

Russian Diction Guide
Eugene Onegin
Undercroft Opera

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Transcription systems used in this production of Eugene Onegin.

For this production of Eugene Onegin, principals are expected to procure the piano-vocal score by Anton Belov available at www.classicalvocalreprints.com. Smaller roles may be able to make do with photocopied pages. Chorus members will be provided with specially prepared chorus scores.

Those using Belov's edition (principals and any chorus members who wish) must learn the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcription system for Russian. It is the best transcription system and well worth the time invested in becoming proficient in reading the symbols for the Russian sounds so that you have the best possible pronunciation. Principals should review the information available on the opening pages of Belov's edition for further instructions in forming Russian and some additional nuances that will not be covered in this document or the workshop.

Those using the chorus scores will be reading a specially designed (and, in a sense, simplified) transcription system that utilizes a combination of symbols used in the Library of Congress system for Russian transliteration, one IPA symbol, and this author's own innovations. The transcription system is designed to (1) take advantage of symbols that are familiar to English speakers from: our own English writing system; from singing in Italian; and from hearing and reading Russian names, etc. in newspapers and on TV; (2) employ only the minimum required number of new and unfamiliar symbols; (3) utilize a number of other techniques to achieve the most accurate singing pronunciation as quickly and easily as possible. To this third point: the transcription will put spaces between "phonetic words" instead of grammatical words; palatalization will not be shown in places it would naturally occur based on American English phonetics; only the minimum number of vowel symbols required for a good choral pronunciation will be used in this transcription.

Chorus vowel inventory.

For the choral parts we will use 5-6 vowels. (The IPA transcription in Belov will have some additional vowels that principals should learn). Here are our 5-6 vowels:

Vowel symbol in IPA	Vowel symbol in Choral score	Sound / Comments
a	a	'hot'
ɛ / e	e	'bed'
ɔ	o	'thought' or, really, the first half of the diphthong 'coat'
u	u	'boot'
i	i	'pizza'
ɨ	ɨ	This vowel is similar to [i] but the back of the tongue moves forward to create a sound that is like the vowel in 'inn' without letting the tip of the tongue recede. This vowel is not a diphthong. It will be beautifully achieved by being very attentive to keeping the consonant before it hard (non-palatalized). This vowel proceeds from the hard consonant and does not have to be specially made independent of that consonant, so don't let it get you down!

Consonant inventory.

HARD (NON-PALATALIZED) CONSONANTS

What is a “hard” consonant in Russian?

All of the consonants in this table should be pronounced with the middle of the tongue away from the hard palate (hard part of the roof of the mouth). This non-palatalized, “hard” articulation is the way we pronounce most consonants in English. Russian hard consonants are often velarized instead, meaning the back of the tongue moves toward the soft palate, but we don’t need to worry about that to be understood.

Sometimes we palatalize English consonants before the vowel [i] ('teeny' 'seen' 'keen' etc.). Therefore, in the transcription, wherever you see the vowel [i], you must remember to not palatalize the preceding consonant. If you pronounce the consonant “hard,” i.e. with the tongue away from the soft palate, you will get a good vowel sound for [i].

Consonant symbol in IPA (in Belov)	Consonant symbol in choral score	Comments
t	†	Dental like Italian. Tip of tongue touches upper teeth.
d	d	Dental like Italian. Tip of tongue touches upper teeth.
s	s	
z	z	
p	p	
b	b	
f	f	
v	v	
l	l	Use the “dark l” like in English ‘pull’.
r	r	Rolled or flipped.
m	m	
n	n	Alveolar, keep n right behind the upper teeth. In English n moves around.
k	k	
g	g	
x	kh	Like ch in German. ‘Bach’
ʃ	sh	‘show’
ʒ	zh	The sound of s in ‘pleasure’
ts	ts	Like z in German or English word ‘pits’

SOFT (PALATALIZED) CONSONANTS

What is a “soft” consonant in Russian?

All of the consonants in this table have two **simultaneous** places of articulation. They should be pronounced with the middle of the tongue on or close to the hard palate (hard part of the roof of the mouth). The hard palate is the secondary place of articulation. For example, the consonant [t^y] is pronounced like [t] plus [y] – two articulations at the same time. The trick to making accurately and understandably pronounced Russian words is to make these two sounds at the same time and not sequentially. Therefore, we will use a superscript ^y instead of a regular y to show softness.

