

# POPULAR MUSIC AND POPULAR REVOLT IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE: THE CONTRADICTIONS OF PIERRE-JEAN DE BÉRANGER

*Larry Portis*

(American University of Paris)

The fifteen years of the Napoleonic regime saw the consolidation of the French Revolution. It was then that new social relations were regularized, even sanctified, in a comprehensive legal system. The rights and responsibilities of each citizen were detailed in a Civil Code which preserved the essential accomplishment of the ten turbulent years between 1789 and 1799: the feudal society founded upon hereditary inequalities was no more; formal equality before the law now governed political and social behavior. The problem remaining in the post-revolutionary period was the choice of a system of political representation. This unresolved constitutional question contributed to an endemic political instability that complicated the evolution of capitalist production and enterprise, regardless of the elimination of feudal privilege and juridical incoherence.

Napoleon's dictatorship provided the stability necessary for the legal consolidation of the social revolution. But his departure in 1814-15 opened another period of political adjustment. From 1814 to 1848 the words «liberty» and «democracy» once again represented a call to action against established authorities. The emergence of the modern protest song was part of this renewal of revolutionary activity. Its foremost exponent was Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857).

From the final months of Napoleon Bonaparte's regime as emperor, until the departure of the Bourbon king Charles X in July 1830, Béranger was one of the most influential public figures in France during a period of social and political unrest. Although he did not take part in any of the conspiracies of the 1820s, and did not advocate insurrectionary or violent acts against constituted regimes, he was perceived by the authorities as a major threat. Imprisoned twice for extended periods because of his irreverent songs, Béranger became a national hero. His satires of venal politicians, the clergy, the king, and opportunists in general welded together opponents of the Restoration regimes by inspiring them with the sentiment that time and reason worked against corrupt and stupid governments. A «social romantic» long before others (like Georges Sand, Victor Hugo, and Flora Tristan) began to champion the cause of the «People», Béranger, perhaps more than anyone, facilitated the alliance between the middle classes and the urban proletariat which resulted in the Revo-

lution of 1830. His songs at once fused the political passions of different social groups, and obscured their conflicting interests.

### *Politics and popular music after the French Revolution*

From the great social upheaval of 1789-99 and the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte, to the successive revolts and reactions that punctuated the development of urban-industrial society, two factors combined to make song a highly politicized means of political expression in post-revolutionary France. First, the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population continued to live a rural existence, meant that regional folkways maintained a certain force and contributed to the rituals and amusements of even those who elected or were forced to leave the countryside for the urban centers. For a still largely illiterate working population, song was a central element in social relations and cultural life. Second, the progressive evolution of class consciousness throughout the century encouraged the dominated classes to denounce and ridicule the oppressors using the medium of song.

It was the French Revolution which opened the modern era of popular music. Popular revolts were a constant feature of the feudal society under the ancien régime, and were certainly celebrated by the people in song, but the historical uniqueness of the French Revolution was that it released social energies at all levels on a relatively long-term basis. Equally important, the French Revolution was a *national* phenomenon. Not only was it not confined to a particular region, but no overriding authority could contain it. On the contrary, the most important objective of the revolutionaries was to create a national consensus in order to protect the Revolution against the still present counter-revolutionary forces of the Old Regime. For these reasons, song was an essential component of the new order struggling to establish itself.

Songs like «Départ pour le siège de la Bastille» and «Siège et prise de la Bastille», sung on 14 July 1790, the first anniversary of the taking of the fortress, or the famous «Ça ira», created on the same occasion, celebrate exploits quickly transformed into elements of nationalist ideology, or they are attempts to buttress revolutionary morale<sup>1</sup>. When the flight of Louis XVI in June 1791 and the radicalization of the Revolution in August 1792 announced the more direct involvement of the common people in the direction of the Revolution, the use of music and song as revolutionary propaganda became more pronounced. The belligerent song «La carmagnole des royalistes» is the best and most celebrated expression of popular defiance of the enemies of the Revolution. Created after the people's attack against the Tuileries place and its hated Swiss guards, the message of the «Carmagnole» was clear. Suddenly there was a certain (lower) class pride that inspired the political struggle:

<sup>1</sup> For this period see Robert Brécy, *Florilège de la chanson révolutionnaire de 1789 au front populaire*, Paris, Editions Hier et Demain, 1978, p. 13-30.

«Amis restons toujours unis.  
Ne craignons pas nos ennemis.  
S'ils viennent attaquer.  
Nous les ferons sauter.

Oui je suis sans culotte moi.  
En dépit des amis du roi;  
Vivent les Marseillais.  
Les Bretons et nos lois.

Dansons la carmagnolle  
Vive le son vive le son  
Vive le son vive le son  
Dansons la carmagnolle  
Vive le son du canon».

