

# Patronage and Profit: The Musical Life of Jean-Baptiste Lully

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The role of patronage in the work of musicians and composers has long been recognized as a powerful force in the shaping of music history. A quintessential example of this phenomenon is none other than the influence of King Louis XIV on the musical life of France during his reign, and particularly on the output of his chief musician, Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687). Indeed, it is impossible to accurately represent Lully's career without mentioning the role that the king played in ensuring his success as a musician. For the purpose of this report, I will trace Lully's progression from humble beginnings to the highest musical position in France, and I will offer a brief analysis of his musical style in general with special attention given to the *ballet de cour*, the genre that first launched his career.

From the beginning of his career, Lully proved to be highly motivated and ambitious. Born a Florentine, he first moved to France as a language tutor to the cousin of King Louis XIV, Anne-Marie-Louise d'Orléans, in hopes of musical recognition and advancement<sup>1</sup>. Not limited to musical skill, Lully also demonstrated competency as a dancer, and it was not long before he managed to secure a position as a performer in several *ballet de cours*. He was fortunate to perform alongside the king himself for the first time in 1652 in the *Ballet royal de la nuit*. Louis XIV was young at this time, and Lully, being a few years older, was in a perfect position to befriend him and take advantage of the connection. As Lully was particularly talented in playing his roles, he

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<sup>1</sup> Jérôme De La Gorce, "Lully," *Grove Music Online*, accessed November 8, 2013.

soon won the admiration of the young king and was appointed the post of *compositeur de la musique instrumentale* in 1653<sup>2</sup>.

It was not unusual for a participant in the *ballet de cours* to be promoted in this way at the time. The members of the royal court were constantly struggling for higher positions, and they knew that this was most quickly achieved by gaining the favour of the king who freely promoted and demoted as he pleased. As Louis XIV was a lover of dance and often performed in the ballet himself, the *ballet de cour* became a most effective way for performers to become recognized, not only by the king, but also by other wealthy patrons. Likewise, to gain a position as a dancer, one needed a connection to the royal family or the court. As Kettering notes, dancers were discovered and chosen through these connections, as was the case with Lully. Furthermore, those who pleased the king were rewarded in lavish ways, such as through household offices, provincial governments, marriages, pensions, publicities, and, in Lully's case, important musical positions and titles<sup>3</sup>.

After achieving his first title, Lully continued to work toward further advancement. One of his earliest duties as a composer of instrumental music was to contribute to the music of the *ballet de cour* along with several other composers who usually specialized in either vocal or instrumental music. However, to work collaboratively was not Lully's ultimate aim. Instead, it appears that he wished to distinguish himself from the other musicians of the royal court. Whether this was his conscious goal or not, Lully did distinguish himself in a number of ways and was successful primarily because he had the favour of the king. Unsatisfied with the *24 Violons du Roi*, Lully requested his own ensemble of violins, over which he had full control to conduct as he pleased, and which he used in all of his musical performances. Predictably, the king soon became particularly fond of Lully's ensemble<sup>4</sup>. Lully seemed to have a singular talent for knowing the

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<sup>2</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Kettering, "Favour and Patronage: Dancers in the Court Ballets of Early Seventeenth-Century France," *Canadian Journal of History* 43, no.3 (2008): 400-402.

<sup>4</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

musical tastes of the king and composing accordingly<sup>5</sup>. This gift succeeded in gaining for him the highest office of a musician, and in 1661 he was promoted to *surintendant de la musique de la chambre du roi*. Soon after, he married the daughter of the composer Michel Lambert, a decision that also secured his position and good reputation<sup>6</sup>.

In 1672, Lully further solidified his own power by buying the privilege of the opera from Perrin and becoming the director of the *Académie Royale de Musique*. A year later when the Molière died, he gained control of the *Palais Royal* free of charge and forced Molière's troupe out. At this point, he was able to control the performances of his works by rival musicians, limiting their productions to no more than two voices and six violins. When a group of people wishing to oppose Lully's growing monopoly attacked a performance of his *tragédie en musique, Alceste* (1674), the king decided to move the performances to the court where they would be free from criticism and would be guaranteed better publicity<sup>7</sup>.

