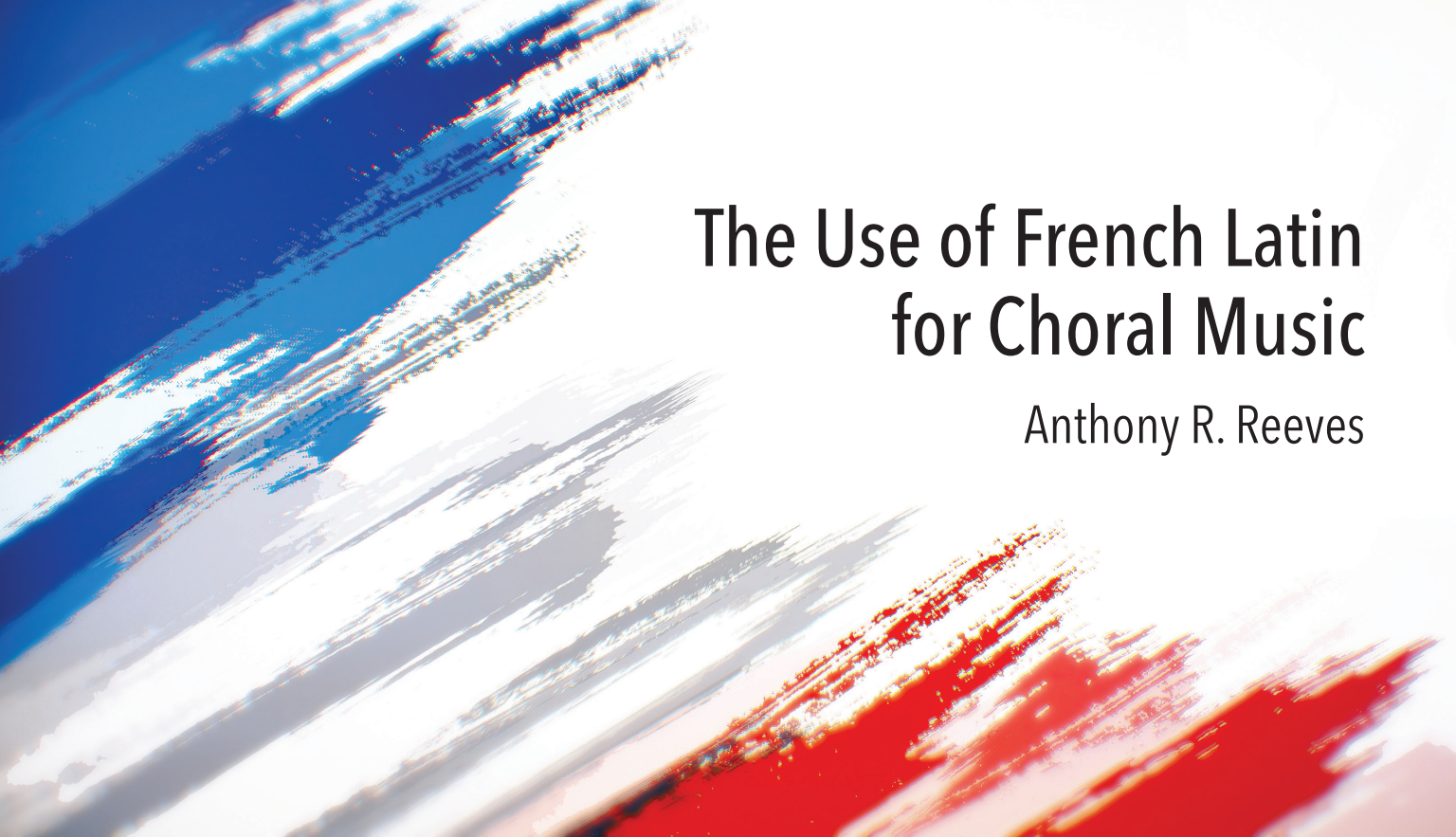




The Use of French Latin for Choral Music

Anthony R. Reeves

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The last fifty years have witnessed an explosion of research and knowledge about performance practice in almost every area of music. Basic musical elements once thought to be absolute, such as articulation, vocal technique, and ornamentation, have been subject to great experimentation and debate. Conductors everywhere are becoming increasingly aware of new discoveries regarding authentic performance practices and are putting them to use in their work. This is best seen in the abundance of performances and recordings featuring original or reproduction instruments.

