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Songs without Music: The *Hymnes* of Le Franc de Pompignan

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In the first edition of his *Poesies sacrées* (1751), Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan (1709–1784) published 40 poems in four books, each containing ten poems. These *Poesies sacrées*, or Sacred Poems, were to be printed three times in his *Oeuvres choisies* or Selected Works of 1753, 1754, and 1754–55. This modest collection was to be enlarged to 85 poems divided into five books of unequal length in its definitive form in the *de luxe quarto* edition of 1763 and finally as the first volume of his *Oeuvres* in 1784, which is the text I am using in this article. Although at least one critic, the Canadian poet Robert Finch, maintained that we should consider as sacred songs the *Odes* (translations of certain psalms), the *Cantiques* (drawn from texts chosen from several Old Testament books), and even the selections from the *Prophéties* as well as the *Hymnes*, these observations are limited here to the hymns.

The ten hymns published in the first cycle of four editions are paraphrases of texts found in the New Testament and were intended

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to be sung during the high mass on certain Sundays and important holy days during the liturgical year. Of the six hymns added in 1763, four celebrate saints (St. John the Baptist and three saints of national importance, Saint Genevieve, Saint Clotilde, and Saint Louis) and would be sung on their feast days, while the other two are a translation of Psalm CXII (In exitu Israel de Aegypto) in the Vulgate (Psalm CXIII in the other editions of the Bible) and a hymn of thanksgiving based on the Te Deum, and could be sung at other appropriate occasions. I have examined elsewhere different aspects of the first three books of the Poésies sacrées, but the hymns have been neglected, even in the three monographs devoted to the poet in the twentieth century. I propose to address the Hymnes in the present article. Very little work has been done on the hymns, and nothing has been published on them as songs.

Poetry, for Le Franc, consists of many elements, not the least of which is inspiration. In the present case, that is sacred verse, divine inspiration is needed, and Le Franc does not hide his belief that the poetry of the Bible is the oldest, the most venerable, and the closest to God’s conception. Indeed, he addresses this question directly:

God himself inspired men to write poetry. To celebrate his grandeur, his power, his mercy, his goodness, to express his anger and his indignation, he wanted men to use a language that is at once full of images, bold, melodious, subject to sonorous and cadenced measures, so as to distinguish it from the ordinary and common way of speaking.


6. Le Franc de Pompignan, Œuvres, xv–xvi. "Dieu a lui-même inspiré la poésie aux hommes. Il a voulu que pour célébrer ses grandeurs, sa puissance, ses miséricordes, sa
If poetry, and especially biblical poetry, is almost as close to the language of God as human beings can get, a step closer yet is poetry put to music, "melodious, subject to sonorous and cadenced measures." One of the many ways poetry can be made musical is by the use of harmony.

Harmony is the subject of one of Le Franc's very first known poems, the text of a kind of salon opera titled Le Triomphe de l'Harmonie written when he was just twenty years old. He later used a slightly revised version of this text as the prelude to his very successful full-scale opera, produced seven years later in 1737 and bearing the same title. The goddess Harmony, in part with her song and her verse, in part with her reason and her grace, conquers the forces of War, Discord, and Disputes of all sorts.

Harmony triumphs in his sacred verse in other ways, too—ways more appropriate to the subject of this article. Harmonie serves as an antonym and as a resolution not only of désaccord (discord in the sense of disagreement) but also of discordance (discord in the sense of dissonance); that is, it has in French, as in English, a musical value, too, along with its social and political meanings. It is the musical sense of the word that is of interest to us here.

Harmony is not just musicality, however; it is also the unity between a thought or an image and its expression, or what we might call Proportionality. It follows that if an idea or a person is "pleasing, tender, and brilliant," the language used to express this idea must reflect or incorporate these qualities; and if an idea or event is "majestic" or bonté, que pour exprimer sa colère et son indignation, on se servit d'un langage figuré, hardi, mélodieux, assujetti à des mesures sonores et cadencées qui le distinguaient de la marche unie du discours ordinaire et commun." It is perhaps worth noting here that the book is not divided into chapters. The Poésies sacrées consists of a fairly long introduction, the Discours préliminaire, followed by five Livres, or books, of which the Hymnes is the fourth (the others are the Odes, the Cantiques or Canticles, the Prophéties, and the Discours philosophiques or Philosophical discourses). All five books are contained in vol. I; thus, Oeuvres, I, xv–xvi means vol. I, pp. xv–xvi of the 1784 edition. This is the case throughout the article.

7. Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan, Le Triomphe de l'Harmonie, score, 1730, Collection de Solleine, Bibliothèque Nationale, Manuscrits fonds français 9293, 47–51. Dated and signed, the manuscript consists of two scenes in one act.

8. Le Triomphe de l'Harmonie, ballet héroïque, musique de Grenet, Oeuvres (Paris: Nyon l'ainé, 1784), III:1–56. This opera-ballet was performed in Paris in 1737 and 1738.
"The Hymnes of Le Franc De Pompignan"

"sublime," "lugubrious but consoling," or "terrifying . . . triumphant, full of love and happiness," the language used to express it must possess these qualities. In some cases, particularly in the Prophéties and the Odes, the subject matter and the Hebrew text (although not necessarily the Latin text of the Vulgate) require the powerful imagery that I have analyzed elsewhere as Muscularity (see note 4). The nature of the hymns does not lend itself to this aspect of Le Franc's poetic register.

Le Franc states clearly that the canticles were poems intended to be sung. It goes without saying that the hymns were also intended to be sung. Speaking specifically of his hymns written in French (instead of Latin), the poet builds into his aesthetic ideal uniting poetry and music the concepts of harmony and proportionality. On this matter, he says,

My hope is for this genre to succeed enough so that our finest poets will cultivate it and our best musicians will compose songs in it. The motets of Lalande, Campra, Mondonville are enjoyed even by people who don't know Latin. They would hear this delightfully exciting music with even greater pleasure if it were supported by French words. Using as models the psalms and canticles, all the component parts of poetry would have to be brought to these French poems. I would like to see them pleasing, tender and brilliant for the feasts of the Virgin, for Christmas; majestic and sublime for the Resurrection, Pentecost, the Ascension; lugubrious but consoling for the All Souls Day; terrifying for the Last Judgment; triumphant, full of love and happiness for All Saints Day. Music appropriate to odes fashioned in this taste would surely produce an astonishing effect. My hymns will be thought of, perhaps, as only rough drafts of these great paintings; but the sketch is good, and others can fill in the details and the colors.


10. Ibid.; emphasis added. "Je souhaiterais que ce genre réussit assez parmi nous pour engager nos bons poètes à le cultiver, et nos habiles musiciens à y consacrer leurs chants. Les motets de Lalande, de Campra, de Mondonville charment les personnes même qui ne savent pas le latin. Elles entendraient avec bien plus de plaisir cette musique ravissante, si elle était sur des paroles françaises. Il faudrait qu'on se proposant pour modèles
True to his words, he sought to put his hymns to music: hymn II, a Christmas hymn simply titled “Pour le Jour de la Nativité du Seigneur,” had been performed in Bordeaux in 1742, as we have discovered in an imprint. Unfortunately, the text does not contain the music. And we know that, even when the words of a song can stand on their own as true poetry (think of simply reading Georges Brassens, a laureate of the Académie Française in 1967, instead of hearing him sing), or perhaps more to the point for eighteenth-century music, Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” or a Bach cantata gives them a life they would otherwise not have. We consider, similarly, the renowned fourteenth-century French poet and composer, Guillaume Machaut (1300–77), whose music has been lost. We can only imagine what his song-poems would have sounded like. Likewise, without hearing what must have been echoing in Le Franc's ears as Le Franc composed his hymns, we must consider them in an imperfect form—that is, as songs without music. Even so, they are effective verbally and lyrically and often possess a musicality

les Psalms et les Cantiques, on rassembla dans ces petits poèmes français tous les caractères de la poésie. Je les voudrais agréables, tendres et brillants pour les fêtes de la Vierge, pour la Nativité; majestueux et sublimes pour la Résurrection, la descente du Saint-Esprit, l'Ascension; lugubres, mais consolants, pour le jour des Morts; terribles pour le jugement dernier; triomphants, remplis d'amour et d'allégresse pour la fête de tous les saints. Une musique assortie à des odes travaillées dans ce goût ferait vraisemblablement une sensation étonnante. Mes Hymnes ne seront, si l'on veut, que des esquisses de ces grands tableaux; mais le dessein en est bon; d'autres y mettront le coloris.”

