

# Latin Pronunciation Guide

## St. Francis de Sales Music Program

There are different ways of pronouncing Ecclesiastical Latin. We use the "Roman" or "Italian" method, with the details specified below. Uniform pronunciation is very important for creating a blended choral sound. Therefore, although you may pronounce Latin differently in other contexts (such as in the classroom or when serving at the altar), please conform to these guidelines, when you sing with us.

### SYLLABIC STRESS

In Latin, two-syllable words are nearly always stressed on the *penultimate* (second-to-last) syllable. Words with more than two syllables are stressed on either the *penult* or the *antepenult* (third-to-last syllable), depending on the makeup of the word.

Liturgical texts sometimes mark a stressed syllable with an acute (´) accent mark. Texts may indicate syllabic stress for all of, some of, or none of the words. The accent mark does not change a syllable's vowel sound but only shows that it has syllabic stress.

### VOWELS

Latin Letter(s)	IPA Transcription	Pronounced as in...	<u>Not</u> as in...
a	[a]	father	can
e, ae, oe	[ɛ]	red, men, met	ray, may
i, y	[i]	feet	milk, tin
o	[ɔ]	for, bought	go, row
u	[u]	moon	custom

The Latin letters and letter combinations listed above each have one vowel sound and one possible pronunciation. They should be pronounced purely and consistently, without introducing other sounds. Unlike Classical Latin, we will not distinguish between long and short Latin vowel sounds.

Latin vowels never become neutral or schwa [ə] vowels, as they often do in the unstressed syllables of English, French, and German words. For example, the name "Maria" is pronounced as "muh-REE-uh" [mə-'ri-ə] in English but must be pronounced as "mah-REE-ah" [ma-'ri-a], in Latin.

As a general rule, when multiple vowels come together, each keeps its own sound and constitutes a separate syllable, but there is *not* a glottal stop between them.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
diéi	[di-'ɛ-i]	dee-EH-ee
fili	['fi-li-i]	FEE-lee-ee
eórum	[ɛ-'ɔ-rum]	eh-OH-room
próut	['prɔ-ut]	PROH-oot
áit	['a-it]	AH-eet
introíbo	[in-trɔ-'i-bɔ]	een-troh-EE-boh
túum	['tu-um]	TOO-oom

## Multiple Vowels That Are Treated as One Syllable

An exception is that, as already indicated, *ae* and *oe* (sometimes written as *æ* and *œ*) are pronounced as one sound and are treated identically to *e*. If such a syllable is stressed, then an acute accent mark might be placed over the *e*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
caelum	[ˈtʃɛ-lum]	CHEH-loom
saecula	[ˈsɛ-ku-la]	SEH-koo-lah
ecclesiae	[ɛk-ˈklɛ-zi-ɛ]	ehk-KLEH-zee-eh
proelium	[ˈprɛ-li-um]	PREH-lee-oom
coeptis	[ˈtʃɛp-tis]	CHEHP-tees
poenitentiam	[pɛ-ni-ˈtɛn-tsi-am]	peh-nee-TEHN-tsee-ahm

Moreover, there are a few diphthongs: *au*, *eu*, and *ay*. In the diphthongs, the two vowels each maintain their pure sound but are simply pronounced as one syllable rather than two. In such cases, the first vowel is emphasized and the second vowel is de-emphasized. If multiple notes are sung on a diphthong, then all of the notes are sung on the first vowel, except the very last note.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
lauda	[ˈla:u-da]	LAH:oo-dah
Euge	[ˈɛ:u-dʒɛ]	EH:oo-jeh

## Hardening & Softening Vowels

As in a number of the Romance languages, Church Latin has hardening and softening vowels. *A*, *o*, and *u* are hardening vowels. *E*, *ae*, *oe*, *i*, and *y* are softening vowels. The significance of this is explained below.

## CONSONANTS

### Consonants Affected by the Vowel That Follows

Some consonants and consonant combinations have a hard or soft sound, depending on the following vowel. *A*, *o*, and *u* tend to harden the preceding consonant; while *e*, *ae*, *oe*, *i*, and *y* tend to soften the preceding consonant.