To repeat from above, sometimes we palatalize English consonants before the vowel [i] ('teeny' 'seen' 'keen' etc.). Therefore, in the transcription, in many instances where the vowel [i] comes after a consonant, the superscript y has been omitted. You should pronounce any vowel before [i] soft. In some cases the superscript ^y will still be written before [i] for consonants that are especially tricky for English speakers to soften such as [l^y].

Consonant symbol in IPA (in Belov)	Consonant symbol in choral score	Comments
т	т ^y	'teeny'. Sometimes you will hear some [s] (affricated) sound in soft [т ^y], which is not wrong but should not be the aim
д	д ^y	Sometimes you will hear some [z] (affricated) sound in soft [д ^y], which is not wrong but should not be the aim
с	с ^y	'seen'
з	з ^y	
п	п ^y	
б	б ^y	
ф	ф ^y	
в	в ^y	
љ	љ ^y	Dental [l] plus [y]. Somewhat similar to Italian 'Pagliacci', English 'million'
р	р ^y	Rolled or flipped
м	м ^y	
н	н ^y	Similar to the Italian "gnocchi" or English "minion"
к	к ^y	'keen'
г	г ^y	'gear'
ч:	х ^y	Similar to 'Hugh'. This sound is not found in the choral lines.
ш:	ш ^y	'sheen'
ч	ч	'Cheetos'
ј	ј	'yippee'

On the importance of soft/hard contrast and on vowel color.

The contrast between soft/hard consonants in Russian must be observed as consistently and accurately as possible for the sung words to be understood. Changing a soft consonant to hard or vice versa has as likely a chance of changing the meaning of the word as it does of rendering the word incomprehensible or of being perceived as a foreign accent. Here is an example:

m^yat^y = to wrinkle

m^yat = wrinkled

mat = curse words

mat^y = mother

You may have noticed that the quality of the [ɑ] in each of these words changed. Russian vowels will change in response to the consonant environment surrounding them, but the vowel qualities do not determine the meaning of the word. (In linguistics, these various sounds are called “allophones of the same phoneme.”) Soft consonants will draw the tongue forward and brighten the vowel. Hard consonants will do the opposite. You should allow the vowels to be somewhat flexible and respond to the tongue position of the consonants surrounding it. You will have a more natural and fluid sound this way. If there are tuning issues due to disagreements in vowel quality on certain notes, the chorus master or other musical staff will be responsible for noting them and bringing the chorus into agreement.

Soft consonant exercises.

Use the vowel [i] (which is articulated with the tongue in the same position as in the consonant [y]) to learn the double articulation of the soft consonants. We will move from forward vowels to back to rounded vowel and from consonants in which the difference between the hard and soft sound is obvious to consonants in which the difference is obscure to a native English speaker’s ear.

Repeat the series of sounds and the words, focusing on making the primary and secondary articulations simultaneous.

n^y

ini-ni-ni-ni-inin^y

in^ye-n^ye-n^ye-n^ye-in^yen^y

in^ya-n^ya-n^ya-n^ya-in^yan^y

in^yo-n^yo-n^yo-n^yo-in^yon^y

in^yu-n^yu-n^yu-n^yu-in^yun^y

n^yet, n^ye, n^yes^yot, kn^yagin^ya, tan^yusha, d^yen^y

|^y

ili-li-li-li-ili|^y

i|^ye-|^ye-|^ye-|^ye-i|^ye|^y

i|^ya-|^ya-|^ya-|^ya-i|^ya|^y

i|^yo-|^yo-|^yo-|^yo-i|^yo|^y

i|^yu-|^yu-|^yu-|^yu-i|^yu|^y

|^yiba (liba), kup|^yet, |^yenskiy, bal^yat, |^yub, tol^yko, uzhel^y

†^y

iti-ti-ti-ti-itit^y

it^ye-t^ye-t^ye-t^ye-it^yet^y

it^ya-t^ya-t^ya-t^ya-it^yat^y

it^yo-t^yo-t^yo-t^yo-it^yot^y

it^yu-t^yu-t^yu-t^yu-it^yut^y

smatri^ye, zat^yanit^ye, khot^y, tiranit^y

d^y

idi-di-di-di-idi

id^ye-d^ye-d^ye-d^ye-id^ye

id^ya-d^ya-d^ya-d^ya-id^ya

id^yo-d^yo-d^yo-d^yo-id^yo

id^yu-d^yu-d^yu-d^yu-id^yu

khad^yi, d^yela, d^yevitsⁱ, d^yen^y, malad^yosh

p^y

ipi-pi-pi-pi-ipip^y

ip^ye-p^ye-p^ye-p^ye-ip^yep^y

ip^ya-p^ya-p^ya-p^ya-ip^yap^y

ip^yo-p^yo-p^yo-p^yo-ip^yop^y

ip^yu-p^yu-p^yu-p^yu-ip^yup^y

pir, p^yes^yenku, note: "pyot" ← soft consonant plus glide can also occur and will be transcribes like this

