

The Globalization of French Sound: French Convents in Australia

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Recent studies of European colonization have offered important insights into the nature of imperialism. According to Michael Adas, it was the use of “superior technology—the surveying instruments and firearms—that set the Europeans off” from the non-Western peoples.¹ But imperialism is not simply a process of confrontation or dialogue with an exotic other, but also a process of cultural transfer, in which constructions of the other are an existing part of a domestic identity and are transported to a new location such as Australia. Aspects of this self-reflection can be seen in the use of musical technology in convents in France during the nineteenth century. During this period, French convents were understood and defined themselves as “other” by creating an enclosed secluded space as a refuge from secular modernism. The French *congréganistes* saw music as a key component of their cultural difference. As an important part of the secluded convent sphere, cutting-edge acoustical technologies were successfully transported globally by the French convent community where they have often remained. Ultimately the convent’s aim was not only to enforce the French tradition of cloistered women in the global environment, but to ensure the survival of the specialized French convent musical culture and its sonic technological approach while it was under attack in France during the period of the separation of Church and State.

The case-study which I will refer to is that of the *Maison* and *Pensionnat* established by French Sacred Heart nuns in Glen Iris, Melbourne in 1888. It has an extensive archive containing House and School Journals dating from its establishment as well as an extensive archive of musical material brought from French houses much of which remains in the organ tribune at the school, still currently operating on its

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¹ Michael Adas, “The Machine as Civilizer,” in *European Imperialism, 1830-1930: Climax and Contradiction*, eds. Alice L. Conklin and Ian Christopher Fletcher (Boston, 1999), 67-74.

original site as a Catholic Independent school. Although the major archives associated with the Sacré-Coeur order in Poitiers and Roehampton reveal a much more extensive picture of the order, particularly through their complete listings of all nuns (and their biographies), the material in the archive in Melbourne provides a particularly rich picture of a distant French convent community and highlights the importance of music in the convent's global expansion.

Often assumed to be of Irish origin, the establishment at Glen Iris was, in fact, thoroughly French. A product of the re-establishment of the enclosed teaching *congrégation* by Napoléon I, the community, founded by Madeleine-Sophie Barat, had been approved in 1807 with the title "Dames de l'instruction chrétienne."² Their official aim at their establishment was "the free instruction of poor young girls and the education of ladies in continental France and the Colonies."³ Les Dames du Sacré-Coeur de Jésus as they became known around 1815 had strong right-wing Catholic support throughout the nineteenth century. The Restoration government facilitated their growth firstly, by removing the suppression of the Jesuits, the then Catholic ally of the *congrégations*, and secondly by enabling the purchase of the Sacré-Coeur "Mother House," the Hôtel Biron (now the Musée Rodin) in the rue de Varenne, Paris.⁴ Sacré-Coeur is listed amongst the largest convent orders at counting in 1823 and 1861, the dates marking the period of the Restoration and the middle of the Second Empire.⁵ By the beginning of the Third Republic, the Sacré-Coeur community was considered the second richest *congrégation* in France.⁶

In keeping with the agenda of leading Catholic thinkers such as Félix Dupanloup and Maxine du Camp, Sacré-Coeur enforced female enclosure.⁷ Considered crucial to the formation of the image of the "pure" nun who might morally and sexually protect and influence the younger female generation,⁸ Sacré-Coeur Constitutions stated that "the entrance door shall be kept closely shut and shall open only from the inside."⁹ It was therefore impossible to leave the convent without being noticed. In addition a portress noted anyone entering or leaving the convent space.¹⁰

Sound played an important role in the creation of the enclosed convent space. The Hôtel Biron site was dominated by a range of disparate sounds resonating around the enclosed compound. Behind the expansive reception room was a maze of echoing corridors. These extended in two different directions from the front leading backwards

² For a detailed description of the edicts facilitating the re-establishment of the enclosed teaching *congrégation* in the early nineteenth century see Claude Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin: Les congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1984), 68-73.

³ "Les Soeurs ou Dames de l'instruction chrétienne d'Amiens, ont pour but l'instruction gratuite des jeunes filles de la classe indigente, et l'éducation des demoiselles, tant dans la France continentale, que dans les Colonies." Archives de l'Archevêché de Paris 4R 8.

⁴ Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin*, 354, 476.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 334-335.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁷ See Félix Dupanloup, *Nouvelles oeuvres choisies. Controverse sur l'éducation des filles* (Paris, 1874), 3: 196-197; and Maxine du Camp, *La charité privée à Paris* (Paris, 1885), 10-15.

⁸ For the implications of convent enclosure for female students in the convent *pensionnat* see Bonnie Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1981), 168-181.

