

MAŁGORZATA GAMRAT

JEAN-BAPTISTE ROUSSEAU'S POETIC CANTATAS
AND THEIR PLACE IN THE CULTURE OF FRANCE:
A PRELIMINARY STUDY

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the poetic cantata invented by Jean-Baptiste Rousseau (1670–1741) was one of the major genres of French literature, with a theory developed by its founder, who also made it popular in his own country and later elsewhere in Europe (Knabe et al. 201; Dorival 13–15). This genre played a key role in the emergence of the secular French music cantata characteristic of that country's culture. The poetic cantata appeared at a time of great historical and artistic changes in France, in the late years of Louis XIV's reign, the regency of Philippe I, Duke of Orléans, and Louis XV's ascension to the throne. It was a period of worldview transformations (marked, among other, by the sanctimonious piety of Louis XIV), which entailed such changes in culture as the rejection of the Italian theatre by the king, the gradual domination of French authors and language on the stage, as well as a decrease in Italian music's and musicians' presence in spectacles, at the royal court, and in many French salons. It was in many ways an age of transition in music and literature. On the one hand, we can observe the dominance of excellent authors who were not great masters (sometimes referred to today as the *maîtres mineurs*). They were active in the interval between Racine, Molière, and Voltaire, and in music – between

Dr hab. MAŁGORZATA GAMRAT – Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II, Instytut Nauk o Sztuce; adres do korespondencji: Al. Raławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin; e-mail: malgorzata.gamrat@kul.pl; ORCID 0000-0002-6588-7533.

Dr. Hab. MAŁGORZATA GAMRAT, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Institute of Art Studies; address for correspondence: Al. Raławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: malgorzata.gamrat@kul.pl; ORCID 0000-0002-6588-7533.

Lully (after whose death interest in the opera declined in France) and Rameau. On the other hand, it was a time of evident ferment in the arts, of search for new genres and new forms of artistic expression. In literature, the French language and French poets (such as Boileau and Pascal) grew in importance. In music, there was increased demand for French works and for settings of French texts. The idioms of French music began to emerge, even though Italian influence and conscious combinations of these two types of music were still present.

JEAN-BAPTISTE ROUSSEAU AND HIS POETIC CANTATA

J.-B. Rousseau's poetic cantatas emerged around 1700 and were circulated in manuscript copies at first, then in salons and in literary cafés, such as Café Laurent, where they were presented and discussed as a new literary form, which soon began to inspire artists and underwent modifications as a result of artistic debates and experiments (cf. Voltaire; Dorival). Printed editions, both of individual pieces and collections, only came later.

The poetic cantata is a genre which, by definition, derives from music. Rousseau's concept implied specific solutions in the field of language (which was devised as ideally suitable for singing, in a period when the French language was otherwise considered unfit for this purpose), versification, construction, style, theme, and philosophy (cf. Scanno in Rousseau), narrative and logical links between relatively independent smaller-scale segments, as well as the combination of epic, lyrical, and dramatic elements within one poetic work. Of much importance in Rousseau's cantatas was also the rhetorically and dramaturgically justified *imitazione della natura*, which is one of the elements relating his cantata genre to music (Dorival 20). Other consequences of the emergence of the poetic cantata for poetry included the increased role of musical qualities in the texts, the highly emotional stance of the subject, and the emergence of neologisms (cf. Sablayrolles), which contributed to the development of the French language.

J.-B. Rousseau defined all these elements in his preface to *Oeuvres diverses* of 1712, which was the first print edition authorised by him (I, VII). In that preface, the author points to the Italian and ancient origins of the poetic genre, which he defines as "a kind of ode quite new in our country, examples of which can be found in the Antiquity. Italians call it a Cantata because it is particularly well suited for singing" (XXIII). In that first edition,

Rousseau also applies the terms *ode sacrée* (XV) and *cantique sacrée* (XXII). As the sources that he drew upon for these pieces, he mentions Racan (Honorat de Bueil, seigneur de Racan) and the *Psalms of David*. Such works, he emphasises, should tend towards the *sublime*, which can be achieved by, among others, creatively developing the existing models. According to Rousseau, what counts in the cantatas is the wealth of imagery, diversity of figures, maximum expression, the presentation of great things in an even more splendid manner, “a veritable field for the *sublime* and the *pathétique*” (XXII).

Discovering the ideal structure proved by no means easy and took him much time. He eventually opted for the following cantata form: “They are wont to divide it into three ‘stories’ (*récit*), separated by arias (*air*), which forces them to diversify the metre in the strophes, with verses sometimes longer, and shorter at other times” (XXIII). Shifts in the subject, who expresses his or her feelings in the first person or comments on the events in the third, entail a considerable degree of metrical freedom. Rousseau emphasises that “stories (recitatives) are the body, while the sung arias are the souls” (XXIV), and that a cantata should properly start with a recitative.