This glorification of the people would later be considered far too subversive, and would be superseded by the more appropriately nationalistic military march, «La Marseillaise», created in July 1792:

«Amour sacré de la Patrie,  
Conduis, soutiens nos bras vengeurs:  
Liberté, Liberté chérie  
Combats avec tes défenseurs;  
Sous nos drapeaux que la victoire  
Accours à tes mâles accents;  
Que tes ennemis expirans  
Voient ton triomphe et notre gloire;  
Aux armes, Citoyens!»

Today, while «La Carmagnole» retains its subversive content and continues to be adapted to popular social struggles, «La Marseillaise», understandably, inspires a purely patriotic kind of fervor.

Following closely the twists and turns and ups and downs of political and social evolution in France, the critical content of popular music was forced underground after the Thermidorian reaction of July 1794 and did not completely surface until after the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte. The Bourbon restoration offered a rather restricted space reserved for freedom of expression. In these difficult conditions, Pierre-Jean de Béranger began to impose his oeuvre on the political and social imaginations of all social classes.

Who was this audacious artist? Born around 1780, son of a bank clerk, grandson of a tavern keeper on his father's side, Béranger's mother was the daughter of a tailor. Petty-bourgeois, upwardly mobile, Béranger came of age during a time of frustration for those of his station due to the limitations placed upon social advancement by political dictatorship and the near constant wars of Napoleon. Like others of his generation, the restrictions placed upon social mobility at a time of rising expectations led to the expression of political frustrations in a variety of surreptitious ways. For some it was in the criticism implicit in historical or economic analysis (Jules Michelet, Jean-Baptiste Say), for

others it was in poetry (Gérard de Nerval), drama (Victor Hugo) or fiction (Honoré de Balzac). The current of utopian socialism can also be understood in these terms. The post-revolutionary atmosphere, however, was more conducive to an epicurean disdain for mediocrity than it was to a call to arms. It was with such an attitude that Béranger, who worked variously in a bank, in a university office, and in a print shop, began after the age of 30 to write and publicize songs.

Hardly subversive activity in itself, songwriting, or the invention of songs, was virtually a national pastime in the urban centers. The reasons for this are clear. On the one hand, most of the population was illiterate and thus dependant upon oral communication. On the other hand, at a time when opinions could not be expressed openly, singing was a highly effective and relatively safe way of communicating points of view. With the use of the *double entendre*, and without leaving a tangible record of possible indiscretions, the politically motivated singer was primarily limited by the limits of his or her personal cleverness. Song was therefore an important vehicle of political opinion.

The formation of singing clubs called the *gouettes*, during the first half of the Nineteenth Century, allowed people from all social stations the opportunity to sing or have their compositions sung, although it has been noted that the majority of the members of these clubs were literate men from artisan ranks. Members of the *gouettes* paid a small amount of dues used to rent a space on a regular or periodic basis. Fraternal orders, the clubs were given names which indicated their semi-confidential nature: The *Société lyrique des Troubadours* (The Troubadors' Lyrical Society), the *Bergers de Syracuse* (The Syracuse Shepherds), the *Sacrifice d'Abraham* (Abraham's Sacrifice), the *Infernaux* (The Infernal Ones), the *Ménagerie* (The Menagery) where each member received the name of an animal. The dominant themes of the compositions tested in the *gouettes* were «epicurean»-devoted to the celebration of eating, drinking and other sensual pleasures. Public affairs were treated with a certain satirical cynicism, although during the Napoleonic regime the reveler was careful not to overstep certain limits.

In 1810, employed as a clerk at the university, Béranger was in daily contact with the repressive controls of the Napoleonic dictatorship and the current of rebelliousness growing among the student population as the glories of the Corsican's reign wore thin. Here the contradiction was plain. The University had been designed by Napoleon himself to create and preserve social order. University instruction, he said, should be «une garantie contre les théories pernicieuses et subversives de l'ordre social». It should be

«toujours prête à résister aux théories dangereuses des esprits qui cherchent à se singulariser et qui, de période en période, renouvellent ces vaines discussions qui, chez tous les peuples, ont si fréquemment tourmenté l'opinion publique»<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> «Un discours de Napoléon sur l'Université», *Revue internationale de l'enseignement*, 15 September 1911, cited by Jean Touchard, *La Gloire de Béranger*, Paris, A. Colin, 1968, vol. 1, p. 86. Touchard's massive, two-volume thesis is the most detailed discussion of Béranger's work in

Far from having this effect, the universities became hotbeds of anti-Napoleonic agitation. The desired discipline was increasingly difficult to obtain. Even the young Auguste Comte, future avocet of «Order and Progress», who as a student met Napoleon at the Ecole Polytechnique, was expelled from school for his unruly behavior.

In 1810, when Béranger began to contribute songs to the repertoire of the singing clubs, France entered a period of economic crisis. The British blockade, instead of continuing to protect French industry from British competition on the Continent, began to limit economic expansion. After having consolidated the social revolution of 1789-99, Napoleon's autocratic regime was now an obstacle to further progress. Far from fueling economic growth, the Emperor's wars were now sapping the vitality of the Nation. Grumbling increased in volume, and given the police controls in place and the increasingly severe censorship, only creative artifice could effectively, and safely, call the regime into question.

