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Book Review

Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France. Jann Pasler. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 789 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-25740-5. Hardcover, $70.00.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. For historians, the big questions are the most enduring and the most tantalizing in their stubborn evasion of any single, permanent resolution. The big questions are what Jann Pasler has sought to address in her tour de force, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France*. How do we define the difference between high and low culture? What influence can "good" music have on the formation of human character? And, especially for those of the Francophone persuasion, why can't Americans be more like the French?

In these times of belt tightening and budget slashing, this last question seems to have been the fundamental impulse behind Pasler's encyclopedic work. As she relates in her preface to *Composing the Citizen,* the French understand that music is a powerful force in the construction of shared cultural identity, and that it can communicate—even evangelize—collective ideals of citizenship and civilization. Although readers of her work may already be wearing the robes of the proverbial choir, the message to a broader public is this: music, as well as the "civilizing" powers of cultural memory, cannot safely be left to the vagaries of the marketplace. Pasler's goal is to advocate for the essential role of music in a free society, as well as the moral obligation of a (small *d*) democratic government to support this crucial endeavor.

Composing the Citizen opens with a promenade through Paris, commenting on architecture and city planning as both metaphorical and physical representations of a collective French cultural experience. Pasler cites the late nineteenth-century Hôtel de Ville, the early eighteenth-century Assemblée nationale, and the stolidly Third Republic Printemps department store as having been designed "to encode political and social values" and provide a "visual demonstration of the harmonious beauty of reason and power" (p. 1). Pasler's deep affection for Paris is abundantly clear in her enthusiastic descriptions; her guided tour of the city's geographical history—from its grandest monuments to its obscure, medieval alleyways—is worth the price of admission.

As announced by the book's title, the core mission of this impressive work is to certify music as a vehicle of positive change, especially within the unstable, emerging nation that was Third Republic France. Pasler's thesis is that the intertwined concepts of musical efficacy and public utility were central to the formation and realization of French public policy. Music was essential to the "the formation of citizens, the health of the democracy and the unity of the French people, over and above class distinctions" (p. xii). Openly critical of Great Works appraisals within a static hierarchy of absolutes, Pasler examines a wide-ranging cast of characters and the music, ideas, and performances in which they participated. Her objective is nothing short of decoding the "conceptual apparatus implied by the notion of public utility into the rich details of daily life . . . [and the] extent to which music took part in the constitution of a social bond and national identity in flux" (p. 33). This is a formidable, even Herculean, task.

The concept of *utilité publique* is as difficult to pin down as it is deeply embedded within the French legal code. According to Pasler's careful descriptions of its roots in Hellenic philosophy through the ancien régime, the French notion of public utility is based on the primacy of community good over personal gain, and the idea that good government would ensure the best outcome for the broadest swath of society. Acknowledging that the inherent mutability of the concept made it adaptable to a variety of political causes, Pasler argues that *utilité publique* was an effective agency for both the state (governing the people) and the people (shaping their government). Pasler cites a convincing variety of public pronouncements, from official bulletins of the 1889 Exposition Universelle to advertisements in family magazines promoting the educational value of musical scores. She suggests that because the call for public utility was issued from a wide spectrum of political, financial, social, and artistic interests, it is sine qua non to understanding all aspects of the national discourse. Outlining specific areas in which music "links sound to society, music to the community" (p. 83), Pasler provides an in-depth survey of contemporary literature on the relationship between music, public education, and the formation of citizenship with a sense of a shared national identity.

Despite a careful rationale for its imperative, however, a fundamental aspect of public utility remains unexplained: practically speaking, how much *utilité* can music actually deliver? Whatever the political persuasion of the composer, the bureaucracy, or the performer, can we really assess the efficacy of music in achieving a utilitarian goal? In Pasler's remarkable efforts to shift historical inquiry from an elitist perspective to a more equitable viewpoint, there is an elemental challenge, one faced by governments, advertisers, foundations, and anyone else attempting to deliver a targeted agenda. How do we know who will be the consumer, and how much will be consumed? Moreover, with regard to the broadcasting of an agenda, how influential or efficacious is the intent of the producer? Is it, in fact, possible for music to "compose a citizen" or citizenry? One of the troubling generalities in this work is the conflation of a wide spectrum of ideas and agendas under the single label "republican." Pasler draws numerous, careful associations between the eighteenth-century French Revolution and the nineteenth-century Third Republic. Too often, though, the term *republican* is used as an all-inclusive, implicitly biased signifier of "the good" in opposition to monarchists or those sympathetic to the Catholic church: "While those nostalgic for monarchy or the empire wished to forget that the Revolution had taken place, republicans sought to incorporate its legacy, assimilate its various factions, and render permanent its impact on French society" (p. 161). Elsewhere, however, the term is used to imply adherence to notions of convention and outmoded tradition. Of Debussy, Pasler writes that the composer "challenged republican notions of beauty. His music has form, measured proportions, and formal closure, but they are neither conceived in conventional terms nor articulated with traditional means" (p. 536). In the book's vast and detailed index, there are entries for "republican ideology and values," "republican politics," and "political constituencies [in Third Republic politics]." Other than a summary of political maneuverings and alliances prior to the establishment of the Third Republic in 1875, however, there is no satisfying outline of republican political parties, or their major players. Recounting events surrounding the coup attempted by General Georges Boulanger in the late 1880s, Pasler describes Boulangist sympathizers as "a resentful offshoot of radical republicans" (p. 495). Who were the base-line radical republicans, and what was their agenda? Although keeping closer tabs on the shifting political landscapes might well have necessitated a score card in addition to extending the already-lengthy index, it would have been helpful to define or qualify the ubiquitous term "republican."

