
H-France Review Vol. 6 (March 2006), No. 25

Response to Stuart Carroll's review of **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.

Response by Kate van Orden, University of California, Berkeley

In his review, Stuart Carroll rehearses a critique of cultural history that is still surprisingly commonplace, arguing that culture plays little role in the history of society and politics. In such a scenario, music is required to remain soft, feminized, and passive, a Venus awaiting the return of her Mars from battle. Political power is for "real" historians to wrestle with, whereas historians of *belles lettres* and the arts should be content to study the "epiphenomena of culture" for themselves without being tempted to attribute social import to their subject matter.

The premise of *Music, Discipline, and Arms* is that music operated on both sides of the war vs. peace equation during the French Wars of Religion. At first blush, music would seem to have little to do with violence, but upon closer inspection it becomes clear that music instruction taught not just the social dexterity associated with song and dance as a means of self-presentation, but physical dexterity as well. Rhythm, in particular, was a key element in a new human technology that allowed for the coordination of troops during a time of great military expansion. Thus Balthasar de Beaujoyeux described his choreography for the famous *Balet comique de la Royne* of 1581 as "une bataille rangée" (because the dancers kept their places so well), and Ronsard likened the horse ballet performed the same year as a simulacrum of war. Young gentlemen flocked to the army of Maurice of Nassau to learn his balletic pike drills in order to captain infantry companies more effectively, and students at Antoine de Pluvinel's military academy in Paris learned to ride to music not just to perform in ballets, but to refine the skills of group coordination upon which the new cavalry would depend. To relinquish the notion that music always stood on the side of peace is to make available a new outlook: far from "calming the savage breast," music often made combat more effective. The wars that began while I wrote only served as a reminder that music is still used today for strength training, to impose political sentiments, and even to quell dissent.

In his forthcoming book, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 2006), Stuart Carroll will, I imagine, discuss the violent tenor of life in seventeenth-century France, a taste of which we are treated to in his review. As related in the OUP catalogue, the conceit of his book is that the French were not nearly as well-behaved as their civility manuals, rules of conduct, and laws against dueling would have us believe. Indeed—as he makes clear in this review—he takes issue with a basic premise of Elias's *Civilizing Process*, that the exercise of violence was more easily centralized by the state as social pressure grew for men (especially) to control their emotions and behavior.

When viewed from the perspective of music history, the supposed tensions Carroll would like to preserve between blind aggression and the kinds of corporate discipline associated with civility dissolve. For music was uniquely over-arching. It comprehended everything, ranging from Bodin's neo-Pythagorean theory of absolute monarchy to the music that measured out a five-year-old's first lessons in curtseys, *révérences*, and social hierarchy. As a force that was believed by Machiavelli, Descartes, and many others to act directly upon the body, music circumvented all the complications of literacy and reason. Music theory was of the highest metaphysical order whereas musical practice was of the broadest cultural dispersion. No wonder Jean-Antoine de Baif and the other academicians of the 1570s

believed that their experiments in *musique mesurée* could restore moral order to the country and consequently—their royal patrons to power. No other theory, practice, or liberal art could claim the vast import of music.

Mine is hardly the first study to implicate music in the pursuit of power. The political importance of music theory caught the eye of scholars long ago, most notably the “Warburgians” Frances A. Yates and D.P. Walker, and, more recently, Margaret M. McGowan. Where *Music, Discipline, and Arms* aims to break new ground is via the important (and understudied) question of performance. In the study of history, one always reaches a point at which the documents fall silent. Even in the case of music, the notes printed on the page of a part-book, the descriptions of the music sung at one station of a royal entry, the engravings of a horse jumping into the air to the sound of trumpets and drums, these witnesses to musical events and scripts for performance are, in the end, quiet and inactive. They refuse fully to disclose what the music sounded like, what it meant to hearers, and how it operated culturally and socially—the more so because music was independent of the textual. Like the masters of arms that learned Nassau’s weapons drills by rote and traveled the countryside selling their skills to local militias, the dance masters and violinists whose expertise was acquired and retained within the confines of a guild system privileging orality and memory as the means to control trade secrets, and the sixteen-year-old fencing students who might have learned the bastardized secrets of Thibault’s magic circle third-hand from their instructors, the reach of music extended well beyond the material on which we usually base our histories.

