

Nicholas Hammond, *The Powers of Sound and Song in Early Modern Paris*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. ix + 203 pp. Maps, tables, figures, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. \$89.95 US (hb). ISBN: 978-0-271-08471-8; \$32.95 US (pb). ISBN: 978-0-271-08472-5.

Review Essay by David Garrioch, Monash University

This is not a conventional history book, although at first glance it is presented as one. It is best approached as a multifaceted study of a text, a four-line song from 1661 that begins “Grands Dieux! quelle est vôtre justice?” The song contrasts the fate of Jacques Chausson, about to be burned alive for sodomy, with that of the comte de Guitaut, named as a Knight of the Order of the Saint-Esprit, who according to the song is being rewarded for the same “vice”. With a couple of exceptions, each section in Nicholas Hammond’s book – sometimes a chapter or more, sometimes part of one – deals with a theme or question relating to this song. Different sections help us to understand why and how songs like this one were produced, in what contexts they were performed, and what the words might reflect about seventeenth-century French society and politics. Hence, after a brief discussion of sounds in Paris, the second half of chapter one discusses the Pont-Neuf as a new kind of space, one where songs like this one might be heard, despite the efforts of the authorities to suppress them. The second chapter is devoted half to professional street singers, mainly one named Philippot who did sing on the Pont-Neuf, and the other half to Madame de Sévigné, whose letters record her interest in songs, including those she heard in the streets. Chapter three then turns to the political context of 1661. The death of Cardinal Mazarin and his unpopularity are briefly evoked through songs hostile to him. Hammond then approaches the beginning of Louis XIV’s personal rule, not through songs but via Bossuet’s sermons, with the reminder that they were intended to be heard and not read. This is followed by a description of Nicolas Fouquet’s ill-judged attempt to impress the king and to win appointment as first minister, emphasizing the sounds of fireworks and of theatrical performance at Vaux-le-Vicomte. A longer section then covers Fouquet’s trial, the speeches made and the songs it stimulated.

The second half of the book (chapters four to six) is broadly about sodomy, the “vice” for which, according to the 1661 song, “Grands Dieux,” Chausson will be punished and Guitaut rewarded. Hammond treats sodomy as synonymous with homosexuality, although a footnote shows that he is well aware of the debates on this question. This part of the book asks who Chausson and Guitaut were, and why and how each of them arrived at their eventual fate, before going on to discuss why the song expresses apparent outrage at the difference in their treatment. Chapter four has three main sections. The first is devoted to the trial of Chausson and of his co-defendant, Jacques Paulmier, while the second recounts their execution, with a description of the sounds that may have accompanied it. The third section of the chapter analyses other songs that mention Chausson, whose name became synonymous with “sodomite” right through the eighteenth century.

Chapter five turns to Guitaut. Having described the sights and sounds of the ceremony in which Louis XIV conferred the newly-revived Order of the Saint-Esprit on sixty men, it recounts Guitaut’s ascension from Cardinal Richelieu’s page boy to favourite of the prince de Condé. While noting that Condé’s sexual conquests of women were sometimes celebrated,

Hammond emphasizes the homoerotic nature of his relationships with a range of favourites and the use of the language of love between men in his immediate circle. Even though the 114 letters from Condé to Guitaut do not, it seems, reflect this strongly homoerotic culture, we are assured that “their warmth and intimacy reveal a commitment that goes far beyond that of a patron and his client or even of close friends” (p. 137). Madame de Sévigné is then again summoned as a witness, although to Guitaut’s character rather than his sexuality. She was his neighbour in Paris and had a warm relationship with him. “Much of their affinity,” Hammon comments, “relies on shared auditory delights” (p. 141).

The final chapter is the least unified of all. It begins with the sense of injustice expressed in the 1661 song. This, Hammond suggests, arose not from a perception that Chausson and Guitaut were treated differently because one moved in elite circles and the other did not, but rather because the two men came from similar milieux. This similarity is demonstrated with reference to two further songs, one alleging that Chausson was executed for loving a page boy of the prince de Conti, the second, from 1649, suggesting that Guitaut’s uncle was having sex with his ensign. Both Chausson and Guitaut had ties to page boys and to the princes of the blood, whose households were reputed to be rife with homosexual activity. The second section of chapter six demonstrates the prince de Condé’s interest in what was being sung in the streets of Paris, particularly when it was about his own exploits. The final part of the chapter speculates on the authorship of the “Grands Dieux” song, proposing three equally plausible possibilities.

