

## ORGAN MUSIC DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION OF 1789

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**SUMMARY.** The following work contains information regarding the French art of organ music during the French Revolution of 1789. The revolutionary period had been a very difficult time for church organists who were forced to play and compose revolutionary music during the festivities organized by the state. The essay offers details on the most important organists active during the period of the revolution and their organ works, followed by the analysis of two representative revolutionary works: *Marche des Marseilloise et l'Air Ça-ira* by Claude Benigne Balbastre and *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte* by Jacques-Marie Beauvarlet-Charpentier.

**Keywords:** French Revolution, revolutionary music, organ, hymn, battle scene, sound effects.

After a period of over 150 years of uninterrupted development, the French art of organ music had been heavily struck by the French Revolution, which had a devastating effect on the instruments as well as on the fate of organists and organ builders. The properties of the church had been confiscated by the state, and the instruments - which according to the writings of François Sabatier had been in a number of at least 2000 - had been sold, destroyed or abandoned<sup>2</sup>. Church organists had lost their employments and organ builders were forced to turn into carpenters in order to make a living.

Many times the government organised feasts in the churches turned into Temples of Reason<sup>3</sup> (E.g. 1) during which the organists played revolutionary music. Ferdinand-Albert Gautier (1748-1825), organist at the Church of Saint-

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<sup>2</sup> Sabatier, François, *Les Orgues en France pendant la révolution (1789-1802)*, L'Orgue nr. 143, 1972:77.

<sup>3</sup> During the French Revolution of 1789 several ideological movements appeared, such as the *Cult of Reason*, the *Cult of the Supreme Being* and the *Theophilanthropy*. All these cults had the purpose to replace the religious cults with other ideologies which put man, nature and thinking in the middle of all things.

Denis described one of these festivities as follows: „At the *séances Décadeires*<sup>4</sup>, they assembled in the quire of the Temple of Reason, and there they sang lively songs, clad in diaphanous draperies, - a scene of riot. The tune of *Cadet Roussel* was one of those which I was compelled to accompany as a chorus, as well as several others of the same kind. The *Marseillaise* was not forgotten and was enthusiastically called for, the *Carmagnole* and *Ça ira* formed part of the service. The most remarkable thing about it all was the *maire*, a former priest, was in the pulpit singing the verses which the others repeated in chorus. I am not saying this on the report of others: I saw it with my own eyes and heard it with my ears.”<sup>5</sup>

E.g. 1



**Graphic reproduction of the Temple of Reason arranged in the interior of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris<sup>6</sup>**

Another similar situation took place in the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, where Gervais-François Couperin was compelled to play the organ during a feast organised in the honor of Napoleon I, to celebrate his victory

<sup>4</sup> The religious holidays had been replaced by festivities held every ten days, called *Festivals of Reason*.

<sup>5</sup> Ochse, Orpha, *Organists and Organ Playing in Nineteenth-Century France and Belgium*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> <http://1789-1799.blogspot.ro/2012/01/la-dechristianisation.html>.

in Egypt<sup>7</sup>. **Charles Broche** (1752-1803), organist at the Cathedral in Rouen was however completely satisfied with the task of composing and playing revolutionary music. For the festivities of the government he had composed the following works: *Bataille à grands choeurs*, *Invocation à la Liberté*, *Hymne à l'Égalité*, and *Hymne aux braves défenseurs de la Patrie*. Sadly, none of the above mentioned works have been published, except for the improvisation on the battle of Jemappes<sup>8</sup>. Claude Bénigne Balbastre was an active composer and organist before and during the revolution. He had composed a work which can be played on the piano as well as on the organ entitled *Marche des Marseilloise et l'Air Ça-ira*, and a short piece which imitates the sound of the canons entitled *Cannonade*.

The *Marche des Marseilloise et l'Air Ça-ira* are in fact two separate pieces which are usually played together. The first piece is based on the revolutionary hymn *Marche de la Marseilloise*<sup>9</sup>, whilst the second one is based on the popular contredans *Ça ira*<sup>10</sup>.

The *Marche des Marseilloise* is preceded by the following indication: *Arrangés pour le Forte Piano Par le Citoyen C. BALBASTRE Aux braves défenseurs de la République française l'an 1792 de la République. (Arranged for the piano by the citizen C. BALBASTRE For the brave defenders of the French Republic in the year of the Republic 1792).*

The first section of the piece is a homophonic representation of the hymn, provided by the composer with the indication *Fièremment* (with pride). This indication already suggests the character of the following music. Of course, as the majority of revolutionary music, this piece is composed in C-major, which contributes to the high-minded atmosphere of the music (E.g. 2).

