Epilogue: in the beginning was song

And the light shineth in the darkness;
and the darkness comprehended it not.

(John 1.5)

We have (rather deliberately) said very little about the subject of music, as this is not obviously a part of Rousseau’s social philosophy. Yet music was – though scholars have often forgotten this1 – Rousseau’s main passion, and this passion spilled over into his political writings in more ways than one. Rousseau, the musician and note-copier, was an accidental philosopher. Had he not seen the prize question from the Academy in Dijon on that fateful day in 1749, chances are that Rousseau would have remained an obscure figure and not a celebrated or reviled author. It is more likely that he (at best) would be remembered as a (very minor) composer – though Mozart adored his work (Wivel 1996: 65) In Dialogues he has the character of Jean-Jacques say of Rousseau, who is the subject of this strangest of autobiographies; ‘he was born for music … he discovered approaches that are clearer, easier, simpler and facilitate composition and performance … I have never seen a man so passionate about music as he’ (I: 872–3). This passion prompted his first published work – Projet concernant de nouveaux signes pour la musique, which he (without much success) sent to the Académie des Sciences in the early 1740s, and his obsession with music was evident in his numerous writings on musicology (Dictionnaire de musique, Lettre sur la musique française and L’Origine de la mélodie) and, of course, in the music he composed.

Rousseau studied music at Le Maître in Annecy, and taught himself by reading and annotating contemporary composers. During his stay in Italy he was captivated by Italian music, and upon his return to Paris in 1745, he completed his first opera, Les Muses Galantes (of which only parts have
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survived). It was after the composition of this work that he fell out with the most notable French composer at the time, Jean-Philippe Rameau. During a rehearsal in the house of La Pouplinière in 1745, Rameau accused Rousseau of having copied some of the opera’s passages from an Italian composer. Rousseau never forgave him! Following some difficult years Rousseau finally achieved musical fame in October 1752, with Le Devin du Village, first performed for the court in Fontainebleau, and taken up by the Académie Royale de Musique. It stayed in the Opera’s repertory for sixty years, and the youthful Mozart used the libretto for his Bastien und Bastienne. Indeed, Mozart’s debt to Rousseau was not only confined to his youthful works, but also to his more mature works. Mozart’s biographer Robert W. Gutman has written thus:

In the Marriage of Figaro, Rousseau’s principle of the General Will, or common good, hovers over the luminous conciliation achieved in the final moments: Count Almaviva’s contrition restores harmony to the domain of Aquasfrescas, the characters’ sense of well-being derived from the new social contract guiding their relationships one to the other. (Gutman 1999: 123)

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the storyline was a romanticised praise of rustic simplicity. Yet his musical mind was felt in subtler ways than this. ‘Rousseau argued that the modern harmonic system depends on an “analytic” and “scientific” way of thinking, which he termed L’esprit de système’ (Blum 1985: 352). This had profound implications for his philosophy. The whole tenor of his prose had a musical aura about it. His works were composed rather than written – which, perhaps, explains his eloquence. Readers of Rousseau’s work in the original French have been struck by the rhythmical patterns. Rousseau’s prose reads as a melody: ‘just as in his musical compositions, in his prose Jean-Jacques knew how to quicken and retard tempo for the sake of emphasis’ (McDowell 1968: 19). This musical quality was not unintended. Through the melodious tone he wanted to prove a philosophical point (Wokler 1987: 328). He lamented, in The Essay on the Origin of Language, that philosophers, ‘in cultivating the art of convincing had lost the art of arousing’ (V: 425). Language had lost its potency, and modern man was doomed to live in a state of tranquillity like that of the imprisoned companions of Odysseus waiting to be devoured by the cyclop’ (V: 425). Without the ability to speak passionately and with arousal, ‘we can only groan and be quiet’ (III: 609). Music, however, held out some hope, as this was the only means through which man could awaken our slumbering emotions. In Dictionnaire de musique he wrote that
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Music acts more intimately on us by in a sense arousing in us feelings similar to those, which might be aroused by another … may all nature be asleep, he who contemplates it does not sleep, and the art of the musician consists in substituting for the insensible image of the object that of the movements which its presence arouses in the heart of he who contemplates. (V: 860–1)

