

German Transcriptions & Translations

The International Phonetic Alphabet transcriptions used in the German texts correspond in the most part to the pronunciation suggested in the *Duden's, Das Aussprachewörterbuch*. An added source of reference was the Langenscheidt's Euro-Set on CD-rom. Translations were made with the using the Langenscheidt's Euro-Set, the Oxford, German/English Dictionary, the WordAce Talking Translation Dictionary from Transparent Language, and the Oxford, Pop-up German dictionary for the PC.

German pronunciation. In many respects, German is a very easy language to pronounce for speakers of English. It, like Italian, is commonly said to be a “phonetic” language; that is, for each letter there are normally no more than one or two pronunciations and for each pronunciation there are usually no more than one or two spellings. Even when there are two pronunciations for a single letter, the singer will be relieved to find that German is a language of order. Rules are rules, and one abides by them with relatively few exceptions.

The many aspirate consonants, the use of the glottal stop, and the uvular *-r* heard in the conversational language often gives rise to the misconception that German is a guttural language. This is an unfortunate misconception. Such an approach to the language can be disastrous to good vocal production, and further, it will not lead to good German diction. Indeed, proper pronunciation of German requires bright and forward vowels, projected by “forward moving” consonants.

Students of German diction are fortunate in having at their disposal a definitive reference work, *Deutsche Hochsprache* by Theodore Siebs. Intended for the use by professional actors, singers, and announcers, Siebs provides IPA transcriptions of most German and foreign words and proper names commonly used in the German language. Rules presented here are those for stage German.

German Diphthongs

Although the German syllable normally contains only one vowel sound, the German language makes use of three diphthongs. There are at least three accepted IPA transcriptions for the three German diphthongs.

Possible transcriptions	1	2	3
-ai, -ei, -ay, -ey	= [a:e]	[a:i]	[a:ɪ]
-au	= [a:o]	[a:u]	[a:ʊ]
-eu, -äu	= [ɔ:ʏ]	[ɔ:i]	[ɔ:ɪ]

Although the transcriptions under #1 are a bit more difficult to read for the English speaking singer, they more accurately represent the sound of the German language and correspond to the standard transcriptions found in dictionaries published for the German speaking public. Those pronunciations listed under #3 correspond to the English pronunciation. There is a slight rounding of the lips at the end of the diphthongs that differentiates the German *mein Haus* from the English *mine house*.

Changes in German orthography

In 2000, the German spelling rules received a "facelift." In order to standardize the spelling and grammatical rules a great deal of inconsistencies in syllabification, spelling, capitalization, and use of punctuation were addressed. It is not necessary here to go into all the changes that have taken place since most of the changes have not been adopted in the classic poetry used in song literature. For further information on this subject, I suggest the book, *Wie schreibt man jetzt?* published by Duden.

Below is a short summary of the changes I have made in this text.

Syllabification: Previously, the consonant combinations *-pf* and *-st* were not divided in syllabification. The new rules allow for their division. The combination *-ck* was previously divided as *k-k*, now the combination *-ck* is kept together and treated as the *-ch*, *-ph*, *-th*, and *-sch* and placed with the following syllable.

The *-ß* and *-ss*: The *-ß* is used in place of the *-ss* when the preceding vowel is pronounced long and closed. Previously, this rule had many exceptions. The newest usage does away with the irregularities and, except in proper names, the old spellings are replaced with the spelling that most accurately shows the color of the preceding vowel.

Old spelling	New spelling
muß (<i>must</i>) [mʊs]	muss [mʊs]
daß (<i>that</i>) [das]	dass [das]
kuß (<i>kiss</i>) [kʊs]	kuss [kʊs]

Double consonants

In normal speech, double consonants are not stressed. One does not hear *Wellen* [ˈvɛl.lən] or *Mutter* [ˈmʊt.təʁ] as we would in Italian but rather [ˈvɛ.lən] and [ˈmʊ.təʁ]. Instead of dwelling on the double consonant, the native speaker will shorten and open the preceding vowel, "clipping" the entire word. In this text all double consonants will be transcribed as single consonants in keeping with standard transcription practices for spoken German.

The expressive use of double consonants in singing is much more difficult to capture since it reflects an emotional choice.

The German *-r*

The letter *-r* is normally represented in dictionaries as the trilled [r]. In speech, the pronunciation of the *-r* is uvular; that is, it involves contact between the far back part of the tongue and the uvula, producing a gargling sound. This pronunciation, transcribed as [ʁ], is used in singing popular songs and in spoken dialogue but should be avoided in art song and opera.

There are three distinct sounds for the sung German *-r*, two used in the pronunciation of Latin and Italian and one that is similar to the reflexive *-r* found in English.

