

Kastner, Jean-Georges (1810-1867): Overview of Writings

Jean-Georges Kastner occupies a singular position in nineteenth-century musical life. Born in Alsatian Strasbourg to a German-speaking family, he trained in theology before turning definitively to music, arriving in Paris in 1835. This dual cultural inheritance—Alsatian by birth, Parisian by adoption—shaped everything he wrote. Kastner was simultaneously a composer, a theorist, a journalist, a folklorist, and an amateur historian of remarkable (if sometimes undisciplined) ambition. His literary output is consequently vast and heterogeneous, spanning rigorous pedagogical treatises, ephemeral newspaper criticism, and an entirely *sui generis* genre of his own invention: the *livre-partition*, a hybrid publication combining an extended musicological essay with a fully scored composition for choral voices, soloists, and orchestra. If his writings have remained on the margins of musicological attention, it is partly because they resist easy categorization, and partly because Kastner himself was more synthesizer than originator. A tireless compiler of others' ideas, he was at his best when mapping an intellectual terrain, at his weakest when venturing judgments of his own. His written output touches an extraordinary range of subjects: military music, orchestration, ancient and medieval instruments, the dance of the dead, Aeolian harps, the street cries of Paris, the mythology of the Sirens, musical proverbs and idioms in the French language, and the relationship between music and cosmology. Running alongside all of this, and interrupted only by his sudden death in 1867, was an even more ambitious project: a vast *Encyclopédie de la musique* on which he had labored for nearly two decades, and which was left incomplete.

Correspondence

Kastner's surviving correspondence illuminates a career built on wide professional networks. Among his most significant correspondents were the musicologist Edmond de Coussemaker, with whom he shared antiquarian interests in medieval music; the pianist and pedagogue Heinrich Panofka; the composer François Bazin, a fellow alumnus of the Paris Conservatoire; Jules Lovy, critic and editor; and Stephen Heller, several of whose works Kastner reviewed in the press. He also corresponded with Paul Mercadier on acoustical questions, and maintained ties with Henri-Montan Berton, under whom he had studied composition at the Conservatoire. His letters to Giacomo Meyerbeer and to the publisher Maurice Schlesinger, editor of the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, document his integration into the Parisian musical establishment during the July Monarchy, the Second Republic and the Second Empire.

Journalism

Kastner joined the editorial board of the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* in 1836 and contributed to it regularly over the following decades. His journalism of 1843 is representative of its range: it includes a substantial memoir on the state of music in Germany, a piece on Cherubini's autograph manuscripts, and a series of reviews covering works by Gustave Héquet, the Prince de la Moskowa, Stephen Heller and Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst, Louise Farrenc (whose piano quintets he reviewed favorably), Charles Dancla, and George Onslow. These reviews are workmanlike rather than brilliant, and Kastner was never the polemicist that Berlioz was; his critical prose tends toward summary and description rather than philosophizing or satire. Yet taken collectively, his journalism provides a detailed record of Parisian musical life across three decades.

Theoretical Treatises

Kastner's two major treatises address orchestration and military music respectively. The *Traité général d'instrumentation* (1837; expanded second edition 1844) appeared slightly before Berlioz's celebrated treatise and was aimed explicitly at students and young composers, maintaining throughout a didactic rather than artistic tone. Where Berlioz's *Traité* addresses the composer's imagination, encouraging creative approaches to timbre, doubling, and color, Kastner's is a methodical survey of each instrument's capabilities, written for practical use in the classroom. Notably, Kastner, fluent in French but never entirely at ease with its musicological vocabulary, fell back on German conventions when French seemed insufficient: his treatment of octave registers, for instance, adopts the Germanic system (*contre-octave*, *grande octave*, *deuxième petite octave*, and so on) rather than relying solely on numerical notation. This close attention to the peculiarities of the French language appears to have sparked an abiding fascination with linguistic usage, which would eventually yield the *Parémiologie musicale de la langue française*, a compilation of musical idioms and proverbs. The *Manuel général de musique militaire* (1848), a comprehensive history and practical guide to military music across cultures and centuries, remains his most consulted reference work.

