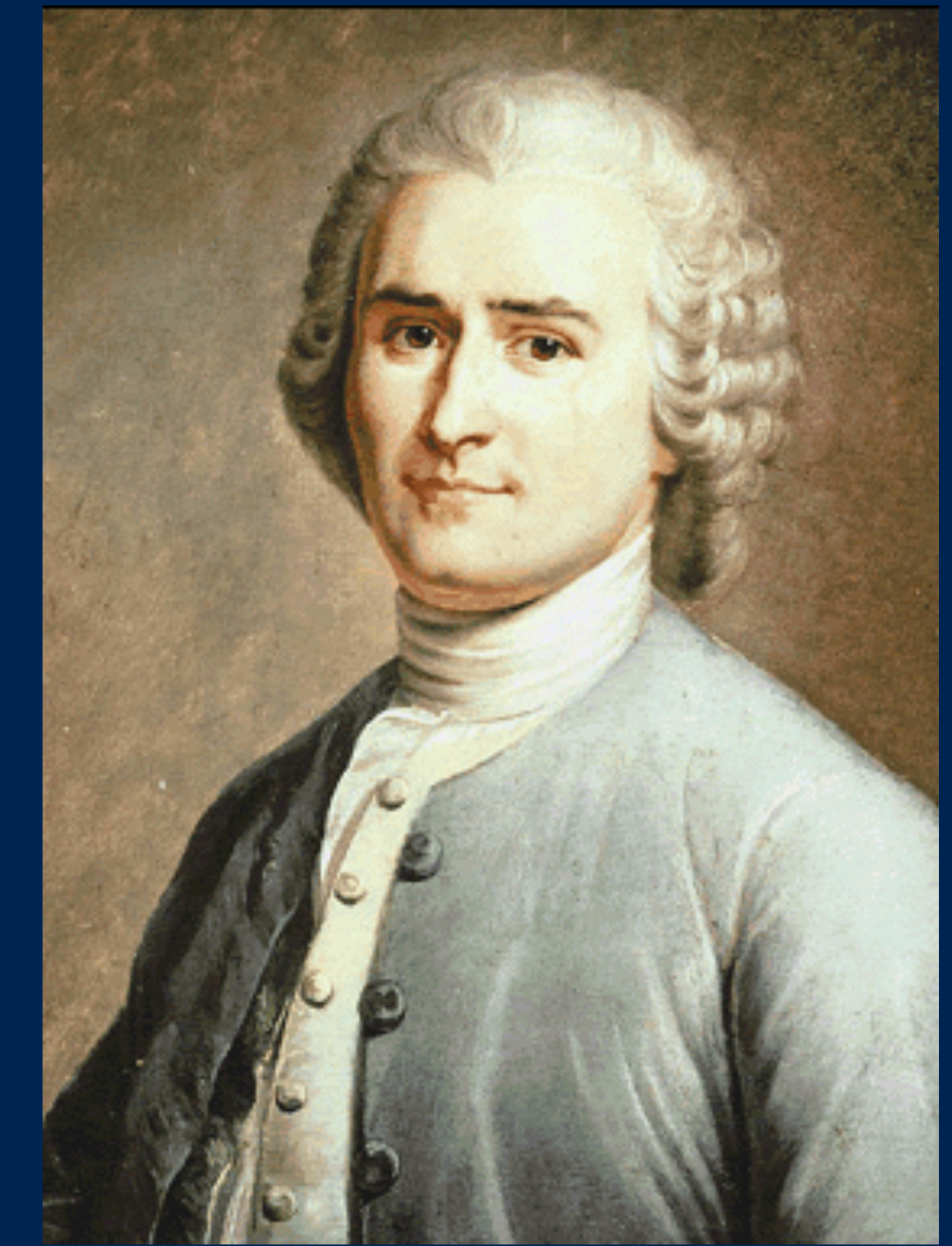




Melody as Rousseau's Triumph in "La Querelle des Bouffons"

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Introduction

Published in 1753, the *Lettre sur la musique française* by 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau marked one of the culminating points of the little-known, but fantastically important *Querelle des Bouffons*: a "philosophical war" that took place in Paris between 1752 to 1754 between leading French philosophes of the day, such as Jean-Philippe Rameau, Denis Diderot, Jean d'Alembert, and Rousseau himself.

