

REVISITING PIERRE VILLETTE: *AN EXPLORATION OF THREE SELECTED MOTETS*

Sean Michael Burton

The year 2026 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of French composer Pierre Villette (1926–1998). The unaccompanied choral music of Villette represents a mature synthesis of conservative compositional techniques and twentieth-century harmonic innovations, including the influence of jazz on composers working in Paris during the immediate aftermath of World War II. His relatively conservative compositional style furthers a lineage through the music of Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy, Francis Poulenc, Maurice Duruflé, and Olivier Messiaen. Though a classmate of Pierre Boulez at the Paris Conservatory in the 1940s, Villette engaged in an alternate approach to composition, avoiding the dominant French modernism of the mid-twentieth century. Instead, Villette combined retrospective influences ranging from Gregorian chant—similar to his teacher, Duruflé—to the provocative harmonies of Poulenc and Messiaen.¹ The resulting sound image runs the gamut from ethereal to feral.

Villette kept only a part-time career as a composer, in part due to health problems and his primary occupation as an academic administrator, first as head of the Besançon Conservatory (1957–67) and later as director of the Darius Milhaud Conservatory in Aix-en-Provence (1967–87).² His output of eighty-one compositions includes small-scale pieces for orchestra, chamber music, and choral works.

Sean Michael Burton, DMA
Head Music Teacher
Sioux City Community School District
Sioux City, IA
seanburtonmusic@gmail.com



Though not particularly well known in the United States, nor often performed in his native France, Villette's choral music enjoys regular performance throughout Germany, Japan, and in the United Kingdom.³ In addition, there are a variety of commercial recordings available by British choirs. Beauty and accessibility unite in the choral music of Pierre Villette, making his motets relevant to myriad ensembles and a broad audience. This article highlights Pierre Villette's personal attributes and compositional style while exploring three of the composer's fifteen unaccompanied motets.

Biography

Born into a musical family on February 7, 1926, Pierre Marie Charles Villette received his primary artistic influence during his formative years from his father, Henri Villette.⁴ A skilled amateur musician, Henri played piano, violin, organ, and viola, experimented with composition, and conducted a civic orchestra of some two hundred musicians while operating a wood-working business.

The family resided in the city of Duclair, Seine-Maritime, near Rouen. From the age of six, Pierre sang in the choir of Rouen's Saint Evode Cathedral, where he learned the organ from Jules Lambert and sang plainchant as well as a variety of choral music by major composers including Palestrina, Mozart, Beethoven, and Franck.

During his teenage years, Villette followed the model of significant French composers from previous generations. He devoted himself seriously to the organ and worked as the organist of two small churches, Saint Thérèse de Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray and Saint Paul de Rouen.⁵ By the age of fifteen, after approximately one year of commuting weekly to Paris for lessons in organ and harmony with Maurice Duruflé, Villette gained successful entrance into the Paris Conservatory.⁶

Villette's education at the conservatory began in 1941. There he entered the composition class of Jean Gallon (1878–1959), the teacher of luminaries such as Messiaen, Duruflé, and Dutilleux, the latter whose music Villette admired more than all of his contem-



Photo courtesy of Josette Villette.

poraries.⁷ Regrettably, the Nazi occupation of Paris interrupted his studies, and the young composer left France's capital city for *service agricole obligatoire* (compulsory agricultural service) on his grandmother's farm in Normandy.⁸ Following the 1944 liberation of Paris, he returned to the conservatory and continued his study of composition with Henri Büsser (1872–1973).

During the early 1940s, Villette attended several live performances of The Glenn Miller Orchestra. According to his wife, Josette, these experiences hearing live jazz profoundly impacted the young composer and strongly influenced Villette's compositional style.⁹ By 1948, Villette's studies were suspended again. His father's sudden passing forced Pierre to return home and manage the family business. The strain of dealing with

his father's affairs took a significant toll on his health, and he endured seven operations, culminating with the removal of a lung. Despite hardships of health, Villette's creativity persevered, and he won the second Grand Prix de Rome in 1949 for his cantata *La Résurrection de Lazare*.

During the early 1950s, Villette spent long periods recuperating in the Alps but still continued to compose, earning the Prix Georges Bizet in 1954. In the same year, while working as a church organist/choirmaster in Plateau d'Assy, he met his future wife, Josette; the two were married in 1956. In 1957, Villette's career in academic administration began in Besançon.

