

# The Confusion of Diverse Voices: Musical and Social Polyphony in Seventeenth-Century French Opera

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*This essay explores how two early modern French writers considered choral music in opera as a figure for society. Pierre Corneille, in his musical tragedy “Andromède,” and scientist and critic Claude Perrault, in several texts about music and acoustics, made subtle apologies for the polyphonic choral song condemned by many contemporaries as unintelligible. Beyond defending the aesthetic value of choral music, Corneille and Perrault associated multi-part song with collective vocalizations offstage, in the real world. Their instructions on how to appreciate choral interludes in opera also served, therefore, to train listeners to attend to the polyphony of society.*

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## INTRODUCTION

IN A SHORT manuscript text meant to serve as a preface to his treatise “De la musique des Anciens” (On the music of the ancients), architect, physician, natural historian, and music enthusiast Claude Perrault (1613–88) recounts an eventful visit to the opera. He describes going to the theater at the Jeu de Paume de la Bouteille, home of the Académie d’Opéra, for a repeat viewing of Robert Cambert and Gabriel Gilbert’s pastoral *Les peines et les plaisirs de l’amour* (The pains and pleasures of love, 1672). Seated comfortably in the auditorium, Perrault waits for the performance to begin, delayed for the tardy arrival of a “grand prince.” To pass the time, Perrault eavesdrops on a conversation between two fellow opera connoisseurs. Paleologue (student of the ancients) and Philalethe (truth lover), as he calls them, debate the merits of French versus Italian and ancient versus modern music and drama. Their dispute provides an alternative entertainment of sorts. Perrault’s ear is riveted: “The subject of their conversation, which was a thing about which they disagreed, pleased me at first,

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and so captured my attention, that my ear let not a single of their words escape, and my memory preserved them faithfully enough to remember everything they had said, once I had returned home.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, Perrault is not the only one hanging on to the learned debate. All the spectators within earshot seem to be listening in and taking sides. They act as “chorus of murmurers,” punctuating the conversation with applause or peals of laughter.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the opera begins: “violin music began the play’s overture. This pleasant noise . . . occupied the minds of the two debaters, and imposed upon them a silence that they did not breach, except to complain about the crudeness of the majority of spectators who, speaking louder than before, made a terrible noise that prevented them from hearing the violins.”<sup>3</sup>

This ironically circular account of frustrated or interrupted listening may resonate with concert- and theatergoers who find themselves annoyed by talkative seatmates, buzzing cell phones, or crackling candy wrappers. In today’s theater culture, the ambient noise of the audience is clearly distinguished from the desirable sound produced by the performers.<sup>4</sup> The majority of theater historians contend that this expectation of silence in the amphitheater, and the attendant experience of any stray sounds as unwanted noise, only emerged in France in the mid- to late eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Yet Paleologue and Philaëthe seem to anticipate this modern culture of theatergoing. They certainly treat the spectators’ chatter as annoying distraction—which they attempt to silence in turn with the noise of their own complaints. Perrault’s language, however, blurs the distinction between the “pleasant noise” of the musicians and the “terrible noise” of the unruly spectators, just as his account of eavesdropping finds an acceptable substitute for the delayed chorus of opera singers in the “chorus of murmurers” responding to the learned men’s debate. In contrast to both the boisterous crowd and the shushing connoisseurs, Perrault represents himself as an avid and ecumenical listener, able to derive auditory pleasure from both on- and offstage sound, from both music and hubbub.

<sup>1</sup> “Le sujet de leur entretien qui estoit d’une chose dont ils estoient en contestation, me plut d’abord, et me donna tant d’attention, que mon oreille ne laissa échaper aucune de leurs paroles, et ma memoire les conserva assez fidelement pour me représenter tout ce qu’ils avoient dit, lors qu’estant de retour”: Perrault, 2003, 576. See also Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Français 25350. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> “Un chœur de murmurans”: Perrault, 2003, 586.

<sup>3</sup> “La musique des violons commença l’ouverture du theatre. Ce bruit agreable . . . occupa l’esprit des deux disputans, et leur imposa un silence qu’ils ne rompirent que pour se plaindre de la brutalité de la plupart des spectateurs qui faisoient en parlant plus hault qu’auparavant, un bruit effroyable qui empeschoit d’entendre les violons”: Perrault, 2003, 586.

<sup>4</sup> Home-Cook, 33.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Johnson, 55; Lough, 204–05; Harris, 14.

Juxtaposing an erudite debate on operatic aesthetics with descriptions of social noise, Perrault's anecdote places itself in a long intellectual tradition of considering music and society in relation to one another. Throughout the early modern era, theorists approvingly cited ancient authors to bolster affirmations that music was above all a discipline that helped to instill order in society. This idea justified the founding of the Académie de poésie et de musique in 1570, as described in its *Lettres patentes*: "And as the opinion of several great personages, legislators as well as ancient philosophers, is not to be disdained, let it be known that it is of the utmost importance for the morals of a city's citizens that the music commonly used in the land be restrained under certain laws, all the more so because the minds of most men are shaped and behave according to how that music is; such that where music is disordered, there morals are also depraved, and where it is well ordered, there are the men well-formed and instructed in morality."<sup>6</sup> The persistence of the parallel between musical culture and social order is demonstrated in its rehearsal in Jacques Bonnet and Pierre Bourdelot-Bonnet's early eighteenth century *Histoire de la musique et de ses effets* (The history of music and its effects, 1715), which credits Plato with discovering that music is not only "for the pleasure of the senses; but rather to serve as a rule for the government of men, and to correct the unruliness of their passions."<sup>7</sup> Music, in these writers' view, acts as a social *pharmakon*, sympathetically inflaming or calming the emotions of its listeners, imposing its dissonance or harmoniousness on human communities. The language of order and rule in such passages conveys the idea that the right kind of music can establish concord, synchronizing diverse individuals into a coherent society.

Analogies equating orderliness to music and social chaos to noise continue to the modern era, exchanging their Neoplatonic underpinnings for materialist justifications. Philosopher Jacques Attali, for example, analyzes the "political economy of music" through which power "appropriate[s] and control[s]" the vital noise of humanity.<sup>8</sup> Another strain of criticism, best exemplified by Theodor Adorno, holds that different kinds of music encourage different modes and habits of listening, which in turn influence how listeners attune

<sup>6</sup> "Et que l'opinion des plusieurs grands Personnages, tant Legislateurs que Philosophes anciens ne soit à mépriser, à sçavoir qu'il importe grandement pour les mœurs des Citoyens d'une Ville que la Musique courante & usitée au Pays soit retenue sous certaines loix, dautant que la plupart des esprits des hommes se conforment & comportent, selon qu'elle est; de façon que où la Musique est desordonnée, là volontiers les mœurs sont depravez, & où elle est bien ordonnée, la sont les hommes bien moriginez [*sic*]" transcribed as appendix 1 in Yates, 319.

<sup>7</sup> "Pour le plaisir des sens; mais bien plutôt pour servir de règle au gouvernement des hommes, et pour corriger les déreglements de leurs passions": Bonnet and Bourdelot-Bonnet, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Attali, 4–6.

themselves to each other and the world.<sup>9</sup> Perrault, in many ways, stands as an intellectual precursor to these twentieth-century developments in musical sociology, sharing their materialist approaches to analyzing audition in a social context. In contrast to his contemporaries, he eschews the commonplace opposition that assigned positive value to music while denigrating noise. In fact, he titles his essay on acoustic science “Du bruit” (On noise, 1680), arguing that this term best captures the full range of what the ear can perceive. Whereas *son* (sound), for Perrault, designates singular, resonant tones, *bruit* includes these along with all that is piercing, muted, multiple, or “confused.”<sup>10</sup> More scientist than critic, Perrault seeks to characterize and examine auditory sensations rather than pass judgments upon them. In the context of the opera hall, this evenhanded approach to different kinds of sound begins to reveal its social and ethical implications. Perrault points toward a different way of listening to social noise, as if it were its own kind of music. He suggests how music connoisseurship might provide a model for inhabiting the social world in all its complexity, and even for discerning something—maybe pleasure, maybe sense—from the chaos of voices in society.

While Perrault makes a fairly explicit analogy between the sounds of opera and the sounds of the crowd, many seventeenth-century discourses about opera invite readers to draw similar connections. Opera was a uniquely noisy genre. Its audiences were frequently represented as more lively than those for spoken theater. The genre itself provoked a number of raucous critical quarrels. Even before the savage debates between supporters of Lully and of Rameau, or between fans of French and Italian song, critics hotly debated the aesthetics of musical drama. Several charged that opera was nothing but empty noise, pleasurable but evacuated of sense. In his famous critique, for example, Saint-Evremond (1613–1703) declared, “it is in vain that the ear is flattered and the eyes charmed, if the mind does not find itself satisfied.”<sup>11</sup> Another objection, most often heard before the ascension of royal composer Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–87), was that music interfered with listeners’ basic comprehension of lyrics and therefore plot. Choral music posed a particular challenge to the ears as the confluence of multiple voices made it impossible, according to these critics, to discern the words’ meaning. The defining feature of opera—its fusion of a dramatic poem with music—undermined its intelligibility. In its very form, in other words, opera troubled neat distinctions between disciplined music and unruly, irrational, meaningless noise.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Adorno, 288–317.

<sup>10</sup> Perrault, 1680, 2:1.

<sup>11</sup> “C’est vainement que l’oreille est flatée, & que les yeux sont charmez, si l’esprit ne se trouve pas satisfait”: Saint-Evremond, 9:82.

This ambivalence at the heart of opera's form makes it a productive site for thinking through the tension between order and multiplicity, between discipline and freedom in society. As Mitchell Cohen writes, "opera is by definition an art of diversity," and this diversity invites the "weaving" of political concerns through various aspects of operatic performance: "ideological claims, applause, subversive suggestions, embedded worldviews and categories, elucidating reflections, revealing or combative probes."<sup>12</sup> Opera's political entanglements in ancien régime France were both obvious and complex, and have been amply studied by critics. Sponsored by the state, operas tended to glorify the monarch, showing off the kingdom's resources of wealth and talent and explicitly lauding the king in encomiastic prologues.<sup>13</sup> Yet the disorderliness of the genre—its representation of outsized passions, its irrational heroes, its massing of bodies on stage for choral songs and dances, as well as the renowned unruliness of the opera audience—undermined the image of a rational and disciplined state, in some cases even suggesting covert critiques of the monarchy.<sup>14</sup> In these ways, the divergent aspects of opera represent in microcosm the larger problem of how to rule over chaos, how much to discipline complexity.

These social and political resonances of discourses on opera are especially audible in discussions of the role of choral music for many voices. Several scholars have recently investigated the choruses of Lullian and post-Lullian French musical tragedy as stand-ins for the public. Largely passive, and charged with singing the praises of gods, heroes, and kings, these choruses often represent an idealized image of monarchical subjects. Viewing the chorus as "object" rather than "agent," Catherine Kintzler understands its function as mainly aesthetic in nature.<sup>15</sup> Olivia Bloechl situates this ornamentality of the chorus within the "political theology" of absolute monarchy, arguing that the singers' gratuitous glorification of the monarch models the role of "an emerging civil society."<sup>16</sup> Focusing on choral dancing as an important supplement to song, Rebecca Harris-Warrick adds that the chorus provides "a visual sign" of sovereign characters' power; yet she also notes that the large crowds of performers onstage remind the audience that singular authorities are embedded in and depend on "surrounding social networks."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps because of its ideological ambiguity, the chorus remained a contested feature of musical drama, its most

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Isherwood, 150–202; Weber, 1984, 64–65.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, 17–40; Norman; Cowart, 120–60.

<sup>15</sup> She notes the chorus provides "entertainment" for spectators and pleasantly "suspends" the forward progress of the drama. Kintzler, 80–82.

<sup>16</sup> Bloechl, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Harris-Warrick, 2016, 10. See also Harris-Warrick, 2007.

significant songs relegated to the end of acts and often cut or simplified in reprised productions.<sup>18</sup> Representing both social multiplicity and the excesses of the operatic form, the chorus galvanized early modern French critics' anxieties about the politics of musical drama.

In what follows, I seek to extend these investigations by considering the examples of two authors whose writing about pre-Lullian operatic choral music focuses less on what the chorus represents than on how choral music should be heard. Responding to the taste for richly textured, often asynchronous multi-part song preferred in this period (as opposed to the homophony that prevailed in Lully's time), these writers both highlight the challenge choral music poses to logocentric notions of order while also suggesting how practices of audition can nonetheless derive meaning or social value from this complexity. Pierre Corneille (1606–84), reluctant author of a very early prototype of French opera, the musical tragedy *Andromède*, stages the tension between the dramatic and aesthetic value of choral song, on the one hand, and a neoclassical preference for order and rationality, on the other. Although he condemns “the confusion a diversity of voices brings to it,” Corneille nonetheless structures his play around the interventions of a polyphonic chorus, which represents the people or public of the kingdom depicted on stage. The chorus's ambivalent role in *Andromède* calls into question the nature of the relationship between the collective and the more powerful characters who both direct it and listen to it.

Writing decades after Corneille, during the early heyday of French *tragédie lyrique*, Perrault constructs a nuanced defense of the complex, polyphonic style of composition going quickly out of style under the influence of Lully. Perrault's defense of polyphony in music—particularly in vocal music, and most especially opera—is developed in dialogue with his understanding of the physiology of hearing. The human ear's capacity to hear multiple vocal lines at once can only realize itself, Perrault suggests, in the presence of asynchronous, multi-part song. As such, listening to polyphony becomes an aesthetic practice, a way of tuning the ear to discern the individual lines in the confusion of many voices. When Perrault turns this form of listening from opera to the social soundscape, it also becomes an ethical practice, pointing toward a different, more receptive way of managing the noise of society. Both authors' meditations on music “for many voices” lend themselves to broader-reaching reflection on the relationship between the singular and multiplicity, shedding particular light on the role of the listener in negotiating complexity in social and political life.

<sup>18</sup> Naudeix, 315–16.

## CORNEILLE'S CHORAL NOISE

The work that could be considered the first French-language opera was commissioned, in part, in response to clamorous public turmoil. During the minority of Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715), first minister Cardinal Jules Mazarin (1602–61) made opera a centerpiece of the culture of entertainment at court. He brought some of the most acclaimed Italian composers, set designers, and singers to France, using his connections to the powerful Barberini family to secure the services of artists who could bring luster to the French royal family and honor to himself.<sup>19</sup> The Italian-language operas staged at the Petit Bourbon theater were artistic successes that also succeeded in helping Mazarin to gain favor with the queen regent. But they simultaneously fueled xenophobic rhetoric by detractors of Mazarin's policies and perceived abuses of power.<sup>20</sup> By 1647, Mazarin and Anna of Austria (1601–66) undertook to silence critics of the Italianate culture of the court by commanding an "opéra à la française."<sup>21</sup> They commissioned Pierre Corneille to write a French-language musical play that would reuse the machines and set designs recently prepared by Giacomo Torelli (1608–78) for a representation of Francesco Buti and Luigi Rossi's opera *Orfeo* (1647). Contemporary commentators described Corneille's task as a kind of translation, a reprise of *Orfeo* in the French language. Instead, Corneille produced a very different kind of work based on a different mythological story. His *Andromède*, with music by Charles Coypel d'Assoucy (1605–77), was finally performed in 1650, in the midst of the civil revolt against the regency government, which became known as the Fronde.

