

# Theoria

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## CONCERNING THE INSPIRED REVELATION OF F.-J. FÉTIS

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The music-theoretic reputation of François-Joseph Fétis is secure. To be sure, his musical, historical, and philosophical discussions are marred at times by a penchant for pedantic bibliomania. And, given his impressively broad reading and scholarship, he seems at times curiously casual in citing the works of other thinkers. Bryan Simms has observed this trait even in a matter so fundamental as Fétis's implicit claim to have authored the term tonalité.<sup>1</sup> Still, there is no gainsaying the grandeur of Fétis's vision, and the historical importance of his having promulgated it vigorously and widely.

Among significant components of that vision, the following three theses can be brought into focus.

1. Tonalité is an Anschaung whereby human cultures perceive, articulate, and organize their various relationships among tones, whether the tones be successive or simultaneous.
2. "Nature" does not provide us with the ratios of small, whole numbers, to be validated by philosophy, mathematics, or physics, as a basis for one and only one "true" tonalité. Rather, "Nature" provides humankind with only a raw continuum of pitches (timbres, durations, intensities, etc.)
3. From this musical State of Nature, different human cultures, with different Anschaungen, perforce perceive, articulate, and organize tonal relationships in different systems, projecting a wide variety of tonalités both geographically and historically.

The three theses are manifest in the following passage from the preface to the third edition of the Traité de l'harmonie, where Fétis is explaining, in

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Simms, "Choron, Fétis, and the Theory of Tonality," JMT 19 (1975): 112-38.

1849, how he came to write the work.

. . . new reflections [on counterpoint and fugue] . . . made me discover new and innumerable applications for the law of tonalité, applications which demonstrated to me, with new and greater force, the absolute identity of the principles that govern the melodic succession of tones, and those that are the basis of harmony. Thus I had no further doubt; I was sure that one single law governed the relationships of tones, in successive order as in simultaneous aggregates.

But what is the law of tonalité itself, and whence does it come? If I were to abide by the unanimous opinion of music theorists and historians on this issue, Nature had fixed the order of tones in the scale, and we find the elements of that order in the multiple resonances of certain bodies, in the methodical division of a stretched string, and even in certain numerical progressions . . . But what's this? Haven't we the proof that tonalité has not been the same at all places and in all times? Don't we know that even today it is not the same among all peoples . . . ? . . . We must therefore acknowledge that the mysterious law which governs the affinities of sounds has a different origin. Now I could find that origin only in human organization . . .<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> \* . . . nouvelles réflexions . . . me firent découvrir de nouvelles et innombrables applications de la loi de tonalité, qui me démontrèrent, avec une force nouvelle et plus grande, l'identité absolue des principes qui règlent la succession mélodique des sons, et de ceux qui sont les bases de l'harmonie. Ainsi donc, il n'y avait plus de doute pour moi, et j'avais la certitude qu'une seule loi régit les rapports des sons, dans l'ordre successif comme dans les aggregations simultanées.

"Mais quelle est la loi de la tonalité elle-même, et d'où procède-t-elle? Si je m'en rapportais à l'opinion unanime des théoriciens et des historiens de la musique, la nature a fixé l'ordre des sons de la gamme, et nous en trouvons les éléments dans les résonnances multiples de certains corps, dans la division méthodique d'une corde tendue, et même dans certaines progressions numériques. . . . Mais quoi! n'avons-nous pas la preuve que la tonalité n'a pas été la même partout

The three theses are manifest again in a passage that comes shortly after. Fétis italicizes the passage throughout, as it presents the distilled essence of his theory.

Nature furnishes as the elements of music only a multitude of sounds that differ in intonation, duration, and intensity, by greater or lesser nuances.

Among these sounds, those whose distinctions are sufficiently perceptible to affect the organ of hearing in a determinate manner become the object of our attention; the idea of relationships among them arises in the intellect, and under the influence of sensibility on the one hand and will on the other, the mind entwines them into differing series, each one of which corresponds to a characteristic order of emotions, feelings, and ideas.

These series then become types of tonalités and types of rhythmic structure that entail necessary consequences, under the influence of which the imagination enters into play, to create the Beautiful.<sup>3</sup>

et dans tous les temps? Ne savons-nous pas qu'aujourd'hui même elle n'est pas identique chez tous les peuples . . . ? . . . Il faut donc reconnaître que la loi mystérieuse qui règle les affinités des sons a une autre origine; or je ne pouvais la trouver que dans l'organisation humaine . . . " François-Joseph Fétis, Traité complet de la théorie et de la pratique de l'harmonie, 12th ed. (Paris: Braudus et Cie, 1879), x-xi. The preface to the third edition was written in 1849.