As this outline of the book perhaps makes clear, it jumps from topic to topic and often ends up in a different place from the one predicted at the outset. I found this disconcerting, but it does not detract from Hammond’s imaginative reconstruction of certain aspects of the world of seventeenth-century Paris. The most original and valuable contributions are twofold: first, the demonstration of the ubiquity and the role of song in the city; and second, the discussion of the banality and widespread acceptance of same-sex relationships among men. On the former, the description of the singers on the Pont-Neuf is fascinating, and particularly the detailed portrait of the blind singer Philippot Le Savoyard. This man composed many of his own songs, and Hammond skilfully analyses the words in order to reveal why Philippot was so successful, in part thanks to the unique and appealing self-image he constructed. A key point that emerges from this discussion is that, as in other areas of culture, there was much crossover between elite and popular circles. Courtly songs and music found their way into the street-singers’ repertoire, sometimes modified for wider consumption. De Sévigné’s cousin, Bussy-Rabutin, like many cultivated noblemen, wrote songs, and if we take her complaint at face value, she heard some about herself being sung in the street. Her correspondence shows that she listened to the street songs and was often amused by their bawdiness.

The subject matter of the songs was mostly drinking, love, and scurrilous gossip, but the political nature of a small number of them is particularly interesting. Hammond stresses that “when it came to times of momentous change, the songs almost always offered alternative commentaries to official accounts” (p. 59). This bears out what Robert Darnton has observed about song and poetry in eighteenth-century Paris, but also points to its perennial nature.[1] Political song was not something that appeared, along with the idea of “public opinion,” in the eighteenth century. Examples of verses celebrating the death of Mazarin, those concerning Fouquet’s trial, and others about Condé, reveal the continued existence of political commentary through song. Concern about public perceptions also emerges from the commissioning of songs, by figures such as Condé and by the Paris police, that we would describe as propaganda.

The second major contribution of this book bears on seventeenth-century Parisians' awareness of and attitudes to male same-sex relationships. Hammond argues that homosexual acts, not simply homoerotic language and gestures, were common in the princely households. He makes a strong case, although much of his evidence can be (and has been) interpreted differently, given that early modern male friendship was often expressed in highly homoerotic language, particularly through letters.[2] Equally interesting is his demonstration of perceptions of "sodomy" in the songs. Many of those about Chausson, not solely "Grands Dieux," express sympathy for the executed man, even outrage at the injustice of his execution. Along with other sources, they reveal not only that homosexual acts, consensual sex or rape, were seen as common in court circles, but also that they are treated quite matter-of-factly, an argument he has made at greater length elsewhere.[3]

The strength of the book's arguments depends to some extent on who wrote the songs and on how widely they circulated. The source for most of them is the "Chansonnier Maurepas" in the Bibliothèque nationale, a vast collection apparently composed "for surveillance purposes" (p. 28). Nearly all the songs are anonymous, but it would have been helpful to include a more detailed discussion of the Chansonnier and its sources. What was the relationship of its content to printed songsheets and published songs? Can we distinguish those likely to have been commissioned by various authorities from the ones produced by professional singers? And can any of the songs from 1661-1662 be demonstrated to have been sung on the Pont-Neuf or elsewhere? The discussion of the authorship of the "Grands Dieux" song, right at the end of the book, is exemplary and would have been useful at the outset. The strong implication in the early chapters of the book is that songs like this one were composed and sung (in this instance surreptitiously, given its critique of the authorities) by the street singers, whereas the three men whom Hammond later suggests as possible authors of the "Grands Dieux" song are the poet Claude Le Petit, the nobleman Bussy-Rabutin, and Jacques Chausson himself, the latter two both linked to court circles. If it was Bussy-Rabutin, then it was probably composed out of resentment that Guitaut was honoured by the king, and not Bussy-Rabutin himself. Even if it circulated widely, that would be relevant to Hammond's earlier discussion and might lead us to interpret the song rather differently.

So would the circumstances of its performance, if it was sung at all. We do learn that the police monitored performances on the Pont-Neuf. Hammond states that "singing songs in public was considered a crime" (p. 23), and this claim is repeated in the cover blurb and on the publisher's web page.[4] Yet the evidence quoted, the "Règlement général" of 1635, quite clearly banned stopping and assembling a crowd, not singing in the street. The quotation given was part of a more general clause that also covered sellers of patent medicines, tooth-pullers, and puppet-shows: it was an attempt to prevent large gatherings that blocked traffic and offered opportunities for pickpockets and perhaps seditious activity, but it did not ban singing in public, even by professional singers.[5] That does not much matter for the analysis of the songs, but it is revealing of the attitudes of the authorities, and an accurate reading of the Règlement in fact reinforces Hammond's point about the ubiquity of song and its potential for protest: street singing was an activity that the authorities saw as legitimate, but of which they were always suspicious, and the ordinance gave them grounds for arresting singers who stepped out of line.

