

Viva Voce: Recordings of Spoken Latin

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The early days of the 'restored' pronunciation of Latin coincided with the early days of the gramophone; and we have a number of interesting early recordings, by W. H. D. Rouse, R. S. Conway, and others, to remind us of this. Technically these classics of modern spoken Latin are, inevitably, poor by today's standards; and even the best of them – like Mr. H. A. B.

White's more recent Linguaphone readings – suffer from a pre-occupation, again perhaps inevitable in the historical context, with sheer accuracy of pronunciation, at the expense of all those other qualities by which recorded readings of poetry or prose would normally be judged. It was, after all, the main aim of the 'restorers' to substitute for the 'native' pronunciation of Latin the closest possible approach to the sounds of classical Latin, and they showed convincingly that our evidence allows us to make this approach very much closer than one might have expected over a distance of 2000 years – even if the absence of recordings from ancient Rome makes the ultimate step in the restoration impossible. The pronunciation which, owing to their efforts, has now become accepted in Britain is at its best considerably more accurate in several respects than the pronunciation prevalent in even Germany or Italy; and the early British recordings of spoken Latin played an important part in bringing this about – even though their accuracy is not always quite complete (e.g. Mr. White's open *ē* and his Italianate *gn* are not in accordance with the evidence).

It is not to disparage the value and interest of these recordings to say that the need has been felt, at least since the advent of 'hi-fi' and the long-playing record, for something that should be technically more up-to-date and, while not sacrificing accuracy

in any way, should concentrate on an attempt to make Latin authors live, in the sense in which good recorded readings of more modern works make their authors live. If questions of interpretation and of individual (or national) taste are bound to play an even more important rôle in any such attempt than they do in the reading of modern works in the reader's own language, this cannot detract from the need.

In recent years the vacuum has begun to be filled; and the process has yielded one excellent recording by Viktor Pöschl (*Römische Dichtung*, Artemis Verlag, Zürich) of part of *Aeneid* vi backed by Horace's 'Bore' (*Sat.* i. 9) and two of Ovid's 'Transformations' (*Met.* i. 452-567; x. 243-97). It is hard indeed not to be gripped by Pöschl's rendering of the Sibyl's prophecy, or not to enjoy the comedy when Horace is left in the lurch by his mischievous friend; but the English-speaking listener – and especially the English-speaking teacher – will be conscious throughout that this is essentially a German recording (in actual pronunciation [e.g. *oe, ae, eu, v*], in its treatment of elision, in the prominence of the metric ictus, and in general intonation), and he will be left wishing for something of an equally high standard from a less foreign mouth. (The snags, but not all the advantages, are shared by the 7-inch, 45 r.p.m. records published by Polyglotte, Düsseldorf.)

If at this point he turns to the much-advertised Folkway recordings from New York, his expectations will be high, and they will be heightened by the attractive appearance of the 'sleeves' of these high-priced 12-inch records. Unfortunately all his hopes are doomed to disappointment, and he is destined to find that, so far from being an improvement on the 'early classics', the spoken Latin on these records throws away the earlier achievement without adding anything that is of any value.

The straight readings in this series (*Ovid, Horace, Roman Love Poetry*) by John F. C. Richards substitute for the 'restored' pronunciation a new kind of 'native English' Latin which, while generally observing quantities and rendering most consonants

with approximate correctness, rests content with thoroughly English vowel sounds, making *puella*, for instance, begin like 'puerility' and *turgidulus* like 'turkey'. The readings, moreover, are completely monotonous in tempo, phrasing, and delivery; and their general effect resembles nothing so much as a barrel-organ churning out so many 'lines' – any connexion with poetry being purely coincidental. And since, in one passage, the reader even stops to correct an error, further comment is probably superfluous.

The series also contains some 'lecture recitals' (*Julius Caesar, Cicero, Virgil, Introduction to the Latin Language*) by Moses Hadas. The amount of spoken Latin contained in these is comparatively small; and it seems doubtful whether recording, rather than print, is appropriate for the bulk of the material, which consists of lecture, translation, and summary. In the *Introduction* record, at least, the selection of passages shows an enterprising scope and variety, which could have been greatly expanded if the descriptive material had not used up so much space. But the greatest disappointment is, once again, with the quality of the readings themselves. These share almost every one of the faults of those by Richards, and they add to them a cavalier treatment of quantity, accent, and ictus, which does not despise *bônus* or *locus* or even *Iovis incrementum* (*V. Ecl.* 4. 49) and which makes it possible in at least one passage to count ten downright mistakes in two lines. If Richards' readings show how the 'restored' pronunciation should not be Anglicized, Hadas' readings can show only how Latin ought not to be read.

So the need remains. Latin teachers, as well as a wider public, are entitled to expect that the British pioneers of modern spoken Latin should find successors in our day to maintain, and improve upon, their work. An awareness of this has begun to emerge; and I hope before long to be able to report some more encouraging developments.

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