In 1813, one year before Napoleon's defeat, Béranger's barely dissimulated satirical attack on Napoleon, «Le Roy d'Yvetot», announced both the beginnings of «social romanticism» and the new spirit of popular revolt that would intensify throughout the century. Nothing could have been more innocuous than Béranger's lament for the fictional king of Yvetot, an unimportant monarch who never left a real mark on history. But it was in eulogizing the modest and kind-hearted sovereign that Béranger made the most telling comment on the fourteen-year reign of the man called a «world-historical individual» by the philosopher G.F.W. Hegel. The King of Yvetot went to bed early and got up late; he was not a driven workaholic like Bonaparte. He was crowned by a simple commoner; not by the Pope like Bonaparte. He had a dog instead of a pretorian guard. He did not attempt to enlarge his territorial possessions. *His* code was the pursuit of pleasure, not total, centralized power. The refrain was eloquently clear: «What a good little king he was!» In 1813, after the retreat from Russia when the reversal of Bonaparte's fortunes was apparent to everyone, the message could not be lost: the mere evocation of a «good little king» was a slap in the great emperor's face. Béranger's song indicated that the revelry of the singing clubs was taking a dangerous turn.

After the Emperor's definitive defeat at Waterloo, and with the imposition of a restored Monarchy by a self-styled «Holy Alliance» of Bonaparte's sworn enemies, political criticism could scarcely be contained any longer. The proliferation of the *gouettes* was perhaps to be expected in such a context. According to France Vernillat and Jacques Charpentreau, beginning around 1817 there were already so many such clubs that their numbers can only be estimated<sup>3</sup>.

print. Another essential work is Pierre Brochon's, *La chanson française. Béranger et son temps*, Paris, Edition Sociales, 1956.

<sup>3</sup> See France Vernillat and Jacques Charpentreau, *La chanson française*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1983 [1971], p. 34-36. Touchard provides sources that estimate the number to have been around 300 in 1818 in Paris alone. Touchard, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

Outlets for frustrated political impulses in the midst of dictatorial and then simply reactionary rule, the *goguettes* were the descendants of the clubs that played so important a role during the French Revolution, and the precursors of the banquet societies that preceded the Revolution of 1848.

But how audacious was it to present «Le Roy d'Yvetot» near the end of Bonaparte's reign? In fact, the danger was not great, and the socially frustrated and ambitious Béranger could easily be suspected of opportunism. However, if he was opportunistic, he was certainly less so than others who went from supporting Napoleon to flattering the new regime of the returned aristocrats. In June 1814, at the beginning of the Emperor's exile on Elba (April 1814-March 1815), Béranger satirized the new collaborators in a «Requête présentée par les chiens de qualité, pour obtenir qu'on leur rende l'entrée libre au jardin des Tuileries». Béranger wrote derisively of the opportunistic and privileged «dogs of the faubourg Saint-Germain» who, after «licking the boots» of the Emperor, now «bite his heels» as he leaves («Quand sur son règne on prend des notes, Grâce pour quelques chiens félons! Tel, qui longtemps lécha ses bottes Lui mord aujourd'hui les talons»). In 1816, in «Paillasse» (to be translated as something between a buffoon and a doormat), Béranger again used the metaphor of a dog, jumping when his master bids it to denote the behavior of those who ingratiated themselves with the new régime. Here we see clearly the two poles of Béranger's work. On the one hand, he criticizes arbitrary authority; on the other hand, he ridicules those who conform to it or attempt to profit from it.

Ferocious critic of opportunism, Béranger was himself criticized by a rival songwriter who became director of Vaudeville under the new government of Louis XVIII. Marc-Antoine Désaugiers, in his song «Le commis indépendant» (1816), after concluding that he was the object of Béranger's «Paillasse», mocked the spectacle of a State employee (Béranger) biting the hand that fed him. Thus accused of opportunism himself, Béranger redoubled his criticism of others. Attacked on occasion because of the particle «de» in his name (placed there by his socially ambitious father), Béranger responded, in his «Le Vilain», by saying that he was perhaps a «bad boy», but he remained, nevertheless, a man of the people.

Regardless of his own vulnerability to criticism, Béranger's songs had achieved a national renown by 1818. The end of the imperial dictatorship had opened a new space for critical discourse in France. The need of the imposed constitutional monarchy to present as democratic a face as possible in order to receive the approbation of the French people meant that *Liberties could be taken*, in spite of continued censorship. In this context, it was natural that the authorities should take an interest in Béranger's work.

In 1821 the public prosecutor proposed that street musicians be recruited by the authorities to sing songs countering those critical of the government, and in 1822 the préfet de police in Paris did exactly that. It appears, however, that the public reception of their efforts was so disappointing that the experiment was immediately stopped. Nevertheless, the police spied and reported

upon singers, musicians, composers, music publishers and printers with ever-increasing energy<sup>4</sup>. The activity of police in this regard can easily be compared to that of the police in England today, who spare no effort in using the latest advances in electronic technology to locate and repress dangerous assemblies of adolescents in «Acid-house parties».