Despite its fraught context, *Andromède* has been considered a distinctly apolitical spectacle. In *Corneille et la Fronde*, Georges Couton glides over the musical tragedy, calling it "one of these periodic flights to fairyland."<sup>22</sup> Yet in its form and in the mythological story it stages, *Andromède* grapples with the themes of heroism and governance that characterized the playwright's works for the tragic stage. The drama begins in the midst of a crisis in the kingdom of Ethiopia. On the day of the eponymous princess's wedding to her father's nephew Phinée, Queen Cassiope offended Neptune by boasting that her daughter was more beautiful than his sea nymphs, the Nereids.<sup>23</sup> The god punished Ethiopia with a raging storm that killed several people. An oracle advised the royal family to appease Neptune by sacrificing a young girl to his monster each month. After several months, the god remained angry, and it becomes clear

<sup>19</sup> Freitas, 44; Parrott.

<sup>20</sup> Dartois-Lapeyre.

<sup>21</sup> Sébastiani, 195.

<sup>22</sup> Couton, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Corneille, 1651, 12.

that Andromède herself must be sacrificed. As the play opens, the hero Persée arrives at the Ethiopian court and, in the very first scene, points out the royal couple's mismanagement of their quarrel with the gods. He reminds Cassiope that they have offended not only Neptune but Jupiter as well, who is displeased by the plan to marry Andromède to the mortal Phinée.<sup>24</sup> The royal family, he implies, have pursued their own interests without regard either to the god's wishes or the well-being of their subjects. Over the course of the play, Persée restores order to the kingdom through his heroism, acting in effect as a supplement or corrective to the king and queen's failed leadership. Framing his version of the myth in this way, Corneille raises subtle questions about the relationships among gods, mortal rulers, and the people, in particular about the duties and responsibilities of those in power.

The political resonances of the opera's plot are understandably muddled, however, by the formal complexity of the spectacle. For many seventeenth-century audiences, music, dance, and god-bearing theatrical machines indicated a distinct lack of seriousness. Indeed, *Andromède's* reputation as a frivolous departure from Corneille's serious dramaturgy began, in many respects, with the playwright himself. In the "Argument" that preceded the first published edition of the play, Corneille famously declared that "this play is only for the eyes."<sup>25</sup> Anticipating the disparagements of later critics, such as Saint-Evremond, here Corneille presents himself as deeply uneasy with the spectacular and musical elements of the genre in which he was commanded to work, treating it as a lesser theatrical form.

In expressing reservations about the genre, though, Corneille also points toward some ways in which opera is uniquely suited for reflecting on the serious questions of state that occupied his nonmusical tragedies. At first, he suggests a harmonization of musical tragedy with its tuneless counterpart, attempting to align opera with the critical standards upheld by contemporary academic dramatists and thus transform it into a respectable genre. He describes, for example, how he endeavored to tame many of the more excessive aspects of his Italian models, reconciling the spectacle as much as possible to Neo-Aristotelian norms for verisimilitude, explaining that he endeavored to employ machine effects such that they appeared "necessary to the drama."<sup>26</sup> He also limits the role of music in the representation. Unlike *Orfeo*, a completely sung-through opera (whose plot is also a meditation on music's power), *Andromède* relies mostly on spoken dialogue ornamented by a couple of duets, an aria, and above all choral songs performed at the climax of each act, often to accompany a machine

<sup>24</sup> Corneille, 1651, 15.

<sup>25</sup> "Cette Piece n'est que pour les yeux": Corneille, 1651, n.p.

<sup>26</sup> On Corneille's relationship to the spectacular in the "Argument," see Delmas, xxi–civ; Bolduc, 159–72; Visentin.



effect. Corneille explains: “I was careful to have nothing necessary to the [spectators’] understanding of the play be sung, because, sung lyrics being in general poorly understood by the audience on account of the confusion that the diversity of voices brings to them when pronouncing them together, they would have caused great obscurity in the body of the work, if they had to inform the audience about something important.”<sup>27</sup> Music is good for occupying the ears of the spectators while their eyes are “arrested” by visual effects.<sup>28</sup> Music is also useful for covering up the grinding and screeching of the machines that produced those effects.<sup>29</sup> But Corneille views song—especially multi-part composition—as incapable of transmitting meaning to the audience.<sup>30</sup> The diversity of opera, in particular its arrangement of multiple voices, is at odds with the aesthetic discipline favored in contemporary dramaturgy. In the “Argument,” at least, Corneille portrays himself as a masterful author ruling over the potential chaos represented by music.

In condemning song and, in particular, the “confusion that the diversity of voices brings,” Corneille is, in fact, rehearsing a rather old critique of multi-part vocal music. Humanist thinkers in sixteenth-century Florence and Venice condemned the polyphonic madrigals then considered the height of modern compositional accomplishment because their lyrics were incomprehensible. Vincenzo Galilei (ca. 1520–91) wrote a *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music* (1581) that argued in favor of reviving an ancient style of composition—monody—that favored the intelligibility of song texts. Eventually, composers developed a “continuo-accompanied monody” in which a continuous or figured bass line provided harmonic support to a solo voice.<sup>31</sup> The technique proved useful for opera, inspiring the recitativo style featured prominently in Italian musical theater, in that it afforded a high level of improvisational freedom to the singer, with bass instrument players adapting to the vocalist’s cadences. Similar debates played out in the French court under the Valois rulers.

<sup>27</sup> “Je me suis bien gardé de rien faire chanter qui fut nécessaire à l’intelligence de la pièce, parce que communément les paroles qui se chantent étant mal entendues des auditeurs, pour la confusion qu’y apporte la diversité des voix qui les prononcent ensemble, elles auraient fait une grande obscurité dans le corps de l’ouvrage, si elles avaient eu à instruire l’auditeur de quelque chose d’important”: Corneille, 1651, n.p.

<sup>28</sup> “Chaque acte . . . a . . . du moins une machine volante avec un concert de musique, que je n’ai employée qu’à satisfaire les oreilles des spectateurs, tandis que leurs yeux sont arrêtés à voir descendre ou remonter une machine” (“Each act . . . has . . . at least one flying machine with a musical concert, which I only used to satisfy the ears of the spectators, while their eyes are arrested by the sight of a descending or rising machine”): Corneille, 1651, n.p.

<sup>29</sup> Calhoun.

<sup>30</sup> Akiyama, 408–09.

<sup>31</sup> Cohen, 13–16; Palisca, 333–407.

Aiming to bring harmony to the kingdom during the Wars of Religion, the Académie de poésie et de musique proposed to create a revolutionary fusion of verbal and musical compositions that would harness the therapeutic powers of both art forms. In practice, song settings were composed to follow the rhythms of the *vers mesuré* poetic form, which was thought to imitate ancient Greek prosody. Privileging verse over setting, the songs tended to exhibit “severely homophonic chordal texture.”<sup>32</sup> In these humanist traditions, music served the text and intelligibility ruled, arguably at the expense of auditory pleasure.

Although Corneille’s revival of the humanist critique of polyphony conforms to contemporary dramaturgical values, it seems oddly anachronistic from a musical-historical perspective. In fact, Luigi Rossi’s score for *Orfeo* made abundant use of the new Italian composition style, particularly in the solo airs and recitatives that prevailed in that opera. Sung by a single voice at a conversational pace, his songs’ lyrics are easily comprehensible to listeners. If Corneille were truly concerned about the intelligibility of song in his musical play, he and his composer collaborator could have chosen to adhere to this Italian model, or even to have strictly limited music in the play exclusively to solo recitative. Corneille, in his dual role as author of the play and organizer of the entertainment, did not take this approach. Instead he eliminated almost all solo singing, leaving mostly choral pieces—works that rely on a “diversity of voices.” Moreover, the surviving fragments of d’Assoucy’s score for the original production of *Andromède* suggest that he employed intricate four-part polyphonic compositions, similar to the Renaissance madrigals condemned by humanists. A collection of d’Assoucy’s published four-part airs includes one choral song from *Andromède*, “Long live the happy lovers.”<sup>33</sup> Although the bass part has been lost, the three surviving vocal scores reveal a richly textured composition. The voices begin and end the chorus in unison. In the middle verses, however, the vocal parts sing asynchronously, such that words and syllables overlap and slide apart, echoing over the course of the line. The effect, although beautiful, certainly would make it somewhat difficult to discern lyrics, at least without the help of a libretto. D’Assoucy’s approach to the music of *Andromède*, in other words, belies Corneille’s professed resistance to an aesthetics of diversity and confusion.

Corneille’s ambivalence—this contradiction between his claims about his approach to the operatic form in *Andromède* and the actual realization of it—importantly centers on the musical and dramaturgical role of the chorus. The

<sup>32</sup> Walker, 91. See also Schenbeck, 17. Jean Vignes stresses the diversity of the surviving corpus of compositions produced by artists in the Académie’s circle. Vignes, 284–85.

<sup>33</sup> D’Assoucy, fols. 16<sup>v</sup>–17<sup>r</sup> (the individual parts for this air appear on the same folios of each of the three extant volumes of d’Assoucy).

status of the chorus was rather controversial in seventeenth-century dramatic poetics. Although many sixteenth-century poets included choruses in their tragedies, by the early seventeenth century choral discourse had disappeared from nonmusical theater.<sup>34</sup> Academicians acknowledged that it was crucial to the origins of theater, including the most esteemed tragic genre.<sup>35</sup> They praised the chorus as representing the voice of moral virtue on stage, and noted its utility in summarizing offstage events so as to maintain *bienséances* as well as unities of time and place.<sup>36</sup> Yet most agreed that the chorus had outlived its usefulness. As François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac (1604–76), noted in his *Pratique du théâtre* (1657), “presently the discourse of choruses is absolutely useless in this art of theater.”<sup>37</sup> Many of d'Aubignac's objections to the chorus appear to stem from what classicist Nicole Loraux identifies as the “constitutive conflict” at the heart of the tragic genre: the conflict between drama and lyric, embodied in the distinction between named characters who express themselves in cogent, metered dialogue and the chorus who gives voice to passionate lamentation.<sup>38</sup> In seeking to emphasize the rational aspects of tragedy, seventeenth-century interpreters of ancient drama naturally diminished the dramatic value of the emotional chorus. It could be acceptable if it supported the verisimilitude of the drama.<sup>39</sup> For example, it could represent the people the main characters would normally meet in the course of the action. Even so, large groups of performers on stage disrupted dramatic illusion.<sup>40</sup> If modern playwrights were to reintroduce choruses, d'Aubignac advises, they would have to bring them in with care so that their words and movements caused “no disorder.”<sup>41</sup> Although it might be both verisimilar and useful to have the populace represented in a drama and comment on the action, this “large body,” much like the “diverse voices” of song Corneille disparages, runs the risk of introducing chaos on the stage.<sup>42</sup>

Although he is working in a genre that took a more lenient approach to verisimilitude, Corneille heeds d'Aubignac's recommendation to make the chorus a seamless part of the fictional world represented in the drama. Throughout the performance, the singers of the chorus play the role of communities important to the plot. Most often, they embody the Ethiopian people gathered around

<sup>34</sup> Jondorf, 65–70; Biet, 190–91.

<sup>35</sup> Vauquelin de la Fresnaye, 87; d'Aubignac, 250.

<sup>36</sup> Vauquelin de la Fresnaye, 89; La Taille, 18; d'Aubignac, 268; Scaliger, 146–47.

<sup>37</sup> “Presentement le discours des chœurs est absolument inutile dans cette pratique du Theatre”: d'Aubignac, 250.

<sup>38</sup> Loraux, 81–82.

<sup>39</sup> D'Aubignac, 250–52.

<sup>40</sup> D'Aubignac, 264.

<sup>41</sup> D'Aubignac, 274.

<sup>42</sup> D'Aubignac, 274; Corneille, 1651, n.p.

Queen Cassiope's palace. In this fictional role, the chorus performs obedience to monarchical authority in their movements and song. Corneille's stage directions do not indicate entrances and exits for the chorus, suggesting they remained in place for the duration of each act, silent unless required to sing. Their songs also convey submission, usually responding to some cue given by a named character.

This discipline effectively solves the problem of the unintelligibility of the chorus's "diversity of voices," as their songs simply mirror verses first clearly declaimed by individual characters. In act 1, for example, Cassiope directs the singers who represent the people of Ethiopia. As Venus departs the stage, the queen encourages the chorus to sing: "Let us accompany her into the heavens with our thanks; worshipping her power with a common voice."<sup>43</sup> The chorus's lyrics underline the idea of perfect unison and rhetorically extend praise for the goddess to the natural environment, which, the song predicts, will "echo" with sighs of love in testament to her power.<sup>44</sup> A similar scene marks the celebration of Persée's victory in act 3, when Cassiope proclaims, "People, with full voice, public joy / Expresses itself in triumph after such a miracle."<sup>45</sup> Another example occurs with the announcement of Phinée and Andromède's marriage in act 4, when the chorus repeats "Long live the happy lovers."<sup>46</sup> Yet another concludes the play, when the chorus rehearses Jupiter's words in a musical demonstration of "public acclamation."<sup>47</sup> The repetitive structure of the choral interludes in *Andromède*—that the chorus repeats words sung or pronounced by a singular character—relieves them of the need to be understandable. Their lyrics are superfluous and unoriginal, a charming extension of someone else's words. In effect, Corneille stages a passive chorus, a spectacle of communal acquiescence to authority.

Within this restricted role, however, the chorus nonetheless serves an important purpose in the play. Most obviously, it represents ordinary subjects' glorification of gods and sovereigns, standing in for the French monarchical state. In her analysis of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century operatic choruses, Bloechl analyzes the political significance of such ostensibly excessive exaltation of all-powerful figures.<sup>48</sup> Corneille's earlier libretto points to a more practical—

<sup>43</sup> "Suivons-la dans le ciel par nos remerciements; Et d'une voix commune adorant sa puissance": Corneille, 1651, 24.

<sup>44</sup> Corneille, 1651, 25.

<sup>45</sup> "Peuple, qu'à pleine voix l'allégresse publique / Après un tel miracle en triomphe s'explique": Corneille, 1651, 70.

<sup>46</sup> Corneille, 1651, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Corneille, 1651, 123. It might be worth noting that Rossi's *Orfeo* also represented the chorus as a sign of the "common will" ("al commune volere"). See Cohen, 155–56.

<sup>48</sup> Bloechl, 22.

if no less ideological—function of the chorus. Even if it lacks independent speech, and can only paraphrase or repeat verbatim sentiments first uttered by named characters, it crucially also allows those sentiments to reverberate across the fictional environment depicted in the play. This amplificatory role of the chorus is highlighted in the call-and-response lyrics exchanged with named characters. In the prologue, when the Sun invites Melpomène to join him in the heavens, he proposes that they make his daily transit together in honor of the monarch: “In uniting our voices together, / May we make resound on land and sea / That he is the youngest and greatest of Kings.”<sup>49</sup> Immediately thereafter, the duet conscripts the chorus into this task of making the *encorium* resonate.

This motif of choral resonance begins to suggest how communication might occur in a choral voice, even when its words are obscured by the confusion multi-part song may bring. Indeed, the lyrics of most of the choral interludes refer to the complex resonances the singers engender. For example, when the chorus lauds Persée for slaying the monster, they proclaim their intentions to make the landscape reverberate with their words: “Let our fields and forests / Resound only with his glory.”<sup>50</sup> The motif of “fields and forests” is itself an echo of act 1, when the singers laud Venus: “In our fields and forests / All our voices / Will bless your sweet ravages.”<sup>51</sup> In all of these instances, the chorus’s songs may indeed be considered ornamental in that they do not add new information to the play as such. But they perform a function in broadcasting something—usually praise—and in amplifying another speaker’s discourse. In this way, they stage a relationship between authoritative individual characters and the group, prodding spectators to consider the community’s role in the royal drama. Singular power speaks, but it relies on choral voices to echo and transmit any message across spatial boundaries, between heaven and earth, between the human world and the natural environment.

This recognition of the collective’s role as an essential support to a leader’s power repeats in the fictional structure of the play. This appears most clearly in comparing Corneille’s libretto with source versions of the Andromeda myth. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and, indeed, in other early modern retellings of the story, Andromeda was the sea monster’s sole victim. In Corneille’s play she is one in a series of young girls taken by the beast in a sort of ritual sacrifice, such that the whole of Ethiopian society is implicated in this tragic scenario. Although the

<sup>49</sup> “Qu’en unissant ensemble nos voix, / Nous faisons resonner sur la terre & sur l’onde / Qu’il est & le plus jeune & le plus grand des Roys”: Corneille, 1651, 5.

<sup>50</sup> “Que nos campagnes & nos bois / Ne resonnent que de sa gloire”: Corneille, 1651, 71.

<sup>51</sup> “Dans nos campagnes & nos bois / Toutes nos voix / Béniront tes douces atteintes”: Corneille, 1651, 25.

chorus never explicitly laments the anonymous girls the community has lost to the monster, brief references to prior expressions of sorrow and distress haunt the chorus's lyrics. Early in the play, for example, they contrast the "sighs of love" that will resound throughout the countryside thanks to Venus's intervention with the "laments" ("plaintes") that echoed there beforehand.<sup>52</sup> Another important trace of communal mourning occurs in act 1, when the audience learns that collective murmuring is what alerted the hero Persée to the trouble in Cassiope's court. As he explains: "a confused noise informs me of this great evil."<sup>53</sup>

The interdependence of the named characters and the chorus in *Andromède* sketches out a more complicated relationship between leaders and the collective than what might initially appear. If gods and royal figures presume to rely upon the amplificatory power of the choral voice, the hero distinguishes himself by the ability to hear and interpret—or appropriately respond to—the confusing sounds produced by diverse voices. Persée reacts to the "confused noise" coming from Ethiopia without having to interpret it or translate it into an intelligible message. His heroic listening recalls other acts of audition by marginal figures in some of Corneille's other plays, who report on the noise of the populace kept offstage by the conventions of tragic dramaturgy. One such memorable scene appears in *Nicomède*, staged one year after *Andromède*. In the final act, as Prusias stubbornly clings to power, the guard Araspe warns the king that the people's displeasure is evident in their "words that I hear even from here."<sup>54</sup> In each play, Persée and Araspe's attunement to the sounds of collective distress works to highlight the relative deafness of the monarchs they serve. Although collective expression may remain too "confused" to convey precise and rational meanings, the voice of the crowd demands a response from those endowed with the power to act or to speak in more intelligible ways.

Choral song's status as a demand that crystallizes relationships between the collective and singular powers comes into focus in *Andromède*'s grand denouement. Once Persée has slain the monster, defeated his rival Phinée, and been promised *Andromède*'s hand in marriage, it only remains for Jupiter to offer a benediction and secure the kingdom's future peace. "Master of the Gods, make haste to appear," sings the chorus, to usher the god onto the stage.<sup>55</sup> Although song accompanies each entrance of a supernatural being in the play, this is the first and only lyric to contain an imperative request directed toward the god. As such, this final scene also represents the most orderly version of the relationship between a sovereign and a collective in the whole play. They entreat him,

<sup>52</sup> Corneille, 1651, 18.

<sup>53</sup> "Un bruit confus m'apprend ce mal extrême": Corneille, 1651, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Corneille, 1980, 2:702 (5.5.1581).

<sup>55</sup> Corneille, 1651, 120.

he responds, they express their “acclamation.” The exchange between the chorus and Jupiter implies that the group of singers is here finally heard, rather than treated as an amplifier or echo. Like his son Persée, then, Jupiter distinguishes himself by his ability to hear. While Persée listens like a hero, attuned to sounds of distress, Jupiter hears like a sovereign, responsive to his subjects’ petition.<sup>56</sup> Jupiter’s sovereign listening allows the play to finish on an orderly note, even as the multiple voices of the chorus resound.

In this way, Corneille solves the problem of the confusion produced by diverse voices singing together, not necessarily in unison, by staging examples of auditory rule. The exemplary acts of listening performed by Persée and Jupiter reframe the question of whether choral song is intelligible as a question of who is capable of making sense of it and how listening underpins political relationships (between the hero and the people, between the sovereign and subjects). Staging a contrast between weaker and stronger modes of listening to choral expression, the play also asks the audience to consider their own role as listeners in the auditorium and perhaps out in society. This is the sort of invitation that Perrault takes up in his scene of listening at the opera in the 1670s.

#### PERRAULT’S EAR FOR POLYPHONY

Representations of listening in musical drama often have a metatheatrical dimension, inviting audience members to think about their own habits of listening. Merely attending a play or an opera might already constitute a self-conscious experience of listening. The auditorium is the place where people go to listen together, while also revealing the diversity of possible listening experiences. In his “critical history of listening,” philosopher Peter Szendy reflects on modern musical appreciation as a conflict between an individual listener’s unique experience and the “injunction of a *you must*”—a way of hearing imposed by composers, musicians, cultures of appreciation, or fellow connoisseurs: “Flighty and fickle or attentive and concentrating, silent or dissolute, is listening strictly my private affair? But then, from where does this *you must*, which dictates my duties, come to me? And what are these duties? This *you must* that always accompanies me, that sends this demand to me: to whom am I accountable, to whom and to what do I have to answer?”<sup>57</sup> The communal act of listening resides in an impossible desire to share a listening experience

<sup>56</sup> This could be compared to the kind of sovereign listening described in the *Mémoires* of Louis XIV as a state of being “informé de tout, écoutant mes moindres sujets” (“informed about everything, listening to my least subjects”): Cornette, 72.

<sup>57</sup> Szendy, 4.

with others, which entails wanting to make others hear as we do.<sup>58</sup> Attention to the different kinds and acts of listening engendered by a performance or a work “is also making the work into a battlefield: a theater of operations of listening where various camps clash with each other.”<sup>59</sup> The audience, in this view, enacts its own hidden drama in which individual listeners struggle against those who would control or discipline their way of hearing.

Perrault’s vignette of operagoing in the unpublished preface to “De la musique des Anciens” dramatizes this battlefield, exploring the tension between a multiplicity of “operations of listening” and theoretical ideals of a communal experience of appreciation. By depicting this clash over listening styles or practices, Perrault’s text, although less obviously fueled by political considerations than Corneille’s reflection, gestures toward the relationship between musical culture and political and social life. Like in *Andromède* and its paratexts, in Perrault’s account, some ways of listening manage to make sense of the confusion produced by many voices. Yet rather than propose an approach to auditory rule, Perrault sketches out a way of hearing the many-voiced collective that respects its multiplicity. His anecdote critically juxtaposes forms of appreciation that submit to external authorities (such as academies) and are intolerant toward complexity with those that follow more personal standards of judgment and manage to value rich textures, asynchrony, and vocal multiplicity. In this way, Perrault proposes a finely tuned, extremely subtle challenge to the pompous aesthetics associated with the French monarchy, using aesthetic experience to argue for the superiority of polyphony both in music and in social and political life.

As the performance of musical drama moved beyond the court into Parisian playhouses in the mid-seventeenth century, the space of the opera frequently inspired reflections on the chaotic unruliness of the society who frequented it. Early performances at the Académie d’Opéra’s first home, the Salle de la Bouteille, provoked an infamous melee between guards and crowds of spectators swelled by unticketed pages and attendants, prompting a debate about whether servants should be banned.<sup>60</sup> Travelers and social satirists skewered the rowdy behavior of all ranks of spectators and noted that many elite operagoers hosted parties and other diversions in their loges—rival entertainments to what passed on the stage.<sup>61</sup> Opera historians debate the extent to which this commonplace image of the boisterous audience accurately reflects the behavior of spectators.<sup>62</sup> Regardless of their

<sup>58</sup> Szendy, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Szendy, 114.

