
H-France Review Vol. 6 (March 2006), No. 24

Kate van Orden, *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. xiv + 322 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN (cloth): 0-226-84976-7.

Review by Stuart Carroll, University of York.

Sometime in the last two weeks of April 1652, a certain monsieur Pascal, son of a *conseiller* of the *Cour des Aides* of Clermont, left the town with two seconds, where they had a *rendez-vous* to fight with three other men, like them descended from the *noblesse de robe*. Before you re-read this sentence in disbelief--no, this was not Blaise Pascal, whose father had sold his councillorship many years before and moved away, but his first cousin, Martin. Nevertheless, the document is astonishing in other ways. Here is a duel arising from a feud between factions of the *robin* elite of local society, a group we are told who embody the new virtues of civility, obedience, and self-restraint. In the combat, in which two men were killed, many of the courtesies and rituals that are said to constitute a new form of fighting in this period, the "duel", are dispensed with. Since the seconds were not there to see fair play but to fight and since each combatant discharged his pistol before joining with their swords, and since they fought to the death rather than first blood, this *mêlée* resembled not the duel, with its rules of fair play and rituals of honorific exchange beloved by writers, historians and film-makers, but the chaos and carnage of battle.

The spread of stronger and lighter types of sword and new styles of fighting in the Renaissance privileged dexterity over brute force: the compatibility between the disciplines of dancing and sword-play was born. Fencing and the ballet appealed to social climbers like Monsieur Arnauld because these were gentlemanly virtues with which one was not endowed at birth, but which, with patience and talent, one could acquire. It is the role of music in the new social dexterity that Kate van Orden seeks to trace in *Music, Discipline, And Arms in Early Modern France*. She argues that the social and self-disciplining role of music pre-dates the Baroque and can be traced to the Neo-platonic academies of the Renaissance. Music spoke a language beyond words and inscribed itself directly on the soul so that "royal government was ultimately internalized through music." A political technology of the body was in operation as the discipline required of drill and dance was internalized into self-restraint.

Van Orden, a performer herself, brings a deeply learned, refreshing and original approach to the topic. The chapter on the political and religious uses of singing during the Wars of Religion is the highlight, brilliantly realised, thought-provoking, and worth the cover price alone. Though she is somewhat less assured when she moves beyond the music--her knowledge of things military is particularly shaky--she is never less than interesting and there are fascinating insights into all sorts of subjects, from dressage to drumming. What van Orden is able to demonstrate, I think quite convincingly, is that the militarization of society can be traced much further back than the reign of Louis XIV. But the failings of this book are not empirical, but conceptual. The great conceit of cultural history is that the epiphenomena of culture are not important and worthy of study in themselves but charged with portentous political and social overtones. So pornographic pictures of the king's mistress cannot *simply* be titillating amusement, they are required to be symbolic of the desacralization of monarchy and of the impending collapse of the old social order. Van Orden is not to be satisfied with showing us the centrality of music to the study of politics and studying musical history for its own sake, she wishes to place music in the service of the "civilizing process" and the rise of the monarchical state. In this she simply succeeds in putting some old wine into new bottles, namely Norbert Elias, vintage 1939, washed down with a drop of Michel Foucault.

Elias's ideas were initially slower to catch on in France than in the Anglophone world, but found increasing favour with the rise of the cultural history in the 1980s, most notably in the works of Robert Muchembled and Roger Chartier. At the same time in Germany (whose provincial *Kultur* Elias juxtaposed to aristocratic *civilité*), the notion of the "civilizing process" became the subject of a withering critique, on both philosophical and empirical grounds.[1] It is too much to expect of a specialist musical historian to be aware of these critiques, but the early modern historians on whom she relies for much of the social and political background have no such excuses.[2] From a methodological point of view, the "civilizing process" as currently envisaged privileges a rather top-down, court-centred view of politics, where unruly warriors require domestication into compliant courtiers. How far did high culture shape political discourse and social activity? What sixteen-year-old wannabee dueller could possibly have understood or even afforded Thibault's beautifully illustrated and utterly impractical folio exposition of the Pythagorean principles of fencing, the *Academie de l'espee*? Does the discipline required to dance the ballet really reduce the inclination for rebellion? Such a notion suggests that rebellion is a passion that can be controlled and is not a rational calculation made in council. In any case, in a society where everyone was the king's good servant obedience and rebellion are relative. Contemporaries too, most notably Montaigne, were suspicious that the new social dexterity required by civility was really only exterior polish. Outside the Parisian academies, social life was dominated by older customs. The significance of Monsieur Pascal's duel lies not in the involvement of his cousin Blaise, who arrived in Clermont not long after and stayed for several months, but in its banality. Political ascendancy in mid-seventeenth-century Clermont, as it had been elsewhere in rural France for the previous century, was a life and death struggle which, partly due to the dynastic weakness of the monarchy and partly due to social and religious fissures, had cost the lives of thousands of nobles. Violence was not only necessary to everyday politics, it was expected, accepted and to a degree officially tolerated. Civility did not overcome violence in seventeenth-century France, but coexisted with it.

This is a beautifully produced book with a large number of illustrations but, because music speaks a language beyond words, I wanted and needed to hear the music. Copyright issues aside, in this multimedia age, there must surely be some way for publishers to provide downloadable excerpts on the web free of charge.

NOTES

[1] Hans Peter Duerr, *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess* (Frankfurt, 1988)

[2] For those without German, a creditable defence of Elias is offered by Jonathan Fletcher, *Violence and civilization: an introduction to the work of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge, 1997).

Stuart Carroll
University of York
smc4@york.ac.uk

Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of *H-France*. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172