

The Aesthetic System of Delsarte and Wagner

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Introduction

On 17 September 1839, Richard Wagner arrived in Paris, an event which marked the beginning of an aesthetic education for the composer that many now believe laid the foundation of his artistic practices for the remainder of his career. In 1886, Nietzsche famously asserted that Paris was ‘the true soil for Wagner’, and that ‘French Romanticism and Richard Wagner belong most closely and intimately together.’¹ In 2004, Mary Ann Smart suggested that Wagner ‘may have absorbed some unacknowledged dramaturgical lessons during his miserable sojourn in Paris in the early 1840s.’² In 2013, Herman Gramppp recognised Paris as ‘the birthplace of an aesthetics that ultimately resulted in Wagner’s reconceptualization of opera’, and that same year, Roger Allen noted that by the time Wagner had left Paris for Dresden in May 1842, ‘the elements of the aesthetic program which were to nourish his later works were largely in place.’³ Thus, whilst scholars tend to agree that Wagner learned a great deal about aesthetics during his first sojourn in Paris between 1839 and 1842, what has not been known is exactly what he learned and from whom.

This Element explores the striking similarities between a number of Wagner’s writings, namely *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, *Oper und Drama*, and the essay ‘Über Schauspieler und Sänger’, and François Delsarte’s (1811–1871) ‘Cours d’esthétique appliquée’, a theoretical and practical training course for artists that Delsarte taught in Paris beginning in the spring of 1839 and ending with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in the summer of 1870. This Element also details the rise of Delsarte as a celebrated teacher of aesthetics and an interpreter of Gluck’s repertoire during the same years that Wagner lived in the city – at one point, within a twenty-minute walk from Delsarte’s studio.

In the 1840s, Delsarte rose to fame in the private salons of Paris as an interpreter of the repertoires of Gluck, Lully, and Rameau.⁴ In 1848, he was reportedly the first musician to simultaneously hold all three positions of voice

¹ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, ‘Nietzsche Contra Wagner: From the Files of a Psychologist’, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 263–82 (p. 273).

² Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 29.

³ Herman Gramppp, ‘Paris’, *The Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 380–83 (p. 381); Roger Allen, ‘Aesthetics’, *The Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6–10 (p. 7).

⁴ See Mark Everist, *Genealogies of Music and Memory: Gluck in the Nineteenth-Century Parisian Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 27–39. Shortly after Delsarte began lecturing in 1839, he gave a number of private concerts in order to prove to his detractors at the Conservatoire that his singing method, based on the *voix sombrée*, did not ruin voices, demonstrating that he had successfully rehabilitated his own voice using this very method. See François Delsarte, ‘Mémoire sur la voix sombrée (1852)’, *François Delsarte: Une anthologie*,

teacher, declamation teacher, and stage manager at the Académie Royale de Musique.⁵ During the height of his career in the 1850s, Delsarte's name became practically synonymous with the science of aesthetics, some of his students referring to him as 'The Great Delsarte', 'The Master of Masters', and 'The Newton of Aesthetics'.⁶ In 1855, Delsarte was awarded a gold medal at the Exposition Universelle for his invention of the 'Guide-accord', which, along with his 'Phonoptique', appears to have been one of the first mechanical devices to tune stringed instruments mathematically without the help of the ear.⁷ In the 1860s, Delsarte was decorated twice by the King of Hanover, George V, for his contribution to the arts and sciences,⁸ the king sending his best court singers to study with Delsarte in Paris.⁹ However, it was his 'Cours d'esthétique appliquée' that seems to have had the greatest cultural impact, with Delsarte teaching the course for over thirty years in the city. Saint-Saëns, who attended the course, recalls in his memoir that: 'Although this course was instructive, few attended, for Delsarte was almost unknown to the general public; his influence barely extended beyond a fairly restricted circle of admirers, but the quality of those few redeemed the quantity.'¹⁰ That apparently small circle of admirers is believed to have included philosopher Victor Cousin, artist and critic Théophile Gautier, writers Angélique Arnaud, Delphine de Girardin, and Henri Lasserre, poet and statesman

ed. Alain Porte, facsimile edition (Cœuvres-et-Valsery: Ressouvenances, 2012), 154–90 (pp. 178–79).

⁵ 'