Paul Henry Lang: an Enlightened Critic of the French Enlightenment

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Voltaire, with a touch of awe usually reserved for the illustrious dead, once called his very much alive contemporary and fellow Encyclopedist, Denis Diderot, a *pantophile*, this is to say, one who knows about and is interested in everything. With the appearance of *Music in Western Civilization* in 1941, it became apparent that Paul Henry Lang was also such a man. On that occasion Virgil Thomson wrote, "It is really a history of music adorned with constant references to the other arts, to political events, to social conditions and to those customs both local and general that are nowadays referred to as cultural patterns." Warren D. Allen noted, "Not since the appearance of two great histories of music by Dr. Charles Burney and Sir John Hawkins, back in 1776, has there been anything in the English language which can compare with Lang's colossal achievement." And Eric Blom stated, ". . . a vast and impressive book . . . enormously large and rich. . . . To have planned such a work at all is to be acclaimed a man of rare intellectual courage and zeal; to have carried it out so well is to take a high place among contemporary musical scholars."

Recently Lang's wide-ranging intellect has borne new fruit: a remarkable biography of the great 18th-century master Handel. Lang's interests, his appreciation, and his authority seem to lie everywhere. For those like myself who are primarily interested in the French 18th century, it is manifest that he excels in the so-called Age of Enlightenment. His judgments are sure, his insights brilliant.

Among Dr. Lang's investigations of themes related to music in 18th-century France, there immediately comes to mind a host of topics: *La Querelle des Bouffons*, music of the French rococo, Jean-Philippe Rameau's squabbles with the *philosophes*, the Encyclopedists' forays into the history, science, and aesthetics of music, and, more explicitly, the concern of such figures as d'Alembert, Grimm, d'Holback, Rousseau, and Diderot with musical theory and practice. All of this is indeed part and parcel of the French Enlightenment.

The term "Enlightenment," it will be recalled, commonly

designates a revolution in the history of ideas and especially in 18th-century France. This includes, on the one hand, the popularization and dissemination in literary form of scientific knowledge and, on the other, an all-pervasive philosophical and critical spirit. Those in the forefront of the movement were generally referred to as *philosophes*, although most of them shunned the construction and elaboration of systems of philosophy. They believed that human progress was a distinct possibility through the use of the experimental method in science and the free exercise of God-given reason in all matters pertaining to man. Moreover, most of them were Encyclopedists as well, in other words, contributors to the *Encyclopédie*, that stupendous intellectual and publishing enterprise of the age.

Specialists in this area—an area with intricacies of thought and feeling and with the darkness of still insufficiently explored corners—are brought up short by the spectacle of a musicologist adroitly overcoming the difficulties of its topography, and penetrating its recesses with consummate ease. But the musicologist is Paul Lang and, as the French would say, *C'est tout dire!*

Scattered throughout his writings is evidence of his masterful understanding of the age. Two recent articles clearly demonstrate their author's comprehension of and insights into the period in question. The first of these is "Diderot as Musician,"[1] and the second, "The Enlightenment and Music."[2] Professor Lang's vast erudition, which he wears so lightly, is everywhere apparent in these pages. He has that singular gift of being at once lucid, interesting, and challenging to Enlightenment specialists and cultured lay readers alike.

In "Diderot as Musician," the author effortlessly seizes the various facets of Denis Diderot's exceptional mind. He traces the evolution of the *philosophe*'s thoughts and speculations on music in all their manifestations. The reader is afforded a crisp account of Diderot, a highly knowledgeable amateur of music who was drawn into the field first as a musical scientist, a mathematical acoustician, then as a lover of music as a purely artistic expression. Professor Lang reminds us that Diderot arrived reasonably late at the conclusion that music is the most violent of all the arts. We also see the impact of Diderot, as editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopédie*, on the aesthetics of music and, more specifically, the role he played in bringing about operatic reform. It is here that Professor Lang renders no mean service to students of the

Enlightenment by setting them straight in a few, carefully chosen words on the thorny problem of Rameau's relations with Diderot, Rousseau, d'Alembert, and others of the Encyclopedic group. Lang tells us "I dwelt on this unhappy episode at some length because music historians are too ready to put all the blame on the *philosophes* who wronged a great composer, while the literary historians cannot fathom Rameau's exceptional qualities as composer-scholar."

Professor Lang's "The Enlightenment and Music" is—for those concerned with French 18th-century history, science, philosophy, and literature—a most useful pendant to the preceding article, and a veritable treasure-trove of information. We are properly convinced that music—dealing as it does with mathematics and art, physics and aesthetics, tied up as it is with the human mind and human emotions—is heir to a hundred definitions, all more or less true, none wholly so. We are, in consequence, led to believe that it is perhaps the most complex of all man-made disciplines. Furthermore, we are duly persuaded that, with the Enlightenment, the myths regarding the origin and growth of the involved phenomenon that is music are abandoned in favor of concrete theories. Music is now viewed or conceived as a rational discipline with melody as its essence, and Leibnitz's definition is called to mind that music is "a hidden mathematical exercise of the spirit unaware of its counting while making music." In short, its double function—that of a science and that of an art—becomes strikingly clear. Even the layman is at last able to see in music, as in other disciplines, a serious attempt being made to bring reason and nature into some sort of unison; such an effort is, as Professor Lang points out, characteristic of the Enlightenment.

In all this, precisely what was accomplished in the age under scrutiny? Before entering into specifics, Professor Lang has this to say:

> The desire to understand and explain the world of appearances was as strong in music as in the other fields during the Enlightenment, but since music without the conceptual associations does not express anything but itself, the philosophers and musical theorists hit upon a formidable obstacle. They explored the scientific properties of music, and here the achievements of the Enlightenment are extraordinary.

These achievements, as well as the more technical aspects of

the article itself, might be fittingly summarized by Lang's concluding sentence: "The Enlightenment gave us all our modern theories and concepts of music; it codified tonality, it created the system of harmony by recognizing the dualism of major and minor, and, above all, it created musical logic."

The men of the French Enlightenment knew full well that the performing arts as a whole and music in particular were an ennobling "means of addressing mankind" (Mussorgsky). Of this too, both in the above-mentioned articles and in his writings in general, Paul Henry Lang has been eminently successful in convincing the interested reader.

NOTES

[1] *Diderot Studies* 10:95–107 (1968).
[2] *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 1:93–103 (September 1967).