

Agenda-Driven Music in the Court of Louis XIV

by Kacie Brown

Louis XIV's reign was marked by significant contributions to the arts, a legacy that is evident in his lavish palace at Versailles. Music was ubiquitous in his court; he employed many musicians and held grand musical events including ballets, operas, and instrumental ensembles, and each of these genres developed significantly during his reign.¹ Composer Jean-Baptiste Lully was instrumental in the propagation of music in Louis XIV's court. In his biography of Lully, Ralph Scott describes the transformations Lully heralded under Louis XIV's jurisdiction, including an establishment of strict performance practices and a new French national opera style.² In this paper, I argue that Louis XIV's extravagant efforts to promote and centralize the arts in his kingdom were almost exclusively politically motivated and that this motivation to project his absolute power is clearly seen in ballet and opera, particularly Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Ballet de Flore* and *Phaëton*. In these works, Lully asserts the king's power through his use of the French overture style, overtly laudatory librettos, and text expression symbolic of Louis XIV's superiority.

Louis XIV's reign began when he was just four years old. His mother served as his regent, assisted by Italian Cardinal Mazarin, who was responsible for introducing the new genre of opera to France.³ The music of Louis XIV's court was clearly influenced and informed, at least initially, by Italian music, especially given Jean-Baptiste Lully's Italian background.

Louis XIV was an avid dancer himself, according to Parmenia Migel, who describes his appearances in ballets at his own court from ages 12 through 31.⁴

¹Julie Anne Sadie, "Louis XIV, King of France," Grove Music Online, accessed October 21, 2018, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

²Ralph Scott, *Jean-Baptiste Lully* (London: Peter Owen, 1973), 67.

³Terence D. Wright, "Lully and Quinault: Musico-Dramatic Synthesis in the 'Tragedies en Musique.'" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1983), 12.

⁴Parmenia Migel, *The Ballerinas: From the Court of Louis XIV to Pavlova* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 4.

These early appearances likely provided a unique musical background for Louis XIV that helped shape his view of music and dance as a vessel for displaying his power. Julie Anne Sadie suggests that Louis XIV's nickname, the "Sun King," came from his frequent appearances as Apollo, the "god of sun and music."⁵

This image of Louis XIV's costume for an appearance as Apollo (see Fig. 1) reveals how elaborate his costumes were, undoubtedly



Fig. 1. Louis XIV dans *Le Ballet de la nuit* (Art by Henri de Gissey, 1653. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.)

⁵Julie Anne Sadie, "Louis XIV, King of France," Grove Music Online, accessed October 20, 2018, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

accentuating the “Sun King” and making it appear as if he himself was the center around which everything else orbited. Fiona Garlick describes the expectation that, when involved in dances, nobles, especially the king, “refrain from excessive display of virtuosity, demonstrating only those skills which would pass for natural graces.”⁶ This suggests that his appearances themselves, adhering to elite decorum, were a display of power.

Louis XIV’s reign during the mid-17th Century was marked by a great level of concern for the status of the monarchy; in her book *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle*, Georgia Cowart describes the English and French monarchical traditions leading up to Louis XIV’s reign that likened monarchs to Jesus, suggesting that they had both divine power and human desires.⁷ Similarly, Cowart compares the relationship between Louis XIV and the music of his court to the relationship between God himself and sacred music.⁸ This illustrates the greatly elevated status of the music of his royal court. Nobles at the time were also highly influenced by the ideas of Neoplatonism, specifically the idea of “man drawing closer into communion with the harmony of the universe.”⁹ Musical productions in the royal court adhered to these principals, with many of the operas and ballets depicting protagonists who were almost always “rewarded for their virtue.”¹⁰ Cowart also describes how court ballets portrayed Louis XIV’s kingdom in a utopian light with perpetual social concord.¹¹ These portrayals of ideal, virtuous, French heroes and perfect societal harmony were likely directed towards citizens of France as a kind of indoctrinating reminder of the expectations placed upon them, but

⁷ Fiona Garlick, “Dances to Evoke the King: The Majestic Genre Chez Louis XIV,” *The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 24.

⁸ Georgia Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), xix.

⁹ Ibid.

