POPULAR SONG UNDER LOUIS XIV:
SATIRICAL STREET SONG AND PROTEST THEATER

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In early modern France, individuals from all social ranks composed, improvised, and sang new texts to preexisting melodies with such boundless enthusiasm that contemporary commentators at times described this obsession as an illness or mania. Participants in these parodic song traditions performed, manipulated, and adapted malleable tunes for diverse forms of sociability and identity construction. The Parisian soundscape, for example, was in part shaped by the tradition of singing *vaudevilles*, or street songs that served as vehicles used to rapidly circulate gossip, news, and scandals of the city and the court. In this paper, I will begin by examining the Pont-Neuf and the Place Dauphine as they emerged in seventeenth-century Paris as public spaces that cultivated rich cultures of popular entertainment. Written accounts, engravings, paintings, and iconography provide a means to reimagine the vibrant musical and theatrical traditions inhabited by itinerant actors, charlatans, and street singers, all of whom contributed musical sounds to the quotidian urban soundscape.

Phillipot le Savoyard, the most famous street singer during Louis XIV’s reign, published collections of his songs. An analysis of these publications suggests that street singers formed their repertoire by writing new texts to *vaudevilles*, by composing new songs in the popular style, and by performing and adapting music from court spectacles. These songs, which survive in Philippot’s printed song collections and in manuscript *chansonniers*, demonstrate the interconnected nature of street theater, popular songs, and the musical cultures of the salons, the court, and the Opéra. They further suggest that song performance served as a mechanism of cultural mediation between social ranks.

I will conclude with a new analysis of a brief flowering of a form of protest theater, known as the *pièces par écriteaux* or mute divertissements, which emerged at the Parisian fairgrounds in the early eighteenth century. These fairground entertainments – a form of resistance to the crown’s strict administrative control of the Parisian theatrical scene – engaged the audience with singing *vaudevilles*, tunes that had previously “run” through the streets “in the mouths of the people,” while the actors relied on slapstick, mime, and dance to articulate plot. I conclude by suggesting that our understanding of the operas of Jean-Baptiste Lully and other court and public spectacles is incomplete without a consideration of the totality of the mechanisms through which the Parisian public interacted with and reused songs of diverse origins.

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