

Session: Urban Elites in the 18th Century Metropolis and Smaller Town – Cultural Styles and Identities in a Comparative Perspective

The Brussels music scene, 1740-1780: expression of an urban or a courtly-aristocratic culture?

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After the troubles of the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) the Southern Netherlands entered a period of political stability and economic recovery that would last for more than thirty years. Music as well profited from these favourable social circumstances. The main centre of musical activity was Brussels, where the governor-general had his seat. He was the princely representative of the Austrian emperor, who had acquired the region under the Treaty of Utrecht (1713). As the political and administrative centre Brussels was the largest town in the Southern Netherlands. The population amounted to ca 60,000 inhabitants in 1755. In comparison with London or Paris, the size of Brussels was very modest, but the region of which it was the centre, belonged to the most intensely urbanized of whole Europe, and this from the Middle Ages on.

This paper deals with the question whether the Brussels music scene in the second half of the 18th century, until the collapse of the Ancien Régime (1792/1794), may be qualified as distinctly ‘urban’, as being the unambiguous expression of the social world of the townsman. Already a superficial view on the principal pillars of the Brussels music scene reveals a more complicated constellation. Indeed, not so much the town as such but rather the court of the governor-general was the main pole of attraction for professional musical activity in the town. The governor-general had the enjoyment of a *Chapelle Royale*, a mixed ensemble of nearly 30 choir singers and musicians, which first task consisted in the musical adornment of the church services at the court. As far as its secular tasks were concerned, these served both purposes of representation and distraction. Also the opera house, known as the *Grand Théâtre*, stood in a close relation to the court and the central government. Although the theatre was privately owned and managed, its administration depended largely on the government, which decided on the granting of the necessary patent and financial support. Therefore the central government was in a position to subject the administration to an excessive and embracing control. In the last decades of the Ancien Régime Brussels counted two concert societies with

a more or less regular activity. About these societies, called *Concert Noble* and *Concert Bourgeois*, the historian is scarcely informed. Nevertheless it is known that the *Concert Bourgeois* was not as exclusively 'bourgeois' as its name might suggest. The society was founded in the early 1750s under the protection of the governor-general. Each time the governor-general honoured a concert with his presence, the event took the form of an exuberant celebration of his highness. Moreover, some of its principal benefactors belonged to the high nobility and the concert audience as well showed a substantial aristocratic component.

The governor-general was of course not in a position to monopolize all musical activity in the town. Beside him the names of a small number of high aristocrats continually appear in the musical history of the period. Anyway, the governor-general and these aristocrats, moving in the microcosm of the court, had much in common. Since they had a great impact on the form and nature of the Brussels music scene, it is of importance to draw their profile. This should allow to pronounce in a more balanced way about the supposedly urban nature of the Brussels music scene. A first distinctive characteristic of the governor-general and the aristocrats around him was their political powerlessness. This especially applied to Charles of Lorraine, who was governor-general from 1741 to his death in 1780. Charles was the younger brother of Francis, whose marriage to Maria Theresa in 1736 had given the latter the prospect of acquiring one day the German emperorship. However, to the imperial dignity did not correspond real political power and the same can be said about the position of his brother Charles in Brussels. His presence in the town served a merely representative purpose. In her policy of centralisation and modernisation the empress Maria Theresa preferred to rely on a removable minister plenipotentiary. Being reduced to a largely ceremonial role, Charles tried to compensate for his lack of real power with a flamboyant court life. In this way the governor-general and his courtiers developed into stereotypical representatives of what Norbert Elias indicates, borrowing the word from Veblen, as a 'leisure class'. In a constant search for novelties they tried to chase away the spectre of tedium. In this context music was one of the elements, able to provide for the necessary diversion. Since the objective was to break boredom, music making in the courtly setting more than once took the form of an 'extravagancy'. Most striking were the so-called *mascarades*, musical parades in which the members of the high aristocracy, disguised in exotic outfits, actively participated. Charles of Lorraine particularly cherished this kind of enjoyment and spent a lot of money on organizing these *mascarades*. Other striking examples of musical extravagancies are the musical boat

trips on the Brussels canal, for which the prince Charles-Joseph de Ligne (1773) or the duke of Arenberg (1786) took the initiative. These were like miniatures of the famous excursions on the Thames of king George I in 1717, on which occasion Handel's famous Water Music had resounded for the first time.

