

Paul-André Dubois, *Musique et dévotion dans la mission jésuite du Canada. Sources, histoire et répertoire du petit motet et du cantique spirituel savant chez les Abénaquis de la Nouvelle-France*, Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2023, 503 pp., ISBN 9782763746746. Price \$79.

Paul-André Dubois is professor of history of New France at Université Laval. He is also a professional musicologist and a musician. In his master and doctoral dissertations (1996, 2004), as well as in his first book, *De l'oreille au coeur* (1997), he investigated the little practised field of music as an element of contact between the indigenous peoples and the European inhabitants of early North America. In his latest, magisterial *Lire et écrire chez les Amérindiens de Nouvelle-France* (2020), he focused on the more general issue of cultural contact, mainly with regard to the northern Maritime regions. There he emphasized the parallel developments of the two societies and their increasing integration, which did not preclude, for the indigenous peoples, any sudden loss of their own identity. In *Musique et dévotion dans la mission jésuite du Canada* (2024), Dubois returns to the more specific field of music. His new book is at the same time a musicologist's examination of religious singing at the Saint-François mission, and a social historian's depiction of everyday life in a community for which church gatherings and participation in common singing represented key moments in one's personal and social life. *Musique et dévotion* is a remarkable piece of historical scholarship that, by focusing on a specific field of investigation, is not only a major contribution to historical knowledge, but it also enhances our historiographical awareness of themes that all too often have become prey to ideological commonplaces.

The book focuses on the Jesuit mission known at Saint-François de Sales (present-day Odanak, Québec), a village at the confluence of the Saint-François with the Saint Lawrence rivers. The village was home to some 400 Abenakis, the progeny of a migratory movement that had left their ancestral lands in Maine and the Maritime region of Canada and had eventually settled there in the early eighteenth century. The Saint-François Abenakis practised the Catholic religion, spoke French, and continued to do so after the British conquest of Canada. They acquired their notoriety in the English-speaking world through the American Kenneth L. Robert's *Northwest Passage* novel (1937), a fictional depiction of the punitive raid led by Major Robert Rogers (1731–95) that took place on October 4, 1759. The Saint-François community was served by a succession of Jesuit priests – the brothers Jacques Bigot (1651–1711) and Vincent Bigot (1649–1720) between 1700 and 1707, Joseph Aubery (1674–1756) from 1709 to 1756, and Claude-François Virot (1721–59) between 1756 and 1759.

Throughout the Americas, European music became almost immediately a significant element of cultural contact. The indigenous peoples loved the instruments that produced it and the melodies of religious singing. Natives sang with pleasure and did it well. Indeed, the Abenakis of Saint-François came to regard polyphonic singing, which was not part of their traditional way of chanting, as a major present that the Jesuits had brought to them. They may not have understood what they were singing or hearing, but they were enthralled by a music "*dont les couleurs, les effets et surtout la gravité, [leur] parlaient d'emblé*" (364). The objective of the musical act was not to make the Abenaki performer or listener to say "*je crois,*" but "*je sens*" (367), in a sort of emotional miracle repeated over and over on each and every festive celebration. For their part, Europeans' prejudices about the guttural harshness of indigenous languages were confronted by their almost celestial way of church singing, especially when performed by women. The French compared indigenous female voices to those of nuns' choirs, and judged them as sweet as the sounding of the Italian language.

Musique et dévotion examines the development of one particular kind of musical theme of the *petit motet* (literally "small anthem"), within the context of religious music as it was performed in the Abenaki mission of Saint-François from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. As Dubois explains, there is no overall satisfying definition of a *petit motet*, except that it was short, rarely over two-minutes long (hence *petit*), normally given in Latin, not necessarily polyphonic, with a text that emphasized religious devotion. During high mass, or another significant church gathering, the faithful joined in when the priest or the cantors intoned a *plain-chant* in Latin (i.e., a Gregorian-style song) or a profane or paraliturgical devotional song in vernacular, but listened in awe to the *petit motet* as it was performed by a well-instructed soloist or a choir normally consisting of two or three cantors (*chantres*). In most missions, Jesuit priests, who were not musicians and only saw liturgical music as an enticing sequel to their own preaching and the precepts of catechism, limited themselves to *plain-chant* and vernacular singing. What made the Saint-François experience different from any other was the regular performing of *petit motet*, the careful training and rehearsals of the Abenaki cantors, and the fact that the text of these *petits motets* were a direct translation from the original Latin into the local Abenaki language.

