
H-France Review Vol. 5 (August 2005), No. 85

D. Kern Holoman, *The Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, 1828–1967*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004. xvi + 620 pp. Tables, figures, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 (cl). ISBN 0-520-23664-5.

Review by Jolanta T. Pekacz, Dalhousie University.

This book concerns the orchestra of the Société des concerts du Conservatoire in Paris, one of the most prominent philharmonic societies, from its inception in 1828 until 1967, when it was dissolved and reincorporated as the Orchestre de Paris/Société des concerts du Conservatoire.

The role of the Société des concerts du Conservatoire in French musical life is difficult to exaggerate. The orchestra gave approximately 3,000 concerts during its 140 artistic seasons. It was instrumental in introducing to the French audience orchestral and orchestral-choral repertoire after Haydn, including the entire oeuvre of Beethoven, many of the works by Hector Berlioz, and by the French composers of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The orchestra played a major role in fostering the concerto in the nineteenth century and in developing the custom of allocating central places in its programs for one or more soloists.

Portions of the history of the Société des concerts du Conservatoire have been told many times before.^[1] What makes Holoman's book different from these earlier histories is its scope—from the society's inception to its dissolution—and its extensive use of the society's own administrative archive, which began to be available to scholars in 1975 and which includes personnel registers, minutes of the weekly meetings held by the administrative committee, minutes of the annual general assemblies, concert programs, press reviews, correspondence, subscription lists, accounting records, as well as souvenirs and memorabilia. As a result, Holoman has produced a monumental work of over 600 pages, accompanied by a web site containing reference materials drawn from the society's archive.^[2]

The book's stated purpose is "to get the facts of the Société des concerts du Conservatoire set out—unlike the archive itself—in some trackable order" (p.22) and the author chose the chronicle approach as the best means to achieve this end. Thus, the book does not have any specific thesis nor does it follow any argument; the main ordering principle is chronology. A laudatory tone assumed by the author in the book's first chapter (Beginnings) suggests his descriptive and commemorative, rather than analytical and critical, approach to the Société's history.

Holoman begins with an overview of the historical background, structure, and personnel of the Société des concerts du Conservatoire (Part I, including four chapters: Beginnings, The Musicians, The Hall, and The Concerts). The main body of the book is divided into three parts (Part Two: 1828-72; Part Three: 1872-1919; Part Four: 1919-67), subdivided into eight chapters, and consists of a chronological survey of the society's activities under its successive conductors, beginning with the society's founder, François-Antoine Habeneck (1828-48). Each of the three parts following Part I begins with a brief overview, follows a conductor-by-conductor scheme, and contains a mixture of biographical information about the conductors, prominent musicians and composers, information about the orchestra's repertoire, major concerts, finances, internal power struggles, and anecdotes.

The extensive use of archival resources documenting season-by-season administrative meetings, financial operations, negotiating concert tour contracts, and other vital practical concerns typically

absent in musicological analyses, gives the reader a good grasp of the day-to-day operations of the Société and highlights many lesser known aspects of the orchestra's activity. And considering the long history of the Société, spanning across two world wars, the great depression, and fundamental changes in the profession of music, such as unionizing, the variety of topics included in the narrative makes the book a unique resource.

But the formula of a chronicle based on archival resources meticulously documenting each season and each conductor's tenure, including financial and personal squabbles, is also a source of the book's weaknesses. For one, it makes it difficult to contain the book within a reasonable size, and it accounts for the book's patchy coverage and, at times, repetitive narrative. It also makes the book look at times as a transcript of archival materials without a specific direction and structure, and without adequate critical scrutiny.

It is true, as the author implies, that a much longer book could be written about the Société than the already monumental work Holoman produced. And it is also true that there would still be lacunae, no matter how long the book, and that the reader would still be left with questions. These dilemmas are known to every historian, but, rather than including yet another piece of information and yet another story, historians typically select and order their sources, and present their readers with referenced conclusions. A more rigorous process of selecting and critical scrutiny of his sources would have helped Holoman create a book with a sharper focus, and very likely a shorter one.

As it stands, an inadequate scholarly apparatus with respect to sources, rather than incomplete coverage, is a major problem of Holoman's book and the reason why it must be treated with caution as a scholarly resource. Archival sources, just as any other sources, must be treated with caution, especially official documents pertaining to an organization's activity, as they often present the problems of propaganda and concealment. And there seems to be no shortage of these in the Société's archives, as the reader can sense from Holoman's narrative. Corroboration and checking for consistency is therefore vital in a work so heavily based on archival sources as Holoman's history of the Société des concerts du Conservatoire.

