



REVIEW: BOOK

From Servant to Savant: Musical Privilege, Property, and the French Revolution

Rebecca Dowd Geoffroy-Schwinden
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At the heart of Rebecca Dowd Geoffroy-Schwinden's *From Servant to Savant* is the radical, tantalizing proposition that the rise of musical romanticism constituted not merely an aesthetic shift, but also a political one, precipitated by cataclysmic changes in social and economic relations in the wake of the French Revolution. She argues that musicians and composers were among the most vocal proponents of socio-economic overhaul during this period, advocating such liberal reforms as the protection of private property, copyright law, state artistic subsidy and democratic nationhood.

With this assertion, Geoffroy-Schwinden boldly wades into a number of overlapping, contentious debates in French Revolutionary historiography concerning the degree of continuity and change wrought by this unprecedented event. While Marxist historians of the early twentieth century viewed the French Revolution as the catalyst for the rise of industrial capitalism (see, for example, Georges Lefebvre, *Quatre-vingt-neuf* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1970)), revisionist scholars have noted that the economic changes established by the Revolution were limited, and that many of the Revolution's most radical reforms were almost immediately reversed – first by Napoleon and then under the Bourbon Restoration (see François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)). Similarly, many musicologists believed that the rise of an increasingly chromatic genre of so-called 'rescue opera' in the 1790s was evidence that the events of the Revolution had prompted the rise of musical romanticism (see Winton Dean, 'Opera under the French Revolution', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 94/1 (1967–1968), 77–96). However, others have since pointed to the persistence of more conservative musical trends (such as the revival of *opéras-comiques* from the 1750s and 1760s) as nuancing the idea that the French Revolution also ushered in a concurrent 'revolution' in musical taste (see Julia Doe, 'Two Hunters, a Milkmaid, and the French "Revolutionary" Canon', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 15/2 (2018), 177–205, and Mark Darlow, *Staging the French Revolution: Cultural Politics and the Paris Opéra, 1789–1794* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)).

Geoffroy-Schwinden's primary contribution to these debates is to suggest that the French Revolution, in abruptly ending the system of royal patronage and *privilege* that governed musical production under the ancien régime, oversaw shifts in the means of musical production based on three central principles: 'the composer's sovereignty, the work's inviolability, and the nation's supremacy' (3). Public musical performance in ancien-régime France was kept under tight monarchical control in order to protect crown-funded monopolies. Following the mercantilist logic of Louis XIV's finance minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, musicians or musical establishments required a special *privilege* in order to engage in public musical production. As the author notes, these *privileges* flowed down from the King like a 'fountain' (23), via guilds, ministries, the nobility

and other significant institutions like the Académie royale de musique. Geoffroy-Schwinden suggests that the abolition of musical *privilège* did not come out of nowhere: it was afforded by the gradual professionalization of the musician's craft over the course of the eighteenth century. Musicians had spent the last few decades of the ancien régime slowly breaking away from their traditional roles as servants to the aristocracy, forging more independent, specialized careers built on commercial networks of (equally specialized) professional contacts. For Geoffroy-Schwinden, this long-term process of professionalization meant that musicians were ideally positioned to advocate for and capitalize upon the Revolution's reforms to public and private property. And given that this growing professionalization and emphasis on property tended to place composers and works at the centre of musical production, the Revolution's musical reforms necessarily ushered in an era of musical romanticism in which so-called *Werktreue* reigned supreme.

Geoffroy-Schwinden's argument spans a *longue durée*. Part 1 of the monograph, 'Musical Privilege', examines the ways in which musicians navigated and ultimately transformed the regulatory systems that governed musical performance under the ancien régime – from the closing decades of the *grand siècle* to the eve of the Revolution. It comprises just two chapters: the first, a summary of the manifold legal challenges to the system of *privilège* in the lead-up to the Revolution and the second, a detailed study of the role of the Masonic lodges in promoting the professionalization of musicianship. Part 2, 'Property', is markedly longer than part 1 and considers musicians' involvement in legal reform during the Revolutionary decade and into the nineteenth century. Four chapters present different perspectives on the changing status of music and property during the Revolution: music's relationship to copyright law, the conception of music as public property, the intersection between music and the nascent museum movement, and, finally, music's relationship to the proprietary politics of science and technology.