11. According to MS 1696 (16) pièce 46 of the Bibliothèque Municipale de Bordeaux (4 pp. in-folio), this hymn had been set to music and performed in 1742. Below the title on the imprint, we see the words “Mis en musique par M. LEVENS, Maître de musique de l'Eglise Métropolitaine St. André de Bordeaux, l'Année 1742.”

12. “Thèmes: Les différents themes abordés par Brassens dans ses textes [Themes: The different themes used by Brassens in his texts],” Eric M. Free, accessed January 8, 2014, http://eric.m.free.fr/. At the Brassens site constructed by Eric M. Free, the following poets (from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century) are among those listed: Paul Fort, 8 poems; Pierre Corneille, 1 poem; Antoine Pol, 1 poem; Gustave Nadaud , 2 poems; Alfred de Musset, 2 poems; Jean Richepin, 2 poems; Alphonse de Lamartine, 1 poem; Théodore de Banville, 2 poems; Victor Hugo, 2 poems; Paul Verlaine, 1 poem; Francis James, 1 poem; François Villon, 1 poem; Louis Aragon, 1 poem. Thanks to the music, and to Brassens's singing, each of these poems has taken on a new and more complete life.

13. Modern critics have not overlooked this important point. I cite but one example: “Like most songs, this work [Katherine Philips's 1664 poem “Mutual affection between Orinda and Lucatia”] is misrepresented if considered only as a text stripped of its musical setting.” Dianne Dugaw and Amanda Powell, “Sapphic Self-Fashioning in the Baroque
that clearly comes from the eighteenth century. I look at the nature of that musicality to set the stage for brief analysis, emphasizing here harmony and proportionality.

Metrical feet, such as the iamb or the spondee, do not exist in French; instead, we count syllables.¹⁴ The most common syllabic forms are the Alexandrine, a dodecasyllabic line with a caesura after the sixth syllable, used in meditative or philosophical verse, in comedies, in tragedies, and in sonnets; the octosyllabic line, originally used in narrative romances, which gives a more rapid, fleeting impression, and tends to be used in light verse forms; and the hexameter, or demi-Alexandrine, which breaks the predictable regularity of the Alexandrine and helps make the stanza lighter and airier. The decasyllabic line, popular in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, is more rarely used; the tetrameter even more so.

One of the ways to express musicality in French verse, to get some of the lilt that is more easily produced in English, is to vary the meter, using lines of different lengths, and particularly to use lines of an odd number of syllables. The great symbolist poet Paul Verlaine, known for the musicality of his poems, wrote explicitly late in the nineteenth century in L'Art poétique,

De la musique avant toute chose,
Et pour cela préfère l'Impair . . .

(Music first of all,
And for that, prefer lines of odd-numbered syllables . . .)

Already in 1742, in the hymn mentioned above, for Christmas, Le Franc had incorporated this idea in his hymn. He opens the poem with a six-line stanza of hexasyllables; a second stanza with four lines of twelve, eight, twelve, and twelve syllables; a third four-line stanza with alternating lines of eight and six syllables, then two four-line stanzas of octosyllabic lines. Three stanzas of five-syllable lines follow:

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¹⁴ For a full description of the evolution of French verse forms, see Frédéric Deloffre, *Les Vers français* (Paris: Sedes, 1973); the present question is addressed in chapter 6, "Naissance d'un art poétique: élaboration et spécialisation des différents types de vers," 59–67.
Suspend your harshness,
Rigorous winter;
Stormy winds,
Blow far from these shores.
Birds that in our woods
Are frightened by their gusts,
On your humid branches
Let your voices ring.
Hasten to bloom,
Flowers, decorate our fields;
These happy moments
Are every bit as lovely as dawn
In the most beautiful of springtimes.)

Nor is this the only example of the use of "musical" lines in the Poésies sacrées: Le Franc has lines of five and seven syllables scattered throughout the first four books of this volume.