### Approximate English Sound

Latin Letter(s)	Hard Sound		Soft Sound	
	(before <i>a</i> , <i>o</i> , and <i>u</i> )		(before <i>e</i> , <i>ae</i> , <i>oe</i> , <i>i</i> , and <i>y</i> )	
c	k	[k]	ch	[tʃ]
g	g	[g]	j	[dʒ]
sc	sk	[sk]	sh	[ʃ]
xc	ks	[ks]	ksh or gsh	[kʃ] or [gʃ]

*C* has a hard sound (*k*) before *a*, *o*, and *u*; as in the English word *cocoa*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
júdica	[ˈju-di-ka]	YOO-dee-kah
confitébor	[kɔn-fi-ˈtɛ-bɔr]	kohn-fee-TEH-bohr
inimicus	[i-ni-ˈmi-kus]	ee-nee-MEE-koos

*C* has a soft sound (*ch*) before *e*, *ae*, *oe*, *i*, and *y*; as in the English word *church*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
Cecília	[tʃɛ-ˈtʃi-li-a]	ch eh-CHEE-lee-ah
caéli	[ˈtʃɛ-li]	CHEH-lee
cýmbalis	[ˈtʃim-ba-lis]	CHEEM-bah-lee

*G* has a hard sound (*g*) before *a*, *o*, and *u*; as in the English word *government*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
gaudéte	[ga:u-ˈdɛ-tɛ]	gah:oo-DEH-teh
égo	[ˈɛ-gɔ]	EH-goh
gubernátor	[gu-bɛr-ˈna-tɔr]	goo-behr-NAH-tohr

*G* has a soft sound (*j*) before *e*, *ae*, *oe*, *i*, and *y*; as in the English word *generous*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
mágister	[ˈma-dʒi-stɛr]	MAH-jee-stehr
génitum	[ˈdʒɛ-ni-tum]	JEH-nee-toom
Regína	[rɛ-ˈdʒi-na]	reh-JEE-nah
Evangélium	[ɛ-van-ˈdʒɛ-li-um]	eh-vahn-JEH-lee-oom

*SC* has a hard sound (*sk*) before *a*, *o*, and *u*; as in the English word *scan*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
scápuilis	[ˈska-pu-lis]	SKAH-poo-lee
scóbis	[ˈskɔ-bis]	SKOH-bee
scúto	[ˈsku-tɔ]	SKOO-toh

*SC* has a soft sound (*sh*) before *e*, *ae*, *oe*, *i*, and *y*; as in the *sh* in the English word *shed*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
ascéndit	[a-ʃɛn-dit]	ah-SHEHN-deet
discérne	[di-ˈʃɛr-nɛ]	dee-SHEHR-neh
sciéntia	[ʃi-ˈɛn-tsi-a]	shee-EHN-tsee-ah
suscípiat	[su-ˈʃi-pi-at]	soo-SHEE-pee-aht

*XC* has a hard sound (*ks*) before *a*, *o*, and *u*.; as in the English word *Excalibur*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
excánto	[eks-'kan-tɔ]	ehks-KAHN-toh
excólo	[eks-'kɔ-lɔ]	ehks-KOH-loh
excussórum	[eks-kus-'sɔ-rum]	ehks-koos-SOH-room

*XC* has a soft sound (*ksh* or *gsh*) before *e*, *ae*, *oe*, *i*, and *y*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
excélsis	[ɛg-'ʃɛl-sis]	ehg-SHEHL-sees
excíto	[ɛg-'ʃi-tɔ]	ehg-SHEE-toh

### Complicated Conditions

Ordinarily, *t* has a hard sound (*t*), as in the English word *tuba*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
Pátrēm	[ˈpa-treɪm]	PAH-trehm
térra	[ˈteɪ-ra]	TEHR-rah
altáre	[al-'ta-re]	ahl-TAH-reh

However, *ti* can have a hard (*tee*) or a soft (*tsee*) sound, depending on the surrounding letters.