<sup>3</sup> "La nature ne fournit pour éléments de la musique qu'une multitude de sons qui diffèrent entre eux d'intonation, de durée et d'intensité, par des nuances ou plus grandes ou plus petites.

"Parmi ces sons, ceux dont les différences sont assez sensibles pour affecter l'organe de l'ouïe d'une manière déterminée, deviennent l'objet de notre attention; l'idée des rapports qui existent entre eux s'éveille dans l'intelligence, et sous l'action de la sensibilité d'une part, et de la volonté de l'autre, l'esprit les cordonne en séries différentes, dont chacune correspond à un ordre particulier d'émotions, de sentiments et d'idées.

"Ces séries deviennent donc des types de tonalités

Numerous philosophical writings are precedents for the stance Fétis assumes here. His indebtedness to Kant, for example, will be obvious to the reader who is familiar with that philosopher's discussion of space.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Fétis's debt to Hegel is quite as clear.<sup>5</sup> The "influence of . . . will," in the passage quoted above, might suggest an acquaintance with the ideas of Schopenhauer, who was Fétis's contemporary. I do not know to what degree that suggestion is valid. If one takes into account a social context, rather than an individual psychological context, for the creation of tonalités, the "influence of . . . will" suggests more strongly the cultural General Will of Rousseau.

In fact, Rousseau would seem a perfect patron saint for Fétis. Just as Rousseau had wished to liberate political and social thought--indeed civilization itself--from the bonds of a stultifying rationalist/empiricist system, so Fétis wished to liberate music theory from analogous bonds. And had not Rousseau himself, as musician and critic, pointed the way of opposition to Rameau, the arch soi-disant musical geometer and acoustician? Further, was not the picture Rousseau had painted, of an unarticulated State of Nature twined into this or that social system through conventions established by the General Will, a prototype for the picture Fétis displays in the last-quoted passage above? Rousseau, to render his picture vivid, perpetually bu-

et de rythmes qui ont des conséquences nécessaires, sous l'influence desquelles l'imagination entre en exercice pour la création du beau." Ibid., xi-xii.

<sup>4</sup> For example: "Space does not represent any property of objects as things in themselves, nor does it represent them in their relations to each other . . . Space is nothing else than the form of all phenomena of the external sense, that is, the subjective condition of the sensibility, under which alone external intuition is possible. . . . It is therefore from the human point of view only that we can speak of space . . . The constant form of this receptivity, which we call sensibility, is a necessary condition of all relations in which objects can be intuited as existing without us, and when abstraction of these objects is made, is a pure intuition, to which we give the name of space." Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. J. M. D. Meikeljohn (New York: Wiley Book Company, n.d.), 68-69. Fétis does not himself use the word Anschauung.

<sup>5</sup> One notes it (elsewhere) in connection with certain ideas about cultures, "races," and history.

tresses the arguments of The Social Contract by references to cultures of other times and other places; the trait is shared by Fétis, though not so much in the treatise on harmony as in his other works, where one might even say that he runs this habit into the ground. Finally, the Romantic exuberances of the French philosopher surely provided a more modish cultural model for Fétis, self-proclaimed representative of his culture, than did the painstaking reflections of the German Idealists--no matter to what extent the latter model better suited the private temperament of the musical scholar.

It is perhaps in the last-mentioned connection that we can best understand a remarkable passage where Fétis appears to unbosom his innermost self quite in the manner of Rousseau. The passage follows directly upon the first of the above quotations, and straddles the second one.

Now I could find that origin [for the law of tonalité] only in human organization, but the mode in which that organization acted, determining this or that tonal arrangement . . . , presented itself to my mind in only a confused manner. My uncertainties made me continue to refrain from publishing my theory of harmony, for I understood that it would remain incomplete until my doubts had been dispelled.

The moment finally came when I could enter into possession of a doctrine . . . that alone could furnish the complete solution to all the problems. Here are the circumstances under which the doctrine was revealed to me:

On a lovely day in the month of May, 1831, I was going from Passy to Paris and, following my custom, I was walking down a lonely path in the Bois de Boulogne, dreaming of that theory of music . . . of which I wanted to make a Science worthy of the name. All at once the truth presents itself to my spirit [Fétis changes to the narrative present tense]; questions pose themselves with precision, the shadows disperse; false doctrines fall about me bit by bit; and all that is the result of the following propositions, which are my point of departure:

Nature furnishes . . . [etc. as above]

