133 Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born at Geneva in 1712 and died in 1778 near Paris. With his battle cry, "Retournons à la nature," Rousseau exerted a deep and lasting influence on the music of his time. He was not technically trained as a musician, but this did not prevent him from taking a passionate interest in things musical. In the "Querelle des Bouffons" Rousseau fought on the side of the partisans of the Italian *opera buffa*. His most important writing in this field is his *Lettre sur la musique française* (*Letter on French Music,* 1753); a reference to its sweeping indictment of French music is almost *de rigueur* in later writings of the period.

Rousseau even tried his hand as composer of a comic opera on a French text in which he attempted to follow the principles of the *opera buffa*. The work—*Le Devin du village* (*The Village Soothsayer,* 1752)—was extremely successful and played an important role in forming the style of French *opéra comique*. Rousseau was also the author of a valuable *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768).

FROM *Letter on French Music* (1753)

To The Reader:

Since the quarrel which arose last year at the Opéra[1] produced nothing but abuse, bestowed by the one party with much wit and by the other with much animosity, I was unwilling to take any part in it, for that kind of contest was wholly unsuited to me and I was well aware that it was not a time to speak only reason. Now that the buffoons are dismissed, or the next thing to it, and there is no more question of cabals, I think I may venture my opinion, and shall state it with my customary frankness, without fear of offending anyone by so doing. It even seems to me that in a subject of this kind, any reserve would be an affront to my readers, for I admit that I should have a poor opinion of a people who attached a ridiculous importance to their songs, who made more of their musicians than of their philosophers, and among whom one needed to speak more circumspectly of music than of the gravest questions of morality.

Do you remember, sir, the story, told by M. de Fontenelle,[2] of the Silesian infant who was born with a golden tooth? Immediately all the doctors of Germany exhausted themselves in learned disquisitions on how it was possible to be born with a golden tooth; the last thing that anyone thought of was to verify

TEXT: The original edition (Paris, 1753). Translation by William Strunk, Jr., and Oliver Strunk. Except for notes 1, 12, 19, and 20, the editorial notes in this selection are by Harvey Olnick.

1. See p. 9.
2. Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757), *littérateur,* perpetual secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, and author of the famous remark, "Sonate, que me veux-tu?"

the fact; and it was found that the tooth was not golden. To avoid a similar embarrassment, it would be well, before speaking of the excellence of our music, to make sure of its existence, and to examine first, not whether it is made of gold, but whether we have one.

The Germans, the Spaniards, and the English have long claimed to possess a music peculiar to their own language; they had, in fact, national operas which they admired in perfect good faith, and they were firmly persuaded that their glory would be at stake if they allowed those masterpieces, insupportable to any ears but their own, to be abolished. Pleasure has at last prevailed over vanity with them, or, at least, they have found a pleasure more easily understood in sacrificing to taste and to reason the prejudices which often make nations ridiculous by the very honor which they attach to them.

We still have in France the same feeling about our music that they had then about theirs, but who will give us the assurance that because we have been more stubborn, our obstinacy has been better grounded? Would it not then be fitting, in order to form a proper judgment of French music, that we should for once try to test it in the crucible of reason and see if it can endure the ordeal?

It is not my intention to delve deeply into this subject; that is not the business of a letter; perhaps it is not mine. I wish only to try to establish certain principles by which, until better have been found, the masters of the art, or rather the philosophers, may direct their researches; for, as a sage once said, it is the office of the poet to write poetry and that of the musician to compose music, but it is the province only of the philosopher to discuss the one and the other well.[3]

. . . . . .

The Italians pretend that our melody is flat and devoid of tune, and all the neutral nations[4] unanimously confirm their judgment on this point. On our side we accuse their music of being bizarre and baroque.[5] I had rather believe that both are mistaken than be reduced to saying that in countries where the sciences and the arts have arrived at so high a degree of perfection, music has still to be born.

