

## André Grétry, *Mémoires, ou Essai sur la musique* (1789)

In 1789, André Grétry (1741-1813) was at the height of his fame and emerging from an especially prolific period of composition, having written around fifteen *opéras-comiques* since the 1768 premiere of *Le Huron* in Paris. As director of music for Queen Marie-Antoinette, he enjoyed the favour of the court and an illustrious reputation. Such was the context, just prior to the first revolutionary events in Paris, for the publication “with the King’s approval and privilege” of his first written work, *Mémoires, ou Essai sur la musique*.

In terms of genre, the title of this hybrid work is curious. On the one hand, it includes a romanticised story of the author’s life, from his childhood in Liège and his years of musical training in Rome (covered in the section “Voyage de l’auteur en Italie”, a typical piece of Romantic or pre-Romantic *écriture de soi*) to his social life in Paris. But it is equally an “Essay on Music”, in that each important event becomes a pretext for reflections on various aspects of musical technique: the influence of rhythm on man, the teaching of composition, the difficulties of counterpoint (treated to a whole section, “De la musique d’église”), and the respective roles of the voice and instruments. The arrangement of the material follows the progression of Grétry’s musical abilities – his education –, giving the work a certain resemblance to Rousseau’s *Émile*, which it indeed frequently cites.

The agenda in these *Mémoires*, aimed at a wider audience than the select company of connoisseurs, is to convince readers that, despite the warring pamphlets and quarrels over particular composers, in which each one “preaches for his own saint”, “there is a saint for everyone” (p. 3), i.e. a music able to elicit universal acclaim, transcending genre and nationality. Drawing on his practical knowledge of music, his experience as a composer, Grétry sets himself to analyse the reasons for his works’ success, supporting his observations with numerous examples from great musicians such as Pergolesi, Lully, and Gluck. His aesthetic values align in many ways with those of Rousseau: melody is raised to the status of a fundamental musical principle, its quality dependent on the simplicity and emotional generosity of the soul that conceives it. Yet the melodist, though a “child of nature” (p. 261), must not overlook the harmonic resources of composition; Grétry ultimately takes an eclectic position, admitting, for example, Gluck’s expression of the passions through harmony and the orchestra rather than the human voice and melody.

It remains difficult to see this book as anything other than an “Essay on *My Music*”; if there really is “a saint for everyone”, a genuinely universal music, then Grétry, implicitly, is its model. On republication in 1797, the *Mémoires* were augmented with two new volumes containing descriptions of most of his operas, varying in

detail and enriched with anecdotes about his life and on compositional technique. Beyond the details of interest to enthusiasts of his work, these two volumes are less dense and novelised than the first, which still reads as an essay.

Such an assessment, however, risks diverting attention from a striking aspect of this work: its reception in the contemporary scientific community. The *Mémoires* were reprinted several more times (in 1812 and 1828) and translated into German by Karl Spazier in 1800. The physicist and musician Ernst Chladni promised in an 1801 letter to write a review of it. Moreover, Grétry was credited with several significant observations about music's influence on the body - particularly rhythm's effect on the pulse - as well as on the soul, as a balm for melancholy and a stimulant capable of inducing delirium. For this reason, he is often cited in medical theses and treatises from the early nineteenth century, such as *Des maladies mentales* (1838) by the French founder of alienism, Jean-Étienne Esquirol. Indeed, in trying to analyse the physical and moral effects of his music on audiences, Grétry started a line of inquiry into the connections between music and psychopathology, which paralleled the psychophysiological debates engendered by the rise of the human sciences during this period.

**Pierre BROUILLET**

28/06/2022

Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

To quote this article: Pierre Brouillet, "André Grétry, Mémoires, ou Essai sur la musique (1789)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 19/02/2025, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/2097>.