All this struck me all at once, like a flash of lightning, and emotion obliged me to sit down at the foot of a tree. There I passed six hours

absorbed in meditation; but those hours were for me a complete lifetime, during which the historical tableau of all conceptions of the art, of all tonal forms, from antiquity to our own time, unrolled before my eyes. I grasped the principles of all this, the reasons for the transformations, and so I even penetrated the future of music . . . Finally, by examining the causes that determine the attraction of tones in harmony, I discovered the origin of the errors that have rendered false to this very day the mathematical theory of music . . .<sup>6</sup>

\* " . . . ; or je ne pouvais la trouver que dans l'organisation humaine, mais la mode d'action de celle-ci, qui détermine telle ou telle constitution tonale . . . , ne se présentait à mon esprit que d'une manière confuse. Mes incertitudes me faisaient toujours reculer la publication de ma théorie de l'harmonie; car je comprenais qu'elle resterait incomplète jusqu'à ce que mes doutes fussent dissipés.

"Le moment vint enfin où je pus entrer en possession d'une doctrine . . . qui seule pouvait fournir la solution complète de tous les problèmes. Voici dans quelles circonstances elle me fut révélée:

"Par un beau jour du mois de mai 1831, j'allais de Passy à Paris, et, suivant mon habitude, je marchais dans un chemin solitaire du bois de Boulogne, rêvant à cette théorie de la musique . . . dont je voulais faire une science digne de ce nom. Tout à coup la vérité se présente à mon esprit; les questions se posent nettement, les ténèbres se dissipent; les fausses doctrines tombent pièce à pièce autour de moi; et tout cela est le résultat des propositions suivantes, qui sont mon point de départ:

"La nature ne fournit . . . [etc.]

"Tout cela m'avait frappé à la fois comme un éclair, et l'émotion m'avait obligé de m'asseoir au pied d'un arbre. J'y passai six heures absorbé dans la méditation; mais ces heures furent pour moi une vie tout entière, pendant laquelle le tableau historique de toutes les conceptions de l'art, de toutes les formes tonales, depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours, se déploya sous mes yeux. J'en saisis les principes, les causes de transformations, et j'arrivai ainsi jusqu'à l'avenir de la musique . . . Enfin, l'examen des causes déterminantes de l'attraction des sons dans l'harmonie me fit découvrir l'origine des erreurs qui ont faussé jusqu'à ce jour la théorie mathématique de la musique . . ."

Verging on the maudlin, the narrative yet has an indubitable charm: For once, it seems, the sober scholar unbuttons his vest and speaks to us from the heart, establishing his credentials as a true French Romantic. The state of confusion, the lonely walk along the path, the never-to-be-forgotten Moment of Enlightenment, the sudden dazzling flash of the lightning, the falling away of false doctrine, the manic reception of the Truth, compressing a lifetime's worth of thought, the source for a complete lifework of theories and treatises--is not all this quite *comme il faut*? And that marvelous bit about the tree! Surely Rousseau himself could not have managed the scene any better.

And in fact he did not. Here is how Rousseau, writing in 1762, tells the story:

After having passed 40 years of my life thus discontented with myself and with others, I was searching in vain to break the bonds that held me attached to that society which I esteemed so little . . . All at once a happy chance came, to make clear to me what I had to do for myself. . . I wish . . . to paint that moment, so singularly epoch-making in my life, which will always be present to me, even if I live forever.

I was going to see Diderot . . . in Vincennes; I had in my pocket a copy of the Mercure de France, whose pages I began to flip through as I walked along the path. I fall upon [Rousseau changes back and forth to and from the narrative present tense] the question posed by the Academy of Dijon, that question which was the occasion for my first piece of writing.<sup>7</sup> If ever anything resembled sudden inspiration, it is the movement which arose within me at that reading; all at once I feel my mind dazzled by a thousand lights; throngs of lively ideas presented themselves all at once with a force and a confusion that hurled me into an inexpressible turmoil . . . A violent palpitation oppresses me, makes my bosom heave; no longer able to breathe as I walk, I let myself tumble beneath one of the trees along the avenue, and I pass there a half-hour in such agitation that, upon arising, I found the entire front of my vest wet with tears I had not felt myself let-

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Fétis, Traité, xi-xii.

<sup>7</sup> These references will be clarified at the end of note 8.



ting fall. Oh . . . if I had ever been able to write even a quarter of what I saw and sensed beneath that tree, with what clarity would I have made people see all the contradictions of the social system, with what force would I have exposed all the abuses of our institutions, with what simplicity would I have demonstrated that Man is naturally good and that it is only through these institutions that men become wicked. Everything I was able to remember, of those throngs of great truths that illuminated me in a quarter of an hour beneath that tree, has been scattered all too feebly in my three principal writings . . .