Occasionally, the reader is left to wonder about topics conspicuously avoided. The book's cover photo of the rubble that had once been the Palais de Tuileries is referenced by Pasler's text, indicating that the image was approved, if not chosen by the author. Yet there is very little discussion about this powerful, architectural souvenir of the Siege of Paris or the suppressed revolutionaries of the subsequent Commune whose actions produced these ruins so "fraught with uneasy and powerfully ambivalent symbolism" (p. 20). According to Hollis Clayson's definitive work *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870–71)*, the debate over this "symbolic casualty of the suppression of the Paris Commune" raged for no less than eleven years in both the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, as governmental officials argued about how to address issues associated with this emblematic space, left from the founding year of the Third Republic. Clayson argues that understanding the psychological and social consequences of what Victor Hugo called "The Terrible Year" is critical to understanding the profound differences between Second Empire and Third Republic France, especially the attendant linkages among cultural production, social structures, and political agendas. If, as Pasler contends, the architecture—or in this case, architectural ruins located at the historical center—of Paris serves as metaphor for the French cultural experience, an examination of this powerful cover image would have been a worthy topic to explore.

Related to the fundamental issue of public utility and its agency is a peculiar lacuna: there is no real discussion of the opera *Messidor* (1896), lauded elsewhere by James Ross as "the most ambitious expression of republican patriotism" among all dramatic works produced during the Third Republic. Both the opera's composer Alfred Bruneau and its librettist Émile Zola were high-profile voices for political action and change, most notably during the unrest fomented by the Dreyfus Affair. The title of the opera was chosen from the Revolutionary calendar—Messidor was the harvest month—and as such, directly aligned with republican nostalgia and propaganda. Quoting a minister of Public Instruction, Religion, and Fine Arts from the year of the opera's composition (1896), Pasler underscores the identity-forming propaganda value of the revolutionary heritage. In the words of Minister Eugène Spuller, "Republicans of my generation were raised on the school of the French Revolution, in the religion of its principles, in the cult of its great men" (p. 94). Slightly later, Pasler contends that

> Music [in the Third Republic] was more than merely a frivolous activity of aristocrats or an emblem of monarchical power and prestige. Revolutionaries had demonstrated that it could spread ideas, influence mind, heart and body; infuse energy; and shape character. (p. 95)

> With *utilité publique* as a guiding principle, the Revolution, despite its complexities and contradictions, thus offered paradigms for concepts, institutions, and musical practices that would ensure the growth and survival of republican values . . . [T]he heritage of the Revolution permeated republican rhetoric and shaped republican identity. (p. 97)

In his highly regarded work *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle*, Steven Huebner describes the shared intellectual basis for the *Messidor* authors' collaboration: "For Bruneau and Zola, 'truth' and 'humanity,' as well as progress, implicitly lay in communicating the experiences of real communities through observation, reason and empathy."[1] Although the opera was a critical and financial failure at the Opéra in 1897, it was intended as nothing less than a political manifesto in the guise of music drama. Coauthors of an explicatory article published in *Le Figaro* the morning after its premiere, Bruneau and Zola explained that their objectives in *Messidor* were to "unite the music as intimately as possible with the libretto," thus "to embrace progress and innovation [while seeking to promote] sane reason and sound clarity." Thus, the opera would advance the public good as it would "embody the spirit of our race."

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[1] Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism and Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 400.

Does the abject failure of such conspicuous political intent serve as evidence that there might be little to no measurable *utilité* in opera's practical capacity to shape ideology or influence public opinion? More importantly, did the practical impotence of *Messidor*'s political message influence Pasler's decision to skew the evidence by sequestering an arguably significant example *hors du débat*?

Despite its occasional inconsistencies, Pasler's work is a treasure trove of information for specialists, as well as for general readers interested in French cultural history. Nothing short of encyclopedic in scope, *Composing the Citizen* represents a profound depth of research, including a broad array of contemporary histories, governmental documents, and press accounts in its portfolio of evidence. At the same time, it is eminently readable, enticing the reader to jump in feet first and immerse him- or herself in the shifting currents of musical culture in Third Republic France. Pasler explores not just the musical genres and venues of the mainstream élite but also entertainment catering to a variety of popular tastes and budgets. The strength of *Composing the Citizen* lies in Pasler's ability to bring together and sort out disparate aspects of political, economic, and cultural trends. The chapter on "Wagner's Threatening Allure" (pp. 507–19), for example, is an excellent précis of the issues surrounding the German composer's influence in France. In addition to reviewing the usual cast of Wagnerian sympathizers and antagonists in the musical world, Pasler also discusses Wagnerism in relation to what she terms "the artistic agendas of republicanism" (or more accurately "republicanisms") as they intersected with issues of secular rationalism and race (p. 508). Despite its considerable scope, Pasler's work intentionally raises more questions than it answers. Rather than issuing pronouncements or historical truths, Pasler encourages active listeners to explore beyond the Great Works and examine the variable functions of music in building—from the grassroots and up—the enduring structures of democracy.

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