
H-France Review Vol. 16 (September 2016), No. 177

Adeline Cordier, *Post-War French Popular Music: Cultural Identity and the Brel-Brassens-Ferré Myth*. Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. 188 pp. \$109.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781409426066.

Review by Kaley Mason, Lewis & Clark College.

On January 6, 1969, François-René Cristiani interviewed Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel, and Léo Ferré in a Left Bank apartment in Paris.^[1] This meeting of celebrated French singer-songwriters (*auteurs-compositeurs-interprètes*) was immortalized by Jean-Pierre Leloir's photographic account. Many readers will know these images well. At the height of their respective careers, three masters of the *chanson française* sit around a table with microphones, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, or a pipe in the case of Brassens. They appear relaxed and affable while listening to each other's musings on life, art, religion, and politics, among other themes. Leloir's photographs captured the imagination of postwar France, not least because of the ways in which these three figures collectively represented contemporary ideals of Frenchness and French masculinity. The mediatization of the radio interview not only reinforced their status as tradition bearers for the Golden Age of *chanson française*. It also stoked sentiments of cultural nationalism against a background of growing Anglo-American influence in French music scenes. Why did these singer-songwriters, as opposed to other plausible trios, become icons of exceptionality for a French song genre? How did the story of a rare meeting of *chanson* luminaries nourish a collective sense of French belonging? Adeline Cordier addresses these questions in an incisive analysis of how song repertoire, celebrity mediation, and sociocultural forces converged to mythologize a trinity of *chanson*.

Since the publication of Louis-Jean Calvet's path-breaking *Chanson et société* in 1981,^[2] literature on the *chanson française* has grown into a substantial body of multidisciplinary work in French and English. In addition to encyclopedic tomes by notable music critics like Serge Dillaz,^[3] scholars of contemporary French culture have expanded the scope of research on French popular song. For example, Jean-Claude Klein explored a century of *chanson* expression through visual culture;^[4] David Looseley situated the genre in relation to music scenes and postwar politics;^[5] Chris Tinker examined the relationship between poetry, performance, and society in the careers of Brassens and Brel;^[6] and more recently, Barbara Lebrun edited a volume on the embodied and gendered dimensions of francophone song through performance.^[7] One publisher in particular, though, has led the way in sustaining scholarly interest in *chanson*. Beginning with Peter Hawkins' *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* in 2000,^[8] Ashgate has published several books on French popular music,^[9] including Adeline Cordier's recent contribution in 2014. Her book, *Post-War French Popular Music: Cultural Identity and the Brel-Brassens-Ferré Myth*, thus joins a lively field of research on one of Europe's most distinctive and contentious popular song genres.

As the title suggests, *Post-War French Popular Music* is not about three singer-songwriters. While Cordier does sketch portraits of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré with abundant reference to secondary literature, she rarely discusses individual artists at length, focusing instead on the differences between them and the wider cultural context. This emphasis on contrast and context generates the friction she

needs to craft a convincing explanation for why these contemporaries were mythologized together. Rather than pursue a comparative structure with a predictable sequence of spotlights on each artist, she takes the trio as her primary object of analysis. This is why the radio interview with Cristiani provides such a compelling springboard for a book-length study. The event sets up a lens for introducing the artists as poles in a triangle within which Frenchness could be defined through spaces of paradoxes and contradictions. In this way, she establishes a framework for examining how the trio could embody more French cultural meanings than any single artist. Hence an important aim is to tease out the discrepancies underpinning meanings of Frenchness associated with the trio.

The book is organized into seven chapters and a conclusion. It also includes a single image in the front matter: a monochrome photograph of Brel, Ferré, and Brassens by Leloir. Chapters one through three provide contextual framing, chapter four outlines the argument and theoretical framework, and the remaining three chapters examine themes of Frenchness in the trinity's songs, biographies, and media discourses. In the introductory chapter one, Cordier opens with a discussion of the 1969 interview and its continuing relevance. Leloir's photograph and her description of the event serve as a catalyst for asking how we might explain the cultural significance of such an unlikely trio. Instead of looking solely at the artists' lives and repertoires for insights, she widens the lens to consider the construction and circulation of media representations. After briefly introducing each artist, she then devotes most of the chapter to reviewing scholarly literature before repeating the question, "why these three?"

