

Nicholas Hammond, *The Powers of Sound and Song in Early Modern Paris*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. x + 203 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780271084718 (hb).

Review Essay by Lewis C. Seifert, Brown University

In *The Powers of Sound and Song in Early Modern Paris*, Nicholas Hammond invites readers to reconstruct some of the “sound worlds” of seventeenth-century Paris and, so doing, to reconsider the social, political, and sexual dynamics of the period. Inspired by the emerging field of sound studies, Hammond’s book raises important and fascinating questions about the sensory tools we use to apprehend the past. Whereas a long tradition (particularly for the reign of Louis XIV) has privileged visual culture, Hammond urges us to take account of the sonic cultures that were no less defining of the period.[1] In the first part of the book (“The Power of Sound”), Hammond uses specific examples to survey the broader context of seventeenth-century Parisian sound cultures. Chapter one begins with a consideration of recent sonic theory, which Hammond uses to uncover the social and political ramifications of sound in representations by writers and officials. Chapter two then reconstructs the performance context of Parisian street songs and what he aptly calls “the multidirectional movement of identities” in the city (p. 31) by focusing on Philippot “Le Savoyard,” a famous bard associated with the Pont Neuf, the epicenter of such performances. Traveling beyond the bridge, chapter three explores sound and oral cultures that attended Louis XIV’s rise to power in the early 1660s, from sermons by Bossuet to a comédie-ballet by Molière and Lully, to the trial of Nicolas Fouquet. In part two (“Chausson’s Song”), Hammond fleshes out the multifaceted meanings of a simple four-verse song from the *Chansonnier Maurepas* about the execution of Jacques Chausson, for sodomy and impiety, and the simultaneous knighting of Guillaume de Comminges-Pechpeyrou, comte de Guitaut, rumored to be the lover of the Grand Condé.[2] Chapter four examines the circumstances surrounding Chausson’s trial and death and then the memory of this execution, especially in street songs long after the event. Chapter five then turns to Guitaut, who, because of his social station and connection to Condé, not only escaped punishment but improved his social standing. As Hammond shows, Guitaut and Condé were fully aware of the disparity between what could be written and spoken about their relationship. In the final chapter, Hammond probes further the contrasting worlds of Chausson and Guitaut that are the subject of the four-verse song studied in chapters four and five. In spite of their radically different fates, Chausson and Guitaut were portrayed as more alike than different in songs that Hammond sees as evidence of a widespread tolerance, if not sympathy, for same-sex erotic relations.

Like all explorations of the sonic worlds of the past (at least before the advent of sound recording), Hammond’s effort to reconstruct the sound worlds of seventeenth-century Paris relies on a profoundly paradoxical premise. To “hear” those sound worlds, one must read written documents, be they descriptions of the noises and sounds of the period, song texts, or musical scores. With the possible exception of sight reading from a musical score, reading is itself (for most of us at least) a silent activity performed with our eyes. This is in no way to invalidate the

effort to imagine the sound worlds of the past; rather, it is to underscore the necessarily speculative and at least somewhat elusive nature of the exercise. To “hear” the sounds of the past is, for the most part, to imagine those sounds, using available written sources as guides and accepting that we will never know if what we reconstruct is what was actually heard. There are, of course, attempts to make those sound worlds audible. Historically-informed performances of period music are perhaps the most common, but there are also performances of period texts with early modern pronunciation.[3] And, fortunately for readers of Hammond’s new book, there is his website “Seventeenth-Century Parisian Soundscapes” (parisiansoundscapes.org), with transcriptions of songs from the *Chansonnier Maurepas* and both sound and video recordings of a few of these by the group Badinage. But as welcome and valuable as these performances are, it is important to remember that they are themselves *interpretations* of written traces of the sonic past. They are, that is, the product of the informed but speculative work that goes into any attempt to reconstruct the sound worlds of the past; and, as interpretations, they are not—and cannot be—definitive forms of those sound worlds. My point, once again, is not to discount the efforts to reconstruct past sound worlds, but rather to foreground the specific nature of the work done by sound studies. In their Introduction to a special issue of *Paragraph*, Sarah Kay and François Noudelmann affirm that work in this field leads to a “radical rethinking of the historical archive.”[4] At least part of this rethinking, it seems to me, involves coming to terms with the elusive nature of that very archive. Unlike studies of visual culture or literary texts, for instance, the object to be interpreted by sound studies is not given in advance, but only hinted at by various sources. (This may explain in part why visual culture has tended to dominate interpretations of the reign of Louis XIV.) The study of the sonic past requires one to come to terms with the gap between the written and the sonic even as one uses the written to (attempt to) bridge that gap. Put otherwise, studying the sonic past requires a measure of informed, but still imaginative conjecture.