At the centre of the Dubois book is a 582-page manuscript compilation of musical scores of *petit motets* (23% of the whole) and liturgical songs (55% are *plain-chant* scores), roughly consisting of 440 elements, both in their Latin originals and their Abenaki translations. Aubery compiled it not later than the 1740s. Its final version is currently preserved by the Musée des Abénakis

in Odanak. Most likely, when he arrived at Saint-François in 1709, Aubery was confronted with bundles of musical scores, manuscript and printed, of unknown origin. These remounted to his Jesuit predecessors, probably even to the experience of Sébastien Râle (1652–1724) with the Eastern Abenakis, and certainly to the more recent experience of Vincent Bigot. Given his own passion for music, his acquired knowledge of the Abenaki language, the need to instruct his cantors, and the wish to provide his successors with a reference tool for the use of future generations of priests and faithful, Aubery compiled a manuscript that Dubois has patiently examined and organized into a thematic catalogue of 128 *petits motets* and devotional songs (369–409). The Dubois catalogue also includes the devotional songs copied by Virot, who was Aubery's successor at Saint-François. Around 1755, Virot diligently reproduced the Aubery manuscript (86% of it) and added some material collected on his own. His 500-page manuscript is preserved at the Archives de l'Archidiocèse de Québec.

The Aubery manuscript has been known for some time, but only a refined scholar such as Dubois, who combines the technical expertise of a musicologist with a profound knowledge of the reality of early contact, could fully exploit its potential. Let me emphasize three aspects of this book that I have found particularly innovative and original. The first is Dubois' attention to material culture. What did it mean exactly for a missionary to put "pen to paper" in the physical surroundings of an indigenous village, where writing paper was a treasure and proper lighting almost unavailable? As Dubois summarizes it all, the exercise of writing for posterity included physical elements such as "*cuir, carton, cordage, toile, colle, pinceaux, ciseaux, poinçon, règle et, bien sûr, une grande quantité de papier vierge qui allait former les cahiers*" (35).

A second aspect is the influence of chance on the destinies of both objects and persons. The stories of the Aubery and Virot manuscripts are exemplary in this regard. When in 1759 Major Rogers burned Saint-François with all the papers that the missionaries had patiently collected for years, it so happened that the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste de La Brosse (1724–82), Virot's successor, had detached one of them from the rest in order to better study it during a short trip to Yamaska. Thus the bulk of the written papers was lost, except what later became known as the Aubery manuscript that La Brosse had carried with him in his baggage. Later, the manuscript ended up in the hands of yet another missionary, the Sulpician François Ciquard (1754–1824), who eventually consigned it to the Québec bishop, Joseph-Octave Plessis (1763–1825), for the archdiocesan archives. The roundabout story of the Virot manuscript is almost as tortuous and lucky (via Detroit and Michilimackinac) as that of the Aubery

manuscript. In 1759, the Iroquois killed Viroit during the last phases of the Seven Year's War, but his manuscript survived his sudden death.

A third aspect that comes out of *Musique et dévotion* with remarkable freshness is the depiction of a day – any festive day – in the church of the Abenaki village of Saint-François where the faithful attended mass during one of the festive days of the year. The church was small, but so were most mission churches or chapels, given that men and boys were away for long periods of the year for hunting, fighting, or diplomacy, and there was no need for larger and costlier buildings. The priest celebrated in Latin (a language that the faithful did not understand), with the assistance of altar boys, properly dressed with liturgical vestments sent by French benefactors who had them specially made for the distant missions. Women, with their small children, congregated at the centre of the nave and participated in the common singing, giving the impression that liturgical singing was mostly a female activity. Somewhere between the altar and the main door, a cantor led the assembly's spontaneous choir. Gregorian hymns (in Latin) and profane songs were for all to sing; the singing of *petits motets* was limited to one or more cantors. According to Dubois, the role of specialized cantors increased with time and at times evolved into the function of *cultural brokers* between the two societies (316). At Saint-François this became the prerogative of the Gill family, a multilingual *métis* family that carried on such role and tradition until well into the nineteenth century. Liturgical singing, of course, was not improvised. Aubery regularly instructed his cantors, who enjoyed singing the *petits motets* in their own language and were facilitated by the shortness and relative simplicity of their melodies.