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<sup>7</sup> Ochse, Orpha, *Organists and Organ Playing in Nineteenth-Century France and Belgium*, p. 6

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>9</sup> The *Marseillaise* is a hymn which had been composed by Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle in Strasbourg after France had declared war against Austria. It became the anthem of the French Republic in 1795. The original text of the hymn is the following: *Allons enfants de la Patrie./ Le jour de gloire est arrivé !/ Contre nous de la tyrannie L'étendard sanglant est levé, (bis)/ Entendez-vous dans les campagnes /Mugir ces féroces soldats ?/Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras / Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes !/Ref: Aux armes, citoyens, / Formez vos bataillons, / Marchons, marchons ! / Qu'un sang impur / Abreuve nos sillons !*

<sup>10</sup> The *Ça ira* was a popular French contredans composed by Bécourt, provided with a revolutionary text by a French soldier.

*Claude Balbastre*  
(1724-1799)

*Fièremment*

**Balbastre, Claude-Benigne, *Marche des Marseillois*, mesures 1-15<sup>11</sup>**

After the glorious Grand-choeur of the beginning a first variation follows which presents the theme in a faster *tempo*, hidden within a series of sixteenth passages. The verse before the refrain is once again perceived in *p*. This time the refrain is accompanied by fast rising and descending sixteenth passages which confer a restless atmosphere to the music.

The second variation once again has a homophonic conception, but in a very fast *tempo*. In the 82<sup>nd</sup> measure a new section begins marked by the composer with the word *Combat* (Battle). The combat situation is suggested by the dotted rhythms of the two hands and the fast rising and descending sixteenth passages (E.g. 3).

<sup>11</sup> [http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d6/IMSLP125582-WIMA.b4c2-Balbastre\\_Marseillaise.pdf](http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d6/IMSLP125582-WIMA.b4c2-Balbastre_Marseillaise.pdf).

E.g.3

Balbastre, Claude-Benigne, *Marche des Marseillois*, measures 82-96<sup>12</sup>  
The combat scene

The most descriptive part of the piece is the section which depicts the fled of the enemies and the sound of the canons. The fled is suggested by a long rising sixteenth passage at the end of which one can hear the sound of the canon, imitated by the organ with a cluster (E.g. 4).

<sup>12</sup> [http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d6/IMSLP125582-WIMA.b4c2-Balbastre\\_Marseillaise.pdf](http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d6/IMSLP125582-WIMA.b4c2-Balbastre_Marseillaise.pdf).

## E.g. 4

**Balbastre, Claude-Benigne, *Marche des Marseillois*, measures 97-104<sup>13</sup>**  
**The fled of the enemies and the sound of canons**

After the combat the *Ça ira* follows (E.g. 5), which celebrates the victory of the French army, as indicated by the composer with the remark *La victoire* (The victory). It is basically a simple piece of music marked by the composer with the indication *Gaiment*. After a first presentation of the hymn (the refrain) which is accompanied by a series of descending octaves, a short *Reprise* follows where the music modulates in G-major. The piece ends with the return of the refrain on the *Grand-choeur*.

## E.g. 5

**Balbastre, Claude-Benigne, The refrain of the *Ça ira* , measures 1-8<sup>14</sup>**

<sup>13</sup> [http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d6/IMSLP125582-WIMA.b4c2-Balbastre\\_Marseillaise.pdf](http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d6/IMSLP125582-WIMA.b4c2-Balbastre_Marseillaise.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Idem.

**Jacques-Marie Beauvarlet-Charpentier** (1766-1834), organist at the church of Saint-Eustache and at the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris composed a revolutionary piece for piano or organ, entitled *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte* (1797), a depiction of the battle of the French army led by Napoleon I in Italy.

The work begins with a short introduction where one can hear the sound of the trumpets announcing the battle (E.g. 6), provided by the composer with the remark *Appel de Trompette* (Trumpet call).

**E.g. 6**

Un peu vite  
Appel de Trompette

5

Majestueux

11

**Jacques-Marie Beauvarlet-Charpentier, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Mesures 1-16<sup>15</sup>**

<sup>15</sup> Beauvarlet-Charpentier, Jacques-Marie, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Les Éditions Outremontaises, Montréal, 2010.

The next section presents the song of the general who is preparing to go into battle, followed by the chorus of the soldiers who sing the *Chant du depart*<sup>16</sup>, another popular song during the period of the Revolution. This section suggests the movement of the soldiers who march on to the battle field. The next section, beginning in measure number 81 presents the sixth verse of the *La Marseillaise - Amour sacré de la patrie* (Sacred love of the Fatherland). The music is conceived in *p* with the indication *Lent et expressif* (E.g. 7).

## E.g. 7

**Jacques-Marie Beauvarlet-Charpentier, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Mesures 80-89<sup>17</sup>**

The intimate atmosphere of the section is suddenly interrupted by the sound of the cannons, followed by the charge of the horses suggested by the 3/8 bar, the *appoggiaturas* in the bass line and the tempo indication *Animé* (Lively). The music is now in *c-minor* (E.g. 8).

<sup>16</sup> The *Chant du depart*, also known as the *frère de La Marseillaise* (the brother of the Marseillais) had been composed by the renown French composer Étienne Nicolas Méhul on a text by Marie-Joseph Chénier.

