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Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen. Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2009. xxii + 789 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendices, index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-5202-5740-5.

Review essay by Charles Rearick, University of Massachusetts.

The introduction to this sweeping history does not provide a conventional overview of the book, but it does give us big hints about the approach taken in the chapters that follow. In her opening forty-nine pages, Jann Pasler takes us on “a walking tour of Paris” (p. 1). Her walking tour is actually a well-executed sprint through the city’s history and its topography of symbolic monuments and mundane spaces, whose networks the author presents as a “model for thinking about the musical world” in France (p. 3). As a preview of her historical account, that introductory tour epitomizes her preference for big-picture, multi-perspectival synthesis rather than the now-common approach of presenting a series of “moments” or cultural episodes. Through the rest of the book, Pasler—ever a knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide—gives us a step-by-step narrative of the early Third Republic, carefully explaining all manner of features encountered *en route*: political vicissitudes and crises, *expositions universelles*, colonial presences, shifting gender roles, and literary movements. She also guides us expertly through the music of the period, drawing on her deep research and learning to illumine facet after facet—compositions, composers and performers, musical organizations, performances, venues, the programming of concerts, attendance, critics’ reviews, the selection and training of musicians, state support for music, and reception by different strata of society. While chronicling and contextualizing that wealth of particulars, she unfolds a trenchant argument about music’s importance to republican France.

In making such a strong case for music, *Composing the Citizen* is implicitly a riposte to the visual culture studies for the period and their privileging of sight.[1] Of course, any study of a single strand in the rich tapestry of history inevitably runs into the problem of gauging the part’s relation to other parts. In republican festivals, for example, music and visual spectacle went together. How can historians separate out the effect of one or the other? At times the author tries to do it, suggesting that music had an impact greater than anything else by reason of its sensorial and emotional immediacy. The assertion is plausible, but finding evidence for it is another matter. More generally, how can one determine the part played by music in rooting the republic in the daily lives of the people? How to assess its contribution in comparison with all the other things that went into the making of republican culture—everything from public schools and textbooks to newspapers, gymnastic societies, military service, festivals, and the legion of “great men” and Marianne statues?[2] A specialized study can certainly bring out new perceptions and understandings, but it also risks exaggerating the importance of one piece of the picture. While running that risk, Pasler’s valuable work not only increases our understanding of one part, but also provokes us into taking more seriously its contribution to the whole.

Here I must emphasize that her in-depth examination of music sets her specialty in a broad context of the arts and French cultural history. She regularly draws parallels with the visual arts and provides insights into their role in French history.[3] In contextualizing ideas and programs of the republicans, she traces lines of continuity from *ancien régime* monarchs to French revolutionaries and then on to the

Third Republic. Most importantly, she shows, republican leaders continued a tradition of state support for the arts as *useful* for the regime and the nation.

The common foundation of their arguments was the concept of public utility, which Pasler highlights as a distinctive feature of French government and society. In the republicans' minds, public utility meant usefulness to the many, not the few. It held out the standard of the public good, in place of luxury, frivolous distraction, or mere entertainment. One of the signal contributions of *Composing the Citizen* is its cogent exposition of the republican philosophies of the arts—and music, in particular. In their flights of utopian idealism, republican speechmakers, cabinet ministers, and scholars heaped a host of expectations and hopes on music. As Pasler makes exceedingly clear, the results they expected from music were nothing less than socially and politically transformative. They aspired to establish the republic in the everyday social and cultural life of the people—in *moeurs*, not just minds. And they looked to music as a powerful force for bringing about that transformation. They counted on it, Pasler shows, to help foster critical judgment and shared tastes in the French people, overcome social divisions, reconcile divergent and clashing parts of the French past and present, and create a new common identity among the French, as citizens of the nation and the republic.

