



BOOK REVIEW: Music, Pantomime and Freedom in the French Enlightenment, by Hedy Law. €69/£60/\$99. Boydell & Brewer Ltd, Bridge Farm Business Park, Top Street, Martlesham IP12 4RB, Suffolk, UK.

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Abstract

I begin by sharing my appreciation of the book's engagement with a hitherto-neglected genre in eighteenth-century French musical practice, pantomime. Law carnalizes the Enlightenment, returning the movement which had its apogee in works of philosophical abstraction and universal law to its site of origin: the body. In so doing, she furnishes us with many piercing insights, though I question the extent to which she associates particular artistic decisions with specific philosophical concepts. Nonetheless, she analyzes a broad range of concepts in detail through her well-chosen lens, presenting us with a bounty of discoveries. I note how this book contributes to the discourse around the importance of dance and the carnal in studying this period and how this will aid the study of French music within Europe. Law links Enlightenment questions to musical practice in depth and breadth, making a major contribution to scholarship of the movement. I go on to question how Law's conclusions might be built upon, particularly considering race. This book's insights will be crucial in interrogating the universality to which the Enlightenment lays claim and could provide important groundwork for a musicological critique of the movement. Law's analysis of Salieri's *Tarare*, for example, argues that all his characters have 'natural liberty'. The author's detailed work here is a valuable foundation for asking how natural liberty functions in the highly racialized eighteenth-century operatic discourse: whether, in fact, in a racist milieu, Salieri is upholding the highest ideals of the Enlightenment in his music and doing anti-racist work.

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BOOK REVIEW

***Music, Pantomime and Freedom in the French Enlightenment*, by Hedy Law. €69/£60/\$99. Boydell & Brewer Ltd, Bridge Farm Business Park, Top Street, Martlesham IP12 4RB, Suffolk, UK.**

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Music, Pantomime and Freedom in the French Enlightenment by Hedy Law is an important contribution to the study of eighteenth-century French music. The book focusses in detail on pantomime, a hitherto somewhat neglected area of study, arguing that composers from Rameau to Gluck used pantomime to explore and to interrogate moral liberty. Law's work is detailed, precise, and imaginative, and opens many doors for further study of how the philosophy, literature, drama, and politics of the Enlightenment interacted with its music. *Music, Pantomime and Freedom* probes the origins of modern thinking about liberty and personhood, explores how these ideas were articulated, and explains how they were popularized. In so doing, its contribution to musicology extends beyond its given scope, particularly into the area of historical race musicology, a field where questions of personhood and freedom are central.

Law's focus for most of the book is on 'moral liberty,' the eighteenth-century term for an individual's ability to think for themselves, to express themselves, or to make decisions for themselves. Today, we might call it agency. Law argues that French composers in this period used pantomime, a style of expressive dance and drama separate from courtly dance, to explore or to express Enlightenment ideas of moral liberty in three key ways:

- 1) they composed music for pantomime without following existing dance conventions; 2) their music heightened performers' awareness of their moral liberty during performances; 3) pantomime performances stimulated spectators to recognize themselves as thinkers of liberty (xii).

The book ranges across four main composers: Rameau, Rousseau, Gluck, and Salieri, examining how each used pantomime to interrogate different aspects of moral liberty. Chapter 1 plays many roles. It situates pantomime within the literary and musical culture of eighteenth-century France and examines its origins as a cultural force in the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* (The Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns), an academic debate starting in the 1680s and running through to the 1720s about the spirits of modernity and antiquity, and the relationship between them. Law also examines how Rameau used pantomime across his oeuvre. Rameau articulated moral agency and thought about liberty through pantomime. His pantomimes link music, dance, and drama, the three working together expressively. Law analyses the Statue/Woman's animation scene from *Pygmalion* (1748) to demonstrate how Rameau turns commonplace musical gestures into moments of dramatic significance, drawing on the concept of 'instituted signs' inaugurated during the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*. An 'instituted sign' is one which has 'an arbitrary relation to our ideas' (6), which is to say one that depends on context for its meaning. Rameau's skill and innovation is in synthesizing *la belle danse*, the courtly dance tradition, drama, and music through pantomime.

Law identifies a commonplace ornament, an ascending double appoggiatura, which gains significance because of its marriage to an act of admiration on stage.

Rameau also uses pantomime to articulate class dynamics. The aforementioned ‘animation scene’ from *Pygmalion* has the Graces teach the Statue/Woman civilized manners through *la belle danse*, which is incorporated dramatically alongside a pantomime of admiration performed by some ‘simpletons’. Pantomime and courtly dance exist alongside one another, the former ‘as a kind of dance’ (52) and the latter ‘as a cultural icon of French high art’ (ibid.). Law’s analysis furthers a point made by Nicolas Bricaire de la Dixmerie in 1769, which she quotes towards the end of the chapter: ‘Rameau helped push dancing beyond the simple graces characteristic of most of Lully’s dances, bringing about “in dance the same revolution as in our music”’ (53–4).

