



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

Musique et société dans les Caraïbes françaises, 1750–1810

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Julia Prest 

University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK
jtp22@st-andrews.ac.uk

This invited conference of nine speakers and ten papers was originally scheduled to take place in person in April 2021. For obvious reasons, it was postponed for just over a year, and while most invitees were able to attend in person, some (and a small number of listeners) joined remotely. In-person attendees met in the centre of Tours at the vibrant Centre d'études supérieures de la Renaissance, whose mission includes teaching as well as research activities. Delegates were welcomed first by Philippe Vendrix (Université de Tours and Centre d'études supérieures de la Renaissance) and then by the principal conference organizer, Pedro Memelsdorff (Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya, Barcelona, and Université de Tours). Memelsdorff explained that the principal driving force behind the conference was his experience attending another event, on a related topic, in Paris in 2016, at which none of the delegates knew anything about music in the 'French' Caribbean or even that there was such a thing to study. Yet, even as the current conference aimed to increase awareness of this overlooked portion of music history, Memelsdorff acknowledged that its French focus was not ideal for a region such as the Caribbean, which was – and is – multilingual and extremely diverse.

The conference opened with a panel featuring two papers on 'French' Guiana. The first, by Marie Polderman (Université Toulouse Jean-Jaurès), introduced us to the diverse soundscapes of this French colony in the eighteenth century. These featured the sounds and music of a range of groups, including Amerindians, colonists, enslaved people and Maroon communities, whose voices and instruments were put to a variety of uses – political, ritual, celebratory, therapeutic and communicative. Among other sources, Polderman drew, fascinatingly, on a number of objects now found in museums in Cayenne and Paris, including a turtle shell from the Musée du quai Branly that was used as an idiophone. She also mentioned the brief but important existence of a theatre in Kourou in 1763, created by the colony's new intendant, Jean-Baptiste Thibault de Chanvalon, to entertain his wife. This was a topic that Memelsdorff expanded on in his paper, which otherwise focused on a single important work, the *Messe en cantiques à l'usage des nègres*, a mass written for enslaved Africans. Memelsdorff has managed to identify the composers of all but one of the musical movements of the mass, which include Lully and Marais. He has also solved the mystery of why the mass does not feature in all editions of Préfontaine's *Maison rustique de Cayenne* (1763), in which it had originally appeared: some copies were intended for Jewish and Protestant settlers in France, while only a minority were for colonials travelling to the French Caribbean.

The second panel was concerned broadly with Saint-Domingue, which enjoyed the richest theatre scene of the late eighteenth-century Caribbean. To open, my paper (Julia Prest, University of St Andrews) proposed a reading of *Le Cadi dupé*, Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny and Pierre-René Lemonnier's popular opéra-comique, as an orientalist and especially an ableist work. Drawing on critical disability studies, I argued that when the work was performed in the colony, the comical role of Ali – whose lack of femininity and desirability is explicitly linked in the libretto with her

multiple disabilities – would have resonated particularly strongly with enslaved people and, to an extent, members of the military. Enslaved people were routinely ‘disabled’, physically and rhetorically, by their masters, while soldiers and sailors were often injured in service. In a co-presented paper on Saint-Domingue’s most famous performer of colour, known as Minette, Kaiama Glover (Barnard College, Columbia University) and Laurent Dubois (University of Virginia) joined forces to bring into conversation the early historical account of Minette’s life and work by Haitian historian Jean Fouchard and a fictionalized account by Haitian writer Marie Vieux-Chauvet, which Glover has recently translated into English (Marie Vieux-Chauvet, *Dance on the Volcano*, trans. Kaiama L. Glover (New York: Archipelago, 2017)). The dialogue between Dubois, who is a historian, and Glover, who is a specialist in literature, shed light on the preoccupations of their respective authors, but also reminded us that the boundary between history and literature is a more porous one than official academic boundaries might suggest. The panel ended with Memelsdorff’s second paper, in which he shared the many fruits of his recent labours in the archives of Paris and Aix-en-Provence. Memelsdorff has not only uncovered a number of important details about Minette’s social networks and personal life (including two children whose existence has been previously overlooked), he has also found evidence of an unknown theatre set up in Port-au-Prince sometime after 1798 during the throes of the Haitian Revolution. This was narrative-changing stuff.

The other three-pronged panel of the conference opened with Laurent Dubois’s account of the mixed religious climate of eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, illustrated with a series of musical clips from the Haiti Lab at Duke University. Dubois made the important but often overlooked points that many Africans arrived in Saint-Domingue having already experienced a combination of African and Catholic religions, and that residents in the colony included some literate Muslims. He reminded us too of the overlaps between Haitian *vodou* and Catholic traditions, and emphasized the significance of the Haitian *banza*, or banjo. In a presentation that took in eighteenth-century Martinique and Guadeloupe as well as Saint-Domingue, Bernard Camier (Université des Antilles) explored intersections between music, slavery and colonialism, arguing that they cannot ultimately be separated, particularly in the context of the many Creole traditions that emerged. It is always good to have one’s preconceptions challenged, and this was the case with Camier’s anecdote about a ball organized in Fort-de-France, Martinique, by enslaved domestics to music performed by white musicians. A paper by Mélanie Traversier (Université de Lille) was similarly wide-ranging in its exploration of the management – or, rather, the policing – of the spaces in and around public theatres in the French Caribbean, drawing on an impressive array of primary sources. Where Camier was concerned primarily with music, Traversier was concerned primarily with noise, including what was perceived as disruptive noise and other (sometimes unwelcome) aspects of the theatrical experience, including air quality and smell. There is surely scope for a whole conference on music and smell – two of the strongest triggers of memory.

The final day of the conference featured a double bill from Vincent Cousseau (Université de Limoges) and Jacques de Cauna (Université de Bordeaux), who took us respectively into the time of the Haitian Revolution and well into the twentieth century. Cousseau’s exploration of the final years of the Haitian Revolution emphasized the ubiquity of military music at a time when the musical traditions of both the church and the theatre were less widespread than in earlier decades. Battles were fought to the accompaniment of music, and prisoners were publicly executed to the sound of more music. Cousseau also noted the creation by military leaders of new military orchestras, some of them based on racial ancestry: Toussaint Louverture’s orchestra comprised white people and people of mixed racial ancestry, whereas Dessalines’s orchestra was composed of people of African ancestry. The conference ended with de Cauna insisting on the extensive influence of Creole music as it made its way from the Caribbean (partly with refugees from the Haitian Revolution) to New Orleans, across the US and then further afield. Delegates might not have expected to find themselves listening to Chuck Berry or Doctor Jazz during their visit to Tours, but it was a fitting end to a conference that sought to explore a largely overlooked field while

also regretting that it couldn't expand that field more. The closing discussion session revisited the problem of examining only the 'French' Caribbean – still unresolved as a problem but well aired and not taken for granted. And, as Vendrix observed, limiting our area of study to the 'French' Caribbean did not prevent us from uncovering a wide range of musical traditions that overlap with – and diverge from – each other. Indeed, our findings confirm that the topic of music in the colonial Caribbean needs to be explored on a larger regional scale in order to do it full justice.

Julia Prest is Professor of French and Caribbean Studies at the University of St Andrews. A graduate in music and French, she wrote her PhD thesis on Molière's comedy-ballets at the University of Cambridge and has published widely on early modern French and Caribbean theatre, including ballet and opera. Her third monograph, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue*, is currently in press with Palgrave Macmillan. Julia is the creator of the trilingual (English–French–Kreyòl) performance database *Theatre in Saint-Domingue, 1764–1791* www.theatreinsaintdomingue.org.