

# Performance Practice Review

---

Volume 5  
Number 1 *Spring*

Article 3

---

1992

## "Singing in Latin, or, Pronunciation explor'd." By Harold Copeman

Douglas Leedy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Leedy, Douglas (1992) "'Singing in Latin, or, Pronunciation explor'd." By Harold Copeman," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 3. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199205.01.03  
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol5/iss1/3>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

## Reviews of Books

Harold Copeman. *Singing in Latin, or, Pronunciation explor'd*. Oxford, The Author, 1990. ix, 359p.

How shall we characterize Harold Copeman's *Singing in Latin*? Masterly it certainly is, bringing together a great many of the most important sources on regional pronunciations of Latin throughout Europe from the time of Charlemagne to the present. Indispensable, undoubtedly; the author evaluates this source material and makes musical, sensible recommendations for Latin pronunciations suitable to specific works and repertoires, filling at last what has been a virtual vacuum, with the exception of Ross Duffin's brief, preliminary study, "National Pronunciations of Latin ca.1490-1600",<sup>1</sup> in an important area of performance practice, and creating a resource that no serious choral conductor (or singer, for that matter) can afford to overlook. And exasperating; the author says on the first page that "this is not a formal or tidy study," and one may easily sympathize with the problems that the organization and interpretation of so great a quantity of material have imposed; yet decisions he has made, acting as his own publisher and, presumably, editor, about format and production methods have made this book so unpleasant to use that one glance at it may put off many of those who might benefit from his wealth of knowledge and generally excellent advice.

To take the last matter first, except for the indexes and a few other pages, the entire book was printed from computer-generated dot-matrix originals. At best very fatiguing to read, dot-matrix print (which may well be the nadir of typography, however mercifully brief its manifestation) has served Copeman's purposes especially badly, as his presentation requires numerous type styles and sizes, including italic,

---

<sup>1</sup>*Journal of Musicology* 4 (1986), 217-26.

boldface, minuscule for footnotes, and International Phonetic Alphabet symbols. In my review copy the boldface registered barely or not at all; on over two dozen pages portions of the footnotes had faded or smeared into illegibility. (On the bright side, Copeman's computer has given us footnotes that actually are footnotes, *Deo gratias*, not data buried somewhere at the back of the book.)

If one can get past the eye-strain induced by the printed page (and one must), another difficulty arises, that of organization of material. Here a daunting complexity is the main obstacle, as the number of musically important places and times (distinguishing 16th-century Picard/Walloon, Flemish, Burgundian and Francien Latin, for example), pronunciation reforms and restorations, and other historical quirks, fascinating in themselves (the vacillation of certain German courts between the Protestant and Roman faiths, for instance, or what pronunciation may have been favored by a certain Spanish musician at a German Jesuit college in 16th-century Rome—not a trivial case, as the musician happens to be Victoria), have created a logistical nightmare.

Copeman's task has divided itself handily into two main parts: the presentation of source-materials on pronunciation (a rich resource of this book that is drawn mainly from old grammars, tutors, and treatises, but includes information from some illustrious figures, Erasmus and Milton among them, and from a few musicians), and second, the distillation of this material into specific recommendations. The first part of the book Copeman logically devotes to the source-materials, after an explanation of his phonetic method and a brief history of Latin as sung. The remaining two-thirds of its pages he gives over to "Weighing the Evidence: Practical Solutions," arranged chronologically in two main periods, with the principal division at 1650; these periods are further subdivided geographically. So far, fine, but one may find the use of this practical part of the book hampered by the fact that substantial quantities of primary material have spilled over alarmingly into it from a dozen or so additional sources, resulting in constant distractions in the text and voluminous footnotes.

Another organizational difficulty is created by the fact that the history of Latin pronunciation in England is more complex than anywhere else, thanks in part to William the Conqueror and Henry VIII, but mostly to drastic changes over many centuries in the way English itself was pronounced, especially the "Great Vowel Shift," which went on from the 15th to the 17th century, dragging Latin pronunciation along with it (as is familiar to us from the sound of a few well known legal Latinisms).