The carol continues for some time in this vein, pleasing and tender; perhaps he heard the brilliant tones of flutes and trumpets when he wrote lines such as these that begin and end the hymn:
Quelle clarté perçante
Se répand dans les airs!
La flamme des éclairs
Est moins éblouissante...

Chantons, mêlons nos voix aux céléstes concerts.
Nuit à jamais célèbre! éclatante victoire!
La mort et le péché sont rentrés dans leurs fers.

Honneur, triomphe, gloire,
Au Dieu de l'univers.

(What a clear and piercing tune
Can be heard in the air!
The flame of lightning
Is less blinding.
What a clear and piercing tune
Can be heard in the air!...

Let's sing, let's lend our voices to the heavenly concert.
O Night forever famous! O brilliant victory!
Death and sin have retreated to their prison.

Honor, triumph, glory
To the God of the universe.)

The "pleasing and tender" qualities of this Christmas carol can also be seen in hymn IV, celebrating the presentation of the infant at the temple and the ritual purification of his mother. The musicality of this hymn is expressed by such elements as douceur (sweetness or softness) and sentiment, a word which Le Franc uses frequently in his prefatory remarks, and which he often succeeds in expressing. But the sweetness and the sentiment he refers to have nothing to do with human (and especially sexual) love. With few exceptions, the Bible—and particularly those passages Le Franc chose to translate or to paraphrase—is not lyrically effusive. Love of God, indignation, despair, terror, adoration, serenity—emotions such as these are the stuff of his verse. We will see some of these elements in a moment, but first, let us take a look at two
short passages of this hymn ("Pour le jour de la Purification," 273–75),
which Le Franc specifically calls a cantata (and just imagine what Bach
could do with these texts!):

Accourez dans le saint lieu,
Volez, nations fidèles:
Couvrez des fleurs les plus belles
Le berceau de votre Dieu.

L'Enfant qu'ici je contemple,
De grands rois l'ont imploré.
Hélas ! encore ignoré,
Il est offert dans le temple
Où lui-même est adoré.

Volez, nations fidèles,
Accourez dans le saint lieu;
Couvrez des fleurs les plus belles
Le berceau de votre Dieu.

(Hasten to the sacred place,
Fly, faithful nations,
Cover with the most beautiful flowers
The crib of your God.

The child that I behold here,
Great kings have implored him;
Alas! Still unknown,
He is offered in the temple
Where he himself is adored.

Fly, faithful nations,
Hasten to the sacred place,
Cover with the most beautiful flowers
The crib of your God.)

Speaking of Bach, I cannot resist pointing out the baroque image of
the second stanza of this piece. However classical or neoclassical he
might have been, Le Franc had a penchant for baroque imagery, often
sublime, often fearsome, often violent; but here, all is harmonious, all is sweetness and sentiment, all is pleasing and tender.

The closing passage of the hymn, a prayer in itself, consists almost entirely of these elements:

Gloire, triomphe au divin Père,
Honneur au Fils, Dieu comme lui.
Le tribut d'une foi sincère
Obtient leur immortel appui.

Esprit-Saint, recevez l'hommage
Des coeurs qu'illuminent vos feux;
Par vous seul nous faisons usage
Des seuls biens digne de nos voeux.

Gloire, triomphe au divin Père,
Honneur au Fils, Dieu comme lui.
Le tribut d'une foi sincère
Obtient leur immortel appui.

(Glory, triumph to the divine Father,
Honor to the Son, God like him.
The tribute of a sincere faith
Earns their immortal support.

Holy Spirit, receive the homage
Of hearts lit up by your flames;
Through you alone we make use
Of the only worship worthy of you.

Glory, triumph to the divine Father,
Honor to the Son, God like him.
The tribute of a sincere faith
Earns their immortal support.)

Variety of tone and form are also important to rendering in French the musicality of the Hebrew original, according to our poet:
Mais si l'on avoue que [les psaumes] ont été faits pour être mis en musique et chantés, on ne saurait disconvenir qu'il n'ait fallu pour les plier avec plus de grâce aux différentes modulations du chant, un mélange de brèves et de longues arrangées avec plus d'art et de symétrie que dans la prose. . . . [Les rimes] y sont amenées pour flatter l'oreille et pour favoriser le chant.