In response to this line of inquiry, Cordier begins with the media in chapter two. She draws on newspaper articles, audiovisual archives, and song texts to show how journalists and critics constructed complementary profiles of each singer-songwriter. This is the only chapter where she discusses the artists in separate sections. At first the absence of parallel subheadings seems curious. For example, Cordier foregrounds Ferré as anarchist and romantic poet, yet when discussing Brassens she highlights categories like "the man," "his songs," and "the songwriter." She then unfolds a section on Brel chronologically, thereby presenting yet another way of organizing the profiles. While some readers may find this approach incongruent at first, the inconsistency of the subheadings may reflect Cordier's interest in analyzing the trio synthetically, as opposed to emphasizing comparative vignettes. More importantly, though, we learn how the media cultivated character traits associated with each singer-songwriter, from the celebrity anarchism and high-brow poetic aspirations of Ferré, to the anti-authoritarianism and Gallic wit, nonchalance, and sincerity of Brassens, to the theatricality and adventurism of Brel.

Following the media portraits of chapter two, Cordier zooms out to consider wider transformations in the French music industry. She devotes much of chapter three to describing how *chanson* singer-poets responded to the youth culture of the 1960s and the media, including magazines, television, and radio programs. She describes how the popularity of Anglo-American popular music presented significant challenges for aspiring *chanson* singer-songwriters, noting that artists like Brassens, Brel, and Ferré developed their careers alongside rock-inspired *yéyé* performers like Johnny Hallyday and Sylvie Vartan. But she also discusses how these two genres diverged in significant ways, highlighting the emphasis in *chanson* on lyrics instead of dance rhythms, marginality over conformity, and national identity over international music trends. Some readers, however, may expect more specifics related to the claim that *chanson*, unlike *yéyé*, "had no Anglo-American influence" (p. 57). Besides the well-documented impact of jazz on the *chanson française* in the early decades of the twentieth century, as Cordier acknowledges later in chapter seven, there were other North American models shaping the genre, like the Québécois singer-songwriter, Félix Leclerc, whose blend of folk, jazz, bluegrass, and old-time country music inspired Brassens's trademark instrumentation of an acoustic guitar with minimal accompaniment.[10] In other passages, though, she avoids overstating the opposition between *chanson* and *yéyé* artists with nuanced description of their overlapping venues and values, including the celebrity star-system and shared "preoccupations at the heart of the social revolution of the 1960s" (p. 58). The reader leaves this chapter with an overview of the political economy of music in France during the 1960s, as well as a sense of how

singer-songwriters from the cabaret tradition sought to distinguish themselves as artists while rejecting and embracing the industry forces behind the commercial success of *yéyé*.

Having established a historical, biographical, and cultural frame of reference, chapter four develops the book's main argument. Cordier opens with a detailed account of Cristiani's radio interview, the only known event where the trio met. She suggests that without this convergence and its documentation by Leloir, the trio could not have become a myth. Their mediated co-presence was essential for constructing meanings of Frenchness that "go beyond their own existence" (p. 74), or in Roland Barthes' terms, to function as a second-order semiological system. She draws fruitfully on Barthes's *Mythologies*, mobilizing his theoretical framework to explain why the association of these three artists with songwriting and performance was eventually overshadowed by their collective significance as a sign of Frenchness. Cordier reminds us that in order to grasp the semantic intentions of the myth, we need to know how the media transformed the lives and songs of these singers into discourses that could be mobilized to construct a trio of singers as myth. Following Barthes's theory that a myth "presumes the cultural disposition and sensitivity of the individual or group that it addresses" (p. 77), she turns to introduce examples of specific qualities or debates recognized as typically French, including the tension between revolt and the status quo reflected in national traditions, the simultaneous fascination and mistrust of American culture, and the culturally specific ways in which gender and class tensions played out in France. The next three chapters elaborate on how such themes crystalized contradictions and paradoxes in the Brassens-Brel-Ferré myth.

Chapter five explores the tension between non-conformism and conservatism. By foregrounding the trio's personification of a postwar French ideal of rebellious individualism that nonetheless stopped short of threatening the social order, Cordier shows how each singer-songwriter in his own way embraced modern and traditional values. All three sought to present themselves as non-conformists even as they expressed an intense nostalgia for idyllic pasts, as reflected in Brassens's archaic language, rural characters, and bucolic settings; Ferré's Bohemian Paris; and Brel's bourgeois childhood. Early in the chapter it seemed like Cordier might limit her analysis to lyrics and visual imagery, thereby missing an opportunity to consider how performance may have shaped the way these artists reinforced contradictory meanings of Frenchness. However, in her discussion of the ethereal effects of Ferré's style of chanting, she alludes to how analysis of performance and musicality might further strengthen her overall argument. Indeed, in chapter seven and the conclusion, she comments on the significance of orality in the increasingly media-driven societies of the 1960s.