It was the publication of his songbook in 1821 that provoked the authorities to act specifically against Béranger. These songs implicitly denounced the reactionary measures taken and the political tendencies encouraged by the regime, especially the mounting influence of the Church. This was one year after the politically-motivated assassination of the Duc de Berry (February 1820), which would have ended the Bourbon dynasty had it not been for the birth of the Duke's son, the «miracle child», seven months after his death. In May 1820, the police requested information on Béranger from the university officials and concluded that «le sieur Béranger a fait évidemment tout ce qui dépendait de lui pour exaspérer les esprits et les porter à la rébellion». In fact, the police were seriously studying his songs, and by September 1820 had concluded that his «Le vieux drapeau» and «Souvenirs du peuple» were particularly subversive. The former was liable to be «jetée avec profusion dans les casernes et répandue parmi le peuple», while the latter was

chanté dans tous les ateliers de travail, dans les cours des maisons connues pour renfermer des manufactures ou fabriques. Il y vient des chanteurs ambulants qui ne manquent point d'étonner la complainte favorite<sup>5</sup>.

The intensification of governmental censorship and repression in general after this assassination, seen from the point of view of the authorities, was eminently justified by the discovery of the insurrectionary plans of the Charbonnerie in 1822. Béranger was not implicated in this great liberal conspiracy, although he had many close friends who were. He was, however, a member of the *Société des apôtres* and is said to have been an active member of the *Société des amis de la liberté de la presse*.

At a time when the liberal bourgeoisie chafed under reactionary governments, going to prison as a dissident was a mark of honor. Béranger was not the only songwriter who literally held court in jail and who commercially profited from his detention. If his next songbook, which appeared in 1825, did not contain any noteworthy provocations, it wasn't because his oppositional ardor had been calmed; it was rather because, at this time, the left-liberals were simply biding their time, as Charles X had recently acceded to the throne.

But the songbook published in 1828, was the most provocative of all. Not only did it rather openly attack the king and the government, but it broke with the strategy of the left-liberals, who were responding favorably to overtures from Martignac, the moderate prime minister. Béranger was opposed to the

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 201-202.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from the préfet de police Anglès to the Baron Mounier, peer of France, 22 May 1820 and Ministry of the Interior, police report of 12 September 1820, cited in *ibid*, p. 388-389.

new cooptive policy of «fusion». His songs «Le sacre de Charles le Simple» and «Les infiniment petit ou la gerontocratie» were veritable challenges thrown in the face of the regime. Accused of «offense to public and religious morality and to the State religion», Béranger was tried in December 1828 and sentenced to nine months in prison. From 10 December 1828 to 22 September 1829, he was incarcerated in the prison of La Force. Once again, his popularity greatly increased, and that of the régime declined. In prison, he once again received hundreds of visitors and the accolades of people from every social class.

It was generally recognized that the collaboration between different classes which brought down the regime of Charles X in the «three glorious days» of July 1830 owed much to the songs of Béranger, which built a bridge between the people and the middle classes. Three years after the Revolution of 1830, he wrote in the preface to an edition of his compositions that

Il fallait un homme qui parlât au peuple le langage qu'il entend et qu'il aime, et qui se créât des imitateurs pour varier et multiplier les versions du même texte. J'ai été cet homme.

But his effort was in no way a manipulation of the people. On the contrary, as he explained, «Le peuple, c'est ma Muse»<sup>6</sup>. And by the «people» Béranger meant the uneducated, laboring masses whom he considered as a «folk» in the Romantic tradition, that is, as responsible for the generation of the Nation's cultural depth and vitality. However, in Béranger work the theme of the people is indissociable from that of *la patrie*. More than that, he sees the bourgeoisie as an extension of the people. Here we have a projection of the notion that the *Tiers Etat* is everything, and that it is synonymous with the Nation. As Touchard says:

Béranger ne parle du peuple qu'avec émotion et respect. Il en a une conception à la fois extensive et dichotomique qui le porte à intégrer dans le peuple la bourgeoisie qui pense bien et à refuser toute qualité à ceux qui n'appartiennent pas au peuple<sup>7</sup>.

Typical of the social romantic, Béranger asserted that

depuis 1789, le peuple ayant mis la main aux affaires du pays, ses sentiments et ses idées patriotiques ont acquis un très-grand développement; notre histoire le prouve. La chanson, qu'on avait définie l'*expression des sentiments populaires*, devait dès lors s'élever à la hauteur des impressions de joie ou de tristesse que les triomphes ou les désastres produisaient sur la classe la plus nombreuse.

