

Italian Pronunciation - a Primer for Singers

The goal of this little guide is to help those with little or no knowledge of Italian pronunciation avoid some of the errors most commonly made by American English speakers. If you've sung much Italian, you probably know most or all of what's in here.

Italian spelling is largely phonetic; that is, with only a few exceptions a single letter or cluster of letters represents the same sound, and each sound occurring in the language has only a single written representation. Even so, a short, informal guide like this one can't cover the subject in any depth, and no written material can substitute for repeatedly and attentively listening to good spoken and sung Italian.

Vowels

There are only 7 Italian vowel sounds (one each for **a**, **i** and **u**; two each for **e** and **o**) compared to 15 or so in English

When two or more vowels occur in a row, they are always pronounced separately, as in Australia [a-u-stra-li-a]

	English equivalent	Example
a	(open) like a in papa	mamma
e	1. (open) like e in set 2. (closed) like a in say	1. bello 2. sera
i	(closed) like ee in steep	amico
o	1. (open) like o in pot 2. (closed) like o in post	1. otto 2. sole
u	(closed)_like oo in boot	uno

The most striking differences between Italian and English vowels are

- **Italian vowels are pure.** A sound written with a single letter has a single, unchanged value, whereas in English the sound often changes from one pure sound to another. For example, the **o** in **go** changes from the pure o-sound of Italian to the sound made by **oo** in the English word **boot**.
- **Unaccented English vowels tend to change value towards a more neutral sound ; Italian vowels don't.** Compare the two **a**'s in **amass**. No Italian vowel ever makes a sound (schwa) like the first **a**.

One-sound vowels a, i, u

Italian **a** is very open. For many American English speakers, it is similar to the short **o** in **hot** or to the first **a** in **papa**. It should **never** sound like **uh** or **aw**.

i and **u** are easier because they make sounds which regularly occur in just about everyone's English. Italian **i** makes a long **e** sound, as in the word **steep**. Italian **u** makes the sound of **oo** in **boot**.

Two-sound vowels e, o

Each has a so-called "open" and "closed" sound. Although there are some rules about which sound to use, there is plenty they don't cover. There is often no way to know which sound to use in a particular word if you haven't heard it spoken correctly. It's much too complicated a subject to embark on here, but there is one simple rule for the spoken language: Italian unstressed **e** and **o** are always closed. It's not always the case for sung Italian, however.

Open **e** makes a sound similar to English **short e**, as in **bet**; **the Italian sound is maybe a bit more open (mouth taller)**. Long **e** makes a sound like the **a** in **chaotic**. It's not the same as the much more common (in English) vowel sound in **way** since this slides from the sound we're looking for into **ee**.

Open **o** is like the vowel in **awe** if you say it without any hint of diphthong. Closed **o**, like closed **e**, rarely occurs in English without sliding into something else. It's the first vowel sound in **go**, before it turns into **oo**.

Diphthongs

Diphthongs (always written with 2 vowels) are frequent in Italian. Sometimes **i** is pronounced like **y** in **yard** (e.g. in the word **pietà**) rather than having its normal value, and similarly **u** may make a sound like English **w** (**guarda**). The rules for when this happens are too complicated to go into here. Other than these cases, each vowel in a diphthong has its usual sound, though in a stressed syllable one is longer than the other (no easy rule to determine which should be the long one), and the two sounds are distinct, with no slide from one into the other.

Consonants

This section mentions all consonants which have more than one sound and some additional consonants whose Italian sound is enough **unlike** English that an English pronunciation will stand out unpleasantly in an Italian word.

Double consonants

Double consonants in Italian should take noticeably longer to say than the corresponding single consonants. Usually (unless the setting of text to music makes it impossible) the same is true in sung Italian. It's obvious how to do this for a consonant like **s** or **n** but even stopped consonants, like the double **tt** in **tutto** can and should be made longer. Just hold the position of your mouth when the consonant is formed (in the case of **t** this would be with your tongue up against your teeth) for a bit, then release.

Hard and soft: interactions among c, g, sc, h, and i

As in English, **c** and **g** may be hard or soft. Each is **hard** when followed by a (different) consonant or by one of the vowels **a**, **o** or **u** and is **soft** when followed by **e** or **i**. The hard sounds are similar to English: **g** as in **good**, **c** as in **car**. Soft **g** is also similar to English, like the **g** in **general**. However Italian soft **c** is like English **ch** in **chess**. But there are some additional wrinkles:

- **h** following a **g** or **c** makes it hard
- an **i** usually gets "used up" in making a consonant soft and has no sound of its own
- The soft sound make by **sc** is like the sound **sh** makes in **ship**

Here are examples of practically everything that can happen to a **c**.

Italian letters	sound	English example	example word
c followed by o, a or u	hard c	c in car	così
c followed by consonants other than c	hard c	c in car	clemenza
c followed by i or e	soft c	ch in church	città
c followed by h	hard c	c in car	Pinocchio
c followed by i and additional vowel	soft c, silent i	ch in church	pagliaccio

Here are examples of a **g**.

Italian letters	sound	English example	example word
g followed by o, a or u	hard g	g in goal	gatto, gonna, gusto
g followed by i or e	soft g	g in general	giorno, gelato

r

Italian r is either trilled or flipped, which is just a very short version of a trill.

Double **r** is generally trilled, if the musical setting allows for it.

Exactly when a single **r** should be trilled (and for how long) and when flipped is beyond the scope of this guide, but a good rule of thumb for single **r** is:

- flip if between two vowels (e.g. in "fiori"),
- trill in other positions (initial, preceding another consonant, following another consonant, or at the end of the word), e.g. in "ritorna", "nostro" and "cor".
- An American r-sound is **never appropriate**; better to just leave the sound out altogether.

t and d

t and **d** are less harsh than their English equivalents.

The **t** is not aspirated; that is, you shouldn't be able to feel a strong puff of air in front of your mouth when you say it, as you can with the English version. The difference seems subtle to many English speakers, but not to Italians.

To get a more Italian sound for both letters, your tongue should just touch the back of your teeth, not your gums, and it should be somewhat relaxed, not tense and pointed, at the front.

s and z

s and **z** each can make two sounds: one *voiced* and the other *unvoiced*.

Italian sound	English word example
unvoiced s	mouse
voiced s	dozen
unvoiced z	pizza
voiced z	like English ds in pads

There is no way to tell just from the spelling of a word containing **z** whether the **z** is voiced or not.

s is generally voiced if it:

- (single, not double) occurs between two vowels,
- if it precedes a voiced consonant (as in the word **sdegno**).

The main thing to start with is to just be aware that there are two possible sounds for these letters and listen carefully to an accurate pronunciation of new words containing them.

gn and gl

The Italian sounds represented by these spellings don't exist in English.

Italian **gn** makes a sound *approximately* like the **ny** in the English word **canyon**, but not exactly. To come closer to the Italian sound, the tip of your tongue should touch the back of your bottom teeth.

Similarly, Italian **gl** makes a sound sort of like the sounds in the middle of the word "million", but not quite the same. To come closer to the correct Italian sound, the tip of the tongue should touch the back of the bottom teeth.

Both of these sounds are pronounced as if doubled.

ch and gh

The Italian **ch** makes a sound like the **c** in **car** as in **anche** or **chilo**.

The Italian **gh** makes a sound like the **g** in **goal** as in **spaghetti** or **funghi**.

Source: <http://www.stanford.edu/~jrb/reference/italian.html#ref>
and
<http://www.conversationexchange.com/resources/pronunciation/it/index.php>