Within this sweeping narrative, Geoffroy-Schwinden offers a series of discrete, meticulously researched case studies designed to anchor her argument in its historical context. The amount of detail can be somewhat dazzling. The first chapter, for example, addresses the gradual dilution of the royal 'fountain' of privilege – a system that was explicitly designed to be exclusionary but which became less and less so over the course of the ancien régime. To explain this process, Geoffroy-Schwinden painstakingly explicates a number of complex juridical concepts under Colbertian law: the difference between privilege and property, the difference between guild musicians and academy or court musicians, and the legal position of music publishers and engravers among France's various monopolies and guilds. She then outlines a number of ways in which musicians and composers fundamentally altered the elaborate legal groundwork of musical *privilège* in the later years of the era – 'semipublic' concerts that challenged the monopolies of public theatres, a growing 'gig economy' of freelance musicians and new legal challenges to the *privilège* system.

There have been a number of recent studies that have zeroed in on the French system of *privilège* as it related to specific (usually theatrical) institutions; however, this monograph may be the first to frame musical *privilège* as an elaborate legal, administrative and ideological ecosystem with broad effects on musical production and labour as a whole. Indeed, Geoffroy-Schwinden's bird's-eye view allows her to consider musical *privilège* from a number of different angles and across a variety of (often long-neglected) contexts. And by studying the complex and interlocking musical networks of Enlightenment France comparatively (and with an eye to their inherent interconnectedness), the author locates a distinct entrepreneurial spirit among the increasingly professionalized musician class – present across a range of institutions, professions, regulatory practices and individual agents.

The extended study of musicians in Masonic lodges in the lead-up to the Revolution that concludes part 1 of *From Servant to Savant* demonstrates the strengths of this approach – notably, its ability to identify previously hidden ideological tensions in the unstable political landscape of the late ancien régime. Geoffroy-Schwinden presents the changing role of musicians in these lodges as a barometer for broader shifts in the system of musical *privilège* in society at large. The Freemasons, she argues, offered a system of musical patronage based not on the entitlements of

courtly *noblesse*, but on the more egalitarian principles of sociability, worldliness, meritocracy and *politesse*, affording many musicians a new sense of status and an expanded professional network. However, Geoffroy-Schwinden suggests that the old system of *privilege* still held sway over these supposedly independent spaces, with musicians initially struggling to convince a largely aristocratic Masonic leadership that they held professional or bourgeois rank.

In part 2 of *From Servant to Savant*, Geoffroy-Schwinden argues that the Revolution's abolition of privilege enabled various competing visions of music as private property to flourish. Chapter 3, 'Private Property: Music and Authorship', suggests that musicians, frustrated by widespread piracy and increasingly eager to strengthen their own authorial and economic control, advocated stricter copyright laws to replace the old system of *privilege*. The prospect of music *qua* property raised broader questions regarding which aspects of music could, indeed, be owned and by whom. In other words, the rise of musical copyright in France forced musicians to confront anew the idea of a 'work concept' in so far as it forced them to identify aspects of the work that could be protected as their inviolable property. In this way, this monograph provides a new (and refreshingly historicized) perspective on Lydia Goehr's (now canonical) argument that the *Werktreue* emerged as a regulatory concept in Western music around 1800. Chapter 5 outlines Bernard Sarrette's attempt literally to construct a museum of musical works as part of the Paris Conservatoire's library in the late 1790s. For Geoffroy-Schwinden, such attempts to preserve a musical heritage post-Revolution evinced a new system of musical property built upon notions of authorial control drawn from the fine arts and 'fixated on the materiality of art objects born of "genius"' (163). These chapters constitute a crucial intervention on Geoffroy-Schwinden's part, as she positions Revolutionary musicians not as mere reactionaries – responding tacitly to changes imposed on them from above by Republican politicians – but as active agents, perhaps vanguards, in the formation of romantic aesthetics, French republicanism and imperialism, and even industrial capitalism.