Throughout a distinguished thirty-year career as head of the Besançon Conservatory and director of the Darius Milhaud Conservatory in Aix-en-Provence, Villette established himself as a fair but strict administrator¹⁰ as well as a passionate advocate for music education.¹¹ In 1987, Pierre Villette retired from academic life, devoting himself solely to the composer's craft—in his own words, “à la gloire du Seigneur” (to the glory of God).¹²

Donald Hunt, the first choral conductor to champion Villette's works in England during his tenure as organist and master of the choristers at Worcester Cathedral and close friend of the Villette family, eloquently describes the composer's final years:

After his retirement, Villette continued to live in Aix-en-Provence, patiently cared for by his devoted wife as his health deteriorated. He continued to compose, but the works were now almost all on a smaller scale, mostly devoted to instrumental offerings, especially for the piano. But inevitably there were more works for the church, as this was always a high priority for him; throughout his life he had a strong faith, and he gained so much inspiration from the language of the traditional Catholic liturgy, hence an almost continuous supply of motets, many of which he would not have heard sung in his lifetime.¹³

Pierre Villette passed away on March 6, 1998. Fondly remembered by his family and friends as a devout

Catholic, he is no less memorable for his kindness and generosity to students, witty sense of humor, and artistic sensitivity, the characteristic which most inspires this study.¹⁷

Overview of the Motets

Villette's unaccompanied motets fall into three periods of composition. The early period, 1944–60, was marked by seven works for mixed chorus (Table 1 on the next page). The second period, 1983–91, is where we find Villette's most extended works: *Attende, Domine* (1983), *Inviolata* (1991), and the 1983 *O magnum mysterium*, a less complicated motet in comparison to the other two. The late years, 1992–95, function primarily as a return to simplicity. Villette produced four works for mixed chorus: *O quam amabilis es*; *Notre Père d'Aix*; *Jesu, dulcis Memoria*; and *Panis angelicus*. The only exception to this more restrained compositional style is the composer's lone contribution to the treble choir literature, an intricate setting of *O quam suavis est* (1993).

Ave verum, Op. 3

Following the example of such esteemed French composers as Gounod, Franck, Fauré, and Saint-Saëns, Villette completed his setting of *Ave verum* on April 9, 1944, at the age of eighteen. Villette scored *Ave verum* for unaccompanied mixed chorus, dedicating it to his cousin, Canon Roland Delestre.¹⁵

Villette cast *Ave verum* in five sections, congruent with the structure of the original Latin text, a short Communion hymn whose authorship is thought to be by either Pope Innocent III or Pope Innocent IV.¹⁶

The text of *Ave verum Corpus* commemorates Christ's redemptive Sacrifice, and especially focuses on the great symbol of Baptism: the pouring forth of water from his pierced side.¹⁷

Two textual omissions in Villette's *Ave verum* warrant exploration. He avoids setting the words “O Jesu pie” and “miserere mei, Amen,” instead repeating the words “O Jesu dulcis” twice (first in the soprano and alto voices, then in the tenor and bass voices) and

Table 1. Pierre Villette's Unaccompanied Choral Works
Pierre Villette. *Catalogue des Oeuvres de Pierre Villette*. Unpublished Manuscript, 1995.

Title	Opus	Year	Publisher
<i>Ave verum</i>	3	1944	Heugel/Alphonse Leduc/ Wise Music
<i>Salve Regina</i>	5	1944	Heugel/Alphonse Leduc/ Wise Music
<i>O Salutaris hostia</i>	21	1954	Heugel/Alphonse Leduc/ Wise Music
<i>Hymne à la Vierge</i>	24	1955	Éditions Durand/ Universal Music Publishing Group
<i>O Sacrum convivium</i>	27	1959	Heugel/Alphonse Leduc/ Wise Music
<i>Strophes Polyphoniques pour le Veni Creator</i>	28	1959	Éditions À Cœur Joie
<i>Adoro te</i>	31	1960	Éditions Durand/ Universal Music Publishing Group
<i>Attende, Domine</i>	45	1983	United Music Publishers
<i>O magnum mysterium</i>	53	1983	Éditions Durand/ Universal Music Publishing Group
<i>Inviolata</i>	66	1991	United Music Publishers
<i>O quam amabilis es</i>	71	1992	United Music Publishers
<i>Notre Père d'Aix</i>	75	1992	Édition Philippe Caillard
<i>O quam suavis est</i>	76	1993	Éditions À Cœur Joie
<i>Jesu, dulcis Memoria</i>	78	1994	United Music Publishers
<i>Panis angelicus</i>	80	1995	United Music Publishers

moves forward with an outburst on the text “O Jesu fili Mariae” before concluding the motet with the text “Tu nobis miserere.”

