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In search of a politesse du chant: Rediscovering salon vocal performance practice through the lens of the airs sérieux in the Recueils d'airs sérieux et à boire de différents auteurs, 1695-1699

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background and motivation for the study

At the end of the seventeenth century, the Ballard music printing house in Paris embarked on a new publishing venture: the *Recueils d'airs sérieux et à boire de différents auteurs*.¹ From 1695 to 1724, Christophe Ballard and, later, his son, Jean-Baptiste-Christophe Ballard, created what was to become a vast collection of vocal works which would bear witness to musical tastes at the turn of the seventeenth century and develop and thrive for thirty years.²

The monthly frequency of the *Recueils* made it a reactive publication which was able to be responsive to the musical tastes and fashions of its market audience. Ballard's editorial task in producing the *Recueils* was a cyclical and co-dependent one, in which he identified musical trends and fed these trends back to his clientele by selecting and publishing those airs which best gave voice to them. Given the longevity and success of the *Recueils*, the airs in the series can be said to represent musical taste of the time. As witnesses to evolving music practice and documents on performance practice, the songs in the collection warrant detailed investigation.

The desire to unveil and, quite simply, to sing the *airs sérieux* in the *Recueils*, a neglected repertoire which had nevertheless shaped the musical and cultural *Zeitgeist* of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Paris, was the impetus for this study. While French baroque vocal forms such as opera (to use a loose term) have become somewhat mainstream in modern lyric programming, the *air sérieux* as a genre, to which some of the finest composers of the day turned their hand, remains relatively unknown territory. What of the hundreds of *airs sérieux*, often anonymous, which were considered by Ballard to be worthy of publication in a collection for which there was a compelling appetite month after month over the course of several decades?

Realising that the long publication span of the *Recueils* would inevitably imply an evolution in the air and its performance contexts that was too expansive for an in-depth piece of artistic research, I chose to concentrate on the early years of the *Recueils*, that is, those published between 1695 and 1699 inclusive, and to focus exclusively on the *airs sérieux* in the collection, rather than the *airs à boire*.³

¹ *Recueils d'airs sérieux et à boire de différents auteurs* (Paris: Christophe Ballard, 1695-1715; Paris: Jean-Baptiste-Christophe Ballard, 1716-1724). These are conserved in the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, and the volumes published in the years 1695-1699 which are the subject of the present study are found at F-Pn VM⁷ 528-532. These will hereafter be referred to as the *Recueil* or *Recueils* as context dictates. When referring to a specific *air sérieux*, I will use the catalogue number (usually accompanied by the *incipit* of the air) which I assigned to each piece when I made an inventory of the collection. The catalogue number consists of the abbreviation "RASB" in combination with the year of publication, the month of publication, and the page number. For example, "RASB 1695/5/86" refers to an air on page 86 of the *Recueil* published in May 1695.

² On the death of Christophe Ballard in 1715, Jean-Baptiste-Christophe Ballard assumed editorial responsibility. Hereafter, "Ballard" refers to the former pre-1715, the latter post-1715, or the publishing house generally, according to context.

³ Hereafter, "airs" will refer to *airs sérieux* unless otherwise specified.

In my concert practice prior to commencing this study, I regularly included in my programmes *airs sérieux* such as those found in the early *Recueils*, singing in small ensemble settings with harpsichord, viola da gamba, and theorbo in large churches or mid-size concert halls throughout the Low Countries, the United Kingdom, Austria, Switzerland, and Japan. Typically, my colleagues and I would programme *airs sérieux* amongst short instrumental works with a complementary tonality, forming mini, hybrid “suites” of music. Alternatively, we would fashion a sort of instrumental “introduction” for the airs – either an improvisation in the same key and style from the harpsichordist, or an instrumental rendition of one of the sung verses. These airs would often be programmed in concerts featuring Italian music. Sung alongside cantatas by Luigi Rossi and Carissimi, the brief French airs would feel like mini-*divertissements*, and never managed to provoke the same emotional response from the audience as their Italian foils.

