

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 6 (May 2006), No. 61

**Katherine Ellis**, *Interpreting the Musical Past: Early Music in Nineteenth-Century France*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. xxii + 295 pp. Personalia, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-19-517682-0.

**Sophie-Anne Leterrier**, *Le mélomane et l'historien*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2005. 227 pp. Index. €23 E.U. (pb). ISBN 2-20-026914-5.

Review by William Weber, California State University, Long Beach.

---

One of the most important changes in cultural history and cultural studies has been the effort to explore the origins of classics or canons within an artistic field. What has long been taken for granted is now found to derive from ideology and contemporary influences as much as from the music itself.[1] Deconstructing assumptions about musical canons poses a particular challenge given the relatively late arrival of such notions and the strong moral and civic values the music has carried since around 1830. Two important recent books, one by a musicologist and the other by a historian, reach similar conclusions while pursuing somewhat different approaches to the rise of musical classics.

Katherine Ellis approaches the subject with great intellectual acuity in her second major work on this subject, *Interpreting the Musical Past*. Historians will profit from the book's analysis of nationalistic themes in musical ideology and its wide-ranging research on provincial concert life. Her first study, *Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century France*, explores the romantic and utopian principles set forth in a journal in the 1830s and 1840s that gave intellectual direction to performing great works from the recent past.[2] By her interpretation, the movement then underwent a retrenchment in the 1850s in reaction to the avant-garde forming around Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt. What had begun as a radical departure from musical tradition became conservative in its effort to protect the newly established classical music concerts from pressures made upon them by progressive composers and critics. I find this narrative valuable for understanding the evolution of musical thinking within Europe as a whole. It shows a new order coming into being within musical life after 1848 as concerts of commercially-based popular music diverged from those of learned classical music. All of this suggests important parallels regarding periods and ideological activity that can be seen between musical and political life.

*Interpreting the Musical Past* concerns a specific region of musical culture: the repertory now called early music composed from the time of Giovanni Palestrina in the late sixteenth century to that of Johann Sebastian Bach around 1750. These works were rediscovered for publication and performance, brought back into view after long periods of disuse. By comparison, almost all the music performed by orchestras, choruses, and string quartets before the 1860s had remained in repertory since their origins. Survival and rediscovery led to fundamentally different roles within musical memory. While works survived upon a normative basis as canons, those that were revived were treated in historical terms, performed in chronological order as exemplars of periods.

The music of George Frideric Handel was something of an exception to this rule, however. A few of his pieces were performed at the Concert Spirituel in the middle of the eighteenth century. His oratorios, masques, odes, concertos, and even some opera arias spread to Vienna and Berlin in the 1770s and to Paris in the 1790s. Indeed, his music was the starting-point of the "classical" repertory of the early nineteenth century, linked closely to works by Franz Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and

---

Ludwig van Beethoven at the prestigious Société des Concerts from its founding in 1828. Still, Ellis does show that in France the oratorios acquired an ideological function comparable to that of Palestrina that linked them to historically-oriented performance of early music.

The book shows that an extraordinary amount of early music was performed in France throughout the nineteenth century, probably more than in any other country. While England led Europe in canonic performance of old music during the eighteenth century, France moved to the forefront in spreading early music within remarkably diverse levels of French society. In the mid-1840s aristocratic ladies and gentlemen, led by the Prince de la Moskova, sang Palestrina's hymns in public events of the Société des Concerts de Musique Vocale, Religieuse et Classique. Choral societies proliferated in the provinces from 1860 on, most prominently in Protestant areas such as Alsace and Western France. The Association Musicale de l'Ouest, for example, put on three-day annual festivals in Poitiers, Limoges, Angoulême, and La Rochelle. In 1900 the Exposition Universelle offered a Disney-like theme park along the Seine called *Le vieux Paris* that offered some 52 million visitors minstrels and choirs as well as craftsmen and cobbled streets.

Yet the French nonetheless acquired an inferiority complex about their own music just as much as did the British. One of Ellis's central arguments is that the growth of French musical life was founded ideologically upon the deprecation of the nation's composers and their music. A complete recycling of repertory took place in the Opéra and the Concert Spirituel in the 1770s, and from then on French music of the eighteenth century was derided as too anachronistic for revival, as a "heavy intoning" that the public would supposedly not tolerate. Some provincial churches kept the music of Michel De Lalande or André Campra in repertory, but few concert societies paid much attention to French music written prior to the 1800. While a cult did develop for Jean-Baptiste Rameau, commentators identified his music with Italian as much as French music and often scorned it as excessively feminine.

Ellis's argument has important implications. It demonstrates that traditional values persisted in France on a stronger basis than elsewhere in Europe or America. The long-standing focus upon music of the present—or its evolution, usually called "les progrès de la musique"—did not disappear in the face of the new musical classicism that arose in the 1820s and 1830s, at least in regard to music by French composers.

I would add that musical culture had traditionally been governed by a particular kind of cosmopolitanism. No single country or region could exist on its own; involvement internationally, whether in complementary or competitive terms, was basic to musical culture. French opera departed from this practice to an unusual extent, since Italian opera companies were excluded from the French stage for the most part until 1770, a resistance to cosmopolitan authority that originated in the response to the Fronde. Nonetheless, the many numbers from Italian opera sung in concerts maintained a strong international focus within Parisian musical life. Tradition reasserted itself in the recycling of all old operas in the 1770s and the development of a fundamentally Italian—read cosmopolitan—opera repertory that could not be defined in patriotic terms despite the European-wide hegemony of Parisian-based grand opera by the 1840s. David Bell showed likewise that late eighteenth-century nationalistic tendencies interacted with universalism each of a Catholic and an enlightened nature.[3] By the 1850s the music of Mozart and Beethoven originally called German had become a cosmopolitan musical culture that forced composers to defend their interests in nationalistic terms even in Germany.

Ellis makes a finely-etched analysis of musical ideology that should interest historians: "Questions of identity, chauvinism, patriotism, and nationalism are, accordingly, central to this study," she notes (p. xviii). The book disclaims any clear-cut answers to the question whether national and musical politics cohered ideologically. But it does demonstrate that musical life was involved in the diverse ways by

---

which the church and religious thinking were reshaped in the nineteenth century. National and ecclesiastical politics took a particular form in musical life, but larger political contexts remained closely bound to such discourse. The Ultramontane movement in music was split between radicals who demanded that churches stick to Gregorian chant and moderates who favored Palestrina's hymns that congregations could sing more easily. Pius X, therefore, sought compromise by allowing both options in *Motu proprio* (1903). Ellis has thereby contributed to recent research into the diverse array of religious movements in the nineteenth century.[4]

Republicanism became identified with Handel's oratorios, "a musical symbol of idealized Republican nationhood" (p. 210) within efforts to democratize taste for good music. Such ideology did not spread as widely as Ultramontanism, however, since the working-class choruses of the state-supported Orphéon performed mostly music written by their conductors—another example of traditional programming. Finally, Bach stood above partisan identities, perceived in universalistic terms and identified with Catholic musical learning more than with Saxon Protestantism.

Sophie-Anne Leterrier has written a book that handily complements *Interpreting Music of the Past*. Trained in history proper (or "plain" history, as a musicologist once said to me), Leterrier offers a survey of the leading movements, leaders, and ideas surrounding interest in early music between the late eighteenth century and World War I. A reader new to the subject might well start with this volume. Leterrier analyzes how musical movements related with the succeeding regimes and with the evolving hegemony of history within French culture and politics. Sections of the book—particularly an attempt to compare tendencies in major regions of Europe—seem rather scattered, but the discussion is insightful in comparing the nature of what she calls "survival" and "revival" in musical culture (p. 146).

Leterrier confirms Ellis's evidence that France rivaled the German states in the richness of efforts to bring old music back to life. She presents thoughtful biographical sketches of the key figures in this history, most important of all the Belgian François Fétyis who produced editions of old works, started the main French music magazine, popularized early music widely, and had as powerful an impact upon musical life as any figure in Germany or Austria. Leterrier illustrates the organic naturalism and anthropological sensibility by which he viewed musical culture; she also characterizes him as being bypassed and discredited by the 1860s. Joseph-Napoleon Ney, prince de la Moskowa (who married a daughter of Jacques Lafitte) tried to get the Papacy to support a federation of choirs singing Palestrina's music. Louis Blanc's brother Charles pops up writing an agenda for reform of the much-criticized Conservatoire in November 1848, glibly linking musical Catholicism to antiquity, Martin Luther, the Revolution, and the French state.

