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Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009, 817 p.

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REFERENCES

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- 1 In *Composing the Citizen*, Jann Pasler presents a study on music as a “public utility” in Third Republic France. The author takes us on a journey through the institutional and ideological apparatus on which attempts to achieve social cohesion in that context were grounded, and explains how music helped to articulate and maintain it. The journey is a fascinating one, as it draws on a wide array of methodological approaches that range from urban anthropology and semiotics (focused on Paris), to theories of nationalism, sociology, politics, gender studies and postcolonial theory. None of these methodological repositories is called upon gratuitously, but constitute a critical arsenal which Pasler draws upon and administers wisely.
- 2 Pasler’s study could therefore be defined as a sociology and anthropology of musical practices and their connection with State ideals and policies in Third Republic France; furthermore, she provides a solid historiographical basis for her study. Indeed, the author has subjected the definition and use of most analytical strategies and objects to the contingencies of time and place, and the agency of cultural codes and practices, starting with the very concept of “public utility”. Pasler builds on a synthesis of conceptions and notions of “public utility” that were formulated before and during the Third Republic, and describes how musical practices met them with varying degrees of commitment and efficiency. This emphasis on the public dimension of music conducts

the analysis and description of all musical practices through the prism of wide-ranging and far-reaching humanistic goals, such as the improvement of democracy, progress, civilisation, social “health”, and other values that Pasler correctly connects with the foundations of revolutionary thinking in France, dating back to 1789 and earlier.

- 3 The author’s epistemological positioning seems mostly to be encapsulated in her statement that, “in adapting to people’s needs and desires as they shift, musical meaning itself can change over time” (p. 697). Meaning production, therefore, becomes a performative act, open to cultural agency and, therefore, subject to sociopolitical pressures and conditionings. Thus, in a framework defined by the pursuit and establishment of democracy in Third Republic France – even if certain groups challenged this pursuit – the uses and meanings of music result from a negotiation process involving a variety of social and institutional agents and conflicting interests. The Third Republic State took part in that process as a powerful and privileged actor, defining and enforcing policies with varying degrees of success, and retaining the widest economic and political share in the commission of music and the arts. However, the State did not determine the meanings and uses of music. Instead, in its attempt to bridge social and institutional gaps and stimulate cohesion, the State sought to fulfil social demand, and, therefore, entered into a process of engagement with the institutional and social agents responsible for the production and consumption of music and the arts. For these reasons, Pasler’s study of music as public utility in Third Republic France is not – or not only – a study of cultural policy and legislation. Instead, it achieves a right balance between a phenomenology and a history of the relation between state policies and social practices across classes in Third Republic France.
- 4 In light of this rationale, it seems somewhat striking to find that Pasler endorses other authors’ statements – which she quotes – informed by structuralist approaches, such as: “Albert Boime may be correct in arguing that the blurry lines and subjects used by the impressionist painters in the wake of the Commune represent an attempt to reappropriate the Paris landscape for the bourgeoisie” (p. 19); or, more conspicuously: “Miriam Levin finds in the [Eiffel] Tower’s construction ‘a symbol of the liberal democratic production system’, as each part, composed of the same material, works together towards the goal of progress”; or even Pasler’s own contention that Ravel’s *La Valse* is “a powerful critique of war that plays on our desire for waltz as culmination [...] The brass imitations of the waltz theme sound like daggers, the final strikes of the gong, the hypnotic pounding of devastation” (p. 700). A form of semantic determinism underlies all these statements, and conflicts with the otherwise well-achieved, stated attempts to account for semantic mobility, as well as social and historical agency. This conflict becomes particularly conspicuous in a phrase like “our desire for waltz as culmination”, in which notions of self and other, past and present, and, more generally, “difference”, fully collapse.
- 5 But the achievements and strengths of the book are too great not to compensate this small incongruence, which holds no far-reaching implications. Pasler’s greatest contribution consists, on the one hand, in giving voice to social groups and musical practices so far absent from most histories of music in Third Republic France; and, on the other, in her proven ability to read beyond the binaries informing some of those histories: “My goal is not to argue which composers ‘won’ or to disparage those who ‘lost’, a product of how we construe the ‘battle’. Rather, I hope to change the terms of the discourse, shifting it away from what leads too quickly to value judgements”

(p. 29); “Focused on the national interests of the country more than the special interests of factions or individuals and seeing social value in musical differences and diversity, I ask what rendered music valuable to French people of all classes and what it contributed to ‘composing’ citizens” (p. 310). Pasler’s stated endeavour to account for the role of music in helping to formulate class identity, consciousness, behaviour, and, related to it, in shaping different modes of consumption across the whole social spectrum, takes her to analyse the functions assigned to music in the rise of consumerism and the birth of a shopping culture in Paris, or the populist projects of mass education carried out through the Lamoureux and Padeloup concert seasons. Furthermore, the author integrates these musical practices in the cultural and social landscape of Third Republic France, thus defining their sociopolitical functions organically, in relation with other forms of expression. The endeavour to read beyond established binaries deserves recognition, insofar as it offers an alternative to previous studies, which have been more focused on the agents of social and political destabilisation and have rendered a somewhat artificial landscape of political and cultural battles between two radically opposed sides.¹ Pasler shows awareness that not all cultural products are the result of a dialectical struggle, whether between pro- and anti-Wagnerians, monarchists and republicans, pro- and anti-Dreyfusards, and a long etcetera, aimed at achieving cultural and political hegemony. Many elements escape those binaries, as other recent studies have previously shown.²

