

Jann Pasler. 2009. *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Reviewed by Mark Seto

Nineteenth-century French music, arguably more than other repertoires, seems to resist straightforward narrative history.¹ In recent years, scholars have favored thematic studies of the period, concentrating on specific political or social phenomena (Spies 1998; Fulcher 1987, 1999), individual genres (Archbold and Peterson 1995; Huebner 1999; Lacombe 2001), or musical institutions (Strasser 1998, 2001; Holoman 2004). Jann Pasler takes a similarly prismatic approach in her new book, but treats her subject with such remarkable breadth and attention to detail that the result is one of the most comprehensive examinations of French musical life to appear in recent memory.²

The focus of *Composing the Citizen*—Pasler’s first monograph and the opening volume in a planned trilogy on “Useful Music” (xviii, 188)—is the republican concept of *utilité publique*. In the generation after the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), French leaders viewed music as integral to the public good. Music could be valuable to society in four principal ways: it could teach judgment and cultivate an informed citizenry; bring together a heterogeneous people divided by class, religion, and politics; help negotiate ideological conflicts; and encourage French citizens to imagine a common identity (84–90). In contrast to critics like Adorno, who have argued that music’s only possible use in a capitalist society is as a commodity (82–83), Pasler’s concept of the useful is much more expansive. She employs a broad range of disciplinary methods to elucidate her subject, from history and sociology to political theory and musical analysis. She also explores the full spectrum of music in public life—not only at well-known institutions like the Paris Opéra and the Conservatoire, but also in department stores, cafés, outdoor festivals, and the zoo.

By documenting such a wide variety of musical practices, Pasler offers a model for how to write a music history that extends beyond composers, modernists, and elites to encompass the neglected, the quotidian, and the popular. She challenges several historiographic clichés:

namely, that in the past, only the elites had access to or an interest in serious art music; that serious and popular domains were distinct; that early mass culture had a necessarily deleterious effect on musical progress; and that art music performances by the major orchestras increasingly presented music by dead composers. (xiv)

None of these assumptions, Pasler argues, held true during the Third Republic. Music—new and old, “serious” and “popular”—played a vital role in French life. The implicit message of *Composing the Citizen* is that the French example can help us reconceptualize the value of music in contemporary Western society.

As the connection to the present day suggests, the book’s subtitle only loosely captures the scope of Pasler’s project. The book’s focus, geographically and chronologically, is in fact narrower than Third Republic France. Although she “[does] not wish to deny the importance of musical life” outside of Paris (5), Pasler concentrates on the French capital and devotes comparatively little attention to the provinces. Her study focuses on the first three decades of the Third Republic rather than its entirety (1870–1940). Yet Pasler also spends a significant portion of the book exploring the legacy of the French Revolution and discussing how nineteenth-century leaders conceived of their history. More broadly, *Composing the Citizen* can be read as a case study of the relationship that a democratic society can have with the arts, and the book will be worthwhile to anyone who cares about the role of music in public life. Pasler explores three issues with particular relevance today: debates about making the arts accessible to all citizens; music’s ability to build community and stimulate dialogue among people of diverse backgrounds; and the potential of music to reinvigorate a culture and suggest a better future.

Pasler begins the book with an evocative “walking tour” of Paris which introduces the central themes of her study. Building on the theories of artistic production developed by Howard Becker (1982) and Pierre Bourdieu (1993), she uses the cityscape as an entry point for considering “the structure of the musical world” and “the kinds of networks music needs to thrive” (3), such as relationships between institutions and the state, listeners and performers, or teachers, composers, and critics.³ Paris’s history and its power structures, she argues, are inscribed in its geography. The Opéra and the Comédie-Française, for instance, were built facing the Ministry of Finance so government officials “could literally keep an eye on” the recipients of state subventions (14). At the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, thousands of working-class Parisians were displaced by Baron Haussmann’s sweeping reorganization of the city during the Second Empire. Other aspects of the city’s topography—its cabarets, bustling quarters, and narrow streets—remind visitors of the “spontaneous and ephemeral aspects of French musical life” (25).

The walking tour of the capital also serves as an inspiration for the book’s unconventional organization (40). Just as Paris is laid out in a spiral, radiating out in expanding circles from the Ile de la Cité to the outer arrondissements (and by extension, to the rest of the country and the world),

Composing the Citizen builds on themes outlined in the introduction in four parts of increasing length. While the book follows a loose trajectory from the Revolution to the early 1900s, its arrangement is primarily topical, with key issues recurring throughout the study.⁴ Pasler moves seamlessly from one subject to the next, though a few paragraphs summarizing the book's layout would have been a valuable addition to the introduction. Such a blueprint would have been helpful for readers interested in jumping to a specific point of interest, particularly since the book's section headings tend towards the suggestive rather than the denotative. To that end, I will use the following paragraphs to sketch out the book's organization while highlighting some specific issues her study raises.