The least partial among us[6] content themselves with saying that Italian music

3. Omitted here is an extended section in which Rousseau seeks to prove that the Italian language is best suited for musical setting.
4. There was a time, says Milord Shaftesbury, when the practice of speaking French had made French music fashionable among us. But Italian music, by giving us a nearer view of nature, soon gave us a distaste for the other and made us see it as dull, as flat, and as doleful as it really is. [Au.]
5. It seems to me that people no longer dare make this reproach so frequently since it has been heard in our country. Thus this admirable music has only to show itself as it is in order to clear itself of all the faults of which it is accused. [Au.]
6. Many condemn the total exclusion of French music unhesitatingly pronounced by the amateurs of music; these conciliatory moderates would have no exclusive tastes, as if the love of what is good ought to compel a love of what is bad. [Au.]

and French music are both good, each in its kind, each for its own language; but besides the refusal of other nations to agree to this parity, there still remains the question, which of the two languages is by its nature adapted to the best kind of music. This is a question much agitated in France, but which will never be agitated elsewhere, a question which can be decided only by an ear perfectly impartial, and which consequently becomes every day more difficult to resolve in the only country in which it is a problem. Here are some experiments on this subject which everyone is free to verify, and which, it seems to me, can serve to give the answer, at least so far as regards melody, to which alone almost the whole dispute is reducible.

I took, in the two kinds of music, airs equally esteemed each in its own kind, and divesting them, the one of its *ports-de-voix*[7] and its perpetual *cadences* the other of the implied notes which the composer does not trouble to write, but leaves to the discretion of the singer;[8] I sol-fa'd them exactly by note, without any ornament and without adding anything of my own to the sense or connection of the phrases. I will not tell you what effect this comparison produced upon my mind, because I have the right to offer my reasons but not to impose my authority. I merely report to you the means which I adopted to form my own opinion, in order that you, in turn, may employ them yourself if you find them good. I must warn you only that this experiment requires more precautions than one would think. The first and most difficult of all is that one must maintain good faith and be equally fair in choosing and in judging. The second is that, in order to attempt this examination, one must necessarily be equally acquainted with both styles; otherwise the one which happened to be the more familiar would constantly present itself to the prejudice of the other. And this second condition is hardly easier than the first, for of all those who are well acquainted with both kinds of music, no one hesitates in his choice, and one can tell from the absurdly confused arguments of those who have undertaken to attack Italian music, how much they know of it and of the art in general.

I must add that it is essential to proceed in exact time, but I foresee that this warning, superfluous in any other country, will be quite useless in France, and this sole omission necessarily involves incompetence in judgment.

With all these precautions taken, the character of each kind of music is not slow in declaring itself, and then it is quite hard not to clothe the phrases with

7. The *port-de-voix* is a specifically French *agrément*, an upward resolving appoggiatura executed by means of a mordent. *Cadence* is the French word for trill. See musical illustrations in Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris, 1768), Plate B, Figure 13.

8. This procedure gives all the advantages to the French music, for the implied notes in Italian music are no less of the essence of the melody than those which are written out. It is less a question of what is written than of what should be sung, and this manner of writing notes ought simply to pass as a sort of abbreviation; whereas the *cadences* and *ports-de-voix* of French music are indeed, if you will, demanded by the style, but are not essential to the melody; they are a kind of make-up which covers its ugliness without removing it and which only makes it the more ridiculous to sensitive ears. [Au.]

the ideas which are suited to them and not to add to them, at least mentally, the turns and ornaments which one is able to refuse them in singing; nor must one rest the matter on a single trial, for one air may give more pleasure than another without determining which kind of music has the preference, and a rational judgment can be formed only after a great number of trials. Besides, by foregoing a knowledge of the words, one remains ignorant of the most important element in the melody, namely the expression, and all that can be determined in this way is whether the modulation is good and whether the tune is natural and beautiful. All this shows us how hard it is to take enough precautions against prejudice and what great need we have of reasoning to put us in a condition to form a sane judgment in matters of taste.

I made another experiment which requires fewer precautions and which may perhaps seem more decisive. I gave to Italians the most beautiful airs of Lully to sing, and to French musicians some airs of Leo and of Pergolesi,[9] and I observed that while the French singers were very far from apprehending the true taste of these pieces, they were still sensible of their melody and drew from them in their own fashion melodious, agreeable, and well-cadenced musical phrases. But the Italians, while they sol-fa'd our most pathetic airs with the greatest exactness, could never recognize in them either the phrasing or the time; for them it was not a kind of music which made sense, but only a series of notes set down without choice and as it were at random; they sang them precisely as you would read Arabic words written in French characters.[10]

Third experiment. I saw at Venice and an Armenian, a man of intelligence, who had never heard any music, and in whose presence were performed, in the same concert, a French monologue which began with these words:

Temple sacré, séjour tranquille,[11]

and an air of Galuppi, which began with these:

Voi che languite
Senza speranza.[12]

9. Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687) was the creator of the essential form of French opera, the *tragédie lyrique*. Born in Florence as Giovanni Battista Lulli (a form of his name he consistently avoided), he left Italy at the age of eleven to become a servant in a noble French household. Leonardo Leo (1694–1744) was an opera composer of the Neapolitan school and the teacher of Jommelli, who is mentioned below. Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710–1736) is best known for his setting of the *Stabat mater* and the comic intermezzo *La serva padrona* (1733), which became the rallying point for the Italian faction in the "Querelle des bouffons" after it was performed in 1752 by an Italian troupe on the stage of the Paris Opéra.
10. Our musicians profess to derive a great advantage from this difference. "We can perform Italian music," they say, with their customary pride, "and the Italians cannot perform ours; therefore our music is better than theirs." They fail to see that they ought to draw a quite contrary conclusion and say, "therefore the Italians have melody and we have none."[Au.]
11. From Jean Philippe Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricis* (text by Simon Joseph Pelegrin) performed in 1733: Act I, Scene I (*Oeuvres completes*, vol. 6, p. 53).
12. A pasticcio of the opera *Arsace* performed in Venice in 1743 contains an aria set to this text by Baldassare Galuppi.

Both were sung, the French piece indifferently and the Italian badly, by a man familiar only with French music and at that time a great enthusiast for that of M. Rameau. I observed that during the French song the Armenian showed more surprise than pleasure, but everybody observed that from the first bars of the Italian air his face and his eyes grew soft; he was enchanted; he surrendered his soul to the impressions of the music; and though he understood little of the language, the mere sounds visibly enraptured him. From that moment he could not be induced to listen to any French air.

But without seeking examples elsewhere, have we not even among us many persons who, knowing no opera but our own, believe in good faith that they have no taste for singing and are disabused only by the Italian intermezzi? It is precisely because they like only the true music that they think they do not like music.

I allow that the great number of its faults has made me doubt the existence of our melody and has made me suspect that it might well be only a sort of modulated plainsong which has nothing agreeable in itself and which pleases only with the aid of certain arbitrary ornaments, and then only such persons as have agreed to consider them beautiful. Thus our music is hardly endurable to our own ears when it is performed by mediocre voices lacking the art to make it effective. It takes a Fel or a Jélyotte[13] to sing French music, but any voice is good in Italian music, because the beauties of Italian singing are in the music itself, whereas those of French singing, if there are any, are all in the art of the singer.[14]

Three things seem to me to unite in contributing to the perfection of Italian melody. The first is the softness of the language, which makes all the inflections easy and leaves the taste of the musician free to make a more exquisite choice among them, to give a greater variety to his combinations, and to provide each singer with a particular style of singing, so that each man has the character and tone which are proper to him and distinguish him from other men.

The second is the boldness of the modulations, which, although less servilely prepared than our own, are much more pleasing from being made more perceptible, and without imparting any harshness to the song, add a lively energy

13. Marie Fel (1713–1794) and Pierre Jélyotte (1713–1797), the two leading singers of the French lyric stage, are best known for their performances in traditional French opera. Although they sang in Rousseau's *Le Devin du village,* they avoided taking sides in the aesthetic battle of the time.

14. Besides, it is a mistake to believe that the Italian singers generally have less voice than the French. On the contrary they must have a stronger and more harmonious resonance to make themselves heard in the immense theaters of Italy without ceasing to keep the sound under the control which Italian music requires. French singing demands all the power of the lungs, the whole extent of the voice. "Louder," say our singing masters; "more volume; open your mouth; use all your voice." "Softer," say the Italian masters; "don't force it; sing at your ease; make your notes soft, flexible, and flowing; save the outbursts for those rare, brief moments when you must astonish and overwhelm." Now it seems to me that when it is necessary to make oneself heard, the man who can do so without screaming must have the stronger voice. [Au.]

to the expression. It is by this means that the musician, passing abruptly from one key or mode to another, and suppressing, when necessary, the intermediate and pedantic transitions, is able to express the reticences, the interruptions, the falterings, which are the language of impetuous passion so often employed by the ardent Metastasio, which a Porpora, a Galuppi, a Cocchi, a Jommelli, a Perez, a Terradellas have so often successfully reproduced,[15] and of which our lyric poets know as little as do our musicians.

