

**Rousseau on Arts and Politics**  
**Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert**

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## **The Play of the Passions: Music, Mores, and Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert***

The theater brings our passions into play, and Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert* is a reflection on the sorts of passions inspired by the theater and their moral and political consequences. 'The theater is made for the people,' he writes, 'and it is only by its effects on the people that one can determine its absolute qualities' (17; V: 16). But peoples vary, Rousseau explains. Different peoples have different customs, mores, opinions, and even the same people changes character over time. 'Man is one; I admit it! But man modified by religions, governments, laws, customs, prejudices, and climates becomes so different from himself that one ought not to seek among us for what is good for men in general, but only what is good for them in this time or that country' (17; V: 16). One of Rousseau's concerns in the *Lettre à d'Alembert* is to discover whether the theater would be good for his native Geneva. The Genevans have their own customs, mores, and opinions; the Parisians have theirs. The theater 'says' different things to the two peoples. The passions of those peoples are different, and what is communicated to them in the theater is different: what *ought* be communicated to them is also different. Rousseau's examination of the theater is premised on an underlying analysis of the passions, their development, and their transmission through various forms of human communication. Some of Rousseau's most important reflections on those subjects, reflections with direct relevance to his discussion of the theater in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, are found in a neglected portion of his corpus: his writings on music.

The inquiry in the *Lettre à d'Alembert* into the play of the passions in the theater has its theoretical foundation in Rousseau's writings on language and music.<sup>1</sup> It is worth remembering in this context the fully spectacular character of the *spectacle* of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. Recent revivals of classics by Molière and others remind us of the non-dramatic elements of the original productions. The *spectacle* Rousseau examines was characteristically a mix of drama, dance, and music. His discussion of 'theater' in the *Lettre à d'Alembert* must therefore be read broadly. In order to examine the

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Catherine Kintzler, *Poétique de l'opéra française de Corneille à Rousseau*, (Paris: Minerve, 1991), 457.

theoretical foundations of Rousseau's treatment of the theater, I shall examine his understanding of music and the passions and their relation to mores and politics.

*The Development of Rousseau's Musical Theory*

Rousseau is known to us primarily as a political philosopher, but he first gained recognition as a musician and music theorist. He considered music, in one aspect or another, as his primary vocation and avocation throughout his life. The author of one of the most popular operas of eighteenth-century France, main contributor of the articles on music for the *Encyclopédie*, spirited polemicist for Italian as against French music during the 'Quarrel of the Bouffons,' antagonist of Rameau, inspirer of Gluck, Rousseau made an important contribution to the theory and practice of music of his time and beyond. He wrote of himself in the third person of the *Dialogues*: 'J.J. was born for music. Not to be consumed in its execution, but to speed its progress and make discoveries about it. His ideas on the art and about the art are fertile, inexhaustible' (164; I: 872). Rousseau also explains in that work that his musical writings and compositions are animated by the same feelings and ideas as all of his works, that they too are based on the principle of his 'system': that 'man is good although men are wicked' (22-23; I: 686-87).

Rousseau's musical writings and compositions are not, then, an isolated part of his *oeuvre*, but an important facet of his philosophy.

A brief review of Rousseau's career as a musician and the development of his musical theory will help situate his theory of the communication of the passions through language and music. Rousseau had very little formal musical training. He rather imbibed music and drew on his growing passion for the patience to study it more systematically. As a music teacher and copyist, Rousseau found fault with the music notation used in his day. He therefore devised a new a system of notation, and it was with this scheme and a play, *Narcisse*, that Rousseau set out for Paris in 1741, with dreams of fame and fortune for himself in the artistic and intellectual capital of Europe. He presented his plan to the Academy of Sciences, but was disappointed with its reception. Rousseau presented an expanded version of his plan as the *Dissertation sur la musique moderne*, but that work, published largely at his own expense, was not a success. A year as secretary to the French ambassador in Venice was even less successful, but it did offer him the opportunity to reacquaint himself with the Italian music he had grown to love during his wanderings in Italy as a youth. After his return to Paris, Rousseau set to work on an opera, *Les Muses galantes*. He was able to have his opera performed at the household of La Poplinière, a wealthy

tax-farmer and also, fatefully for Rousseau, patron of the prickly Jean-Philippe Rameau. Rameau, the most celebrated musician and musical theorist of the time, listened with increasing impatience to Rousseau's opera, but finally accused him of plagiarism (I: 334). Charges of his incompetence as a musician would dog Rousseau throughout his life.