After having discovered . . . in the false opinions of men the source of their miseries . . . I sensed that it was naught but the same opinions which had rendered me unhappy myself . . .<sup>\*</sup>

\* "Après avoir passé 40 ans de ma vie ainsi mécontent de moi même et des autres je cherchois inutilement à rompre les liens qui me tenoient attaché à cette société que j'estimois si peu . . . Tout à coup un heureux hasard vint m'éclairer sur ce que j'avois à faire pour moi même . . . Je voudrois . . . peindre ce moment qui a fait dans ma vie une si singulière époque et qui me sera toujours présent quand je vivrois éternellement.

"J'allois voir Diderot . . . à Vincennes; j'avois dans ma poche un Mercur de France que je mis à feuilleter le long du chemin. Je tombe sur la question de l'Académie de Dijon qui a donné lieu à mon premier écrit. Si jamais quelque chose a ressemblé à une inspiration subite, c'est le mouvement qui se fit en moi à cette lecture; tout à coup je me sens l'esprit ébloüi de mille lumières; des foules d'idées vives s'y présenterent à la fois avec une force et une confusion qui me jetta dans un trouble inexprimable . . . Une violente palpitation m'opprime, soulève ma poitrine; ne pouvant plus respirer en marchant, je me laisse tomber sous un des arbres de l'avenue, et j'y passe une demie heure dans une telle agitation qu'en me relevant j'aperçus tout le devant de ma veste mouillé de mes larmes sans avoir senti que j'en repandois. Oh . . . si j'avois jamais pu écrire le quart de ce que j'ai vu et senti sous cet arbre, avec quelle clarté j'aurois fait voir toutes les contradictions du système social, avec quelle force j'aurois exposé tous les abus de nos institutions, avec quelle simplicité j'aurois démontré que l'homme est bon naturellement et que c'est par ces

Fétis even has the advantage over Rousseau: The musician managed to remember and publish everything he had seen in his vision quite fully and accurately, while the philosopher is reduced to despair over his imperfect memory. But then Fétis had all of six hours under his tree, while poor Rousseau had to make do with only half an hour--or was it a quarter of an hour?

institutions seules que les hommes deviennent méchants. Tout ce que j'ai pu retenir de ces foules de grandes vérités qui dans un quart d'heure m'illuminèrent sous cet arbre, a été bien foiblement epars dans les trois principaux de mes ecrits . . .

"Après avoir decouvert . . . dans les fausses opinions des hommes la source de leurs miseres . . . je sentis qu'il n'y avoit que ces memes opinions qui m'eussent rendu malheureux moi meme . . ." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, letter to M. de Malesherbes, January 12, 1762. The letter is transcribed, preserving Rousseau's own orthography, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 1:1135-36.

The Academy of Dijon offered a prize for an essay on the question: "Has the progress of the arts and sciences tended to the purification or to the corruption of morality?" Rousseau's answer, the Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences, constituted a violent diatribe against civilization. Composed in 1749 and published in 1750, it won its author the prize and instant notoriety as well. These facts are sketched by G. D. H. Cole in the introduction to his translation of Rousseau's The Social Contract and Discourses (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1950), xi-xii.

Rousseau did not turn 40 until 1752, but it is clear from the rest of his letter that the incident he describes occurred in 1749, triggering the composition of the prize essay, for Rousseau lists that essay in the letter among his subsequent "principal writings," referring to it as "that first discourse."

Rousseau also mentions in the letter that Diderot was being held prisoner at Vincennes. Diderot was of course a paradigmatic symbol for "the progress of the arts and sciences," and Rousseau was no doubt overwhelmed by bitterly ironic sentiments as he contemplated "the purification or . . . the corruption of morality" both in Diderot and in the society which had imprisoned him, the society which Rousseau "esteemed so little," by which he felt himself imprisoned as well, "attached" by hitherto unbreakable "bonds."

Eight years before composing the preface to the third edition of the harmony book, Fétis had published his eight-volume Biography of Musicians, which contains an extensive article on Rousseau. Near the beginning of the article, Fétis states that he will confine his remarks to Rousseau's achievements as a musician, pointing out that

The life of this famous man has been written and set forth in biographical collections too frequently to require its presentation here. I believe I ought to refrain as well from discussing those of his writings that have no connection with the object of this dictionary.<sup>9</sup>

One can only admire the learned scholar's judicious foresight, considering the use he found for this material some eight years later. If he did not quite succeed in his attempt to establish his credentials as a follower of Rousseau, l'homme naturel, he did nonetheless create for himself a special place among the disciples of another great cultural avatar, the faux dévot Tartuffe.