Not only does Béranger participate in the kind of romantic nationalism that inspired the research of Jules Michelet and others of his contemporaries, but he shows the influence of the new socialism which was turning towards

<sup>6</sup> Pierre-Jean de Béranger, préface [1833], *Chansons de P.-J. de Béranger 1815-1834*, Paris, Perrotin, 1861, p. IV.

<sup>7</sup> Touchard, *op. cit.*, p. 226.



a new kind of class identification. «Tout ce qui appartient aux lettres et aux arts», he concluded, «est sorti des classes inférieures, à peu d'exceptions près»<sup>8</sup>. After the Revolution of February 1848, Karl Marx wrote to the Provisional Government of France: «A vous Français, à vous l'honneur, à vous la gloire d'avoir jeté les fondements de cette Alliance des Peuples si prophétiquement chantée par votre immortel Béranger»<sup>9</sup>.

Marx certainly did not exaggerate the importance of Béranger's songs, although he tactfully neglected to point out that Béranger himself had become a Bonapartist. Nevertheless, Marx's homage to Béranger must be qualified, for the famous singer was merely the tip of a musical iceberg. The French population at the time was not a massified audience, but rather a singing society. France in this respect was more similar to some third world countries today than to contemporary industrialized societies in the West. Without the radio, television, records, tapes or compact disks, one was forced to sing or listen to live performances to be entertained. Thus the importance of the song. Béranger was more renowned for his compositions than for his vocal interpretations of them. It was his words that were subversive. Among the «laboring» and «dangerous» classes, therefore, where singing was an aspect of everyday life and where literacy was rare, the talented songwriter was an important person.

Regardless of Béranger's popularity, the real *chansonnier* of the people was Emile Debraux (1796-1831), a liberal and freemason, who published his first collection of songs in 1822. His initial popularity came in 1818 with his song «La colonne», which he first sang at the *goguette* called *Au Sacrifice d'Abraham*. Announcing a new nostalgia for Napoleon Bonaparte and the Empire, «La colonne» caused a sensation because it criticized Béranger as being politically timid in this regard, a timidity somewhat understandable given the thrust of «Le Roy d'Yvetôt»! Much closer to the «people» by virtue of his social origins, his life-style, and his social sensibilities, Debraux was nevertheless a disciple and admirer of Béranger. Béranger, in turn, could not help but admire Debraux and even, at times, follow his lead. Bonaparte's death in 1821 rendered «bonapartism» a more universally useful arm in the struggle against the Bourbon regimes, and Béranger did not hesitate to use it.

During this period of political reaction, the personal rivalry which existed between Béranger and Debraux remained subordinate to the common cause. Debraux came to be known as the «Béranger of the people» or the «Béranger of the working class». One is tempted to compare their relationship with that which existed between Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger in the 1940s or between Phil Ochs and Bob Dylan in the 1960s. The differences are of course

<sup>8</sup> Béranger, *op. cit.*, p. IV-XV. Béranger's «Les fous» is a homage to the utopian socialists Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier et Enfantin.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Brécy, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

important, but in each case the dialectic between commercial success and political commitment, between social idealism and personal ambition, illustrated the political tensions and the social dimension of creativity specific to each historical period. After Debraux was sent to the prison of Sainte-Pélagie for one month in 1823 for «offense to good manners» (outrage aux bonnes moeurs), he markedly softened his criticisms of Béranger, who had already spent three months there in 1821<sup>10</sup>.

Jean-Pierre Béranger was only the most celebrated of a host of songwriters who wrote for the «people». As urban misery was produced by the progress of industrial capitalism, the social criticism contained in popular songs sharpened. The new consciousness of class divisions which followed the bloody suppression of the textile workers' revolt in Lyon in 1831 was a tremendous stimulus to the production of songs with an undisguised political content. In a time-honored manner, a growing number of «proletarian poets» adapted new lyrics to well-known tunes.

Although the working-class uprisings following the Revolution of 1830 are now best known to us through Victor Hugo's novel *Les misérables* (1862) and Eugène Delacroix's painting *Liberty Leading the People* (purchased by the new government and carefully kept in storage until it was itself liberated by the Revolution of 1848), for the lower classes these events were remembered through the repetition of the many songs that recalled them. The proletarian poet Hégésippe Moreau, who died a pauper at the age of 29, depicted the insurgents of Lyon as martyrs:

«Ils sont tous morts, morts en héros,  
Et le désespoir est sans armes;  
Du moins, en face des bourreaux  
Ayons le courage des larmes!»

In the same vein, Altaroche (1811-1884) bitterly indicted the bourgeoisie and fatalistically held out the prospect of armed struggle in the future:

«Au nom du plus saint des devoirs,  
Tonne un jour le canon d'alarme!  
Les bras velus et les doigts noirs,  
Sauront seuls soulever une arme,  
Brandir une arme»<sup>11</sup>.

What is important to understand is that the publication of such incendiary verses was not an attempt to radicalize a quiescent working population, but rather a manifestation of an established tradition of musical-oral political expression in an increasingly tense social context.