The third advantage, the one which gives to melody its greatest effect, is the extreme exactness of time which is felt in the slowest as well as in the liveliest movements, an exactness which makes the singing animated and interesting, the accompaniments lively and rhythmical; which really multiplies the tunes by making as many different melodies out of a single combination of sounds as there are ways of scanning them; which conveys every sentiment to the heart and every picture to the mind; which enables the musician to express in his air all the imaginable characters of words, many of which we have no idea of;[16] and which renders all the movements proper to express all the characters,[17] or at the will of the composer renders a single movement proper to contrast and change the character.

These, in my opinion, are the sources from which Italian music derives its charms and its energy, to which may be added a new and strong proof of the advantage of its melody, in that it does not require so often as ours those frequent inversions of harmony which give to the thoroughbass a melody worthy of a soprano. Those who find such great beauties in French melody might very well tell us to which of these things it owes them or show us the advantages it has to take their place.

On first acquaintance with Italian melody, one finds in it only graces and believes it suited only to express agreeable sentiments, but with the least study of its pathetic and tragic character, one is soon surprised by the force imparted to it by the art of the composer in their great pieces of music. It is by the aid of these scientific modulations, of this simple and pure harmony, of these lively and brilliant accompaniments that their divine performances harrow or enrap-

15. With the exception of the *buffa* composer Galuppi, this list names the more prominent opera composers associated with the Neapolitan school. Galuppi was performed by the Italian troupe, but few of the works of the others appeared on the Paris stage, their operas gaining standing by performances of isolated arias and by the accounts of those who had heard them elsewhere.
16. Not to depart from the comic style, the only one known to Paris, consider the airs, "Quando sciolto avrò il contratto," "Io ho un vespaio," "O questo o quello t'hai a risolvere," "Ha un gusto da stordire," "Stizzoso mio, stizzoso," "Io sono una donzella," "Quanti maestri, quanti dottori," "I sbirri già lo aspettano," "Ma dunque il testamento," "Senti me, se brami stare, o che risa! che piacere!" all characters of airs of which French music has not the first elements and of which it is incapable of expressing a single word. [Au.]
17. I shall content myself with citing a single example, but a very striking one: the air, "Se pur d'un infelice," in *The Intriguing Chambermaid* [*La Finta cameriera*], a very pathetic air with a very lively movement, which lacks only a voice to sing it, an orchestra to accompany it, ears to hear it, and the second part, which should not be suppressed. [Au.]

ture the soul, carry away the spectator, and force from him, in his transports, the cries with which our placid operas were never honored.

How does the musician succeed in producing these grand effects? Is it by contrasting the movements, by multiplying the harmonies, the notes, the parts? Is it by heaping design upon design, instrument upon instrument? Any such jumble, which is only a bad substitute where genius is lacking, would stifle the music instead of enlivening it and would destroy the interest by dividing the attention. Whatever harmony several parts, each perfectly melodious, may be capable of producing together, the effect of these beautiful melodies disappears as soon as they are heard simultaneously, and there is heard only a chord succession, which one may say is always lifeless when not animated by melody; so that the more one heaps up inappropriate melodies, the less the music is pleasing and melodious, because it is impossible for the ear to follow several melodies at once, and as one effaces the impression of another, the sum total is only noise and confusion. For a piece of music to become interesting, for it to convey to the soul the sentiments which it is intended to arouse, all the parts must concur in reinforcing the impression of the subject: the harmony must serve only to make it more energetic; the accompaniment must embellish it without covering it up or disfiguring it; the bass, by a uniform and simple progression, must somehow guide the singer and the listener without either's perceiving it; in a word, the entire ensemble must at one time convey only one melody to the ear and only one idea to the mind.

This unity of melody seems to me to be an indispensable rule, no less important in music than the unity of action in tragedy, for it is based on the same principle and directed toward the same object. Thus all the good Italian composers conform to it with a care which sometimes degenerates into affectation, and with the least reflection one soon perceives that from it their music derives its principal effect. It is in this great rule that one must seek the cause of the frequent accompaniments in unison which are observed in Italian music and which, reinforcing the idea of the melody, at the same time render its notes more soft and mellow and less tiring for the voice. These unisons are not practicable in our music, unless it be in some types of airs chosen for the purpose and adapted to it. A pathetic French air would never be tolerable if accompanied in this manner, because, as vocal and instrumental music with us have different characters, we cannot employ in the one the same devices which suit the other without offending against the melody and the style; leaving out of account that as the time is always vague and undetermined, especially in slow airs, the instruments and the voice would never be in agreement and would not keep step well enough to produce a pleasing effect together. A further beauty resulting from these unisons is to give a more sensible expression to the vocal melody, now by letting it unexpectedly reinforce the instruments in a passage, now by letting it make them more tender, now by letting it give them some striking, energetic phrase of the melody of which it is itself incapa-