Part one, "Forming Public Spirit and Useful Citizens" (104 pages), outlines the theoretical and historical roots of public utility as the French conceived it. In the first chapter, Pasler traces the notion from antiquity (Plato's *Republic*, Horace's *Ars poetica*) through the eighteenth century (Rousseau, Diderot). For Enlightenment philosophers, the theory of utility provided a means of reconciling individual and collective interests. This concern for the public good and public utility has been an enduring feature of French policy since the late eighteenth century—more so, Pasler argues, than in any other society or national government (57). This attitude explains why useful music has been so meaningful in France: whereas artistic value in nineteenth-century Germany was often tied to metaphysical expression and musical autonomy, French leaders prized music for its potential to shape individual *mœurs* and collective values. Chapter 2 examines music during the French Revolution through the lens of the Third Republic. Much like the way Renaissance humanists looked to ancient sources to explore music's affective potential, French leaders in the late nineteenth century studied how revolutionaries used music "to build a republic not only of minds but also of hearts" (95). Revolutionary leaders instilled common values through popular songs and music education; encouraged a sense of fraternity through music in public festivals; and fired up a unified *esprit public* through opera and other theatrical entertainments. Their integration of music into public life established a paradigm for later French leaders, and the revolutionary era serves as a focal point in Pasler's study that she returns to throughout the text.

In part two, "Shaping Judgment and National Taste" (140 pages), Pasler discusses how music could mold individuals into active citizens and revive national pride. Concert life flourished in the Third Republic, and on any given Sunday afternoon a listener could choose between several different performances, often of the same piece. This wealth of options encouraged people to develop musical tastes, a skill that Pasler links to broader social

engagement: “Learning critical judgment through contemplating differences, making comparisons, and forming opinions connected art to politics, active listening to active citizenship” (204). These analytical tools were especially useful, Pasler asserts, in concerts that juxtaposed *la musique ancienne et moderne*. The French early music revival has been studied by Katharine Ellis (2005), Catrina Flint de Médicis (2004), and others, but Pasler’s original contribution is to highlight the contexts in which older masterpieces were heard. Many concert programs in the 1870s, by professional groups and amateurs alike, set up explicit comparisons between the old and the new, giving listeners the opportunity to reflect on the presence of the past and the nature of French identity. As she does throughout the book, Pasler marshals an impressive amount of archival material to support her argument, including concert programs, reviews, and critical writings. Most of the performances she cites suggest a clear desire to elicit contemplation and judgment among listeners, but on rare occasions the documentary evidence seems pushed a bit far: as Pasler herself acknowledges, not every concert featuring *la musique ancienne et moderne* was necessarily designed with pedagogical intent. The second half of part two considers the relationship between musical taste and international politics. The enthusiastic international reception of contemporary French works—Pasler’s key examples are *Faust* and *Mignon*—validated tastes at home and encouraged French leaders of all political persuasions to support national music and musical institutions.

Part three, “Instituting Republican Culture” (190 pages), examines how French leaders used music to promote republican ideals like egalitarianism, progress, secularism, and tolerance. Of particular importance is Pasler’s discussion of “An Ideology of Diversity, Eclecticism, and Pleasure” (chapter 6), which provides a welcome counterbalance to criticism that has equated musical value with seriousness—a position that has been exposed as a canard in recent scholarship, but that retains some influence in narrative histories and the musicological canon. As they consolidated power at the end of the 1870s, French republicans sought to democratize pleasures that had previously been associated with the Ancien Régime. Aesthetic pleasure, exemplified in the works of Delibes and Massenet, became a focus of public policy, and people “began to think of charm as a category of judgment with serious connotations,” not simply a frivolous diversion (377). Pasler recuperates the notion of eclecticism, an important republican principle that had been tainted by anti-Semitic discourses (for instance, in Wagner’s criticism of Meyerbeer). She also adds her two cents to a thoughtful body of scholarship on French Wagnerism (especially Huebner 1999; Fauser and Schwartz 1999), noting that French leaders’ promotion of aesthetic tolerance helped provide a hospitable context for the *maître de Bayreuth* in the 1880s (394).

Her point is well taken, although it bears remembering that the republican interest in diversity was just one of many considerations in the complex, and still turbulent, reception of Wagner during this time.

Chapters 7 and 8 address, respectively, the role of music in colonialist and anti-colonialist agendas, and the social utility of musical “distractions” within France. According to Pasler, both sides in the colonialism debate—republican proponents who believed in the possibilities of assimilation, and opponents of imperialism among the monarchist Right and the radical Left—used music to support their viewpoints. Meanwhile, French leaders began to promote economic liberalism as necessary for the public good. In the musical sphere, competition encouraged innovation and higher standards across a wide range of performing ensembles. Performances in commercial settings such as the Bon Marché department store and the Jardin zoologique d’Acclimatation brought together listeners from different classes and cultural backgrounds. However, increased accessibility and commercialization led some to question whether music could still be useful in the ways republicans originally envisioned: could background music in a café, for instance, really teach critical judgment?

