

# La Langue Universelle?

## *French Music and Its Rhythms of Cultural Engagement*

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Henry Longfellow's remark that music is the universal language of mankind does not apply well to French musical culture. There musical culture has often had a particular accent, whether in the spectacular performances at the eighteenth-century Opéra and the nineteenth-century Philharmonie de Paris, in the mundane, quotidian voices of twentieth-century buskers and radio broadcasts, or in twenty-first-century streaming platforms such as Deezer. Even though opera is certainly one of the more significant examples of French music, the dynamics that played out within it during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were evident in French encounters with other musical forms in the twentieth century, whether jazz, beguine, chanson, rock, folk, electronica, or rap. The five articles contained in this special issue of *French Historical Studies* on music in French history reveal the importance of music as a method of studying the history of France. Music and sound have long occupied a privileged place in French history, often directly tied to France's cultural power and its efforts to incorporate external cultural influences. The dynamics at work in the history of French music operate at the highest levels of recognition and support in its institutions as well as at the margins of cultural acceptance. The articles that follow trace these dynamics to reveal how French musicians, composers, librettists, critics, and audiences participated in and reacted to them. The examples here point to how music and sound were critical in understanding efforts of political outreach, both foreign and domestic; how musical classification and the creation of repertoires have often obscured the reality of how French musicians and audiences experienced their works; and how French cultural norms have remained consistent in the production of French music in the modern period no matter the genre or players. Taken together, these articles

underscore the important role that French music has played along multiple registers in its political, social, and cultural history.

The study of French music encompasses investigation of authorities that were embodied in the form of institutions, aesthetics in the form of artists, reception in the form of critics, or technology in the form of recording and broadcasting, just as a sampler to the vast amount of scholarship. This issue focuses on genres such as opera, vaudevilles, and so-called world music, as well as the performance of music as part of political ceremony in the diplomacy of early modern France. The scholars included draw on a variety of historiographic approaches, as well as elements of musicology, literary analysis, cultural studies, and sound studies, to show how the study of music calls for a rich combination of analytic tools to provide a nuanced understanding. In this introduction, we wish to highlight three specific themes that emerge across the spectrum of the articles: the role of repertory in defining institutional power in musical production, the emphasis on distinct French variations of genres and styles, and the importance of engagement with foreign musical styles and forms in defining specific genres. Thus did specific musical ideas and forms persist in France, often as part of the interaction between performers and audiences. Furthermore, French musical culture developed in a complex tandem of engagement with and isolation from foreign musical styles. Opera offers a rich example of how these phenomena operated in French music, as do the other genres covered in this issue.

In the history of opera, we can see how authority was embedded in repertoires, performing institutions, and the tastes of audiences. Even though opera is certainly one of the more significant examples of how repertory shaped musical style and meaning during the nineteenth century, the dynamics that played out there during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were evident in French encounters with other musical forms throughout the modern period. The tensions between internal canons and the acceptance of perceived foreign influence defined much of the development of these musics in France, especially with the advent of recording technology and broadcasting. French audiences embraced these new genres and styles, and French musicians developed their own variations of each, with critics serving as an important conduit for shaping their meaning. In these musical styles, the fusion of genres developed through interactions with new ideas of rhythm, timbre, and arrangement, often intersecting with French encounters with new populations. That intersection included African American soldiers after the First World War, migrant workers during the various phases of economic development in the French mainland, young artists capitalizing of the expansion of radio and television in the postwar period, and indeed, missionary artists such as Afrika Bambaataa performing in France

during the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Each of these moments led to new innovations in musical style and expanded audiences but also helped confirm specific French iterations of those styles, especially at moments of great cultural change in French society.

The role of music became more pronounced beyond institutions thanks to music's increased ubiquity and potential for shared experience as it became a larger part of mass culture beginning in the late nineteenth century. New canons developed that shaped the perception and reception of musical ideas, creating new fusions of musical thought and reconfiguring a type of aural Frenchness in these various genres. For that matter, major canons emerged in French musical life, rising and falling with the evolution of new tastes since the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, the internet brought new possibilities of musical exchange and encounters, just as the French government increasingly found value in supporting music as a distinct expression of French culture. This support included the passage of the Pelchat amendment in 1996 to protect French-language popular music in France.<sup>3</sup> With the continued dominance of the English language in the global music marketplace, the Pelchat amendment established institutional methods of supporting localized forms of global pop music, again showing the power of institutions in shaping the course of music.<sup>4</sup> And French music continues to develop, as French rap remains a robust form of French-language music and recent pop acts such as Daft Punk, David Guetta, and Christine and the Queens have found international success. Associations such as La Souterraine suggest the fecundity of French popular music and remain connected to a model of Frenchness rooted in the French language.<sup>5</sup>

