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C O D A

When focus on the health of the country transformed the national dialogue, the republican ideal of public utility found other forms, just as aristocratic values arguably survived in modernist music. Expropriation laws have continued to clear the way in France for new public buildings, parks, and high-speed trains. Tourism and nuclear energy became public services. And in July 1987, to recognize non-profit work serving the country's general interest, laws were passed concerning "foundations of public utility." This enabled banks, companies producing luxury goods, and other private organizations to receive tax and other advantages for patronage of the arts, culture, the environment, and various social services.¹ But the legacy of public utility from early Third Republic France extends well beyond such economic interests. French officials still conceive of their public institutions as working in the service of citizens. The community, the nation, and even, to some extent, public institutions are consubstantial with the people itself, not a force inhibiting individual freedom. As socialists, in some ways functioning as successors of *opportuniste* and radical republicans, clash with far-Right conservatives of the Front National, and, at least on this question, with President Nicolas Sarkozy's pro-business views, debates over the luxury versus the utility of goods and social services remain heated. Nonetheless, most French continue to believe in beauty and culture as integral to their country. Modern monuments in Paris associated with successive presidents—Georges Pompidou's Centre national d'art et de culture near the oldest part of the city, François Mitterrand's huge new Bibliothèque nationale in its working-class east, and Jacques Chirac's Musée du quai Branly, devoted to non-Western indigenous art, in its wealthier west—attest to the ongo-

1. A recent example is a nonprofit foundation, "30 million d'amis," dedicated to fighting against the abandonment of domestic pets. Its logo, featured prominently on billboards in the Paris Métro throughout summer 2008, includes, in large letters, "reconnue d'utilité publique."

ing concern with siting public institutions in a way that challenges insular tastes and increases their access to those most in need of other perspectives.²

The Third Republic laid a foundation for how music could help “compose” citizens, forging a relationship to the nation and one another based on the republican principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Three ongoing concerns hark back to this period: the desire to assure accessibility to the arts for all citizens, the use of music and musical practices to build community and help people explore what they value as a people, and faith in music’s capacity to revitalize and help us imagine change because we have heard it. The first goes to the heart of all public utilities: the right of all people to have their basic needs met. In the United States, the electricity and water companies today have a monopoly on this concept. But in France, where music has long been recognized as a powerful and empowering medium that can electrify crowds and nourish body as well as soul,³ orchestras continue to receive state subsidies. Public support of music is analogous to public health insurance, something assured in many European nations, but still contested in the United States. Ironically, perhaps, if we think of government as centralized control, French socialists today, like their republican predecessors, encourage popular participation in culture and refuse to see culture as handed down from on high or associated with the distinction of socially privileged or highly educated elites. Ongoing support for the contemporary music research at the Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique in Paris, however, suggests that conservatives and progressives alike continue to see value in high culture and intellectual musical practices, in part because of their currency in the realm of international exchange.

Music also helped the French to navigate the flux of a complex and dynamic national identity. As those at the *fin de siècle* came to grips with themselves as a hybrid people with eclectic interests, the product of both assimilation and resistance to various invader cultures, France offered an alternative to both the ethnic model of identity found in Germany and Japan and that based on shared philosophical ideals such as in the United States, a model particularly valuable in today’s world. If there is coherence in the French nation, it derives from both a certain sense of the public interest, that which anything of public utility serves, and shared culture. Music, an integral part of this, can be perceived as autonomous and

2. Various public cultural festivals and institutions, such as the Théâtre national populaire, the Festival d’Avignon, and the Cinémathèque française, have also addressed this.

3. On the aesthetic power of music to “play with life’s depths, the extremes of passion, simulating the complexities of thought, and seeming to stir nature itself,” see Paul Valéry, “At the Lamoureux Concert in 1893,” in his *Occasions*, trans. Roger Shattuck and Frederick Brown (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 198–99.

“pure,” its practice possibly bringing grace to the individual, or an expression of “universal” taste, be it through certain forms or abstractions inherent in the human mind. As I’ve shown, it also has the potential to play a significant role in debates over identity, reinforcing one position or another or helping people reconcile what stands in the way of social solidarity. Moreover, some of the subjects that attracted composers at the fin de siècle maintained their appeal in the twentieth century, when, for example, Canteloube composed an opera on *Vercingétorix* (1933) and Honegger an opera on *Judith* (1926) and an oratorio on *Jeanne d’Arc* (1938). Through works such as these, music can unite or divide, musical tastes articulating the boundaries of communities.

