

The Educational Value of French Popular Music

When I was a student of French, I remember telling my friends, who were reading History or Geography, that French was not just a subject but more a way of life with food, wine, music, television, radio and newspapers all part of the mix. On one occasion, we agreed to go to the pub to study. My friends took files, paper, pens and textbooks. I took a novel by Zola which wasn't even on the syllabus. They remained sceptical as to whether this was studying but I knew I was right.

For twenty years when I was working in the Financial Services Industry, my only consistent connection with French was in listening to Chanson (notably Léo Ferré) and it was the quality of the texts, which are often poetic and intellectual, which distinguishes the form from that of the brief and repetitive texts of the 'yé-yé years' and beyond, which drew me to it. This tradition of poetic and anti-establishment texts has little equivalent in English speaking countries with the exception of a few singers such as Bob Dylan, Jake Thackery and, in terms of political commitment, Billy Bragg. This very limited activity enabled me to keep up with my language skills and facilitated my transition to Teacher (via a PGCE Course) and then to student, firstly through my MA in Translation and now as a PhD student researching (you've guessed it) Léo Ferré. I am specifically considering the way in which he assimilated the Modernist Tradition of French poetry into his own writing and it is worth noting that he set many poems by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Apollinaire and Aragon amongst others. Nonetheless, his work, which spans a period of more than 40 years, also gives many insights into the Social, Political and Economic development of France during the second half of the twentieth century.

An avowed anarchist 'from the heart' who followed no banner, he took up anti-establishment positions on many issues and this frequently led to trouble with the authorities. Two of his early songs: *Monsieur Tout-Blanc* which criticised the Pope's silence on the Holocaust during the Second World War, and *Mon Général* which was a visceral attack on General de Gaulle, were banned for long periods. Songs such as *Le Chien* and *Il n'y a plus rien*, represent the poet/prophet level of chanson which makes extensive use of colourful language – a literary tradition which goes all the way back to François Villon, Rabelais and Rimbaud, the latter being a particular hero of Ferré. These songs called for fundamental changes in society by means of insurrection, believing that 'we' will have it all.

Dans dix mille ans
(*Il n'y a plus rien*)

He was also deeply opposed to what Guy Debord described as *La Société du Spectacle*, and in many songs, made bitter criticism of the rise of consumerism and celebrity. An early song: *Vitrines* is a good example of the former and the various versions of *Les Temps difficiles* for the latter.

Ferré was not alone and many songs by Brel, Brassens and others could also be cited. Current singers such as Renaud continue to show the failings of modern society. Just two examples from his best known songs make a damning indictment of the way life is lived in France: *Hexagone* and *Mon HLM*. Following Aznavour's example, he also takes up the case of homosexuals (*Petit pédé*)...

Use of language in popular song has also been important and a study of lyrics enables a foreign student to acquire an awareness of argot and verlan.

Anglo-saxon rappers are famous for their bitter lyrics reflecting the culture of guns, drugs and casual sex but in France we see a much wider agenda. To cite one group alone (Sniper) we see complex and well-written songs about social exclusion (*Pourquoi*), the destruction of the environment (*Visions Chaotiques*), the devastation caused to family life by alcoholism and absent parents (*Sans (re)parents*), an extremely moving love song (*Elle*) and the story of a failed attempt by Africans to cross the sea to reach Eldorado. In their latest CD (May 2006) we also have their view of the problems experienced in the parisian banlieues towards the end of 2005. In *La France itinéraire d'une polémique* their political view is clearly expressed but they are not threatening the stability of the nation in their music but simply saying:

Ce texte n'était qu'un signal d'alarme [...]
An appel au secours

Chanson also reflects regional diversity, showing that the days when anything outside of Paris was 'le desert' are long gone. Zebda from Toulouse, I AM from Marseille both reflect their own communities and if you want to hear rap with begpipes, you can do no better than to listen to Manau from Brittany.

A great deal more could be written on this topic but I hope that this very rapid overview will convey some of my enthusiasm and encourage a greater understanding of a very important element in French culture.

Jim Hopwood : August 2006

Reply Slip

Doing Business With Japan

Cardiff, 29 September 2006

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