A few years later Rousseau was entrusted with the task of writing the articles on music for the *Encyclopédie* edited by his friends Diderot and d'Alembert. It is to these articles, along with the one on 'Political Economy,' that Rousseau refers at the outset of the *Lettre à d'Alembert* when he explains that he would not have criticized d'Alembert's article on Geneva had he not himself been one of the authors associated with the project (5; V: 5-6). D'Alembert announced Rousseau's participation in the *Discours préliminaire* to the first volume of the *Encyclopédie* (1751). He also refers there to the Citizen of Geneva's recent attack on the progress of the sciences and arts in the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. D'Alembert suggests in defense of the Enlightenment project that the corruption from the sciences and arts is due only to their abuse by cultivated minds, remarking, perhaps somewhat uneasily, that in any case Rousseau 'seems himself to have given suffrage to our work by the zeal and the success of his collaboration on it.'<sup>2</sup> Rousseau's relations with d'Alembert and the other Encyclopedists would eventually sour as they discovered that his attack on the sciences and arts was more than a clever paradox. The scene for the *Lettre à d'Alembert* is set.

The *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* was the first product of the illumination of Vincennes, Rousseau's blinding first glimpse of his theory of the natural goodness of man and his corruption in society. He would also rethink his ideas on music within the context of that 'system.' The simultaneous elaboration of his theory in his philosophical works and his continued work on music would be the crucible in which his mature musical theory would develop. That development would occur in two episodes, the 'Quarrel of the Bouffons' and Rousseau's polemical exchange with Rameau.

The 'Quarrel of the Bouffons' pitted the proponents of classic French opera against the enthusiasts of the Italian style, including Rousseau and most of the Encyclopedists. The quarrel erupted with the triumphant production in Paris of Pergolesi's comic opera *La Serva padrona* by a troupe of traveling players. Rousseau, incidentally, was the first in France to engrave and publish Pergolesi's *opéra buffa*. Rousseau's contribution to the quarrel turned an ongoing dispute into an open

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<sup>2</sup>Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard N. Schwab (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 103-4; 133.

war. In his *Lettre sur la musique française*, which appeared in late 1753, he asks not whether French music is excellent, but whether there is even a French music at all. His analysis in the *Lettre* concerns the relationship of music to language. In brief, Rousseau argues that the character of a music depends upon its melody, and the character of the melody depends upon that of the language from which it is derived. He imagines a language totally inappropriate for melodious song, and that language turns out to be French. The reaction to Rousseau's *Lettre* was immediate and furious. He was burned in effigy by the musicians of the Opéra and denied entry to the theater despite the free pass he had earned as a composer whose works had been presented there. Those works included his *Devin du village*, first performed with great success at Fontainebleau in 1752 and then at the Paris Opéra just before the appearance of his *Lettre sur la musique française*, and then over 400 times in the next fifty years.<sup>3</sup> As for Rousseau's *Lettre*, it received over thirty mostly angry responses, including one by Rameau.