The Livres-partitions

Kastner's most idiosyncratic contribution to nineteenth-century musical culture is the livre-partition, a genre he developed across nine publications between 1852 and 1858. These works, which include *Les Danses des morts* (1852), *La Harpe d'Éole et la Musique cosmique* (1856), *Les Voix de Paris* (1857), and *Les Sirènes* (1858), combine lengthy musicological and historical essays with original musical compositions whose subject is the topic of the essay itself. Kastner was candid about the synthetic nature of these books: they draw heavily on secondary sources and should be read as learned surveys rather than strictly scholarly investigations. To a certain extent they are vanity projects, the work of a prosperous and well-off amateur historian pursuing arcane enthusiasms. Yet they are also programmatic musical works in which the "program" is an entire volume of prose.

Les Danses des morts is perhaps the most substantial. Its first part traces the concept of the *Totentanz* from antiquity through the Middle Ages, cataloguing known monuments, murals, manuscripts, and other objects across European

culture. Its second part focuses on the musical instruments depicted in these works, culminating in an original composition, *La Danse macabre*, with a text by the poet and librarian Édouard Thierry (1813-1894), who would also provide the text for the cantata that concludes *Les Voix de Paris*. Kastner advances a bold interpretative thesis: the skeleton in Dance of the Dead iconography is not a straightforward personification of Death, but a *larva*—a ghostly spirit from classical tradition—which explains why artists showed it dancing and playing instruments.

Les Voix de Paris (1857) is the livre-partition that most clearly anticipates what we would now call “sound studies.” Its full title announces both scope and method: *Essai d’une histoire littéraire et musicale des cris populaires de la capitale depuis le Moyen Âge jusqu’à nos jours*, preceded by a philosophical introduction on the nature of the cry as vocal phenomenon, and followed by the *Cris de Paris*, a *Grande Symphonie humoristique vocale et instrumentale* in three parts. The governing conceit is established in the book’s opening pages: great cities possess their own music, a *musique sociale* constituted by the layering of individual and collective cries that fill their streets, and Paris offers this material in peculiarly rich form. Kastner invites the reader to hear the urban soundscape symphonically—to attend to the shouts of fishmongers, ragpickers, knife-grinders, and pastry-sellers as so many instrumental parts in a vast, disorganized, but potentially coherent concert of ambient voices. The historical essay traces the literary and musical documentation of Parisian street cries from the thirteenth century through the revolutionary period and into the mid-nineteenth century, culminating in a comparative survey of foreign city cries from Cairo to London to Madrid. Many of the notated examples reproduce older musical works that featured Parisian cries; no concrete evidence points to Kastner walking the streets of Paris and transcribing cries by ear. Running through the whole text is a philosophical argument—indebted above all to Wilhelm von Humboldt and to the physiologist Colombat de l’Isère—that the worker’s undisciplined cry occupies a structurally significant position between speech and song, connecting the origins of language to the origins of lyric art, and that the city’s noise therefore constitutes not merely sociological data but aesthetic and anthropological evidence. *Les Voix de Paris* was mined by composers seeking Parisian *couleur locale*, and it is highly likely that Jacques Offenbach and Gustave Charpentier consulted Kastner’s text when they wrote *Mesdames de la Halle* (1858) and *Louise* (1900), respectively.