As for the content, he tells us it should either deal with mythological tales or with allegorically interpreted historical events, with frequent reference to moral issues, usually in the final section of the piece. For this reason, Rousseau draws on rhetorical figures and *topoi* already present in ancient poetry (Pindar, Horace) and on cultural codes typical of his own times (frequently depending on the audience’s erudition), such as courtly life presented in the garb of the Antiquity (Bajer 77–78). The cantata ought to demonstrate a certain degree of universality in emotional expression and representation of characters. Rousseau views the poetic cantata as an independent piece of poetry, and as high-quality artistic material for music composers at the same time (Rousseau, *Oeuvres diverses* XXIII; Gamrat, “Literackie inspiracje” 68).

Out of Rousseau’s entire body of writings, it is the cantatas that survive to our day as masterpieces of the genre, as his major contribution to the development of French poetry, and indirectly – also of French music. From among the other poets of that time, poetic cantatas were written by Antoine Houdar de La Motte (1672–1731), François Joseph de La Grange (1677–1758), Antoine Danchet (1671–1748), Louis Fusellier (1672–1752), Thomas l’Affichard (1698–1753), Mlle Malcrais de la Vigne (actually Paul Desforges-Maillard; 1699–1772), and Alexandre-Xavier Harduin (1718–1785). Their texts were printed in *Mercur de France* (around 170 pieces in the years 1717–1771) and in J. Bachelier’s edition of *Recueil de cantates* (1728), as well as in collected works.

THE MUSIC CANTATA IN THE 18TH CENTURY

The poetic cantata's musical counterpart was developed by Nicolas Bernier (cf. Couvreur) and Jean-Baptiste Morin (Tunley 50–71), who belonged to artistic and intellectual circles close to J.-B. Rousseau, such as those of the Duke of Orléans and Café Laurent (cf. Clark and Connon). Notably, the interrelations between music and poetry (and the unity of the arts in general) had been very important and institutionally supported in France ever since the sixteenth century. The Académie de poésie et de musique, active in 1570–1589, was followed by other institutions, and the tendency to bring artists from many disciplines together in the same institutional body culminated in the establishment of the Institut de France in 1795 (Gamrat, *Muzyka fortepianowa* 80–82).

The eighteenth-century French cantata differs from its German and Italian counterparts both in its subject matter (which is nearly exclusively secular) and in the artistic means it applies. It is therefore distinguished in music history as the *cantate française*. It features a clear-cut division into the Italian-type aria or the more French-style arietta, the French recitative, and, in later years, also a large-scale instrumental ritornello. The cantatas were originally written for solo voice (usually a soprano), more rarely for two or three voices with basso continuo. These works were strongly influenced by their poetic model, which made composers search for a sound language adequate to the new poetic discourse; it also increased the awareness of the relations between words and music. Since allegory and the subject's emotions are key elements of these music works, rhetoric plays an important role in them and is present in all the musical parameters.

During that period, despite the dominance of the French language, the French cantata demonstrated a powerful influence of Italian music (very popular in seventeenth-century France, promoted by the king; the first cantata composers were frequently pupils of Italian artists living either in Italy or in France). Italian-style cantatas, or those that comprised some Italian elements, were for the most part pieces whose form strictly followed J.-B. Rousseau's model (3 arias and 3 recitatives). They featured long Italian-style arias (frequently da capo and with elements of bel canto), Italian recitatives and a strongly chromaticised virtuosic type of Italian-style accompaniment (e.g. Montéclair, Morin, Bernier, and Stuck). The French-style cantatas, on the other hand, had a variable structure, French recitatives drawing on the Lully tradition, brief arias (varied in form) or ariettas (e.g. Campra). The accompaniment also included

melodic instruments. The text was more and more dramatically conceived, and the relations between words and music were even closer than in the Italian-style cantatas. Italian and French elements were frequently combined (as in Morin and the *goûts réunis*). Comparison of Italian and French music became a subject of theoretical treatises, such as *Comparaison de la musique italienne et de la musique française* by Le Cerf de La Vieville (1704).