Lully's rivals did not succeed in dethroning him from his lofty position, but instead, he continued to increase in power. As he was not of noble birth, the composer wished to elevate his status by achieving nobility<sup>8</sup>. In 1681, his performance in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) pleased the king so much that he allowed Lully to buy a secretarial office, enabling him to be ennobled<sup>9</sup>. With this and his other titles, there was little to stop Lully from a complete monopoly on secular music performances in Paris, Versailles, and in the surrounding provincial regions. No opera could be performed in France without his direct permission and he charged heavily for it. He was also able to control the establishment of new opera houses in provincial areas and, in this way, could minimize his competition<sup>10</sup>. Aside from this, Lully was receiving royalties from his printed music and from the librettos that were sold to the audience before

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<sup>5</sup> James Parkinson Fairleigh, "Lully as Secrétaire Du Roi," *Bach* 15, no. 4 (1984): 16.

<sup>6</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Farleigh, "Lully as Secrétaire Du Roi," 18.

<sup>9</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

<sup>10</sup> Farleigh, "Lully as Secrétaire Du Roi," 19-20.

performances<sup>11</sup>. It is clear that Lully profited greatly from his friendship with Louis XIV to the point that the king's patronage ensured not only the security of his position and power, but also the popularity of his music. Opposition was not an option so long as he continued to secure the favour of the king. Whether his musical style is completely representative of the tastes of the French people at the time is difficult to know, since composers beside Lully were given little opportunity to thrive.

Lully's catering to the preferences of the king was characteristic of his musical compositions throughout his lifetime. As the king was a dancer, he showed a preference towards dramatic entertainments in which the music did not compete with the choreography and story. Strong melodies and complex harmonies were not his priority. Consequently, Lully composed many works for theatre and dance with *airs* that were short, formed of irregular measures, and broken into by many *récits*. Indeed, there was a precise number of measures prescribed for the *airs*<sup>12</sup>. To create diversity in the music, Lully created a musical language for the French *récits*, with rising and falling intervals and dissonances to underline the meaning of certain words. However, in contrast to Italian *recitativo*, there were few melismas or ornamentations, so that the text could still be properly understood<sup>13</sup>.

The writing of Philippe Quinault, Lully's librettist for the majority of his operas, was perfectly suited to complement Lully's music. The vocabulary was relatively simple, making the text easy to understand, and the lines were short with odd numbers of syllables for his *airs* and lyrical passages<sup>14</sup>. Additionally, the plots for the dramatic works were far less complex than their Italian counterparts so that the audience would remain engaged throughout the entire performance<sup>15</sup>. There was a unity of action in Quinault's dramas, unlike many other

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<sup>11</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

<sup>12</sup> Sir John Hawkins, "Memoir of Giovanni-Battista Lully," *The Harmonicon* 8, no.12 (1830): 489.

<sup>13</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

<sup>14</sup> James R. Anthony, "Quinault, Philippe," *Grove Music Online*, accessed November 10, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

operas of the day and the narratives were based either off of classical mythology or stories of chivalry<sup>16</sup>. The librettist took every opportunity to relate the storylines to the political successes of the king, often portraying him as the hero<sup>17</sup>. Both Lully and Quinault, wishing to maintain employment, astutely aligned their art to the king's wishes.

As Lully's first main genre of composition, the *ballet de cour* played a significant role in establishing him as the king's principal musician. It is interesting, then, to note that there are many gaps in the music that Lully composed in this style. This is largely a result of the fact that no original scores or parts exist for the ballets, and the only manuscripts of the music are copies from years after the original productions. This leaves us with no contemporaneous documents to guarantee Lully's authorship. To further complicate matters, some of the ballets have several different versions of the same works<sup>18</sup>. This is suspect, considering that there were only a few performances in a short period of time, which in most cases would leave little room for alteration. Scholars have few words to say on this subject, though some will admit the discrepancy. Yet, as the early ballets were collaborative works, the possibility remains that other composers were more involved in the writing process than is indicated in the manuscripts. Perhaps the variations are a result of the participation of multiple composers for a given ballet. As the king's favoured musician, Lully could certainly have been attributed music that was not entirely his. However, with so little evidence on the subject, the question cannot be answered either way as of yet.

The only surviving contemporaneous documents from the *ballet de cours* are the *livrets* (librettos). Thankfully, they provide a good amount of contextual information about the productions, though their musical material is limited. The *livrets* contain descriptions of each *entrée*, the names of the performers, the texts of the *airs*, as well as verses written in honour of some of the noble participants. They also

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony, "Quinault, Philippe."

<sup>17</sup> Julie Anne Sadie, "Louis XIV, King of France," *Grove Music Online*, accessed November 8, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

give information on some of the instruments that were played during performances, which included *violons, violes, basses à cordes de boyau, hautbois, flûtes, vielles, clavecins, guitars, castanettes*, and others. However, the *livrets* only mention the instruments that appeared on the stage. They do not indicate which performer was playing it or whether there were additional instrumentalists playing off-stage<sup>19</sup>.