The concentration on the material from the society's own archive at the expense of a broader contextual research makes the society's orchestra appear as a microcosm largely isolated from the outside world, driven by its internal dynamics, and only marginally by outside influences, including those from other orchestras. A more extensive use of contemporary press coverage, for example, beyond the laudatory clippings stored in the society's archive, would place the orchestra in a more authentic context. The lack of corroboration of the archival sources, such as concert programs, is a potential source of factual errors as the works printed in the programs (and stored in the society's archive) were not always identical with the works actually performed. The wider use of the contemporary press would have helped rectify this problem.

More attention to accurate transcription of documentary evidence would have saved Holoman from misleading conclusions. For example, with respect to Habeneck's practice in the early 1830s of performing Beethoven's quartets by the entire string section of the orchestra, Holoman claims that Frederick Chopin, who apparently knew Beethoven's quartets by that time, disapproved of the practice. As evidence, Holoman quotes, inaccurately, a sentence from a letter Chopin wrote to a friend in Warsaw in 1834, taken out of its context ("You think you're hearing four gigantic instruments: the violin like a palace, the viola like a bank, and the cello like the Protestant church" [p. 154]). In fact, in his letter to Józef Nowakowski, Chopin was more impressed by the society's orchestra than critical of Habeneck's practice and emphasized that although all the strings played the quartet, each section sounded like one instrument. An analysis of the section of Chopin's letter in which he refers to Habeneck's practice and an

accurate translation of the section would have helped Holoman avoid this misleading supposition. The section reads: "I would like to give you today my ticket for a Conservatoire's concert. This is one thing that would surpass your expectations. The orchestra is *non plus ultra*. They give today Beethoven's symphony with choirs and one of his quartets played by all the violins, violas, and cellos of the Conservatoire's orchestra; as many as fifty players—they repeat this quartet on demand. They gave it at the last concert—you would think that only four instruments are playing, but a violin as big as a castle, a viola as a bank, and a cello as a Lutheran church." [3]

Of lesser importance, by comparison, appear to be discrepancies between English translations of primary sources included in the book and corresponding versions of these sources (either in English or in French) placed on the web site. English translations in the book do not always match English translations of the same originals posted on the web site. For example, the article by François-Joseph Fétis quoted on pp. 4-5 in the book does not match the English translation of the same article on the web site: the ellipses appear in the second paragraph in the web site version, but they do not appear in the book; there are also discrepancies in punctuation and in grammatical tenses.

And although the web site is a useful device to locate surplus reference material, it would be more user friendly if it contained bibliographical references of the sources quoted in the book, not just pages in the book in which they appear. The lack of such references forces the reader to have the book at hand and to consult the Notes section to identify the source of material on the web (both the originals and translations). Finally, the web site suggests that the material it contains represents the history of the Société des concerts du Conservatoire while, in reality, it reflects the contents of the Société's archives. An explanation of the web site contents on the entry page would be appropriate, especially for those users who are not aware that the web site has something to do with the book, as there is no information to this effect on the web site either.

The book's significance in the literature on the Société des concerts du Conservatoire lies primarily in its bringing to light the rich archival resources pertaining to the activities of the Société. Due to its shortcomings in scholarship, however, the book should be treated with circumspection as a scholarly resource.

NOTES

[1] The major works include: Antoine Elwart, *Histoire de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire Impérial de Musique* (Paris: S. Castel, 1860); Arthur Dandelot, *La Société des Concerts du Conservatoire de 1828 à 1897* (Paris: G. Havard Fils, 1898; 2nd ed. 1923); E.-M.-E. Deldevez, *La Société des Concerts, 1860 à 1885* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1887).

[2] <http://hector.ucdavis.edu/sdc/> (accessed 11 July 2005).

[3] "Chcia bym ci dzi mój bilet na koncert Konserwatorium ust pi . To jest jedno, co by twoje oczekiwania przesz o. Orkiestra *non plus ultra*. Daj dzi symfoni Beethovena z hórami [!] i jegen kwartet jego, grany przez mass wszystkich skrzypków, altówek i violoncell orkiestry Konserwatorium; nic wi cej tylko 50 skrzypków;—powtarzaj oni ten kwartet na danie. Dano go przez ego koncertu—my la by e tylko cztery instrumenta graj, ale skrzypce takie du e jak zamek, altówka jak bank, a violoncella jak luterski ko ció ." Fryderyk Chopin to Józef Nowakowski in Warsaw, 15 April 1832, in *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina*, 2 vols., ed. Bronis aw Sydow (Warszawa: Pa stwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1955), vol. 1, p. 214.

Jolanta T. Pekacz
Dalhousie University
mailto:jpekacz@dal.ca

Copyright © 2005 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. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172