

# MUSIC AND THE ABSOLUTE MONARCH : TRENDS IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY FRANCE AND CHINA<sup>1)</sup>

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The purpose of this paper is to show how music was used to support autocratic government at the courts of two great contemporary rulers. Louis XIV of France(1643~1714) and the Kangxi Emperor of China(1662~1772). At a time of world-wide development in the arts, it is appropriate to compare and contrast the situation of one of the most influential of them at the very heart of contemporary western and eastern civilizations the courts of the Sun King at Versailles and the Son of Heaven in Beijing. But to do so, we must first go back several centuries and note the philosophical ground according to which each conceived its musical usage.

In Europe, Plato had first emphasized the necessity to the Governor of music, dance and verse, which linked him with cosmic movement, the rhythm of the spheres. Later, in the sixth century, Boethius had named Christ Summus Ille Musicus', thereby stressing that through the most divine music, communion could be achieved with Christ and God. Mediaeval theologians elaborated on the spiritual importance of number in music, the third representing the Trinity, the octave the perfection of wholeness, etc. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries neo-Platonists, for example Marcilio Ficino, revived the concept of music in the service of the state at a time when discussion about statecraft absolutism and the divine right of kings was helping to redefine the ruler's methods and powers.

In China, such ideas would have been perfectly familiar. Ever since the Han dynas-

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ty the *Yueji* ('Classic of Music') had been studied and accepted as defining music and dance as a bridge between Heaven and man. The more perfect the music and dance performed in court rites, the more harmoniously the people of the Empire would live and work together. Perfect music could even keep the succession of the natural seasons properly timed and prompt the hatching of eggs, the growth of feathers on young birds, and the sprouting of new shoots on vegetation ! Early Han numerologists, like their later counterparts in mediaeval Europe, stressed the connection between musical number and good government : the five strings of the *guqin*, for example, corresponded to the five elements and the five orders of human relationships, and their fine tuning was therefore a positive means of helping to balance the natural and human worlds.

For many centuries Chinese monarchs fully accepted what the *Yueju* said about the practical value of music to their government and endeavoured to make it as perfect as they could. Sometimes their efforts seemed to pay off : in the early Tang dynasty, when bands of foreign musicians maintained at the court in Changan, including some from the kingdoms on the Korean peninsula contributed to ceremonial music there, China's international prestige soared. At others they did not no amount of tinkering with the musical system at the Kaifeng court in the eleventh century succeeded in stemming or coping with the crisis caused by foreign invaders from the north. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Manchu conquerors, having learned from the results of the Mongols' failure to achieve accommodation with their Chinese subjects, adopted a generally conservative approach to government practices, anxious to prove that they knew how to rule in approved Confucian style. In their musical habits, therefore, they largely continued with Ming and earlier traditions, including the performance of foreign music, though by now the court music establishment was considerably smaller than it had been at its *apogée* in the Tang.

Louis XIV of France and the Kangxi Emperor of China were contemporary rulers of great Empires, each of them having an exalted view of his own role. Each had come

to the throne as a boy, and both were consequently susceptible to the influence of their advisers and to the classical views of government which they were taught by them including positive views on the power of music. But both were strong characters who in due course were able to shape their own decisions and political destinies.

Louis' court at Versailles was a splendid, colourful and cultured place of fine buildings and beautiful gardens in which sculptures, paintings and the performing arts were conceived as a whole. The King first saw himself represented on the stage as Apollo and in later artistic form as the rising sun, a symbol which was as powerfully effective in France as the Emperor's dragon emblem was in China, though the Son of Heaven could never have conceived of the public proclamation of his image in the shape of personal statues, as Louis XIV did. Royal Academies of Dance and Music were established in Paris in 1662 and 1669, and in the early part of his reign the King continued to support the ballet, which had been popular at the court of his father Louis XIII.<sup>2)</sup> But rivalry with musicians caused the influence of the dancers and royal interest in the ballet to wane, and the rising fortunes of music and the theatre, coming together in the development of opera, are glitteringly associated with the spectacular career of Louis' Superintendent of Music, the Italian Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632~87).

In the hands of Louis and Lully, glorious music full of pomp and enthusiasm, trumpets, drums and choirs filled the court and society at large. Music for special occasions such as weddings, christenings, victories and visiting embassies was celebrated with canon, bells and fireworks, while other entertainment music, religious music, and even music which accompanied the spectacle of the King going to bed and rising, which courtiers were regularly invited to watch, was scarcely less grandiose. The purpose of all this musical activity was to create a sense of immense grandeur with

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2) Reflecting the neo-Platonist idea that it mirrored the movement of the heavenly spheres, ballet was a rather slow, measured and stately affair, not quite as static as the dances that still accompany Confucian ritual music in Seoul, but bearing little resemblance to modern concepts of balletic art.

which to overawe both the nobility and people. Contemporary critics like La Bruyère observed that at the Mass itself it was the King, not God, who had become the object of veneration, and indeed in style and form there was little difference between Lully's *Te Deum* and the opening passages of his opera *Isis*, in which he glorified his royal master.<sup>3)</sup> As for the operas, Lully composed his great series of thirteen *Tragédies Lyriques* in an equivalent number of years. The story lines were mostly in classical settings and to modern taste they appear simple and rather feeble. They invariably exalt virtues such as love, patriotism and honour and celebrate the defeat of evil by the forces of good—representing of course, Louis XIV and France. They also boast of France's newly created naval power and her military victories, and were a means of overawing her neighbours and enemies with a sense of her splendour and power.

