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Laura Mason. *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. xi + 268 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3233-0.

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In the 1970s and 1980s, students of the French Revolution built upon an earlier wave of revisionism which had argued that the events of 1789 to 1794 were primarily political, rather than social, in nature. Three historians in particular, Mona Ozouf, Francois Furet, and Lynn Hunt, offered compelling strategies for investigating the discursive practices and symbolic activities of revolutionaries who desired to regenerate the French body politic.[1] Subsequent work by these scholars and others, while not necessarily in agreement on the origins, accomplishments, or legacies of the Revolution, has continued to explore revolutionary language, festivals, printed discourse and iconography as a means to understand the political culture of the Revolution. The recent book by Laura Mason, *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799*, both contributes to this literature on the cultural history of the Revolution and suggests important correctives to its predecessors.

Professor Mason, who teaches history at the University of Georgia, has written a history of French singing culture from 1787 to 1799 which enables us to hear the many voices of Parisians who used song to express their desires, political and otherwise. Mason's central historiographical contention is that recent historians of revolutionary political culture have over- estimated its unity and incorrectly attributed its creation to a restricted group of literate elites. Instead, she argues, the uses of song remind us of the contingency of the Revolution on and off the streets of Paris. On a day-to-day basis, Parisians of all classes and political persuasions sang the politics of improvisation. Through her work, we follow the "careers" of great revolutionary songs such as *La Marseillaise*. We listen to the often discordant swell of voices in the streets, marketplaces, cafes, theaters, and other public spaces of the capital. And we witness the rising importance of song as a method of political expression in the first three years of the Republic, and the growing concerns of Revolutionary regimes to stifle that expression.

Mason makes clear the contestatory nature of Revolutionary political culture through discussions of four songs of the period which moved from the status of lighthearted, ephemeral entertainment previously associated with song to that of political anthem. The first of these songs to emerge as politically significant, *Ca ira* (which the author translates as "things will work out"), became popular among Parisians and others who donated their time to prepare the *Champs de Mars* in the weeks before the Festival of the Federation in July 1790. This work, a "simple song with a quick, bright tune" (p. 43), easily accommodated new verses which might deliver different messages. The verses most popular in July 1790 stressed the coming together of French citizens in anticipation of a new golden age; other verses popular at the same time and in the next two years, however, urged listeners to "Hang the Aristocrats!" and demonized other elements of French society. A year later, in late summer 1791, royalists adopted an air from a comic opera staged at the *Comedie- italienne* as their own signature song. This tune, titled *O Richard, o mon roi*, implied in the theater and in popular usage that the King was being held hostage by the Revolution; rewritten lyrics cited by Mason make this message explicit. By 1792, as political divisions hardened, revolutionaries and royalists alike used these songs to confront opponents in public spaces.

Both songs, however, were eclipsed that year in revolutionary significance by a work from the pen of a military officer named Joseph Rouget de l'Isle; the song is known today as the *Marseillaise*. Originally a war hymn titled the *Chant de guerre pour l'Armee du Rhin*, it migrated south from the Eastern front to Marseilles, where it was adopted by the *federes* stationed in that city. They in turn brought the song with them to Paris in midsummer 1792, and by late August 1792, in the wake of the storming of the Tuileries Palace, newspapers were reporting to the rest of the country how the song had swept the city. Mason emphasizes how the *Marseillaise*, initially written as a battle cry to inspire the troops, "became a

wholesale republican attack on despotism at home and abroad" (pp. 98-99), allowing singers and audiences to imagine they were excoriating a variety of enemies. Between 1792 and 1796, the song expanded the role of revolutionary anthem as it was sung at festivals, in the theaters, in public gardens and at fraternal dinners, by soldiers and civilians, and at moments of victory and defeat alike; it also played a "double role as a patriotic instrument and a source of profits" (p. 100). In the post-Thermidorian period, however, another song, the *Reveil du peuple*, arose in reaction to the excesses of the Terror to challenge the pre-eminence of the *Marseillaise*. This work, embraced in early 1795 by the *jeunesse doree* who emerged after Thermidor to challenge the Jacobins, called upon the French to overthrow the "cannibalistic hoard vomited up from the depths of hell" which had seized power, but as Mason aptly points out, it offered no future direction for the Republic. Thus, when the Directory replaced the National Convention in early 1796, the song was adopted specifically by Royalists who wished to turn back the clock, while the Directory endorsed the *Marseillaise* as the anthem sung by the triumphant armies of the Republic in battle. It was in this guise that the *Marseillaise*, the most successful song of the Revolution, continued its Republican career into the modern period.