The five articles included in this issue bring into focus this dynamic of engagement and distancing, exploring the sounds of Siam in the late seventeenth century as experienced through the aural norms of French diplomats; the influence of Italian-style music in the eighteenth century and the durability of French popular musical forms in response; the connection between the grand opera and French political identity in the nineteenth century; and the influence of the imperial project on the perception of genre in contemporary music. For example, France's imperial expansion echoes in the late twentieth-century music

1. See, e.g., Jackson, *Making Jazz French*; Gillett, *At Home in Our Sounds*; Moore, *Soundscapes of Liberation*; McGregor, *Jazz and Postwar French Identity*; Aidi, *Rebel Music*; Briggs, *Sounds French*; and Durant, *Hip-Hop en Français*.

2. Weber, *Canonic Repertories and the French Press*; Weber, *Rise of Musical Classics*.

3. Petterson, "No More Song and Dance."

4. Northrup, *How English Became the Global Language*, 130.

5. Mansuy, "Unearthing the Future of French Pop." French scholars have responded to this situation by turning their attention to the study of popular music in France. See, e.g., Guibert and Rudent, *Made in France*; and Dauncey and Le Guern, *Stereo*. See also *Volume! The French Journal of Popular Music Studies*, founded in 2002 by G r me Guibert, Marie-Pierre Bonniol, and Samuel Etienne.

of Kassav, with the categorization of the musical culture of DOM-TOM operating outside the established canon of French music despite the group's long presence with France. The continuity of sound, or at least its principal meaning, suggests the resilience of the model of French music as a distinct category from other European examples. The articles in this issue illustrate that French music was vibrant yet periodically quite static during the modern period. This nature of French music in the modern period charted the cultural boundaries that dictated French engagement with the musical other and the construction of an aural Frenchness.

In "The Sounds of Siam: Sonic Environments of Seventeenth-Century Franco-Siamese Diplomacy," Downing A. Thomas reveals that the diplomatic encounters between the agents of the Sun King and the King of Siam involved not merely exchange of ideas and goods. The diplomats who arrived in Siam in the seventeenth century noted the sonic environment they encountered and how it shaped their perception of the kingdom. Much of their response, which was recorded in their personal recollections of their journeys, reinforced attitudes that they developed from court culture and the meaning of sound in the absolutist politics of Louis XIV. These fading echoes that Thomas gleans reveal how the new and novel sounds were an important part of the efforts to bring these two kingdoms into greater diplomatic harmony. As French perspectives entrenched notions of French cultural superiority in the realm of music, the recognition of the sounds of Siam shows how diplomats were attuned to the role of sound and music in pomp and circumstance that greeted them on their arrival. This reaction from the diplomats reveals how French engagement with foreign sounds reinforced a particular French understanding of sound and music. Drawing from the discipline of sound studies, Thomas's article underscores the role sound had in the diplomats' interpretation of Siamese culture and its position vis-à-vis French music and politics.

In eighteenth-century France a *vaudeville* was a contrafact, a musical composition based on a well-known melody whose chord progressions were adapted to a new text, often with comedic or satirical implications. Jenna Harmon demonstrates how such pieces drew from sources as various as folk melodies, popular songs, and opera airs. However, she also shows that in the middle of the eighteenth century a new style of composition, the *ariette*, became more dominant within the musical world, reflecting the growing influence of the Italian *bouffon*. Nevertheless, under the Old Regime *vaudevilles* continued to appear in newspapers and literature, recalling the singers on the famous Pont Neuf who would write and sell songs that capitalized on the week's gossip. Her article, "It Is No Longer in Fashion—More's the Pity': Reconsidering the Obsolescence of the

Eighteenth-Century Vaudeville,” explains how the melodies selected by authors of *vaudeville* were not an idle choice, because they carried important interpretive implications for the public. As Harmon notes, “Virtually any preexisting melody could serve as the basis for a *vaudeville*, from old folk melodies to opera airs.” Until the mid-eighteenth century, an *ariette* referred to a piece with virtuosic singing, such as found in French opera, “especially when it came to long melismas on particular vowel sounds.” However, after the arrival of the Italian Bouffon players in 1752, the term *ariette* referred to newly composed songs used in the French comic opera genre, *opéra-comique*. Harmon shows how the policing of genre by critics in this period obfuscated the reality of practice for composers and performers and again offers another case of foreign engagement reinforcing French concepts of music. Additionally, she reveals the influence of repertory and canonization in the defining of French music.