Poetic and music cantatas very quickly achieved immense popularity, which continued to grow nearly until the middle of the century, as evident from the number of poetic and music cantatas written in that period as well as their place in concert life, both in private venues, in salons, and at public events such as Philidor's *Concert Spirituel* and the *concerts français* series. The cantata's position is also confirmed by its reception in the press, especially in *Mercure de France* (previously *Mercure Galant*; Tunley 6–16), which focused on literary issues, and in treatises on both literature and music. The poetic cantata appears in *La querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* as a representative of modern poetry (Dorival 15–19). The cantata's popularity gradually began to wane in the mid-eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the genre was of key importance in its heyday, though it was for many years passed over and considered as secondary by researchers (even David Tunley called it a “minor form”; Tunley XII). Other cantata composers from the heyday of the genre included: Sébastien de Brossard (1655–1730), Jean-Baptiste Stuck (1680–1755), André Campra (1660–1744), Michel Pignolet de Montéclair (1667–1737), Thomas Bourgeois (1676–1750), Philippe Courbois (1705–1730), Louis Nicolas Clérambault (1676–1749), Laurent Gervais (1670–1748), André Destouches (1672–1749), Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764), Jacques Aubert (1689–1753), Louis Lemaire (1693–1750), and Joseph Bodin de Boismortier (1789–1755). Many of them likewise included self-commentaries in prefaces to editions of his works or commented on their compositions in music treatises. Some of these works have no modern critical source editions, and they remain little known (Sadler, Dubruque in Clérambault, 3). Nevertheless, the available source materials and later commentaries are sufficient for a preliminary discussion of the key characteristics of the genre.

THE CANTATA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY (AND LATER)

The poetic and music cantatas returned in the nineteenth century. France underwent great social and political transformations in that period (the revo-

lution, the rise of the empire, the development of institutionalised, state-controlled education), as well as artistic changes. Of particular importance in art was the gradual fading away of Classical models and another era of ferment in art, the dispute of the Romantics with the Classics, in which Rousseau was quoted as a relic and stereotype from the times when poetry had not been “real poetry” yet (Bajer 76).

Rousseau’s works were a compulsory component of state school syllabuses, which was important for the education of would-be writers, who returned to this genre throughout the age. The cantata also became a compulsory element of the syllabus at the Conservatoire de Paris composition classes (cf. Pierre), and remained an obligatory piece (interchangeably with a *scène lyrique*) in the Prix de Rome competition (so-called *cantate de Rome*) until as late as 1968 (cf. Lu and Dratwicki).

The cantata was conceived as a test of the candidate’s ability to understand the literary text and reflect its main ideas in music. It is a difficult form since it does not have the support of the stage component (despite theatrical imagination being frequently inspired by the dramaturgy, epic design and profound lyricism of the libretti) and because it is relatively much shorter than the opera. Besides, the performing forces in a cantata are considerably limited (frequently only 1, 2 or 3 voices and an instrumental ensemble). It is in fact only the music and the way of singing (suitable for the aria and recitative forms) as well as the selection of accompanying instruments (in the 19th century it was usually an orchestra) that decide about the value of the given piece. Libretti were originally written in the spirit of Rousseau’s texts, which many composers considered as ideal for musical settings; their authors frequently were selected members of the Institut de France (Bonnaire 177–78). To more modern composers such as Hector Berlioz, however, such libretti stood in the way of creative freedom and imagination (cf. 1870). One example of a libretto constructed in accordance with Rousseau’s formal guidelines is *Herminie*, written for a 1828 competition by Pierre-Ange Vieillard (1778–1862). The author preserved the model form (3 arias and 3 recitatives), but changed the order of segments at the end of the piece (RA RA AR/prayer). The conventional reference to history is still there (the story of the medieval knight Tancred and his beloved); the highlight is on emotions and philosophical reflection, making it possible to comment on human emotionality and actions in a universal manner.

The cantata was, at that time, one of the many genres practised by budding composers and by poets associated with the Institut de France, as well by such

Romantics as Delavigne and Lamartine, who developed Rousseau's model both thematically and structurally by adding a chorus and numerous voices performing the recitatives and arias, which are frequently hard to distinguish from each other (cf. Delavigne's *Les Troyennes*, 1824; Lamartine's *Cantate pour les enfants d'une maison de charité*, 1830). In that age the cantata was overshadowed by the opera but still played an important role in the formation of audiences (concerts by conservatory students and the Institut de France competition winners), performers, and the composers themselves (cf. Reicha, Pierre, Gamrat, "Rola nauczania"). The events related to the Conservatoire's and the Institut's activity received much coverage in the press of the time (for instance, in *Gazette et Revue Musicale de Paris* and the *Journal des débats*). In later decades (and until today) the cantata has been conceived as a genre that accompanies various important events (and so is of occasional character), and allows artists to demonstrate their utmost skill in both composition and poetry. The genre has been much less prominent in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries' poetry, but has remained present, to mention only: Paul Claudel's *La Cantate à trois voix* (1912), Paul Valéry's *Cantate du Narcisse* (1944), André Doms' *Cantate pour le vif des temps* (1971), Paul Colinet's *La Cantate* (1976), Louis Aragon's *Cantate à André Masson* (1977/1979), and Jean-Yves Casanova's *Cantata per Maria Magdalena* (2017).

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