⁹ Archives of Sacré-Coeur, Roehampton, *Constitutions and Rules of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus [1833-]: With separated revisions in accordance with Canon Law 1922* (Roehampton, 1924), 108. Apart from small revisions denoted in brackets (not applicable to this study), these constitutions are identical to the original nineteenth-century constitutions of the order accepted by Gregory Pope Pius XVI 17 June 1833.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 446.

to two separate buildings. In between was a large garden and grotto with ceramic statues and a fountain. The two sides of the courtyard created a lively acoustical barrier and footsteps and human voices could be heard clearly. The chapel, positioned at the side of the courtyard, contained a new French organ which could be heard throughout the compound. Along with the organ was the convent bell which was rung in association with the sonic ticking of the mechanical clock.¹¹

Like Chateaubriand's first Christian monasteries which contained "divine music mixing with the sound of cascades and springs,"¹² the nineteenth-century convent was a sonic Eden. Sound was used as a sensory stimulant within the enclosed compound to depict paradise, with its heavenly and natural elements. The emphasis on silence, *le silence de Dieu*, contributing to the feeling of the convent as a place of refuge from the secular world, was not in conflict with the sonic environment of the convent space. It was a silence "full of sonorous realities" and a place where "certain sounds reinforce[d] the experience of silence."¹³ Cutting-edge mechanical sonic technology, the *orgue de chœur* models of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll and Joseph Merklin purchased by the convents, enhanced the communicative power of the sounds within the convent space.¹⁴ They brought to fruition the idealized religious musical experience described by Chateaubriand, the sound of nature "murmuring" and "breathing" in enclosed spaces. As in the larger convent space itself, the sound palette produced by the nineteenth-century convent organ depicted the God-created universe, an "imitation of the symphony of solitude."¹⁵ The reflection of the natural was achieved through the sounds of the stops (individual sound colors) such as the open harmonic flute (*flûte harmonique*), *hautbois* and *trompette*. The high wind pressure of the organ created a vague impression of wind in the trees. These sounds intermingled with the mechanical noise of the organ that implied a divine, non-human presence. Other sounds became reflections of the celestial voices, privy only to the ears of the nuns. The most widely used of these was the named *voix céleste* stop, literally "celestial voice."

Although many of the sounds on the new organ were taken from previous models, the nineteenth-century organ design incorporated new mechanisms that made the sonic effect more powerful and more immediate to the ear. Cavaillé-Coll had applied a mechanism, the Barker Lever action, developed from principles of

¹¹ I base this description on having visited the site as it is today as well as other Sacré-Coeur convent sites such as the Poitiers house which has changed relatively little since the nineteenth century.

¹² "[M]usiques divines se mêlaient au bruit des cascades et des sources." François-René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du Christianisme. Quatrième partie, livre troisième*, chronology and introduction by Pierre Reboul (Paris, 1966), 2: 118.

¹³ Camille Maclair, *La religion de la musique* (Paris, 1909), 53-55.

¹⁴ For lists of convent orders purchasing models of these organs by these builders see Gilbert Huybens, "Paris Communautés, Ecoles, Théâtres, Facultés," *Aristide Cavaillé-Coll: Opus List*, trans. and ed. Peter Swift on behalf of the International Society of Organbuilders (Lauffen and Neckar, 1985); and Michel Jurine, *Joseph Merklin, facteur d'orgues européen. Essai sur l'orgue français au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1991). Joseph Merklin was born in Oberhausen 1819 and died in Nancy 1905. He presided over one of the largest organ factories of the nineteenth century and was the chief rival to Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. Decorations for his achievements included that of the *Chevalier de la légion d'honneur*. Initially trained by his father in Freiburg, and then with Friederich Haas and E.F. Walcker, Merklin began his business in Brussels in 1843 joining Friederich Schütze in partnership in 1853 as the Société anonyme. The firm opened a branch in Paris in 1855 on acquisition of the Daublaine-Callinet and Ducroquet firms. Merklin left the Société anonyme in 1870 for a new life in Paris and began organ building in Lyon in 1872, the Belgian connection continuing under the name of Pierre Schyven. The firm built large instruments for St-Eugène and St-Eustache, Paris, the French cathedrals of Arras, Blois, Bourges, Clermont-Ferrand, Limoges, Lyon, Montpellier, Moulins and Rouen.

¹⁵ Chateaubriand, *Génie du Christianisme. Fragments*, 483.

contemporary steam engineering to his large instruments, consisting of “pneumatic assisting motors interposed between the keys and the pallet pull-down wires.”¹⁶ This mechanism was primarily designed to conquer the inertia of previous mechanical actions and enabled the instrument to maintain a large reservoir of air under pressure, dramatically enhancing the tonal power of the instrument. The *voix céleste*, was at the time a radically new and innovative acoustical sound, using the power of higher-wind pressure and “narrow-scaled pipes” to give a “sharp heterodyne effect.”¹⁷ The pipe was tuned deliberately sharp or flat producing an ethereal, shimmering quality. It resembled no obvious earthly sound and would have become known to the nuns after repeated hearings.