The decision to repeat “O Jesu dulcis” in hushed tones without setting the words “O Jesu pie,” and the insertion of the text “Tu nobis miserere” (you have mercy upon us) instead of “miserere mei, Amen” (have mercy upon me, so be it) may function as a manifestation of the composer’s personal faith. With this alteration of text, perhaps Villette implores God to make a spiritual presence known during a period of world conflict.

Mediant harmonic relationships dominate Villette’s tonal aesthetic, although the presence of pervasive unresolved dissonance throughout *Ave verum* resists conventional analysis solely with Roman numerals. Nonetheless, Villette clearly delineates the motet’s five-part structure with fermatas at each major cadence point, and the composer’s avoidance of parallel fifths concurs with established conventions of common practice voice leading.¹⁸

Christopher Hyde cites jazz as a speculative but significant harmonic feature of Villette’s compositional style,¹⁹ an assertion confirmed by Villette’s widow, Josette, and daughter, Anne. A minor example of parallel fifths concurs with the presence of a thirteenth chord in second inversion found in measures 37 and 38 of *Ave verum* (Figure 1 on the next page).²⁰

A final note concerning the harmonic attributes of *Ave verum* concerns Villette’s release of tension in the last three measures, concluding the work on an enhanced yet unresolved chord (D major with an added sixth). This manner of conclusion became a trademark for Villette’s *a cappella* choral music, as evidenced in Table 2.²¹

Hymne à la Vierge, Op. 24

According to Villette’s handwritten *Catalogue des Oeuvres de Pierre Villette*, the composer completed what is likely his most

performed and certainly most recorded work on April 3, 1955, dedicating *Hymne à la Vierge* to “Chanoine DEVÈMY.”²² However, the year of composition cited in both the 1967 published edition by Éditions Durand and the notes to the 1976 recording with the Worcester Cathedral Choir is 1954.²³ To confuse matters further, Donald Hunt and Fiona Clampin cite Josette Villette as the dedicatee in their respective publications on Pierre Villette.²⁴ The cover page of the sole manuscript source, a facsimile, cites 1955 as the year of composition, and there is no visible dedication on the score.

Despite its unclear genesis, the popularity of Villette’s

Table 2. Enhanced and/or Unresolved Conclusions in Villette’s Unaccompanied Choral Works

Work	Last Chord
<i>Ave verum</i>	I +6
<i>O Salutaris hostia</i>	I 9 +6
<i>Hymne à la Vierge</i>	I (but with +4 → 5 appoggiatura)
<i>O Sacrum convivium</i>	I -7 -3 -5
<i>O magnum mysterium</i>	I+6
<i>Inviolata</i>	I +11
<i>O quam amabilis es</i>	I +7 9
<i>Notre Père d’Aix</i>	I 9
<i>O quam suavis est</i>	I +7 9 +11
<i>Panis angelicus</i>	I +7 9

The image displays a handwritten musical score for the motet *Ave verum*. The score is written on four staves, with lyrics in French. The lyrics are: "in ex a mi ne . pp { o Je sus dul cis", "o Je sus fi li Mari ae", "Tu no bis mi se re", "a e f o Je sus fi li Mari ae", "Tu no bis mi se re". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "pp" and "f". A large handwritten signature "Pierre Villette" is written across the bottom of the page, with the date "9 Avril 1944" written below it. The word "R a l l e" is written above the final staff.

Figure 1. Last page of *Ave verum* manuscript facsimile.

Hymne à la Vierge is well documented. The piece has been performed throughout the world and professionally recorded by several outstanding ensembles, including the Cambridge Singers, Choeur de Chambre de Rouen, Choir of New College Oxford, Holst Singers, Rodolfus Choir, Westminster Cathedral Choir, and Worcester Cathedral Choir.