The governor-general and the high aristocracy, who were at the basis of a great deal of musical activity in the town, can hardly be described as a distinctly 'urban' group. Charles of Lorraine had grown up in the ancestral residences of Nancy and Lunéville, where he had developed, besides a lifelong enthusiasm for theatre and music, an even stronger passion for hunting, which may be qualified as the archetypical pastime of the aristocrat. During his Brussels years, he retired as often as he could, to one of his residences in the surrounding countryside. There, he indulged in numerous hunting parties, but at the same time, he was not deprived of musical and theatrical delights. The members of the court chapel were obliged, whenever summoned, to follow the governor-general to his residences outside Brussels. Similar scenes might be observed in the castles of the *grands seigneurs*, to which they moved after passing the cold months in the town. Some of them enlarged their residence with a private theatre. In the plays that were performed on these stages, the members of the aristocracy liked to participate themselves. In addition they called upon professional singers and musicians from the Brussels scene. Since the number of musicians in Brussels was rather limited, the services they paid to the aristocracy on the countryside, disordered the musical agenda in the town from time to time. So Vitzthumb, the director of the *Grand Théâtre*, had to postpone the premiere of the *opéra comique* 'Ernelinde' (Poinsinet) in 1772, since several members of the opera company stayed in Heverlee near Louvain, where the duke of Arenberg had spent a considerable amount of money on the establishment of a charming theatre. Unlike the princes and *grands seigneurs* in Germany and Austria, however, none of the great noblemen of Charles' circle had their own music chapel. They contracted with musicians and singers on a punctual basis. As distances in the Southern Netherlands were restricted and the road network belonged to the most advanced in Europe, there was no need for such chapels. Musicians, living in Brussels, could be easily engaged to render their services in the surrounding area. Whereas the aristocrats distinguished themselves by a typical life pattern of periodical alternation between town and countryside, the musicians whom they called upon, formed a professional group that was firmly embedded in the social world of the town.

Norbert Elias has asserted that in most European countries of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the court represented the central factor in the framing of models and standards of conduct, and from this point of view, clearly overshadowed the town. The latter was, according to a typical phrasing in the Ancien Régime, little more than the ‘aping’ of the court. Notwithstanding the high degree of urbanization in the Southern Netherlands, this seems true with regard to the music scene in Brussels as well. In the course of the eighteenth century, there can be observed even a certain decline of musical and theatrical activity with a pronouncedly urban stamp. This had much to do with the establishment of the *Grand Théâtre* in 1700, which may be considered a key moment in the musical history of the town. The monopoly position of the new theatre, controlled and subsidized by the central government, led to a marginalization of the existing, more traditional forms of (music) theatre. This was particularly detrimental to the old ‘chambers of rhetoric’, which had been for centuries the nuclei of urban theatre life. In the eighteenth century these chambers lost much of their status and turned into a kind of second-rate stages, with a repertoire that was to a large extent a derivative of the pieces performed in the *Grand Théâtre*, and attracting an audience for which the threshold of the opera house was too high, be it for financial or social reasons. Another symptom of a declining urban musical culture was the crisis of the Brussels fraternity of Saint Job. This corporative body of musicians enjoyed a number of privileges, granting its members an exclusive right to teach music and to play on festive occasions in the town. In the eighteenth century these privileges came under pressure, as the fraternity witnessed numerous infringements on their rights by musicians who belonged to the court chapel or to the orchestra of the *Grand Théâtre*. The growing weight of the central government, especially in the second half of the century under the absolutist rule of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, turned out to be disastrous for the fraternity, that barely took any advantage from the legal actions it brought against various court musicians.

The predominance of the court and the aristocracy in musical matters, however, does not exhaustively characterize the Brussels music scene. A more adequate understanding of the problem can only be gained if it is situated in a broader geographical context, which brings us more in particular to the special relation of Brussels to the French capital. It was the occupation of the town in 1746-1749 by the troops of Louis XV during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) that brought about a qualitative change in the impact of French culture. French had already been the language of the central government from the end of the fifteenth century, but from the middle of the eighteenth century it started to affect much

