

Handy-Dandy Latin Pronunciation Guide

1. Overview: Though now considered a “dead” language, Latin is very much alive in Western music, since composers from medieval times through the 17th century almost invariably composed sacred music in Latin rather than in their native tongue. It’s also kept alive today in countless expressions and words that are so well assimilated into English that people don’t recognize them as Latinate (*saliva, cranium, per capita, carpe diem, curriculum vitae; media* and *data* as the plurals of *medium* and *datum*—or at least they used to be). If you study Latin in school you are probably used to one sort of pronunciation (called Classical Latin—with *c* and *g* always hard, as in *hacker* and *garage*, and *v* sounding as *w*). When we sing Latin, or Roman Catholic officials speak it, another kind of pronunciation is used, called Church or Ecclesiastical Latin. This is largely Italianate, and probably resembles the way it was pronounced during the Middle Ages in Italy by the intellectual classes (and priests). Of course there were many variants, so now you’ll often hear early music specialists and some choirs singing in what they think was 17th-century “German Latin,” or 18th-century “French Latin,” and so on. The guide below is for the Ecclesiastical Latin that still is most often heard.

2. Important vowel sounds, singly and in combinations:

<i>a</i>	warm and open, as in <i>father</i>
<i>e</i>	as in <i>men</i> or <i>red</i> ; never as in <i>Ray</i>
<i>i</i> and <i>y</i>	= <i>ee</i> , as in <i>machine, feet</i>
<i>o</i>	= <i>aw</i> , as in <i>bought</i>
<i>u</i>	= <i>oo</i> , as in <i>tutor, moon</i>
<i>ae, oe</i>	= slightly closed <i>eh</i>
other double vowels	two sounds, emphasis on first

(examples)

ad, mater, sanctus
te
in, qui, Kyrie
gloria, omnis (awm-nees)
cum, sanctus
coelum, caelum (same word)
lauda, filii, eorum, ait

3. Important consonants, singly and in combinations:

<i>c</i> (before <i>e, ae, oe, i</i>)	= <i>ch</i> , as in <i>church</i>
<i>cc</i> (before same)	= <i>t-ch</i>
<i>sc</i> (before same)	= <i>sh</i> , as in <i>shed</i>
<i>c</i> (in all other cases), <i>ch</i>	hard, as in English <i>k</i>
<i>g</i> (before <i>e, ae, i, y</i>)	soft, as in <i>gentle</i>
<i>g</i> (before other letters)	hard, as in <i>go</i>
<i>gn</i>	= <i>ny</i> as in <i>canyon</i>
<i>h</i>	silent, except as <i>k</i> in
<i>j</i> (or consonant <i>i</i>)	= <i>y</i> as in <i>yes</i>
<i>r</i>	slightly rolled and separate
<i>s</i>	= <i>s</i> as in <i>sea</i> , sometimes softened
<i>sc</i> (before <i>a, o, u</i>)	= <i>sc</i> as in <i>scope</i>
<i>t</i> and <i>th</i>	= <i>t</i> as in <i>ten</i>
<i>ti</i> (before a vowel and following any letter except <i>s, x, t</i>)	= <i>tsee</i>
<i>x</i> (in words beginning <i>ex</i>)	= <i>ks</i>
<i>xc</i> (before <i>e, ae, oe, i</i>)	= <i>ksh</i>
<i>x</i> (before other vowels)	= normal hard sound
<i>z</i>	= <i>dz</i>

caelum, Cecilia (che-chee-lee-a)
siccitas, ecce (et-che)
scio, descendit (de-shen-deet)
caritas, Christus, machina
magi, Regina, genitor
gratis, gloria
Magnificat, agnus (ah-nyoos)
nihil (nee-keel), *mihi* (mee-kee)
Jesus, alleluia, major (mah-yor)
carnis, Kyrie (Kee-ree-e)
fides, misericordia
scutum, Pascha
catholicam, Thomas, except for
gratia, patientia (pa-tsee-en-tsee-a)
constitutio (con-stee-tu-tsee-o)
laetitia (lae-tee-tsee-a; *exception*)
exaudi, pax
excelsis (ek-shel-sees)
excussorum (eks-koos-so-room)
zizania (dzee-dzahn-ee-a)