<sup>60</sup> A police ordonnance passed in 1671 and rescinded soon after briefly forbade pages and servants from attempting to enter the opera without a ticket (as was the custom at other theaters). La Gorce, 21.

<sup>61</sup> See the examples anthologized in Wood and Sadler, 22–40.

<sup>62</sup> Wood and Sadler, 29–30, surmise that the claims are “grossly exaggerated.”



truth value, these representations are significant in what they reveal about social critics' attitudes toward the crowd. In writing about the social phenomenon of operagoing, the audience came to function as a metonym for society (at least *mondaine* society) and as a locus for anxieties about social disorder.

In Perrault's anecdote, both connoisseur figures, Paleologue and Philaethe, echo these commonplace tropes, focusing their ire specifically on how the crowd disrupts their experience of the music. Complaining of "the crudeness of most of the spectators," the interlocutors especially condemn their fellow operagoers' listening habits: "Most people . . . believe it is fashionable not to pay attention to this kind of music, because they do not know the names of the musicians who make it, all their curiosity going only to know the names of the girls who are singing, without examining either what is beautiful in their song or the relationship that the voices have with each other and with the orchestra's accompaniment."<sup>63</sup> Paleologue and Philaethe repeat a common refrain in depictions of the opera audience by portraying spectators as more interested in the youth and beauty of the female singers than the pure charm of their song. Many accounts from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries bolster the idea that the reigning "culture of listening" at the Paris Opéra privileged socializing over complete engagement with the music. As James Johnson has described in his work on listening at the Paris Opéra, during this period, "attention was a social faux pas" while "circulating, conversing, arriving late, and leaving early were an accepted part of eighteenth-century musical experience."<sup>64</sup> These habits derived largely from the Opéra's function as a space of sociability, especially valuable for courtiers who relished the freedom it offered relative to the stifling etiquettes of court. This mode of sociable listening also enhanced pleasure, creating an individual aural experience characterized by delightful diversity, as attention flutters from music to conversation to the crowd's antics and back again. According to the prevailing aesthetic values and social practices of the age, this way of listening has much to recommend it.<sup>65</sup> It is striking, then, that both Paleologue and Philaethe denigrate these common habits of spectatorship. To return to Szendy's metaphor, they draw a first line in the

<sup>63</sup> "La plupart du monde . . . croit qu'il est du bel air de n'avoir pas d'attention a cette sorte de Musique parce qu'ils ne savent pas les noms des Musiciens qui la font, toute leur curiosité n'allant qu'à scavoir les noms des filles qui chantent, sans examiner ny ce qu'il y a de beau dans leur chant ny le rapport que les voix ont les unes aux aultres et avec l'accompagnement de la symphonie": Perrault, 2003, 586.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, 31.

<sup>65</sup> As Weber, 1997, 681, points out, although this mode of listening challenges "the idealistic aesthetic that defines our approach to musical experience" in modern times, it "should not lure us into thinking that one could not listen in the earlier period, or, indeed, that people in general did not."

battlefield of listening practices, pitting their connoisseurship against the socially oriented, semi-attentive habits of the crowd.

This shared dismissal of the predominant culture of listening unites the two characters whose approaches to musical appreciation are otherwise quite opposed to each other. Indeed, the bulk of Perrault's short text is devoted to an account of the debate between these learned men as they expose the differences between their musical tastes and values. Paleologue, as his name suggests, espouses the "inimitable" perfection of classical works, viewing modern efforts in art and literature as weak striving toward ancient standards of achievement.<sup>66</sup> His trust in these predetermined aesthetic criteria is such that, even before the curtain rises, Paleologue knows he will not enjoy what he hears. His prospective enjoyment would seem to derive instead from the pleasures of criticizing the defects of modern composition, and he will listen carefully in order to find ammunition for his critiques. His deference to the authority of the ancients, and that of the academies who preserve and polish those traditions, is further reflected in his authoritative style of speech, heavy on sweeping pronouncements. He refuses to let his discourse be interrupted by the crowd attending to the debate. When one anonymous operagoer raises his voice in agreement, "he prevented him from continuing, impatient to triumph over his opponent."<sup>67</sup> Submitting only to the external authority of ancient partisans, Paleologue has no need for a chorus of ordinary listeners to concur with his judgment.

The inferiority of his approach to musical connoisseurship becomes clear over the course of the dialogue, not only through the relative crudeness and rigidity of his arguments as compared to those of his opponent, but also ultimately in his positive reaction to the music he ostensibly condemns. In spite of his expectations, as the violins begin to play he finds himself, like Philaethe, carried away by the music: "very sensitive to the sweetness produced by the assemblage and encounter of the different sounds of many voices and instruments."<sup>68</sup> Perrault's brief description of the opening of the opera emphasizes the plurality, diversity, and multiplicity of its sounds. Indeed, the prologue to *Les peines et les plaisirs de l'amour* features an intricately textured choral song that begins with one voice over a *basse continue*, with the others joining one by one at the end of each verse until it becomes a round—each voice singing the same melody asynchronously.<sup>69</sup> The tangle of sounds and voices overcomes the

<sup>66</sup> Perrault, 2003, 581.

<sup>67</sup> "Il l'empescha de continuer dans l'impatience où il estoit de triompher de son adversaire": Perrault, 2003, 581.

<sup>68</sup> "Fort sensibles à la douceur qui resulte de l'assemblage et de la rencontre des differens sons de plusieurs voix et de plusieurs Instrumens": Perrault, 2003, 587.

<sup>69</sup> Cambert, 8–10.

ancient partisan, who “listened to it with less disdain than he had done at the start of their conversation; he entered even in some way in his/its [*ses*] sentiments.”<sup>70</sup> In his analysis of this passage, Veit Erlmann describes Paleologue’s surprising response as a kind of madness: a “madness of listening,” an auditory riff on Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s notion of the “madness of seeing.”<sup>71</sup> As the excesses of Baroque art enthrall the viewer, so the music envelops its hearer to produce an “auditory frenzy” dissolving the boundaries between the perceiver and the object of perception.<sup>72</sup> For Erlmann, this form of all-consuming listening reflects not only Baroque aesthetics but also Perrault’s understanding of the physiology of hearing as a full-body sensory process.<sup>73</sup> When Paleologue is won over by the music, then, perhaps he is overcome by the embodied experience of the vibrations of the voices and the violins. The music itself behaves as the agent, exerting itself on Paleologue’s nervous system, bypassing his thinking mind’s prejudices. His form of listening, once shaped by a rigorous academic framework, is vanquished by the power of Cambert’s (1628–77) composition.

As opposed to Paleologue, who claims to evaluate music by predetermined standards of taste, Philaëthe rejects the idea of a single, normative “good taste” (“bon goût”). He dissects the concept of taste into two categories, both defective in his view. The first kind of taste arises from our natural assessment of the goodness of things “founded only on instinct,” as when the tongue immediately recognizes a flavor as pleasant or unpleasant.<sup>74</sup> This kind of instinctual taste is contingent and subject to change over time. Philaëthe offers the example of the tang of wine, which might disgust a child but gratify the adult that child becomes, but he could just as easily point to the fickle and pleasure-driven tastes of the noisy crowd of operagoers around him (or, indeed, to Paleologue’s experience of being overcome by Cambert’s prologue).<sup>75</sup> The second sort of taste—especially relevant for judging art or literature or music—can be socially conditioned. “Fear” and “shame” prompt connoisseurs to adopt the opinion

<sup>70</sup> “L’escoutoit avec moins de mépris quil n’avoit fait au commencement de leur conversation; il entra mesme en quelque façon dans ses sentimens”: Perrault, 2003, 587.