Once firmly established, the Third Republic's leaders and supporters implemented a variety of policies and programs supporting their ideals of democracy, transparency, and greater cultural inclusiveness. Ministers of fine arts and music scholars made their republicanism clear in their works, but composers did not do so regularly—at least not patently. Augusta Holmès's "Le Triomphe de la République: Ode triomphale" appears to have been the exception. For the historian's reading of other works, the always difficult question of reception is particularly thorny: was music that now seems to convey republican values or themes (Saint-Saëns's "La Jeunesse d'Hercule," for example) perceived by audiences in those terms? Or did the ideological content come through to only a highly politicized minority?

Pasler deals with these difficult questions adroitly at many points, carefully noting subtle complexities and offering multiple answers, all of which may be valid to varying degrees. For the embattled transition period of the 1870s, she identifies some works as monarchist, others as republican, but also points out that both were on the same program at times. Possibly, she suggests, such programs helped people integrate divergent parts of the French past. In any event, political differences did not always neatly divide the world of music. Republicans continued to grant big subsidies for the Opéra, that old bastion of conservative elitism, and republican composers continued to write religious music—even in the heyday of the radicals' anticlericalism. Music that moved audiences, this account suggests, generally reflected the social attitudes and political convictions of listeners rather than swaying or changing minds. The author is especially skeptical about the effectiveness of the musical events (and the exhibits) at the 1889 Universal Exposition, finding them not didactically persuasive in ways that republicans hoped.

The bigger challenge for the historian is to assess the results of republican programs and musical practices overall. How much of the republicans' hopeful thinking was realized in everyday institutions and practices of the French people? Did the Republic's programs succeed in "composing the citizen"?

An essential condition for such an outcome was reaching all strata of society—that is, democratizing music, bringing art music in particular to more of the population. Pasler gives an excellent accounting of such democratization under the Third Republic: more members of the working-class participating in choruses, wind bands, and orchestras; the creation of school music courses for women and the *Conservatoire populaire de Mimi Pinson* (1902); free performances at the Opéra; and the performance of classical excerpts in almost every venue, including the zoo in the Bois de Boulogne, the capital's circuses, department stores, parks, and the Folies-Bergère.

Yet most of those musical experiences were still limited to the few—or even to traditional elites. The

participation of “all classes” may well have distinguished many concerts of the early Third Republic, but only a small fraction of the population was able to attend any of them—even in huge venues like the Paris Hippodrome, where some ten to twenty thousand people gathered for the festival of French music in 1878. Moreover, there is little evidence that social divisions and cultural chasms were being eliminated or reduced through such musical experiences.

In efforts to make musical programming more democratically inclusive and to reach the people, the limits of republican efforts show up clearly, though that is not what the author emphasizes. In the matter of the “popular,” this book reports, republican music scholars and officials concerned themselves mainly with folk songs (called “chansons populaires”) and scorned the crowd pleasers that the many heard nightly in *cafés-concerts*. And they paid no attention to the *chanteurs de rue* performing on street corners and in courtyards—or the amateurs singing *chez les marchands de vin*.^[4] Republican unease with the popular was plainly strong and deep. As believers in “progress” striving to “elevate” the plebs, republicans readily accepted traditional cultural distinctions of high and low—the binaries of art music and the unrefined, the serious and the light, the noble and the frivolous. In *Composing the Citizen*, similarly, there is little on the popular songs of the time, performances, and their reception in the many modest venues of the capital and provincial towns. (Yet officially supported music, notably opera, is given extensive coverage.)

Pasler cites contemporary France’s *Fête de la musique* as an exemplar of successful democratic community experience. Certainly it is a popular success, an enjoyable participatory festival bringing forth a great variety of music and listeners in myriad venues. But does it unite the people beyond the moment, and does it help them imagine a social identity other than their everyday familiar ones? Most striking to me, besides the widespread enjoyment on a special summer evening, is that the plethora of musical offerings divides people into disparate audiences according differences of taste—without a demonstrable carryover effect on everyday civic life.

