PERFORMANCE PRACTICE: CRAFTING A HISTORICALLY INFORMED INTERPRETATION OF *NOUVELLES POÉSIES*

by Andrew Justice

Résumé

Si le manque de sources concernant l'interprétation des *Nouvelles poésies* peut de prime abord frustrer les musiciens intéressés par ces pièces, il est possible de glaner des informations à l'aide de concepts musicaux historiquement liés pour créer une approche nouvelle et novatrice de l'interprétation de ce répertoire.

Étudier le rôle joué par la pratique de la parodie dans le Paris du dix-septième siècle—ou par l'utilisation d'une musique préexistante jointe à des textes dévotionnels nouveaux—figure par ces concepts. La parodie a exercé une influence importante sur les genres vocaux populaires ainsi que sur l'engouement naissant pour le concert dont le but spécifique était la consommation musicale—par opposition à une utilisation de la musique comme arrière-plan pour d'autres évènements. Cette différence significative constitue une nouvelle tendance à cette époque et a sans doute contribué à la popularité des concerts à domicile.

Les musiciens s'intéressant aux *Nouvelles poésies* peuvent également se pencher sur les bases de l'interprétation du baroque français, notamment sur le plan de la technique vocale (prononciation, ornementation, respiration, etc.) et des notes inégales. Le présent essai approche ce genre de considérations à l'aide de citations tirées de sources originales françaises pour l'interprétation musicale comme les écrits de Bénigne de Bacilly et de Marin Mersenne.

Nous traitons de l'accompagnement du continuo, principalement dans le cadre d'une plus grande communication des paroles et de l'utilisation des instruments pour créer une exécution qui capte l'oreille de l'auditeur. Cet essai s'intéresse également à la pratique de l'*alternatim* (alternance de la voix et des instruments d'un vers à l'autre) permettant conférer des nuances et des variations à l'exécution. Les questions du lieu de l'exécution—à domicile, dans une pièce, à l'église ou dans un espace sacré similaire, sur scène—et de la distribution des effectifs (nombre de voix, masculines ou féminines, quels instruments utilisés et combien, etc.) sont également importantes.

En abordant les concepts mentionnés ci-dessus, le présent essai introduit des ressources bibliographiques de référence susceptibles de guider le musicien curieux dans le processus très subjectif de mise en œuvre d'une interprétation historiquement ancrée. Parmi ces ressources figurent des études largement utilisées sur l'histoire de la musique baroque française, des sources de première main, des ressources de premier ordre pour entamer l'étude de l'interprétation musicale historique et une sélection d'études consacrées à la fonction de la musique au sein de la religion.

L'auteur inclut également des commentaires tirés de son expérience personnelle en tant qu'interprète de la musique de cette collection afin d'illustrer la viabilité d'utilisation de ces concepts. Le dessein final est d'instruire et d'encourager les lecteurs motivés, avides de s'embarquer pour un voyage de découverte de la richesse musicale de cette collection et d'apprécier les bienfaits tirés d'une exploration des différentes possibilités d'interprétation.

A compendium such as *Nouvelles poésies* presents the performer with several factors to consider in preparing an interpretation, aspects that may initially seem trivial but can help to shape a creative and effective performance of this little-known repertoire. Chief factors include general performance practice techniques of the represented genres in Paris around the turn of the eighteenth century; the presence and effect of contrafacta or parody procedure in the majority of the pieces; and questions of performance venue and forces, which may include considerations of class, gender, physical location, and religious devotion. This essay will discuss these factors with the aim of introducing interested musicians to resources that may aid in the development of a historically informed performance of music from *Nouvelles poésies*.

Although a fair amount of secondary literature examines French music and culture in the Baroque era (see Anthony,[1] Isherwood,[2] and Sadie[3] for starters), the majority of it focuses on larger concepts: Versailles, Louis XIV, opera, ballet, *grands motets*, Jean-Baptiste Lully, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, and the so-called Querelle des Bouffons. Studies regarding Baroque chamber music often revolve around the development of specific instrumental styles and the performers and composers closely associated with them, such as harpsichord (François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau) and viol or viola da gamba (Marin Marais and Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe).[4] Rarely, if ever, does one find a specific discussion of how parodied secular vocal works would have been performed in early eighteenth-century Paris, regardless of venue. Thus it is left to today's performer to learn about the essential trends in French Baroque performance practice and then employ those concepts to shape an interpretation.

