

## A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO RUSSIAN PRONUNCIATION

### A. VOWELS

English has five vowels (A,E,I,O,U) and Russian has the five equivalent pairs of vowels. Each pair has a hard vowel (low, dark sounding) and a soft vowel (high, palatalized):

- 1-2 **А а / Я я** – like 'A' & 'YA' in English respectively;
- 3-4 **Э э / Е е** – like 'E' & 'YE' in English respectively;
- 5-6 **Ы ы / И и** – like 'I' when holding a pencil in your teeth & 'EE' (without pencil) in English respectively;
- 7-8 **О о / Ё ё** – like 'O' & 'YO' in English respectively; and
- 9-10 **У у / Ю ю** – like 'OO' & 'YOO' in English respectively.

This is a slight simplification of how the soft vowels sound. The 'Y' at the start of the soft vowels is not really pronounced but just provides a high placement. The main difference is that the hard vowels are lower in throat and the soft vowels are high, near the soft palate. As a start, try saying the hard vowels with a sad face and the soft vowels while smiling.

There is also one semi-vowel:

- 11 **Й й** – like the letter 'Y' in English, often used for compound vowels and at the end of names (e.g. Чайковский – the 'ай' is like the 'Y' in the English word 'SKY' and the 'ий' is like the Russian 'I' vowel).

### B. CONSONANTS

These can be divided into four groups as shown below -

#### i. Look English and sound the same:

- 12 **К к** – same as English;
- 13 **М м** – same as English; and
- 14 **Т т** – same as English.

#### ii. Look English but sound different:

- 15 **В в** – like 'V' as English;
- 16 **Н н** – like 'N' as English;
- 17 **Р р** – like 'R' as English;
- 18 **С с** – like 'S' as English; and
- 19 **Х х** – like a guttural 'CH' in the Scottish word 'loch' or the German word 'ach'.

#### iii. Don't look English but sound English:

- 20 **Б б** – like 'B' in English (looks like a curly B);
- 21 **Г г** – like 'G' in English (looks like the Greek letter Gamma);
- 22 **Д д** – like 'D' in English (looks like the Greek letter Delta);
- 23 **З з** – like 'Z' in English (not to be confused with the vowel Э);
- 24 **Л л** – like 'L' in English (looks like the Greek letter Lambda);
- 25 **П п** – like 'P' in English (looks like the Greek letter Pi); and
- 26 **Ф ф** – like 'F' in English (looks like the Greek letter Phi).

#### iv. Don't look or sound English:

- 27 **Ж ж** – like 'J' in the French word 'je';
- 28 **Ц ц** – like 'TS' in the English word 'cats';
- 29 **Ч ч** – like 'CH' in English word 'cheek';
- 30 **Ш ш** – like 'SH' in English word 'shop';
- 31 **Щ щ** – a higher-placed version of 'SH' like in the English word 'sheet';
- 32 **Ъ ъ** – not pronounced, but makes the preceding consonant hard; and
- 33 **Ь ь** – not pronounced, but makes the preceding consonant soft.

### C. PRONUNCIATION RULES

Russian is a phonetic language; there are just a few exceptions to this pronunciation guide:

- i An unstressed 'O' is pronounced much closer to 'A';
- ii A consonant preceding a soft/palatalized vowel will be palatalized. So for example, an 'L' before a soft vowel will sound close to the Italian word 'gli' whereas before a hard vowel will be pronounced at the back of the throat (in what we perceive to be a very Russian way). Similarly a palatalized 'T' is wet, as opposed to the harder one that is closer to a 'D';
- iii There are three consonants which change the following vowel from soft to hard, and these are Ж ж, Ц ц and Ш ш. So, for example, the word 'Жизнь', which means life, is actually pronounced 'Жызьнь'; and
- iv A few words, often foreign, break the rules (e.g. 'Радио', meaning radio, where the unstressed 'O' is pronounced as an 'O' rather than an 'A'). These are rare and need to be learnt as exceptions.