(But if you agree that [the Psalms] were made to be put into music and sung, you would also have to agree that they must be provided with more grace in the different modulations of song, with a mixture of long and short syllables arranged with more art and symmetry than in prose. . . . [Rhyme] is introduced to appeal to the ear and to favor singing.)

He adds that a “symmetrical mixture of stanzas of unequal length forms a harmonious contrast” (mélange symétrique de strophes inégales formerait un contraste harmonieux) and that poetry must “imitate music, whose charm consists in a melodious variety of tones and accords” (imiter la musique, dont le charme consiste dans une mélodieuse variété de tons et d'accords). The critic Robert Finch, as indicated near the beginning of this article, is particularly sensitive to the musical quality of the Poésies sacrées, comparing the various poems to musical compositions consisting of movements vivace, adagio, and moderato: “like music, especially music of the time, these lyrical movements can hardly be appreciated in short snippets but must be followed throughout their changing web of orchestration from beginning to end.” Indeed, Finch believes the first four books of the Poésies sacrées, including the Hymnes, are “admirably suited for the purpose, there is little doubt [Le Franc] hoped they might be set to music.”

As we have seen, throughout the Hymnes, Le Franc uses lines of five and seven syllables, anticipating by more than a century what the great poet Paul Verlaine will say explicitly in L'Art poétique.

He also introduces an extraordinary variety of meters and strophic forms, as Finch observes:

15. Pompignan, Discours préliminaire, xli.
16. Ibid., liv–lv.
No two poems in the [first] four books are identical in form. Their length ranges from three to thirty stanzas, each of which may have anywhere from three to fifteen lines. Eight, twelve, six, seven and (in the *Hymnes*) five and four syllable lines are used uniformly, or in combination, throughout a stanza. A poem may consist of a single type of stanza or of several intermingled types. A total of one hundred thirty-five stanza-forms, all but twenty-nine being irregular, are used, and each form heightens or reflects the sense or feeling it embodies.¹⁸

We have also seen that harmony is not just an element in the musicality of poetry; it is also the union of a thought or an image and its expression, what I am calling Proportionality. In certain cases, and in particular in the *Odes* and the *Prophéties*, the subject matter and the Hebrew text (but not necessarily the Latin text of the Vulgate) call for powerful images, which I have characterized as Muscularity (see note 4). The nature of the hymns does not lend itself very well to this aspect of Le Franc’s poetic register. But it does pay attention to proportionality and to the appropriateness of the words for many of the feast days it sings.

I have tried to demonstrate, following Finch, the extraordinary variety of meters which characterizes Le Franc in the hymn for Christmas and others. In the Christmas hymn he mixes lines of six, eight, and twelve syllables, and he includes five-syllable lines to add a bit of lilt to the rhythm of the poem. I have also pointed out how the words reply to the meaning he wants to associate with this feast day. Another hymn showing this kind of harmony between the meaning of the day being celebrated and the emotions associated with it can be seen in Hymn XIII, “For All Souls Day.” For this day he wants the music to be lugubrious but consoling.

Ecoute, Dieu puissant, le cri de ma douleur;
Autour de moi la mort a déployé son ombre.
De nos iniquités si tu comptais le nombre,
Qui pourrait soutenir le poids de ta fureur?

¹⁸. Ibid., 197.
Ah! suspends tes coups redoutables;
Contre des humains misérables
Quelle haine peut t'inspirer?
Voudrais-tu foudroyer l'argile
Dont tu formas l'être fragile
Que ton souffle fit respirer?

Que l'homme est malheureux, que sa vie est cruelle!
Il naît comme la fleur, il est foulé comme elle;
Ses maux sont mille fois plus nombreux que ses jours.
Il disparaît, semblable à la vapeur légère,
   Ou tel que l'ombre passagère,
Qui fuit au même instant qu'elle marque son cours.

(Listen, God almighty, to my painful cry;
All around me Death has cast its shadow.
If you counted the number of our iniquities,
Who could sustain the weight of your fury?

Ah ! hold back your fearful blows;
Against miserable human beings
What hatred can inspire you?
Would you strike with thunder the very clay
With which you created the fragile being
That your breath gave life to?

