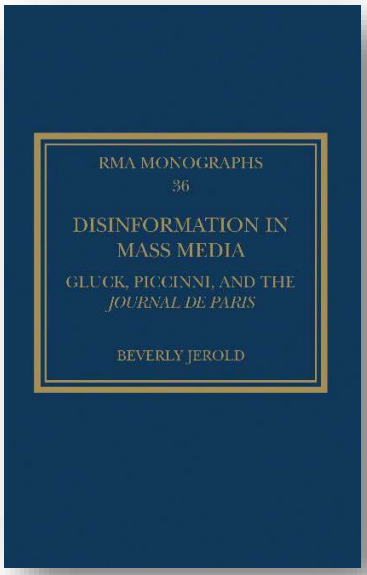
The Independent Scholar Vol. 8 (December 2021) ISSN 2381-2400



Disinformation in Mass Media: Gluck, Piccinni, and the Journal de Paris

Beverly Jerold

London & New York: Routledge, 2021.

Series: Royal Musical Association Monographs no. 36

ISBN 9780367350178
Hardback £45 / €53 / $63
144 Pages; 9 B/W Illustrations

https://www.routledge.com/Disinformation-in-Mass-Media-Gluck-Piccinni-and-the-Journal-de-Paris/Jerold/p/book/9780367350178

Review by Amanda J. Haste

From an early twenty-first-century standpoint, one cannot fail to be aware of the power of today's mass media not simply to report current events but to wield considerable influence through the way they present information, and indeed disinformation. But this is not a new phenomenon: in *Disinformation in Mass Media: Gluck, Piccinni, and the Journal de Paris*, Beverly Jerold relates the eighteenth-century quarrel (*querelle*) concerning the operas of the German composer Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) and the Italian composer Niccolò Piccinni (1728-1800) as "an early instance of using daily mass media to sow discord in society at large for political advantage" (1).

The author is herself an independent musicologist and a practising musician and, although one needs no musical knowledge to follow her gripping account of this political drama, the author's deep knowledge and understanding of the musical issues at stake shine through as she examines the quarrel from several aspects.

The reason this particular quarrel became front page news, as it were, was due to the founding of the *Journal de Paris*, which appeared daily and catered to a large audience in the city of Paris, France. The *Journal de Paris* (JP) was, unlike the political and literary journals which had hitherto only appeared sporadically, a commercial enterprise which "held enormous power to distort facts, ridicule individuals, and publish anything to further its own aims". This meant it "aimed low – and then lower" and was temporarily shut down by the censor after publishing "indiscreet material". However, when the JP resumed publication it "avoided the censor by exciting controversy through cleverly designed attacks on prominent individuals" in the world of opera, and specifically the music of the German-born composer Gluck and the Italian Piccinni (3).

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It must be remembered that at that time the opera was not an elitist entertainment: most literate people went to the opera, often to see or be seen, so the "insulting articles, letters, and epigrams" aroused considerable interest (4). Gluck already enjoyed a near-monopoly at the Paris Opéra, and efforts had been made to allow Piccini to compose for the Opéra and to have his works performed there, but the texts published (often anonymously) in the JP consistently supported Gluck's position and undermined that of Italian opera in general, and the music of Piccinni in particular, claiming the latter was only fit "for concerts and the Italian theater" (96).

As Jerold points out, this *querelle* only really escalated just after the JP came into existence, and the "texts and events reveal manipulation of public opinion on a grand scale" and "substantial financial rewards" for the paper and its supporters. (4).

Jerold begins by setting the scene by outlining the major figures and events which preceded the explosion of coverage in the JP. Throughout the book she also explains important aspects of Baroque opera production, such as the use of melody (the French *air* or the Italian *aria*) and *recitative*, the declamatory device used to move the narrative on using natural speech inflexions, with few notes and little rhythmic interest. French opera used far more *recitative* than melody, whereas Italian opera was more melody-oriented (15). It has to be said that Italian audiences rarely actually listened to the *recitative* passages, preferring to spend the time "gossiping, playing cards, and visiting other boxes" (116). While Italians favored beautiful melodies, for French opera-goers it was "volume and high-pitched emotion" which were the crowd-pullers. As W.A. Mozart wrote to his father from Paris in 1778, French singers "really should not be called such – for they do not sing, but scream – howl – that is, from the whole neck, from the nose and throat" (3).[1]

Although the *querelle* pitted the German Gluck against the Italian Piccinni, Gluck was much travelled, and had studied and worked in Italy, Austria and London as well as France. Gluck was a demanding musical director and succeeded in getting French singers to introduce more dramatic content rather than simply bellowing, and his operas are a unique blend of Italian and French traditions.

The JP maintained their campaign for over a year, often invoking a nationalistic agenda, and such controversy was clearly very good for business; there was a complete disregard for integrity and the quarrel "was incited with such cunning that few knew its origin" (119). Jerold concludes by raising some interesting questions about the motives of the individuals concerned, not least among them Gluck himself.

This is a fascinating account of the musical and political background of eighteenth-century Europe, with which the reader will find countless parallels in the present-day campaigns mounted against public figures. This book is a fascinating exploration of the machinations of a few designed to manipulate public opinion and create a furore, which will resonate with anyone who has read a newspaper or delved into social media. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose.* Academically rigorous, but written in an accessible style, I heartily recommend this book to musicians and non-musicians alike.

Dr. Amanda J. Haste (Ph.D. Musicology, Bristol University, UK) *teaches as adjunct faculty in the Music Department of Aix-Marseille University, France and has published widely on identity construction through music and language. She co-authored (with Prof. James Block, DePaul University)* Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization *(Paris: Ex Modio, 2015) and is currently completing a monograph on music as a vector for identity construction in twenty-first-century monastic communities.*

[1] *Mozart Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*, ed. W.A. Bauer and O.E. Deutsch, 7 vols. (Kassel : Bärenreiter, 1962-1975). Vol. 2, p. 397.