The story of French song culture in the revolutionary decade, however, is not limited to the trajectories of these four songs, as *Singing the French Revolution* makes abundantly clear. Mason is also concerned to illuminate the "practices" and "representations" of singing across the Revolutionary decade. She begins her story of French singing culture in the streets and public spaces of Old Regime Paris, where *chansonniers* tried to make a living singing popular tunes before crowds of the literate and semi-literate in search of news and diversion. Entrepreneurial printers attempted to capitalize on the largely oral world of the street singers by printing collections of popular songs in cheap formats. While Mason emphasizes that these Old Regime singing practices involved commoners and elites, she is also careful to point out that the tawdry reputations of the *chansonniers* and the shabbiness of the printed song collections associated popular song with the dregs of society in the minds of many pre-revolutionary observers. With the advent of the Revolution, however, both the practices and the representations of popular singing changed dramatically. As the singing of *Ca ira*, the *Marseillaise*, and other revolutionary songs gained acceptance in public gatherings, government officials and many citizens began to view singing as a patriotic duty which expressed notions of community and support of the revolutionary cause. Songs were no longer essentially linked to a marginalized street culture. Singing became most "politically correct", Mason argues, during the fraught years of 1793 and 1794, when the Revolution's advocates sought transparency between the ideas and actions of all French citizens loyal to the Republic. In the post-Thermidorian period of the revolutionary decade, song was once again uncoupled from direct political expression, but in new ways which would anticipate the nineteenth century rather than recall the Old Regime. While the government bureaucratized the creation and dissemination of popular song through the establishment of the National Conservatory and increasingly tight censorship of printed songs, *goguettes*, or singing societies of artisans and laborers, began to meet in the upper floors of cafes in Paris and its suburbs, where a re- politicized song culture emerged again after 1830.

It must be emphasized, however, that Mason's discussion of revolutionary song culture is not the story of how the Jacobins came to employ singing and song culture for their own pre-determined political agenda. In fact, as she explicitly states at one point, "the Jacobins did not lead the way in appropriating songs to the revolutionary project" (p. 216). Rather, as one learns here, it was the royalists in the early phases of the Revolution who used the satirical potential of song in print and performance to perhaps greater effect than the leaders and supporters of the new regime. Further, after the August 1792 overthrow of the constitutional monarchy, it was the fraternal singing practices of the sans-culottes and the commercial opportunism of publishers anxious to cash in on patriotic sentiment which made song such a powerful revolutionary and republican force.

The politicians were more wary; Mason identifies a Robespierrist singing policy which sought to channel song into officially sanctioned state celebrations of the new Republic, and a Dantonist strain which saw the silencing of popular song as essential to a demobilization of the Terror. And, finally, during the Directory, both the government through the initiatives of the National Conservatory, and private citizens through less confrontational singing practices, tried to restore a social and cultural stability upon which the new republican polity could rest. Their short term failure, as Mason emphasizes, should not discredit the importance of directorial culture for an understanding of nineteenth-century republicanism. *Singing the French Revolution*, then, is a broad-based inquiry which seeks to remind us of the chaotic nature and lack of pre-determined direction in revolutionary political culture, rather than its continuity with a supposedly stable Old Regime political discourse.

When investigating revolutionary song culture, Mason implies, the important questions of rupture and continuity should not be analyzed in terms of political culture but rather of popular culture, a term which graces the book's sub-title. It was not until 1789, Mason believes, that artisans and peasants learned how to shape their beliefs and symbolic practices into a powerful critique of state power. Before the revolutionary divide, these grievances found only local expression which did not threaten the state; afterwards, one enters a world where popular culture is used by workers, women and others to craft a strategy of opposition to oppression (p. 10). The uses of singing during the Revolution, Mason argues, provide an exemplary case of this transformation in popular culture.

Mason's contribution to our understanding of song, popular culture, and the Revolution can perhaps best be understood when compared with the assertions put forth in another recent, important study of French music of this period. James H. Johnson's *Listening in Paris* differs from the present work in both chronology and intent; in it, Johnson studies the progressive silencing of opera and concert hall audiences from the *Guerre des buffons* of the 1750s to the musical romanticism of the July Monarchy.[2] He argues that musical audiences grew quiet over the course of this century as they became less aristocratic, and therefore less sure of their social place and more committed to a rigid, self-monitoring behavior. The rise of the romantic composer and performer, an artist mythically endowed with genius far beyond the capacity of his auditors, accentuated the tendency towards reverential silence, as did the formal changes in operatic and instrumental music which demanded greater concentration. While Johnson acknowledges the turbulence of the revolutionary decade in his work, he also concludes that "… the Revolution ultimately left scarcely a trace on French musical experience" (p. 103). In a purely aesthetic sense he may be right; similar claims have been made about the place of revolutionary novels, plays, and painting in the history of these art forms. But in his determination to relate a linear narrative of the auditory discipline imposed upon supposedly acquiescent French audiences from the Old Regime to the mid-nineteenth century, he cannot account for revolutionary moments of spectator intervention and appropriation. We can look to Johnson for a nuanced explanation of the *longue duree* from the perspective of the opera house, but we ought to turn to Mason for the *histoire evenementielle* of the revolutionary decade in the streets, the vaudeville theaters, and the popular press. Her rich, non-linear account of the revolutionary uses of song restores an agency to citizen-singers and listeners that today's shower-stall Pavarottis can only envy!

If you wish to explain to your students the powerful connections between song and French Republicanism, evident recently in the bicentennial Bastille Day extravaganza which featured a rendition of the French national anthem by the African-American opera singer Jessye Norman staged at the *Place de la Concorde*, you could do no better than to play for them the *Marseillaise* and assign the appropriate passages from Laura Mason's fascinating new book.

Notes:

[1]. I refer specifically to the following three works: Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution.* (Cambridge MA, 1988 [originally published in French in 1976]); Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, (Cambridge and Paris, 1981 [originally published in French in 1978]); and Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984).

[2]. James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995). For French singing culture at another moment of national crisis, see Regina M. Sweeney, *French Musical Entertainment and Ritual During the Great War*, forthcoming.

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