As differences of class increase in our globally interconnected, finance-driven world and as religious practices drive wedges into our societies, creating deepening fissures, music’s broad accessibility makes it possible to create dialogue, as it did between monarchists and republicans under the Moral Order and the *ralliement*, to promote tolerance and understanding, and, whenever possible, to enable consensus without repression. Like citizenship, it can serve as a medium for enhancing self-awareness. If, as I have here suggested, music could help people address their differences and assure survival of their values, this depends on a public of active listeners, active in defining the context for what was written and what it could mean. If such listening engages one in comparative judgment and empathetic, imaginative engagement, music continues to help us face the unfamiliar, the Other in its many guises, as well as to consider what we share.

Finally, for those seeking it, the Third Republic has shown how music can be a regenerative force, expressing a society’s hopes and dreams. In the wake of war, this could entail regeneration through the sheer energy and vitality of the country’s music and music making. But as French citizenship is complex, multidimensional, and ambiguous, today, with so many immigrants and their children in the country, even more so than before, this could be construed differently depending on a person’s politics and other beliefs. Regeneration might entail confronting and reconciling the new with the old, the promise of change through assimilation of difference or hybridization with the need to preserve a native culture whose perceived purity is threatened by eternal influences. What is crucial here, as I have tried to show, is that, if an aspect of music is public taste, as understood in the late nineteenth century, then, in adapting to people’s needs and desires as they shift, musical meaning itself can change over time. Composers like Debussy attacked the Republic for clinging to older types of expression. But even if republicans called for an allegiance to the common good, higher principles than unfettered individualism, and sought an alternative to the constraints of religion, for the most part, and especially when

it came to art music, they tried to foster freedom of expression, some of them, such as Ferry, promoting innovation far more than the artistic establishment. When progress is a central tenet, as it was for both republicans and monarchists in the Third Republic, music and musical progress can serve as a metaphor for a people's aspirations and an emblem of pride and glory at home and abroad. Music, like other forms of public utility, clarifies what people value as individuals and a nation.

Understanding music's utility, I have suggested, also entails looking beyond the impact of the great works to the dynamic flow of musical life. While scholars are just beginning to examine elite institutions such as the Opéra, I have found just as important organizations not dependent on and protected by large state subsidies, ranging from orchestras, necessarily sensitive to market pressures, to working-class choruses and wind bands. Because I believe that much is to be learned from study of more than the tastes and practices of elites, whether from the establishment or the avant-garde, those with money or talent, I have opened small, but, I hope, evocative windows on the musical tastes and practices of amateurs as well as professionals. Only by examining a wide range of music-making contexts—including public schools, department stores, gardens, hotels, and brasseries—can we understand the extent to which the performance of music contributes to forming communities, microcosms of what states hope to forge in the nation.

If we believe that there is something lost in leaving culture entirely to the free market, the concept of public utility is still relevant as a way of helping people negotiate their conflicting needs and desires, especially in the increasingly diverse and complex societies in which we live. The Nazis may have rendered problematic the use of music for public purposes, and contemporary advertising has made us leery of music's capacity to manipulate and exploit our desires. At the same time, the enormous growth of the Fête de la musique, now taking place all over the world, reminds us of music's power not just to "foster self-knowledge and the formation of groups," but also to "reconcile the imaginary and the political through musical performance."⁴ With this book, I hope to encourage dialogue about music's role in democracy.



If I end this book as I began it, with challenges to music's utility, let me also give the last word to Ravel. When faced with the worst devastation his generation had

4. "25 années de Fête de la musique: Un Bref historique," in *25e Fête de la musique: Dossier de presse* (Paris: Fnac, 2006), 3, 8.