Thus court music in France both exposed and glorified the king as a means of exalting his supernatural prowess. This was in direct contrast to the situation in Beijing where the same end was sought by using music to emphasize the separateness and mystery of the emperor.

Early in the eighteenth century the European vogue for *chinoiserie* had Versailles fully in its grip. The main sources of Louis' information about China were the Jesuit missionaries, some of whom had worked at the Ming and Qing courts since around 1600. The first French members of the Order had been sent out by Louis in 1687. One of them, Father Gerbillon, acted as interpreter at the Treaty of Nerchinsk with Russia in 1689, and partly out of gratitude for this the Kangxi Emperor issued his famous Edict of Toleration in 1690, giving support to the Christian cause. The Jesuits sent back to Europe a rather flattering description of Chinese politics and society, though not so flattering of Chinese music, which Europeans of their age generally disliked.

Probably in imitation of Louis XIV's Academies, Kangxi established a cultural acad-

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3) In China too, we may note, the tunes played at court ceremonies intended to exalt the Emperor were frequently the very same as those used to accompany religious rites, only the words being different.

emy of his own in the grounds of his favourite estate, the Garden of Eternal Spring and put it in the charge of his third son. This was to be a research centre where Chinese and Jesuit scholars could work together on cultural projects. One of the first fruits of its work was the production in 1713 of the *Liu zhengyi*. Although this included one volume contributed by the Portuguese Jesuit Father Pereira on western staff notation, a subject which had intrigued the Emperor, it was generally a conservative work and did not, for example, recognise Prince Zhu Caiyu's work on equal temperament tuning in the Ming dynasty. Kangxi himself probably had a hand in compiling it. His predecessor the Shunzhi Emperor had mostly continued Ming practices and had even taken the reactionary step of removing female musicians from court ceremonies, and Kangxi was not inclined to be particularly innovative, however interested he was even in barbarian music. The lesson of the *Yueji*, which he cited and obviously believed in, was that the power of music to influence his Empire was too great for him to take radical liberties with it.

Music featured prominently in the life of both the Inner and Outer Courts. The two areas were physically separated within the walls of the Inner City, the Inner Court - which was predominantly the preserve of the imperial family - being located within an enclave on the eastern side, and the remaining Outer Court being the domain of the highest echelons of the bureaucracy. Each maintained own bands, though many of the musicians played in each and the music they played was often the same, though with different words. Music accompanied the frequent sacrificial rites, celebrated special occasions such as the Emperor's birthday, weddings, visits by foreign embassies etc., and provided entertainment. As at Versailles there was music for everything, including the movement of the Son of Heaven and his consort around the court. Much of it was noisy and played by ensembles with horns and drums, and again as at Versailles, part of its object was to overawe the courtiers with its splendour. In contrast to France, however, it was also intended to impress by its differentness, not simply of quality but of its very nature. Some of the Jesuit accounts reported back to Europe

the Confucian belief that good government depended on special music (something that may have appealed to Louis and Lully), and that for centuries the ruling family had preserved music of their own that was never heard by outsiders. This was the music known as *yayue*, 'elegant music', and although it began to lose its exclusivity as the Qing dynasty wore on and even began to be adulterated by the influence of popular music, it always remained strange even to Chinese ears, and some of the principal instruments on which it was performed, such as the ranks of bronze bells and stone chimes, were not and never had been used by people outside the court.

In a recent book<sup>4)</sup> Wan Yi provides transcriptions of examples of Qing court music and discusses its characteristics. The most important kind, used at sacrifices and major ceremonies, was called *zhonghe shaoyue*, 'Well balanced music of Shao'. It was pentatonic, one note corresponding to one syllable of text and both here and according to neo-Platonist thought in France, the words of the text were more important than the music itself. It followed the Ming shape of mixed short and long lines, except for a period after 1683 when an attempt was made to even them up. Then, because no one had bothered to have the musicians retrained accordingly the result was an unhappy confusion, but undoing a decision approved by the Son of Heaven was not a simple move, and it was not until 1741 that his grandson, the Qianlong Emperor, restored the familiar Ming pattern. The range of music used was, as to some extent in France, rather limited and repetitive and the type of music to be played on particular occasions - for example, at the three levels of sacrifices - strictly defined. So were the numbers of players, dancers and musical officials required to perform it as well as the robes they should wear. Though smaller than those of earlier dynastic courts, their full complement still ran to several hundreds, far greater than that available to Jean-Baptiste Lully, whose total orchestra of 77 was the largest in seventeenth century Europe. Not all musicians played at once, indeed for some post-banquet entertainments

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4) Wan Yi, *Qing Dai Gongting Yinyue* ('Qing Dynasty Court Music'), Beijing, 1985.

very small ensembles were prescribed, including that for the performance of Korean music which called only for flutes, pipes and drums.

Later in the eighteenth century the Qianlong Emperor introduced modifications to court music that established its form for the remainder of the dynasty, and it was during his reign that Beijing opera developed and began to influence the repertoire of court music. But by then it was too late : at a time when autocracy in France was giving music the stimulus that encouraged the growth of opera as an art form and would open up the full range of musical style as never before, far outlasting the government system that promoted it in China court music as a genre was no longer satisfying as an art form and furthermore had ceased to achieve its political function of impressing either the courtiers themselves or the barbarians. Future musical inspiration would have to come from other sectors of society, as in fact it had been doing for some time. The *Yueji* had finally been proved wrong.