



REVIEW: BOOK

## Music, Pantomime & Freedom in Enlightenment France

Hedy Law

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*Music, Pantomime & Freedom in Enlightenment France* follows the trajectory of pantomime from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition on Parisian *foire* stages to its integration into the reform operas of Christoph Willibald Gluck and Antonio Salieri. The status of pantomime rose from the 1730s to the 1750s, particularly through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Le devin du village* (1752–1754), and it came to be accepted as a more articulate form of gesture than 'decorative' dance (*la belle danse*). At times, it was even believed to communicate more effectively than language. As the demand for operatic verisimilitude grew through the 1770s, Gluck drew on both pantomime and pantomime-inspired musical gestures to propel dramatic action forward. By the 1780s, Salieri was using gesture and motion within music not only to articulate conflicting or unspoken thoughts, as Gluck had done, but also to dramatize inaction. Hedy Law emphasizes that pantomime falls within a genealogy of dance as well as an archaeology of communication: through a comprehensive study of pantomime in Paris, she narrates how the significance of physical and musical gesture was honed and refined over the course of the eighteenth century.

By putting music back into conversation with its sister art forms, Law illuminates multiple new dimensions to familiar issues in eighteenth-century music scholarship: the transition from imitative to expressive aesthetics, the unfolding of opera reform in France and the nuances of eighteenth-century *querelles*. She clarifies contemporaneous perceptions of the relationship between music and language, and of musical topics and signs. A number of recent issues in the field also come into play here, such as the role of audiovisual cognition in music, as probed in Deirdre Loughridge's *Haydn's Sunrise, Beethoven's Shadow: Audiovisual Culture and the Emergence of Musical Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), and the role of gesture in Italian music that is explored in Ellen Lockhart's *Animation, Plasticity, and Music in Italy, 1770–1830* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017). The book thus contributes meaningfully to several eighteenth-century scholarly conversations.

Law situates the historical trajectory and aesthetic evolution of pantomime within a solid Enlightenment intellectual genealogy. It begins with Jean-Baptiste Dubos's foundational claim that pantomime might rise above its fair-theatre *bas comique* role to serve instead as an enlightened form of dance, restoring the art form to its original stature in ancient Greece and Rome. A long line of writers took up Dubos's proposal, and Law builds her method on the robust body of literature generated in response to his claim. The depth and breadth of French Enlightenment texts surveyed in this book and the nuanced lexical probing performed here are remarkable. Law grasps and grapples with this discourse expertly, sparing no detail. From this rich collection of primary sources she establishes a framework for interpreting gestures as signs in eighteenth-century pantomimes: accidental (relating back to previous connotations), natural (such as cries or sighs) or instituted (arbitrarily assigned meanings). These significations eventually extend beyond the gestures of stage actors

into orchestral accompaniments. Through this scheme Law performs a number of detailed analyses of movement, music and text. The resulting intellectual history connects pantomime as a cultural phenomenon with contemporaneous thought on moral liberty. The broadest conclusion she draws from this assessment is that pantomime provided opportunities for composers, performers and spectators to exercise moral liberty, especially of expression, even before the 1789 Revolution legally granted French citizens the right to communicate freely. Law is nevertheless categorical in her assertion – correctly so – that the historical actors in this study thought of liberty in strictly moral and not necessarily political terms.

The chapters proceed chronologically. The first shows the rising prevalence of pantomime in early eighteenth-century France, where it was conceived as both a decorative dance and an expressive form of acting. Jean-Philippe Rameau approached pantomime in his *Platée* (1745) through a density of musical motives rather than a single unifying dance form to imitate the gestural variety one would expect from a pantomime actor. Law interprets his reconciliation of pantomime's identity as both dance and gesture as an exercise in creative liberty. Building on the seminal work of Jacqueline Waeber, chapter 2 adds a new layer to well-known comparisons between Rameau and Rousseau. Although they shared similarities in their approach to pantomime, Rousseau, unlike Rameau, 'organized musical-gestural units into signs so that spectators could follow the resulting pantomime as continuously as if it were a narrative' (91–92). Law shows how the pantomime of *Le devin du village* put Rousseau's theories of moral liberty into practice: gestural signs were to facilitate spectators' reflection on the plot, teaching them to take pleasure in ambiguity and freedom during acts of interpretation.