This practice of strategic positioning was present in my mind when making recordings, too, and is reflected in the choice and ordering of repertoire in two of my discs which feature this repertoire; in *Musique pour Mazarin* (recorded with *Le Jardin Secret* for CORO in 2008), the French airs are purposefully nested within a strategically-arranged musical framework such that they are either made into “suites” as described above, or they act as “light relief” to the heftier Italian cantatas on the recording, which seemed better able to stand alone musically. Equally, in the disc featuring the *airs sérieux* of Jean-Baptiste Drouard de Bousset (recorded with *Le Jardin Secret* for Fuga Libera in 2015), the vocal pieces are artfully arranged by tonality, and, in a spirit of musical *bricolage*, surrounded by improvised introductions and postludes in order to “fill them out”.

Unlike singing a more substantial work such as a French cantata, *airs sérieux* have no surrounding narrative or immediate back-story to frame them. In contrast to singing a programme of operatic airs, too, the *airs sérieux* in the repertoire studied are brief, with no sure way for the singer or audience to be able to anchor the piece into a larger dramatic vector. The airs are built around a standard poetic vocabulary, yet this homogeneity of expression produces a vast variety of styles, implicating a large cast of pastoral characters who do not necessarily bear any relationship to one another’s emotional situation. Looking back at the rationale for programming airs in an almost apologetic way by “hiding” them within larger musical concoctions, the strong impression that remains in my mind is that the short and fragmentary expressions of emotions in the airs needed some sort of larger framework to “prop them up”. Even now in contemplating alternative programming choices, I feel that a further framework in which to place the airs is necessary.

Thus, alongside my musical curiosity about the *airs sérieux* of the *Recueils*, this study was equally motivated by my search for a performative context that would make sense of these brief pieces. As I will demonstrate in chapter 2, *airs sérieux* such as those published in the early *Recueils* were sung in a diverse range of musical fora, and the composing and singing of these airs was an activity which was integral to the Parisian salon at the end of the seventeenth century, and to the polite conversation practised there. Having read about the development of the *air sérieux* and music-making in Paris at this time, I formed the contention that the sociable interaction of these worldly gatherings held the clues to this meaningful context. I hypothesised that by modulating my performance habits to accord with the standards of *bienséance* and decorum demanded in polite society, I would be able to access the performance practice surrounding the airs in this refined context. Although

studies have been done by musicologists and historians both on the salon and on conversation, no work had previously documented the performance practice of the air within salon interaction from the practical, vocal perspective of the artist.

Thus it was my aim not only to uncover and present this forgotten repertoire, but to explore and document from a very practical and personal vocal point of view, how an *air sérieux* when sung in the salon context would sound, and the paths which I feel the theorists are instructing us to take in order to reach this new sonic landscape.

1.2 Scope of the study and research questions

As part of my quest to reconstruct the vocal practices of a Parisian salon, I looked at writings dealing with singing, aesthetics, and music. As I delved further into the literature and continued to sing the airs in the *Recueils*, it quickly became evident that despite my interest in and experience with French baroque vocal music, my approach did not share the same focus as that espoused by the theorists who wrote about the art of singing at a time close to the publication dates of the *Recueils* investigated.

It became clear that salon vocal practice was in effect a decorous, modified version of the vocal and gestural practices of the professional stage singer, and I therefore found it necessary to re-assess my understanding of the instructions handed down by the theorists to that particular musical demographic. I felt sure, as a result of my reading and the findings presented in this study, that performances of late seventeenth-century French baroque repertoire which claim to be historically-informed (my own included) did not fully reflect the instructions of the theorists. Cherry-picking of information from the treatises had led to a brand of performance practice which was not in fact correct. I felt that in order to build a salon version of song, I first had to destroy then rebuild my conceptions of the vocal practices of the stage from which salon singing was derived. I felt I had to seek out a version of the airs which would have accorded with the ideals espoused by the theorists before I could see how this ideal would have been tempered by salon factors.