1. Pronounce *-r* as the trilled [r] when initial in a word or medial when following or preceding a consonant.

traben ['tra:ˌbən] unsre ['ʔunz.rə] bringen ['brɪ.ŋən]

The trilled [r] is used after open vowels.

fort [fɔrt] ort [ʔɔrt] Bern [bɛrn]

2. The single-tap *-r* [r] is used when found between two vowels including adverbs when the first preposition ends in an *-r* and the second begins with a vowel.

zögere ['tsø:ˌgø.rə] daran (adverb) [dar.'an] ware ['vɛ:ˌrə]

3. When found after a closed-long vowel either at the end of a word or element or before a consonant, the single *-r* is pronounced with a reduced R-colored non-syllabic vowel written as the turned A [ɐ], the sound of this vowel is similar to the *-r* in the British pronunciation of the words *hair* and *butter*.

Bier [bi:ɐ] Pferd [pfe:ɐt] fährst [fɛ:ɐst]

The final *-r* in the prefixes *dar-*, *er-*, *her-*, *vor-*, and *zer-* is pronounced as the non-syllabic [ɐ].

erlangen [ɛɐ.'la.ŋən] herkommen [hɛɐ.'kɔ.mən] herbei (adverb) [hɛɐ.'ba:ɐ]

In the combination *-er*, either at the end of a word or a word element, the entire syllable takes the sound of the syllabic [ɐ]. Care must be taken not to mistake the final *-er* spelling for the pronoun *er* [e:ɐ] or the prefix *er-* as in *erlangen* [ɛɐ.'la.ŋən].

Vater ['fa:ˌtɛ] wiedersehen ['wi:ˌdɛ.zɛ:ˌən]

This is quite appropriate in German to fill the entire syllable with the sound of the turned A [ɐ].

erobern [ɛɐ.'ʔo:ˌbən] aber ['ʔa:ˌbɛ] hundert ['hun.dɛt]

It is the reflexive *-r* that poses the most problem for the non-native singer. In the years prior to the Second World War and shortly thereafter, the German *-r* was always rolled. During the last quarter of the 20th century the pronunciation of the sung *-r* began to resemble that of the spoken *-r*. It is important to remember that the consonant *-r* is more often spoken and sung with the [ɐ] than it is rolled. Note the usage of the three pronunciations of the German *-r* in the example below.

Herr **Meister** **und** **Frau** **Meisterin,**
[hɛr 'ma:es.te ʔunt fra:o 'ma:es.tɛ.rɪn]

Lasst **mich** **in** **Frieden** **weiterzieh** **und** **wandern.**
[last miç ʔɪn 'fri:ˌdɛn 'va:e.te,tsi:n ʔunt 'van.dɛn]

Use of the Glottal Stop

In German, unlike French and Italian, words beginning with a vowel will be preceded by a glottal stop [ʔ]. The glottal stop is also used with a complex word when the second element begins with a vowel. Example: *uralter* (ancient) ['ʔu:ɐ.ʔal.tɐ].

Exception: when the first element of an adverb ends with a consonant and the second element begins with a vowel, do not use the glottal stop but elide the final consonant into the next element. Example: *hinein* [hɪn.'a:ɛn]

The IPA symbol for the glottal can be given as either [ʔ] or [ʔ̚]. Since the [ʔ̚] looks quite similar to the lower case *l* [l], IPA Source uses the [ʔ̚].

In singing it is important to make use of the glottal stop to ensure idiomatic pronunciation. In practice, native German singers are more flexible in their application of the glottal stop. For example, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, in the opening phrase of [Gute Nacht](#) from Schubert's *Die Winterreise* sings:

Fremd bin_ich ʔeingezogen

Fremd zieh_ich wieder ʔaus

Click the link to hear it sung and you will notice that the glottal stops are extremely light and only before the words beginning with back vowels.

Here is another example from [Wasserflut](#):

Manche Trän'_aus meinen ʔAugen

Ist gefallen_in den Schnee;

Seine kalten Flocken saugen

Durstig_ein das_heiße Weh.

Again, Mr. Dieskau elides most final consonants to words beginning with vowels. The one elision marked in red is done with such finesse that, even after repeated hearings, it is difficult to tell if the consonant is elided or if the glottal stop is used.

In the more energetic [Der stürmische Morgen](#) the use of the glottal stop is both strongly marked and ignored.

Mein Herz sieht_an dem Himmel

Gemalt sein ʔeig'nes Bild -

ʔEs_ist nichts_als der Winter,

ʔEs_ist nichts ʔals der Winter,

Der Winter, kalt ʔund wild!

In this example we start to see a pattern of glottal stop usage. Words beginning with front vowels (in this case the [i] and the [ɪ]) will tend to allow the elision of the previous consonant; words beginning with a more open, back vowel ([a], [o], [ɔ] and [ɛ]) will use the glottal stop. But even this is not a firm rule. Look and listen to the repeated lines of text in the last verse. In the first instance the combination *nichts als* is elided and in the second instance Mr. Dieskau uses a clear glottal stop.

The use of the glottal stop is indicated in all instances in the IPA transcriptions of German texts included in this site. How and when you apply the glottal requires taste and familiarity with the German language. Listening closely to German natives will help develop your ear.

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