Throughout the July Monarchy of Louis-Philippe (1830-48), political pressures built-up against a corrupt regime founded upon a restricted political suff-

<sup>10</sup> See Touchard, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Brécy, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

rage. Having benefitted from the arbitrary restrictions imposed upon the press by the Restoration governments, the new monarch was thus obliged to put up with a growing volume of disrespectful attacks. The drawings of Daumier are well-known. To them must be added the satirical songs performed in the *goguettes*. When the «Revolution of contempt», as the poet Lamartine called it, came in February 1848, the production of political songs increased even more. The number of newspapers made a quantum leap and the theatres were opened to the people.

But the revolutionary euphoria was short-lived. After the crushing of the popular insurrection in June 1848, the political songs were fewer, more somber, and sung only before listeners whose sympathies were known. The situation was even worse after Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte carried out a *coup d'état* in December 1851. The obsession of this mediocre man, called «Napoleon the Little» by the safely exiled Victor Hugo, was to recreate the empire of his illustrious uncle. Little imagination is needed to understand that this Bonaparte, whose dictatorship lasted twenty years, would be less tolerant of ridicule than Louis-Philippe had been. If, in the 1830s, there were at least one hundred popular singing societies in the Paris region, according to Robert Brécy's estimate, under the new dictator they were virtually all suppressed. Song was simply too subversive. Two revolutions had demonstrated its power. It could not be allowed unrestricted existence.

### *Towards the commodification of French popular music*

Like the broader current of Romanticism, songwriting and singing adapted to the new political situation. During the Second Empire, when even «La Marseillaise» was prohibited, songwriters turned to other things, if they had not been exiled, deported or imprisoned. If their hands were not broken, as were Victor Jara's before his execution by the soldiers of Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1973, the repression was just as effective. The situation was comparable to that in the United States after the Second World War. Denunciation of people expressing opposition to the regime was institutionalized. Careers were broken, artists ceased their activity, some committed suicide, others (like the former revolutionary songwriter Pierre Dupont) sought favor by celebrating the exploits of the emperor, still others resigned themselves to the quest for purely pecuniary gain. All of these reactions must be seen against the backdrop of the accelerated industrialization of the country.

In this new socio-political and economic context, popular music was turned in a more commercial direction. The *goguettes* were finished. Paris was rebuilt by Bonaparte and Baron Haussmann according to bourgeois tastes and the requirements of military logistics against any future popular insurrection. The economy was stimulated by state planning and the removal of tariff restrictions. In short, a speculative and commercial atmosphere was created which laid a veneer of frivolity and effervescence over the structure of political repression of political opposition and economic exploitation of the working

classes. It was in this new atmosphere that the café-concert, the *caf'conc* as it was called, became the privileged site for the production of popular music in France.

In principle, the café-concert was simply a bar in which some form of musical entertainment was engaged in order to attract customers. Nothing unique about this. However, during the period of the Second Empire, when the city of Paris was being sanitized for its bourgeois inhabitants, entertainers were forced off the streets at the same time that they were being drawn into the commercial establishments. Simultaneously, the music was being commercialized. These different factors combined to create a veritable institution which transcended the sum of its parts. The café-concert quickly became more than a simple café where music was sometimes heard. It was transformed into a much larger enterprise whose major objective was to host performers who gained a reputation, thus publicizing the establishment.

What was a café-concert really like? There are innumerable descriptions of them in the literature of the period, and perceptions naturally differed. From the viewpoint of someone who performed in them, they were necessary to the cultural vitality of the nation, but did not receive the recognition they deserved. This was the opinion of Emile Mathieu who in 1863 discussed working conditions in them, concluding that performance in the café-concert was a much more serious test of professionalism than doing orthodox theatre. As far as the establishments themselves were concerned, a good idea is furnished by Mathieu's description of the *Casino de Marseille*, which he considered the best in France:

Situé dans une rue infecte, l'aspect en est repoussant, il semble en y entrant qu'on y sera pas en sûreté; tranquillisez-vous, il n'en est rien. Il y a bien souvent du scandale, mais on peut l'éviter. La salle de café chantant ressemble assez à une cantine; le public qui fréquente cet établissement est composé de matelots de différents nations. Il y a une petite scene sur laquelle quatre ou cinq femmes siègent tout en raccommo- dant leurs bas. L'orchestre est composé de six musiciens (tous en bras de chemise), lorsqu'une dame a chanté, on l'applaudit, et on lui jette des sous comme marques de satisfaction, de là une *foultitude* de révérences et de baisers qui servent de quittances. J'ai remarqué que le public qui se montre si bienveillant, a toujours soin de viser à la tête de l'artiste; on rit beaucoup lorsque les pièces de monnaie manquent d'éborgner la chanteuse. J'ai vue une jeune fille de 17 à 18 ans qui avait une douzaines de marques au cou et à la figure, ce qui prouvait l'adresse de ce trop brutal public<sup>12</sup>.