An area not fully integrated into the general practices of most choral conductors, however, concerns the use of colloquial Latin pronunciations for choral music. Some conductors feel it is simply too time consuming to work out complex pronunciations. They are unsure what is authentic, and insecure about their own abilities in this area. As a result, the only regional pronunciation heard with any regularity is the Austro-German pronunciation of Latin. Those of us living outside Germany hear this Latin variant mainly because of the many professional choirs with recording contracts in German-speaking countries. However, some German

choirs overuse the Austro-German Latin (e.g., in performance of pieces such as the Mass settings of William Byrd) in much the same way liturgical Latin pronunciation is ubiquitous in America.

Relatively few conductors know about alternative Latin pronunciations, and even fewer understand the value of employing them. In fact, most regions of Europe have their own historical Latin pronunciations, and using the appropriate one can enrich performances of that region's repertoire and make them more historically accurate. One of the most distinctive variants of Latin pronunciation lies in the sounds of French Latin. Once conductors and performers understand the subtleties of French Latin, many idiosyncrasies of French choral repertoire (often very confusing to conductors and performers) will be less mysterious.

Latin: A Brief History of Pronunciation

Latin, like English, is a language of many different accents. Consider, for example, variants of the English language; people from Britain speak differently than people from the southern United States, yet the vocabulary germane to the language remains essentially the same. Because Latin is a dormant language, it is easy to forget that it too was pronounced differently in the various regions of the former Roman Empire. As the vernaculars



developed, their sounds colored the archaic language (Latin) used mainly by the church; this symbiotic development resulted in regional variants of Latin pronunciation. It is important to realize that the Roman Catholic Church did not codify today's "standard liturgical Latin" until early in the twentieth century; prior to that time, the Latin rites of the Church were pronounced differently from place to place. Thus, it makes sense that conductors can improve the stylistic integrity of any historic music by utilizing the appropriate regional Latin pronunciation. Following the same logic, applying French Latin pronunciation to French music can yield more authentic performances.

The History of French Latin

Of all the regional variants, the French Latins¹ have been especially infamous:

The Gallic² pronunciation of Latin was notorious from early times, when the Celtic Gauls came to speak the language of their Roman conquerors. It was later affected by the waves of Germanic settlers and invaders from the fifth to the tenth centuries.³

It is important to remember that in most of Europe, Latin was not the native tongue; it was forced upon local populations after Roman conquests. Influenced by their own indigenous languages, the native people colored Latin with their own speech habits and pronunciations. From the fifth century, Germanic settlers occupied northern Gaul; their language merged with that of the local Gallic-Roman descendants, giving birth to early forms of French and eventually affecting the Latin of the Church. This merging of tongues and dialects resulted in a form of Latin strongly flavored by Francien (the language of central France). Other regions of France, especially Normandy and Provence, developed their own dialectal variations, but it was the Germanic-Gallic-Roman Latin tongue that was to mature into modern French.

The emergence and development of medieval and modern French continued to influence the way Frenchmen pronounced Latin. A thorough investigation of

this matter will uncover at least four different pronunciation systems (in different historical eras) in central France, with other variant systems in certain French regions, as well as in what are now the Low Countries. When speaking of historic French Latin, this article refers to the time periods approximated by many linguistic historians as: mid-third century–800 C.E.; 800–1250; 1250–1650; and 1650–1920s.

Closely connected to French Latin is the Franco-Flemish pronunciation, used in the Low Countries. The Picardi Walloon tongue is still spoken in parts of northern France and southern Belgium, and was much more pervasive a thousand years ago. Although French, Flemish, and Dutch each exacted their influence on this region and its language, the region's own idiosyncratic pronunciation of Latin became significant in music history because of the influence of the Franco-Flemish (or Franco-Netherlandish) school of composers and the influence of the Court of Burgundy. Machaut, DuFay, Ockeghem, Josquin, and Mouton are but a few of the better-known composers associated with this school, and a great deal of their music would benefit from the use of Franco-Flemish Latin diction. (To be clear, the Franco-Flemish Latin variant is different from Dutch, or Netherlandish, Latin.)