b^y

ibi-bi-bi-bi-ibi

ib^ye-b^ye-b^ye-b^ye-ib^ye

ib^ya-b^ya-b^ya-b^ya-ib^ya

ib^yo-b^yo-b^yo-b^yo-ib^yo

ib^yu-b^yu-b^yu-b^yu-ib^yu

dubinku, b^yedniy, s^yeb^ya

r^y

iri-ri-ri-ri-irir^y

ir^ye-r^ye-r^ye-r^ye-ir^yer^y

ir^ya-r^ya-r^ya-r^ya-ir^yar^y

ir^yo-r^yo-r^yo-r^yo-ir^yor^y

ir^yu-r^yu-r^yu-r^yu-ir^yur^y

strike, s^yurpris, gr^yemina, r^yechi, gar^yacha

Exercise for [i]

Use a low, open vowel [a] to practice making a very hard (non-palatalized, velarized if possible) sound on your consonant. Try to replicate that consonant sound but following it with the vowel [i]. Allow the consonant's acoustics to modify your [i] naturally into a [i]. The tongue position will ideally end up high and central by letting the consonant's articulation influence the vowel. Alternatively, you may have to most success by practicing the syllable first with the vowel we use in "huh" then with the [i].

ma, 'muh', mi

(Dark L) mila, "miluh", mili

b'ednakh, "b'ednuhkh", b'ednikh

ba, "buh", bi

d'erzhat'e, "d'erzhuh't'e", d'erzhit'e

vashla, "vuhshla", vishla

Russian singing diction tips.

- Don't over-pronounce your consonants.** Especially when singing in Russian for the first time, a lot of the habits we pick up from trying to have good diction when singing in English will lead to incorrect and incomprehensible sounds in Russian. Avoid aspirating, lengthening, doubling consonants in an attempt to project consonant sounds. Accurately articulated sounds will be heard. Consonants unnecessarily aspirated, lengthened, and doubled will sound vulgar or comic. Instead, try to pronounce all consonants correctly, simply, and legato.
- Do emphasize stressed syllables,** especially the stressed syllable of the one or two most important words of the sentence. Stressed syllables are printed in bold type in the transcription. The "intonational center" in a spoken Russian sentence is indicated by increasing vowel loudness, increasing vowel length, and changing the pitch of the stressed syllable of the important word. Tchaikovsky already told us our pitches, so we must show emphasis through loudness, length, and vocal color. Every phrase should be organized around movement to and from the most important one or two words.
- Do sing legato whenever possible.** Russian has a linguistically rare feature: fully voiced consonants. The vocal chords start phonating in Russian voiced consonants before the onset of the vowel. For unvoiced consonants, the vocal chords start phonating right at the beginning of the vowel but without aspiration. (Contrast with English where the difference between voiced

and unvoiced consonants is primarily determined by lack or presence of aspiration. This is why the Russian word пал ‘pal’ may be heard as ‘ball’ to an English native speaker.) Anyway, the point is that the full voicing of Russian voiced consonants and lack of aspiration makes a great linguistic environment for gorgeous legato singing!

4. **Rearrange the letters and spaces in your transcriptions to make consonant clusters a cinch.**

Russian sometimes has consonant clusters at the beginning of words that are long or use combinations of letters we don't do not meet in English. English has its own long and complicated consonant clusters, but they are between words. Whenever the Russian cluster is not the first word in the sentence, you can make things easier on your brain by writing the first consonant or two of the cluster as the end of the previous word. The cluster will magically be easy to pronounce and will sound right. For example, during the ball scene there is a line: (5) у nikh pashlo н'е fshutku д'ela. You may adjust your text to instead be spelled: (5) у nikh pashlo н'ef shutku д'ela