The Paris Conservatoire emerges as a focal point in the second part of the monograph. Geoffroy-Schwinden suggests that notions of music as public property pervaded the institution as something of a counter-discourse to the idea, propagated by advocates of copyright law, that music should be considered private property. She points to the language of public utility that accompanied the founding of the Conservatoire and to the institution's involvement in the official functions of the nascent republic (the education system, the military and the notorious Revolutionary festivals) as evidence that many musicians who once saw themselves as servants to the court sought to rebrand themselves as public servants through associating with public institutions. However, the fact that musicians used the Conservatoire to align themselves with the state did not necessarily contribute to the growing politicization of the musician class, but instead endowed musicians with a sense of 'apolitical professionalism' (130) that sheltered them from the Revolution's many political upheavals.

This is where the two key threads of Geoffroy-Schwinden's analysis of Revolutionary music-making intertwine. The emerging notions of music as public property and music as private property both held at their core the idea of the musician as savant: in the case of private property, as professionalized freelancer whose authorial control is absolute, and in the case of public property, as expert custodian of musical knowledge. The Revolution's various interlacing notions of musical property congealed around this new figure of the professional musician, laying the foundations for a romantic epistemology constructed upon the twin notions of musical individualism and artistic ownership: thus, 'modern professional musicianship crystallized within a system of possession at the service of liberal individuals' (210).

Scholarship on the French Enlightenment has been enriched by a number of authoritative studies of the history of labour, which have reframed the fall of the ancien régime by examining the ways in which individual trades or professions adapted to the decline of French mercantilism (see, for example, Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675–1791* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), and Steven L. Kaplan, *The Bakers of*

Paris and the Bread Question, 1700–1775 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996)). *From Servant to Savant* extends this methodology to the musician's craft, recasting musicians as economic agents, actively engaged in transforming the markets in which they laboured. Furthermore, Geoffroy-Schwinden's argument not only captures the actual working practices of eighteenth-century French musicians (both before and after the abolition of *privilège*), but also their career aspirations – the way that they theorized their social positions and conceived of their futures as workers and citizens. In this sense, *From Servant to Savant* is as much an intellectual history as it is an economic one, preoccupied with the ideologies (juridical, political, social) that governed musicianship in eighteenth-century France.

Given this methodological approach, Geoffroy-Schwinden's monograph is sure to have a broad appeal beyond musicology: legal historians, economic historians, labour historians, historians of education and those interested in the historiography of the French Revolution more generally will find enormous value in this path-breaking volume. However, the non-musicological appeal of this volume can be a double-edged sword. Besides one (particularly illuminating) study of a Couperin keyboard suite in part 1, the monograph contains very little musical analysis. While this approach surely makes the book accessible to a wider scholarly audience, I felt that part 2, in particular, would have benefited from more musical evidence. If the Revolution did indeed precipitate the 'material realities of musical production and epistemic practices that made so-called musical Romanticism possible' (17), then it follows that this 'romantic' mode of musical production would be audible in the aesthetics of Revolutionary music. Geoffroy-Schwinden clearly details the ways in which eighteenth-century musicians conceived of musical works (as public property, as private property, as museum pieces, as technology, as labour and so forth), but very rarely connects these ideologies to the sonic properties of the works in question. Given the broad range of composers and genres discussed – even part 2 runs the full gamut of Revolutionary musical taste, from Champein to Le Sueur, from military band music to opera arrangements – I hoped that the volume would address how the Revolution's competing understandings of musical property mapped onto the kaleidoscopic musical landscape of 1790s France.

Ultimately, *From Servant to Savant* is a provocative study that not only rewrites the history of musical romanticism (and its much-debated shadow, the so-called work concept) but also provides a vital musical perspective to ongoing debates over French Revolutionary economics. Its wide-ranging case studies shed light on oft-neglected areas of musicological enquiry, from music in the Masonic lodges to musical plagiarism and the nascent conservatoire movement. These examples alone make this book an essential read for those seeking to understand the depth and complexity of music-making in the French Enlightenment. Geoffroy-Schwinden provides a compelling new framework for investigating the politics of music-making in the French Enlightenment, one rooted in the ethics and practices of musicians' labour. This study has the potential permanently to upend our understanding of the musical work in the eighteenth century by offering novel ways of looking at old problems of Revolutionary historiography.

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