Coming from someone who attempted to give a positive image to the café-concert, Mathieu's description is striking. He is torn between a need to counter the constant threat of repression held out by the government of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, and his resentment of how the public received artists like himself. It should be stressed that Mathieu *liked* the cafés-concerts. But the best one in France, in his estimation, is located on a dark, seedy street. The interior looks like a mess hall. The clientele is largely working class and brut-

<sup>12</sup> Emile Mathieu, *Les Cafés-concerts*, E. Mathieu, Paris 1863.

ish. The prostitutes are on display. And, when the audience does not simply ignore the performers, they martyrize them. However in twenty years time this relationship will be reversed. When, in the early 1880s, the café-concerts take on a more decidedly «artistic» character on the heights of Montmartre, the performers are accorded more status, and the customers, or at least the slumming, bourgeois customers, are the ones insulted.

But in the new atmosphere emerging in the 1850s, the bourgeois could not be insulted; they had to be catered to in every way. The workers had been crushed in June 1848 and again in 1851 when they attempted to resist the *coup d'état* which led to the dictatorship. It was thus logical that the presence of women was more important in the café-concerts than it had been in the fraternities of the *gouettes*. The establishments functioned as public brothels where upper-class men could make contact with prostitutes in pleasant conditions. If the presence of female «artists» added a new element and a new sound to popular music, it was also a glaring aspect of social oppression and exploitation that did not go unnoticed by those who spoke for the working class.

Another prominent feature of the café-concerts was a certain social ambiguity. Were the cafés-concerts bourgeois or working-class institutions? Opinions were varied. On the one hand, in the most celebrated café-concerts, bourgeois customers were always present and they were certainly necessary to the financial well-being of the establishments. On the other hand, as Emile Mathieu revealed, the ambiance was decidedly plebeian. Talk was raucous, good manners were hardly observed, prostitutes roamed openly. In his study of Manet's *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881), the art historian Timothy J. Clark maintains that

the public in these places played out a charade of classlessness. The *calicot* (young lower-class man) played at being a dandy, the dandy pretended to be a *calicot*. They all tried to hide in the same troubled torpor, the same collective enthusiasm, the same «débraillement social»<sup>13</sup>.

Clark's thesis, that the café-concert from the early Second Empire until around 1885 was where both the lower and bourgeois classes refined their respective identities, is compelling. He claims that bourgeois culture at the time was

especially make-shift, marked and misshapen by its own heterogeneity. It cobbled together its travesties of aristocratic style, and its covert, envious imitations of the «popular», and the patchwork almost always showed; the materials rarely took on a new order of their own. Shuttling between aristocrat and *populaire*, the bourgeois maintained his sense of identity only by never standing still [...] The café-concert was the perfect place for this. Two forms of life were held in permanent tension there: in a kind of double masquerade, the bourgeois behaving as part of «ce public en veste, en

<sup>13</sup> Timothy J. Clark, «The Bar at the Folies-Bergère», in *Popular Culture in France. From the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century*, Saratoga, CA, Anma Libri & Company, 1977, p. 247.

casquette et en pipe», and the apprentice decked out in *habit noir*. The café-concert was a place of exchange: exchanging selves, shifting identities<sup>14</sup>.

In effect, we can see in the café-concert an early vehicle in the creation of the illusion of classlessness which works so powerfully on the contemporary social imagination.

However, this was also the period of time in which social class ghettos were being created in Paris and in other French cities. People from different social classes were living less and less in the same apartment buildings, and less and less in the same neighborhoods. As Georges Duveau has stated, after 1860

l'aristocrate ou le bourgeois se sent mal à l'aise dans le ruelles populaires; il rêve d'avenues droites, aérées, où il rencontre surtout des hommes de sa classe; il veut baigner dans une atmosphère de sécurité matérielle et morale; il veut éloigner de ses yeux les spectacles qui troubleraient sa quiétude<sup>15</sup>.

If, therefore, the café-concert was a new social institution which brought different social classes into a new kind of physical proximity, for the population as a whole it was paradoxically the expression of widening social and cultural distinctions.

What music was generated by and popularized in the café-concerts? the songs were declamatory, comic or sentimental sung in a popular idiom. The orchestration has not left a lasting contribution to musical development as did the operettas of the time. Indeed, this was not the theatre; it was rather the first effort made to package popular music for the masses, and «the masses» means people from all social classes who could be amalgamated into a consumption unit. Performances for the upper classes and sheet music and lyrics for the workers: there was money to be made from all levels of the social scale. When we consider that the sale of sheet music of the «hits» of the time ranged into hundreds of thousands of copies, we understand that we are already in the era of mass-marketing. At the very least, we are far from the highly-charged political atmosphere of the *goguettes* that produced the songs of Pierre-Jean Béranger and Emile Debraux.