To better understand the context of musical parodies in Paris at that time, Anthony elucidates:

In the Ancien Théâtre Italien, [. . .] opera airs were parodied as well. Naturally, the operas of Lully and Quinault were a primary source far into the eighteenth century. Certain scenes, already popular in their original versions, were great favorites. Although clichéd themes (such as the conflict between love and glory) and the general pomposity of *tragedies en musique* made them ideal targets for satire, the parodies themselves underscored the popularity of the originals. Not only were the texts and music parodied, but the best-known performers of the Opera were mimicked as well.[5]

The immense popularity of opera, musical theater, surrounding subgenres (*chansons*, *vaudevilles*, *airs de cour,* etc.),[6] and even the performers themselves essentially defines the existence of parodies like the contrafacta in *Nouvelles poésies*.[7] In addition, Lesure notes the seventeenth-century Parisian trend of organizing public concerts for the sole purpose of listening to music (as opposed to merely being the background for social events), a vogue that eventually included programs performed by well-known musicians at the homes of nobility.[8] A journalist's 1654 description of society news, written in verse, artfully confirms the fascination: "And what's more, his charming niece / played for us many an excellent piece / on the viol and, more disarming, / upon her harpsichord so charming."[9] Given the general reputation of parodies and the growing practice of home concerts—which undoubtedly included and may have even focused on works for fewer performers—one can more easily grasp the value and function of a published assemblage of parodied vocal works set principally for solo voice and continuo, with some extra instrumental and multivoice works included.

Vocal Technique

The major characteristics of seventeenth-century French singing style, as outlined by Sanford and based on several detailed primary sources,[10] diverge notably from the Italian techniques codified by Giulio Caccini and Pier Francesco Tosi, among others, and retain the

1. James R. Anthony, *French Baroque Music from Beaujoyeulx to Rameau* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1997).

2. Robert M. Isherwood, *Music in the Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

3. Julie Anne Sadie, ed., *Companion to Baroque Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990).

4. David Ledbetter, *Harpsichord and Lute Music in 17th-Century France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

5. Anthony, *French Baroque Music from Beaujoyeulx to Rameau*, 191.

6. Ibid., 215. Anthony notes *airs de cour* as another genre with collections of published parodies.

7. Consider the popularity and cultural/commercial function of the "great themes of classical music" (Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, "Ode to Joy," *Carmina Burana*, etc.), even as we continue to move further away from their eras of composition.

8. François Lesure, et al., "France." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed January 24, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40051.

9. Jean Loret, "From *The Historical Muse* (1654)," in *Source Readings in Music History*, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 596.

10. The most significant are Bénigne de Bacilly's *Remarques curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter* (1668) and Marin Mersenne's *Harmonie universelle* (1636).

sixteenth-century French practice of careful attention to pronunciation—achieved through virtually constant air pressure, speed, and volume, as well as throat articulation and *agréments* for ornamented second verses.[11] Components of good diction included a nonforeign accent, clear delivery for spaces of any size, proper execution of syllabic quantity, and inflection of words to communicate meaning and underlying passion. The task of learning historical French pronunciation—which is perhaps most discernible in the *oi* vowel, executed as 'oé' or 'oué'—gives the modern performer an extra challenge. Even Rameau's landmark 1722 *Treatise on Harmony*, which discusses a deep connection between harmonic structures and their ability to convey passion, concedes that the performer must declaim the text well and shape the melody and harmony accordingly.[12]

Further exploring the notion of how pronunciation can affect the communication of passion, duration, and strength of articulation (hence consonants) became a notable feature of French vocal music, which stood in contrast to the Italian tradition of emphasizing vowels. Indeed, Marin Mersenne advocated that the best delivery of anger was to abruptly cut off final syllables and reinforce final notes; another approach involved the lengthening of consonants to the point of influencing the length of subsequent vowels and, hence, rhythmic relationships. Ornamentation, including vibrato, was to be executed with a high degree of *délicatesse*, so as to perceive the finest nuances of textual articulation. Bénigne de Bacilly's list of vocal faults also highlights the importance of quality pronunciation: incorrect techniques include nasal singing, incorrect placement of ornaments on consonants, executing runs with the tongue, and confusing long and short syllables. In sum, even a cursory survey of French Baroque vocal techniques reveals the basic concept of close attention to diction and its contribution to a clear and effective transmission of the text.