*TI* has a hard sound (*tee*), if it is not followed by another vowel within the same word.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
laetíficat	[le-'ti-fi-kat]	leh-TEE-fee-kaht
trístis	[ˈtris-tis]	TREES-tees
omnipoténti	[ɔm-ni-pɔ-'ten-ti]	ohm-nee-poh-TEHN-tee

*TI* also has a hard (*tee*) sound when it comes after *s*, *t*, or *x*; even if it's followed by another vowel within the same word.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
hóstia	[ˈɔs-ti-a]	OHS-tee-ah
béstia	[ˈbes-ti-a]	BEHS-tee-ah

*TI* has a soft sound (*tsee*) when it is followed by another vowel within the same word (and is not preceded by *s*, *t*, or *x*).

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
patiéntia	[pat-si-'ent-si-a]	paht-see-EHNT-see-ah
grátia	[ˈgrat-si-a]	GRAHT-see-ah
constitútio	[kɔn-sti-'tut-si-ɔ]	kohn-stee-TOOT-see-oh
laetítia	[le-'tit-si-a]	leh-TEET-see-ah

## The Softer Side of S

Outside of the combinations of consonants included above, certain letters have a hard sound on their own but are somewhat softened between two vowels.

### Approximate English Sound

Latin Letter(s)	Hard Sound (usually)	Soft Sound (between two vowels)
s	s	z
x	ks	gz

*S* ordinarily has a hard sound (*s*), as in the English word *sea*. It always has a hard sound at the beginning of a word, for example.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
súis	[ˈsu-is]	SOO-ees
pénnis	[ˈpɛn-nis]	PEHN-nees

However, *s* is slightly softened (towards English *z*) between two vowels within the same word.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
Jésus	[ˈjɛ-zus]	YEH-zoos
miserére	[mi-zɛ-ˈrɛ-ɛ]	mee-zeh-REH-reh

*X* ordinarily has a hard sound (*ks*), as in the English word *cortex*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
pax	[paks]	pahks
déxter	[ˈdɛk-stɛr]	DEHK-stehr
éxtra	[ˈɛk-stra]	EK-strah

However, *x* is slightly softened (towards English *gz*) between two vowels; as in the English word *exalt*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
exércitus	[ɛg-ˈzɛr-tʃi-tus]	ehg-ZEHR-chee-toos
auxílium	[a:ug-ˈzi-li-um]	ah:oog-ZEE-lee-oom
exaltábo	[eg-zal-ˈta-bo]	ehg-zahl-TAH-boh

## The Strange Case of the Letter H

*Ph* has an *f* sound, as in the English word *phonics*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
triúmphum	[tri-ˈum-fum]	tree-OOM-foom
scápha	[ˈska-fa]	SKAH-fah
pharisaéi	[fa-ri-ˈzɛ-i]	fah-ree-ZEH-ee

Any other time that *h* comes after a consonant, it hardens the sound of that consonant, regardless of what vowel follows. Therefore, *ch*, *gh*, and *th* all have the hard sound of their initial consonant.

*CH* has a hard sound (*k*), regardless of surrounding letters.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
máchina	['ma-ki-na]	MAH-kee-nah
pulchéllus	[pul-'kɛl-lus]	pool-KEHL-loos
charísma	[ka-'ris-ma]	kah-REES-mah
níchil	['ni-kil]	NEE-keel

Since the words *nihil*, *mihi*, and their compounds were spelled with a *ch* (rather than just an *h*), in some time periods; we give the *h* in these specific words the same hard sound as Latin *ch*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
níchil	['ni-kil]	NEE-keel
míhi	['mi-ki]	MEE-kee

*TH* has a hard sound (*t*), too, regardless of surrounding letters.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
Cathólicam	[ka-'tɔ-li-kam]	kah-TOH-lee-kahm
Thómas	['tɔ-mas]	TOH-mahs

In all other cases, *h* is completely silent.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
hyssópo	[is-'sɔ-pɔ]	ees-SOH-poh
hómo	['ɔ-mɔ]	OH-moh
hómínes	['ɔ-mi-nɛs]	OH-mee-nehs
haec	[ɛk]	ehk
hóra	['ɔ-ra]	OH-rah

### The Enigmatic Engma

In some circumstances, *nc* and *ng* are given an engma (English *ng*) sound.