- 6 Despite all the book’s achievements, however, one cannot help feeling that certain realities have been masked or neglected. Not that *Composing the Citizen* aims at providing a full account of musical culture in Third Republic France. But in her study of music as a “public utility”, Pasler has consciously and necessarily left some elements out, the implications of which are not fully realised or acknowledged. The focus on the role of music as a public utility makes it seem as if all elements of musical culture could be regarded as contributing to achieving social cohesion in varying degrees. As the author knows well, attempts at de-stabilising the Republic and obliterating democracy were real, especially coming from the realms of monarchic and anti-Republican organisations, such as Action française, and their satellite institutions, such as the Schola Cantorum. Pasler’s analysis of the propagandistic role played by music in preparing General Boulanger’s failed coup d’état (1889), which was aimed at establishing a military dictatorship and propitiating the return of the monarchy (p. 495-498), shows enough evidence of her awareness about this issue. But in her narrative, this episode appears as an accident on the way to the final goal of achieving social cohesion, and grounding democracy and civilisation. There is, again, a sort of determinism in regarding every aspect of musical culture in terms of its position in relation to State interests and policies.
- 7 After reading *Composing the Citizen*, it seems as if music’s proven capability for creating ideological divides and raising social barriers had been sidelined, or was deemed less powerful and significant than State ideals. While the survival of the Third Republic until the Second World War might contribute to reaffirming that stance, I argue that not enough mention is made of the struggles and challenges endured by the Republic, which, especially after the Dreyfus affair at the turn of the century, was forced to veer towards the right. Part of this omission stems from the limitation to the first three decades of the Third Republic, for which no substantial argument is provided. If the purpose is to show how the founding principles of the Third Republic instituted music as a public utility, this should have been made clearer in the title and introduction. But

I doubt that this is what Pasler has pretended, specially as she remarkably describes the process through which music became a public utility, presenting it as a gradual achievement that extended over the years, reaching across most social and cultural environments. This book's underlying assumption that State policies mean little without the process of negotiation through which they are shaped, enforced and reformulated – to which I have referred above – further suggests that Pasler does not merely seek a description of the grounding principles on which the Third Republic was first established, especially as that process needs to extend over time; rather, as stated above, the author has written a social history and anthropology of music and State ideals in Third Republic France. That those ideals fell under threat after the Dreyfus affair does not necessarily mean that music could no longer serve as a public utility.

- 8 Pasler's successful attempt to account for music's power to stimulate social cohesion and undermine social barriers partly stems from the awareness of living in an increasingly globalised world, which underpins and motivates her attempt at "deconstructing many of the premises underlying [her] previous work on French modernism" (p. XIV). This consciousness, however, seems to have obscured the fact that, for good or for bad, there are barriers that conflict with and challenge the drive of globalisation or the rise and growth of democracy,³ all the more so in Third Republic France, when globalisation was far from reaching today's development. Furthermore, Pasler's focus on "public utility" means that individual stances and achievements are underplayed. This problem becomes evident in her statement that "the Republic's focus on diversity, eclecticism and pleasure favoured the acceptance of Wagner's works and the adoption of Wagnerian elements in French operatic formulations" (p. 394). While this view rings true as regards performances of Wagner in State-subsidised institutions such as the Palais Garnier, to what extent can the Wagnerism of Alfred Bruneau or the symbolists be considered a consequence of official eclecticism, and not of individual or collective choices? This dilemma becomes aggravated in the case of the rival institution of the State-sponsored Conservatoire, namely, the Schola Cantorum, where Wagner not only represented an aesthetic choice, but also the source and support of a staunchly anti-Republican ideology which he shared with some members of its directive. In the Schola, Wagner's music served as the basis for an anti-Semitic musical aesthetics which, in the rise of the Dreyfus affair, became a powerful rhetorical weapon against official cultural and political discourses. It would require a totalitarian regime to have all Wagnerian allegiances silenced and repressed, and, in the case of Third Republic France, the case was fortunately different. The presence of Wagnerism in post-Sedan France, amidst staunch opposition, ultimately speaks more about the good health of democracy and official tolerance in that context than an alleged widespread propagation of an eclectic official aesthetics.
- 9 I would not like my concerns to spoil the excellent impression that the book has caused in me. I think that this is the most fascinating single-authored, book-length study on music culture in Third Republic France. But, while I am appreciative of its contributions, I see that some of its shortfalls betray an overreaction to previous assumptions, which were in need of revision. Pasler has successfully provided that revision, and the novelty of her approach, that is, the analysis of realities that coexisted with and even presided over cultural battles, sheds new light on issues that required a subtle reorientation.

NOTES

1. FULCHER, Jane F., *French Cultural Politics and Music: from the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999; FULCHER, Jane F., *The Composer as Intellectual: Music and Ideology in France 1914-1940*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.
 2. KELLY, Barbara (ed.), *French Music, Culture, and National Identity, 1870-1939*, Rochester, New York, University of Rochester Press, 2008.
 3. See BIDDLE, Ian, and KNIGHTS, Vanessa (ed.), *Music, National Identity and the Politics of Location: Between the Global and the Local*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2008; most specially see the introduction.
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