ble, but for which the listener, skillfully deceived, never fails to give it credit when the orchestra knows how to bring it to the fore at the right moment. From this arises also that perfect correspondence between the ritornelli and the melody, as the result of which all the strokes which we admire in the one are only the development of the other, so that the source of all the beauties of the accompaniment is always to be sought in the vocal part; this accompaniment is so wholly of a piece with the singing and corresponds so exactly to the words that it often seems to determine the action and to dictate to the actor the gesture which he is to make,[18] and an actor who would be incapable of playing the part with the words alone might play it very correctly with the music, because the music performs so well its function of interpreter.

Besides this, the Italian accompaniments are very far from always being in unison with the voice. There are two very frequent cases in which the music separates them. One is when the voice, lightly singing a passage over a series of harmonies, so holds the attention that the accompaniment cannot share it; yet even then this accompaniment is made so simple that the ear, affected only by agreeable harmonies, does not perceive in them any harmony which could distract it.

The other case demands a little more effort to be comprehended. "When the musician understands his art," says the author of the *Letter on the Deaf and Dumb*,[19] "the parts of the accompaniment concur either in reinforcing the expression of the vocal part, or in adding new ideas demanded by the subject and beyond the capacity of the vocal part to express." This passage seems to me to contain a very useful precept, and this is how I think it should be understood.

If the vocal part is of such a nature as to require some additions, or as our old musicians used to say, some divisions, which add to the expression or to the agreeableness without thereby destroying the unity of the melody, so that the ear, which would perhaps blame them if made by the voice, approves of them in the accompaniment and allows itself to be gently affected without being made less attentive to the vocal part, then the skillful musician, by managing them properly and disposing them with taste, will embellish his subject and give it more expression without impairing its unity; and although the accompaniment will not be exactly like the vocal part, the two will nevertheless constitute only a single air and a single melody. For if the sense of the words connotes some accessory idea, the musician will superimpose this during the pauses of the voice or while it sustains some note, and will thus be able to present it to the hearer without distracting him from the idea expressed by the voice. The

18. Numerous examples may be found in the intermezzi which have been performed for us this year, among others in the air "Ha un gusto di stordire" in *The Music Master* [*Il Maestro di musica*]; in that of "Son padrone" in *The Vain Woman* [*La Donna superba*]; in that of "Vi stò ben" in [*Livietta e*] *Tracollo;* in that of "Tu non pensi" in *The Bohemian* [*La Zingara*]; and in nearly all of those which require acting. [Au.]

19. Denis Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (Paris, 1751), an essay that takes as a central theme the relation between language and gesture. Its assertion that the French language in its logical clarity is unsuited to poetry gave additional support to Rousseau's position.

advantage will be still greater if this accessory idea can be expressed by a restrained and continuous accompaniment, producing a slight murmur rather than a real melody, like the sound of a river or the twittering of birds, for then the composer can completely separate the vocal part from the accompaniment, and assigning to the latter only the expression of the accessory idea, he will dispose his vocal part in such a way as to give frequent openings to the orchestra, taking care to insure that the instrumental part is always dominated by the vocal, a matter depending more upon the art of the composer than on the execution of the instruments; but this demands a consummate experience, in order to avoid a double melody.

This is all that the rule of unity can concede to the taste of the musician in order to ornament the singing or to make it more expressive, whether by embellishing the principal subject or by adding to this another which remains subordinate. But to make the violins play by themselves on one side, the flutes on another, the bassoons on a third, each with a special motive and almost without any mutual relation, and to call all this chaos music is to insult alike the ear and the judgment of the hearers.[20]

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If I may be allowed to state my frank opinion, I find that the further our music advances toward apparent perfection, the more it is actually deteriorating.

