

*I prefer that which moves me to that which surprises me.* François Couperin

*I prefer the bizarre over the insipid.* Anne-Louis Girodet

Something happened in Paris between the last days of Louis XIV's reign, in the first quarter of the 18th century, and the first days of the 19th century. At the inauguration of France's state run *Conservatoire*, the country could claim a tradition of musical accomplishments that was subtle, elegant, emotionally restrained--a tradition emblematic of a court society: a French Classical tradition. *Calme Luxe et volupté*. Words to be marched to the guillotine!

In 1795 a building that was soon to have a remarkable concert hall, was re-dedicated to the education of the Republic's young musicians, musicians taught by the revolutionaries of the old regime. Paris, still unaware of Beethoven, was hailing Haydn and listening to the operas of Mozart. If, on the eve of the revolution, Paris was prepared to reject a set of aesthetics that had been carved to perfection over 150 years, it was yet unprepared to measure up to the truly revolutionary music emanating from Vienna and the east of Europe. Is it possible that the French never completely understood the kind of compositional changes embodied in the sonata principal of Haydn and Beethoven? Whatever the case may be, Paris was able to offer performers of the highest virtuosity and taste to a population hungry for new music and instrumentalists. Even through the *Terror*, the city did not see an end to public performances.

The *Conservatoire* has its roots in the 17th century *École Royale de chant et danse*, which taught singing, instrumental music, harmony and composition, as well as dance. It was installed in existing *Hotel des Menus-Plaisirs*, built in 1763. This building served as the depot for the sets and costumes of the Opéra. In 1786 a school for declamation was added. It became the major teaching institution for classical French acting, producing the finest comedians of the early 19th century, including the actor François Joseph Talma. In 1795 it was named the *Conservatoire de musique et declamation*. It remained in this building until 1913.

Newly baptized by the infant republic, the *Conservatoire* was to educate composers and performers, to utilize them to celebrate the values of the republic and, less obviously, to camouflage the disorder that had taken over France. (Indeed, all were vulnerable: Both musicians and scientists could not guarantee their immunity to the irrationalities of Robespierre, and several ended their lives on the scaffold.) Just as China and Russia held hard rules for the arts, so did France. Music for the *Sacrés*, organized by the government, was to be sung by large choirs who were charged with patriotism but incapable of complication. Operas had to tell stories that could express the themes of the new society. A government-run agency could best control the education of a nation's musicians—not the Church and not the Palace.

And Yet, Paris is a complicated place. Ambivalence abounds, and judgments in Paris can be as faulty as the Judgment of Paris! The *Conservatoire's* concert hall, the setting for the premier of Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique*, the first Parisian performances of

Beethoven's symphonies, and for the trials of geniuses like Debussy and Ravel, that hall did not necessarily advance the success of genius. The *wise* panelists of the *Conservatoire* rejected the brilliance of Debussy and Berlioz, just as the academicians of the visual arts rejected the Impressionists. Real revolution threatens poise. The French breathe poise.

At the dawn of the 19th century, there was a new Parisian audience to please, and of course a significant portion of the city's former audience was absent. The nobility, highly educated in the arts, was no longer the market for music, but an emerging audience found itself listening to new sounds. Barely informed but desirous of social elevation, what did they hear and what did they understand? Little, it seems! Rising to the challenge to educate not just a new generation of musicians, but a new audience, the *Conservatoire* responded with a series of *Concerts français* given 12 Sundays during the year. Students performed new orchestral works, rehearsed by Professors Cherubini and Méhul. At performance time, the baton was handed over to the brilliant student François-Antoine Habeneck, the man who introduced Paris to the symphonies of Beethoven. The popularity of these regular concerts demanded a new hall, and François Delannois, architect of Passage Vivienne, Europe's earliest, covered commercial street or gallery, was commissioned to build it.

Although it is off the beaten path of today's tourist, the *Conservatoire's* concert hall is a choice destination for the enthusiast of early 19th-century Paris. Built in 1811 in the Pompeian style, it is in pristine condition. Apply the right degree of reverence as you approach the concierge guarding the entry of the school, and he will allow you to enter. Expect to experience a revelation: Imagine, for a moment, a performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* in this space. Imagine the four, large harps set up across the entire stage for the *Ball Scene*. Recall the biting brass section, and the chills it sends down your spine during the *March to the Scaffold*. Recall the haunting and savage *Witches' Sabbath*. Now consider that the *Conservatoire's* concert hall seats only 450, and you quickly comprehend the painful impact of a healthy forte in that space! Remember, too, that Berlioz's audience could hardly have forgotten absent friends who had been marched to the guillotine just a few decades earlier. Stand in that space, now empty, and you can surely appreciate the horror this new music inspired.

