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Review: *Utilité publique and Public Utility*

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## *Utilité publique* and Public Utility

CORMAC NEWARK

Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France*. Berkeley, CA, and London: University of California Press, 2009. xxi + 789 pp. ISBN 978 0 52025 740 5.

WHEN you have written a book that is almost 800 pages long, and are proud to say that it has occupied you on and off for most of your professional life to date, doubtless you think carefully about the opening paragraph. Jann Pasler begins with a recollection from her student days in Paris, when a passer-by went out of her way to help. For the passer-by, Jann the 19-year-old musician was nothing less than a representative of what sustains civilization from one generation to the next, above all when times are hard. For Professor Pasler, that anonymous Parisienne was to become an important personification of a characteristically French belief in the social significance of music. In this book, her project is to trace in detail expressions of that belief during the Third Republic (above all the years 1870–1900), as well as to set that belief in a formative historical context stretching right back to the Revolution.

It is a project that will be of interest to many, and not only because times are indeed hard: I suspect that every Anglophone musicologist who has lived in Paris has an equivalent story to tell. My own, for example, dates from 1994, and the final of one of the Concours Internationaux de la Ville de Paris, the Mstislav Rostropovich Cello Competition. In a city that never does things by halves, the mayor's office had assembled a jury, chaired by Slava himself, that read like a *Who's Who* of cello playing and teaching at the time. It also included Henri Dutilleux. The solo test-piece, which each of the six finalists would play in the first half of the concert, had been specially commissioned from Alfred Schnittke. In the rather longer second half, each performed a concerto of their choice, accompanied by the Orchestre de Paris. As I recall, the winner, in addition to being awarded the Grand Prix de la Ville de Paris, was guaranteed further concert bookings and, perhaps most significantly, a recording contract.

But it was not so much the opulence of these arrangements that seemed essentially Parisian as the reaction when the winner was announced: Ha-Na Chang from South Korea. So furious were some members of the audience that their boos and whistles did not end when they left the concert hall. A large number of them congregated outside and waited for the jury to leave in order that they could express their displeasure again, face to face. I can still remember what seemed to me to be the somewhat uncomfortable expression on Rostropovich's face as he and his colleagues ran the gauntlet of the crowd; uncomfortable, I imagined, because the protest was not motivated by chauvinism (although two of the finalists were French) but by the fact that Chang was then only 11 years old. The feeling was that in particular the Dvořák Cello Concerto, chosen by her and a number of the others, simply could not be adequately rendered by a child; that the competition had been distorted

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by the marketing potential represented by a *Wunderkind*; that a serious French artistic event had been turned into a circus by pressure from globalized big business.

As well as proving that those stories from the wild side of Paris reception studies (the 1861 *Tannhäuser*, the première of *Le sacre du printemps*, etc.) were not merely exaggerations aimed at making music history more interesting to undergraduates, but were in fact only too plausible, the events of that day in 1994 offered an insight into how Parisians are liable to hear music. Whatever the merits of her interpretation, Chang's triumph had a significance that, for a large part of the audience, was simply incompatible with the dignity of the institutional context – and perhaps even of the piece as well. That it was Rostropovich – an artist firmly committed to the capacity of musical performance to signify far beyond itself, perhaps especially in connection with the Dvořák Concerto – who was presiding over this perceived aberration must have seemed bitterly ironic to many of them.<sup>1</sup>

Underlying stories like this – then, now and under the Third Republic – are often interpretations of *utilité publique*, a guiding principle for French republicans. At an institutional level, the nearest equivalent in English is charitable status, a designation that, in the UK as in the USA, hardly describes adequately the range of organizations it covers, from opera houses to voluntary groups working with the homeless; it really determines only which tax regulations apply. As Pasler explains, *utilité publique* is a much richer concept, drawing on Cicero, *ancien régime* manners and notions of the state, and Rousseau's *Contrat social*, among many other sources, as well as on Revolutionary debates over the extent and overlap of the public and private spheres. At the level of political philosophy, it provided both a map for administrators, showing where their responsibilities lay or might advantageously be extended, and, especially during the period in question, a way of promoting social homogeneity and national unity.