How unfortunate is man, how cruel is his life!
He is born like the flower, he is trampled on as it is;
His misfortunes are a thousand times more numerous than his days.
He disappears, akin to the fleeting vapor,
   Or like the fleeting shadow,
That disappears at the very instant it can be seen.)

To illustrate the terrifying aspect of the day of the dead, Le Franc chose to compose a passage in odd-numbered syllables, which seems to rush toward the most frightening conclusion of all: eternal life in the torments of Hell:
O jour de colère,
Terribles moments!
O jour de misère,
De pleurs, de tourments!

La foudre dévore
La terre et le Ciel.
Nous voyons éclore
L'effroyable aurore
Du jour éternel.

Vengeur de nos crimes,
Où fuir? où cacher
Les tristes victimes
Qu'au fond des abîmes
Ta main va chercher?

(O Day of wrath,
Terrifying moments!
O Day of suffering,
Of tears, of torments!

Lightning and thunder devour
Heaven and Earth.
We see the start
Of the frightening dawn
Of the eternal day.

O Day of wrath,
Terrifying moments!
O Day of suffering,
Of tears, of torments!

Avenger of our crimes,
Where can we flee, where can we hide
The bitter victims
Whom in the depths of abysses
Your hand will go to seek?

O Day of wrath,
Terrifying moments!
O Day of suffering,
Of tears, of torments!

He ends his hymn in harmony with the meaning he sees in the feast day, consolation. The short final stanza consists of lines of five and seven syllables:

Âmes des fidèles,
Reposez en paix.
Que les portes éternelles
Pour vous s'ouvrent à jamais.
Âmes des fidèles,
Reposez en paix.

(Souls of the faithful,
May you rest in peace.
May the gates of eternity
Be forever open for you.
Souls of the faithful,
May you rest in peace.)

The end of the world is pictured in hymn XIV, “For the first Sunday of Advent.” This hymn, which the poet calls “Ode on the Last Judgment,” shares most of the characteristics of the Hymn for All Souls Day, including the use of five-syllable lines, normally lyrical, but used here to paint a terrifying event, the end of time. The rapidity of the events
suggests that of the Last Judgment. Even the angels tremble with fear at the sight of the end of creation:

Les monts se renversent
Sur le sein des flots;
Les vents se dispersent
Sur les vastes eaux;
Les ondes se percent
Des chemins nouveaux.
Les tonnerres grondent,
Quels embrasements!
Les Cieux dissous fondent;
Leurs écoulements
Allument, confondent
Tous les éléments.

(The mountains crumble
In the bosom of the sea;
The winds are dispersed
Over the vast oceans;
The waters are pierced
With new pathways.
The thunder rumbles,
What fiery lightning!
The heavens, dissolved, melt away;
Their debris
Burns and mixes together
All the elements.)

Here, having arrived at the end of time, I must take leave of my gentle reader, even though we have not been engaged together in an analysis of all the poems. I thought it would be more interesting, and more useful, to present certain aspects of the work of this poet who is too little known even in France in the twenty-first century, and who is much better than his reputation. Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan produced, for the

first time in 1751, a text, which he called *Poésies sacrées*, which was doubled in size in 1763 and which he published for the last time the very year of his death, 1784. This text consisted of two parts, an Introduction or *Discours préliminaire*, which contains many pages of Le Franc’s theory of poetry and especially of religious poetry, and five books of poems, the fourth of which, the *Hymnes*, the subject matter of this article, is derived from New Testament sources and the lives of the saints (the other books—Odes, Canticles, Prophesies, Philosophical Discourses—are translations or paraphrases of Old Testament sources). I have tried to show how he applied his theories to his poems, and I hope I have shown that his poetry, even the hymns (which I had always considered to be the weakest of the five books, but which I now find, after several years of close reading, to be a worthy companion to the other books) illustrate his theories. Like most Catholic hymns of the period, these were not intended as songs sung by the congregation, but rather as performances given by trained singers, accompanied by several instruments. But unlike most of the hymns written in the period, they were written in the vernacular, in French, so that the parishioners could understand the words they were hearing. Unfortunately, we have not yet discovered the musical settings for these hymns, which remain, to us at least, songs without music.