CHAPTER 2

Choral Societies and Nationalist Mobilization in Nineteenth-Century France

Sophie-Anne Leterrier

In nineteenth-century Europe, national movements found expression and support in convivial sociability and shared cultural interests. Choirs could galvanize or mobilize a part of the population with national fervor, and choral festivals became tribunes for the assertion of a separate identity. Choral societies made an important contribution to nationalist mobilization, mostly in east European and Balkan countries, but also within empires (as in Wales). In France, the choral movement was not divisive; instead of challenging the national state, the male choral societies or orphéons were among its supporters. This came about for historical reasons that will be examined below.

The Legacy of the French Revolution

The history of France in the nineteenth century is defined by the French Revolution, with the government and the people either celebrating revolutionary principles and conquests, or seeking to discredit and eradicate them. Among the principles of the French Revolution, the most important was the idea of the nation. This idea made possible a rupture with absolutism, privileges, and feudal order. Reference to the nation legitimized post-revolutionary powers (through the Constitution, the parliamentary system, and the rule of law). But at the beginning of the century the nation was more a utopian concept than a reality. France already existed as a state, which meant that the choral societies did not have to build an ‘imaginary’ nation,¹ but to cope with a real one. In a sense, the orphéons’ mission was precisely what the French Revolution had in view: to make a nation by creating unity among different people. The orphéons were a concrete way of learning democracy by incarnating and practicing it.

After the nation, education was perhaps the second most important principle of the Revolution. In Georges Danton’s famous words, “After bread,

¹ See Benedict Anderson’s famous concept of nations as ‘imagined communities’ (1983).
education is the first need of the people." The revolutionary project was also a pedagogic project, not only involving the school system but leading to a real conversion from subject to citizen, from alienation to reason and freedom. Education is another word for Regeneration. The orphéonic movement was strongly committed to this progressive concept of education. The idea of the orphéons emerged from the Society for Elementary Instruction, a small circle of philanthropists.

The French Revolution had to deal with an absolute king and a state religion. In the beginning, deputies tried to favor religious freedom, but to preserve the Catholic church. They integrated it into the new state, with priests becoming civil servants if they agreed to sign the Constitution civile du clergé. But the king never accepted these dispositions, nor did many priests, whose resistance was one of the causes of the division of the nation, leading to civil war. In nineteenth-century France, religious questions were still very political. Restoration was also a religious reaction. Religion was always involved in decisions about schools, morality, or power. The claims of secularism were a result of the Revolution. Nineteenth-century republicans called themselves sons of Voltaire; they might be Catholics in private, but they refused a ruling Catholic church. Even in the field of leisure and art, in France religious structures did not offer an open and welcoming frame. On the contrary: where religion divided, singing would unite.

Before being real institutions, the orphéons were the utopia of the singing nation. The choral movement carried big hopes at the beginning; it appeared as a mean of bringing art to the people, making artists from everyone. The ideal of music as a noble, moralizing, 'social' art, was kept alive by the social movement of the mid-century.

In the first decades, Saint-Simonians were eager to make the arts more accessible to the masses, but rejected the utilitarian view that the arts should be an after-hours distraction for the workers, a placid after-dinner diversion. “Instead, they directed music to enter as active participant into the struggle for social reform. They demanded that music sing forth the ideals towards which society should be striving and that it draw people's attention to what one of them called society's 'hideous sores' (such as prostitution and social parasitism).”

Saint-Simonians were numerous among the first orphéonists, and some, like Félicien David, wrote choral music. By the same token, some Polytechnicians were involved, which was not surprising given their contribution to the liberal movement in general. From 1836, former schoolmates created an association

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2 Locke (1986), 230.