For the *républicains opportunistes* of the 1870s and 80s as much as for their radical and *progressiste* successors, music had an important place in this. It represented a well-established arena for debating issues of taste, style and influence in an international perspective, but was also a means to engender, within the domestic public, a sense of common heritage, experience and values. As Pasler puts it, their conviction was that music 'could be part of a shared cultural imaginary, if not an entirely shared material reality'. She pursues manifestations of this conviction through a broad range of milieux: occasions calculated to express national and social identity (e.g. the Revolutionary festivals); musical institutions, public and private (from the Opéra to the various orchestral concert series); social music-making (such as the *orphéons*, the male-voice choirs that grew up all over France during the nineteenth century); the education system (specialist and general); and music historiography.

Although for many readers the potential of music for use as a tool of social engineering, or at the very least of social cohesion, may not in itself require such lengthy examination, that is not quite Pasler's subject. Her book is not so much about the attempts on the part of invested elites and genuine idealists alike to turn music to the service of the republican project – which, though fascinating, were not unique in their historical and practical aims – as it is about the obvious, yet still to us mysterious, success of those attempts. From the impressive

<sup>1</sup> Rostropovich gave a famously emotional performance of it, with the Soviet State Symphony Orchestra at the London Proms, on 21 August 1968, the day that Russian tanks entered what was then Czechoslovakia and the so-called 'Prague Spring' came to an abrupt end.

detail of her account there emerges the sense that the political argument was almost circular: French administrators sought to give intellectual substance, and institutional form, to a conviction that was all but innate in them and their class. As the Preface has it: 'When it came to music, what was uniquely French about this idea was, not simply that it could be socially useful, but that public institutions, and to a certain extent the French public as well, should regard music's utility as ideologically important.'

Mapping the development of this attitude among members of that public, especially audiences from other social classes, is of course more problematic. Certainly any reception study extending much beyond Paris must inevitably confront the same difficulties that the republican liberal elites of the time did, as they constantly tried to reconcile the forces acting on the wider population (different dialects, experience of war, loyalty to religion and feudal tradition, etc.). Even within Paris, moreover, the documents surviving in archives – of which Pasler surveys a great number, from parliamentary speeches to concert programmes, along with various iconographical sources – and the reviews of newspaper columnists allow research to follow the trickle-down of policy only so far. She is sensitive to this, and tries to address the question of audience buy-in in a number of ways. One is to focus on orchestral concert series' practice of relying on single-ticket sales, often last-minute, rather than season subscriptions. This was in order to be able to gratify requests for works to be repeated, and more generally to tailor the – often self-consciously didactic – programming to whatever seemed to be catching the popular imagination at the time.

Looking back over sets of data such as these, combining as they do clear records of governmental policy with intelligible artistic decisions, and at least hinting at how audience understanding went beyond simple taste or gross chauvinism, it is always tempting to over-narrativize. Pasler makes some gestures in that direction, but they seem almost involuntary; overall, this is a disciplined reading of the evidence. And where it scores most highly over much of the other work that has been done in this area is in its concern to set before the reader the complexities of the contemporary social situation. The political complexion of the republican movement is here properly variegated, and competing ideological and artistic interests are given appropriately specific treatment. Similarly, *utilité publique*, though it may sound an irresistibly left-wing idea, is shown as motivating musical endeavours from all elements of what was an increasingly complicated social mixture. The Comtesse de Greffulhe's Société des Grandes Auditions Musicales de France, for example, was a noble enterprise in more than the genealogical sense, as Pasler explains, for it not only promoted new music by French composers, but also fostered cohesion among political factions and a sense of national artistic purpose beyond politics. Its achievement, essentially, was to relocate salon culture to the public domain – a select public, to be sure, but one capable of mobilizing substantial investment, in every sense, in the cause of music's *utilité publique*. Her husband's wealth, which came from finance, as well as that of similar-minded, new-aristocratic bankers such as Baron Adolphe de Rothschild, thus subsidized music for all on a scale comparable to state institutions.