It was perhaps necessary that it should reach its present state, in order that our ears might insensibly become accustomed to reject the prejudices of habit and to enjoy airs other than those with which our nurses sang us to sleep; but I foresee that to bring it to the very mediocre degree of merit of which it is capable, we shall sooner or later have to begin by once more descending (or reascending) to the state to which Lully brought it. Let us agree that the harmony of that famous musician is purer and less inverted; that his basses are more natural and proceed more directly; that his melody is more flowing; that his accompaniments, less burdened, spring more truly from the subject and depart from it less; that his recitative is much less mannered than ours, and consequently much better. This is confirmed by the style of the execution, for the old recitative was sung by the actors of that time in a way wholly different from that of today. It was livelier and less dragging; it was sung less and declaimed more.[21] In our recitative the *cadences* and *ports-de-voix* have been multiplied; it has become still more languid and has hardly anything left to distinguish it from what we call "air."

20. Omitted here is a section in which Rousseau praises Italian accompaniments for the sparseness of their harmonic doublings; in comparison, French accompaniments, as he states at the end of the *Lettre*, suggest the "padding of a pupil."

21. This is proved by the time of the representation of Lully's operas, much longer now than in his day by the unanimous report of those who have seen them long ago. Thus, whenever these operas are revived, they call for considerable cutting. [Au.]

Now that airs and recitatives have been mentioned, you will permit me, sir, to conclude this letter with some observations on the one and the other which will perhaps throw some helpful light on the solution of the problem involved.

One may judge of the idea our musicians have of the nature of an opera by the singularity of their nomenclature. Those grand pieces of Italian music which ravish the soul, those masterpieces of genius which draw tears, which offer the most striking pictures, which paint the liveliest situations and fill the soul with all the passions they express, the French call "ariettes." They give the name of "airs" to those insipid little ditties which they interpolate in the scenes of their operas, and reserve that of "monologues" particularly to those long-drawn-out and tedious lamentations which if only sung in tune and without screams would put everybody to sleep.

In the Italian opera all the airs grow out of the situation and form a part of the scene. Now a despairing father imagines he sees the ghost of a son whom he has unjustly put to death upbraid him with his cruelty; now an easygoing prince, compelled to give an example of severity, entreats the gods to deprive him of his rule or to give him a less susceptible heart. Here a tender mother weeps to recover her son whom she thought dead; there we hear the language of love, not filled with that insipid rigmarole of "flames" and "chains,"[22] but tragic, animated, ardent, and faltering, and befitting impetuous passion. Upon such words it is appropriate to lavish all the wealth of a music full of force and expression and to enhance the energy of the poetry by that of harmony and melody.

The words of our ariettes, on the contrary, always detached from the subject, are only a wretched medley of honeyed phrases which one is only too glad not to understand. They are a random assemblage of the small number of sonorous words that our language can furnish, turned and twisted in every manner except the one that might give them some meaning. It is upon such impertinent nonsense that our musicians exhaust their taste and knowledge and our actors waste their gestures and lungs; it is over these extravagant pieces that our women go into ecstasies of admiration. And the most striking proof that French music is incapable of either description or expression is that it cannot display the few beauties at its command except upon words which have no meaning.

Meanwhile, to hear the French talk of music, one would imagine that in their operas it depicts great scenes and great passions, and that only ariettes are found in Italian operas, to which the very word "ariette" and the ridiculous thing it signifies are equally unknown. We must not be surprised by the grossness of these prejudices: Italian music has no enemies, even among ourselves, but those who know nothing about it, and all Frenchmen who have tried to

22. The special attention given to the musical setting of such words in the *tragédie-lyrique* grew out of classical French declamation. Compare Diderot, who has the same complaint (see pp. 924–27, 930–32).

study it with the sole aim of criticizing it understandingly have soon become its most zealous admirers.[23]

After the "ariettes," which constitute the triumph of modern taste in Paris, come the famous monologues which are admired in our old operas. In this connection it is to be noted that our most beautiful airs are always in the monologues and never in the scenes, for, as our actors have no art of pantomime and the music does not indicate any gesture or depict any situation, the one who remains silent has no notion what to do with himself while the other is singing.

The drawling nature of our language, the little flexibility of our voices, and the doleful tone which perpetually reigns in our opera, give a slow tempo to nearly all our French monologues, and as the time or beat is not made perceptible either in the melody or in the bass or in the accompaniment, nothing drags so much or is so relaxed, so languid, as these beautiful monologues, which everybody admires while he yawns; they aim to be sad and are only tiresome; they aim to touch the heart and only distress the ear.