Am I unfair to Fétis? Is not the scene of the path, the lightning flash, and the tree a cultural topos, a sort of public domain? Perhaps. Yet I feel that the case needs a spiritual prosecutor. Rousseau writes in 1762 in what has at least the external form of a personal communication; his scene manifests the rage for liberty, virtue, and justice on the part of a man who feels himself alienated from these categories by his society, a man who must accordingly seek their source in the Nature that provides us with lightning and ways through the trees. Fétis, who has read Rousseau, writes in 1849 in the preface to an already popular and influential publication; his scene manifests a social accomplishment, a way of reassuring his readers that he is as capable of fine sentiment as any of them, a way of reassuring them that the theory they are reading was produced, enfin, by a (then) socially approved type of "inspiration" rather than by hard work, let alone the

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<sup>9</sup> "La vie de cet homme célèbre a été trop souvent écrite et placée dans des recueils biographiques, pour qu'il soit nécessaire de la donner ici. Je crois devoir m'abstenir aussi de parler de ceux de ses écrits qui n'ont pas de rapport avec l'objet de ce dictionnaire." Fétis, Biographie universelle des musiciens (Brussels: Meline, Cans et Compagnie, 1841), 7:493.

study of Kant and other unheard-of creatures.<sup>10</sup> In short, Rousseau uses the topos to explore a profound alienation from his society; Fétis uses the topos to express a comfortable accommodation within his. In this connection Rousseau is telling the truth, whatever his inattentions to temporal consistency, while Fétis is false to his own virtues as a scholar, false to the spirit of Kant that informs his theoretical stance, and false to the spirit of the topos itself.

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<sup>10</sup> Curiously, Fétis's narrative seems to invoke Kant at the precise moment before his inspiration strikes. He describes himself as imagining a future "theory of music . . . of which I wanted to make a Science worthy of the name." In so writing, he appears to refer obliquely to Kant's treatise, the Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics that Will Be Able to Advance a Claim as Science (Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können). It is hard for me to imagine that the oblique reference is purely coincidental. I cannot decide to what extent Fétis may have intended it deliberately, nor to what extent he identified himself, consciously or unconsciously, with the German metaphysician, either in 1831, or in 1849, or as-he-saw-himself-in-1831, when he looked back from 1849. In any case, the effect of the reference, coming where it does in the story, is to highlight the "inadequacy" of the Kantian mode unaided, in solving Fétis's problem, compared to the "efficacy" of the Rousseauian inspiration--that is, to hear Fétis tell the tale.

Kant, incidentally, was himself much influenced by Rousseau, though more in moral philosophy than in metaphysics. Kant, indeed, "was . . . a great admirer of Rousseau and knew all his works very well. They could at times profoundly excite him. When the Emile first came into his hands he even for some time omitted to take his regular daily walks! . . . An engraving of Rousseau in his living room was the only picture in his house" (Stephan Körner, Kant [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982], 220-21). I do not know if Fétis had access to this biographical information, which was published in 1804, the year of Kant's death. Fétis's library did not include those publications, though it did include complete editions of both Kant and Rousseau, as well as many commentaries on each philosopher (Catalogue de la bibliothèque de F. J. Fétis, ed. Merzbach and Falk [Brussels: Librairie Européenne C. Muquart, 1877]).

And so Rousseau's scene makes a sacrament of his dissatisfied quest, while Fétis's scene is designed to render his findings socially acceptable, allowing him to enjoy his satisfaction in public. Arnold Schoenberg, writing in 1911, supplies the last word for me better than I could for myself:

One searches for the sake of searching. . . .  
Finding . . . can easily put an end to striving.

Our age seeks many things. What it has found, however, is above all: comfort. Comfort, with all its implications, intrudes even into the world of ideas and makes us far more content than we should ever be. . . . We solve problems to remove an unpleasantness. But, how do we solve them? And what presumption, even to think we have really solved them! . . . It is . . . easy to have a 'Weltanschauung', a 'philosophy', if one contemplates only what is pleasant and gives no heed to the rest. The rest--which is just what matters most. . . . These philosophies may very well seem made to order for those who hold to them. . . . The thinker, who keeps on searching, does the opposite. He shows that there are problems and that they are unsolved. . . . Those who so love comfort will never seek where there is not definitely something to find.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, Theory of Harmony, trans. Roy E. Carter (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1978), 1-2.