Regional variants of Latin pervaded Europe until November 22, 1903, when Pope Pius X (r. 1903–14) issued his decree *Motu proprio*⁴ with many rules concerning sacred music and its liturgical performance. The *Motu proprio* included two matters meriting special note: guidelines for the restoration and performance of Gregorian chant, and directions for a universal pronunciation of Latin based on the Roman model. All the guidelines for official pronunciation follow this decree, including those in the *Liber Usualis* (itself a late nineteenth-century creation).

Pius X was more conservative than his predecessor (Leo XIII), and many historians believe he was responsible for a widening gulf between "modern thought" and the Roman Catholic Church. As an example of his conservatism, he instructed the Holy Office to issue a decree condemning those who applied new methods of research to Scripture or theology, resulting in a defecation of many Modernists from the Church (e.g., Alfred Firmin Loisy and George Tyrrell).



The French accepted Pope Pius's standardized pronunciation of Latin slowly and reluctantly. The French church had long been subject to the influences of Gallicanism, a French tradition of resistance to papal authority. Two kinds of Gallicanism may be discerned in French history: an insistence on special rights for the French monarch within the French church, and an insistence on some degree of independence for the French church from Rome. Even after the Roman Church established supreme papal authority as dogma in 1870, the French continued to resist. It could hardly have surprised anyone when they proved reluctant to capitulate on the matter of Latin pronunciation.

In 1912 the Pope wrote the Archbishop of Bourges urging him to press for the standardization of Latin pronunciation in France; as late as 1928, Pius XI wrote, "We, ourselves, express the keenest desire that all bishops of every nation shall endeavour to adopt it [the standardized Roman pronunciation] when carrying out the liturgical ceremonies."⁵ Whereas the French eventually gave in, their capitulation was neither willing nor complete. In recent years, increasing numbers of French performance and recordings employ the historic French Latin pronunciations. (Although it is interesting that while the German bishops elected, in 1972, to return to the use of German Latin, the French bishops never made a parallel decision.) In any case, a performer of French music written in Latin before the first few decades of the twentieth century would be shortsighted to ignore the performance ramifications of historical pronunciations.

Examples of French Choral Literature

Table 1 on the next two pages gives some examples of composers whose choral music can benefit from an historic French Latin pronunciation. The list is far from exhaustive but shows the breadth of pre-1920 composers to whom this article applies, as well as some post-1920 composers whose work (e.g., recordings, writings, or interviews) demonstrates their affinity for French Latin pronunciation.

Liturgical Latin vs. French Latin

The currently accepted liturgical Latin pronunciation has much to recommend it, largely because it is a comparatively simple system to teach and learn. Only five vowel sounds exist in modern Latin, and the consonants are simple, most sounding very much as they do in English. Furthermore, virtually no exceptions exist in the rules for liturgical Latin pronunciation.⁶ Familiarity with the system yields little confusion and efficient use of rehearsal time.

Standard liturgical pronunciation is essentially Italian Latin and hence shares many attributes with the Italian language. Because the vowels tend to be open and the consonants short and precise, the pronunciation does not interfere with the *bel canto* vocal production typically taught in private study. These very attributes, however, are also weaknesses. For example, open vowels, although they are unobtrusive to vocal technique and quite beautiful in artistic solo singing, tend to yield a colorless ensemble sound and can make it difficult to produce fine shadings of tone for text painting or other expressive purposes.

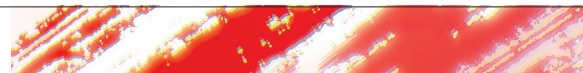
Another problem with the standardized liturgical pronunciation lies in its universality—the uniform rules cause singers to produce homogenous sounds regardless of composer, nationality, era, or style. It seems logical that composers determined the shapes of vocal lines based on the vowel sounds inherent to their own regional variant of Latin, or at least the variant of the region in which they worked. Performing vocal music using a pronunciation far removed from the pronunciation known by the composer is comparable to ignoring dynamic markings in a Chopin piano piece. This author believes it is impossible to create "authentic" performances of early music without making the sound of the text of paramount importance.