On a gentler note, the violinists Pierre Rode, Rodolphe Kreutzer and Pierre Baillot admonished their students to play delicately, to err on the side of softness, and this seems completely appropriate in a hall where the slightest musical whisper can be universally and perfectly heard. These three violinists were all performers, composers and teachers. And while they represented the French school of violin playing, all three were under the influence of Italian violinist Giovanni Battista Viotti, an international musician much admired by Mozart. Rode was a student of Viotti, but Kreutzer and Baillot were his disciples as well. They all performed Viotti's concertos in public concert, and all swam in the current of a style that was international, if not more specifically Viennese.

The French, while voicing praise to the idea of the larger public, of *les enfants de la Patrie*, could never abandon the private salon and the remarkable elegance that

accompanies the life of the élite. With that in mind, our program includes violin variations by Pierre Rode, with moments that bring wit and refined expression to the fore. More remarkable is the exquisite Andante by the composer Hyacinthe Jadin. He held the post of piano teacher of the woman's classes at the Conservatoire. His romantic miniature work, so expressive of the French talent for touching understatement and salon aesthetics, foreshadows Chopin and recalls the values of François Couperin. This uniquely gifted pianist's few remaining sonatas show promise of a future more thrilling than any other of his colleagues, and yet tragically he died at the age of 24.

One role played by the *Conservatoire* was to codify instrumental techniques and produce textbooks for each instrument. These volumes, created by the fabled performers of the day, included a repertoire of études and caprices, information on good taste and proper attitudes towards the instrument, score and audience; and detailed instructions for the playing of the violin, piano, flute, cello, and so on. As such, they provide a window into the values of the early 19th century and the closest possible contact with these performers.

Today, young cellists still enter the world of the solo sonata with the didactic works of Jean-Baptiste Bréval. Our sonata, more sophisticated than Bréval's student works, is dramatic music that explores the tempestuous world of G minor. Violinists still refine their techniques with the aid of Rodolphe Kreutzer's caprices or études. It was then and should be understood now that these works, demanding of the hand, also demand of the mind and heart, allowing the performer to find the musicality as well and the dexterity of each study. Baillot tells us in his violin method that the violin is played as much with the soul as it is with the fingers.

Étienne Méhul, reigned in the world of opera while his symphonies were hailed as worthy comrades to those of Haydn. He entered the public sphere with a series of six piano sonatas that predict his future dramatic style. His style here, mostly gallant, includes interjections of disturbing but beautiful romanticism as delicious today as they were surprising and possibly upsetting in 1783. After these early works, Méhul abandoned the keyboard. He remains one of those lionized composers whose cameo decorates every opera house and concert hall built in France from 1811 to 1900.

Méhul, as all French composers found their works compared, almost always unfavorably and with a profound sense of national inferiority to Haydn and Beethoven. Familiarity with Beethoven made the rejection of ancient French musical traditions all but unavoidable. The young talent of the *Conservatoire*, the French *avant-garde* of the time, found Beethoven an inescapable influence. So did all of Europe. One of the many conservative, under-educated critics in Paris, in a lament for the days of the sensitive and decorous Couperin, clearly preferred to feel moved by music, rather than surprised:

*This is a dangerous example for music. The contagion of Germanic harmony seems to be creeping into the modern school of composition forming at the Conservatoire. They seem to think they can produce an effect by providing the most barbarous dissonances and by using all the instruments of the orchestra to make a din.*

But the time of the bizarre, so praised by the great Romantic artist Anne-Louis Girodet, has arrived, and there is no fear of ugliness and exaggeration in the service of expression. Somehow, Berlioz with his brilliance for color and instrumentation remains fundamentally French, but the rest of France does not.

François Devienne and the Bohemian Anton Reicha, both star professors at the *Conservatoire*, were able to supply Paris with trios, quartets and larger chamber works that stood comparison with the new repertoire coming from Vienna. Both trios performed on our program are ambitious and successful compositions that handle large forms in interesting ways, and create a dramatic and compelling narrative. Interestingly, in the provinces of France, one critic commented after hearing one of Reicha's quartets:

*I cannot describe how delighted we were, who until now had only those sterile quartets churned out from mangled opera themes. Now at last we had real music that could hold its own next to Haydn and Mozart....and which no longer obliged us to blush....*

It would take the French Naturalist writers Edmond de Goncourt and his brother Jules, with their love of Boucher, Fragonard and Watteau; Debussy the great revolutionary of the 20th century, with his distaste for the monopoly of German musical values, to bring French music and painting back to their roots and to their unique strengths, inescapably seductive for the connoisseur and somehow noble in its sensuousness. But for our program on January 25th, Four Nations will join the children of the *Patrie* and pay homage to this generation of composers who, with heads safe on shoulders, steered Paris into the 19th century.

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