When *nc* comes at the end of a word, the *n* makes the same sound as in the English word *thank*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
tunc	[tuŋk]	toongk
nunc	[nuŋk]	noongk

When *nc* is followed by *t*, the *n* makes the same engma sound.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
sánctus	['saŋk-tus]	SANGK-toos
púnctum	['puŋk-tum]	POONGK-toom

When *ng* is followed by a hardening vowel (*a*, *o*, and *u*), it also gets an engma sound.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
contingo	[kɔn-'tiŋ-gɔ]	kohn-TEENG-goh
angústia	[aŋ-'gus-ti-a]	ahng-GOOS-tee-ah

When *ngu* is followed by another vowel within the same word, the *ng* gets an engma sound; and the *gu* makes a *gw* sound that forms one syllable (*i.e.*, a glide) with the vowel that follows.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
sánguis	['saŋ-gwis]	SAHNG-gwees
língua	['liŋ-gwa]	LEENG-gwah
extínguo	[eks-tiŋ-gwɔ]	ehks-TEENG-gwoh

### Another Glide About Which to be Glad

QU makes a *kw* sound and also forms a glide with the vowel that follows it, as in the English word *quality*.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
qui	[kwi]	kwee
que	[kwɛ]	kweh
quod	[kwɔd]	kwohd

Unlike *qui*, the word *cui* is actually two syllables ['ku-i] ("koo-ee"), but is sometimes treated as one syllable [kwi] ("kwee") in certain hymns due to metrical considerations.

### Beware the I's of Church

When *i* comes at the beginning of a word or between two vowels within the same word, it is pronounced as *y* would be in English and forms one syllable with the following vowel. Sometimes, this semiconsonant form of *i* is instead written as a *j*. It is pronounced the same way, regardless of which letter is used to represent it.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
Jésus	['jɛ-zus]	YEH-zoos
Ioánnem	[jɔ-'an-nɛm]	yoh-AHN-nehm
allelúia	[al-lɛ-'lu-ja]	ahl-leh-LOO-yah
májor	['ma-jɔr]	MAH-yohr

### A Couple of More Consonant Sounds

*GN* has the softened (*ny*) sound given to these letters in French and Italian.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
Agnus	['an-jus]	AHN-yoos
régnum	['rɛn-jum]	REHN-yoom
magníficat	[man-'ji-fi-kat]	mahn-YEE-fee-kaht

Z makes a *dz* sound.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
Zizánia	[dzid-'za-ni-a]	dzeed-ZAH-nee-ah
zámia	['dza-mi-a]	DZAH-mee-ah

### Consonantal Coincidences

When multiple consonant sounds occur with no vowel in-between, they are articulated by closing to the first consonant sound(s) at the end of the preceding syllable, and then making the remaining sound(s) at the beginning of the following syllable.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
allelúia	[al-lɛ-'lu-ja]	ahl-leh-LOO-yah
sanctíssima	[sanʝk-'tis-si-ma]	sahngk-TEES-see-mah

With doubles of the same consonant, we do not merely make the same sound twice, but must consider what sound an individual consonant would make in the same context. Take, for example, *cc*.

