



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 and many other languages, consonants have distinctive duration, which means that their length can change the meaning of words. For example, saying you know *la nona di Beethoven*, Beethoven's Ninth, is very different to saying you know *la nonna di Beethoven*, Beethoven's grandmother!

As well as delivering meaning, the correct proportion and sequencing of short and long consonants 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.

In addition to double consonants written in the text, there are a number of 'hidden' long consonants in Italian. Some of these occur due to rules inherited from Latin. For example, *ma come* is pronounced [makkome] because the *c* is geminated (lengthened) by the preceding *ma*. Single consonants can also be lengthened to add expressive emphasis.

It's important to identify all long consonants in your score and to ensure these are articulated with adequate length (not strength – see below!) A long consonant in spoken or sung Italian often has a greater duration than the combined length of two short consonants. In sung Italian, a long consonant can be up to five times the length of a short consonant (depending on note duration).

2. Applying strength rather than length to stop consonants

The mistake that singers often make in the articulation of long consonants is attempting to emphasise these by increasing their volume or applying too much force to their release. Stop consonants, which make up the highest proportion of consonants in Italian, need particular attention in this regard. When long stop consonants are articulated with too much strength rather than length, this can result in an accompanying burst of aspiration similar to an [h] – noticeable particularly with the unvoiced occlusive consonants *p*, *t* and *c* as [k].

As with all long consonants in sung Italian, it's important that stop consonants are articulated with length, not strength. The correct length is applied to stop consonants simply by lengthening the hold before their release, rather than releasing them with greater force. This also helps to engage the breath support and relaxes the muscles around the larynx, improving the resonance of the vowel that follows.

3. Making the 'wet' *t* sound

The 'wet' *t* is often produced by native English speakers because in English a *t* sound is an occlu-constrictive consonant. This means that upon the release of the sound, the tongue causes a constriction and audibly obstructs the flow of air, similar to making the *ch* sound.

The 'dry' *t* sound in Italian is an occlusive consonant meaning that after the occlusion of the airflow, there is a clean release without any audible obstruction. In addition, the correct position of the tongue in the Italian *t* is denti-alveolar, meaning that the blade of the tongue is against the upper teeth and upper gum, while in English the tongue is post-alveolar, meaning it touches the ridge of the hard palate.

4. Squeezing the long *s*

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

To make a correct long Italian *s*, there should be a larger resonating space for the outward airstream. This is created by moving the tip of the tongue down and forward towards the lower gum to make a larger channel (groove) between the centre of the tongue and the upper alveolar ridge. In contrast, the English *s* is produced through a smaller channel and has a higher frequency sound.

To feel the correct Italian long *s*, it can be helpful to practise making a low, loud hissing sound. This is also a helpful exercise to do to check that the abdominal muscles are engaged and that the air is flowing.

5. Not rolling the *r*

Singers sometimes struggle with rolling the *r* (a vibrant sonorant consonant) in sung Italian, but with regular practice and specific exercises, everyone can achieve a rolled *r* (provided there are no physical impediments to the tongue).

A tried and tested way to quickly achieve a good, energised rolled *r* involves singing *attro* or *addro*, or a similar combination of a long *t/d* and *r*, with a long stop before the *r*. These combinations are effective because the place of articulation of the *t* or *d* brings the tongue forward into an ideal position to start the roll of the *r*, while the air pressure built by the long *t* or *d* provides the energy needed to sustain the flicking of the tongue tip.

6. Interrupting long sonorant consonants

Long sonorant consonants include the long nasal sounds *mm*, *gn* and *nn*, for example in *mamma*, *gnocchi* and *donna*, and the lateral *ll* and *gl* produced on both sides of the tongue, for example in *bello* and *figlio*.

In contrast to stop consonants, it's important for singers not to interrupt the flow of continuous sound that characterises long sonorant consonants. It's helpful to practise vocalising with simple words that contain these consonants such as *emme*, *anno*, *alla*, *aglio* and *ogni* to enjoy singing smoothly through these sounds without interruption.

7. Adding an evanescent (ghost) vowel where there should be a coarticulation

When two consonants are sung consecutively, it's sometimes possible to hear a brief evanescent (ghost) vowel between the consonant sounds. This not only spoils the fluidity of Italian diction but also creates an extra syllable that interferes with the metrics and rhythm of the line.

It's important to become aware of transitions between consecutive consonants and the rules of coarticulation, a key element of correct Italian pronunciation. In most instances of coarticulation, the first consonant changes its place of articulation to facilitate the transition to the next. For example, where *n* is followed by *p*, *b* or *m*, all bilabial consonants, its place of articulation also becomes bilabial, i.e., it becomes an *m* sound. This occurs, for example, in *Don Pasquale* [dompaskwale], *un bacio* [umbacio] or *con merito* [commerito].

Keen to know more about Italian diction for singers?

All of the topics mentioned here are part of our research-based approach, the Melofonetica Method™, and are discussed fully in our book *The Melofonetica Method: A complete guide to clear and expressive Italian diction for singers* (2023), available from [Amazon](#) and all major booksellers. Why not join one of our upcoming [courses](#) or [contact us](#) to find out more about how we can support you in achieving clear, idiomatic and expressive sung Italian.

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