Accompaniment and "Alternatim"

The usage of continuo in France did not become widespread until the second half of the seventeenth century, first appearing in sacred music—which was more susceptible to Italian influence—and originating with the organ or, occasionally, harpsichord or theorbo. Around the turn of the eighteenth century, in musical treatises, Sébastien de Brossard and Couperin noted the standard combination of keyboard and a bowed string bass, either the violoncello or bass viol. (The choice between the two usually depended on the "Italian-ness" of the composition or venue, but sometimes depended on the technical limitations of the performers).[13] However, this standard combination should not necessarily be taken as a mandatory rule: creative continuo instrumentation can often make the difference between a safe, less interesting performance and one that grabs the listener's ear and brings his or her attention to what is being done differently. In performances with my own ensemble, we have found omitting either a bowed or plucked string instrument to be quite effective in serving the acoustic needs of the performers and/or venue, as well as enabling a performance that better communicates the text.[14] The nonspecific nature of how the music is laid out on the pages of *Nouvelles poésies*—there are sometimes odd approaches to the figured bass symbols and virtually no specifications for instruments—further encourages this notion of flexibility with accompaniment and can lead to viewing such repertoire as available for instrumental doubling and/or alternation.

"Alternatim" is a term normally associated with church music and the alternation of psalm or canticle verses between different groups of singers, a practice used as far back as the fourth century. Beginning in the fifteenth century, the organ gradually became the preferred instrument for alternation, resulting in a substantial body of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French alternatim organ music by Couperin and others.[15] Owing to this phenomenon and the well-established tradition of performing madrigals and motets with consorts of viols or recorders in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Italy and England, a precedent can certainly be made for the instrumental performance of repertoire such as *Nouvelles poésies*. At the very least, the strong influence of

11. Sally Sanford, "National Singing Styles," in *A Performer's Guide to Seventeenth-Century Music*, ed. Jeffery Kite-Powell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 13–17. The majority of this section owes much to a portion of Sanford's chapter, which itself serves as an eminently worthy introduction to this subject.

12. Jean-Philippe Rameau, "On the Properties of Chords," in *Source Readings in Music History*, 696.

13. Peter Williams and David Ledbetter, "Continuo," *Grove Music Online*, accessed January 24, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/06353.

14. All possibilities can be entertained: on a recent tour of programs featuring music from *Nouvelles poésies* as well as other French Baroque repertoire, I played the continuo part on viola while my colleague took the more virtuosic part on bass viol, as we agreed it sounded better and served as an interesting change from standard practice. Some might say that another instrument should have been found, but a historical context for using what is available and making it work can be easily made, and so the opportunities can be myriad.

15. David Hiley and Alex Lingas, "Alternatim," in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, Oxford University Press, accessed January 25, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e215.

dance in virtually all French Baroque music allows performers to coordinate the various parts of sometimes-extensive chaconnes, pavanes, and minuets into an interpretation that clearly displays the structure of the dances as well as the meaning of the text (when applicable).[16]

Perhaps the one central distinguishing feature of French Baroque performance practice is the concept of *notes inégales*, or the custom of performing certain rhythmic divisions in alternately long and short values, even if they are written as equal. Originating as a method of invigorating passages or diminutions, inequality became a fairly standard expressive feature of French musical language well into the late eighteenth century. The degree of inequality ranged from scarcely detectable to essentially double-dotting, depending on the character of the music and the performer's taste. In modern practice, the aural result is often a kind of swing feel in passages notated as even, but many performers attempt to blur that line, so to speak, and emphasize differences in note lengths with articulation instead of borrowed time.[17] As with many concepts in performance practice, inequality was a fairly subjective idea to the French even then, if the wealth of primary and secondary sources discussing it are any indication. Inequality remains a fundamental aspect of performing this repertoire, and today's performers can use it as another tool to help shape an original and engaging interpretation.[18]

Performance Venue and Forces

At this point, the reader has undoubtedly noticed an overarching theme to the performance practice discussion: subjectivity. Indeed, the discipline of historically informed performance practice, sometimes referred to as the Early Music Movement, has origins alongside positivism in musicology and has undergone a transition from the notion of crafting "authentic" re-creations of performances from the composer's time to a more flexible aesthetic.[19] In this more recent approach, historical inquiry guides a modern performer in fashioning a new interpretation and style.[20] It should come as no surprise, then, that when discussing how and where a collection such as *Nouvelles poésies* was performed—the manuscript contains scant primary evidence for intended performance features or functions, and the version represented in this facsimile edition adds an extra layer of inquiry—one must once again use various clues to synthesize a context.

As both Gipson and McKnight have noted in their essays for this volume, the contrafacta for *Nouvelles poésies* were most likely intended for use by aristocratic and similarly socially privileged women to remind them of their religious commitments.[21] This idea is reinforced by the collection's predominance of pieces for solo soprano with basso continuo, which can be taken as an elementary approach to performing this music. However, the presence of works for multiple voices, along with strictly instrumental pieces or those with an obvious instrumental source, suggests more possibilities than, say, a lone woman and her harpsichord—and, of course, the existence of a version given to the Ursulines in New Orleans opens up larger ensemble opportunities.

