

Letter to the Editor

Duelling, the death wish, and the supposed suicide of Pierre Aubry

I read with special interest the article by John Haines published several years ago in *Plainsong and Medieval Music* on the death of Pierre Aubry ('The "modal theory", fencing, and the death of Aubry', 6 [1997], 143–50). While I thank him for clearing up the rumours of a duel with Jean Beck resulting in Aubry's death, I must admit to disappointment in having to abandon the idea that Aubry and Beck fought a duel over a musicological disagreement. Haines's conclusion that the fencing accident that resulted in Aubry's death was a 'suicide in disguise' is, however, untenable, whatever Aubry's state of mind at the time might have been. The fact that this theory has been repeated as fact ('Généalogies musicologiques', *Acta Musicologica*, 73 [2001], 24) prompts the present communication.

Fencing is a contact sport in which points are scored by striking one's sword against the body of one's opponent (the 'target'). For this reason, sport fencers use protective equipment, which mitigates against the effects of contact. The fencing jacket reduces the severity of bruises and welts, but it does not prevent them, nor does it protect against a sharp weapon – serious injuries can occur when a sword blade breaks in action and the resulting sharp point runs the unlucky partner through. The risk of this is very low, however, and in all my years of fencing I have not once seen it happen, even though I have broken many blades. (The broken pieces see further service as bookends and conducting batons.) Because bruises and welts are so routine – and the risk of serious injury so very low – fencers tend to become cavalier about the state of their practice equipment. A small tear in one's jacket, especially on the back side, is easily ignored.

We rarely think about the dangers of driving a car. We are aware of the dangers intellectually, but dismiss them because this is such a routine activity. Likewise, fencers don't consider their sport to be particularly dangerous. Hence the idea that Aubry demonstrated a death wish (a 'suicide in disguise') by fencing in faulty protective gear (a torn jacket and no plastron) is like saying that I had a death wish last week because I drove a car that I knew needed the attention of a mechanic.

Aubry died as a result of a freak accident that no one, not even himself, could have anticipated.

A key point in Haines's argument concerns the *plastron* (not a 'breastplate' as his translation would have it). This is a kind of sleeve worn under the jacket on the sword arm. It is designed to protect against blows to the armpit that penetrate the jacket – just the kind of blow that killed Aubry. Fencers often become nonchalant about the risks they take. (Timid or risk-averse people don't last long in fencing classes.) Many, if not all, fencers have been tempted to forego the *plastron*, especially on a hot summer day (Aubry died in August). Many sometimes fence without one in practice. I even know people who have fenced in bare skin (with foils) on a dare. None of these people were trying to be killed or even expecting to be seriously injured.

The statement that Aubry died in a fencing accident 'apparently while preparing for a duel' is nonsensical, and Haines rightly discounts it (p. 143). Duels in early twentieth-century France were fought at the earliest opportunity, without practice. The main point of the duel was to demonstrate one's manly courage (and therefore honour) in the face of mortal danger, not to kill or inflict injury. This ethos is elegantly described by Kevin McAleer in *Dueling* (Princeton University Press, 1994). Expert fencers seldom duelled with swords, partly because their skill deterred challenges, but also because it gave them an unfair advantage, obviating the risk so that they would not be able to demonstrate their courage (honour).

First of all, it is important to re-examine some of the contemporary evidence presented by Haines in his well-researched article. One of his sources is an obituary published in (the Bulletin of) the International Musicological Society; the other is a news item from the *Vigie de Dieppe* (2 September 1910). According to the obituary, 'le hasard le [Aubry] mit aux prises avec le capitaine de Romilly [his duelling companion on the fateful day]'. This choice of wording does seem to imply that the writer thought that the ensuing bout was a duel. But he then goes on to refer to the *mouche* (protective button) on the *épée*, which most certainly would not be on a sword used in a duel.

According to the much more detailed newspaper report, Aubry and Romilly were fencing 'sous la direction du maître Damotte' (Haines, p. 147). Damotte was thus directing the fencing bout. The director is responsible for all aspects of the bout (including safety), starts and stops the fencers, calls the action, and awards points. Some duels took place with a director.

The *Vigie de Dieppe* continues: 'M. Aubry fait une attaque franche', which Haines translates as 'Mr Aubry makes an open attack'. It really means that Aubry lunged, making a committed attack. The translation 'open attack' is an unhappy one, inasmuch as 'open' in fencing terminology always refers to an exposed target. Of course, one is theoretically exposed when making an attack like this, but the attack itself acts as a defence, hence the famous quote of General George Patton that 'the proper defense is a transfixed opponent' (*The Diary of the Instructor of Swordsmanship*, 1915).