A significant difference between French Latin and liturgical Latin is that French Latin is not as uniform as the standardized version. Vowel sounds tend to change based upon where they are located in a word and what other letters are around them; many consonant sounds are predictably flavored by the sounds of French. Should anyone believe liturgical Latin is in any way neutral, it is important to understand that it is strongly flavored by the eccentricities of the Italian language. (Consider,

Table 1. Historic French Latin Pronunciation

Composer	Variant	Era
Berlioz	French	1650-1920
Binchois	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Busnois	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Campra	French	1650-1920
Charpentier	French	1650-1920
Jacobus Clemens	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Costeley	French	1250-1650
Delalande	French	1650-1920
Dubois	French	1650-1920
du Caurroy	French	1250-1650
DuFay	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Du Mont	French	1250-1650, 1650-1920
Durufié	French	1650-1920
Fauré	French	1650-1920
Franck	French	1650-1920
Gombert	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Goudimel	French	1250-1650
Gounod	French	1650-1920

The Use of French Latin for Choral Music



Janequin	French	1250-1650
Josquin	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Pierre de la Rue	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Le Jeune	French	1250-1650
Lully	French	1650-1920
Machaut	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Obrecht	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Ockeghem	Franco-Flemish	1250-1650
Poulenc	French	1650-1920
Rameau	French	1650-1920
Saint-Saëns	French	1650-1920
Sermisy	French	1250-1650

for example, the rules surrounding the pronunciation of the letter “c” in liturgical Latin, which are obviously Italianate.) Although understandable, given the location of the Vatican, this in no way affected the previous development of French Latin or the sounds understood by centuries of French composers.

Syllabic division is another aspect of the difference between standard liturgical Latin and regional Latin dialects. The French practice of ending syllables on vowels whenever possible directly affected the French pronunciation of Latin. Harold Copeman relates that Erasmus wrote about this in 1528, comparing the French and Dutch divisions (and pronunciations) of the Latin word “Christe”: the Dutch would have divided the word as “Chris-te,” while the French would have divided it as “Chri-ste.”⁷ This seemingly minor detail has

larger implications. For example, final [s] is not dropped in French Latin but is generally pronounced [s]; internal [s] is often dropped. The French division mentioned above would have resulted in a pronunciation of [krite]. (This is in direct opposition to the pronunciation of modern French; therefore, do not accept the postulate advocated by some that merely speaking Latin texts using the rules of modern French pronunciation produces French Latin.)

Syllabic stress in French Latin also bears the mark of French language. In French Latin, as in French, all syllables receive more or less equal stress, with a slight accent usually occurring on the final syllable of a word. In liturgical Latin, syllabic stress often occurs on the penultimate or antepenultimate syllable of a word. These intricacies of accentuation have obvious phrasing impli-

cations. A phrase Lully, Rameau, or even Fauré heard “just so,” performed with a light accent on the final syllable of the last word (with *le bon goût*, of course) sounds quite different when sung in modern liturgical Latin, with an accent on the penultimate syllable. The result of the latter method may be beautiful to our modern ears because we are accustomed to it but will not be stylistically accurate.

When singing Latin-texted French music using liturgical pronunciation, many performers notice the strange way the syllabification of the text lines up with the metrical structure; syllables that should (according to liturgical Latin) be unaccented often appear on the downbeats of measures. However, when one takes French Latin pronunciation into account, these problems disappear and the words fit perfectly within the metrical structure. Indeed, when singers observe the appropriate accentuation, some of the baffling characteristics of French music (e.g., the placement of some ornament signs in French Baroque music) suddenly make sense. Conductor and early music specialist Andrew Parrot writes:

In practice, it is all too easy to find reasons not to bother with the niceties of different historical pronunciations of Latin.... It may also be argued that in any case too little is known, and that relevant information and guidance remain inaccessible to non-specialists.... [However,] in my own experience there have been three principal benefits...firstly, a correctly underlaid text will become easier to sing...[because] the appropriate vowel from the period is likely to be technically more helpful to the singer.... Secondly, the rhythms of the music and language are more likely to match.... Thirdly, Latin is rescued from appearing to be a dead language, or the exclusive property of the modern Roman Church.... In short, what may appear to be merely a veneer on musical performance can shed unexpected light on the nature of the music itself and in particular it helps to refine our understanding of the subtle balance of music and text that characterizes the best vocal writing of any age.⁸