The Italians are more adroit in their Adagios, for when the time is so slow that there is any danger of weakening the sense of the rhythm, they make their bass proceed by notes of equal value which mark the movement, while the accompaniment also marks it by subdivisions of the beats, which, keeping the voice and the ear in time, make the melody more pleasing and above all more energetic by this exactness. But the nature of French music forbids our composers this resource, for if the actor were compelled to keep time, he would immediately be prevented from displaying his voice and his action, from dwelling on his notes, from swelling and prolonging them, and from screaming at the top of his lungs, and in consequence he would no longer be applauded.

But what still more effectively prevents monotony and boredom in the Italian tragedies is the advantage of being able to express all the passions and depict all the characters in whatever measure and time the composer pleases. Our melody, which in itself expresses nothing, derives all its expression from the tempo one gives to it. It is of necessity sad in a slow tempo, furious or gay in a lively one, serious in a moderate one; the melody itself counts for almost nothing in this; the tempo alone, or, to put it more accurately, the degree of rapidity alone determines the character. But Italian melody finds in every tempo expressions for all characters, pictures for all objects. When the musician so chooses, it is sad in a slow tempo, and, as I have already said, it changes character in the same movement at the pleasure of the composer. Contrasts are thereby made easy, without depending for this on the poet and without the risk of conflicts with the sense.

Here is the source of that prodigious variety which the great masters of Italy were able to display in their operas without ever departing from nature, a

23. A presupposition little favorable to French music appears in this: those who despise it most are precisely those who know it best, for it is as ridiculous when examined as it is intolerable when heard. [Au.]

variety which prevents monotony, languor, and ennui, and which French musicians cannot imitate because their tempi are prescribed by the sense of the words and they are forced to adhere to them unless they are willing to fall into ridiculous inconsistencies.

With regard to the recitative, of which it remains for me to speak, it seems to me that to judge it properly we must begin by knowing exactly what it is, for of all those who have discussed it I am so far unaware of any one who has thought of defining it. I do not know, sir, what idea you may have of that word; as for myself, I call recitative a harmonious declamation, that is, a declamation of which all the inflections are formed by harmonious intervals. It therefore follows that as each language has its own peculiar declamation, each language ought also to have its own peculiar recitative. This does not preclude one from very properly comparing one recitative with another to discover which of the two is the better, that is, the better adapted to its purpose.

Recitative is necessary in lyric drama, first, to connect the action and preserve the unity; second, to set off the airs, of which a continuous succession would be insupportable; third, to express a number of things which cannot be expressed by lyric, cadenced music. Mere declamation cannot be suitable for all that in a lyric work, because the transition from speech to song and especially that from song to speech has an abruptness which the ear does not readily accept, and presents a shocking contrast which destroys all the illusion and in consequence the interest.[24] For there is a kind of probability which must be preserved even at the Opéra, by making the language so homogeneous that the whole may at least be taken for a hypothetical language. Add to this that the aid of the harmonies augments the energy of musical declamation and compensates advantageously for what is less natural in its intonations.

It is evident, according to these notions, that the best recitative, in any language whatever, if this language fulfills the necessary conditions, is that which comes the nearest to speaking; if there were one which came so near to it as to deceive the ear or the mind while still preserving the required harmony, one might boldly pronounce that it had attained to the highest perfection of which any recitative is capable.

Let us now examine by this rule what in France is called "recitative." I pray you, tell me what relation you find between that recitative and our declamation. How can you ever conceive that the French language, of which the accent is so uniform, so simple, so modest, so unlike that of song, can be properly rendered by the shrill and noisy intonations of that recitative, and that there should be any relation whatever between the soft inflection of speech and these prolonged and exaggerated sounds, or rather these perpetual shrieks which form the tissue of that part of our music even more than that of the airs? For instance, let anyone who knows how to read recite the first four lines of the

24. Rousseau refers to the Opéra-Comique, which was then giving performances of mixed song and declamation (*comédies mêlées d'ariettes*) at the fairs of St. Germain and St. Laurent.

famous recognition scene of Iphigénie; you will barely detect a few slight inequalities, a few feeble inflections of the voice, in a tranquil recital which has nothing lively or impassioned, nothing which compels the speaker to raise or lower the voice. Then have one of our actresses deliver the same lines as set to music by the composer, and try, if you can, to endure that extravagant shrieking which shifts at each moment from low to high and from high to low, traverses without a subject the whole vocal register, and interrupts the recital in the wrong place to string some beautiful notes upon syllables without meaning, which correspond to no pause in the sense. Add to this the *fredons*,[25] *cadences*, and *ports-de-voix* which recur at every moment, and tell me what analogy there can be between speech and this pretended recitative, or at least show me some ground on which one may find reason to vaunt this wonderful French recitative whose invention is Lully's title to glory.