Les Sirènes surveys the siren myth from classical antiquity through the Norse and Germanic traditions, moving from the Nixe, Ondines, and Walkyries of northern Europe to the Breton Korrigans, the Slavic Roussalkis, the Lorelei, the Fossegrim, and Mélusine, showing how these figures were absorbed into Christian demonology while retaining their essential musical character. Kastner’s conclusion is elegant: the classical siren seduces through hypnotic song leading quietly to death, while her northern counterpart provokes frenzy, wild dancing, and violent ruin. Yet both traditions, Kastner continues, share a common symbolic core in the power of musical enchantment. Published in 1858—remarkably, only a year after *Les Voix de Paris*—, *Les Sirènes* predates Wagner’s *Ring* and cannot, for obvious chronological reasons, address it. But Kastner does observe that *Tannhäuser* draws on the legend of the Venusberg he has just been discussing, and identifies the enchantress of

Lohengrin as belonging to the family of northern water spirits. The book thus constitutes essential background reading for the mythological sources of Wagner, Dvořák, and others. Furthermore, it raises the unresolved question of whether these composers knew Kastner's work directly.

Kastner's writings remain largely unexplored, his correspondence unedited, and several projects, including an *Encyclopédie de la musique* and a treatise on Bohemians, remained incomplete at his death. Noted in his day by Fétis, he deserves reconsideration both as a chronicler of mid-nineteenth-century musical Paris and as an early practitioner of comparative musicology *avant la lettre*.

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For further reading:

Livres-partitions

Les danses des morts : Dissertations et recherches historiques, philosophiques, littéraires et musicales sur les divers monuments de ce genre qui existent ou qui ont existé tant en France qu'à l'étranger (libretto by Édouard Thierry), Paris, Brandus et Dufour, 1852.

Musik der Zigeuner: Les Romnitschels (libretto by Francis Maillan), Paris, 1853.

Les chants de la vie : Recherches historiques sur le chant en chœur pour voix d'hommes, Paris, Brandus et Dufour, 1854.

Les chants de l'armée française : Essai historique sur les chants militaires des français (libretto by Francis Maillan), Paris, Brandus et Dufour, 1855.

La harpe d'Éole et la musique cosmique : Études sur les rapports des phénomènes sonores de la nature avec la science et l'art (libretto by Francis Maillan), Paris, Brandus et Dufour, 1856.

Les voix de Paris : Essai d'une histoire littéraire et musicale des cris populaires de la capitale depuis le Moyen Âge jusqu'à nos jours (libretto by Édouard Thierry), Paris, Brandus et Dufour, 1857.

Les sirènes : Essai sur les principaux mythes relatifs à l'incantation (libretto by Francis Maillan), Paris, Brandus et Dufour, 1858.

Untersuchungen über die Beziehungen der Musik zum Mythos, Paris, Brandus et Dufour, 1866.

Parémiologie musicale de la langue française, ou explication des proverbes, locutions proverbiales, mots figurés qui tirent leur origine de la musique, accompagnée de recherches sur un grand nombre d'expressions du même genre empruntées aux langues étrangères (libretto by Édouard Thierry), Paris, Brandus et Dufour, 1866.

Theoretical writings

Grammaire musicale, comprenant tous les principes élémentaires de musique, la mélodie, le rythme, l'harmonie moderne, et un aperçu succinct des voix et des instruments, à l'usage des amateurs et des artistes, Paris, Henri Lemoine, 1837.

Traité général d'instrumentation, Paris, E. Minier, 1837 (second edition 1844).

Théorie abrégée du contrepoint et de la fugue, Paris, A. Chabal, 1842.

Mémoire sur l'état de la musique en Allemagne, Paris, [s.n.], 1843.

Manuel général de musique militaire à l'usage des armées françaises, Paris, Firmin Didot frères, 1848.

Les Bohémiens (incomplete), 55 pages, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Selected biographical writings on Kastner

"Kastner (le docteur Jean-Georges)", in François-Joseph Fétis, *Bibliographie universelle des musiciens et bibliographie générale de la musique*, Paris, 2nd ed., 1866, t. 4, pp. 480-487.

Hermann Ludwig, *Jean Georges Kastner: ein elsässischer Tondichter, Theoretiker, und Musikforscher, sein Werden und Wirken*, 3 volumes, Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel, 1886.

"Johann Georg Kastner," in Philipp Spitta, *Musikgeschichtliche Aufsätze*, Berlin, Gebrüder Paetel, 1894, pp. 333-361.

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