

Henri-Montan Berton, On Music Mechanical and Philosophical, Followed by a Letter to a Celebrated French Composer (1826)

This brochure of 1826 combines three articles first published in *L'Abeille* in 1821: in the midst of the controversy incited by the performances of Rossini's *Otello* at the Théâtre-Italien, Berton was responding to Stendhal, who saw him as the champion of the counter-revolution in music. Augmented by an epistle in verse addressed to a French musician, Boieldieu, whom Berton enjoins to not let down his guard in the face of the new trend, this brochure constitutes an important document of French anti-Rossinianism under the Restoration, even if Rossini himself is never named. The text takes an agonistic structure, vigorously defending the past masters of music (Berton was a member of the Institut and professor at the Conservatoire) against the wayward ways of the young school.

In fact, much of the text aims to canonise a pantheon of composers, at the core of which figure Haydn, Pergolesi, Sacchini, Jommelli and Piccinni, Cimarosa, and Paisiello. The most sustained attention is devoted to Gluck, raised to the status of the father of tragedy (Berton sees in the middle act of *Orphée* “the archetype of ideal beauty in music”, pg. 23) and to Grétry, honoured as the father of comedy. Add the names of Méhul and Mozart (“the Michelangelo of music”, pg. 30) and there comes together a repertoire of exemplars whose works, for Berton, “have laid down the rules of musical art” (pg. 34): governed by the “unity of interest”, these rules centre on economy of means, simplicity, and concision in the service of a morally-inflected search for truthful expression and an energy of the passions.

Against this musical legitimism stood the young school bitterly contested by Berton, for prioritising (as he saw it) a profusion of accessory means, violation of dramatic conventions, and worship of sheer effect and endangering the voice with overloaded instrumentation and the encroaching “roulade”. If the young generation calls the music of the great masters “philosophical”, Berton decides to call theirs “mechanical”, at once because it is reduced, he says, “to the mere use of physical means”, deprived “of those that empower its moral element” (pg. 40), and because such music could just as well be produced by a man like Maelzel, the inventor of the metronome! “Philosophical music” and “mechanical music” ultimately constitute two orientations between which the young generation will have to choose, situated at once within a renewed quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and another between Classics and Romantics.

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Further reading

Olivier Bara, « Les voix dissonantes de l'anti-rossinisme français sous la Restauration », *Chroniques italiennes*, n°77/78, 2006, p. 107-125.

Emmanuel Reibel, *Comment la musique est devenue « romantique » de Rousseau à Berlioz*, Paris, Fayard, 2013, p. 255 sq.

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