*C* has an English *k* sound before hardening vowels (*a*, *o*, and *u*). Therefore, to articulate *cc* before the same vowels, we must close to an English *k* sound at the end of the preceding syllable and then continue that sound at the beginning of the next.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
accúso	[ak-ku-zɔ]	ahk-KOO-zoh
ecclésiae	[ɛk-'klɛ-zi-ɛ]	ehk-KLEH-zee-eh
peccáta	[pek-'ka-ta]	pehk-KAH-tah

However, when *c* is before softening vowels (*e*, *ae*, *oe*, *i*, and *y*), it makes an English *ch* sound. Therefore, to articulate *cc* before these vowels, we must close to an English *ch* sound at the end of the preceding syllable and then continue that sound at the beginning of the next. Phonetically, this involves closing to a *t* sound and then making a *ch* sound.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
écce	['et-tʃɛ]	EHT-cheh
acceptábile	[at-tʃɛp-'ta-bi-lɛ]	aht-chehp-TAH-bee-leh
occídi	[ɔt-'tʃi-di]	oht-CHEE-dee
succéndo	[sut-'tʃɛn-dɔ]	soot-CHEHN-doh

Double and triple consonants should always be articulated, unless their position within the music renders this a practical impossibility.

## The Letter R, Since We're Already on a Roll

Latin *r* is trilled/rolled or flipped, as it is in Italian and Spanish. With the *r* in American English, the tongue tends to be pulled back and down. For Latin *r*, we instead need to place the tongue forward and up, as it would be when we make a *d* or *l* sound; or when we say the *tt* in the English word *better*.

For those who are not yet able to trill an *r*, an acceptable alternative is to replace each *r* with a gentle *d* or *l* sound. Fortunately, there are many videos on the internet that aim to help English-speakers roll the letter *r*.

Once a singer can make the trilled *r* sound easily, it is helpful to make a distinction between longer and shorter *r* sounds. When a trilled *r* is very brief, then we instead call it a flipped *r*. More capable singers should work towards a thoughtful choice between trilled and flipped *r*. Eventually, this will become instinctive.

Generally, a single *r* should be flipped when it comes between two vowels. Consider, for example, the following words:

*Spiritu*      *quáre*      *glória*

At the beginning/end of a word as well as before/after another consonant, it is often necessary to gently trill a single *r* for practical or semantic reasons, as in these words:

*Christe*      *mágister*      *exsúrge*      *Regína*

Double *r* is also trilled, as in the following words:

*térra*      *currículum*      *horréndus*

These are not rigid rules but give an idea of practical best practices. When in doubt, err on the side of the shorter, flipped *r* in liturgical singing, since it is more restrained and less dramatic.

Care must be taken not to modify the vowel sound in the syllable preceding an *r*.

<b>Word</b>	<b>IPA Transcription</b>	<b>Pronounced as...</b>	<b><u>Not</u> as...</b>
Kýrie	['ki-ri-ɛ]	KEE-ree-eh	KEAR-ee-eh
sapere	['sa-pɛ-rɛ]	SAH-peh-reh	SAH-pear-eh
diligere	[di-'li-gɛ-rɛ]	dee-LEE-jeh-reh	dee-LEE-jeyer-eh

## A Consonant Conclusion

A consonant (or consonant cluster) receives its hard sound, *unless* it is softened according to the rules covered above.

All of the individual consonants not already discussed (*b, d, f, k, l, m, n, p, q, v*) are pronounced as in English.

One final *caveat*: in Latin (as in Italian and Spanish) the *k, p,* and *t* sounds should not involve a violent puff of air (as they might in English). In fact, usually English-speakers can improve their Latin by moving these sounds towards *g, b,* and *d,* respectively, but without voicing the consonants (*i.e.*, without allowing the vocal chords to vibrate).

## FOREIGN WORDS

We will pronounce Greek words (such as *Kýrie* and *Hágios*) as though they were Latin.

In certain words brought into Latin from Hebrew, *ae* is split into two syllables and pronounced as its component letters would be [a-ɛ] "ah-eh." In these cases, a dieresis (¨) is sometimes used to indicate the separation of the vowels.

Latin Word	IPA Transcription	Approximate Pronunciation
Israël	[ˈis-ɾa-ɛl]	EES-rah-ehl
Míchaël	[ˈmi-ka-ɛl]	MEE-kah-ehl

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