Two pieces of secondary-source evidence that support and may help to explain the usage of a collection like *Nouvelles poésies* by groups of religious women are the Maison Royale de Saint-Louis, Saint-Cyr (again, see Gipson in this volume), and the use of motets in Ursuline monasteries in Quebec during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[22] Thus a method of at least alternating performances of this repertoire with either vocal or instrumental ensembles is certainly not out of the question. A 2001 recording by Anne-Catherine Bucher and Le Concert Lorrain offers some fascinating approaches in exactly this manner, interchanging vocal ensembles with solo performances, using instruments as reinforcement, and employing alternatim.[23] While the detailed techniques used on the recording are, again, subjective and up for debate, it remains a highly useful tool in allowing the performer to hear an attempt at realizing the music in the collection and as such can be used to make interpretive decisions.

16. See Betty Bang Mather, *Dance Rhythms of the French Baroque: A Handbook for Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) for an introduction to this multifaceted area of discipline.

17. One hesitates to use the term *tempo rubato* in this context, for that involves actually changing and redistributing "time" in performance; in contrast, the overall pulse of the music is unchanged when employing inequality.

18. David Fuller, "Notes inégales." *Grove Music Online*, accessed January 25, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/20126.

19. By this I mean valuing primary research and empirical evidence over introspective, intuitive, or multidisciplinary approaches.

20. See Howard Mayer Brown, et al., "Performing Practice," and Harry Haskell, "Early Music," in *Grove Music Online* for more extensive discussions.

21. See Catherine Gordon-Seifert, "From Impurity to Piety: Mid 17th-Century French Devotional Airs and the Spiritual Conversion of Women," *Journal of Musicology* 22 (Spring 2005): 270–71 for a concrete example.

22. Erich Schwandt, "The Motet in New France: Some 17th and 18th Century Motets in Quebec," *Fontes Artis Musicae* 28 (1981).

23. Anne-Catherine Bucher and Le Concert Lorrain, *Manuscrit des Ursulines de La Nouvelle Orléans*, (France: K617, 2001).

Of course, not everyone has access to a convent or other religious entity for either performance venue or musicians, but the aforementioned context of usage in the home does allow for wider performative considerations. My own ensemble's association with *Nouvelles poésies* began with a performance at a conference of scholarly music associations, and so the venue decision was made for us: a hotel meeting room, which naturally did not have ideal acoustics. Exhibiting a core membership of soprano voice, recorder, transverse flute, viola, bass viol, and harpsichord, we set about choosing pieces from the collection that would be representative of its content and best suited to our performing forces. With airs for solo soprano and continuo serving as the basis for the program, doubling vocal lines with winds and/or strings gave contrast and strength to particular verses. (The opposite approach, or removing the doubled instruments, allowed the text to be communicated more clearly). That freedom also encouraged better alternation in pieces with observable dance sources, as well as a few works where the voice was eschewed completely—allowing us to create an all-instrumental program using those nonvocal pieces from *Nouvelle poesies* and, for example, an opening sinfonia to an opera or a Couperin harpsichord piece.[24] Although we did not make use of a vocal ensemble in our performance, we were able to communicate the freshness of the compositions and the importance of the texts in a simple yet effective manner, judging by the reaction of the audience of scholars and performers.

In summary, approaching a collection such as *Nouvelles poésies*—for which there are scant resources to explicitly guide performance practice—can initially seem to the performer an insurmountable task of identifying what to do and how/where to do it. What I have tried to accomplish in this essay is to impart the value and opportunity to be found in the wealth of less noticeable extant resources in forming an interpretation of this attractive yet admittedly nebulous repertoire. Investigating primary and secondary sources to assemble a diverse array of tactics that address technique, setting, and the potential for a truly imaginative performance is perhaps the best way to approach this collection. May it result in a newfound appreciation for parody and its function within the larger concepts of Baroque music.

24. In actuality, the only instrument in our performance that seemed out of place was the viola (since it was seldom used in French Baroque chamber contexts, in favor of a viol covering the alto/tenor range), to which I adapted by playing violin, bass, and even trumpet lines—essentially serving as the ensemble's "utility infielder."

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FEATURED COMPOSERS

(original orthography has been retained)

Abeille
Bacilly
Batistin
Beaupré
Bernier
Bertin
Bourgeouis
Boutillier
Brossard
C. D.
Campra
Charpentier
Clerambault
Chausson
Cochereau
Couperin
Courbois
Danielis
Debousset
Deon
Desmarets
Destouches
Dubuillon
Gervais
Gillier
Hardouin
La Barre
La Coste
La Fontaine
Lalande
Lambert
Le Comte
Le Maire
Lully
Marais
Marchand
Monteclair
Mouret
Rebel
Renier
Salomon

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