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Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2009. xi + 789 pp. Tables, figures, notes, index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-520-25740-5.

Review by Jeffrey H. Jackson, Rhodes College.

At first glance, Jann Pasler's new book seems to be the story of French musical culture in the late nineteenth century, but she has actually given us something much more ambitious. In essence, she offers a new, synthetic narrative of the political culture of the early Third Republic. Pasler explores the evolution of republicanism not just as a political ideology but as a cultural practice through the forms in which it was expressed. Although music is at the core of the story, Pasler creates a sweeping history of late nineteenth-century France and provides a grand tour through the period's interrelated political and aesthetic philosophies. One of Pasler's basic assumptions is that republicanism required cultural expressions—especially music—in order to make it work. Indeed, as she takes readers through the deep connections within the cultural politics of the republic, one comes away thinking that had there been no music there could not have been a Third Republic at all. Republican-sponsored music was not just the faint soundtrack in the background of the era's political dramas; it was the rousing chorus which tied those dramas together.

Pasler charts the process by which the Third Republic hoped to make—or “compose,” as she puts it, thus emphasizing the active choice of political leaders as shapers of culture—its citizens by teaching them a new set of political values through the music they promoted. She argues that officially-sponsored aesthetic practices were then absorbed into the larger artistic culture of the day. Music became a way to unify French citizens, molding them into a more cohesive nation with a shared set of values expressed in song and tune and giving them a common cultural language by which to express their political values. Music was educational and ultimately unifying, not because it opened new forms of creativity but as a formative experience which would make French citizens more French.

Republicans were often divided over their political goals, something which Pasler considers quite thoroughly. Republicanism was not static, but an ever-changing political philosophy, nor was the republic a homogenous entity but a set of competing political persuasions which evolved in the years after its founding in 1870. That evolution was accompanied by the transformation in the kinds of music it sought to promote. Recognizing the complexity of cultural politics, the author argues that in some cases music provided the French with a way of working through complex and divisive political questions or of creating cross-class unity. For instance, when describing the fragile days of the early republic, Pasler argues that political songs allowed people in France to contemplate the relative merits of republicanism versus monarchism. “To the extent that listeners were actively engaged with music and the values underlying musical practices,” Pasler writes, “music could help bridge political differences” (p. 208).

However, this points to a fundamental tension running through the book which is never completely resolved. At times, Pasler describes music as a common, neutral cultural ground on which the French

could negotiate the issues of the day. Music was less threatening and more easily discussed than policies or political philosophy outright. But much of the book is based on the assumption that music in the republic was also deeply political and thoroughly politicized by the government itself. Music may have been a less overtly political language, but it was by no means innocent of charged meanings, something central to her larger claim.

The underlying concept which Pasler analyzes is the idea of “public utility,” a notion which she unpacks throughout her discussion. Although it had deeper roots, utility in the modern period came to mean that which was useful for the nation’s interests; as she describes it, “utility became a way of navigating the tensions between individual and collective interests in France” (p. 57). Pasler shows how this idea drew on notions popularized during the French Revolution, and her masterful discussion of the links between the late eighteenth century and the late nineteenth century, which takes up a large portion of the first part of the book, lays important groundwork for the subsequent period. Pasler links the Revolutionary era festivals and celebrations with later republican efforts to use music as a participatory experience to constitute identity. Thus music was “useful” for creating a common sense of French identity while also allowing for individual artistic expression. In drawing on this central concept, Pasler’s argument emphasizes the long continuities between regimes and the centralization of state power, in this case the cultural power of musical production.

Three primary narratives bind the exhaustive detail of the book’s 700 pages of text together. The first is a story of the development of national culture through music, which explores the imagination of community through musical experience. Indeed, Pasler makes a compelling case that music played a crucial role in helping to pull the French together at a time of great political and cultural division. Pasler wisely nuances the argument, however, by demonstrating how contested notions of national identity also played out in the musical realm. Conservatives and others did not accept the republic’s musical *mission civilisatrice* and resisted by offering their own musical forms. Yet despite the acknowledgement of the complexities of these other points of view, the thrust of Pasler’s argument pushes toward the unifying nature of republican musical culture, sometimes to the point of downplaying the potential power of those countervailing currents.