By the 1760s, owing in large part to the renowned English actor David Garrick, pantomime moved from a technique deploying the mere imitation of scripts to an all-surpassing art form capable of expressive, convincing stage action. In chapter 3 this change is shown to have influenced Gluck, who (as is well known) began to employ orchestral accompaniments to advance dramatic action. Law takes a pantomimic lens to this phenomenon. Gluck prepared pantomimes with descriptive recitatives, used musical gestures to relate characters to one another before the diegesis revealed their relationships, and employed musical topics to interconnect scenes. His musical gestures thus rendered the invisible visible, such as Armide's desire to kill Renaud. As actors expressed their moral liberty by taking creative liberty to interpret scripts, spectators were also granted the liberty to decode polyvalent audiovisual signs as they wished. Law's analysis shows, then, that Gluck's orchestral writing – well known to be historically significant – owes its *raison d'être* at least in part to pantomime.

The physicality of Gluck's orchestral approach carries forward into the final two chapters of the book, which cover mechanistic and materialist Enlightenment philosophies. Chapter 4 distinguishes between motion (freedom of choice) and action ('an alternative to determinism' (140)). A detailed account of a Parisian performance of Haydn's 'Farewell' Symphony reveals an overlooked link in the chain of events that induced Parisians to embrace instrumental music. Law argues that when the audience understood the sight of musicians leaving the stage as an allusion to the Concert Spirituel's move to a new location, physical gesture and movement – no longer restricted to the theatre – came to convey comprehensible meaning to concert-hall listeners. In other words, by the 1780s, motion was no longer a purely theatrical device understood only to move dramatic action forward. An example of this change arises from a detailed analysis of Salieri's *Les Danaïdes* (1784), which 'dissociates' pantomimic and dramatic action through tonal ambiguity, indexing moments of truth and Hobbesian corporal liberty. According to Law, Salieri's 'Danaiids demonstrate kinetic and spatial freedom, but their unrestrained freedom indicates "corporal liberty" and not freedom of motion, because there is no evidence that they are capable of reflecting upon their behaviors before they take action' (157). The author thus argues that the Danaïdes are depicted as lacking humanity. The final chapter sets out to demonstrate how questions of natural rights were dramatized in Pierre Beaumarchais and Salieri's 1787 *Tarare*. Beaumarchais revived the prologue-epilogue

framework of bygone *tragédie* to embrace an atomistic theory of human life. Natural liberty was defined as the ‘human nature common to *all* men’ (183), and therefore atomistic understandings supported a view that, in the beginning, all humans were created from a set of equal atoms. Salieri’s Gluckian orchestration is shown to support this interpretation at a number of key moments in the prologue and plot. In his depiction of wind in the prologue, for example, Salieri makes visible the invisible, emphasizing how motion is more natural than language. Throughout the diegesis characters achieve ‘reversals’ that negate their seemingly fixed social status – a theme that connects with the atomistic view of all humans as fundamentally equal and therefore possessing natural rights.

Yet other scenarios in Beaumarchais and Salieri’s *Tarare* reveal the deep inequities underlying Enlightenment thought. Although the *Encyclopédie* asserted that ‘for humans to be “born free” they must not be ‘subject to the power of a master, and no one has a right of ownership over them’ (211), the title character Tarare appears at one point ‘in the guise of an anonymous black mute slave’ (198). Tarare eventually demonstrates the possibility of moral liberty, yet this is accomplished as the character Nature discriminates against non-reproductive sexual relationships and gender non-conforming individuals like the castrato Calpigi. Using inductive reasoning, Law shows (perhaps inadvertently) how deeply unfree Enlightenment ‘freedom’ really was.

While the scenarios in this book took place in textual and theatrical frames, they were instrumentalized in the political arenas of the French Revolution. Law’s study wisely stops short of this event. Indeed, even as the Revolution ostensibly granted freedom of communication to French citizens in 1789, by 1792 more radical revolutionaries capitalized, to disturbing ends, on the relationship between art and freedom cultivated during the Enlightenment. As Edouard Pommier shows in *L’art de la liberté: doctrines et débats de la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), discourses about art and freedom, rooted in a (mis)understanding of Greek and Roman art, justified the theft of cultural property from across Europe, casting stolen goods as ‘naturally’ French through a universalizing logic whereby no art could be considered foreign while resting on French soil. Indeed, the ‘universality’ sought in more ‘natural’ forms of communication like pantomime eventually did not embrace difference but erased it, demanding that bodies conform to a set of gendered and raced expectations determined by nationalist agendas. The paradoxes of Enlightenment freedom and their violent deployment under the name of Revolution are too copious to unpack here. *Music, Pantomime, & Freedom in Enlightenment France*, however, offers a necessary and detailed chronicle of how the moral, intellectual and cultural meanings invested in this art form set the stage for revolution.

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