Latin Pronunciation For Singers

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Singers are often confronted with two ways of pronouncing Latin which are quite different. Even works by the same composer are sometimes pronounced differently as in the case of Carl Orff's *Catulli Carmina* and the *Carmina Burana* in which the word *centum*, for instance, has two distinct sounds. When Catullus asks for a hundred kisses, he says: */k/entum*, while when the men in the tavern sing that a hundred people drink, they say: */ch/entum*. Both pronunciations are correct, the former being the classical and the latter the ecclesiastical. Catullus wrote his poems at a time when only the classical pronunciation was used, and his poems must, therefore, be pronounced that way. The wandering poets of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, composed their Profane Songs (*Carmina Burana*) to amuse themselves and the other guests in the tavern using the language spoken by the common people (*vulgus*). This same language was used by the Church (*Ecclesia*) and this is why this pronunciation is to be used when singing the *Carmina Burana*.

A brief look at the development of the language will help to understand why there are two accepted pronunciations of Latin and to determine when the classical or the ecclesiastical should be used.

Between the time of Augustus (27 B.C. - 14 A.D.) and the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 spoken Latin underwent great changes; it gradually influenced the written language until the wide gap which for centuries existed between the written and spoken idioms had disappeared. With the spreading of Christianity and the emphasis that the new faith put on plebeian elements, the spoken language became the new medium of communication. One could say that with the ebbing power of Rome the importance and influence of literary Latin also diminished. With the decline of Rome after the death of Marcus Aurelius in A.D. 180, the classical period of the Latin language and literature came to an end. Around the same time Christianity was gaining strength. It became increasingly stronger through the next centuries until it was the dominant power in the Western world. It is well known that it has been the Christian Church which has kept Latin alive for so long after it was no longer used as a living tongue. It would not be accurate, however, to call Latin a dead language, because unlike all other spoken idioms which are continually altered by daily use, Latin has remained alive, although unchanging, for much longer than any other language. For centuries it was the medium for theological and philosophical works, for laws, legal commentaries, chronicles, treatises on medicine and astrology, and for almost everything else. It was used as *the* international and cultural tongue, and it was assumed that an educated person would be able to speak, read and write Latin, especially when communicating with people from another country. But most of the time during these centuries it was used in its written form, and as a result there is no evidence of the language as it was pronounced by the Romans. On the basis of works by old grammarians and of Greek transcripts of the Latin language, scholars have been able to approximate the classical pronunciation: the actual speech patterns used by Caeser and Cicero when they so successfully addressed their audiences. Such pronunciation should be used whenever reading the great authors of Rome at the height of her civilization: from Ennius to Cicero, Ovid, Virgil, Horace, Catullus, etc.

The letters or combinations of letters of the alphabet which according to the classical pronunciation are pronounced differently from English are: A always as in *father;* Bs & Bt like *ps* & *pt;* C always like K; G always with a hard sound as in *go;* J like I and both sound like *eat;* Oe like *oi* as in *oil;* Ph always like two distinct sounds as in *up hill;* Qu like *kw;* V like W; Sci & Sce like *ski* & *ske;* Ae like *ai* as in *isle*.

Applying the above rules, we must read the first lines of Actus I of *Catulli Carmina* as follows:

Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse
Od/ea/ et/a/mo. /Kw/a/re /ea/d f/a/k/ea/a/m, fort/a/s/s/e

requiris. Nescio, sed fieri sentio et
re/kw/ea/r/ea/s. Ne/s/k/ea/o, sed f/ea/e/r/ea sent/ea/o et

excrucior. Vivamus, mea Lesbia,
e/cs/k/r/u/k/ea/or. W/ea/w/a/mus, me/a/ Lesb/ea/a,/

atque amemus, rumoresque senum severiorum
/a/t/kw/e /a/memus, rumores/kw/e senum se/w/er/ea/orum

omnes unius aestimemus assis.
omnes un/ea/us /a/ea/st/ea/memus /a/s/sae/s.

Slowly but steadily the language of the Romans like any other tongue developed and changed until, after having passed through long revolutionary processes in the various parts of the Roman Empire, Latin ultimately differentiated into the Romance languages: Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Rumanian.

Once the barrier between the literary Latin of the educated few and the "vulgar", colloquial, folkloristic language of the plebeian masses had been shaken, the latter increased in strength more and more until it prevailed completely. In this way the language of the uneducated people, the vulgar idiom, began to be used also in written form. It was used mostly by simple, religious writers who wanted to teach the Word of God to the masses, and used their medium of communication to be sure that the people could understand them. Christian Latin developed into a particular idiom for a special religious and social group of society. Therefore, the effect of Christianity was felt not only linguistically but also socially: it changed the language and made the people proud to use it. It must be remembered though that the Ecclesiastical language of the first centuries was Greek and not Latin, and that the liturgy of the Christian Church was all Greek. It is interesting to know that it was in Africa that Latin was first introduced into the Church as Northern Africa was the home of Latin literature during the third, fourth and fifth centuries. Tertullian, who was born at Carthage c. A.D. 150-160, is considered the first great writer of Christian Latin literature. And Commodian, another African of the third

Microrhythms: *The Key to Vitalizing Renaissance Music*

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When preparing a Renaissance composition for preformance, most choral conductors begin by studying the flowing melodies, the formal structure, the modal harmonies and dissonances; by considering the text and its musical relationships; and by attempting to establish a proper tempo. These are, of course, desirable steps to be taken in the first stages of preparation, but there are also other, more sophisticated levels of study which demand consideration: for example, *musica ficta* and ornamentation must be considered; note value ratios must be taken into account in determining internal tempo correlations; and the rhythmic subtleties which animate the composition must be discovered. It is the latter problem which is the subject of this article.