Therefore, I undertook a review of the primary theoretical sources as they relate to vocal performance which are as close to the repertoire studied as possible. To the non-French-speaking singer of today, the full arsenal of primary sources remains inaccessible. This is particularly the case for the material on tones of voice and the writings of Mersenne, for which there is no English translation. Indications of general performance conventions are potentially obscured by secondary sources and modern commentators. In an effort to “stand in the shoes” of the seventeenth-century singer, I attempted to equip myself with the knowledge available to them at the time, confining myself first and foremost, therefore, to the primary sources.

Such a theoretical and academic approach is highly appropriate to the field of period performance. Without recourse to the sound-world of contemporaneous seventeenth-century renditions, the modern-day performer is categorically obliged to consult written theoretical traces as the major, and sometimes the only, source of information as to musical practice.

As I will demonstrate in chapter 5, in order to achieve the art of singing well according to the standards of the theorists whose writings are examined in that chapter, the singer was obliged to give voice to the affects encoded within the music and text and, in their *actio*, to create a physical and vocal incarnation of the passions. My quest therefore focused heavily on declamation and the spoken voice, the theory of the passions and their portrayal in the voice and body of the singer. Although this quest no doubt made this dissertation a longer one to read, it was an important one and I consider the practical results and observations which are drawn from applying the findings in chapter 5 which touch on this facet of the study to be as much a part of the research output as those dealing with the salon.

In order to develop an understanding of the historical soundscape of the *air sérieux* within salon culture and polite conversation, I was steered by the research questions listed below, which were significant signposts in the practical part of my study.

Firstly, the quest to revise what I thought of as historically-informed vocal practice was encapsulated within the first research question, formulated as follows:

Research question 1

Using only the clues found within the scores and the instructions set out in treatises dealing with singing, music, aesthetics, and rhetoric, what would the airs sérieux in the early years of the Recueils have sounded like if performed in accordance with those instructions?

This research question is made up of two distinct inquiries:

- (i) *What affects are encoded within the words and music of a piece; and*
- (ii) *How does the singer give voice to these affects?*

My second research question involved a close review of the specific circumstances of the late seventeenth-century salon, its prevailing norms of behaviour, and how these circumstances influenced the art of singing. My hypothesis had been that the rules governing social comportment and factors peculiar to the small-scale setting of the salon would have moderated the way an *air sérieux* sounded in performance in that context. In the hands of the polite member of cultured society, what influence would these “moderating factors” have had on musical practice and vocality? As we shall see, a number of the airs in the *Recueils* were drawn from dramatic stage works. Moreover, brief solo airs with continuo accompaniment similar to those found in the *Recueils* make frequent appearances in spoken and sung theatrical works.

The repertoire in the *Recueils* thus leaves the stage and crosses over into the realm of the polite society member who takes singing seriously but is nevertheless regulated and governed by other values both in comportment and music-making. This issue of cross-over of performance practice is critical to this study, and the concept operates on several levels. Firstly, the airs in the *Recueils* which are drawn from the stage cross over to polite society via the medium of their publication by the Ballards each month. The airs thereby cross over from the professional world of the then-current standards and expectations of stage singers (or *acteurs qui chantent*) to the consumers of the *Recueils*, the cultured amateur music-

maker. The professional singer, too, who makes appearances to sing in the intimate salon gatherings crosses over from the large dimensions of the theatrical or lyric stage to the reduced dimensions of the world of the amateur, which represents not only a physical cross-over in architectural space, but potentially also a cross-over in expectation and a modification of vocal delivery. The salon amateur who sings these airs drawn from dramatic works also crosses over, engaging, however briefly, with the world of the stage professional. The question which will be further explored in chapter 6 and to which substantial attention will be paid in the performance observations in chapter 7 is how a salon rendition of an *air sérieux* by a salon participant would have sounded when contextualised in the performance space of such a gathering, transformed and modified by the rules of social comportment and strictures on modesty and decorum.

Throughout the study, these various strands of inquiry were framed by the following research question:

Research question 2

How might the moderating factors which were inherent to salon practice transform the sound of the air sérieux from the version espoused by the theorists ?