\* \* \*

Political criticism in verse is far from modern. But what has been unique in France in the modern era is the relative persistence of a strong current of social criticism in popular music, in spite of its commodification. This critical dimension of musical culture in France is due to the clarity with which social class relationships have been seen and to a certain slowness in the development of mass marketing techniques. The relative starkness of socio-economic divisions in France has been accompanied by a commensurately pronounced

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 249.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Duveau, *La Vie ouvrière en France sous le Second Empire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1946, p. 343-344.

degree of social-class cohesiveness. This cohesion has given rise to socio-political criticism expressed as much in song as in the satirical journalism which has managed to survive in France even up to the present day (such as in *Le canard enchaîné*, which occasionally offers a satirical song set to a traditional air).

Béranger was one of the first of the modern singer-composers of protest songs. Coming of age during the decade of revolutionary agitation and upheaval, like many of his generation he was an inveterate social critic who had difficulty adapting to the conformity required by the post-revolutionary regimes. His poem-songs crystallized emotions and focused political passions much as Bob Dylan's did in the 1960s. During a period of political contestation against authoritarian and unpopular regimes, Béranger played a cultural role similar to that assumed by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti in Nigeria in the early 1970s (although the latter has been subjected to more violent means of repression). Both, in their lyrics and attitudes, crystallized discontent for the population as a whole, striking out against corrupt élites by ridiculing them. France in the 1820s was a largely rural society composed of mostly illiterate people. The educated lower and middle classes were excluded from direct access to political power and were, therefore, anxious to create bonds of sympathy between themselves and the masses. At the same time, the incipient industrialization of the 1820s led to the first spontaneously organized outbreaks of modern class conflict between factory workers and the wielders of capital. The result of these trends was the «three glorious days» of the French Revolution of July 1830.

The evolution of popular music in France during these years can perhaps be contrasted with that in the United States during the same period. The opening-up of the «National Period», including the War of 1812 and the creation of the «Star-Spangled Banner», stood in stark contrast to the era of open social conflict that Béranger contributed so importantly to. In the United States, political protest in song would be structured by the westward movement, the struggle against slavery, and the Civil War. It was not until towards the end of the Nineteenth Century, when intense industrialization and the relative «closing» of the frontier brought forth a militant labor movement, that song was used systematically as a political weapon.

The situation in France can also be contrasted with that in England during this period. Percy Shelley, for example, was engaged in the cause of the people, but he did not have the liberal illusions held by Béranger<sup>16</sup>. The latter's amalgam of the «people» and patriotic sentiments and his belief that political liberalism stemmed from purely popular cultural sources were projections of the revolutionary notion of «Nation» that inspired the French Revolution and was exploited by Napoleon. Béranger never gave any evidence of understanding the processes of industrialization and proletarianization that had begun to

<sup>16</sup> See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Popular Songs (wholly political and destined to awaken and direct the imagination of the reformers)*, London, Journeyman Press, 1979. The poems in this collection were published by Mary Shelley some years after the poet's death in 1822.

transform French society by the 1820s, and that spurred demands for political change. In Shelley's England, by contrast, the dynamics of modern class conflict, products of the Industrial Revolution, were far more apparent. The transformation of the productive system had been facilitated by the political adjustment of 1688, the «Glorious Revolution» that consolidated the English social revolution of the 1640s. Béranger was a participant in such a politico-constitutional adjustment, the «glorious» Revolution of July 1830.

Perceptions of Béranger and Shelley must be understood within the social and ideological environments in which they worked. Although they both participated in an international cultural movement, Romanticism was expressed differently in different generational and national contexts. Béranger, on the one hand, proved to be the foremost proponent of class collaboration during the period of the French Restoration, and enjoyed a reputation as being a politically astute, practical man. Although his apparent pragmatism was often interpreted as a self-interested kind of opportunism, his songs expressed a political idealism that, while sincere, was certainly at variance with social and economic reality. Shelley, on the other hand, financially disinterested, and lucid as to the political realities of a class-dominated society, was dismissed as a utopian, a romantic devoid of political sense. But Shelley's work had far less impact than Béranger's precisely because it denounced directly the oppression of a disenfranchised and powerless class. Political radicals like Shelley were marginalized by the institutional authorities. In addition, there were more subtle, structural reasons why attempts like Shelley's to raise political consciousness by means of poetry and song were far more difficult in England. The commodification of popular music in England seems to have been more advanced because of 1) the need for more sophisticated means of social control, and 2) the earlier creation of an urban market for music halls.

Because his personal contradictions corresponded so well to those of his society, Béranger became France's national poet by systematically challenging constituted authority. Regardless of his own opportunism and lack of social realism, he was revered by the masses, who were possibly more oppressed after the Revolution of 1830 than they were before. Vehicles for the communication of dissident political culture, Béranger and his songs were historically specific components of the transition from a «traditional» to a «modern» society. At the same time, Béranger was the first «superstar» of modern French popular music, and his career reveals the contemporary dialectic of show business in industrial-capitalist societies. His contradictions were shaped within the force-field existing between political commitment and social ambition, between revolt and accommodation.