Tonally centered in F major, Villette's setting of Roland Bouh  ret's French poem is scored for unaccompanied four-part mixed chorus with choral division of eight parts (SSAATTBB) and optional soprano soloist. While the harmonic language of *Hymne    la Vierge* bears similarity to *Ave verum*, *Salve Regina*, and *O Salutaris hostia* (in terms of mediant harmonic relationships and chromatic embellishments), it is distinct from the three earlier compositions because of its tuneful melody, predominantly homophonic texture, strophic structure, and overall simplicity. These compositional decisions elegantly and concisely declaim Bouh  ret's cosmic prose (in translation²⁵):

   toute belle Vierge Marie,
Votre   me trouve en Dieu
le parfait amour.
Il vous rev  t du manteau
de la Grace
comme une fianc  e
Par  e de ses joyaux.

O beautiful Virgin Mary,
in God your soul discovers
perfect love.
It cloaks you with the mantle
of Grace
like a betrothed
adorned with her jewels.

*All  luia, all  luia. Je vais chanter ta louange, Seigneur
Car tu as pris soin de moi,
Car tu m'as envelopp  e du voile de l'innocence,
Car tu m'as faite avant le jour,
Car tu m'as fait pr  c  der le jaillissement des sources.*

*Alleluia, alleluia. I will sing your praise, Lord,
for you have looked after me,
for you have covered me with the veil of innocence,
for you have made me before the day,
for you have made me go before the gushing of fountains.*

Vous   tes n  e avant les collines
   sagesse de Dieu,
porte du Salut

You were born before the hills,
O wisdom of God,
the way to salvation.

Heureux celui qui marche
dans vos traces
Qui appr  te son c  ur    la voix
de vos conseils.

Happy is he who walks in your
footsteps,
who prepares his heart to listen
to your advice.

Avant les astres vous   tiez pr  sente
M  re du Cr  ateur au profond
du ciel.
Quand Dieu fixait les limites du monde
Vous partagiez son c  ur   tant    l'oeuvre
avec lui.

You were present before the stars,
Mother of the Creator, in the very
depths of heaven.
Quand Dieu fixait les limites du monde
When God was creating the world,
working with Him you shared
His heart.

In his setting of the second verse, Villette creates a notable contrast of texture by indicating the text may be sung by a soprano soloist while the chorus accompanies with quiet humming voices or on the vowel "o."²⁶ Cre-

ating an atmosphere of otherworldliness, this gesture may be intended to evoke an image of humankind's earthly journey (represented by the soprano soloist) toward divine salvation (represented by an angelic humming chorus).

In *Hymne à la Vierge*, Villette firmly establishes the presence of jazz harmonies as an aspect of his compositional style, particularly in the coda (Figure 2). This facet of the composer's personal harmonic language ultimately becomes idiomatic to the majority of his unaccompanied choral works.

A closing thought concerns the enduring popularity of *Hymne à la Vierge*, the cause of which cannot be definitively identified beyond academic speculation. Besides its musical attributes, this author contends the fame of *Hymne à la Vierge* is also related to a practical matter: concert programming.

Three observations support this conclusion. First, the beautiful French language text immediately offers contrast on any program featuring unaccompanied works in Latin, English, or other languages. Second,

an appropriate and convenient partner can be found in Benjamin Britten's *A Hymn to the Virgin*, a pairing that invites comparison, engaging both performers and listeners. Lastly, the overarching theme of Marian devotion is suitable for use in a plethora of concert and liturgical events, especially to programs produced during the Christmas season. An example of the latter includes the 2006 Christmas Eve Service of Nine Lessons and Carols at King's College Cambridge, where *Hymne à la Vierge* was performed, recorded, and subsequently broadcast on international networks.