The second theme of the book is the creation of a democratic culture. Here, the idea of public utility was central. Music, she argues, was useful for creating democracy, emphasizing here the “public” nature of this sense of utility, although at times she perhaps might have more fully developed the idea of who constituted the “public” since surely that was a constantly shifting and wildly diverse category. The French belief in the utility of the arts in a democratic society shows precisely why France has consistently invested public funds into the arts, while public funding for arts in the US, which prizes private initiative, is much more limited; the notion of “public utility” functions differently on opposite sides of the Atlantic. Of course the democratic nature of public utility was problematic, as Pasler points out. Republicans hoped to elevate the tastes of the masses by providing them with an education through music. Listening and singing supposedly taught the French the kind of critical judgment necessary in a more open society. But cultural education also reinforced an elite sense of “distinction” from the masses. Here Pasler’s analysis, which begins to point to some of the crucial fault lines within the philosophy of republicanism itself, could benefit from further exploration.

The third overarching narrative Pasler presents is an alternative interpretation of musical (and, more generally, artistic) modernism which places its development into a larger perspective. Musical modernists reacted against the politically-charged music which the republic championed, thus creating an alternative vision of musical style. Modernists valued the inner artistic vision and a subjective understanding of art over the heavy-handed truth claims embedded in the politicized republican music. In other words, according to Pasler, modernism was an explicit response to political questions rather than the next evolution in an internal musical dialogue.

The attention to the relationship between musical form and historical events marks Pasler's book as an ideal model of the "new musicology," the scholarship among musicologists which has represented their "cultural turn" in the past twenty years.[1] New musicologists have moved away from internal analysis of music styles toward integrating music as part of the larger cultural discourse of a given time period. Pasler's work here and elsewhere exemplifies this kind of scholarship, and it encourages interdisciplinary dialogue and readership. Although she does engage in formal musical analysis and offers readers musical examples in her text, she is much more interested in the ways in which music functioned socially and culturally. This approach takes her away from an exclusive focus on canonical works to investigate more popular forms, including military band music, choral singing, and the *café concert*. Pasler is brilliant at reading music as evidence not simply of music itself but as part of the broader intellectual, social, and cultural framework of *fin de siècle* France.

Despite her expert use of music to engage with history, historiographically the book is clearly more engaged with the musicological literature on music in late nineteenth-century France—works by Katharine Ellis and Jane Fulcher, for instance—rather than the scholarship on the cultural construction of national identity by historians on Third Republic France—even classics such as Eugen Weber or Maurice Aghulon.[2] This is not necessarily a problem because the book is so rich in its detail that French historians will find it of tremendous use. Pasler has clearly enriched the historiography of the study of French culture by tying together so many disparate threads and bringing to historians' attention aspects of French culture which they normally overlook.

Although the subtitle promises an examination of the Third Republic, the book actually only examines the period up to World War I. This distinction is important because it begs the question of what happens to the connection between music and republicanism once France passed through the Great War and entered the culture wars of the post-war era. Did music continue to have the same integrating function in the 1920s and 1930s? The successful story of jazz music, for instance, suggests that the picture in the *entre-deux-guerres* is far more complicated than in the *belle époque* and that music could create just as much division as unity.[3]