The dispute between Rousseau and Rameau was bitterly personal, dating back a decade to the performance of *Les Muses galantes*, but it was also an epoch battle that has been said to mark the end of the reign of classical aesthetics and the beginning of a new era, the Romantic movement.<sup>4</sup> While their dispute grew out of the more limited debate over French and Italian music, Rameau and Rousseau advanced opposing views about the nature of music as an expressive art.<sup>5</sup>

Rameau initiated the exchange with his *Erreurs sur la musique dans l'Encyclopédie* (1755). While Rameau's writing takes the form of a critical commentary on a number of Rousseau's articles in the *Encyclopédie*, he also reprises his quarrel with Rousseau over French music. Rameau denies that melody is the primary source of musical expression, arguing instead that harmony is the source of musical expression and the very structure of music. Music is founded on a universal, natural principle: the harmonics produced by the resonance of a sounding body. 'As long as the melody alone is considered as the principal moving force of music's effects,' he complains in criticizing

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<sup>3</sup>Cynthia Verba, *Music and the French Enlightenment: Reconstruction of a Dialogue, 1750-1764*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 11n.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Kintzler, *Poétique de l'opéra française de Corneille à Rousseau*, (Paris: Minerve, 1991); Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, (London: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>5</sup>Verba, 8.

Rousseau, 'there will not be great progress in this art.'<sup>6</sup> Rousseau, in turn, defends and elaborates the argument of the *Lettre sur la musique française*. 'Melody is a language like speech,' he proclaims. The melody conveys the accents of the passions all the way to the soul; it is a form of characteristically human expression. The harmony itself says nothing, producing only 'agreeable sensations.' The disagreement between Rousseau and Rameau over the relative priority of melody and harmony points to a deeper disagreement over human nature and nature as a whole. As Rousseau's most recent biographer remarks, their debate was one where 'two distinct and well-considered philosophies of music confronted one another.'<sup>7</sup>

Rousseau's direct response to Rameau, the *Examination de deux principes avancés par M. Rameau*, which was published only posthumously, remains focused on the dispute about melody and harmony. His full elaboration of his theoretical disagreement with Rameau can be found in other writings which grew in part out of his polemics with Rameau but which transcend them, notably his *Essai sur l'origine des langues, où il est parlé de la mélodie et de l'imitation musicale*. Rousseau explains that the work originated as part of his *Discours sur l'inégalité*, but that he omitted it as too long and out of place (V: 373). Recent research has also connected the work to Rousseau's polemics with Rameau, which were contemporaneous with the composition of the *Discours sur l'inégalité*. The original draft of Rousseau's response to Rameau's critique of his articles in the *Encyclopédie*, which he entitled the *Principe de la mélodie*, contains not only the eventual text of the *Examination* but also a discussion of the origin and progress of melody in the spirit of the *Discours sur l'inégalité* that would later become part of the *Essai*. We have, then, a constellation of works in which Rousseau develops a theory of music and speech as forms of human communication that serve originally and essentially to transmit human passions: the *Examination*, the *Principe de la mélodie*, the *Essai*, and Rousseau's substantial reworking of his articles for the *Encyclopédie*, the *Dictionnaire de la musique*. Let me now turn to a discussion of Rousseau's theory of the communication of the passions through speech and music.

*The Communication of the Passions Through Language and Music*

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<sup>6</sup>Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Erreurs sur la musique dans l'Encyclopédie*, (Paris: Sebastien Jorry, 1755), 44; reproduced in Rameau, *Complete Theoretical Writings*, ed. Erwin R. Jacobi, 6 vols. (New York: American Institute of Musicology, 1967-72), 5: 219.

<sup>7</sup>Maurice Cranston, *Jean-Jacques: The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712-1754*, (New York: Norton, 1982), 288.

In the *Discours sur l'inégalité*, Rousseau is anxious to convince the reader that speech is not among man's original faculties. Savage men 'had no communication among themselves nor any need of it.' Man does not possess the need to speak, the passions that would compel him to speak, or the reason that would enable him to do so. 'Man's first language, the most universal, most energetic, and only language he needed before it was necessary to persuade assembled men, is the cry of nature' (3: 31; III: 147-148). Natural man—'wandering in the forests, without industry, without speech, without domicile...' (3: 40; III: 159-60)—has no need for anything but the instinctual 'cry of nature.' Fully developed language arises only when he comes together with his fellows, when 'assembled' men—and women—must 'persuade' each other through affecting speech.