The report then continues: 'M. de Romilly dérobe l'épée en faisant un arrêt et en rassemblant en avant'. This is translated as 'Mr de Romilly avoids his *épée* by making a stop-hit [or stop-thrust] as he draws legs and feet together [rassemblement]' with the additional comment that 'Romilly seems here to have thrust and lunged forward'

(n. 28). In fact, the move described is a displacement stop-thrust, in which Romilly avoids Aubry's blade by moving his body to the side and drawing his feet together (the displacement), simultaneously extending his arm for a hit (the stop-thrust). Romilly did not lunge: Aubry's own lunge would carry him forward onto Romilly's blade. The force of Aubry's lunge, combined with that of Romilly's thrust, would all be concentrated on the button at the end of Romilly's blade.

The *Vigie de Dieppe* continues: 'l'arrêt conduit l'épée sous l'aisselle de son adversaire'. This is rendered as: 'the stop-hit leads the épée below the armpit of his adversary' with the additional explanation that 'this was probably an unintended destination for Romilly's hit, since the armpit is outside the normal target area' (n. 29). Actually, the armpit is a most excellent target, and Romilly may very well have intended to hit there. Not only is the underarm area a legitimate target, but it is the best, along with the sword arm, for a right-handed fencer against a left-handed one (Aubry), provided one's opponent will expose this target by lifting his arm as Aubry did when he lunged. Aubry probably lunged with his hand high so that the guard of his sword would protect his face (usual then, but no longer practised), thus Romilly's thrust likely took a line parallel to Aubry's arm. Romilly's point, sliding (more or less) down Aubry's upper arm, then went through a tear in his sleeve (on the back side) and entered his armpit. It is hard to see how a thrust from Romilly intended for the sword arm, for example, could accidentally end in the armpit area in the action described.

The IMS report stated that 'l'épée de M. de Romilly pénétra toute mouchetée' ('the épée of Mr de Romilly entered, *pointe d'arrêt* [the protective tip] and all'), to which the *Vigie de Dieppe* adds 'mais l'épée en pénétrant avec son bouton (elle n'était pas démouchetée comme le bruit en a couru)' ('but the épée, penetrating with its *pointe d'arrêt* [protective tip] which had not been removed as rumour had it').

Crucial to the correct understanding of these two lines is the term *pointe d'arrêt*, which is neither mentioned nor implied in the original French. The words 'mouchetée' and 'démouchetée' derive from *mouche* (also *bouton*), the flat button on the tip of the fencing sword, forged with the blade. The *pointe d'arrêt*, on the other hand, is a three-pronged spike tied onto the button, which, by sticking in the jacket, would help to clarify that a valid hit had been made. Its use was common in épée fencing during the first part of the twentieth century, but other tips were also used. (The amount of cord used in the tie determines the exposed length of the prongs. Sometimes fencers, to sharpen the game, would leave more prong exposed than strictly necessary.)

Removing the button (not the *pointe d'arrêt*) from the end of an épée was a well-known way to convert the fencing épée into a duelling sword. The fencing épée is a real sword, differing from the duelling sword only in that the blade is forged with a blunt tip (the button). In order to use the fencing épée for duelling, one need only file off this button and sharpen the point. A rumour that the buttons of the swords had been removed is in effect a rumour of a duel.

Rumours of duels must have been very easy to start, as seen by the quotes given by Haines in which a duel is already being suspected. Merely belonging to the right

sector of society and having a quarrel with someone from which a duel may be expected to result must have been enough. Duels were illegal for most of the twentieth century and therefore theoretically secret. The preservation of one's honour through a duel, however, needed to be made known, and so duels that resulted in no injuries (usually the case when pistols were used) were publicized, at least by word of mouth. However, when injuries that could not be concealed occurred, honour required that the true cause not be admitted. Certain indirect phrases, used to refer to duels (or in this case, a presumed duel), were intended to accomplish this. One of these is used by Jacques Chailley, whether intentionally or not, about the death of Aubry 'dans un accident d'escrime demeuré inexpliqué' ('Quel est l'auteur de la "théorie modale" dite de Beck-Aubry?' *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* [1953], p. 213). In any case, it is easy to see how the report of an actual duel between Beck and Aubry, in which honour was satisfied but no one injured, could have been conflated with the fact that Aubry was killed with an épée to produce the legend that we have enjoyed for nearly a century.

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