The July Monarchy proved central to the rise of a culture of early music even though the government itself took little direct part in that development. The regime eliminated the Chapelle Royale and refused to allow a school for sacred music, but musicians then started just such an institution on their own that became the focus of aristocratic and literary fashion in the 1840s. Orleanist music lovers turned their backs on anti-clericalism to fill their ears with Palestrina and Gregorian chant. Old sacred music became a moral mission of the nation in some writers' eyes, which proved useful after the breakdown in 1848. "The regime born of the June Days, abandoning the utopia of the people's music," Leterrier concludes, "declared its allegiance for music as high art and therefore for that music's history" (p. 164). The Revolution ended up legitimizing that discipline.

Leterrier captures musical politics of the Second Republic as "un classicisme consensuel," a successful set of compromises among factions reminiscent of Katherine Ellis's analysis. Classical music was a discipline for the orthodox but originality for progressives. Bach was all things to all kinds of people, as Joël-Marie Fauquet and Antoine Hennion argued in *La grandeur de Bach*; piped-in Bach was on the way.[5]

The Third Republic then institutionalized early music, Leterrier shows. While the subject became only marginal to school curricula, the Conservatoire made it substantially part of its program, and the government poured money into the library and instrument museum. French higher education finally recognized music, the first thèse in music (on opera between Lully and Alessandro Scarlatti) being given to Roman Rolland through the École Pratique des Hautes Études in 1895. (While thinking on music and poetry intermingled extensively in the French universities of the sixteenth century, the Counter-Reformation had excluded it almost completely by the reign of Louis XIV.)

Neither of the two books ends up confronting an important question: how did the eighteenth-century repertory of *la musique ancienne* affect musical life after its time? Nowhere else in Europe did operas remain on stage as long as those of Jean-Baptiste Lully did at the Opéra. *Thésée*, composed in 1675, brought that epoch to a close in 1779. Indeed, a medley of the best-known melodies from operas by Lully, Jean-Philippe Rameau, and Christophe Willibald Gluck was staged the year before, bearing the historically-defined title *Les Trois Ages de l'Opéra*.<sup>[6]</sup> Even though the repertory of old operas was completely eliminated (save Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Le Devin du Village*), a coherent historical sense of French music remained in the public mind that must have contributed significantly to the unusually strong revival of early music in France after 1820. A respect for old music built up in the course of the eighteenth century that survived the recycling of repertory and came forth again in the 1820s. The survival of choral-orchestral motets by André Campra in provincial churches itself suggests that. The Société des Concerts developed a repertory not only by Lully, Rameau, and Gluck but also Etienne-Nicolas Méhul, whose music was performed by all the major European orchestras for most of the nineteenth century. The disparate origin of these very composers illustrates how national and cosmopolitan identities interacted within the emerging historical perspective upon French music.

---

## NOTES

[1] William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Dominique Poulot, *Musée, nation, patrimoine, 1789-1815* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997); Trevor Ross, *The English Literary Canon from the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998); Joël-Marie Fauquet and Antoine Hennion, *La grandeur de Bach: L'amour de la musique en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2000); and Sophie Maisonneuve, "La constitution d'une culture et d'une écoute musicale nouvelles: le disque et ses sociabilités comme agents de changement culturel dans les années 1920 et 1930," *Revue de musicologie* 88(2002): 43-66.

[2] K. Ellis, *Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century France: La Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris, 1834-1880* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[3] David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[4] R. W. Franklin, *Nineteenth-Century Churches: The History of a New Catholicism in Württemberg, England, and France* (New York: Garland, 1987); Caroline Ford, *Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); J. P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880-1914* (forthcoming, Oxford University Press). The unusually strong role played by the nobility in the musical life of Third Republic France has been shown by Jane F. Fulcher in *French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Jann Pasler in "Countess Greffulhe as

---

Entrepreneur: Negotiating Class, Gender, and Nation,” in William Weber, ed., *The Musician as Entrepreneur, 1700-1914: Managers, Charlatans and Idealists* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 221-55. See also Katherine Bergeron, *Decadent Enchantress: The Revival of Gregorian Chant at Solesmes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[5] See note 1.

[6] William Weber, “Mentalité, tradition, et origines du canon musical en France et en Angleterre au XVIIIe siècle,” *Annales E.S.C.* 42 (1989): 849-75; idem., “La musique ancienne in the Waning of the Ancien Régime,” *Journal of Modern History* 56 (1984): 58-88; Philippe Vendrix, *Aux origines d’une discipline historique: la musique et son histoire en France aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Droz, 1993); Elizabeth Bartlet, “Jean-Baptiste Lully and the Music of the French Baroque,” in John Hajdu Heyer, ed., *Essays in Honor of James R. Anthony* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 291-318.

William Weber  
California State University, Long Beach  
wweber@csulb.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