

Pronouncing Church Latin

PRONOUNCING CHURCH LATIN: A QUICK REFERENCE

Throughout the history of the church, singers have sung their Latin in ways closely related to the habits of pronunciation in their own languages. As a result one can give no single set of rules for the correct performance of Latin sacred music from all times and places. If you listen to a number of recordings, you will soon notice a number of different ways of treating the language. Nevertheless, the following will give some general hints for a practice based on an Italian foundation that has been widely used by English speakers.

Vowels

a is pronounced as in father: sanctam (sahngk-tahm).

e is pronounced as in egg: ane (ahn-teh).

i is pronounced as in machine: filii (fee-lee-ee).

y is pronounced the same as i: Kyrie (kee-ree-eh).

o is pronounced as in tone: omnia (ohm-nee-ah).

u is pronounced as in ruler: unum (oo-noom).

Note: When two vowels appear together, each is pronounced: mei (meh-ee). (This rule does not apply in the cases of certain diphthongs—see below.)

Diphthongs

ae and oe are pronounced like e: saeculum (seh-koo-loom).

au and eu are treated as single syllables, but each vowel is pronounced distinctly.

In singing, the first vowel is sustained, as in other combinations of two vowels: lauda (lah-oo-dah).

Consonants

The consonants b, d, f, k, l, m, n, p, s, t, and y are pronounced as in English.

c before e, i, y, ae, oe is pronounced ch: coelo (ch eh-loh); in all other cases,

c is pronounced k: cantus (kahn-toos).

cc before e, i, y, ae, oe is pronounced tch: ecce (eht-cheh).

ch is pronounced k: cherubim (keh-roo-beem).

g before e, i, y, ae, oe is soft (as in gel): genitum (jeh-nee-toom); otherwise, g is hard (as in go): gaudeamus (gah-oo-deh-ah-moos).

gn is pronounced ny: agnus (ah-nyoos).

h is mute, except in special instances, when it is pronounced kh: mihi (mee-khee) and nihil (nee-kheel).

j is pronounced as y: Jesu (yeh-soo).

qu is pronounced as kw: qui (kwee).

r is lightly rolled with the tongue.

sc before e, i, y, ae, oe is pronounced sh: ascendit (ah-shehn-deet).

th is pronounced as if the h were absent, as in Thomas.

ti before a vowel and after any letter except s, t, or x is pronounced tsee: gratia (grah-tsee-a).

x is pronounced ks: ex (ehks).

xc before e, i, y, ae, oe is pronounced ksh: excelsis (ehk-shehl-sees).