Rousseau’s *intermède*, *Le Devin du village* (1752), is perhaps best known to musicologists for its contribution to the *Querelle des Bouffons* of 1750s Paris. When it was first performed in 1752–3, it was hugely popular with the King and the public. Musically, the piece was Italianate, but the plot followed the general norms of a French pastorate: a fairly light plot involving love, shepherds, and shepherdesses. This does not mean that the piece is a conservative outlier, dramatically speaking, in Rousseau’s oeuvre. Rather, it is an instrument for exploring and articulating the utility of art for the public good. In Chapter 2, ‘Freedom from an Evil Spell,’ Law shows us how Rousseau used pantomime in his composition to exercise the moral imagination of his spectators. The ‘play-within-a-play’ towards the end of the piece ‘provides a narrative abyss that enables the protagonists to become alienated from their viewing experience, seeing a dilemma anew in a nonverbal theatrical medium in order to reflect on the perils of corruption’ (92). Through the processes by which the characters in the play reflect on their story and share their reflections, Law argues, Rousseau opens a dramatic space whereby the spectators may themselves reflect on and develop their own morality. Law’s insights here may contribute to turning Rousseau’s epithet from composer/philosopher to composer-philosopher. Law’s work tacitly emphasises that Rousseau was an Enlightenment thinker working through and with music, rather than a philosopher who composed on the side. *Le Devin du village* was a means of publicly enacting the Enlightenment.

This preoccupation with audience response runs through into Chapter 3, ‘Things that Move,’ an investigation into the ways in which Gluck used pantomime in his operas and in which ‘the performer’s body onstage helps us to become *thinking* interpreters.’ (133) As with every chapter in this book, though, it’s about much more than that. The chapter examines pantomime as a style of acting, as well as dancing. Law explores the difference that eighteenth-century thinkers articulated between acting as an imitative act and pantomime as an expressive act. Law focuses for much of this chapter on David Garrick, one of eighteenth-century England’s leading actors, who travelled in France. Commentators remarked at the time on the depth and subtlety of his interpretations. Like Pylades, a Roman pantomime actor much discussed and admired in eighteenth-century France, Garrick expressed the inner state of his characters through gesture, revealing the subconscious thoughts and desires which moved them. Law reveals the parallel here between the actor’s gesture and music: in the same way as Garrick’s bodily gestures are less semiotically specific but more expressive than words, Gluck’s music uses signs that are expressive in multiple

ways. The opening chorus of *Orphée et Euridice* (1774) uses ‘a motivic web built upon a gesture (a sigh), a word (the name of Euridice), and a musical topos (lament) [to] illustrate how Gluck’s music *embodies* grief’ (97, emphasis in the original). Again like Garrick, Gluck’s music reveals the subconscious emotions of his characters, as in the case of Armide’s monologue from Act 2, Scene 5 of *Armide* (1777). This chapter explores a contradiction between materialist ‘unfreedom’, humans being governed by subconscious thoughts and desires, and the liberty of the pantomime in interpretation. ‘The pantomime ... helps us develop confidence in ourselves as thinking subjects interested in – and capable of – comprehending a broad spectrum of human communication, especially when it comes to detecting the things that move underneath the observable surface.’ (134)

Chapter 4, “Things that Walk,” interrogates the relationship between two kinds of freedom: freedom of motion and freedom of action. Law uses the example of a performance of Haydn’s ‘Farewell’ Symphony at the Salle des Cent-Suisses in 1784. At the end of the piece, the performers left the stage one by one until only two violinists remained. While the musicians exercise freedom of motion by leaving the stage, Law draws a distinction between this freedom and the freedom to act or think. Law expands and illustrates this point using the example of Salieri’s *Les Danaïdes* (1784), in which the titular Danaïdes, the fifty daughters of Danaus, mythological king of Libya, follow their father’s orders to murder their husbands. Only Hypermnestre refuses, helping her husband, Lynceus, get to safety. In following their orders, the Danaïdes give up their moral liberty and their personhood, while retaining their liberty of motion. Returning to the ‘Farewell’ Symphony, Law concludes that the director of *Le Concert Spirituel*, Legros, has exercised his liberty of action and thought. In this chapter, pantomime has changed from a genre of performance to a medium of communication: bodies expressing liberty in a concert setting.

Chapter 5, “When Humans Dance like Atoms,” points forwards to the French Revolution. Law argues that Salieri’s opera *Tarare* (1787) uses pantomime within a framework of Lucretian materialism to articulate how Nature relates to natural liberty. At a time of growing political discontent in France, the opera provocatively draws a distinction between a king and a tyrant: ‘Beaumarchais and Salieri made clear in *Tarare* that a tyrant can be replaced and a tyrannical regime can be renewed, when humans believe that they *all* can dance like atoms.’ (227) This final chapter brings to a head the perhaps inevitable collision between moral liberty and civil or political liberty, the former referring to agency, the latter to the forms of freedom which necessitate the existence of laws, and legislative and governmental structures. I expand on this further below.