⁹ Keith Pratt, “Art in the Service of Absolutism: Music in the Courts of Louis XIV and the Kangxi Emperor,” *Seventeenth Century* 7 no. 1 (June 1992): 89.

¹⁰ Wright, Lully and Quinault, 75.

¹¹ Georgia Cowart, *Triumph of Pleasure*, 6.

also to foreign nobles visiting the court, as a boastful warning of France’s ideological might and prestige.

In describing the ideology of French nobles at the time, Georgia Cowart notes that the ability to enjoy and produce entertainment was “one of the highest signifiers of power.”¹² Furthermore, in his article about the centralization of music in Louis XIV’s court, Robert Isherwood asserts that Louis XIV’s primary uses for his authority over the arts were to convey his power, preserve an account of his reign for future generations, and to establish France’s superiority in the arts so that they would not have any need to be influenced by the arts in other nations.¹³ He points specifically to the music in Louis XIV’s court serving as a distraction to otherwise rebellious nobles at Versailles and advancing the king’s portrayal as an absolute monarch.¹⁴ According to Donald Chae, Louis XIV used music as a kind of reward system for his subordinate nobles, “carefully [doling] out favors and [settling] debts in selecting which courtiers could participate in court entertainments.”¹⁵ Chae suggests that these favors of musical participation carried more weight than simple praise for good etiquette, as they were “less ephemeral than the status that courtiers might build up (or lose) through etiquette.”¹⁶ Music was clearly highly influential in the politics of French nobility, and Louis XIV masterfully realized its potential in advancing his nationalistic and absolutist agenda from his inner circles to the general population of his kingdom.

At the beginning of his reign, Louis XIV’s power was threatened by the Fronde, a series of civil wars in France from 1648-1653. After the Fronde, however, the French no longer needed a valor-based social hierarchy, and, as Georgia Cowart explains, “the

¹² Ibid, xvi.

¹³ Robert Isherwood, “The Centralization of Music in the Reign of Louis XIV,” *French Historical Studies* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1969): 156.

¹⁴ Ibid, 157.

¹⁵ Donald B Chae, “Music, Festival, and Power in Louis XIV’s France: Court Divertissements and the Musical Construction of Sovereign Authority and Noble Identity, (1661-1674)” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2003), 158, accessed September 24, 2018, Proquest Dissertations and Theses.

¹⁶ Ibid.

pursuit of pleasure, always a component of French court life, became its defining characteristic.”¹⁷ Isaac de Benserade, the poet for many of the ballets in Louis XIV’s court, echoed this shift in his poetry; often drawing on Greek and Roman mythology, he began to focus on the goddess Venus with ideals centered around love rather than Athena, the goddess of war.¹⁸ This change in ideological focus characterizes much of the music throughout the remainder of Louis XIV’s reign, evident in many of the themes of Jean-Baptiste Lully’s works, including *Ballet de Flore* and *Le triomphe de l’amour*.

Under Louis XIV’s authority, Jean-Baptiste Lully was a chief influence in spreading and revolutionizing the court’s agenda-driven music to make it more effective. He was a native Italian who entered Louis XIV’s service in 1653 as a dancer, musician, and composer.¹⁹ In 1661, the king appointed Lully to the elite position of *surintendant de la musique de la chambre du roi*.²⁰ According to Ralph Scott, Lully naturally retained some of his Italian influences, “but he put life into French music, which was then almost moribund, and he is regarded as [French] rather than an Italian living in France.”²¹ He carefully primed himself to win the king’s sympathy by first demonstrating his dedication to Louis XIV and his kingdom of France by initiating a rule restricting Royal orchestras to only French citizens.²² Lully was also in a precarious position as an Italian composer in France, because listeners were not enamored with Italian opera, but he was quick to become acquainted with the tastes of his audience, and, according to Ralph Scott, appealed to popular likings with simple songs and dances, rather than overly virtuosic recitatives and dramatic stage effects.²³ The king viewed Lully very favorably and rewarded his success by granting him his *Privilege* to establish the Royal Academy of Music, a contract whose terms

included virtual “control over all musicians in the country, because it provided that no public concert could be given without his authority, no public plays which were musically supported by more than two musicians could be put on without payment of a royalty to him, and no one in the kingdom could sing in public without his license.”²⁴ This extraordinary license afforded to Lully demonstrates the king’s trust that Lully would expertly centralize music in France. As a result of this promotion, Lully had a kind of absolute power over music and dance similar in extent to Louis XIV’s power over France as a whole. Lully could now groom French musical practices to disseminate only the king’s agenda, easily denying any performances that did not fit his nationalistic aesthetic.