It might be argued that Rousseau's 'negative' argument in the first part of his *Discours* about our lack of speech is so successful that he makes it difficult to conceive how we could have ever come to speak. He presents an account of the origin of languages in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, an account that is not constrained by the negative purpose of the discussion in the *Discours*. In the *Essai*, Rousseau explains the origin of languages in general in terms of passionate expression and the differences among languages as due to the differences in the characteristic passions they express. He also argues in the work that language and music are originally inseparable, and so his account of the origin of differences among languages is also an explanation of the differences among different musics, the theory first exposed in the *Lettre sur la musique française*.

Rousseau begins the *Essai* by stating: 'Speech distinguishes man from the animals. Language distinguishes nations from one another.' Once man develops speech constitutes a universal human property as well as a possession that distinguishes peoples from one another. The differences in languages are due to physical causes such as climate, a cause that 'precedes even mores [*moeurs*]' (V: 375). Rousseau develops a theory of a natural basis for cultural variability in language, music, and mores. At the core of this theory is pity.

Rousseau's account in Chapter Nine of the *Essai* of the origin of languages in the southern climes begins with a discussion of pity. 'Social affections develop in us only with our enlightenment,' he argues. 'Pity, although natural to the heart of man, would remain eternally inactive without the imagination which puts it into play' (V: 395). Pity requires our transporting ourselves outside of ourselves to identify with another, especially another suffering being we see as like us. Although Rousseau's description here of pity as a developed passion might appear to contradict his account in the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*,

where he seems to describe pity as not only natural but active, closer scrutiny reveals that it does not.<sup>8</sup> I suggest that just as Rousseau's negative purpose in that work makes him so exaggerate the difficulties of imagining why we would speak, so too does his positive purpose of portraying the state of nature as a peaceful condition lead him to overstate the role of pity. At any rate, in the *Essai* he argues that our pity is not fully activated since man's reflections are restricted to himself or those few around him to whom he is fully accustomed (V: 395). Man's thoughts and passions are initially essentially solipsistic. Only when his passions extend to others, when he develops 'social affections,' does man's pity fully develop. Pity and the passions develop together; what were natural or 'physical' passions emerge as social or 'moral' passions. It is these developing passions that first cause man to speak. This dynamic is evident in Rousseau's account of the birth of language in this chapter. Men once dispersed come together through some accident. A dry climate makes wells important to its wandering inhabitants.

Here were formed the first ties between families; here the first meetings between the two sexes took place. Young girls came to fetch water for the household, young men came to water their herds. Here eyes accustomed to the same objects from childhood began to see sweeter ones. The heart was moved by new objects; an unfamiliar attraction made it less savage; it felt the pleasure of not being alone. (V: 405-406)

New objects are required to fully activate pity, and pity is so engaged. With the development of pity comes the development of the passions and the transformation of man into a fully social or moral being:

'Beneath aged oaks, conquerors of years, an ardent youth gradually forgot its ferocity, little by little they tamed one another; through endeavoring to make themselves understood, they learned to express themselves. Here the first festivals took place, feet leaped with joy; eager gesture no longer sufficed, the voice accompanied it with passionate accents; mingled together, pleasure and desire made themselves felt together. Here, finally, was the true cradle of peoples, and from the pure crystal of the fountains came the first fires of love'. (V: 406)

The voice is animated by the melodious accents of the awakened passions.

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<sup>8</sup>In the *Discours sur l'inégalité* Rousseau writes: 'commiseration is only a sentiment that puts us in the position of him who suffers—a sentiment that is obscure and strong in savage man, developed but weak in civilized man' (132; III: 156). Pity is one of the 'first' passions to be felt by man (95; III: 126), but is not initially fully active. See Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 71-72.