Law conducts the reader through these arguments in prose that is engaging, clear, and richly expressive. Her analytical writing is admirably light. This book demonstrates Law’s deep knowledge of the primary source material and her deftness at knowing when to apply it.

I want to pause for a moment here to ask how *Music, Pantomime and Freedom* may inform the study of racism, colonialism, and the Atlantic slave trade in this period. Law analyzes not only those pantomime characters who express or achieve liberty, but also those characters who give liberty up, or to whom liberty is denied. The value of this work in the study of the Atlantic slave trade in particular in the eighteenth century is clear, but it also helps us raise questions relating to personhood and racial status more broadly: what is the

relationship between moral liberty, personhood, and race in the Enlightenment, and how does this appear in music? How does music contribute to or resist racism and racialization?

In his recent book *White Freedom* (2021), the historian Tyler Stovall uncovers manifold ways in which modern concepts of freedom—individual, collective, political, moral—are heavily racialized.¹ He argues in particular that there is no contradiction between the struggle for freedom in eighteenth-century European thought and the Atlantic slave trade. The freedom for which Enlightenment thinkers like Locke argue so strongly is, Stovall notes, often predicated upon the individual's right to dispose of their property as they so wish. When Thomas Jefferson espouses freedom, he is partly espousing his right to own slaves in the face of growing British support for abolitionism in the second half of the eighteenth century. Stovall argues convincingly that liberal, Enlightenment ideas of 'freedom' exist in contradistinction to the liberty of, for example, Caribbean pirates or children. He notes that piratical freedom was rejected and quashed, and that the freedom of children was considered underdeveloped and incorporated into ideas about proper human maturity. Liberal Enlightenment freedom exists within a particular historical framework and has particular attributes—the right to own and dispose of property, the right to partake in the democratic process—and particular agents: white men.

Law's study is limited to the genre of pantomime, so my citation of Stovall should not be taken as an accusation of racism by omission, particularly given that Stovall's study was published after *Music, Pantomime and Freedom*. My interest, rather, is in the value of these works taken together. Law's insights lay important groundwork both for historical race musicology and for the continuing performance of eighteenth-century music. By examining the ways in which the genre of pantomime interacts with concepts of liberty, Law helps us to interrogate other genres, too: what, then, of liberty and agency in music *outside* pantomime? Given how heavily eighteenth-century French opera relies on the exotic and the Oriental, what insights might be gleaned about personhood, agency, and race across music for the stage in this period?

These are crucial questions both for historians of this period and for performers of its music. Through grounding her study in musical analysis, Law offers a musicological examination of moral liberty on a granular level. Considering moment-to-moment agency and personhood in the music of this period is critical to achieving genuinely reparative musicology and performance, following William Cheng's recent work.² If we accept, following Tyler Stovall, Charles Mills and others, that the Enlightenment milieu is unavoidably but not irredeemably racist, then our engagement with this music, whether as scholars, performers, or listeners, must be *anti-racist*. One way to achieve this is to examine both the granularity and the broader structures of racism in this period. Law focusses on moral liberty, rather than political or civil liberties. In so doing, she examines agency rather than the broader political structures and legislative concepts that underpin eighteenth-century society and government. Understanding these more general ideas, though, relies on engaging with specific ideas of personhood, agency, and self, and how these were thought about and expressed in the eighteenth century. To understand how we might instrumentalize

¹ Tyler Stovall, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). See particularly: Chapter 3.

² William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

Rousseau's thought towards social justice, for example, we should take in not only his political views and writings, but also his composition and his ideas on the social value of art. As ecological and political catastrophe seems to loom, when musicologists and musicians may be wondering the point of their work, it is heartening to reflect on the possibility of music inciting genuine reflection and social change. *Music, Pantomime and Freedom* is unexpectedly encouraging in that regard.

Law refers frequently to how the music she studies invited spectators to think and reflect on their own moral liberty, both individually and collectively. Engaging with the racist Enlightenment through musicology and performance invites us to do the same, reflecting on our own agency and our own society, and thus, after Rousseau, to use music and the theatre as a social tool of anti-racism. The detailed work Law has done in examining moral liberty in pantomime in Enlightenment France is important groundwork for this effort.

In conclusion, *Music, Pantomime and Freedom in Enlightenment France* is an imaginative, insightful, and innovative book whose contribution to scholarship stretches far beyond its taken subject. The ease of Law's prose and the agility with which she handles primary evidence belie the depth of research that lies so clearly behind this publication. This is a critical intervention, deserving the attention of all scholars of the interaction between philosophy, politics, and music.