Attende, Domine, Op. 45

Following the composition of *Adoro te* in 1960, Villette did not complete another piece for a *cappella* chorus for more than twenty years, until the 1983 *Attende, Domine*. While no documented explanation exists for Villette's lack of composition in a genre at which he excelled, the combination of a time-consuming career as an academic administrator and opportunities to compose instrumen-

Nota - La seconde strophe peut être chantée par un soprano solo
le chœur s'accompagne à bouche fermée ou sur la voyelle "e" /pp

Figure 2. Coda from *Hymne à la Vierge* manuscript facsimile.

tal music likely took precedence over writing in a genre in which he was already established. In the intervening decades between *Adoro te* and *Attende, Domine*, Villette completed thirteen compositions, devoting himself primarily to instrumental music. In these years, he also composed two large-scale choral-orchestral works commissioned by the French government, the 1970 *Missa da pacem* and the 1981 *Messe en français*.

The genesis of *Attende, Domine* lies in Villette's *Hymne à la Vierge*, accidentally discovered by Donald Hunt in 1975.²⁷ As previously mentioned, Hunt, then organist and master of the choristers at Worcester Cathedral, went on to champion the composer's music, recording several Villette motets with the Worcester Cathedral Choir in the mid-1970s.²⁸ Villette encountered Hunt's recordings and sent a letter of appreciation on December 13, 1978, which began a "close friendship and fruitful musical relationship" between the two men.²⁹

On February 7, 1983, Villette finished the final version of *Attende, Domine*, an extensive six-minute motet scored for unaccompanied SSATBB chorus, dedicating it to Donald Hunt, a commission by the Friends of Worcester Cathedral.³⁰ Manuscript analysis reveals Villette's struggle in returning to the genre of the unaccompanied motet. He completed the first version of *Attende, Domine* on February 7, 1982 (also cited as the date of completion in Villette's 1995 *Catalogue des Oeuvres*). However, Villette extensively revised the motet, dating the last page of the final version February 7, 1983, and writing 1983 on the cover page.

With the exception of his 1959 setting of *O Sacrum convivium*, Villette scored all of his unaccompanied choral works for SATB chorus, some with divisi, prior to *Attende, Domine*. Villette's utilization of texture in *Attende, Domine* foreshadows his most extended unaccompanied choral work, the 1991 *Inviolata*, serving to paint the text with expressive vocal registration in addition to mediant harmonic motion and chromatic embellishment as observed in the composer's earlier motets for unaccompanied chorus.

The motet's G minor opening, starkly cast in octave unison whole tones, imbues the penitential text with an aura of stark pathos (Figure 3 on the next page). Villette quotes this motive twelve times throughout the motet,³¹ functioning as a juxtaposition of prayerful re-

pentance and unabashed human expression.

In the second phrase, Villette exploits the full SSATBB texture, but in hushed tones and close harmonies, uttering the repentant text. While Villette remains somewhat faithful to the overall structure of the text, he adjusts the word order of the second stanza, beginning with "omnium Redemptor," then setting "Ad te Rex summe." He also avoids the phrase "quia peccavimus tibi," preferring instead multiple repetitions of "Attende, Domine, et miserere" with the aforementioned whole-tone motive, functioning as a structural unifier throughout the motet as it appears in the text.

The full translated text of *Attende, Domine* follows:³²

Attende, Domine, et miserere quia peccavimus tibi.	Hear us, O Lord, and have mercy, for we have sinned against Thee.
Ad te Rex summe, omnium Redemptor, oculos nostros sublevamus flentes: exaudi, Christe, supplicatum preces.	To Thee, highest King, Redeemer of all, do we lift up our eyes in weeping hear, O Christ, the prayers of your servants.
Attende, Domine, et miserere quia peccavimus tibi.	Hear us, O Lord, and have mercy, for we have sinned against Thee.
Dextera Patris lapis angularis, via salutis, Janua caelestis, ablue nostri maculas delicti.	Right hand of the Father, corner-stone, way of salvation, gate of heaven, wash away our stains of sin.
Attende, Domine, et miserere quia peccavimus tibi.	Hear us, O Lord, and have mercy, for we have sinned against Thee.
Amen.	Amen.

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Villette paints the words “via salutis” (way of salvation) in measures 34–37 with simultaneous homophonic and imitative settings in the men’s, then women’s, voice parts. With the addition of “Janua caelestis,” or “gate of heaven,” what appears to be the first climax

of the motet occurs on the downbeat of measure 39.