Choral conductors can generally be counted on to display the harmonic suspensions of Renaissance music by effectively "rubbing" two voices against one another, but insufficient attention is usually given to the possibility of generating tension by emphasizing the interplay of *rhythmic* counterpoint between the vocal lines. Although these hidden rhythms contain potential life for each individual line and all-out rhythmic excitement when the composition is heard as a whole, the lack of rhythmic clarity in most performances of Renaissance music suggests either principles, or that they are unwilling to spend the time and effort required to teach those principles to their choirs.

Microrhythms can provide the key to rhythmic vitality

century, is the first Christian verse writer in Latin. It is in his poems that we can see (together with an effort to imitate the old system of versification) a new principle, viz. that of rhyme, which was the basic characteristic of Medieval Latin verse. (Up to that time Latin verse had been written on a quantitative principle.)

Latin became the official language of the Church under Pope Damasus (366-384), and then by the end of the fourth century the liturgy was completely changed from Greek into Latin. By this time the language did not sound as it did when Caeser used it, and by the seventh century the inhabitants of various parts of the Empire were aware of the fact that what they were speaking was not really Latin anymore, but a new tongue called Romance. As the clergy were educated in the episcopal schools and were, therefore, provided with a good knowledge of Latin, the ecclesiastical pronunciation did not change much through the centuries. By Medieval times when lyrics and profane songs were composed by the wandering students or Goliards who used the vernacular and imitated the Provencal troubadours, it is still the same pronunciation that is applied. In the poetry popular and learned currents flow together. Most of the lyrics of the Goliards were meant to be sung; therefore, the music was very important, probably more so than the words. Forty-three of the *Carmina Burana* in the original manuscript found in Munich in 1847 were noted to be sung. The Latin of the famous twelfth-century *Cambridge Songs* and the thirteenth-century *Carmina Burana* sounds very much like the Italian language. Like Italian, ecclesiastical Latin is perfectly phonetic and the words are normally pronounced as they are spelled. Once one has learned the standard spelling and the corresponding clear sound for each letter of the alphabet, one will always be able to pronounce a word correctly. Conversely, if one knows how to pronounce a word, one will know how to spell it.

The letters or combinations of letters which in the ecclesiastical pronunciation differ from English are: A always as in *father;* C like *k* before a, o, u, and like *ch* before e, i; CH like *k;* G with a hard sound before a, o, u, as in *go;* with a soft sound before e, i, as in *gem;* GH with a hard sound as in *go;* GN with an approximate sound as in *canyon*; H always silent; I as *ea* in *eat;* J like I; PS both letters pronounced separately; Sce & Sci as in *she;* Ae & Oe always as in *pet* or *they;* Ti before a vowel like *tsi.*

According to the above rules, the first lines of the *Carmina Burana* read:

O Fortuna, velut luna, statu variabilis,
O Fortuna, velut luna, st/a/tu va/r/ea/a/b/ea/l/ea/s.

semper crescis et decrescis; vita
semper cre/sh/ea/s et decre/sh/ea/s; v/ea/t/a/

detestabilis nunc obdurat et tunc curat ludo
detest/a/b/ea/l/ea/s nunc obdur/a/t et tunc cur/a/t ludo

mentis aciem egestatem potestatem
ment/ea/s a/ch/ea/em egest/a/tem potest/a/tem

dissolvit ut glaciem.
d/ea/s/s/olv/ea/t ut gl/a/ch/ea/em/

Some basic rules which apply to both pronunciations: A) Double consonants are pronounced *much longer* than a single one. The Romans used to pronounce them separately as two distinct consonants. B) There are as many syllables in a Latin word as it has vowels or diphthongs. In dividing a word into syllables: 1) two vowels are separated: DE-US; 2) a single consonant between vowels goes with the second vowel: A-MI-CUS; 3) when two or more consonants stand between two vowels, the last consonant goes with the second vowel: SER-VUS; however, tr, dr, ch, ph, qu, st go together: PA-TRI-A, PO-TE-STA-TEM. C) The accent falls on the first syllable in a word of two syllables: SER'-VUS; on the second syllable from the end if this syllable is long in words of three or more syllables: FOR-TU'-NA; otherwise on the third syllable: PE-CU'-NI-A.

The true musician knows that it is the combination of a fine rendering of the composer's music *and* the correct sound of the text that make for an outstanding performance. It is hoped, therefore, that as far as pronunciation is concerned Latin will receive comparable attention among singers as is given to other languages. ❖