Mechanically-produced expressivity offered by the new instrument played an important role in the construction of nineteenth-century French convent identity. The pneumatic motors of the Barker Lever action heightened the performer’s ability to manipulate different types of sounds through various mechanical devices. These mechanical devices enabled greater spatial manipulation of the various voices emanating from the organ. Combination pedals, a feature of the Cavallé-Coll organ, enabling the player to manipulate by foot various groups of sounds without lifting the hands from the keyboard, were keenly used in religious spaces. The convent listener reveled in the crashing reed sounds from a different part of the instrument without warning, or an immediate transition from flutes to the *voix céleste* from a different set of pipes. The *récit* stops could be coupled to the *grande orgue* giving an enhanced, richer sound and were enclosed in an expressive swell box operated by a swell pedal (facilitating greater loud/soft changes). A powerful *tremblant* mechanism (literally “trembling” device) could be applied to this set of stops. The loud *basson et hautbois* could be operated suddenly using a foot lever. In the convent, the sounds of the organ were recognizable as a logical form of discourse to the nuns who had “left” the world for a position within a more heavenly sphere. Music was conceived as a separate speech, a divine language that could only be fully understood in association with the convent environment that produced it. The creation of “pure” musical sound was heightened by the acousmatic¹⁸ nature of the organ performance, where the performer was invisible, and by the increased dislocation between the sound production point (the pipe) and the point of creation (the key).

The sense of otherness created within the nineteenth-century French convent space facilitated its own successful transition abroad.¹⁹ Convent enclosure and its particular sensory construction had ironically led to an international type of freedom for this group of women. As the French nuns arrived in Melbourne, they brought with them numerous objects of their enclosed environment, including the organ and its performance practice, in order to produce a sensory replica of the convent as it was in France. The clock on the south face of the main building was transported from the Sacré-Coeur house in Bordeaux, the oak stalls from Angoulême, the marble altar

¹⁶ Peter Williams and Barbara Owen, *Organ*, The New Grove Musical Instrument Series (London, 1988), 294.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

¹⁸ For a full definition of the term “acousmatic” see Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision*, trans. Claudia Gorbman with a foreword by Walter Murch (New York, 1994), 32, 221. Also see Simon Emmerson’s discussion of acousmatic dislocation in “‘Live’ versus ‘Real-Time,’” *Contemporary Music Review* 10.2 (1994): 95-101. See my recent article “Sonorous Mechanics: The Culture of Sonority in Nineteenth-Century France,” *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 1.1 (2004): 43-66, for more information on the sonic convent space.

¹⁹ For the full extent of the expansion see Margaret Williams, *The Society of the Sacred Heart* (London, 1978), 382-384.

came from Lille, and an 1889 Merklin organ was disassembled in Marseilles, transported, and carefully reassembled in Melbourne in 1905.²⁰ In addition, a number of Sacré-Coeur hymns and hymn books transported from France can be found in the organ room of the convent, some hand-written on French manuscript paper and some copied on arrival. These objects attain considerable “authentic” impact precisely because they are presented within the enclosed unit of the replicated convent space. Separated successfully as an other in France, the convent context can be described as a kind of “spore,” a well-wrapped package of identity that could be transported easily to a distant land.²¹

The Merklin organ was not the first French style instrument to have made its way to Australia. Manufactured by the Merklin-Schütze warehouse in Belgium in 1870, another organ was originally destined for “Melbourne Cathédrale” although it was eventually placed in the Anglican church of St John’s, Toorak.²² French organ building technique also heavily influenced the Australian organ builder George Fincham in his design of the 1880 Royal Exhibition Building organ.²³ Yet the two French convent organs which made their way to Australia—in addition to the Melbourne Merklin organ, Sacré-Coeur also transported an 1890 Puget organ (built by the Toulouse firm of family builders established by Théodore Puget) from their convent house in Bordeaux to their Sydney house at Rose Bay in 1903—are significant in their contribution to the imperialist transportation of the French convent “package.” Transportation of these instruments was in one sense a way of re-creating as authentically as possible the pure enclosure of the convent space for those in many other parts of the world. More importantly however, it created the ultimate model of divine communication in which an acoustical language, like a series of electronic impulses, was “communicated” from convent to convent. A sonic “network” reinforced the unity of the order expanding across increasingly vast distances and eventually weakened the convent’s authentic base in France.

