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Pronouncing Vocal Music

Historical and Regional Pronunciations in Vocal Performance

Douglas Leedy

Whether they commit their work to paper or create it extempore in performance, composers usually have in their mind's ear when setting words to music the specific sounds that characterize a particular pronunciation or dialect, sounds that are thus an integral part of the musical conception. Correspondingly, the re-creation of the original sounds—obviously in some part speculative where the audible record is absent—or something approaching them can have a dramatic effect on the coloration and rhythmic profile of a vocal work in performance, and calls for as much care as other important stylistic factors such as articulation or choice of instruments. (A seemingly small change can generate a large effect, as for example the brightening of vowel quality that occurs when English-speaking singers produce the true dental consonants of the Romance languages.)

The recent evolution of standardized, "received" pronunciations for the major European languages (and church Latin) has brought with it a need for attention to the many musically significant regional and historical pronunciations: for example, the Renaissance French of

Paris and Picardy: Low (Northern) and Saxon German in the 17th and 18th centuries: and the still very diverse Italian dialects, including (among others) those of Naples, Venice, and Tuscany.

The passage of the centuries has gradually brought about drastic changes in the way most European languages are pronounced, perhaps in English most of all, where the Great Vowel Shift profoundly altered the crucial vocalics. (A particularly dramatic shift in timbre can be found in the pronunciation of *i* as in "time"; this diphthong, which is customarily sung today as a prolonged "ah" with a last-minute "ee" offglide [aⁱ], was generally in the 16th and 17th centuries a sustained "ee" that emerged quickly from an initial neutral vowel: "tuhEEEM" [əi]. The earlier *i* can still be heard among folk-singers of Scotland and Northern England.) Nearly as diverse as the regional dialects, and as changeable over time, have been the pronunciations of Latin, which almost everywhere and until quite recently followed the local vernacular.

Written presentation of historical and regional pronunciations can be helpful up to a point. Harold Copeman's *Singing in Latin* (Oxford: the Author, 1990) contains a daunting wealth of information from primary sources, and gives specific pronunciation recommendations not only for Latin but also for many European dialects from medieval to modern times that have informed the local Latin accents. There is no substitute, however, for hearing the actual sounds; coaching by a specialist is highly desirable.

A Selection of Guides

English:

E. J. Dobson, *English Pronunciation, 1500-1700*

(2v., 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968).

E. J. Dobson and Frank Ll. Harrison, *Medieval English Songs*

(New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), p. 39-51, 317-21.

French:

Jeannine Alton and Brian Jeffery, *Bele Buche e Bele Parleure: a Guide to the Pronunciation of Medieval and Renaissance French for Singers and Others* (London: Tecla Editions, 1976; with demonstration tape).

German:

C. V. J. Russ, *Studies in Historical German Phonology* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1982).

Italian:

Gerhard Rohlfs, *Grammatica storica della lingua italiana e dei suoi dialetti* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1966).

A. L. and G. Lepschy, *The Italian Language Today* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1977).

Author's Note:

The just published *Singing Early Music: the Pronunciation of European Languages in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, edited by Timothy J. McGee, with A. G. Rigg and David N. Klausner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), will surely be an important source for those areas and regions it covers. A specialist presents each of the languages or dialects included, which are English, Scots, French, Occitan, Catalan, Spanish, Portuguese, Galician-Portuguese, Italian, German, and Flemish, as well as the characteristic Latin of each area; sample texts can be heard on an included compact disc. This book appeared too recently to be evaluated here.