistic. There are of course, plenty of sources you can draw from. Most of major nineteenth-century poetry has been translated. Yet, even if using a good translation, you should ask serious questions about the background of the poet and historical and social circumstances of the composition.

Let's look at the above example:

An empty "You" by a heart-felt "you"
 She by a slip of the tongue substituted,
 And all the happy dreams
 In my soul, infatuated, she awoke.

Before her, full of thought I stand.
 To turn away my eyes I have no power.
 To her I'm saying: how sweet "You" are,
 But I am thinking: how much I love "you!"

The problem with this translation is that English lacks the formal and informal forms of the pronoun *you*. In English a teacher, a colleague, a parent, a close friend, a lover or the queen are addressed with the same *you*. In most European languages, however, there is a strict distinction. In French it is the difference between *tu* and *vous*, in Italian between *tu* and *lei*, in German between *du* and *Sie*. In Russian the two forms of this pronoun are **ТЫ** and **ВЫ**.

Occasionally, to address someone as "**ТЫ**" could be interpreted as the height of rudeness. Yet two people who know each other intimately would never even consider using "**ВЫ**." Understanding of this cultural background brings to this poem to a new level of intimacy.

Particularities of Russian Grammar

It is not the goal of this book to delve deeply into the grammatical structure of Russian. There is plenty of literature that dwells on that subject. Yet certain singularities of Russian must be briefly discussed in order to explain the structure of a Russian sentence.

Articles

Russian language does not have either definite or indefinite articles. The qualities of the words such as gender, case, plurality and so on, are expressed by word endings and context.

Nouns

Russian nouns are described as having a plurality (singular or plural), gender (masculine, feminine or neutral), and a case (nominative, genitive, accusative, dative, instrumental and prepositional).

Both animate and inanimate nouns have genders. The gender is usually determined by an ending. Most nouns that in the nominative case end on a hard consonant or **й** are masculine, those that end on **а** or **я** (but not **мя**) are feminine, and those that end on **о**, **е**, **мя** are neuter. The words that end on **ь** can be either masculine or feminine.

There are six cases in the Russian language, *nominative*, *genitive*, *accusative*, *dative*, *instrumental* and *prepositional*.

The *nominative case* is the usual, natural form of the noun. In most sentences the subject is in the nominative case.

The **driver** is driving my sister's car down the road.
Водитель ведёт машину моей сестры по дороге.

The *genitive case* marks a noun as modifying another noun. The genitive case is also sometimes described as the *possessive case*. It describes a noun as being the possessor of another noun.

The driver is driving my **sister's** car down the road.
Водитель ведёт машину моей **сестры** по дороге.

The *dative case* is used to indicate the noun to which something is given.

The driver returned the car to my **sister**.
Водитель вернул машину моей **сестре**.

The *accusative case* describes a noun that is the direct object of a transitive verb.

The driver returned the **car** to my sister.
Водитель вернул **машину** моей сестре.

The *instrumental case* describes a noun that is the instrument or means by which the subject achieves or accomplishes an action. Modern English completely lacks this case and accomplishes its function by use of adverbial phrases that begin with *with*, *by*, or *using*.

I split the rock **with a hammer**.
Я разбил камень **молотком**.

The *prepositional case* marks an object of a preposition. Because it often indicates location it is sometimes referred to as *locative*.

They live **in the forest**.
Они живут **в лесу**.

Adjectives

Adjectives modify a noun or a pronoun presenting us with additional information. In Russian adjectives agree with the nouns they modify in gender, number, and case.

My sister drives a **yellow** car.
Моя сестра водит **жёлтую** машину.

Pronouns

Russian pronouns are classified as *personal*, *demonstrative*, *possessive* and *interrogative*.

It is particularly important to observe the phenomenon of two forms of the second person personal pronoun *you*. There is a singular informal (**ты**) and plural formal (**вы**) variants. This distinction is similar to the difference between French *tu/vous*, Italian *tu/lei* and German *du/Sie*.

Verbs

There are three basic tenses *present*, *past* and *future*. It is important to observe that the past tense is made to agree in gender with the subject.

She **went** to the store.
Она **пошла** в магазин.

Notice also that the verb *to be* so necessary for English grammatical construction is rarely used in Russian:

I (*am*) here.
Я здесь.

Syntax

In conversational Russian the basic word order tends to be *Subject Verb Object* in transitive clauses and free in intransitive. Yet because of the syntax system that places in agreement all the parts of a sentence in regard to a case, gender and number, the word order tends to be extremely flexible.

Take the following sentence as an example:

She drove her car.