The tale of the amorous origins of speech in the *Essai* parallels Rousseau's description in the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*. As different families come into contact, the sexes meet and the people assemble: 'song and dance, true children of love and leisure, become the amusement or rather the occupation of idle and assembled men and women. Each one began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself ...' (148-49; III: 169-70). The transformation of the passions of love and self-love wrest the first language—here, song—from men. Our developing passions make us want to express our passions through speech and song. The potential for the development of the passions—our unique faculty of 'perfectibility'—distinguishes man from the other animals, and so too the speech we use to express those passions comes to distinguish us. But the expression of different passions leads to different languages. In the *Essai*, Rousseau contrasts southern and northern languages. His account of the origin of language in northern climates involves the expression of other passions, or rather needs. Instead of the meridional expression of moral love, 'aimez-moi,' the physically needy peoples of the north have a characteristically harsher demand, 'aidez-moi' (V: 408). We recognize the cries of our fellows through our compassion, but that compassion, as the word suggests, requires a recognition of shared passion. To the degree that the passions of one people differ from those of another, so too will the expression of their passions through speech and the response to those expressions. Pity is the basis for human development in general as well as the natural basis for cultural variability in that development.

Having devoted the first half of the *Essai* to the origin of languages, Rousseau turns in the remainder to a discussion of music. He argues that speech and music have a common origin and were originally identical. Human communication is originally and essentially a communication of the passions. The developing passions animate the voice: the 'melodious inflections of the accents caused poetry and music to arise along with language.' However, these related forms of expression vary from people to people depending upon the 'genre of the passion that dictated' them (V: 410). Rousseau elaborates on the variability of accent in languages in the *Dictionnaire de la musique*. Although all men are subject to the same passions, they do not equally possess the language of those passions:

,for the universal accent of nature which draws from every man inarticulate cries and the accent of the language which engenders the melody peculiar to a nation is another thing altogether. The sole difference of more or less imagination and sensibility which is observed from one people to another must introduce an infinity of differences in the accented idiom.... The same basis of passion reigns in its soul; but what

a variety of expressions in his accents and in its language!, (V: 614-615)

Rousseau locates the source of musical expression—and linguistic expression—in melody. The melodious accent of the voice conveys passions from soul to soul. Rousseau returns to his argument with Rameau, but now we see its theoretical foundation. Rameau's universal physical science of harmony cannot account for musical expression and its cultural variability. In his direct response to Rameau, the *Examination*, he explains: 'The most beautiful chords ... can convey to the senses an agreeable sensation and nothing more. But the accents of the voice pass all the way to the soul, for they are the natural expression of the passions, and by portraying them they excite them.' The melody conveys 'sentiments to the heart' by imitating them and we recognize those sentiments through our pity. The melody gives sounds 'the moral effects which produce all of music's energy. In a word, the physics alone of the art is reduced to very little and harmony does not pass beyond that' (V: 358-359). Rameau's theory is limited to the physical, but Rousseau insists that the 'moral effects' of music, its more powerful and culturally specific effects, require, as he says, 'a more subtle metaphysics' (V: 343).

Rousseau provides that metaphysics—the '*morale sensitive, ou matérialisme du Sage*' announced in Book IX of his *Confessions* (I: 409)—in the *Essai* and his other musical writings. That metaphysics is an elaboration of the theory of human nature and development in the *Discours sur l'inégalité*. Rousseau explains the effect of language and music in the chapter on melody in the *Essai*:

'Man is modified by the senses, no one doubts it, but failing to distinguish their modifications, we confound their causes. We attribute both too much and too little authority to sensations; we do not see that often they affect us not only as sensations but as signs or images, and that their moral effects also have moral causes'. (V: 412)

Music is a semantic system whose signs are conveyed by the melody. To decipher those signs means to be a member of a musico-linguistic system:

'Everyone in the universe will take pleasure in listening to beautiful sounds; but unless this pleasure is animated by melodious inflections that are *familiar* to them, it will not be delightful, it will not pass into voluptuous pleasure. The most beautiful songs, to our taste, will always only moderately touch an ear that is not at all *accustomed* to them; it is a language for which one has to have the *Dictionary*'. (V: 415; my emphasis)

We must recognize the images, the sentiments conveyed by the melody. 'The sounds of a melody do not act on us solely as sounds, but as signs of our affections, of our sentiments; it is in this way that they

arouse in us the emotions that they express and the image of which we recognize in them' (V: 417). The accents of the melody are 'moral' signs, signs of social or moral passions that develop differently among different peoples. The power of music over our souls can be grasped only through appreciating both the natural and the cultural sources of its effect.