In his position as *surintendant de la musique de la chambre du roi*, Lully also had lasting impacts on rehearsal techniques. Shortly after his promotion, according to Scott, he “forbade any embellishment which was not in his score.”²⁵ He also established a new ensemble called the *Petits Violons*, for which he “enlisted twenty young men, preferring a lack of experience to ingrained bad habits.”²⁶ His rehearsals were closed, and he would not allow musicians to divulge any details of his works until their performance.²⁷ He also expected a well behaved audience. Audience behavior was unruly before, but after Lully’s ascension to musical power, they “eagerly awaited...the perfectly drilled *premier coup d’archet*, the first stroke of the bow, which was internationally famous.”²⁸ Lully clearly sought careful musical standardization, and this unification likely helped his music more effectively project Louis XIV’s power. Today’s music shows remnants of many of Lully’s developments, particularly in the highly uniform military ensembles, which still serve many of the same nationalistic purposes as Lully’s ensembles did. According to Parmenia Migel, dance was not free from Lully’s influence, either, as “he choreographed most of the court ballets, and he is also credited with defining the five basic positions of the feet

¹⁷ Cowart, *Triumph of Pleasure*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁹ Jérôme De la Gorce, “Lully, Jean-Baptiste,” Grove Music Online, accessed September 10, 2018, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ Scott, *Lully*, 9.

²² *Ibid*, 59.

²³ *Ibid*, 68.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 60-61.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 86.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 37.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 68.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 97.

which are the foundation of all ballet technique.”²⁹ She also describes his implementation of consistent rehearsals and inclusion of female dancers.³⁰ Ballet would look much different today without Lully’s standardization of the positions of the feet, which is still the foundation of modern ballet dancing. Lully’s changes to both music and dance helped serve his primary efforts to glorify the king, but they also allowed for Louis XIV’s subtle influence on music to continue for centuries after his death.

Lully’s *Ballet de Flore* is a prime example of Lully’s promotion of the king’s power. In this ballet, Louis XIV himself was cast as the sun, clearly symbolizing his omnipotence and virtuous power.³¹ The ballet begins with an overture characteristic of Lully’s style with stately dotted rhythms throughout.³² According to Fiona Garlick, the dotted rhythms that are prevalent in entrées and overtures are intended to evoke the king’s gait as he enters a room.³³ She also claims that Lully is credited with the invention of the French overture.³⁴ This demonstrates the importance of Lully’s delicately planned portrayal of Louis XIV; he created a new, lasting, genre for the sole purpose of glorifying the king. Louis XIV obviously was not present at all performances of his court-sponsored works, and at performances he did not attend, the introductory overtures likely evoked the idea that he was an all-powerful, ever-present entity similar to God. Lully keeps his structure very straightforward, with many refrains, rhyming couplets, and tuneful melodies that are metrically simple with few embellishments. As with his standardization of musical practice in the court, Lully’s simple music likely left little room for questions about the intended message, conveying his agenda with little effort. The ballet also includes an uncharacteristic amount of vocal music, which Cowart describes as another “avenue for monarchical propaganda.”³⁵ The

texts that pervade the ballet, which would normally be centered around instrumental music and dance, provide yet another outlet for belligerent assertions of the king’s power and demonstrate Lully’s use of all available resources to serve his royal purpose, which he carried out even by breaking conventions. Lully’s *Ballet de Flore* unambiguously praises the king’s virtuous power within the first two sections. The first section describes a cold winter “surrounded by ice cubes of snow and frost,” with “trees stripped of adornment.” Then, an entrée follows, introduced by a prologue about the sun coming and “bringing peace to everyone.” The entrée employs dotted rhythms like those of the overture, and these stately rhythms clearly equate the sun to Louis XIV. The symbolism is overt; Louis XIV, like the sun, which already served as his nickname, brings peace and harmony, and the earth would be “stripped of adornment” in his absence.³⁶ The entrée also includes a more complex harmonic texture with winds and string instruments and fewer dissonances, rather than the introduction with simple continuo and voices. This places even more emphasis on the entrée, again making Louis XIV’s character the focal point. Finally, the ballet ends with an enormous ensemble, reminiscent of the grandeur of Versailles, with many strings, woodwind, and brass instruments.