<sup>71</sup> Erlmann, 93. Erlmann bases this reading on the ambiguity of the possessive pronoun “ses” in the phrase “il entra mesme en quelque façon dans ses sentimens.” Thanks to Perrault’s long, periodic sentences, it is unclear whether Paleologue is “entering the sentiments” of his opponent in the debate (in appreciating the music) or of the opera itself, losing himself in the passions emanating from the orchestra. Erlmann prefers the latter reading, arguing that Paleologue experiences a fusion of self and music.

<sup>72</sup> Erlmann, 93.

<sup>73</sup> Erlmann, 79. See also Koch, 145–51.

<sup>74</sup> “Fondée . . . sur le seul Instinc”: Perrault, 2003, 579.

<sup>75</sup> Perrault, 2003, 579.

they presume the majority of their learned peers will avow.<sup>76</sup> This kind of judgment does not result from a direct encounter with an object but is mediated through the attitudes of others, and motivated by the desire to conform to a social group. Although he never explicitly says so, Philalethe implies that his interlocutor's clinging to ancient aesthetic values belongs to this category of discernment. In contrast to both instinctual and socially conditioned taste, Philalethe claims to rely on the superior faculty of "good sense" ("le bon sens") in his approach to music appreciation. What this might entail remains vaguely defined in the conversation, emerging in the negative space between the other, inferior forms of judgment. Unlike instinctual taste, "good sense" is not merely an immediate, visceral reaction to a stimulus, but rather requires some reflection and discrimination. Neither is it influenced by external criteria, whether academic prescriptions or the dominant opinions of some other high-status coterie, but rather it results from a singular encounter between an individual and the work. A middle path to aesthetic appreciation, both thoughtful and autonomous, Philalethe's good sense seems, through much of the text, to represent the Goldilocks ideal of aesthetic perception and judgment.

In fact, the author Perrault echoes and extends many of Philalethe's assertions in the theory of musical taste he develops in the treatise "De la musique des Anciens," which also clarifies the connection between this superior form of aural appreciation and complex, modern compositions (such as Cambert's opera). In the story of the opera session, the treatise is characterized as the work of a close friend of Philalethe's, passed along to the narrator Perrault, who then has it published. The text mainly elaborates the arguments for the superiority of modern composition that its fictional frame-tale began through the mouthpiece of the modern connoisseur. What starts as a straightforward valorization of contemporary French music takes an unexpected turn, however, when Perrault begins explaining why the modern outstrips the ancient. He emphasizes that modern music's superiority derives from composers' understanding of "the most beautiful part of music": harmony and, particularly, polyphonic composition—"the mixture of several parts that sing together on different subjects."<sup>77</sup> But Perrault admits that while this form of composition is objectively superior, many listeners—the Chinese, for example—cannot tolerate music "for many voices." Even in France, out of a hundred music lovers, barely two will truly appreciate polyphony, graced with "ears for hearing what is fine in harmony, all others having them only to hear noise."<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Perrault, 2003, 580.

<sup>77</sup> "Le melange de plusieurs parties qui chantent ensemble de sujets differens": Perrault, 1680, 2:339.

<sup>78</sup> "Des oreilles pour entendre ce qu'il y a de fin dans l'harmonie, tous les autres n'en ont que pour entendre le bruit": Perrault, 1680, 2:395.

To most ears, it sounds like a play in which “all the actors were speaking at once; it’s an annoying and intolerable confusion.”<sup>79</sup> Those who are born with ears “capable of tasting harmony,” meanwhile, will take pleasure in such “agreeable confusion.”<sup>80</sup> The perfection of harmonic music seems to reside less in an inherent feature of the composition than in some exquisite quality of the ear itself, and of the mind attached to it. The appreciation of polyphony requires the suspension of the instinct to dismiss the confused sound as noise, an individual effort to listen and discern, similar to what Philaëthe describes as “good sense.” A symbiotic relationship emerges between complex multi-part music and exquisite listening. The music requires gifted ears to be appreciated. Superior listeners need richly textured music to exercise their perceptive faculties.

As Perrault continues to evoke the pleasure to be derived from polyphonic music, he describes in more detail the perceptual and cognitive work it entails, as well as the aesthetic and rational delights to be gained by such effort:

Those who are born capable of tasting multi-part harmony . . . derive all their pleasure from untangling this pleasant confusion: such that to satisfy this pleasure, it is one of the precepts of the art to augment this ostensible confusion through what is called figured counterpoint: for while in simple counterpoint all the parts have just one rhythm, and pronounce the same words together in a parallel measure, in figured counterpoint they take different paths, and while one stops, the other passes over, and pronounces words that another then takes up, at the same time and the other continues to say others; and all that to create this pleasing diversity which is for most people but a tiresome confusion.<sup>81</sup>

This long sentence performs the mental labor of listening to complex, multilayered music—the delightful work of “untangling” asynchronous vocal parts, shifting one’s attention from the one voice to the other to the other and back again. Even while recognizing that this kind of listening is a rare and refined taste, Perrault’s description does its best to convert the reader to its

<sup>79</sup> “Tous les Comediens parloient ensemble; c’est une confusion ennuyeuse & insupportable”: Perrault, 1680, 2:396.

<sup>80</sup> Perrault, 1680, 2:397.

<sup>81</sup> “Ceux qui sont nez capables de guster l’harmonie à plusieurs parties . . . font consister tout leur plaisir à deméler cette agreeable confusion: de sorte que pour satisfaire ce plaisir, c’est un des preceptes de l’art d’augmenter cette prétenduë confusion dans ce qu’on appelle le contrepoint figuré: car au lieu que dans le contrepoint simple toutes les parties n’ont qu’une Rhythme, & qu’avec une mesure toute pareille, elles prononcent ensemble les mesmes paroles; dans le figuré elles tiennent les chemins differens, & pendant que l’une s’arreste, l’autre passe outre & prononce des paroles qu’une autre reprend ensuite au mesme temps que l’autre poursuit à en dire d’autres; & tout cela afin de faire cette agreeable diversité qui n’est pour la plus grande partie du monde qu’une importune confusion”: Perrault, 1680, 2:396–97.

particular pleasures. Perrault evokes here an ear captivated by its own abilities as it bends from one vocal line to another to another, circling back, and finally delectating the “pleasant diversity” of the whole.

This minutely described experience of musical listening resonates with the scientific analysis of different modes of audition that Perrault outlines in his essay “Du bruit,” with which “De la musique des Anciens” was eventually published. Here, Perrault discerns two levels of auditory perception that roughly parallel Philaethe’s hierarchy of taste. One results from animal instinct, or what Perrault calls “habitual and confused judgment” (“jugement habituel & confus”), while the second is produced by “distinct judgment” (“jugement distinct”). This superior perceptive faculty, possessed by humans alone, entails meditating on the fine distinctions in sensation that are “difficult to resolve” and probing the “new difficulties” that present themselves upon longer consideration.<sup>82</sup> At once reflective and empirical (i.e., independent of reference to external aesthetic criteria), this form of judgment conforms to Philaethe’s notion of “good sense” in music appreciation. In the context of “Du bruit,” though, the ramifications for this refined mode of listening extend beyond musical culture. Perrault suggests how these powers of discernment operate in the natural environment (as when they allow hearers to guess what might be making a particular sound) and in the social world (for example, by helping listeners determine a speaker’s emotional tone).<sup>83</sup> Reread in the light of his broader theory of auditory perception, Perrault’s defense of polyphonic song appears not only as a matter of aesthetic taste but as argument for the cognitive value of challenging music. Appreciating multi-part music cultivates the ear, and trains it to find “pleasant diversity” rather than “confusion” in the larger soundscape.