Of course, theoretically, it is possible to change the word order of the sentence with the resulted meaning becoming more and more obscured:

She drove her car.
Drove her car she.
Her car she drove.
Car her drove she.

In Russian, however, all these constructions are perfectly plausible:

Она вела свою машину.
Вела свою машину она.
Свою машину она вела.
Машину она вела свою.
Etc.

This freedom of syntax gives great advantage to poetic expression, yet makes for sometimes extremely awkward word-to-word translations into English:

'urnu s va'dɔj ura'ɲif
Урну с водой уронив,
A flagon full of water having dropped,

ab u'ʈɔs jɛ'jɔ 'dʲɛva raz'ʂilɐ
Об утѣс еѣ дева разбила.
On the rock it a maiden broke.

'dʲɛva pɛ'ʃalʲnɐ ʂi'dit
Дева печальна сидит,
The maiden is sadly sitting,

'praznʲij dʲɛr'za ʃɛʃɛ'pɔk
Праздный держа черепок.
A useless holding piece.

A maiden dropped her flagon breaking it on a rock.
Now the maiden sits sadly holding the broken pieces.

Alexander Pushkin, *A Statue at Tsarskoye Selo*

Common Traps for American Singers

When you approach Russian treat it with the same respect you treat other singing languages!

Approach the language with an analytical mind, understand how it works, do not be satisfied with mere approximations!

Do not invent your own sounds!

Remember, in Russian (as well as in any language) a minute variation in the pronunciation can drastically alter the meaning of a word!

Vowels:

Avoid diphthongs! Remember that unless they are specifically spelled out, there aren't any.

[ɨ]

Make sure that unique Russian sound [ɨ] is pronounced correctly. If you pronounce it more like [i] the meaning can change drastically and often humorously:

забыть [za'biɨ] *to forget*

забить [za'biɨ] *to violently murder*

s_	u'ma	nej'dət	kra'savitsa
С	ума	нейдет	красавица!
From	mind	does not go	the beauty!

i	'rad_bɨ	za'biɨ	je'p	za'biɨ-ta	'silɨ	'ɨt
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И рад бы забыть её, забыть-то силы нет.

And happy I would be to forget her to forget strength I don't have.

(Her beauty does not leave my mind. And I would be happy to forget her, had I the strength.)

Gryaznoy's Aria, *Tsar's Bride* (N. Rimsky-Korsakov)

[ɔ]

Do not be confused by this symbol—it is a well-rounded vowel, close to the Italian open 'o.' It is not the same as the American vowel in the word *hot*. In fact, that English vowel is much closer to Russian *a*.

[u]

Do not palatalize consonants before [u] unless specifically spelled out! To a Russian ear, American singers tend to soften consonants, particularly [n], before a [u] because this phenomenon occurs to a certain degree in English in words such as *new*.

Consonants:

Do not aspirate hard plosive consonants [t] and [d]. If you aspirate them too much, they will sound as [tʰ] and [dʒ] respectively.

Make sure to distinguish between the hard and soft consonants. Try to understand the concept of softening rather than interjecting a j-glide between a consonant and a palatalizing vowel. If this is difficult for you, a tiniest of j-glides can be used as a “vocal crutch.”

[L] and [l̪]

Make sure to especially differentiate between these two sounds. Paradoxically, when you substitute an American *l* for a soft Russian one, it sounds hard to a Russian ear, and when you do the same for a hard one, it sounds soft. Do not go overboard, however, if you thicken your [L] excessively, it begins to sound dull and unattractive.

[s]

Do not voice the [s] before *n*, *m* or *l*.

	correct	incorrect
напрасно	[na'prasno]	[na'prazno]

Consonant Clusters:

Russian words often have three, four, on a rare occasion even five consonants on a row. It is important not to interject shadow vowels into a consonant cluster. Practice by starting at the last consonant of the cluster and gradually adding the preceding consonants.

взгляни [vzɡ]a'ni]

Practice this word as [l̪a'ni] → [ɡ]a'ni] → [zɡ]a'ni] → [vzɡ]a'ni]

Avoid [vʰzʰgʰ]a'ni]

Phrasing and Legato:

Do not become so absorbed in the idea of articulating individual sounds that you neglect the larger concept of a phrase!

Make your consonants small, your vowels long, sing through phrases, do not stop your sound! Pay attention to the stresses within a phrase and not just individual words. Practice singing on vowels alone and then adding consonants.

Try reading the text with the accents of the poetry. Understand its natural flow. Listen to a native speaking reading the poetry. Listen to the great singers of the past and present.

Remember—legato, legato, legato!!!

It is better to make a beautiful line than overly articulate. Do not sacrifice the beauty of your sound for exaggeratedly defined consonants.