Chapter six addresses gender and tacit misogyny in the Brel-Brassens-Ferré myth. Given that masculinity is arguably the elephant in the room for much of the book, some readers may wonder why this chapter is the shortest. Surely the individual masculinities in question converged and diverged in ways that profoundly shaped patriarchal dimensions of Frenchness associated with the myth. One gets the sense that Cordier limited her discussion of gender and sexuality in order to give it more extensive treatment in subsequent publications. After all, delving deeper into gender issues could only complement, rather than undermine the compelling evidence she has already presented by the time we get to chapter six. Still, some readers may find her account of the influence of gender on the construction of the myth underdeveloped, although they would likely appreciate the overview of the historical forces that shaped *chanson's* patriarchal golden age. In any case, the chapter does chart a way forward for subsequent research on women of *chanson* and their exclusion from processes of canon formation.

Lastly, chapter seven examines why the *chanson* was successful at mediating between middlebrow and highbrow cultural expectations. Unlike most music genres, *chanson* managed to merge the popular with the intellectual. As "common poets," *chanson* singer-songwriters were instrumental in the movement to popularize poetry in postwar France. For example, Ferré devoted much of his repertoire to setting the work of surrealist poets like Louis Aragon, and likewise, Brassens was fond of setting nineteenth-

century poetry to music. Although Brel did not draw on the work of established poets, he was also considered a poetic singer for the way he challenged the “hierarchy existing between oral and written genres” (p.134). Building on the idea that oral poetry is fundamentally enmeshed in the social due to the communicative potential of performance through embodied non-textual elements, including charisma and quality of voice, Cordier shows how *chanson* singer-poets were uniquely positioned to ennoble and popularize song.[11] Moreover, as the surveys in Bourdieu’s *Distinction* show, it was precisely because of the ambiguous combination of high and popular aesthetics in *chanson* that singer-poets were able to widen the appeal of their art. The rest of the chapter develops this idea with more discussion of the trio’s embodied aspects of performance, their mediated audiences, and their biographies.

In sum, *Post-War French Popular Music* contributes a focused, yet multifaceted account of how media discourses, postwar anxieties and aspirations, and a distinctive song genre converged to wrap a trinity of singer-poets in enduring ideals of Frenchness. Whereas several studies have examined Brassens, Brel, and Ferré separately, Cordier is the first to problematize the trio as a topic for critical inquiry. Her relational approach sidesteps the tendency in some work on *chanson* to over-emphasize individual genius at the expense of historical forces, mediascapes, and aesthetic communities that nourish individual exceptionality. In this way her book offers a valuable framework for comparing the *chanson française* with other national song traditions wherein mediated constellations of master exponents resonate multiple contradictions and paradoxes.[12] Her book will not only be of interest to scholars of popular music in France, but to anyone interested in canonicity, modern European cultural history, popular culture, oral poetry, aesthetics, and media studies.

NOTES

[1] François-René Cristiani, *Brel, Brassens, Ferré: Trois Hommes dans un salon* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

[2] Louis-Jean Calvet, *La chanson et société* (Paris: Payot, 1981).

[3] Serge Dillaz, *Vivre et chanter en France, tome 1* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

[4] Jean-Claude Klein, *La chanson à l’affiche: Histoire de la chanson française du café-concert à nos jours* (Paris: Du May, 1991).

[5] David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France: Authenticity, Politics, Debate* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

[6] Chris Tinker, *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Personal and Social Narratives in Post-War Chanson* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).

[7] Barbara Lebrun ed., *Chanson et performance: Mise en scène du corps dans la chanson française et francophone* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2012).

[8] Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2000).

[9] See Hugh Dauncey and Steve Cannon, eds., *Popular Music in France from Chanson to Techno: Culture, Identity, and Society* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003); Barbara Lebrun, *Protest Music in France: Production, Identity, and Audiences* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009); Hugh Dauncey and Philippe Le Guern, eds., *Stereo: Comparative Perspectives on the Sociological Study of Popular Music in France and Britain* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010); and Rachel Haworth, *From the Chanson Française to the Canzone d’Autore in the 1960s and 1970s: Authenticity, Authority, Influence* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2015).

[10] Louis-Jean Calvet, *Georges Brassens* (Paris: Payot, 2001).

[11] Paul Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[12] See, for example, Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets: Literature and Popular Music in France and Greece* (London: LEGENDA, 2007) and Haworth, *From the Chanson Française to the Canzone d'Autore in the 1960s and 1970s*.

Kaley Mason
Lewis & Clark College
kmason@lclark.edu

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/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.

ISSN 1553-9172