Because *Musique et dévotion* is centred on the documentary evidence provided by the Aubery and Viroit manuscripts, Dubois correctly asks himself whether these compilations derived from their authors' wish to put some order in a complicated and exotic world, or from a dream of universal salvation through the instrument of participatory music. Or whether they were a consequence of Aubery's and Viroit's passion for classical music, or quite simply an exercise in the Abenaki language. Yet another possibility was that these compilations were practical instruments meant to instruct the cantors or to lead the common singing at mass. But how to distinguish "*le vrai de l'illusoire?*" (346). On this point, Dubois's conclusion is that the Viroit manuscript was never actually used, whereas the Aubery manuscript was. However, only a small portion of the musical scores transcribed and translated by Aubery, including the *petits motets*, became part of his cantors' *répertoire* or was performed during church functions.

So much for the descriptive value of *Musique et dévotion*, which touches upon a topic that had only been examined by few musicologists, Élisabeth Gallat-Morin and Jean-Pierre Pinson in particular, but has been completely forgotten by ethnohistorians. As for historiography, Dubois' contribution can be summarized as follows. First of all, whatever music was performed in New France was entirely derivative from France, as was "*la pleine et totale adhésion des formes et des usages liturgiques du catholicisme tridentin*" (103), including the role of cantors and the physical positions of choirs in the church. The Aubery and Virot manuscripts reflect this dependence, although available sources do not show any explicit link to French musicians – conductor and composer André Campra (1660–1744), one of the best musicians of his times, being the only exception. This confirms a derivative trend that has already been observed in the fields of the visual arts, architecture, interior design, and fashion. Furthermore, in spite of the use of the Abenaki language in *petits motets*, church music does not show any trace of indigenous vocal aesthetics, nor do their Abenaki translations, though formally correct, reflect the vernacular language actually spoken in everyday life. In a certain way, the Abenaki language used in liturgical singing was as distant from the current Abenaki as, in Europe, liturgical Latin was distant from any local vernacular. In Dubois' view, this phenomenon of "*parallélisme linguistique*" (78) was common throughout New France and not peculiar to the Saint-François experience. Lastly, this liturgical Abenaki had nothing to do with any indigenous oral tradition, being the result of an intellectual project wholly devised by the Jesuit missionaries. This excludes any interpretation of the use of the Abenaki language in *petits motets* as a sign of cultural resistance on the part of the indigenous community, an interpretation that is favoured by some ethnohistorians who share a view of contact as irreconcilable antagonism.

Secondly, this case study reinforces the thesis that Dubois had already so clearly expressed in his previous book, *Lire et écrire*. In order to persist as a distinct group, indigenous societies adapted to and indeed used French techniques, institutions, and intellectual models, which included Christianity and its expressions in the form of "*être dévot, prier et chanter*" (4). Those who insist on a fundamental binary opposition between Europeans and indigenous peoples, Dubois argues, imply that the two parties had not modified themselves throughout the French regime and even later and had not undergone a blurring of their borders and identities in a universe that was instead characterized by "*frontières poreuses, où les pratiques et les significations s'entremêlent*" (4).

Supported as they are by a vast array of documentary evidence collected in archives in Canada, the United States, France, and Rome, placed onto the background of a solid and up-to-date familiarity with historiography,

including full explicatory footnotes, Dubois' treatment of his topic and overall conclusions are convincing. Such a superb book is also remarkably free of the petty errors or typos that usually creep into such a lengthy text. This writer has only noted an "*original*" that should have been an "original" (321 – a rather Québécois typo), and four imprecisions in the very same short paragraph, where one should read Pleasant Point, André-Jean-Marie Hamon, 1839 as the date of the first edition of the Hamon book, and bishop of Boston instead of Bordeaux (83–84). *Musique et dévotion* is a scholarly book, but the Presses of Université Laval must be praised for its wonderful production, almost coffee-table like, with hundreds of colour reproductions and high-quality illustrations, including the original musical scores, besides a good bibliography, and a full index. In short, both the author and the Presses of Université Laval should be congratulated for their wonderful achievement.

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