1.3 Previous studies in the field and contribution of this research to existing knowledge

The work carried out by Théodore Gérold⁴ on the art of singing in seventeenth-century France can be considered the starting point for study of the development of the air. Scholars who have explored the *air de cour* are in ready supply. Notable among them are André Verchaly,⁵ Georgie Durosoir,⁶ and Jeanice Brooks.⁷

The *air sérieux* has been the subject of several studies, such as those by Louis Auld⁸ and Lisa Perella.⁹ Some scholars have indeed studied the *Recueils*, but these studies have been approached from a slightly different angle from the present one; Don Fader¹⁰ used the *Recueils* as a lens through which to examine the *goûts réunis* in vocal music, and Catherine Massip¹¹ has explored the volumes to test the penetration of the Italian musical idiom into French publications.

On the *Recueils* themselves, Jean-Philippe Goujon's article¹² presents the most significant contribution, examining the history and contents of the publication and composer attributions. The only other French language study of the *Recueils*, which dates from 1958, is not available for study as it has not been deposited with a library.¹³ Anne-Madeleine Goulet's examination of the song texts of the *Livre d'airs de différents auteurs* between

⁴ Gérold, *L'art du chant*.

⁵ Verchaly, *Anthologie d'airs de Cour Pour Voix et Luth (1603-1643)*.

⁶ Durosoir, *L'Air de cour*.

⁷ Brooks, *Courtly Song*.

⁸ Auld, *The Lyric Art of Pierre Perrin*.

⁹ Perella, 'French Song'.

¹⁰ Fader, 'French Vocal Music'.

¹¹ Massip, 'Airs français et italiens'.

¹² Goujon, 'Les "Recueils d'airs sérieux"', 2010.

¹³ Robert, 'Airs sérieux et airs à boire: à 2 et 3 voix'.

1658 and 1694 represents a major contribution to the study of the literary and social contexts of the *air sérieux* presented in that earlier collection.¹⁴ Included in her study is an invaluable discussion of the place of the *air sérieux* within literary genres, polite society, and conversation, which has been critical in forming a backdrop to the present research.

Several authors have considered the *airs sérieux* found in composer-specific collections, including those by Jean-Baptiste Drouard de Bousset¹⁵ and Michel Lambert.¹⁶ Catherine Gordon-Seifert's work¹⁷ concentrates on the *air sérieux*, focusing on works by Lambert, Bacilly, La Barre, and Le Camus, and analysing their style based on rhetorical devices. In chapter 6 of that work, she offers the reader performance advice for interpreting the airs. In her related article, she groups various airs by Sébastien de Brossard together into musical dialogues, creating conversations in songs, to show the close correlation between airs by that composer and gallant discourse.¹⁸

Other interpretation guides offered to the performer by musicologists are to be found in part 5 of James R. Anthony's book,¹⁹ and in chapter 11 of David Tunley's book on the eighteenth-century French cantata.²⁰ Patricia Ranum's *Harmonic Orator*²¹ represents an extensive investigation of elements relating to the French language, poetry, and musical settings of French dance airs, and the way rhetoric was woven into their phrasing and music. Sally Sanford's article²² comparing French and Italian singing styles in the seventeenth century presents many of the concepts discussed by Bacilly and later French theorists who discuss expressive pronunciation and consonant doubling. It does not, however, address the pivotal influence of declamation on the development of singing, nor the plurality of vocal styles that I will argue existed at the time the airs under investigation were published and sung.

With a different focus to the above studies, this dissertation investigates and unveils the airs contained within the early years of a collection which has not previously attracted significant academic attention, and which has not been the subject of applied, artistic research. The *airs sérieux* are given their first in-depth "forensic" examination in a chapter in which I analyse the *Recueils* as physical objects. By looking at musical parameters such as voice setting, ornamentation markings, and accompaniment indications, I am able to present clues as to who sang these airs, the technical demands required of them, and the context in which they were sung.

Towards the latter part of this study, two dissertations came to my attention. Mallika Lecœur's work²³ investigates conversation as performance in the salon, adding to the

¹⁴ Goulet, *Poésie, musique et sociabilité*. Hereafter, the earlier publication of airs will be referred to as the '*Livres d'airs*'.

