



Seven mistakes that singers make in Italian diction – and how to avoid them

1. Not differentiating between short and long consonants

In Italian, unlike in English, the meaning of words is based on the length of consonants. For example, saying you know *la nona di Beethoven*, which means you know Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, is very different to saying you know *la nonna di Beethoven* which means you know Beethoven's grandmother!

As well as delivering meaning, the correct proportion and sequencing of short and long consonants also gives Italian its characteristic rhythm and musicality. But singers often make all consonant sounds a similar length; usually this means short consonants aren't short enough and long consonants aren't long enough.

To make the right distinction, it's helpful to think of a long consonant in Italian as four times the length of a short consonant.

Long consonant sounds in Italian include double consonants and most groups of consonants, which you'll see written in the text. Then there are also some 'hidden' long consonants; the rules for identifying these are important to learn and come from Latin. For example, in *ma perché*, the *p* is always geminated i.e., made longer by the preceding *ma*.

The correct articulation of all short and long consonants gives three fundamental ingredients for achieving excellent sung Italian: idiomatic pronunciation, the best phrasing in line with the score and a better connection with the breath and voice.

2. Exploding the sound on stop consonants

Amongst the consonant sounds, the highest proportion are plosive i.e., consonant sounds that are formed by completely stopping the airflow. The mistake that singers often make with long plosive consonants is putting too much emphasis on the release of the sound, creating an explosive sound.

Instead, it's important to focus on the onset of the long consonant where implosion helps to engage the breath support and mechanically relaxes all the muscles around the larynx, allowing the singer to control and resonate the vowel that follows.

3. Making the wet *t* sound

The wet *t* sound happens in Italian because singers position the tongue in the wrong place of articulation. The *t* sound in Italian is a dental consonant which means it's produced by the tip/front section of the tongue meeting the teeth, whereas in English a *t* sound is produced by touching the tongue on the alveolar (the upper gums).

To produce an ideal dry Italian *t*, the best way is to create a complete occlusion (a complete stop to the airflow) by touching the tip of the tongue on the back of both the upper and lower teeth.

4. Squeezing the *s*

When making the *s* sound (a sibilant consonant), singers often squeeze the sound by positioning the tip of the tongue too high behind the upper teeth.

To make a correct Italian *s* sound, singers need to make a larger cavity for the airstream by lowering the tip of the tongue towards the lower teeth and gums. It can be helpful to practise making a loud hissing sound to feel the correct Italian long *s*.

5. Not rolling the *r*

Singers often struggle with rolling the *r* (a vibrant consonant) in sung Italian and some believe they will never be able to do this! But with regular practice and specific exercises, everyone can achieve a rolled *r* (if there are no physical impediments to the tongue).

When practising, it helps to relax the tongue but maintain strong breath support and a steady airflow to allow the vibration to happen easily at the tip of the tongue.

6. Interrupting the long sonorant consonants

Long sonorant consonants include the long nasal sounds *mm* and *nn*, for example in *mamma* or *donna*, where the continuous sound is produced via the nose, and the lateral *ll* produced on both sides of the tongue, for example in *bello*.

While it's fundamental to stop the stop consonant sounds in Italian, singers shouldn't interrupt the flow of continuous sound that is important for long sonorant consonants. It's helpful to practise vocalising with long sonorant consonants such as *mm*, *nn* and *ll*, to enjoy singing smoothly through these sounds without interruption.

7. Adding a ghost vowel where there should be a co-articulation

When a singer sings a group of consonants, it's sometimes possible to hear a brief ghost vowel between the consonant sounds. This spoils the purity of the diction and jeopardises the quality and connection of breath support through the group of consonants.

It's important to become aware of transitions between consecutive consonants and where the rules of co-articulation apply i.e., the way that the first consonant needs to change its place of articulation to facilitate the correct transition to the consonant that follows. An example of this is in *Don Pasquale* where the rules of co-articulation mean that the *n* is in fact pronounced as an *m*.

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