suffered, World War I, the composer defied himself in his *La Valse*, the very form he had earlier mocked as “useless.” Unlike Gounod’s *Gallia*, written to revive a people devastated by defeat, *La Valse* (1906–20) involves no chorus and no projections of musical strength. Instead, I hear it as an ode to Western civilization, a reminder that out of the ruins of violence and destruction life will reemerge. The piece begins ominously with disturbing inarticulate noise, the almost inaudible rumblings of muted double basses for thirty-nine measures alternating oscillating seconds superimposed over diminished fourths on E. The first sense of a pulse comes from other double basses in measure 5, articulating those same seconds on a low E and F, downbeat, upbeat, rest. Gradually the harp and timpani fill in the space left by the third-beat rest, and low bassoons, then violas, utter short, erratic melodic fragments, yearning, dreaming of another time, another place, though still very deep and unsettling. It is as if Ravel is pulling music out of the mud of the battlefields.⁵

As energy builds in the violas, their momentum propelled by woodwind arabesques, the orchestral melody, gorgeously colored with harp glissandi, gradually becomes more sensual, more like a Viennese waltz, the tutti strings carrying the listener ineluctably forward. It’s like fragments of pleasurable memories trying to be light-hearted, bearers of our desire, interrupted but ever returning again. Full-blown, goose-bump-raising melodic expression breaks through in the strings with a tune reminiscent of one in Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*,⁶ but this comes reinforced by oddly triumphant outbursts of the percussion, a kind of internal violence. The oboe’s solo, echoed by the strings, then recalls the syncopated rhythms and large leaps of the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, nonchalant and charming, its cadence completely expected, but not when the fortissimo timpani and a full brass chorus interrupt to punctuate these moments of arrival. If at first they sound celebratory, their outbursts, later citing Beethoven, remind the listener that the waltz here is not a frothy dessert. Eventually, the listener cannot help but be caught up in the alternations between rhythmic and melodic drive, but the momentum doesn’t progress very far without a reminder of the opening chaos. Music may be celebrating life here, but there is a dark undercurrent, as if memory of the war will not retreat, even in a waltz, as music will not retreat amid war and human destruction.

Ravel wanted this work, set in 1855 Vienna, to be danced by couples, twirling

5. Such an interpretation depends on a performance that respects the dynamic restraint Ravel calls for in the bassoon entries of waltz fragments (marked piano or mezzo piano).

6. J.-C. Branger, “Ravel et la valse,” *Ostinato rigore* 25 (2005): 156.

like whirling dervishes in a “fantastic and fatefully inescapable whirlpool.” Maybe he thought seeing the waltz, a counterpart to hearing it, would remind listeners of the contradictions of desire and destruction. We want to be taken in, to be taken away, to be possessed by this music. But this is not art for art’s sake. I hear it as a powerful critique of war that plays on our desire for waltz as culmination, as it was in Debussy’s *Ile joyeuse*, *La Mer*, and *Jeux*, and in Ravel’s own music, but does this to seduce us into feeling the price of war, the sacrifice of what we share as Westerners. The end places the listener at the center of the nightmare, caught in the waltz rhythms, as in Saint-Saëns’ *Danse macabre*, yet overwhelmed by the blasting power of the horns, perhaps recalling military horns. The brass imitations of the waltz theme sound like daggers, the final strikes of the gong, the hypnotic pounding of devastation. At the end, Ravel does not let us off or allow us to go back to our easy chairs or our nostalgia. The music pummels us as it transports us.

Ravel, a wartime ordnance truck driver who lost friends in battle and then his mother, admitted that *La Valse* was no longer “musical entertainment, but musical testimony, or even a musical alarm call.” Its final rhythm is that of fatality, the waltz reduced to convulsions and dementia. With the distance of time, Ravel admitted that one might hear in it the horrors of war in 1870 or Vienna in 1919, but recommended instead that the listener concentrate on “the ascending progression of sonorities.” He even once denied that it expressed “a dance of death” or a “struggle between life and death,” preferring that it be heard as an “an ecstatic dance, a turning of more and more passionate and exhausting dances, almost hallucinating, suggested uniquely by the waltz.” Whether Ravel intended the work as a way to exorcise the war and the death of his mother, a sarcastic allegory of Western society, a nostalgic comment on a loss shared by all of Europe, or an adieu to a form of life and music in the midst of disappearing, we shall never know.⁷ But what is certain is that this music was hardly the expression of a “useless” occupation.

7. Ravel cited from various sources in *ibid.*, 155, 157, 158, 159; Ravel, letter to Ernest Ansermet, 20 October 1921, in *A Ravel Reader*, ed. Arbie Orenstein (New York: Columbia Press, 1990), 212.