¹⁵ Garden, 'The Airs of Jean-Baptiste de Bousset'.

¹⁶ Massip, *L'art de bien chanter*.

¹⁷ Gordon-Seifert, *Music and the Language of Love*.

¹⁸ Gordon-Seifert, 'La réplique'.

¹⁹ Anthony, *French Baroque Music*.

²⁰ Tunley, *The Eighteenth-Century French Cantata*.

²¹ Ranum, *Harmonic Orator*.

²² Sanford, 'Comparison of French and Italian Singing'.

²³ Lecœur, 'Conversation and Performance'.

significant body of academic material on the salon, its nature and transformation.²⁴ Michael Bane's dissertation²⁵ looks at both singing and guitar practice, and explores the concept of *honnêteté* and how this modified performance practices amongst amateur music-making in seventeenth-century France. His material on singing primarily addresses, from a musicological point of view, the clash between ideals of physiognomy, noble bearing and good pronunciation. Although reflecting on vocal possibilities in the salon, his approach, in common with Gordon-Seifert's, does not fully situate salon singing on a vocal continuum, and does not give due weight to the significant stylistic influence that dramatic renditions sung by stage professionals must have had on their diluted salon versions. Nor does it consider in depth and from a practical point of view the areas of collision and coalescence between salon values and the type of singing espoused by the seventeenth-century French theorists. Such an approach only tells half the story, in my view. Salon practice was not a modification of what is currently presented to us as historically-informed vocal practice. Relying principally on primary sources, I hope to demonstrate in chapter 6 that the theorists' conception of ideal singing (of which the salon version was a polite dilution) was much richer in affective expression than we know today. The documentation of the steps involved in re-creating what I have termed a "fully-affective" performance that accorded with this vision became a major part of my inquiry and distinguishes this study from all of the above musicological incursions into the field.

This study differs significantly from the above works on the practical front, too. It represents the first examination focused on the *air sérieux* in which new knowledge is generated by a re-reading of the historical sources in conjunction with the practical application of these sources to singing. From the unique position of the artist-researcher, I build up a picture of the declamatory approach to singing espoused by the historical theorists, and then experiment with applying these instructions methodically and systematically to my own voice. By exploring the interwoven theoretical values of decorum, modesty, and *politesse* and applying these to song, the reactions of my voice and body generate a practical, singer's perspective on how this all-important code of behaviour modified the instructions of the theorists who wrote about singing. In doing so, I seek to re-create an undocumented sound-world and a nuanced style of vocalicity which was unique to the salon - a veritable *politesse du chant*.²⁶

1.4 Dissertation road-map

Chapter 1 serves as a brief overview of the scope of the study, introducing the reader to the publication context of the collection and its contents, documenting previous studies in this area, and providing a summary of the essential characteristics of the *air sérieux*.

In chapter 2, I explore the contexts and venues in which these pieces were performed, the status of music-making and singing, and I present a profile of the protagonists who reportedly sang and cultivated this miniature genre. This contextual picture is built up not only by recourse to existing historiographical studies, but also by examining the provenance of several of the airs in the early *Recueils*, notably those drawn from stage works. The salon

²⁴ See for example Harth, *Cartesian Women*; Goldsmith, 'Excess and Euphoria'; Denis, *La muse galante*; Goldsmith, 'Excess and Euphoria'; Lilti, *Le monde des salons*; Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes*.

²⁵ Bane, 'Honnêtes Gens'.

²⁶ This term is borrowed from Bacilly. See 'Réponse', 9.

as a performance locus will be described. I will introduce the way in which stage repertoire was transmitted to the salon, and the intermingling and cross-pollination of performance modes and personnel. Thereafter, the first step of the reconstruction process will begin.

In chapter 3, I examine the *airs sérieux* and the *Recueils* as forensic objects. By investigating the physical format of the collection and the musical parameters, technical demands, and editorial practices associated with the airs, I show the collection to be one which both dictated and reflected musical and vocal practice. The information in this chapter allows me to start to situate the volumes within their sociable circles.