*The 'Progress' of Music and Language, Mores and Politics*

Having found the origin of language and music in our passionate expression, Rousseau offers an account in the spirit of his *Discours sur l'inégalité* of their development along with the development of our passions. Also in the spirit of his two *Discours*, he argues that language and music are 'perfected' in proportion to the decline of their effect upon us. The development of language and music is inextricably linked to the 'progress' of politics and mores.

The digression in the *Principe de la mélodie* on the origin and development of melody, which was incorporated in part into the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, offers Rousseau's most extended treatment of the parallel development of music and mores. He locates the apex of melodic language in ancient Greece. Greek offers a model of an expressive language that works its effects through its highly accented and melodic character. Of all the known languages, it is in Greek that 'discourse must be the most similar to song' (V: 333). Music and speech were the same cadenced communication: 'all their poetry was musical and all their music declamatory' (V: 949). A peculiarly affecting language was the source of the prodigious effects of public discourse of the Greeks.

'Never did the vain noise of harmony disturb these divine concerts. Everything was heroic and grand in these antique festivals. Laws and songs bore the same name in those happy times; they kept unison in all voices, passed with the same pleasure into all hearts, all adored the first images of virtue and innocence itself gave a sweeter accent to the voice of pleasure.' (V: 334)

The Greeks represent for Rousseau a people united by the same passions and by a common idiom to express those passions. 'There are languages favorable to liberty,' he writes in the concluding chapter of the *Essai* on the relationship of languages and government, explaining that 'these are sonorous, prosodic, harmonious languages in which discourse can be made out from a distance' (V: 428). Greek was such a sonorous and persuasive language whose effect was felt in the theater and the political assembly alike.

The Greeks represent for Rousseau a sort of peak of melodic

language. But 'progress' occurred: as language was perfected, melody assumed a separate existence and lost its ancient energy. Finally, a 'catastrophe' occurred. Inundated by barbarians from the cold north, Europe 'lost at the same time its sciences, its arts, and the universal instrument of them both, namely, perfected harmonious language.' The coarse organs of the barbarians vanquished what remained of a melodious language; song was stripped of melody and supplemented by harmony; 'finally, limited to the purely physical effect of the combination of vibrations, music found itself deprived of the moral effects that it used to produce when it was doubly the voice of nature' (V: 335-340). A strikingly similar account of the degeneration of the passion of love is provided by Rousseau in his *Lettre à d'Alembert*. The similarity of the accounts is not accidental: both are based on Rousseau's understanding of the character and development of the passions.

Rousseau finally reaches his own times. 'Music has already ceased to speak,' he laments, 'soon it will no longer sing, and then, with all its chords and all its harmony, it will no longer have any effect on us' (V: 422). The theater has witnessed a parallel degeneration, he explains in the article '*Opéra*.' The unmelodic language and music of the spectacle no longer persuade us, so we must be entertained. The classical opera of Lully had hardly any other end, he says, than that of 'dazzling the eyes and dazing the ears,' but 'all in all it was hard to bore an assembly at a greater price.' Gods and heroes can no longer be made to speak, so we grow to prefer Molière's valets (V: 952). The 'progress' in our music and theater is tied to a similar one in politics and mores. 'Societies have assumed their final form,' he proclaims: 'nothing is changed in them any longer except by arms and cash, and as there is no longer anything to say to the people but, *give money*, it is said to them with placards at street corners or with soldiers in their homes; no one has to be assembled for this' (V: 428). For Rousseau there is an 'essential unity between the realms of ethics and aesthetics.'<sup>9</sup> The language of the theater has to be a political and ethical issue for Rousseau given his theory of language and music as the communication of our passions.