Having finished reading the book, I was puzzled by its misleading title. A good half of it is about sodomy/homosexuality, yet that is not reflected either in the title or in the blurb, which refers only to "the complex acoustic dimensions of class, politics, and sexuality." This

obscures one of the most important contributions the book makes. Of the elements that *are* in the title, song is certainly the central unifying theme, and so are its “powers,” if we interpret that to mean the political and social commentary it sometimes conveyed. “Powers” also refers, clearly, to the potential challenge to royal authority represented by orality, in the form not only of songs but also of sermons and of rhetoric in the courtroom. Yet it remains unclear who was wielding these powers, or to what effect. Here, it might have been helpful to engage with Michèle Fogel’s work, which discusses power and the politics of sound in the period, albeit in a very different way.[6]

Having myself written about early modern city soundscapes, I welcome further attention to the auditory dimension of the urban environment.[7] Yet Hammond’s opening discussion of sonic theory and of sound in seventeenth-century Paris is very cursory and could be entirely removed without any impact on the rest of the book. Strangely, too, the analysis of the songs largely ignores the music, even though Hammond has managed to track down some of the tunes. Only twice does he comment on the effect that hearing them might have had on the way they were interpreted. In the case of “Grands Dieux,” he is able to point to its sadness, which apparently makes it unlike other songs about sodomites. That’s a start, but given the book’s title and stated aims, I was surprised not to find more analysis of the music, particularly in the light of Una McIlvenna’s exemplary demonstration of how to incorporate the music of execution ballads into analysis of their political and social significance.[8]

Fortunately, some of the music – including “Grands Dieux” – is available at a companion web site, <https://www.parisiainsoundscapes.org/>. Again, this title is misleading, since the site contains nothing about soundscapes in general and is devoted exclusively to songs. It nevertheless represents a valuable historical source and a useful complement to Hammond’s book. Viewers will find the texts of many songs from the Chansonnier Maurepas, with a few explanatory notes (more would be helpful, for student use especially). There are a number of recordings, some of tunes alone and some with words and music. It provides the musical notation for a few songs, and under the “Video” tab, a Vimeo and a Youtube recording by a fine period instrument group (named in the heading as “Ars Eloquentiae” but in the videos as “Badinage”: a web search suggests these are two different ensembles). The videos give a wonderful sense of how the songs might have been experienced by an audience, and there are close-ups of instruments, like the hurdy-gurdy, that some viewers may never have seen or heard before. “Grands Dieux” is among the songs performed (and is also available as a recording linked from the “Songs and their Stories” tab). As Hammond points out in the book, it is extraordinarily mournful, not mocking or wry as the words alone might otherwise suggest. Another song discussed in the book, critical of the court, is also available as a recording, under the title “Lanterlu.” The one major drawback of the site, from a historical and musicological perspective, is the absence of any analysis of the material. The site presents all the songs unproblematically as “street songs,” despite their diverse authors and uncertainty about whether they were ever actually performed in public. It is still under development, however, so there may be plans to include some historical and musical discussion.

The Powers of Sound and Song and the accompanying web site are a welcome contribution to an exciting and promising field, the history of song. The book is eclectic, entertainingly written, offering unexpected insights into many aspects of seventeenth-century Paris. Taken together, the web site and the book help to make accessible material that is difficult to find and to interpret; they should provide a fertile stimulus to further research.

NOTES

- [1] Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police: Communication Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- [2] Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Raymond Stephanson, "'Epicoene Friendship': Understanding Male Friendship in the Early Eighteenth Century, with Some Speculations about Pope," *The Eighteenth Century* 38 (1997): 151-70.
- [3] Nicholas Hammond, *Gossip, Sexuality, and Scandal in France (1610-1715)* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011). A point also made by Jeffrey Merrick, "Chaussons in the Street: Sodomy in Seventeenth-Century Paris," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15 (2006): 167-203.
- [4] <https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/978-0-271-08471-8.html> (accessed 12 October 2020).
- [5] The full text of the Règlement can be found in Nicolas Delamare, *Traité de la police*, 2nd ed., 4 v. (Amsterdam: Aux dépens de la Compagnie, 1729), 1:116.
- [6] Michèle Fogel, *Les cérémonies de l'information dans la France du XVI^e au milieu du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).
- [7] David Garrioch, "Sounds of the City. The Soundscape of European Towns, Seventeenth to Nineteenth Century," *Urban History* 30 (2003): 5-25.
- [8] Una McIlvenna, "The Power of Music: The Significance of Contrafactum in Execution Ballads," *Past & Present* 229, no. 1 (November 2015): 47-89.

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