Despite these and other unanswered questions, we do have some knowledge on the nature of the genre itself. The ballet of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was not then as it is today. In addition to dance, it combined operatic singing, drama, poetry, pantomime<sup>20</sup>, vocal *airs*, ensembles, and choruses<sup>21</sup>. As to be expected, all ballets were commissioned by the royal patron, who selected the composers, subject, poets, dancers, and the general distribution of labour<sup>22</sup>. Thus, the costumes were elaborate, the stage effects and machinery revolutionary, and the whole production entirely ostentatious<sup>23</sup>.

The purpose for all of this excess was much more than entertainment. Though the royal court enjoyed their extravagance, much of the agenda behind it was political propaganda. The *ballet de cour* served the purpose of displaying the magnificence of the king and of intimidating anyone who may be in opposition to him. The plots themselves often carried political themes that corresponded with current events and placed the king as the hero of the story. In this way, the musicians and writers of the works were promoting nationalism along with an obvious message about the noble character of their monarch<sup>24</sup>. Lully's contribution to the 17<sup>th</sup> century *ballet de cour* appears to be quite significant, as he provided music for no less than sixteen of them from

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<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Harris-Warrick, "From Score into Sound: Questions of Scoring in Lully's Ballets," *Early Music* 21, no. 3 (1993): 355.

<sup>20</sup> Kettering, "Favour and Patronage: Dancers in the Court Ballets of Early Seventeenth-Century France," 394.

<sup>21</sup> James R. Anthony, "Ballet De Cour," *Grove Music Online*, accessed November 10, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Kettering, "Favour and Patronage: Dancers in the Court Ballets of Early Seventeenth-Century France," 394.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 400-401.

1654-1671<sup>25</sup>. As mentioned above, it is hard to ascertain the authorship of every instrumental passage, since Lully was a contributor among several musicians. However, scholars are quite certain that he composed many of the *entrées* in the *ballet de cours* as they contain compositional traits that resemble those of his later works. For example, Lully's idiomatic writing of rapid passages in the music to represent demons and divinities of the winds is evident in both the ballets and the operas<sup>26</sup>. Additionally, the use of chaconnes and other stately dances, such as the 'Chaconne des Maures' from *Ballet d'Alcidiane* (1658) is paralleled in Lully's later dramatic works<sup>27</sup>. The French overture in this ballet also foreshadows Lully's regular use of the genre. Though it seems Mollier was its inventor, Lully was responsible for making the overture popular. In 'Louchie,' at the end of *Ballet de la Raillerie* (1659), several of Lully's compositional characteristics are evident, such as its exceptional length, studied writing, rhythmic variety, syncopations, use of minor mode, along with other traits. Most noticeable is the fact that it is a minuet, another genre that Lully is known to have popularized<sup>28</sup>. A further argument towards Lullian authorship of the ballet *entrées* is the noticeable Italian influence in the music. Having been raised in Italy, Lully himself no doubt bore the influences of Italian compositional traits in his writing. However, he left his home country before he was exposed to the growing genre of Venetian opera, putting him in an opportune position to bring a new sound to France while still maintaining a distinctly French music<sup>29</sup>. From his native country, Lully adopted the Italian binary *air* in ABB<sup>30</sup> form as well as the Italian *lament* with its slow tempos, descending chromaticisms, and dissonances to represent melancholy and grief<sup>31</sup>. Though his early works contained much more Italian text-setting, Lully eventually began to limit his use of his native

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<sup>25</sup> Anthony, "Ballet De Cour."

<sup>26</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

<sup>27</sup> Anthony, "Ballet De Cour."

<sup>28</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

<sup>29</sup> Denis Arnold et al., "Opera," *The Oxford Companion to Music*, accessed November 13, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony, "Ballet de Cour."

<sup>31</sup> De La Gorce, "Lully."

language to humourous or highly emotional scenes and composed the majority of his music to French texts. His enjoyed much success with his first great French *air*, ‘Sommes nous pas trop hereux’ from *Ballet de l’Impatience* (1661)<sup>32</sup>. The marks of Italian influence in the ballets further support the Lullian authorship for at least the *entrées*.

We have seen that Lully’s musical career was driven by a desire for power and renown. He was successful in his endeavours for most of his life because he was preferred by the king. Thus, his music and his name were spread and his fame was secured in France and in several other European countries. There are few historical cases that so obviously display the role of patronage in the life and work of a composer. If ever the work of a musician was influenced by his patron, so it was in the case of King Louis XIV and Jean-Baptiste Lully.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



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