There is also the ever-present question of reception, one which Pasler examines where she can. But understanding how audiences reacted to a musical performance is difficult. It remains unclear how listeners (especially popular audiences) actually heard the music being performed and whether they had the reaction that music-makers and political elites desired. For instance in her section on the Concerts Padeloup—an important series of popular concerts that brought together a diverse range of Parisians from many walks of life—Pasler claims that the audience "came not only to escape their mundane concerns and enjoy something beautiful, but also to learn, to confront the unknown, and to express their opinions." Such a sweeping statement about people's motivations is problematic enough, but when discussing those opinions, including the assertion that "The audience was more receptive to new French music," she provides a footnote which quotes several articles appearing in highly-specialized musical journals. The interpretation of this very diverse audience's reception is thus filtered through a very narrow perspective of the musical elite (pp. 159-161). In this story, the state remains the primary historical actor, along with composers, musicians, and concert organizers either in the state's employ or sharing their same political goals. Ultimately, we more often understand how elites wanted people to receive the sounds they were hearing. Whether the French actually heard them in that way and responded accordingly is harder to demonstrate.

For instance, did group singing always constitute learning about, or more importantly, believing in shared republican values? Pasler discusses the choral singing groups formed by department stores like the Bon Marché as a way of "mediating class and cultural differences among professionals and amateurs and among rich and poor on stage and in the audience. Through musical performance," she continues, "republican values could permeate not just commerce, but also the private domain, as suggested by the concert's salon décor" (p. 452). However, company-sponsored choral groups were also designed to

inspire loyalty to the store, reinforce its capitalist agenda, and increase efficiency. In other words, this was a means of social control on the part of the Boucicault family who owned the Bon Marché, not an activity designed to unify people to the national cause. Both outcomes could certainly have been possible and mutually reinforcing, but Pasler tends to choose the more positive interpretation, not just here but in most cases where a similar ambivalence could exist. Pasler does acknowledge that musical practices had many agendas behind them; however, the overall thrust of the argument is so directed toward the notion of national unity that sometimes the nuance slips away.[4]

One of Pasler's strengths is her consideration of popular music alongside art music, although her discussions sometimes beg certain questions. Songs sung in *cafés* and cabarets were often thoroughly critical of the government and of the republican message. This was especially true in Montmartre, which retained its own unique identity having been integrated into Paris only in 1860. By the 1880s, Montmartre's denizens were threatening to secede from Paris and, in many ways, from the rest of France and used their songs to promote their cause. Pasler discusses the rediscovery of folk songs in the Third Republic as a way of recapturing French traditions that pointed to a deeply-held shared culture. But did the persistence of some of those folk songs point to an understanding of France that had nothing to do with republican ideas of modern, national unity but which spoke to a pre-republican sensibility in many parts of France. Did the growing resurgence of Catholicism in late nineteenth-century France reinforce an alternative musical culture, especially through liturgy, which would have performed the same kind of "educational" goals as republican music, but to very different ends?

Pasler's book is so thoughtful, engaging, thought-provoking, and such an extremely important contribution to the field of French history that it deserves broad discussion since it is difficult to capture in a review. Yet I was left with one final question: What was unique to music in the dialogue about republicanism? Was there something which music alone contributed to the shaping of republican culture that nothing else could bring? Could there, in other words, have been a Third Republic without republican music?

## NOTES

[1] See Jeffrey H. Jackson and Stanley Pelkey, eds., *Music and History: Bridging the Disciplines* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2005) for a survey of "new musicology" and its connections to the study of history.

[2] Katharine Ellis, *Interpreting the Musical Past: Early Music in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jane Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Maurice Agulhon, *The Republic in the Village: The People of the Var from the French Revolution to the Second Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[3] Several historians have discussed popular musical culture, especially jazz, in the interwar period. See Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Ludovic Tournès, *New Orleans sur Seine* (Paris: Fayard, 1999); Charles Rearick, *The French in Love and War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African-Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1998); Colin Nettelbeck, *Dancing with de Beauvoir: Jazz and the French* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004); Denis-Constant Martin and Olivier Roueff, *La France du jazz: musique modernité et identité dans la première moitié du XXe*

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*siècle* (Paris: Parenthèses, 2000); Matthew F. Jordan, *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

[4] Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

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