Given Jann Pasler’s obvious passion for music and faith in its power, the book’s tendency to emphasize music’s many benefits for the republic is readily understandable. And she obviously shares the democratic hopes of the republican advocates of music. In the first half of the book, at least, her account follows a narrative structure of “progress” (judiciously qualified and never a simplistic unidirectional movement) as she recounts the efforts to bring more classical music to the masses and to build a political culture of republican values.

The last chapters of the book, as well as the later history of the Republic, however, show that republicans were loading excessive expectations onto music. In concluding, the author acknowledges that the construction of a new French republican identity was “not easily resolvable” through their cultural programs, including their musical projects (p. 643). Here I would add another observation that seems pertinent—one made around 1900 by Georges d’Avenel and later reiterated by Theodore Zeldin and Eugen Weber in their reflections on politics in French life: “Politics does not at all have, in the lives of each one of us, the place it holds in the newspapers, in conversation, in the apparent life of the nation. The public life of a people is a very small thing compared to its private life.”^[5]

Furthermore, the political emphasis slights the value and importance of music that was not of public utility. As Pasler makes clear, much of the music discussed in her book does not neatly fit into that concept—not only the disdained *chansonnettes* of the *café-conçs*, but also works of the avant-garde—by Éric Satie, Maurice Ravel, and others. Broad as the book’s conceptual framework is, the concepts of public utility and political culture are not sufficient to encompass the expansive study that the author has produced. Besides developing a political culture argument, she has chosen to give us a *tour d’horizon* of the late nineteenth-century musical world.

Along the way, she offers masterful descriptions and analyses of many musical works, writing at her

lyrical best. Clearly, *Composing the Citizen* is not simply the work of a historian who knows and loves music. The voice of the master musicologist takes over on many pages, noting modes and sonority, analyzing concert programs, pointing out Wagnerian influences, and giving eloquent commentary on pieces by, among others, Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy. Even though the specialist terminology will not be comprehensible to readers lacking musical expertise, overall, this Pasler tour of the pre-1914 era will enable them to hear the period's music with greater historical understanding.

NOTES

[1] Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Richard Thomson, *The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889-1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); Michèle Martin, *Images at War: Illustrated Periodicals and Constructed Nations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). Annegret Fauser explicitly critiques the single-minded focus on the visual and the written in her book *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005).

[2] Recent works on the Third Republic and its political culture include: Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); and James Lehning, *To Be A Citizen: The Political Culture of the Early Third Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001). Other notable accounts include Eugen Weber's classic *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), and Maurice Agulhon, *The French Republic, 1879-1992*, trans. Antonia Nevill, Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, U.S.A.: Blackwell, 1993; the latter is a translation of *La République* (Paris: Hachette, 1990).

[3] Miriam Levin's study, *Republican Art and Ideology in Late Nineteenth Century France* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press 1986) mostly closely parallels Pasler's argument for music in the Republic.

[4] Gérard Jacquemet tells of "l'engouement pour la chanson" in Belleville and the locals singing *chez les marchands de vin* and "dans les salles de réunion": see Jacquemet's classic *Belleville au XIX siècle du faubourg à la ville* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1984), 347. Among music histories focusing on the popular (far fewer than those treating art songs and opera) in the early Third Republic: Serge Dillaz, *La Chanson sous la IIIe République (1870-1940)* (Paris: Tallandier, 1991). For other periods, studies treating popular music (to mention only a few) include: Laura Mason, *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Regina M. Sweeney, *Singing Our Way to Victory: French Cultural Politics and Music During the Great War* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001); Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Ludovic Tournès, *New Orleans sur Seine: histoire du jazz en France* (Paris: Fayard, 1999); and my own account of popular songs with their thematic parallels in movies: *The French in Love and War: Popular Culture in the Era of the World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[5] Georges d'Avenel, *Les Français de mon temps* (1904), quoted in Theodore Zeldin, *France 1848-1945*, Vol. I: *Ambition, Love and Politics*, chapter 14: "The Place of Politics in Life," 387, and Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 3.

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