The Powers of Sound and Song in Early Modern Paris amply demonstrates the rewards of such conjecture, and two areas of Hammond’s exploration of seventeenth-century Parisian sound worlds are particularly fruitful. First is the reminder that “absolutist” political and religious authority had limits and that opposition to authority circulated more freely than we might be inclined to imagine. “For all Louis’s tight control of his subjects, sounds and songs proved much more elusive and difficult to suppress,” he states (p. 78). Indeed, the origins of the *Chansonnier Maurepas*, a collection that provides an important written archive for Hammond’s study, can be traced to records initially kept by the first lieutenants of police, Gabriel-Nicolas de la Reynie and Marc René d’Argenson. What the songs of the *Chansonnier Maurepas* demonstrate is that, to the extent it existed, opposition to authority actively circulated in the sound worlds—or more precisely, the oral cultures—of early modern France. To gain a clearer understanding of the resistance to the political, religious, and social structures of the period, we need to account for its “sonic ecology,” as Kay and Noudelmann call it.[5] And one of the strengths of Hammond’s study is that it lays the groundwork for further exploration of the subversive dimensions of this early modern sonic ecology.

The second area where Hammond’s book is particularly fruitful is the attention it draws to how sound brings into contact people of diverse social status. Both literally and figuratively, the Pont Neuf promoted this contact, as Hammond eloquently explains:

As a bridge between different sides of the city, with the Seine flowing beneath, the Pont Neuf encapsulates both the transience of the songs that were sung and the movement between different worlds that forms so much of their subject matter. Moreover, the social and gender mixing that the bridge enabled was ideally suited to the way that gossip functions, for gossip can just as easily be about valets and servants as it can be about the rich and famous, and the performance of songs on the Pont Neuf makes such gossip available to and consumed by all (p. 25).

The sound world of this most famous bridge is one where the rigid social boundaries of the *ancien régime* reveal themselves to be at least somewhat porous. One of the better-known examples Hammond cites is the marquise de Sévigné, who was keenly interested in the songs that filled the streets of her day. That she would avidly collect and share such songs reminds us that seventeenth-century elites did not insulate themselves from “popular” artforms, that is, artforms shared and/or associated with the lower classes. Of course, other examples from the seventeenth century similarly attest to an interest in non-elite cultural forms. For instance, the vogue of literary fairy tales at the end of the century reflects a familiarity with storytelling among the lower classes, even if the *contes de fées* published bear especially the influence of other literary (written) sources.[6] The key point here is that elites’ knowledge of “popular” artforms, be they street songs or folktales, was dependent on their participation in the oral cultures of their time. As Hammond emphasizes, early modern sound worlds enabled exchanges and contacts between social groups who otherwise had little in common.

Street songs and folktales were certainly part of the sound worlds of their day, but they were more specifically artforms within oral cultures. The distinction between sound worlds and oral cultures, which Hammond does not make, is one that would be useful insofar as it allows a distinction between a broader category (“sounds”) that includes both non-human and human actors and another (“orality”) that is dominated by human actors and their use of language. Most of what interests Hammond are in fact aspects of seventeenth-century oral cultures, with human actors, and so a focus on the workings of orality and its relation to writing would be especially relevant. The work of anthropologists such as Ruth Finnegan and Walter Ong, among others, provides conceptual grids for understanding orality and oral artforms, even if their conclusions are the result of the sort of first-hand contact unavailable to scholars working on oral cultures of the past.[7] Focusing specifically on orality would call attention to the well-known fact that the majority of early modern Europeans continued to exist fully or at least partially within oral cultures. It is, of course, well known that full literacy rates remained very low throughout the seventeenth century (and indeed beyond), and so the work of Finnegan and Ong would suggest that for those who were not literate (or only partially so), the experience of sound and orally-transmitted knowledge was qualitatively different than it was for the fully literate minority. The street song culture that Hammond studies thrived in an environment where a good portion of the audience relied on cognitive skills honed by the need to retain information without reliance on the written word. Of course, even for the literate elite in this period, the experience of sound and the spoken voice was doubtless quite different from our own, evoking affects we strain to imagine today, as Hammond’s subtle discussion of Bossuet’s oratory makes clear (pp. 62-68).

A focus on orality *per se* would also raise further questions about many of the songs alluding to sodomy, including the song about Chausson and Guitaut that is the starting point for chapters

four and five. Hammond maintains that “Grands Dieux!” and others from the *Chansonnier Maurepas* are sympathetic portrayals of same-sex relations. But as he remarks about other similar texts (p. 159), these representations are highly ambiguous, at least when considered as written texts.[8] And so, when approached as spoken or sung texts, this ambiguity gives rise to a range of possible interpretations, from sympathetic to satirical. The recording of this song on the “Seventeenth-Century Parisian Soundscapes” website, for instance, is languorous and tragic in tone. But one could just as easily imagine an interpretation with a faster or variable tempo and an ironic or mocking voice that would be anything but a sympathetic portrayal. Added to the properly sonorous interpretation would be that of the gestures and facial expressions of the singer—the corporeal interpretation—which could emphasize any number of nuances the singer chose to convey. Ethnographers who study oral storytellers and singers, for instance, are careful to observe not only the spoken or sung text, but also the vocal registers and the bodily gestures that accompany it. In these instances, the sonorous is inextricably linked to the visual (for those members of the audience able to hear and see, at least). And so, when imagining performances of these songs, one would do well to consider a full range of possible interpretations in both their sonic and visual dimensions.

