German pronunciation guide for Village Voices

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There are only two definitely non-English sounds in German, the ch (like Scottish “loch”) and ü (like French u). For the rest, if you use the English approximations below then you’ll have an English accent but it won’t really show in the singing.

However, you have to get used to the German spelling. For instance, “v” is pronounced like our “f”, and if you sing it like an English “v” it will sound wrong. At least, unlike English, German spelling is fairly phonetic.

There is also an unfamiliar letter ß, called “eszett”. It is just a form of ss, but with the first s written in the old-fashioned way like f.

There are three additional vowels formed of a, o and u with two dots (an “umlaut”) on top: ä, ö, ü. (Sometimes, though not in our Bach edition, they are written ae, oe, ue.) Their pronunciations are described in the tables.

In the tables I list German letters, approximate English equivalents, and notes. Where possible I have provided some German words (such as names of composers) that may be familiar to show the rules in action.

Vowels

German	English approx.	Notes
a,e,i,o,u	a,e,i,o,u	When *short*. Pronounce in a more northern style. eg Lufthansa When *long* they are just pure, lengthened versions of the short, more like Italian than English. eg Mahler, Beethoven, Schubert
er, ir, ur	air, ear, oor	Give the vowels their full value, and pronounce the r too.
ä	ay	Try to make it sound like a German e. eg Spätlese
ö	er	eg Schönberg, Höchste
ü	-	Try to say “ee” with your mouth shaped for “oo”. eg rühmet, über
au	ow	eg Audi, Sauerkraut
ei	eye	eg Einstein
ie	ee	It’s just a long German “i”. eg Riesling; Nietzsche rhymes with teacher.
eu, äu	oi	eg Freud, deutsch

Consonants

German	English approx.	Notes
b, d, s	p, t, ss	*At end of word.* eg Deutschland, kund und wissend
ch	-	As in Gaelic “loch”. eg Bach
	k	*At start of word.* eg Chören
g	g	*Never* soft as in “germ”. eg Gerhard pronounced “gair-heart”
ng	ng	*Without* a hard g sound: like singer, not finger. eg singen, Engel.
j	y	eg ja, Jung, jauchzet, Jesus
r	r	(In singing) roll like a Scots or Italian r if you can.
s	z	*This is the normal pronunciation.* Note the exceptions below. It can be confusingly different from English. eg so, Sohn, singen, Sauerkraut, preiset all have “z” sound – unlike the related English words so, son, sing, sour.
	ss	*At end of word.* eg das, was
sp, st	shp, sht	*At start of word or part word.* eg Spätlese, Weinstube
sch	sh	eg Schubert
tsch	ch	eg deutsch
ß	ss	Never z. eg laßt, daß
th	t	The English “th” sound doesn’t exist in German.
w	v	eg Wagner
v	f	eg Volkswagen, Von Trapp – correctly pronounced “folks-”, “fon -”.
z	ts	eg Mozart