### *Politics and the Arts*

The critique of the theater in the *Lettre à d'Alembert* is founded on Rousseau's understanding of the effect of the communication of the passions through the language and music of the stage, and indeed

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<sup>9</sup>Glyn P. Norton, 'Retrospective Time and the Musical Experience in Rousseau,' *Modern Language Quarterly*, 34 (1973), 131-45 at 139.

through all the arts, on politics and mores. His primary claim in the *Lettre* is that the establishment of a theater will have a deleterious effect on Genevan mores and politics: 'The first noticeable effect of this establishment will be ... a revolution in our practices which will necessarily produce one in our morals [*moeurs*]' (98; V: 90). However, Rousseau seems to contradict this claim, that the theater will change mores, when he argues: 'Opinion does not depend on the theater, since, rather than giving the law to the public, the theater receives the law from it' (22; V: 21). Indeed, Rousseau takes it for a general premise of his argument that 'the general effect of the theater is to strengthen the national character, to augment the natural inclinations, and to give a new energy to all the passions' (20; V: 19).

The apparent contradiction in Rousseau's argument in the *Lettre* can be resolved now that we understand the theoretical basis of his critique of the theater. First of all, it should be noted that Rousseau is worried about the introduction of the theater into his fatherland precisely because the Genevans are already corrupted. Rousseau acknowledges that Geneva is not Sparta: Genevan mores are already corrupt (133-34; V: 121-122). Rather than reacting with Laconic dispassion to the plays of Paris, the Genevans aim to imitate their corrupted cousins (and linguistic compatriots). There is an almost dialectical relationship between the theater and the passions (and therefore mores): the theater reinforces certain existing passions, but those animated passions create a taste for more vivid passions and a corresponding development—or corruption—in the theater. The passion of love, the primary passion discussed in the *Lettre*, is a good example. Rousseau there discusses the national variations in the relationships between the sexes and, thus, in their shared passion, and also gives an account of the degeneration of that passion that, as noted above, parallels his account of the degeneration of music and language along with mores and politics. While the bare foot of a Chinese woman once titillated us, soon we want to see her ankle, and so on: 'by the very progress of this refinement, it had to degenerate finally into coarseness' (90; V: 82).<sup>10</sup> The very dynamic of the development of the passions makes it so that the theater will at once tend to reflect mores and to change them.

Rousseau seeks to retard the corruption of his compatriots and to channel it into healthier channels. Foremost among his proposals is one for reprising the public festivals he remembers from his youth and

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<sup>10</sup> See generally 81-90 (V: 74-83). Rousseau's concentration in the *Lettre* on actresses in particular as agents of corruption should be read in light of his analysis of the importance of the passion of love for the character and development of the passions in general and therewith of mores.

imagines to have existed among the Greeks.<sup>11</sup> He suggests that the citizens of Geneva become participants in their own civic theater: 'let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves ... do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united' (126; V: 115). Rousseau offers this model to the Genevans as one more proper for their free city than the dramatic entertainments suggested by d'Alembert. The entertainments of Paris might be appropriate for those peoples—at least it keeps them from worse occupations, but they would corrupt the passions and tastes, and therewith the mores and politics of Rousseau's compatriots.

A changing taste carries with it changing mores. At the outset of his *Lettre*, Rousseau explains that he uses the terms 'tastes' and 'mores' (*moeurs*) indifferently: 'For although the one is not the other, they always have a common origin and undergo the same revolutions' (19n; V: 18n). That common origin is the passions that affect language and music along with mores and politics. The theater is the realm of imitation, where the tastes and mores of a nation are represented and the passions are put into play. Rousseau explains in his *Emile* that 'something moral enters into everything connected with imitation,' and he refers his reader there to his essay entitled '*principe de la mélodie*.'<sup>12</sup> The theory of the transmission of the human passions through language and music elaborated in his writings on music and language is the foundation for Rousseau's critique of the theater in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*.

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<sup>11</sup>For Rousseau on festivals in general, with some reference to music, see Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 88-103.

<sup>12</sup>Rousseau, *Emile, ou de l'Education*, (IV: 672). In the original edition of 1762, Rousseau refers the reader to 'an essay on the *principle of melody*,' but in 1764 he altered the citation in his own copy of the work to refer to an essay on 'the origin of languages.'