Scholarship on oral cultures would also frame somewhat differently the hypotheses about the authorship of the “Grands Dieux!” song (pp. 152-60). Hammond entertains three possible candidates: Claude Le Petit, Bussy-Rabutin (Roger de Rabutin, comte de Bussy), and Jacques Chausson himself. Any of these would be plausible so long as we adopt a conventional (modern) understanding of authorship. But the notion of authorship itself is highly problematic in most oral cultures, for a variety of reasons. Texts and songs that enter an oral tradition become malleable, precisely because they are oral, and the performer exerts a creative authority that complicates an understanding of an author as the sole creative origin. The fact that many of the songs in the *Chansonnier Maurepas* exist in multiple versions seems to illustrate this more complex understanding of authorship. To be clear, the “Grands Dieux!” song may in fact have had a single author initially (although the phenomenon of collective authorship was not infrequent in the period), but the performers had a creative role that was no less important. Hammond certainly recognizes the creative potential of performance in his discussion of Philippot “Le Savoyard,” the blind bard of the Pont Neuf famous for the songs he composed and sang (pp. 32-47). But not all singers were authors or composers (nor were all authors and composers performers). In sum, the songs and contexts studied by Hammond allow us to recognize the complexity of authorship in the oral cultures of early modern France.

Scholars building on the conclusions of Hammond’s suggestive study might also foreground orality in revisiting the question of early modern public opinion. The body of work devoted to this topic is considerable, for both the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries, but the role of oral cultures in public opinion could and should certainly be explored further.[9] Particularly for the second half of the seventeenth century, in a political context understood to be “absolutist,” a more detailed consideration of the oral transmission of ideas would reveal an even more variegated and likely more fluid understanding of what constituted public opinion. Beyond the clandestine publications of the ancien régime and its salons (themselves sites of an elite oral culture), the sound worlds explored by Hammond—and especially the songs found in the *Chansonnier Maurepas*—compel us to reconsider a phenomenon more often approached as a product of writing and reading.

This is but one of the many promising avenues for future research opened by *The Powers of Sound and Song in Early Modern Paris*, and scholars are indebted to Nicholas Hammond for showing how to break the silence that has for too long muffled the many sounds of early modern France.

NOTES

[1] For example, Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[2] Grands Dieux! Quelle est vôtre justice ?
Chausson va périr par le feu;
Et Guitaut par le même vice
A mérité le Cordon bleu (quoted by Hammond, p. 95).

[3] See, among others, the historically-informed performance of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* by the Poème Harmonique (DVD, Alpha, 2005) or Eugène Green's performances of seventeenth-century texts, including Eugène Green, *La Parole baroque: essai*, Collection Texte et Voix (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001).

[4] Sarah Kay and François Noudelmann, "Introduction: Soundings and Soundscapes," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 41, no. 1 (2018): 1-9, at 7.

[5] Kay and Noudelmann, "Introduction: Soundings and Soundscapes," p. 5.

[6] Although a long critical tradition held that writers of fairy tales such as Charles Perrault and Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy adapted oral narratives, more recent scholarship has emphasized their Italian literary sources, such as Giovanni Straparola's *The Pleasant Nights* (1551-52) and Giambattista Basile's *The Tale of the Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones* (1634-36). Nonetheless, Perrault, d'Aulnoy, and other writers of *contes de fées* in this period display a keen awareness of the conventions of popular storytelling. For a succinct discussion of these multiple influences, see Charles Perrault, "Introduction," in *Perrault, Fénelon, Mailly, Préchac, Choisy et anonymes: contes merveilleux*, ed. by Tony Gheeraert and Raymonde Robert. Sources classiques, 73. (Paris: Champion, 2005), 13-99.

[7] Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2012); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New Accents (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

[8] I make this point in my own work on songs from the *Chansonnier Maurepas*. See Lewis C. Seifert, *Manning the Margins: Masculinity and Writing in Seventeenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), pp. 157-67.

[9] See, among other works, Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*, trans. Rosemary Morris (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French*

Thought, 1670-1789 (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994); Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades: La Fronde des mots*, Collection Historique (Paris: Aubier, 1985); H el ene Merlin-Kajman, *Public et litt erature en France au XVII e si ecle*, Histoire (Paris: Belle lettres, 1994).

Lewis C. Seifert
Brown University

Lewis_Seifert@brown.edu

Copyright   2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the licence 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.