Music, in other words, held the key to restoring our original emotions, that natural ‘goodness of man’, which manifested itself in the natural compassion with suffering, weak and unfortunate individuals. It is, perhaps, indicative that Rousseau – the thinker of natural goodness of man and a composer – never tired of stressing that music and song was man’s first impulse (Wokler 1987: 328). The first languages must have been poetic rather than prosaic – they would have been sung rather than spoken. And the significance that came to be ‘attached to their terms depended upon the musical forms in which these were constructed’ (327). In the Origin of Languages, Rousseau wrote: ‘The first stories, the first declarations, the first laws were in verse, it had to be so, since passions spoke before reason. The same was true of music. To say and to sing were formerly one’ (V: 410–11). Therefore, before men and women began to communicate, and before they succumbed to amour propre, they had expressed themselves in an impulsive manner – that is by singing. This theory may be empirically dubious. The claim that language was conceived in musical ebullience seems farfetched as a linguistic hypothesis – and, in truth, it is unlikely that it was ever intended to be one. Yet the argument is metaphorically sound in the context of Rousseau’s general philosophy. Just as music gave way to rational discourse, the natural goodness of man was replaced by selfishness and calculation. The sentiments which had once given rise to song were stifled, repressed and forgotten as the social relations of men and women changed under the bondage of an unjust civilisation. There is nothing new in this model, no discrepancy between Rousseau’s political theory and his philosophy of music. Rousseau, we must never forget, was writing against the backdrop of the ‘disenchantment of the world’. Even music, he believed, was in danger of being swept away by the torrents of scientism and wanton philosophy. Rameau, not only a composer but also a materialist musicologist, had developed an ingenious and elaborate science of music based on Newtonian physics. This was an almost blasphemous position according to Rousseau. In Lettre sur la musique française, he wrote, ‘If you limit the music to motions [and other physical phenomena], you completely rob it of its moral effects.’ Moral effects, which he refers to as the ‘voice of nature’ (V: 350). As in society in general, music had followed a process of both degradation and progress; it had been given
articulation, substance and an intellectual basis. For Rousseau the error of Rameau and his followers was to think that the science of harmony—a branch of physics—could elucidate musical phenomena. In fact, music could not be reduced to a set of vibrations. The underlying sense of music was moral and contingent on the specificity of sensitive beings. For this reason music, as an object of study, was fundamentally different from other art forms. ‘Colours,’ wrote Rousseau, ‘are the ornament of inanimate beings; all matter is coloured; the voice proclaims a being endowed with sense; only a sensitive being can sing’ (V: 420). No wonder Rousseau was fond of quoting Horat’s dictum sunt verba et voces, praeteraque, nihil – ‘there are words and voices and nothing else’ (V: 287).

These utterances are a part of his general philosophy. Rousseau never just wrote about music. His writings about music were also metaphors for his general Kulturkampf, that is, in his struggle against the decay or morals and the advances of Godless materialism. It was Rousseau’s central idea that scientism and reason alone could not edify man, let alone awaken his sensible heart.

Music was a countervailing force, a subversive means of undermining the empty castle of rationalism. Music, for Rousseau, was meta-physical, in the Aristotelian sense of being beyond mere physics; ‘as long as you seek the moral implications in the physic of sound you fail to find it. You will reason without understanding’ (V: 919). It was the scientists’ and the materialists’ propensity to ‘reason without understanding’ which more than anything else was Rousseau’s indictment of the philosophy of modernity. Rousseau, the philosopher of the sensible heart, knew that man was a sensitive being (an insight he passed on to the likes of Shelley, Byron, Hölderlin, Mozart and Goethe), and this insight formed the core idea in his political philosophy. Politics (as the science of what ought to be) was grounded in ethics, and ethics could never be but an academic matter. Philosophical reasoning could not ‘understand’, in the sense of empathy, what it is like to suffer. Reasoning could be useful, but only as a means to an end. The moralist—which is everybody who wants to do good—should not be a rationalist, but allow him- or herself to be overwhelmed by emotion. ‘You must be moved to move others … you must light a fire in your own heart and carry it on to others’ (V: 613). To accomplish this it was necessary ‘to make language into song, and make the music into words’ (V: 445). Rousseau’s position has been summed up by Christopher Kelly as follows: ‘whereas Plato [was] interested in taming the power of music and submitting it to reason, Rousseau [was] interested in taking advantage of the untamed power of melody. Perhaps because he regard[ed] social
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life as unnatural, Rousseau … turn [ed] on its head the platonic order that gives primacy to reason over feeling’ (Kelly 1997: 30). And – as mentioned above – man (as a sensitive being) is distinguished by his ability to express emotions through music, for ‘nature itself produces few musical tones. It is only living beings who create them’ (V: 421).

Whether Rousseau succeeded as a musician and composer – ‘made language into song’ – is debatable. But he arguably accomplished the feat of writing poetically about politics – and through his skills as a musician – he aroused feelings about injustice, something which few – either before or after – have achieved. He made ‘music into words’. And this was politically – or philosophically – important. ‘The point is’, said Rousseau, that music ‘can arouse in our heart the same pulsations as one feels in seeing [our fellow beings]’ (V: 861). This was not merely a point of musicology but rather an allusion to those powers of empathy and imagination which lay at the heart of his moral theory. Through arousal of our emotions by music (or words as poetical as melody) man could return to his original purity: ‘music was born in the same instance as speech. The very first words uttered were sung’ (V: 410). But speech degenerated into rational – and disenchanted – discourse. Neither philosophy, nor science could make the world habitable for man. The arts and the sciences – the burden of an inhumane culture – had undermined man’s original compassion. This could not be remedied through mere words. Only sounds, which evoke responses that had once been experienced by other senses and which used man’s imagination as a backdrop could save us, as Rousseau explained, ‘music acts more intimately on us in exciting by one sense affections similar to those, which could be held by another being’ (V: 410). Music held out the promise of re-enchanting the world. The physician had identified the disease – it is time to begin the treatment. As Rousseau wrote when he first entered upon the literary stage:

I must admit that the evil is not as great as it might have become. Eternal foresight, by placing medical herbs next to the various noxious plants, and the remedy against their injuries into substance of a number of harmful animals, has taught the sovereigns who are its ministers to imitate wisdom.

(III: 26)

There is hope – after all!
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Notes


2 Rousseau’s enmity towards Rameau was not surprising. In 1745 Rousseau had revised Rameau and Voltaire’s opera Les Fêtes de Ramire, which became a success. Yet Rousseau did not receive credit for the work.