Examples of French Latin Pronunciation

An example from the standard choral repertoire will readily illustrate some of the differences between standard Latin and the French Latin of c. 1650–1920s. Table 2 on the next two pages lists brief, general guidelines about French Latin diction for music written during this time period. These guidelines are far from exhaustive, and French Latin, like French, allows many exceptions to the rules. In addition, it is important to remember the differing pronunciation practices in the different eras noted above (mid-third century–800 C.E.; 800–1250; 1250–1650; and c. 1650–1920s) and in different geographic areas. For more complete details and information, readers are encouraged to consult the resources at the end of this article. Table 3 on page 66 contrasts the standard liturgical and French Latin pronunciations of the Gloria of the Mass Ordinary.

Conclusion

Awareness of different systems of Latin pronunciation related to geographic regions and historic periods can enhance the stylistic integrity and beauty of sung music, as they are truer to the pronunciations understood by the composers. It stands to reason that when composers wrote vocal music, they made compositional decisions based on the Latin sounds they knew and used. If modern performers endeavor to reproduce the sounds of French Latin when singing French music, the musical product will be more stylistically appropriate and significantly more beautiful than if they use the modern universal pronunciation of Latin bearing little resemblance to the original pronunciation.

The careful choral conductor must consider accurate pronunciations when preparing to perform a piece of early music. Of course, one must take into account the ability level of the singers and available rehearsal time when deciding whether to use historical Latin, but if stylistic accuracy is the goal, appropriate historical Latin pronunciation is crucial. Choirs will reach the expectations set for them, and if proper diction becomes a goal of performance, conscientious choir members will endeavor to meet the goal.

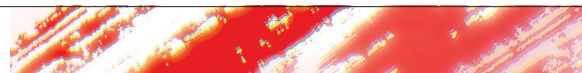
Table 2. Summary of Latin Pronunciation in France, c. 1650–1920

Spelling	Pronunciation Notes
Vowels	
a	[a], more forward than Italian or German
ae	[e] in an open symbol; [ɛ] in a closed syllable
am, an	[am] or [an] <i>but</i> : if a consonant follows, [ã] followed by the consonant
au	[o]; <i>not</i> open [ɔ]
e, ae, oe	[e] or [ɛ], as in "ae" above
em, en	[ɛm], [ɛn]
emp, ent	[ẽ mp], [ẽ nt]
eu	[ø]
i, y	[i]
im, in	[ẽ] or [im] or [in]
o	[o] in an open symbol; [ɔ] in a closed syllable
om, on	[õ]
non	[nɔn]
u	[y]
um, un	[ɯm], [ɯn]
unc, unt	[œt], [õt]
Consonants	
c • before e, ae, oe, i, or y • otherwise	[s] [k]
cc • before e, ae, oe, i, or y • otherwise	[s] [ks]
ch • before e, ae, oe, i, or y • otherwise	[ʃ] [ks]
g	[ʒ]
gn	[ɲ], or [gn] in certain words
h	mute
j	[ʒ]
qu	[kw]
quo	[ko]

s	usually [s]; but [z] between vowels or voiced consonants
s, t	not dropped at ends of words
ti	[si]
x, xc	[ks] before consonant; [gs] before vowel
z	[z]

