

GUIDE TO PRONOUNCING LITURGICAL LATIN

Successful singing of plainsong requires attention to the proper pronunciation of traditional liturgical Latin, which differs from that of classical Latin in several ways. In the first place, **vowels** follow the Italianate model, and are sung as purely as possible (within the bounds of vocal taste), with no hint of *diphthong*—the elision of vowel sounds common in vernacular languages. The following table gives equivalents, which hold true no matter the position of the vowel in the word:

- A** as in *father* (never as in *add*)
- E** as in *mellow*, with no elision to the *i*, as in *obey*; singers who chronically make diphthongs of *e*'s are encouraged to add an *h* (Domin-*eh* D-*eh*-us)
- I** as in *pizza*; it is always sung with a long *e* sound, as in *feet*; this holds true even when it is followed by a voiced consonant (*in* = *een*; *dimittimus* = *dee-meet-tee-mus*)
- [Obviously, this can be overdone, and should be modified for grateful singing, especially on high notes.]
- Note: In this edition, **I** is always used as a vowel; in some editions, **I** is used as a consonant in place of **J**, following classical usage, and is equivalent in sound to the English consonant *y* (*iubilare* = *jubilare* = *yoo-bee-lah-teh*)
- O** as in *motion* or *for*, with never a hint of diphthong to *u* (as in *mowing*); adding an *h* might help (n-*oh*-mine D-*oh*-mini)
- U** as in *truth*; it is always sung like a long *oo* sound (as in *boot*, not as in *foot*), and is never shortened (*but* or *put*); it should never be preceded by a diphthong (as in *cute*)
- Y** is always treated as a vowel, equivalent to **I** above
- Æ** and **Œ**, in sung Latin, are treated as **E** above; they are often written as separate letters (*ae*, *oe*), but are always treated as a single vowel sound
- AU** is a true diphthong, with **A** receiving the majority of the pitch, and **U** added just before the next syllable; especially in melismatic passages where the syllable with *au* receives several notes, singers should strive to maintain a pure *ah* sound for as long as possible (*ca--usam*, *la--udate*)
- Otherwise, consecutive vowels are pronounced separately and more or less equally (*De- i*, *me- us*, *tu- um*, *tu- o*, *Evangelii- i*)

Pay special attention to words that look like English words, but which nevertheless are sung using pure Latin vowels:

Immaculati = *ee-mah-coo-lah-tee*

In liturgical Latin, certain **consonants** receive special pronunciation:

- C** is hard, like *k* before hard vowels (a, o, u); but
is soft, like *ch* before soft vowels (e, i, æ, œ, y)
- CC** becomes *t-ch* before soft vowels (*ecce* = *et-che*)
- CH** is always hard, like *k*, before all vowels and consonants

- G** is hard, as in *got*, before hard vowels (a, o, u); but is soft, as in *gentle*, before soft vowels (e, i, æ, œ, y)
- GN** is pronounced as in Italian (*signor*), it sounds like *n-(i)*, with a soft diphthong before the vowel (*Agnus* = *an-(i)us*)
- H** is always silent, never aspirant; when sung at the beginning of a word, it may modify the vowel slightly to prevent a glottal
- J** sounds like the English consonant *y*; in some editions, it is replaced by **I** (see note above)
- R** is a troublesome consonant generally, as sung by Americans, and can be excruciating when applied to Latin; great pains must be taken to see that it is never significantly voiced (even when it falls on a *liquescent*); it should receive a quick flip with the tip of the tongue, nothing more; it should never modify or interrupt the vowel it follows; beginning singers may need to draw a line through all problematic *r*'s
- PH** is always pronounced like **F**
- S** is always hard, as in *pass* (never soft or *z*-like, as in *was*); however, when it falls between two vowels, it may be softened somewhat (*miserere*)
- SC** becomes *sh* before soft vowels (e, i, æ, œ, y) (*ascendit* = *a-shen-dit*); before hard vowels (a, o, u), it is *sk* (*scandalum*, *sculptus*)
- TH** is always hard, as in *Thomas*
- TI** becomes *tsi* when followed by any vowel (*letitia* = *leh-tee-tsee-ah*); the rule does not apply when it is preceded by **S**, **X**, or **T** (*hostiam*)
- X** is always hard, like *ks*; however, when it falls between two vowels, it may be softened somewhat (*exercitus* = *ek-ze-rchi-tus*)
- XC** becomes *k-sh* before a soft vowel (e, i, y) (*excelsis* = *ek-shel-sis*), but not before a hard vowel (a, o, u) (*excubo* = *eks-ku-bo*)
- Z** is softened and dental, like *dz* (*azymus* = *a-dzy-mus*)

Finally, in order to achieve the sort of rhythmic “fluidity within solidity” demanded by plainsong, care must be taken when executing the *Latin accent*. For two-syllable words, the accent always falls on the first syllable; for longer words, the accent is marked (*Laudáte Dóminum*). Unlike vernacular languages, Latin employs a “quality” accent, rather than one of quantity, either of weight or volume. Because this quality mostly involves lifting the pitch, it is difficult to apply to a text that has a fixed melody. However—and especially in cases of recitation, such as in Psalm verses and other passages with a single repeated note on several syllables—the sense of a lifted accent can be achieved through a slight *heightening* of the voice, both in strength and, to a lesser degree, duration. But this can never sound mechanical, and is best achieved when *thought*, more than sung.

Plainsong, following the classic Solesmes model, respects the rhythmic impulse of the *music* in equal degree to that of the *text*; the seamless integration of these two rhythmic elements is the ultimate goal in singing the chant, even in cases where the two may seem at odds. A gently flowing, steady musical rhythm need not be disrupted in an effort to convey the Latin accent; but neither should the music obscure the meaning of the text, which is, after all, the essence of the prayer it seeks to enliven.