However, Villette repeats the words “dextera Patris,” first set in measures 30–32, with a quickly paced diminuendo. This gesture prepares the true climax of the motet in measures 41–42 on the words “lapis an-

Adagio (♩ = 56 - 58)

Soprano 1
Soprano 2
Alto
Tenor
Bass 1
Bass 2

p

At - ten - de Do - mi - ne et mi - se re,

unis. p

At - ten - de Do - mi - ne et mi - se re,

Adagio (♩ = 56 - 58)

Piano
(for rehearsal only)

5

S1
S2
A
T
B1
B2

pp

qui - a pec - ca - vi - mus Om - ni - um Re - demp - tor

pp

qui - a pec - ca - vi - mus Om - ni - um Re - demp - tor

pp

qui - a pec - ca - vi - mus Om - ni - um Re - demp - tor *p* Ad te

pp

qui - a pec - ca - vi - mus Om - ni - um Re - demp - tor

Figure 3. Pierre Villette, *Attende, Domine*, mm. 1–8.

United Music Publishing, 1985.

gularis” (cornerstone). Here Villette declaims the text in block chords, constructing a literal representation of the cornerstone. Immediately following this eruption, the tutti chorus exclaims *Attende, Domine*, marked *fortissimo* by the composer. Then the opening whole tone motive recurs in muted *piano* tones as the proverbial sinners seek atonement for their outspoken transgressions.

In measure 46, Villette begins a new section with “ablue nostri maculas delicti” (wash away our sins), a deviation from the text’s structure. This digression re-emphasizes the collective plight of humankind as supplicants desiring absolution.

After beseeching mercy with several repetitions of “Attende, Domine et miserere” throughout measures 49–58, the opening motive returns in variation on the word “Amen” as the coda begins in measure 59. At this moment, Villette firmly establishes a G major tonic, resulting in what Hyde affirms as “a i – I modulation across the motet via the mediant, submediant, leading and dominant keys, all of which are taken in their non-diatonic forms.”³³ In this case, change of mode to the parallel major as a compositional decision functions to conclude *Attende, Domine* with an ethos of divine redemption, complete with angelic humming tones in the final measure.

Conclusion

An examination of Villette’s motets, including documentation of the composer’s personal attributes, discussion of text-music relationships, exploration of compositional style, and practical observations for performance clearly substantiates the relevance and merit of the composer’s compositional output. Hunt asserts:

Pierre Villette speaks with a very individual voice in his compositions; he is rarely affected by fashions, and generally makes few dramatic gestures. His music is finely crafted, revealing a tender lyricism blended with a tinge of melancholy, and, especially in his choral compositions, preserving a sense of wonder...to those of us who have made a study of his music, he is instantly recognizable through a turn of phrase or by an unpredictable succession of in-

novative progressions, yet everything he wrote is unmistakably French. He is no imitator, nor is he an experimenter; minimalism and serialism were not in his vocabulary...When the achievements and influences of French music in the twentieth century are eventually assessed it is unlikely that Pierre Villette’s name will figure prominently, but there can be little doubt that his country’s music would have been poorer without him. Those of us who have ‘discovered’ him will certainly feel that our musical lives have been greatly enriched by the experience.³⁴

Hunt’s final summation of Villette’s legacy reflects the composer’s primary professional activity in Besançon and Aix-en-Provence. Villette was educated in Paris and frequently interacted with well-known contemporary composers such as Henri Dutilleux and Witold Lutoslawski.³⁵ However, his residency outside of France’s musical epicenter resulted in a lack of appreciation for and exposure to his music. As we celebrate the Villette centenary in 2026 and studies of his music continue to emerge, the greater musical world will grow to value the significance and quality of Pierre Villette’s contributions to choral music. 

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- ²⁸ Clampin, Notes to “Pierre Villetta,” 3.
- ²⁹ Hunt, “Pierre Villetta,” 14.
- ³⁰ Stanley Vann, “New Choral Music,” *The Musical Times*, 128/1730 (April 1987): 232.
- ³¹ Hyde, “Pierre Villetta,” 38.
- ³² Parry, ed., Translations, 8–9.
- ³³ Hyde, “Pierre Villetta,” 38.
- ³⁴ Hunt, “Pierre Villetta,” 16. The quotation marks for “discovered” reference Matthew Berry’s article in the Nov/Dec 2002 issue of *Choir & Organ*, “Discovering Villetta.”
- ³⁵ de la Montagne, “Pierre Villetta.”