I'm not sure there is a better way of organizing this book than Copeman's, yet it might have caused less frustration if the principal divisions had been national (Italy, Germany, France, etc.) rather than chronological; this would have consolidated the major distraction England poses for the non-English throughout the book—mind you, I'm by no means saying that English Latin deserves any less than the author gives it: 154 pages, dispersed in chunks through the book's 359. (Making it more difficult to find one's way around is the lack of visual cues—spacing, for example—to the beginnings of chapter subsections, and running heads that sometimes give an ongoing display of the chapter or section title and sometimes change capriciously from page to page.)

To represent sound-values in print, Copeman uses his own simplified adaptation of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), except in a few earlier phonetic sources, where he retains the original text. This may require some getting used to for many musicians, I think, but it seems to work well enough as a point of departure.<sup>2</sup>

Vowel quality is of course always difficult to describe. Copeman gives a schematic, cross-sectional vowel-map of the mouth (p. 25) showing the placement of the tongue and shape of the lips for most of the basic sounds—certainly helpful, but still approximate: the forward "a" sounds of French and Italian (*à la/alla*) can be distinguished on this schematic (although not in the IPA, where they share the symbol [a]), but neither the noticeable difference between the pursed-lip and "smiley" German "i"-sound, nor the audible variation in the sound of [ə] (*schwa*, the neutral, unstressed vowel) between German and English are distinguished here, and go altogether unmentioned by the author. The real world of spoken and sung dialects is, of course, far too diverse to be represented in a single study; by opening our ears to basic sonic differences, Copeman inspires a certain confidence that more minute but still telling distinctions can be managed. (Such subtleties can be perfectly mastered only with the help of a pronunciation coach who is a language specialist, as Copeman wisely recommends; a lot of doubt and guesswork could be eliminated by a recording or CD-ROM audiovisual guide to the vocal sounds.)

---

<sup>2</sup>A good basic introduction to the IPA can be found in *Diction for Singers, a Concise Reference for English, Italian, Latin, German, French and Spanish Pronunciation*, by Joan Wall, Robert Caldwell, Tracy Gavilanes, and Sheila Allen (Dallas: pst..., 1990). In course textbook format, this guide uses a slightly larger repertoire of IPA symbols than Copeman's; its Latin is the standard Italian version.



Americans will find an added challenge in the knowledge that the sounds described in this book have been filtered through ears attuned to British English (as the author himself takes some care to point out). We may be amused at seeing *pacem* rendered for the British eye as "parch 'em," or by the warning to British singers that the Verdi *Requiem* will require a distinction to be sounded between "*pace* and *parce*, *parte* and 'paté'" (p. 225). Not so amusing, perhaps, is the instruction, given here complete, to pronounce the vowel-sound represented by the IPA symbol [ʌ] as in "but," with the admonitory footnote, "Not as in some northern English" (p. viii). After reading the entire book, I could not be certain of the sound the author has in his mind for this vowel.

Can we really know how languages sounded in earlier times? Copeman makes a very strong case that we can, more or less closely; he provides strong contemporary testimony from various times and places that includes bilingual puns, homophones, and rhymes, and attempts at phonetic transliteration that still seem to inform the ear today. Where information is missing or inconclusive, reasonable interpolations and extrapolations can often be made. One of Copeman's fundamental principles, based firmly on the evidence we have, is that until the quite recent adoption of Italianate Latin as a universal standard, local Latin pronunciation almost always reflected the sounds of the local vernacular. As a result, this book is not only about Latin pronunciation, but is in fact a guide to the pronunciation of the major European languages and dialects in important musical centers at specific times. (In accounting for the various changes in the sound of Latin, the author has incidentally given us an abbreviated history of Christian Europe from a quite unusual viewpoint.) Copeman's study is nothing less than a tour de force.

Granted the possibility of recreating various historical accentuations of Latin, is it musically worthwhile for choirs to bother with them? Copeman takes up this question at length, offering some sound and candid advice, which, crudely summarized, suggests that the best choirs will find that choosing an appropriate Latin will make a very noticeable difference in color and articulation in the music, a difference that should enhance and complement the musical style, while giving increased presence to the text itself, while other, less skilled choirs needn't trouble themselves with the question. He recommends trying French Latin first, as it is probably the most clearly distinct from the familiar Italian variety, certainly in its altered and often nasalized vowels, but even more in its conspicuous stressing and lengthening of final syllables (one beautiful example of this is Stravinsky's "Pater noster" setting), a characteristic of French Latin that has consistently flummoxed German, English, and

American performers. Next in order of unfamiliarity will probably be the English Latin of Tallis and Byrd, perhaps permanently vexed with uncertainty, or that of Purcell; most singers will find the sound of the latter, as in, for example, "Glaw-ree-ah Pay-try et Fye-lee-oh et Spy-rec-tyoo-eye Sank-toe" rather a shock at first.