Lully, aided by his librettist Philippe Quinault, was also responsible for establishing the French opera tradition.³⁷ According to Ralph Scott, Lully wanted to depart from the lighthearted character of French music and dance to write a tragedy, as he was “convinced...that the tragedy was particularly suited to the French language and spirit.”³⁸ In his dissertation on their synthesis of music and drama, Terence Wright describes how Lully and Quinault rooted their new national opera in the already well-established French literary tragedy.³⁹ These tragedies naturally coincided with their efforts to portray the king’s power, as “the tragic poet...[maintained] a constant, elevated tone of grandeur and gravity.”⁴⁰ As Wright remarks, Lully and Quinault combined the

²⁹ Migel, *Ballerinas*, 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Cowart, *Triumph of Pleasure*, 80.

³² Jean-Baptiste Lully, *Ballet de Flore*, ed. André Danican Philidor, (Versailles: André Danican Philidor, 1690). Libretto translated by the author.

³³ Garlick, *Dances*, 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁵ Cowart, *Triumph of Pleasure*, 81.

³⁶ Wright, *Lully and Quinault*, 12.

³⁷ Scott, *Lully*, 67.

³⁸ Wright, *Lully and Quinault*, 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

leading forms of performing art in France, including dramatic theater, ballet, music, and “spectacle” into a unique and stunning genre.⁴¹ Lully and Quinault’s French national operas were perfectly suited for their role in Louis XIV’s court—they used what they knew of Italian opera and modified it to appeal to the tastes of their French audiences, thereby producing extravagant spectacles fit for the glorification of one of the most extravagant kings.

Finally, Lully’s opera, *Phaëton*, was explicitly created in order to further stratify the eminent Louis XIV from all others. Nicknamed “the opera of the people,” it begins with prologue unrelated to the plot that asserts that the king “makes, by his virtue, the happiness of the Earth.”⁴² This description of Louis XIV as a heroic peacemaker resolves the tension between the “demands of pleasure and power” in his court, as Cowart describes, proclaiming the king’s absolute rule and divine power to spread pleasure from the work’s opening lines.⁴³ The opera follows the demise of Phaëton, son of the Sun, whose “desires go farther than human power.” Again, this opera is a metaphor, demonstrating the king’s unsurpassable superiority and dissuading those who may be insubordinate. The Sun is portrayed as wise and virtuous, and his melodies are relatively tonally stable compared to those of his son, Phaëton, who is portrayed as naïve and impulsive. This is particularly clear in Act IV, Scene II, where the Sun attempts to quell his son’s insatiable desire for immortal power. The Sun stays centered around G, while Phaëton’s line wanders to D and Bb and includes more dissonances. The exaggerated characterization between the Sun and Phaëton further suggests the political motivation behind the work; it was clearly a success given its popularity among the French people.

Louis XIV was an extravagant monarch with immense power, and he conferred his power to all aspects of French society, particularly music. As seen in Lully’s reign as the court’s primary composer and his *Ballet de Flore* and *Phaëton* in particular, all courtly entertainment was primarily created to

glorify the king and his values. Remarkably, Louis XIV’s impact on music, heralded by Jean-Baptiste Lully, is still evident in musical practice four centuries later. In this sense, he seems to have truly achieved, if not greatly surpassed, his goal of projecting the glory of his kingdom through the arts.

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⁴¹ De La Gorce, Lully.

⁴² Jean-Baptiste Lully, *Phaëton*, ed. Théodore Michaelis, (New York: Broude Brothers Limited, 1971). Libretto translated by the author.

⁴³ Cowart, *Triumph of Pleasure*, 126.

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