broader strata of the population. Everyone who wanted to get ahead in society or even just to stay in touch with what was going on in the intellectual and cultural field, experienced a considerable pressure to give up his native tongue, which was Dutch, and to assimilate the French language and culture. In a context of social striving, in which also segments of the middle classes got involved, it was an imperative to behave fashionably and, in this respect, Paris set the trend. As far as opera is concerned, the audience of the *Grand Théâtre* got acquainted with the new genre of the *opéra comique*. It was introduced in Brussels by the famous French playwright Charles-Simon Favart (1710-1792). His troupe had accompanied marshal Maurice of Saxony, who was in the service of the French king, on his campaign in the Southern Netherlands, and upon the seizure of Brussels in 1746 it had settled in the premises of the *Grand Théâtre*. The restoration of the Austrian regime in 1748 did not dull the enthusiasm for the *opéra comique*, quite the contrary. In these years the *Grand Théâtre* turned into a stage that was almost exclusively reserved to the Parisian repertoire, performed by a company in which French singers invariably stole the scene. This fact also influenced theatre activity outside the *Grand Théâtre*. So were the pieces performed by the ‘chambers of rhetoric’ mentioned above most of the time translations and adaptations of French originals. As a consequence, it became increasingly difficult for composers and dramatists in the Southern Netherlands to create a more personal sound, that was more than a mere imitation of the French example. Room for the development of musical creativity was still there in the field of instrumental music, where the contemporary even witnessed a certain revival. However, a true blossoming of music and the arts in general was in the given circumstances not very probable.

From the above it may be concluded that the Brussels music scene in the second half of the eighteenth century, until the breakdown of the Ancien Régime, was still largely tuned to the needs of the ruler and the aristocracy. Members of the non-privileged strata in the urban society evidently took part in the opportunities that offered the town in the musical and theatrical field, but in this participation they were largely driven by reasons of social promotion. Acting that way, they were willing to renounce their mother tongue. At the same time, however, their assimilation into the French culture, at least in a first stage, inevitably remained superficial, so that culturally the level of mere imitation was hard to break out of.

The nature of the Brussels music scene in the last decades of the Ancien Régime gains in interest if it is considered in the light of further evolutions. In fact, the music life in the city

about 1850 seems to have very little in common with the situation under Charles of Lorraine. This might suggest that the occupation (1792/1794) and subsequent annexation of the Southern Netherlands by the French revolutionary troops marked, from a musical point of view, a sharp breach with the past. As both the court and the churches collapsed as centres of musical activity, the French invasion meant, at least in the short term, a musical catastrophe. Even more important was the loss of status that Brussels suffered. As a simple departmental chief town it could hardly aim high musical aspirations. At the same time, however, the French period seems to be decisive for the direction in which the Brussels and Belgian music scene would evolve in the nineteenth century. Many young musicians went to Paris, where they came in touch with a musical culture that was distinctly 'national'. Music should contribute to the development and flourishing of the nation. In Paris they also learned that this aim could best be achieved through a centralistic and hierarchic organization of society. In the musical field the principle of centralism implied a pronounced dominance of the great institutions in Paris (*Conservatoire, Opéra*). François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871), who became the first director of the Brussels *Conservatoire* in 1832, had been a student and subsequently professor and librarian of the Paris *Conservatoire* before returning to his native country. Therefore it may not surprise that he was filled with the firm will to shape the Brussels *Conservatoire* and, more ambitiously, the entire Belgian music scene after the example of the French model. In his aspirations Fétis was hampered by a deeply rooted urban particularism. Unlike France, Belgium had from the very beginning two *Conservatoires Royaux* (Brussels, Liège), which made a consequent organization of musical education along centralistic, hierarchic lines impossible. However, the musical revival of Belgium, so strongly desired by Fétis, met with more fundamental difficulties. The French period, and especially the Napoleonic era, gave birth to a new elite that would set its stamp on the development of the country after Napoleons defeat in 1815. After fifteen years of reunification with the Northern Provinces under king William I, Belgium gained independence in 1830. Doubts about the viability of the newborn state brought the political and economic elites together in an extremely close coalition. This fact gave the quickly industrializing state in many respects the outlook of a big economic project. In a sharp contrast to the governor-general and the courtly aristocrats around him, who had dominated the Brussels music scene in the last decades of the Ancien Régime, the new elites were of a very prosaic nature. Music and culture in general did not count among their primary preoccupations. As a consequence, music got only recognition, as far as it could generate a positive and useful social effect. Especially the forging of a strong national identity was a priority for the new regime and music could give valuable support in

this respect. Music got largely integrated in the realm of the utilitarian argument and this was something Charles of Lorraine, archetype of the 'useless' aristocrat, could hardly have imagined.