Any American choral group that sings music in Latin, and most do, may find that Copeman's book offers an opportunity to get out of a pronunciation rut. Anything, in fact, that will help move the American choral sound forward from the back of the throat will in my view be a blessing. Most of the vowel sounds needed to recreate the colors of the various Latins have nothing to do with the muzzy, neutral-sounding vowels that so commonly emanate from the mouths of American choristers, not infrequently rendering one language indistinguishable from another. (In this connection I wish that Copeman had not omitted the essential point that the "t," "d," and "n" of the Romance languages are dentals, that is, made with the tongue touching the teeth, rather than the alveolars of English, where the tongue touches the ridge behind the upper teeth. In my experience nothing does more to bring the vowels to the front of the mouth than attention to these dental consonants.) American choral singers seem to recoil from efforts to make them aware of the mouth and its various moving parts. But this distaste, not to say squeamishness, has to be overcome if any form of Mediterranean Latin, at least, is to be pursued toward the goal of realism.

A side-effect of brighter, fronted vowels is that they make intonational vagaries more evident, necessitating increased attention to tuning—no bad thing. Copeman deals with this briefly and, with the exception of a couple of small details, knowledgeably, in a footnote on intonation (p. 238).

Extended sample texts are given in an appendix, with parallel IPA notation, for Renaissance Picard-Franco-Flemish Latin, French Latin from various periods (including the recent shift in France to an Italianate style, deplored by Copeman), Roman Latin (there is an appendix on relevant regional Italian Latins), Spanish and Portuguese Latin (both of which seem to need some consonantal fine-tuning), northern and southern German Latin—Saxony and Austria included—from different periods, and various English Latins, including several possibilities for the bedevilled Tudor period. (Those wishing to apply a Germanic accent to Latin but who themselves have little German will need more guidance on the characteristic use of the glottal stop than Copeman gives, in a brief paragraph—not listed in the index—on p. 221. The IPA sign [ʔ] or [ʔ])

for this frequent but invisible consonant would have facilitated the use of the German phonetic texts.) The author takes great pains to make it clear that conjecture must be a part of many of his suggested phonetic realizations, and he sensibly offers alternatives and suggestions on interpretation of the evidence, encouraging us to make, where necessary, our own educated guesses.

In order to have all the texts he transliterates phonetically, one must acquire Copeman's *The Pocket "Singing in Latin"*,<sup>3</sup> a paperback-sized, 48-page, spiral-bound companion booklet intended as a quick reference for rehearsals. In addition to the texts, this booklet contains a brief introduction along with the summarized phonetic guides reprinted from the main volume, though with frequent, arbitrary additions, omissions, and changes that could cause some confusion. The pocket supplement can't really be used, it seems to me, without the main text.

The most encouraging and enjoyable approach to Copeman's study is probably by way of his final chapter, the "Epitome," where the author's engaging, avuncular scholarly style is at its best in his summation of the book, and in Andrew Parrott's terse, well argued Preface. Once one has got adjusted to the book's visual demands, one can more easily and confidently go on to explore this treasury of invaluable (and often entertaining) information. Now that Copeman has established the principal source materials, I should think that performers would be greatly aided by a paperback edition of his practical chapters, shorn of primary source intrusions and footnotes (but with references to the main volume), along with his introductory material and all the phonetic texts—and, needless to say, in a readable typeface. Copeman's study is so important, so vital to our understanding of the sound of a huge proportion of our Western musical heritage, from Perotin to Poulenc, from the *Carmina Burana* to Webern and Arvo Pärt, from Power to Vaughan Williams, that one would wish as few impediments as possible to the enjoyment and practical application of it.

Douglas Leedy

---

<sup>3</sup>Oxford, 1990.