As a prelude to the information presented in chapter 5, chapter 4 investigates the compositional and textual mechanisms by which seventeenth-century French composers and lyric poets conveyed the passions, providing the reader with a set of rules to decipher the passions conveyed in the *airs sérieux* of the *Recueils*.

Chapter 5 will concentrate on the fundamental question of vocal performance practice at the end of the seventeenth century in France; I seek to demonstrate from the sources that it was the role of the singer to portray in his or her voice and gesture the passions encoded in the text and music. Largely confining myself to the writings of French theorists at a period in time which was close to the publication dates of the *Recueils* studied, I re-create from their first principles a conception of *l'art de bien chanter*. Not only will this information be used as a point of departure from which salon singing will later be examined, but by applying this knowledge, I will raise several issues which may expand current thinking on the thorny issue of “authenticity” and historically-informed performance practice.

Drawing on literary accounts and seventeenth-century conversation and etiquette manuals, I describe in chapter 6 the many and various occasions which prompted salon participants to break into song. Castiglione’s conception of the ideal courtier, which translated itself into a very Gallic format in the guise of *politesse*, *honnêteté* and *bienséance*, enters the picture, and I use this chapter to demonstrate how these prevailing values would have transformed the vocal practice presented in the previous chapter.

In chapter 7, the musicological elements and the practical elements of this study meet. The case-study air drawn from the *Recueils* will be submitted to an affective analysis, testing its musical and textual parameters against the rules covered in chapter 4. Synthesising all of the information uncovered in preceding chapters, I examine the case-study air in the various guises elaborated in this dissertation, reflecting on the challenges which the singer meets when confronting the musicological evidence. My notes on the preparation of these renditions and the practical observations which make up chapter 7 form, along with some final thoughts, the responses to the research questions and the conclusion to this study.

1.5 Notes on translations and spellings

I have attempted to avoid large tracts of French texts in this dissertation but have sometimes felt that their inclusion was necessary. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Translations of longer texts appear in the footnotes. Small phrases or words have only been translated where the context does not suffice to indicate their meaning. Original spelling and punctuation have been retained throughout.

Three airs from the *Recueils* investigated were not available for access and copying from the Bibliothèque Nationale. Using my catalogue numbers, these were RASB 1697/3/46, RASB 1697/3/54, and RASB 1699/10/194. The data extracted for the forensic investigation in chapter 3 is reflective of this.

In chapters 4 and 5, there are many references to Mersenne's *Harmonie universelle*, which consists of three volumes made up of five treatises. To clarify my references to this vast work, I have adopted the policy of avoiding the name of Mersenne's titles (as these sometimes overlap and are ambiguous). Instead, I refer to the treatise by large Roman numeral, the book or *livre* by small Roman numeral, followed by the page number in Hindu-Arabic format. The two parts of *livre vi* of treatise IV are simply referred to either as "part 1" or "part 2". Thus, for example, page 340 of "*Ordres des sons*" would be cited thus: IV, vi, part 1, 340. Additionally, it should be noted that there are a number of pagination errors in Mersenne's work. Where relevant, I have indicated the sequentially-correct number in square brackets and have noted the incorrect page number in parentheses following that. Treatises III and IV are the principal ones relevant to this study and are expanded below to show the *livres* of which they are made up.

- I. Traitez de la nature des sons, et des mouvemens de toutes sortes de corps.
- II. Traitez de mecanique.
- III. Traitez de la voix et des chants:
 - Livre i: De la voix
 - Livre ii: Des chants
- IV. Traitez des consonances, des dissonances, des genres, & de la composition
 - Livre i: Des consonances
 - Livre ii: Des dissonances
 - Livre iii: Des genres, des espèces des systems & des modes de la musique
 - Livre iv: De la composition
 - Livre v: De la composition de musique
 - Livre vi: L'art de bien chanter
 - Part 1. Ordre des sons
 - Part 2. L'Art d'embellir la voix, les recits, les airs et les chants
- V. Traitez des instruments à chords