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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

Dobbin, E.

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Summary

This dissertation examines the *airs sérieux* contained within the *Recueils d'airs sérieux et à boire de différents auteurs* published by the Ballard printing house in Paris between 1695 and 1699 inclusive. Inspired by the performer's desire to uncover and to sing this previously neglected yet rich and diverse repertoire, the present study was equally propelled by the researcher's instinct to investigate the vocal performance practice associated with it. Previous academic writings in this field showed that the *airs sérieux* of the type published in the *Recueils* were sung in a variety of fora, notably the seventeenth-century Parisian salon. The vocal practice associated with this sociable institution and its polite modes of conversation and interaction therefore represent the principal focus of this study. In its examination of the nuanced style of singing that was unique to these worldly gatherings, the present study seeks to unveil a *politesse du chant*.

The dissertation consists of the following chapters:

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the study, the artistic motivation behind this project, previous academic work undertaken in this field, and the research questions which were the signposts throughout the trajectory.

In chapter 2, I describe the various performance contexts associated with the singing of *airs sérieux* and provide historiographical evidence as to the protagonists who typically sang this miniature genre. Evidence is presented linking the *airs sérieux* in the 1695-1699 *Recueils* to repertoire for the lyric and dramatic stage, and it was observed that brief solo airs with continuo accompaniment of the type found in the *Recueils* also made frequent appearances in stage works. The salon as performance locus is introduced, and the concept of "cross-pollination" of performance practice is discussed; the publication in the *Recueils* of airs from operatic and theatrical works effectively made these vocal pieces available to the cultured salon participant, and this chapter describes how performance modes and personnel intermingled in that refined environment.

Chapter 3 examines the *airs sérieux* from a musical point of view and from this, I build up a picture of the likely singing public and their vocal capabilities. By investigating the 1695-1699 *Recueils* as physical objects and discussing the printing and editorial choices made by Ballard, I situate the *airs sérieux* within their sociable performance context.

A review of the seventeenth-century theoretical writings on aesthetics and singing revealed that the ideal model was one which was richer in affective expression than we know today. Poets and composers made use of codified textual and compositional devices in order to weave emotional expression into their creations, which the performer was then tasked with incarnating in his or her voice and gesture. For all involved in the creative, performance and listening processes, knowledge of the passions was essential. Chapter 4 sets out in detail the compositional and poetic devices which were the vehicles of affective representation, providing the reader with a set of clues as to how to decipher the passions encoded within a texted piece of music.

Closely linked to this information is the material presented in chapter 5. In that chapter, I examine seventeenth-century historical sources on vocality in order to re-create from first principles an historically-accurate concept of singing well or (in the words of Bacilly) *l'art de bien chanter*. The purpose of this exercise was to form an artistic launch-pad, from which to explore how this ideal model was then transformed and adapted in the salon.

Chapter 6 presents a panorama of literary accounts and seventeenth-century etiquette and conversation manuals, painting a detailed picture of the immediate sociable and conversational context in which people broke into song. Drawing on Castiglione's writings about the ideal courtier, the concepts of *politesse*, *honnêteté*, and *bienséance* are introduced, and the end of that chapter describes how these values left their mark on vocal practice.

The final chapter synthesises all of the above material. Using an air from the 1695 *Recueil* as a case-study and positioned from the subjective perspective of the performer-researcher, I describe and comment on my singing of three versions of this one air: the "concert version", the "fully-affective version", and the "salon version". The concert version is used as a base-case scenario, against which the fully-affective version and the salon version are compared and contrasted. The air is submitted to an affective analysis using the parameters outlined in chapter 4 in order to examine the passions encoded within its text and music. In doing so, personal observations are made as to the usefulness or otherwise of the theoretical and modern writings which address these parameters. By applying the material set out in chapter 5 as strictly as possible, I describe and comment on a fully-affective version of the air, and make observations as to what is happening at the inter-connected levels of the imagination, the body, and the voice. Using the material examined in chapter 6, I then consider the interwoven theoretical values of decorum, modesty, and *politesse* and apply these to the case-study air. 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.

The dissertation closes with a personal reflection on avenues for future potential research, the way in which this study has changed my perspective on teaching French baroque vocal repertoire, and possible connections between salon modes of vocality and current modes of concert performance practice.