<sup>17</sup> Beauvarlet-Charpentier, Jacques-Marie, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Les Éditions Outremontaises, Montréal, 2010.



The image shows a musical score for an organ piece. It consists of four systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system is marked '103 Animé' and 'La Générale'. The music is in 2/4 time. The bass line features a series of tremolos starting at measure 135, which are described as imitating the sound of drums. The piece concludes with the refrain of the Marseillaise in C-major.

**Jacques-Marie Beauvarlet-Charpentier, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Mesures 103-126<sup>18</sup>**

In the 135<sup>th</sup> measure a series of tremolos begin in the bass line, imitating the sound of the drums. The sound storm gradually diminishes eventually reaching *pp*. Then, suddenly the refrain of the *Marseillaise* appears in C-major on the *Grand-choeur* (E.g. 9).

<sup>18</sup> Beauvarlet-Charpentier, Jacques-Marie, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Les Éditions Outremontaises, Montréal, 2010.

## E.g. 9

Très animé

Aux armes, citoyens

151

156

ff

Jacques-Marie Beauvarlet-Charpentier, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Mesures 151-160<sup>19</sup>

The *battle* continues with the march of the armies followed by the battle between the two armies. The composer depicts suggestive scenes using simple musical procedures such as: rising chromatic octaves, sound imitating the call of the trumpets, sudden *crescendos* and *decrescendos*. The feeling of peril is in the air. The stormy battle scene is interrupted by a short section in *b minor* which indicates the movement of the enemy. The musical motifs indicate the lurking of their troops (E.g. 10).

## E.g. 10

Mouvements dans l'armée ennemie

236

241

246

Jacques-Marie Beauvarlet-Charpentier, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Mesures 236-245<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Beauvarlet-Charpentier, Jacques-Marie, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Les Éditions Outremontaises, Montréal, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Beauvarlet-Charpentier, Jacques-Marie, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Les Éditions Outremontaises, Montréal, 2010.

After a short section which depicts the enemy marching on to the Fort of Montezino guarded by the French, the battle scene returns with the same sound effects, first in E major and in C major.

In the following scene the French soldiers are summoned to put down their weapons. On return they respond with the refrain of yet another hymn entitled *Le chant des Girondins*.

**E.g. 11**

The image shows three staves of musical notation for an organ piece. The first staff, starting at measure 305, is titled 'Sommeation de l'ennemi' and includes the lyrics 'Français, bas les ar-mes, bas les'. The second staff, starting at measure 309, is titled 'Les Français s'écrient avec transport' and 'Majestueusement', with lyrics 'ar-mes! bas les ar-mes! Mourir pour la Pa-tri-e, mourir pour la Pa-tri-e'. The third staff, starting at measure 315, has lyrics 'c'est le sort le plus beau, le plus di-gne d'en-vie!'. The notation includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'f', and various musical symbols such as slurs and accents.

**Jacques-Marie Beauvarlet-Charpentier, *Victoire de l'Armée d'Italie ou Bataille de Montenotte*, Mesures 305 – 318.**

The following sections present the scenes of battle, with a series of sound effects like canons imitating clusters, drum imitating tremolos, rhythms which suggest the charge of the horses, and a whole series of fast ascending and descending sixteenth passages which contribute to the overall agitated atmosphere of the music.

After the battle the victory scene follows which presents two new revolutionary hymns: *Vous aimables fillettes et vous jeunes garçons* and *Veillons au salut d'Empire*. Toward the end, the French army prepares to return to its homeland, the soldiers singing: *Partons, partons* (Let us go! Let us go!). The work ends with a long *coda* on the *grand-choeur*.

Another important organist of the revolutionary period was **Gervais-François Couperin** (1759–1826). He was the *organist titulaire* of the Saint-Gervais Church in Paris, a position filled by the members of the Couperin family for a period of 173 years. Gervais-François Couperin was appreciated by the audience for his colourful and virtuosic improvisations. His most popular work entitled *Louis XVIII, ou le retour du bonheur en France Op. 14* (1816), is a tribute to king Louis XVIII who had been crowned after Napoleon I had abdicated in 1814.

After analysing two of the most important organ works composed during the revolutionary period we can conclude that they were very descriptive, offering veritable sound pictures depicting the scenes of battle. From the technical point of view these works are not very difficult; sometimes however it is necessary to be equipped with a series of technical skills which are atypical when it comes to the technique of organ playing: fast rising and descending sixteenth passages, percussion-like repeated chords, rising and descending octaves etc. With regards to their form, virtuoso sections alternate with homophonic hymn-like sections which usually present revolutionary songs.

Although the dawn of the romantic era is usually calculated from the debut of the *Symphonie fantastique* by Hector Berlioz in 1830, a tendency to renew and to romanticize already existed within the pages of these revolutionary works, which are to be conferred with the title of program music.

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