In 1752, at the *Académie Royale de Musique* in Paris, a performance was given of *La Serva Padrona*: a comic opera written by the Italian composer Pergolesi, and was performed by an Italian comic troupe, known as the *Buffoni* (after whom the future quarrel would be named). Though *la Querelle* had many factors that contributed to its eventual realization, nevertheless it was the performance of *La Serva Padrona* that truly ignited the passionate tone of the heated debate, in which the philosophes sought to prove the superiority of either the French tragic opera style, or the Italian comic opera tradition.

In this war, Rousseau fervently defended the Italian music philosophy against the traditional French genre, which is best exemplified through one of his most influential works on music: the *Lettre sur la musique française*. Thus, the key questions of this project include not only why Rousseau decided to side with Italian music in the *Querelle*, but also what were the greater philosophical implications of this war, and what did these implications mean to the society in which Rousseau was writing.



Methodology

Research consisted of the following:

- Contextualization through research and an analysis of secondary sources, with an annotated bibliography as the final product
- Supervised reading and interpretation of the *Lettre sur la musique française* with Professor Rioux-Beaulne
- Preparation of an abstract that illuminates and connects the key themes found in the main text, in order to present the philosophical significance of Rousseau's work and participation in *La Querelle des Bouffons*



For Rousseau, the superiority of Italian music over the French style resides in its ability to speak simply and authentically to the human heart through its preference for the dominance of melody over harmony, and in doing so, is able to profoundly morally affect individuals. This dominance of melody is best characterized by what Rousseau calls the *unité de mélodie*, in which all of the different parts of a piece of music serve to emphasize the central subject in order to emotionally inspire the soul. For Rousseau, this is what is gravely lacking in the French music of his time, represented by the overly-harmonic, emotionally-inauthentic compositions of the *Tragédie Lyrique* genre. Though Rousseau will be met with objection by one of his great rivals in *La Querelle*, music theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau, nevertheless, Rousseau continues to passionately defend Italian music throughout the debate. As such, in his view,

The perfection of the Italian melody can be attributed to:

- The softness of its language: which allows the musician to have flexibility in musical self-expression, to be able to variate different melodic combinations.
- The boldness of its modulations: by being less "formally prepared", the modulations add a "lively energy" to expression.
- The extreme precision of its measure: which is felt in all movements of music, regardless of their tempo. A precision that makes singing more animated and interesting, and which brings all possible emotion and feeling to the heart.

By contrast, French melody:

- Does not allow for an authentic expression of emotion: by being preoccupied with analytical precision and artificial complexities, it does not follow the natural movement of emotion, therefore becoming an arbitrary, meaningless *musique savante*.
- Is boring: based off the French language, which has little flexibility. This lack of flexibility is apparent in the "lamentable tone" that "reigns perpetually" in French opera, making all French monologues follow an awfully slow tempo that incites no emotional response whatsoever in the listener.
- Reflects the degeneration of society: Rousseau sees the "perfection" brought on by modernity as an actual decline. As society becomes more and more "perfect" through all of its progress in the development of the arts and sciences, it moves further away from the emotional authenticity that resided in mankind before the creation of society. French music of the 18th century has come to illustrate this very decline: since French music has become overly-sophisticated in its harmonic, overly-rational abstractions (the ones which modern society prizes), instead of trying to convey authentic, emotional expression, the *Tragédie Lyrique* has therefore become one of the symbols of the fake perfection brought on by modernity.

Conclusion

Through a study of Rousseau's key works on music, it becomes clear that Rousseau's advocacy for Italian music, which prizes melody, the closest instrumental representation of the human voice and human passions, self-expression and freedom, is symbolic of a greater political revolt: a revolt against the constraints of the Ancien Régime. For Rousseau, though modern French society, in its inevitable progress of reason over emotion, has reached an important point of moral corruption, nevertheless individuals are still capable of connecting to the inner, authentic moral core of who they are, and in doing so, are capable of revolting against the constraints of society. In this way, by defending the melodious Italian genre, which prizes melody in its potential for self-expression, over the confining French musical tradition, Rousseau is advocating for one of the few remaining "moral languages" that stands against the historical degeneration brought upon by the Ancien Régime.



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