Table 3. Contrasts Between Standard Liturgical and French Latin

Text	Liturgical Latin	French Latin
Gloria in excelsis Deo. Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.	[gl̥ɔria in ek̥sɛlsis deo ɛt in tɛra paks ɔminibus bɔnɛ vɔluntatis	[gl̥ɔria i neksɛlsi zdeo ɛ ti n̥tɛra pa ksominibɥ zbɔnɛ vɔlɔ̃statis
Laudamus te. Benedicimus te. Adoramus te. Glorificamus te.	laudamus tɛ bɛnɛdikamus tɛ adoramus tɛ gl̥ɔrifikamus tɛ	lodamy stɛ bɛnɛdisimɥ stɛ adoramɥs stɛ gl̥ɔrifikamɥ stɛ
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnum gloriam tuam,	gratsias ag̥zimus tibi prɔ̃ptɛr majam gl̥ɔriam tuam	grasia zḁzimɥ stibi prɔtɛ rmagnã gl̥ɔriã tyam
Domine Deus, Rex caelestis, Dues Pater omnipotens.	dɔmine deus reks t̥fɛlestis dues patɛr ɔ̃n̥nipɔ̃tɛns	domine dey sre k̥sɛlestis dey spatɛ r̥ɔ̃n̥ipɔ̃tɛ̃z
Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe. Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris,	dɔmine fili unid̥ʒenitɛ jesu kristɛ dɔmine deus, ḁpus dei filius patris	domine fili yn̥iʒenitɛ ʒɛzy krite domine dey, sag̥ny zdeɪ filiɥ spatris
Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.	kwi tɔlis pekata mundi miserɛrɛ nɔbis kwi tɔlis pekata mundi sɥ̥ʃipɛ dɛprɛkatsionem nɔ̃stram kwi sɛdɛs ad dɛxtɛram patris miserɛrɛ nɔbis	kwi toli spɛkata mɔ̃ndi mizerɛrɛ nobis kwi toli spɛkata mɔ̃ndi sysipɛ dɛprɛkasionɛ notram kwi sɛdɛ za dɛkstɛrã patris mizerɛrɛ nobis
Quoniam tu solus sanctus. Tu solus Dominus, Tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe. Cum Sancto Spiritu, In gloriq Dei Patris Amen.	kwɔ̃niam tu sɔlus sanktus tu sɔlus dɔminɥs tu sɔlus altisimɥs jesu Kristɛ kum sanktɔ spiritu in gl̥ɔria dei patris amɛn]	koniã ty solɥ sãtɥs ty solɥ zdominɥs ty solɥ zaltisimɥs ʒɛzy krite kɔ̃ sãɔ spirity i n̥gloria dei patris amɛn]



Resources for Further Study

When teaching alternative Latin pronunciations for the first time, one should not underestimate the amount of time singers need to become familiar with the new pronunciations and overcome years of exposure to “traditional” Latin. Several resources exist to enable performers to learn appropriate historical pronunciations. *Singing Early Music*, edited by Timothy McGee and others, covers numerous languages and dialects and includes a CD recording to help performers develop an ear for the correct pronunciations. Harold Copeman’s *Singing in Latin* offers a plethora of historical and practical information. A most interesting and informative book about French Latin is Patricia Ranum’s *Méthode de la Prononciation Latine Dite Vulgaire ou a la Française*. It is in French, however, and no English translation yet exists. 

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NOTES

¹ Instead of French Latin, it might be more accurate to speak of French Latins. The pronunciations in different geographic areas developed and mutated over time. Conse-

quently, it is impossible to give a single set of diction rules for this pronunciation, as in actuality many different pronunciations have existed, one merging into or emerging from another. The task of the choral conductor is then more complex: to determine which of the French Latin pronunciations is appropriate for a piece of music, and then learn and teach it. The resources cited at the end of the article are good places to begin.

² Of or relating to Gaul, or what is modern France.

³ Harold Copeman, “French Latin.” In *Singing Early Music*, ed. Timothy J. McGee, et al. (Indiana University Press, 1996), 90.

⁴ Motu Proprio is the name given to Papal rescripts that use the words “motu proprio” (“of his own accord”) in the document. These words indicate that the Pope has made these decisions personally and of his own accord. It is neither a Brief nor a Bull, and usually creates laws or regulations or grants favors.

⁵ Quoted by Harold Copeman, *Singing in Latin*, 308.

⁶ For a complete guide to standard liturgical Latin pronunciation, see: The Rev. Michael de Angelis, *The Correct Pronunciation of Latin According to Roman Usage* (GIA Publications, 1937).

⁷ Harold Copeman, *Singing Early Music*, 95.

⁸ Andrew Parrot, Preface to Harold Copeman’s *Singing in Latin, or Pronunciation Explor’d* (Harold Copeman, 1990), vi-vii.

⁹ Editor’s Note: This is the author’s information published with the original article in 2001. We were unable to locate updated information for this publication.