Perrault’s unpublished preface, too, points toward this tantalizing possibility that good listeners might turn their “good sense” or “distinct judgment” from music to other kinds of complex sound. The fourth mode of listening to appear in this text, beyond the distracted listening of the crowd, the irrational listening of Paleologue, and the refined hearing of Philaethe, is practiced by the narrator himself. The narrator’s perspective becomes more dominant in the final pages of the preface. After the conclusion of the performance, he joins Paleologue and Philaethe in an appreciative postmortem of the opera. The listeners are now in accord about the success of the spectacle, highlighting especially its “diversity”: they praise “the diversity of the different characters’ personalities so as to have the chance to treat both cheerful and sad subjects.”<sup>84</sup> They especially relish how

<sup>82</sup> Perrault, 1680, 2:312.

<sup>83</sup> Perrault, 1680, 2:329–32.

<sup>84</sup> “La diversité des caracteres des differans personnages pour avoir occasion de traiter des sujets tantost gais et tantost tristes”: Perrault, 2003, 587.

the composer managed to avoid recitativo, “which has no grace when sung,” and chose instead to “find a way to make several voices sing together” by representing “persons who are in conversation and dealing with one another, taking the opportunity to express appropriate sentiments.”<sup>85</sup> The listeners seem to value not only the musical complexity of these compositions but also their naturalism in depicting conversations among different kinds of people.

Immediately after expressing their appreciation for multiplicity in the opera, the interlocutors have the chance to explore the real-world implications of this taste for diversity. Prevented from leaving the theater due to “disorder” caused by the rush of spectators toward the exits, the connoisseurs, rather than disparage their unruly fellow operagoers once again, make the best of the delay.<sup>86</sup> They welcome another voice into their conversation, that of Aletophane, who offers to read them his treatise on ancient and modern music. This text in turn sparks another debate, ultimately convincing the narrator that it deserves to be shared with a wider audience in publication. The stronger presence of the narrator in this last section of the text reminds the reader of his labor as listener and transcriber of the conversations surrounding him. From the outset, his discerning ears have been able to appreciate the duet performed by the arguing connoisseurs and to hear a chorus in the mutters of bystanders. Like the capable listener who appreciates harmonic music, the narrator could pick out individual voices and follow the line of their arguments. Rather than impose an artificial unity or dismiss the chatter as incomprehensible noise, he has appreciated the irresolvable tensions in these debates and reflected on the “new difficulties” that continually refined the discussion. His way of listening reframes the noise of social chatter as intelligible complexity.

As in Corneille’s work, then, Perrault describes a mode of listening that restores a degree of sense to the confusion of diverse voices. But while the heroic or sovereign listening performed by Persée or Jupiter in Corneille’s play imposed order on collective expression by framing it within a political relationship, Perrault’s narrator takes a more modest approach to attending to the chorus of fellow operagoers. Equal in status to those around him, the narrator’s approach to listening derives not from some innate distinction but from a choice to open his ears without prejudice and to cultivate his habits of perception.

Perrault’s preface might be read, therefore, not only as a defense of complex choral compositions but also as a subtle critique of the rise of univocality in both musical and political life. By the time Perrault published “De la musique des

<sup>85</sup> “Trouver le moyen de faire chanter plusieurs voix ensemble à des personnes qui sont en conversation et en affaire, en prenant l’occasion d’exprimer des sentimens dont ils conviennent”: Perrault, 2003, 587.

<sup>86</sup> Perrault, 2003, 587.

Anciens,” in 1680, without its narrative preface but instead as an appendix to his essay “Du bruit,” his defense of polyphony was already anachronistic. He admits as much in the treatise when he notes that, to adapt to the tastes of the majority, modern musicians have returned to composing solo airs and simplified multi-part songs that privilege one part over the others or that have the vocal parts sing in unison. In this sense, modern music is reapproaching ancient styles, striving for a different kind of “perfection,” which consists “in simplicity, clarity, and distinction.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Cambert, whose pastoral operas included polyphonic choral pieces, had fled to England in 1673. Lully now dominated French opera, esteemed for his “uniquely flexible form of recitative” layered over a *basse continue* that privileged intelligibility over rhythmic or harmonic structure.<sup>88</sup> His choruses typically sang in unison, so that no listener could mistake their words for confused noise.<sup>89</sup> For this reason, musicologist Carolyn Wood memorably characterizes the “texture” of Lully’s choruses as “homophonic to the point of stodginess.”<sup>90</sup>

Although musically simpler than his predecessors’ compositions, Lully’s scores earned the praise of most contemporary critics—and of many eighteenth-century commentators—as a “musical rhetoric” that beautifully supported Quinault’s lyrics.<sup>91</sup> Dominant critical opinion valued clarity over intricacy. In light of these developments, Perrault’s account of the very recent history of music concludes on a slightly sour note, remarking the loss of musical complexity and of the opportunity to acquire the capacity to listen to it properly, to experience the joy of discerning music in what at first sounds like cacophony. Yet if the pompous aesthetics of Lully’s operas threaten to overwhelm the ears with monotonous glorification of Louis XIV, Perrault’s preface suggests that more varied sounds may be found in the amphitheater and on the parterre, where listeners sigh, laugh, whistle, murmur, and argue. In this way, the text functions not merely as a nostalgic apology for pre-Lullian composition styles but as an optimistic and future-oriented defense of fine listening that urges its readers to turn their ears toward the many voices of society. Delighting in multiplicity and seeking to preserve it, Perrault’s preferred mode of audition subtly resists the homophony of absolutist political culture.

<sup>87</sup> “En la simplicité, en la neteté, & en la distinction”: Perrault, 1680, 2:401–02.

<sup>88</sup> Arnold and Sadie.

<sup>89</sup> After a performance of Lully and Quinault’s opera *Isis*, La Fontaine complained to a friend “ses concerts de voix ressemblent aux éclats / Qu’en jour de combat font les cris de soldats” (“These vocal concerts resemble the flashes / Of soldiers’ cries on the day of battle”): La Fontaine.

<sup>90</sup> Wood, 133. See also Cowart, 135–36.

<sup>91</sup> Dill, 74.



## CONCLUSION

The recurring topos of early modern French discourse that equated the “diverse voices” of opera (on stage and in the auditorium) with confusion and noise derived from a set of ideological dichotomies as pertinent to social and political life as to aesthetic contexts: rationality against excess, order against disorder, unity against multiplicity, meaningful sound against senseless din. For this reason, the soundscape of opera often served as a microcosm for the soundscape of the wider social world. The Paris Opéra in particular functioned as a critical site of contention for working out broader anxieties about the role of the multitude in monarchical political culture. Indeed, complaints about opera’s noisiness intensified in the eighteenth century in tandem with growing recognition of the role of the public in political life. Charles Dill’s investigation of the “metaphor of noise” in the age of André Campra (1660–1744) and Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) finds that the genre’s critics were deeply disturbed by music’s resistance to discursive intelligibility. Meanwhile, opera enthusiasts privileged enjoyment over eloquence, “allowing something that could not be adequately signified—pleasure—an inroad into public works.”<sup>92</sup> Tellingly, these fans expressed their judgments on individual performances not through language but with nonverbal sound—the whistles of disapproval, the applause of delight. The terms of the debate held opera and operagoers in opposition to the authority of logos.

Writing in earlier moments of French opera’s contentious history, Corneille and Perrault transcend this commonplace opposition by shifting focus from noise itself to the activity of listening to it. Rather than assume the unintelligibility of collective clamor, each author asks, instead, how it might be heard, authorizing the listener to make the babble of society meaningful. Corneille’s fictional depiction of acts of heroic and sovereign listening extends contemporary notions about the duty of monarchs to attend to their subjects by showing how even inarticulate or confused collective experience can convey a message to the skillful ear. Perrault’s narrative of operagoing, read in light of his reflection on the cognitive pleasures of listening to polyphonic song, demonstrates how a refined ear can decipher, and even take pleasure in, a complex assemblage of sounds. From their different perspectives, both writers show how the noise of opera can not only serve as an object of social satire or critique but also inspire ethical approaches to the fact of multiplicity in the wider world.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Dill, 77.

<sup>93</sup> The opera might complement broader early modern debates on “ethical hearing practices” enacted in medical and judicial contexts: Sykes, 91.

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