

André Grétry, De la vérité. Ce que nous fumes, ce que nous sommes, ce que nous devrions être (1801)

Four years after his *Mémoires, ou Essais sur la musique* were republished in an expanded edition (1797), André Grétry (1741-1813), whose *opéras-comiques* had dominated French musical life under the late Ancien Régime and Revolution, felt a need to take up matters no longer directly related to music or composition. The latter, he confessed, interested him “less than formerly” (vol. 1, p. x). The title of his next book could hardly make the broadening of his ambition more explicit: *On Truth: What We Were, What We Are, What We Ought To Be* (1801) tries to be a work of maturity, philosophical and profound. “It is time to look after my retirement”, Grétry writes, “and philosophy, or reason (the same thing), is now my portion” (p. xv). Judging that his *Mémoires* had never considered more than psychological truths, he now wanted to take on moral questions, free from worries about boring a readership of musicians, in what became three heavy tomes addressed directly to the Institut national des Sciences et des Arts (of which he was a member).

Conscious of his maturity and life experience, Grétry pays still more attention to the stunning political evolution of French society during the revolutionary decade. The three parts of his title suggest a historical dimension to his project (“What We Were” is a brief history of France in “the time of Barbary and Feudalism”), mixed with personal testimony of recent events (“What We Are” is nothing more than a synopsis of the revolutionary events, initially in the form of a letter to his friend the abbé Rozier, dead in 1793) as well as, above all, analyses with a moralistic pretention (“What We Ought To Be”). This third section, occupying more than half of the first volume and the whole of the other two, consists in a plethora of analyses in which Grétry obsessively ferrets out manifestation of truth and of bad faith in the behaviour of his contemporaries, the economic structures of society, and various institutions. “Much has been said in the last century about the perfectibility of man”, he writes, sitting at the desk of Rousseau (whose house in Montmorency he had acquired); “Here, I do more than that: I give the answers” (p. xviii). What he gives is a heterogeneous series of moral and political recommendations, in a spirit of republican reform destined for the citizen of the future, aiming always to instil the love of truth, harmony, and reason.

Truth, harmony, and reason: these three terms seem practically interchangeable for Grétry, whose sees liars as those who, in “ringing false” or “jarring” (p. 3), do injury to themselves and others. In this book, truth is not opposed to error, like the truths of physics, but to lies and bad faith. Truth takes on an aesthetic dimension: “I would gladly call truth all that is beautiful and just, and lies all that is ugly and unjust” (p. 50). Spontaneous love of harmony then follows naturally as one of the facets, a

sentimental one, by which we reach moral truth. And so Grétry proceeds to the analysis of the contemporary French society in search of republican “social harmony”, but also to analysis of the human heart, an organ agitated by harmonious or dissonant passions, of which the art of composition had already shown him many secrets. In many ways, though no longer writing about music, Grétry still writes as a musician, promising to make his readers hear what falsity sounds like in society, the better to retune it into a harmonious accord.

In his extended crusade against lies and self-regard, Grétry sniffs out these ills in every aspect of life and society: public instruction, the young, commerce, codes of honour (which legitimate duelling), and mores in volume 1; the arts and sciences, psychological life, love and the female sex (a particular obsession) in volume 2; the figure of Rousseau, moralistic literature, death, happiness, the immortality of the soul, and time in volume 3. Of the volumes, the one with the most to say about music is the second: here Grétry considers the influence of music on morals and its potential political and social uses, especially in civic festivals.

These three tomes seem not to have enjoyed much of an afterlife, and, though available in English translation since 2020, their reception, of which few traces have been found, seems to be just about nil today. The 1900 *Grove Dictionary* article on Grétry saw in *De la vérité* “simply a pretentious statement of his political and social opinions”, which might explain why the book fell into the dustbin of history. For all his ambition and citation of philosophers and writers, Grétry never really offers an original perspective on his subject, truth, either in literary or philosophical terms. The book nevertheless remains an interesting document for historians of this transitional period between Classicism and Romanticism, who can benefit from its numerous life stories and engaging anecdotes of social, scientific, and cultural life of the time.

Pierre BROUILLET

28/06/2022

Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

To quote this article: Pierre Brouillet, "André Grétry, *De la vérité*. Ce que nous fumes, ce que nous sommes, ce que nous devrions être (1801)", *Dictionary of Composer's Writings*, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 19/02/2025, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/2296>.