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HANDLO's TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM for RUSSIAN PRONUNCIATION for ENGLISH-SPEAKING SINGERS

In the following transliteration system, ordinary English letters are used rather than specialised phonetic symbols. This simple system will enable English-speaking choral singers to approach the sounds of Russian words quite closely.

The letter-shapes of most languages have been adopted from those of previous languages, most often over long generations of adaptation but sometimes as “one-off” designs by individuals. The Germanic language family (including English) evolved from the Gothic alphabet created by Bishop Ulfilas in the fourth century AD, and was a collection of letters borrowed from different sources: 20 Greek letters, five Roman and two Runic. In a similar way, the Cyrillic alphabet, now still used in Russia, was devised by Saint Cyril, a Greek missionary to the Slavs in the ninth century AD, who assembled the letter-shapes from the Greek, Roman and Hebrew alphabets. For quick reference, it is helpful to arrange the Russian letters in three columns in the table below. The first column has five characters which look and sound the same as English; the second column contains seven familiar Roman characters but which are pronounced quite differently in Russian; and the third column consists of characters which have been derived from the Greek or Hebrew alphabets. Finally, at the end of the table, are two characters—or, rather, signs—which are not sounds in their own right but have effects on other characters.

Russian is far more consistently pronounced than English. Although there are many slight differences in the sounds of individual Russian letters, there is nothing as disconcerting as, say, the English “ough” as it is diversely pronounced in “rough”, “through”, “though”, “slough”, or “ought”. In Russian, all the separate letters are usually sounded. When two consonants occur together, they are pronounced softly and swiftly.

However, that being said, it is useful to be aware of the importance of “hard” and “soft” sounds in Russian. The hard sounds are generally pronounced slightly forcefully with the tongue held low in the mouth or against the teeth, and the soft sounds are palatised—that is, pronounced softly with the tip of the tongue arched upwards or against the palate. In the case of vowels, there are five hard characters, pronounced “ah”, “e”, “i” (very short), “o” and “oo”, and five different soft characters, pronounced “yah”, “ye”, “ee”, “yo” and “yu”. In the case of consonants, some are always either hard or soft but most have dual-purpose use—that is, even though they retain the same shape they can be pronounced hard or soft depending on where they are situated in the word, or as modified by soft or hard signs that sometimes appear alongside them.

The non-Russian speaker need not worry about learning all these variations before tackling a Russian score. The transliterations used in Handlo scores take the English-speaking singer quite close to the correct Russian sounds and will lay a good groundwork—though, for complete authenticity, a choir would be wise to have some additional coaching from a fluent Russian speaker. Because the transliterations are made up from ordinary English letters, some of the syllables might seem rather strange and cumbersome but they are readily broken down into their component sounds. For example, the Russian syllable “ше” is transliterated in English as “shchye”, and the syllable “тея” as “tyee”. After reading the table below, the singer will recognise that “shchye” is composed of the separate sounds “shch” and “ye”, and that “tyee” is composed of “t”, “ye” and “ee”. In the few cases of diphthongs, successive vowel sounds are clarified by the use of a separating dot. Thus, “тея” will be transliterated as “tye·ee” instead of “tyee”.

Character		Transliterated as:	Pronounced as:
А а		ah	"a" as in "father"
	Б б	b	"b" as in "abound"
	В в	v	"v" as in "vote"
	Г г	g, gh	"g" as in "goat". When at the beginning of a word, it softens considerably (gh) rather like the "dg" in "judge"
	Д д	d	approximately "d" as in "dot" but with tip of tongue pressed against back of top teeth (one of three dental consonants). Often, when at end of a word, it becomes softer as "t" in "dot"
	Е е	ye	"ye" as in "yet"
	Ё ё	yo	"yo" as in "yonder"
	Ж ж	zh	"z" as in "azure". Often when at the end of a word, the "s" sound becomes soft as "sh" in "hush"
	З з	z	always hard as "z" in "zoo"
	И и	ee	"ee" as in "feet"
	Й й	yi	a very quick "yi" or as "y" as in "boy". It is also used with vowels to make diphthongs such as the "i" in "Thailand"
К к		k	"k" as in "kit"
	Л л	l	a soft "l" sound as in "bottle"
М м		m	"m" as in "mother"
	Н н	n	"n" as in "not" (a dental consonant)
О о		aw, o, a	in a stressed syllable it is pronounced as "o" in "shore" when unstressed it is like "o" in "another" or the "a" in "another"
	П п	p	as the explosive "p" as in "pool" or the soft "p" as in "pew"
	Р р	r	the normal English "r" sound but always rolled or trilled (produced with tip of tongue placed gently at back of top teeth and allowed to vibrate, not with the tongue placed hard against the palate as many do when attempting to trill)
	С с	s	"s" in "sat" but softened with a very fleeting "sy" sound
Т т		t	"t" as in "tot" (a dental consonant)
	У у	oo	"oo" as in "boot"
	Ф ф	f	"f" as in "father"
	Х х	kh	"ch" as in the Scottish word "loch"
	Ц ц	ts	always hard as "ts" as in "sheets"
	Ч ч	ch	always soft as "ch" in "chart"
	Ш ш	sh	always hard — almost as a "zh"
	Щ щ	shch	always soft as "shch" in "pushchair"
	Э э	e	"e" as in "bet"
	Ю ю	yu	"yu" as in "yule"
	Я я	ya	"ya" as in "yak"
	Ы ы	i	no exact English equivalent but pronounced like the very short "i" in "ill"
Signs (not pronounced):			
	Ь ь		This is the "soft sign" and usually softens the preceding consonant (by palatising, or arching the tongue towards the palate)
	Ъ ъ		This is the "hard sign" and usually hardens the preceding consonant