Thus the research for *Music, Discipline, and Arms* was conducted in part through performance. I reconstructed a number of the events while preparing the book; and it was through these performances that I came to appreciate the arguments made by Elias.[1] What these performances revealed was a culture that privileged physical refinement, detail, and precision at a time when music was more exact than timepieces. In ballets and drills, music was used to measure, order, and rule the physical world. It is fun to joke about the problems we had coaxing horses into the ring for the reconstruction of Pluvinel’s 1612 ballet and the actual carrots and sticks used in such a production, but the fact of the matter is that to see such tremendous beasts cooperate and “dance” in time to the music was beyond anything I could have imagined from the descriptions I had read of the ballet.[2]

I agree with Carroll that civility did not overcome violence in seventeenth-century France. What I would add is that ballet, which showed off the new refinement associated with civility, became in itself a new field of battle. War moved indoors during the winter and Carnival season, politics were pursued by other means. I can imagine that Montaigne would have been disturbed to know that a truce between the Protestants and Catholics was drawn up in 1623 when the Duke of Rohan’s wife refused to dance in a royal ballet alongside the queen. But in a society that valued physical display and lavish performances as an assertion of power, sometimes artistic matters did affect political outcomes directly.

Carroll asks about the extent to which “high culture” shaped political discourse and social activity, but this is, I believe, a way of phrasing the question that stays trapped in what Michel de Certeau identified as the “scriptural economy” of the textual.[3] It presumes that the documents of high culture—Thibault’s glorious *Academie de l’espee*, Pluvinel’s equally unaffordable *L’instruction du Roy*, the dance music in the inaccessible library of Louis XIV—were at the center of a victorious process of acculturation in which society was “imprinted” with the lessons contained therein. Music moves study of “high culture” outside the dimension of the textual into a world of oral circulation, of practice and action (rather than passive reading). It affords us the opportunity to discuss the horse ballets performed by provincial military academies, civic entries, religious processions, the singing of pilgrims, parochial schooling, the drum patterns used by the infantry and in Jesuit ballets. Performance allows us to measure the reach of more refined behavior into other spheres.

To see horses and the bodies of dancers set in motion to the dance tunes I have known as both a scholar and performer is to see music *embodied*, and to perceive, physically, how dance music was understood to stir the passions and persuade participants to collaborate. Performance serves as a new means of discovery, a type of research through practice that addresses the unintellectualizable essence of music. Some of what I learn by performing can never be translated—many experiences of the body cannot be recounted clearly. But just enough information works its way into my fibers through performance to suggest questions and answers that historians of culture often neglect. Historical performance is an archive—one just as fraught with interpretative problems as any other, but just as valuable, and too rarely studied. In this case, it reveals a dimension in which violence and music are not opposed, just as it allows us to discuss French society in ways that do not place violence and civility in opposition to one another.

NOTES

[1] These included the reconstruction of a masquerade performed at Fontainebleau in 1564 with a geometrical ballet at the end, a semi-staged reconstruction of *La délivrance de Renault* (1617), and a full-scale costumed reconstruction of Pluvinel's equestrian ballet from 1612 that was staged at the Berkeley Festival of Early Music in 2000 and 2002. A one-minute video clip of the performance can be viewed at <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/hfs.cgi/00/16461.ctl> Other ancillary research projects include study of Renaissance and Baroque dance and learning to play the viola da gamba, an instrument favored by noble amateurs at the time and with a left-hand technique reminiscent of the lute.

[2] The music for the 1612 ballet, in the version preserved by André Danican Philidor late in the seventeenth century, is available on commercial recording: *Le Concert des Nations*, Jordi Savall director, "L'Orchestre de Louis XIII (1601-1643) Recueil de plusieurs airs par Philidor L'Aîné" (AliaVox AV9824, 2002). Readers will also find available numerous recordings of Clément Janequin's "La Guerre." But apart from these two works, little of the music discussed in the book has been recorded.

[3] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), Chapter 10.

Kate van Orden
University of California, Berkeley
vanorden@calmail.berkeley.edu

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical 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