Globalizing the convent community was at the heart of administrative restructuring as the convent orders spread. From as early as 1830, Barat campaigned for a moveable “Mother House” within a federal system of individual self-governing communities called Vicariates. The formation of a “union” of convent houses within which the Superior General could move freely created acute tension between the congregation and the Archbishoprics of Paris and Rome throughout the nineteenth

²⁰ “The French Connection,” in *Sacré Coeur: Burke Road 1888-1988*, eds. Kathleen McCarthy and Denise Pitney (Melbourne, 1988), 52-59. Michel Jurine has commented that this instrument corresponds to the model no. 4 in the *Merklin et Cie* catalogue of 1880. The date on the pipework markings include Gambe = 26 Août 1889; Bourdon G.O. = 10 Août 1889. Although sadly underperformed correctly today, the organ is little altered from the original, apart from the more recent addition of electric blowing and a sympathetic restoration in 1984 by George Fincham and Sons, Melbourne.

²¹ For further discussion of the French nineteenth-century convent as other see chap. 3 of Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London, 1996). Also see the discussion of gender and difference in relation to female travel in Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London, 1991); and to the construction of the other at the 1889 Exposition universelle, Timothy Mitchell, “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order,” in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor, 1996), 289-317.

²² Jurine, *Joseph Merklin*, 2: 425. My thanks to John Maidment of the Organ Historical Trust of Australia for this information.

²³ See John Maidment’s work “The 1880 Melbourne Exhibition Organ” which provides the background for the following publication: John Maidment, “As Perfect as any Organ in the Colonies,” in *Victorian Icon*, ed. David Dunstan (Carlton, Australia, 1996), 79-88; and Maidment, “An Ignominious End for the Organ,” in *Victorian Icon*, 416-417.

century. Although Barat's dream of a moveable "Mother House" was never achieved, she was eventually successful in the establishment of the international Vicariate.²⁴

The Melbourne house was one of the many international houses that contributed to this global network of French convent sound. Along with the arrival of the Merklin organ in Melbourne was the French organist Marie Chevreux. Her biography describes how she had renounced "a remarkable aptitude for piano music"²⁵ cultivated by her father, for a particular kind of organ music when she entered the convent of Sacré-Coeur at Laval. Born in 1848, Marie Chevreux was first educated there by the Soeurs d'Evron taking her final vows for the Sacré-Coeur community in 1880. In 1885 she left her position as organist at the Conflans house for Sydney, traveling for a brief period to the Timaru community in New Zealand. She returned to Melbourne in 1899, and died there in 1908. She brought into the Melbourne convent a copy of *Les bonnes traditions du pianiste* containing fifteen technically-advanced piano works by Mendelssohn, Chopin, Hummel, Mozart and Field. Yet the volume was laid aside when she reached Melbourne.²⁶ Her biography shows that she aspired to perform her own simple handwritten improvisations on the Merklin organ, many of which remain in bound French manuscript books in the Melbourne house tribune.²⁷

Chevreux is one of many French religious women who re-created and maintained an important French cultural practice overseas. Data taken from the central archive of Sacré-Coeur in Poitiers and at the house in Roehampton prior to the beginning of the closure of Sacré-Coeur houses in France until its end in 1909 suggest that convent musical culture overseas provided an effective counterbalance against its decline in France. Between 1902 and 1909 Sacré-Coeur organist numbers in France dropped from forty-eight to three. Global numbers however, remained relatively stable (fig. 1). Although the long-term effect of early twentieth-century globalization on French organ culture is still to be fully explored, convent expansion did, at least in the short-term, maintain the French convent musical experience in the face of rapid decline within France. And the richness that these sonic mechanical objects still bring to the modern-day Australian cultural experience is a powerful reminder that French imperialism did not only involve the sizing-up and cataloguing of an exotic culture using European technology. It was also a long-distance and deeply penetrating cultural transmigration of a specific French technological practice.

²⁴ For more details see Jeanne de Charry, *The Canonical and Legal Evolution of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus from 1827-1853* (Rome, 1991).

²⁵ Archives of Sacré-Coeur, Roehampton, "Melbourne: Pensionnat," *Lettres Annuelles, Troisième Partie* (1906, 1907, 1908), 511-515.

²⁶ Félix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, "Concerto, op. 25 Allegro," *Les bonnes traditions traditions du pianiste*, vol. 6 (Paris: Durand, n.d.) marked "Marie Chevreux rscj," Archives of Sacré-Coeur, Melbourne.

²⁷ Chevreux's *Offertoire de Noël* is discussed in my forthcoming book *Women, Science and Sound in Nineteenth-Century France* (Frankfurt, 2005).