It is very amusing to see the partisans of French music take refuge in the character of the language and attribute to it the faults of which they do not dare to accuse their idol, whereas it is evident on all grounds that the recitative most suitable to the French language must be almost the opposite of that which is in use; that it must range within very small intervals, without much raising or lowering of the voice; with few prolonged notes, no sudden outbursts, still fewer shrieks; especially, nothing which resembles melody; little inequality in the duration or value of the notes or in their intensity either. In a word, the true French recitative, if one is possible, will be found only by a path directly opposite to that taken by Lully and his successors, by some new path which assuredly the French composers, so proud of their false learning and consequently so far from feeling and loving what is true, will not soon be willing to seek and which they will probably never find.

Here would be the place to show you, by the example of Italian recitative, that all the conditions which I have postulated in a good recitative can actually be found there; that it can have at the same time all the vivacity and all the energy of harmony; that it can proceed as rapidly as speech and be as melodious as veritable song; that it can indicate all the inflections with which the most vehement passions animate discourse, without straining the voice of the singer or deafening the ears of the listeners. I could show you how, with the aid of a particular basic progression, one may multiply the modulations of the recitative in a way suitable to it and which contributes to distinguishing it from the airs when, in order to preserve the graces of the melody, the key must be less frequently changed; how, especially, when one wishes to give passion the time to display all its movements, it is possible, by means of a skillfully managed interlude, to make the orchestra express by varied and pathetic phrases what the actor can only relate—a master stroke of the musician's art, by which, in an accompanied recitative,[26] he may combine the most affecting melody with all

25. Literally a short roulade, here implying excessive ornamentation.

26. I had hoped that Signor Caffarelli would give us, in the concert of sacred music, some example of grand recitative and of pathetic melody, in order to let the pretended connoisseurs hear for

the vehemence of declamation without ever confusing the one with the other. I could unfold to you all the numberless beauties of that admirable recitative of which in France so many absurd tales are told, as absurd as the judgments which people presume to pass on them, as if one could judge of a recitative without a thorough knowledge of the language to which it belongs. But to enter into these details it would be necessary, so to speak, to create a new dictionary, to coin terms every moment in order to present to French readers ideas unknown among them, and to address them in language which would seem meaningless to them. In a word, one would be obliged, in order to make oneself clear, to speak a language they understood, and consequently to speak of any science or art whatever except music alone. Therefore I shall not go into this subject with an affected detail which would do nothing to instruct my readers and concerning which they might presume that I owed the apparent force of my arguments only to their ignorance in this matter.

I think that I have shown that there is neither measure nor melody in French music, because the language is not capable of them; that French singing is a continual squalling, insupportable to an unprejudiced ear; that its harmony is crude and devoid of expression and suggests only the padding of a pupil; that French "airs" are not airs; that French recitative is not recitative. From this I conclude that the French have no music and cannot have any;[27] or that if they ever have, it will be so much the worse for them.

I am, etc.

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once what they have so long been passing judgment on, but I found, from his reasons for doing nothing of the kind, that he knew better than I the capacity of his hearers. [Au.]

Gaetano Majorano, called Caffarelli after his earliest protector (1703–1783), one of the leading Italian castrati. Louis XV engaged him to entertain the Dauphine, according to the *Mémoires du duc de Luynes* (vol. 12, p. 471 and vol. 13, p. 10), and while in Paris he was also heard at the Concert Spirituel on November 5, 1753—an event Rousseau presumably attended.

27. I do not call it having a music to import that of another language and try to apply it to one's own, and I had rather we kept our wretched and absurd singing than that we should still more absurdly unite Italian melody with the French language. This distasteful combination, which will perhaps from now on constitute the study of our musicians, is too monstrous to be accepted, and the character of our language will never lend itself to it. At most, some comic pieces will succeed in passing by reason of their orchestral part, but I boldly predict that the tragic style will never be attempted. At the Opéra-Comique this winter the public applauded the work of a man of talent who seems to have listened with good ears, and who has translated the style into French as closely as is possible; his accompaniments are well imitated without being copied; and if he has written no melody, it is because it is impossible to write any. Young musicians who feel that you have talent, continue in public to despise Italian music; I am well aware that your present interest requires it; but in private make haste to study that language and that music if you wish to be able some day to turn against your comrades the disdain which today you affect for your masters. [Au.]