From the mid-1880s on, ideas about music’s usefulness began to change. This evolving landscape is the subject of part four, “Shifting Notions of Utility: Between the Nation and the Self” (201 pages). Befitting the spiral conceit of *Composing the Citizen*, Pasler revisits several topics discussed earlier, including early music, exoticism, and national identity. “Music as Resistance and an Emerging Avant-garde” (chapter 9) explores how opponents of republicanism used music to advocate oppositional values. With regime change a real possibility after the 1885 elections, monarchists dissatisfied with the status quo embraced music from or inspired by the Ancien Régime, even holding costume parties with period attire and dance. This incorporation of old music into contemporary contexts may have served as a metaphor, Pasler muses, “for how the monarchy could be integrated and might thrive in the modern world” (501). At the other ideological extreme, artists in the circle around Mallarmé rejected the republican project of utility in favor of the pursuit of “pure intellect” (524). Thus modernism, Pasler argues, did not simply stand for a desire to create “art for art’s sake,” but was “a reconception, an appropriation of music’s utility for nonrepublican purposes” (498).

In chapter 10, Pasler considers music’s symbolic utility at the 1889 Universal Exhibition, complementing Annegret Fauser’s excellent study of the event (2005). The exhibition’s organizers used music to promote three republican ideals: fraternity (through parades and other community-building performances), education (through national or historical concerts that encouraged listeners to reflect on cultural differences or on the past),

and progress (through colonial displays intended to demonstrate the benefits of assimilation). The vast array of exotic music also encouraged new modes of listening, and even of conceptualizing sound, but it was “clear that understanding of the exotic Other was partial at best, if not a total illusion” (585). Chapter 11, “New Alliances and New Music,” discusses the fruitful musical developments of the 1890s against the backdrop of mounting social and political tensions. Whereas scholars like Jane Fulcher (1999) have emphasized the ideological fault lines in *fin-de-siècle* French culture, Pasler addresses how people of opposing political persuasions found common ground through music. Both the Left and Right looked to new music to promote change and to old music “to articulate continuity with the French past” (602). In contrast to performances of *la musique ancienne et moderne* in the 1870s which played up historical differences, Pasler contends that musicians and audiences in the 1890s sought to integrate the old and the new in “a kind of musical *ralliement* [reconciliation] between the aesthetic values of the past and present” (633). While Pasler’s comparison of the two decades is thought-provoking, one wonders how much currency her theoretical distinction would have had among nineteenth-century concert organizers and listeners. The final chapter of the book, “The Dynamics of Identity and the Struggle for Distinction,” explores how the French used music to engage with questions of race, gender, and class. Pasler intends her discussion of these complex issues to be “suggestive more than definitive” (645)—a preview of forthcoming books where she will address these topics at greater length. If the sophistication of this volume is any indication, the next installments will be well worth reading.

Composing the Citizen is a remarkable achievement, both for the depth of Pasler’s scholarship and her stylish prose. My only regret is that in devoting much-needed attention to quotidian and popular musical practices, composers and composers’ institutions sometimes play a secondary role in her historiography. To take one example, the Société nationale de musique, a leading forum for French composers during the Third Republic, receives relatively little attention. Granted, Pasler’s book does not purport to be an all-inclusive history, and the Société nationale has not been wanting for scholarly exploration (see Duchesneau 1997; Strasser 1998, 2001). If anything, its significance has perhaps been overstated in narrative accounts of French music. However, a discussion of the Société nationale could have provided another valuable perspective on music’s potential utility, since the institution’s leadership aimed to elevate listeners and engender national renewal—key republican concerns. Other minor details warrant a brief mention. The book has no bibliography—a justifiable omission, perhaps, in light of the volume’s length (817 pages) and the scope of Pasler’s research—

but a selective listing of sources would have been a helpful inclusion for the many readers who will undoubtedly use this work as a reference.⁵ The unusually small font, while understandable for the same reason, dampens the enjoyment of an otherwise attractive, richly illustrated volume.

Nonetheless, this is an important book, destined to be debated and referenced for years to come. The issues it raises have never been more timely. One sees echoes of Third Republic ideals, for instance, in Gustavo Dudamel's newly begun tenure at the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Observers hope he will revolutionize music education, build community across lines of class and race, and make music accessible to all. Dudamel's first performance as music director was a free community concert for a capacity crowd at the Hollywood Bowl, featuring appearances by several student ensembles and prominent pop, jazz, and rock musicians. The program concluded with Dudamel conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with a "rainbow coalition of choristers drawn from the Los Angeles Master Chorale, the Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers, the Our Lady of Los Angeles Spanish Choir, the Philippine Chamber Singers and other local ensembles."⁶ By linking *utilité publique* to contemporary concerns, Pasler has not only made an invaluable contribution to nineteenth-century French music studies. *Composing the Citizen* is also essential reading for anyone interested in the role that music can play in public life.

Notes

1. On the scarcity of narrative histories of French music, see Henson (2008).
2. For her previous book, a collection of essays, see Pasler (2008).
3. Pasler references the work of these sociologists more explicitly in the introduction to *Writing Through Music* (2008). For another discussion of Becker, see Taruskin (2005).
4. Serendipitously or not, the book's organization as a spiral reflects a mode of thinking about history that Pasler describes in the book and discusses at length in an earlier study (1991).
5. As of November 2009, University of California Press has no plans to include a bibliography in a future volume.
6. Anthony Tommasini, "A Welcoming Party with 18,000 Guests," *The New York Times*, October 4, 2009.

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