There hardly seems a more illuminating illustration of nineteenth-century understanding of *utilité publique* – and of what a special reception environment Paris was – than this. As I began by suggesting, it is still special now, as the conduct of the most recent Rostropovich competition, held last year, clearly shows. It was the first to be run in the absence of its eponymous figurehead, and arguably the first to be planned since the full extent of the current global financial crisis became clear. Christophe Girard, *chargé des affaires culturelles* in

the Paris mayor's office, combined these stark realities in an interview in *Le nouvel observateur*, where he was reported as saying not only that the Rostropovich and the other Concours Internationaux de la Ville de Paris had become 'rather dusty', but also that the city should be concentrating its efforts on the Étienne Vatelot stringed-instrument-making competition, apparently for the simple reason that 'the gentleman is still alive'.<sup>2</sup>

This new pragmatism was evidently some time in taking hold, because the decision to cut the Rostropovich budget from €300k to €250k seems to have been approved by the Conseil de Paris less than four weeks before the beginning of the competition. Claude Samuel, president of the Association pour la Création et la Diffusion Artistique and founder of the competition in 1977, reacted bitterly, but said that he was counting on the fervour of Parisian music-lovers for support; they had always shown great attachment to an artist who, in the face of political oppression, had chosen Paris as a place of refuge.<sup>3</sup> This may have been stretching a point (Britain and the USA also claimed Rostropovich as their own following his departure from the USSR in 1974), but with the final concert of the competition due to take place on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of Rostropovich's celebrated performance at the fall of the Berlin Wall, the geopolitical extravagance of Samuel's rhetoric was understandable.<sup>4</sup> It was, indeed, a historically inevitable mixture of some of the tendencies traced by Pasler: an assumption that musical institutions are for everyone; a conviction that when times are hard, politically as much as financially, those institutions become more, not less, important; and above all a sincere belief that music, with the merest inflection (Dvořák, London, 1968; Bach, Berlin, 1989; etc.), is the most eloquent proponent of social and political solidarity.

More of the themes familiar in Parisian public discourse about music (and now, thanks to Pasler, more widely) emerged in the aftermath of the competition. One might have thought that an event bearing Rostropovich's name and representing such potential for a 'good news' story would have been easy to sell to commercial sponsors, even in these straitened circumstances, but when invited by Girard to do so, Samuel preferred instead to pursue a *larger* public subsidy, but one shared, just as he obviously believed the benefits to be, by the region and even the state. And the report in *Le Figaro*, where one could have expected to find energetic support for an appeal to private enterprise, noted that the competition's funding had already been substantially reduced, and concluded that it would be a shame to put at risk 'something that works and contributes to France's artistic influence'.<sup>5</sup>

*More* money for the arts? Because they contribute to national influence? Paris is indeed a special place, and is looking more and more so just at the moment. France has a thoroughly

<sup>2</sup> *Le nouvel observateur*, 9 October 2008 (all translations are my own). The other Concours Internationaux de la Ville de Paris are the Lily Laskine (d. 1988) Harp Competition, the Olivier Messiaen (d. 1992) Piano Competition, the Jean-Pierre Rampal (d. 2000) Flute Competition, and those named after the trumpeter Maurice André and the jazz pianist Martial Solal, who at the time of writing are, notwithstanding M. Girard's somewhat sinister rationale, also still alive!

<sup>3</sup> Reported in *Diapason*, 10 October 2009, and elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> Salle Pleyel, 8 November 2009. Rostropovich's playing of Bach at the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 was widely reported at the time, and images of the event (e.g. that at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6598895.stm>>) became icons of the re-unification of Germany. He reprised the performance *in situ* on the tenth anniversary in 1999.

<sup>5</sup> *Le Figaro*, 9 November 2009.

right-wing government; on the other hand the mayor of the capital, Bertrand Delanoë, and his grant-slashing attaché Girard are members of the Socialist Party. But that, as Pasler shows us, is not the point: *utilité publique* remains less a question of political allegiance than one of national constitution, in every sense. For proof, you have only to glance across the Channel: here in the UK – where there are Liberal Democrats in the government but some Arts Councils are facing budget reductions of 30%, many local councils are already cutting support for music, and arts and humanities university teaching looks like losing *all* of its subsidy – such talk seems foreign indeed. *Everything* is at risk; artistic influence abroad is surely the last thing on anyone's mind. Whatever the nuances of *utilité publique*, these days 'public utility' simply means a bank whose executives, far from throwing money at the arts, instead threw it away – a bank which has had to be purchased, willy-nilly, by us.