Historical factors pervaded many aspects of French opera. Annelies Andries, in “Mobilizing Historicity and Local Color in *Fernand Cortez* (1809): Narratives of Empire at the Opéra,” notes that a great deal of historical research went into producing Gaspare Spontini’s newest opera, *Fernand Cortez ou la conquête du Mexique* (*Hernan Cortés or the Conquest of Mexico*) for its premiere at the Paris Opéra on November 28, 1809. The opera depicts an important episode in the Spanish colonization of the Americas: the siege and fall of the Aztec capital, México-Tenochtitlan, in 1521 at the hands of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. The libretto, written by Etienne de Jouy and Joseph-Alphonse Esménard, focused on well-known historical events. Historical sources were consulted not only for the set and costume designs but also for musical instruments and possibly even the choreography. Since the artists producing *Fernand Cortez* thought that fidelity to history was central to their work, Andries explores the ideological significance of a source-based methodology in the construction of historical knowledge and meaning around 1800 and the reception of those ideas. Even though the ascendancy of this historiographical methodology tends to be associated with a new generation of historians that arose in France in the 1820s, Andries suggests the influence of grand opera in this knowledge production as part of its elevation within French cultural worlds. Her article points to how the perception of foreign music had an aesthetic influence through opera’s embrace of historical fidelity, although in a manner that reinforced French notions of music.

Diana R. Hallman, in “Napoleonic Commemoration on the Operatic Stage: The *Retour des Cendres* and Halévy’s *La Reine de Chypre*,” chronicles the pivotal intersection between grand opera and political culture in the July Monarchy. The *retour de cendres*, the return of Napoléon’s remains from Sainte-Hélène to

France in 1840, represented an important gesture of Napoleonic restoration in the July Monarchy, along with the creation of monuments, paintings, histories, plays, and encomiums to the defeated emperor. In 1841 Napoleonic commemoration expanded to the stage of the Paris Opéra (the Académie Royale de Musique) with the appearance of *La reine de Chypre*, the five-act grand opera by French composer Fromental Halévy and librettist Henri de Saint Georges. The opera offers a poignant portrayal of the exiled French warriors within a theatrical reframing of Catarina Cornaro's early fifteenth-century rise to power in Cyprus and defiance of Venetian tyranny. Hallman analyzes how *La reine de Chypre* was tied to the political moment of the early 1840s. It expands the study of French grand opera's role in confronting and transforming national memory with a particular focus on the evocation of Napoleonic memory within the July Monarchy. It shows how French operas during this and earlier periods were affected by both preventive and external censorship, mediation of the past and the present, and complexes of visual, musical, and intertextual references. The intersection of opera and politics of repertory becomes apparent in Hallman's study of grand opera as well.

As we move into the late twentieth century, Paul Cohen's "'Zouk Is the Only Medicine We Need': Kassav and the Cultural Politics of Music in the French Caribbean" asserts the significance of a form of French music far from the Parisian capital and how musical groups there have contributed greatly to French popular culture with little recognition of their Frenchness. While less known in the Anglophone world outside the Caribbean diaspora, the musical group Kassav boasts a formidable legacy for musical innovation based in the Creole culture of Martinique and Guadeloupe, as well as a profound commercial impact in France. Kassav's significance lies in the group's engagement with the market while also critiquing it. Their success at creating a new form of commodified pop culture on their own musical, linguistic, and productive terms appeared during a multicultural moment in metropole France. Despite its massive success in France, the music of Kassav is often placed outside the narrative of French pop music and is instead contained within the amorphous genre of "world music." Over their forty-year existence Kassav produced a seamless synthesis of diverse influences: a little hard rock, a touch of metal, a measure of funk, a taste of disco, lots of R&B and 1980s synthesizer pop, and healthy doses of a range of Caribbean styles from salsa and merengue to reggae and ska. By insisting on performing in Creole, the ensemble helped rewrite the terms of *antillais* identity and reminded an unmindful metropole of important imperial histories and legacies. Cohen argues for the need to center the work of Kassav fully in the realm of French pop music to understand the contours and limits of the era of multiculturalism. Again, Cohen shows the continuation of the French

tendency to engage with “foreign” culture—although in this case it is part of French culture—as a method of distinguishing a notion of Frenchness deep into the twentieth century. With the death of Kassav founder Jacob Desvarieux from COVID-19, a reassessment of the group’s place will be sure to follow, but Cohen’s article articulates the challenges that will confront such efforts.

Taken as a whole, these articles suggest the rich polyphony of French musical history and the various realms with which it connects, whether in prestigious or popular permutations. They show musicians and audiences attendant to sounds beyond France but often with an ear toward domestic tastes and styles. As these articles reveal, French music offers an ideal means of understanding the dilemma of a Frenchness paradoxically rooted in a cosmopolitan engagement and a simultaneous sense of distance—one buttressed by institutions that often did not embrace all styles and sounds within French culture and perhaps found that distinctions so tightly drawn were beginning to fade in importance in contemporary art worlds. These tendencies that play out in the articles in this issue have perhaps reached their coda, suggesting that a new era in French music will have new dynamics.

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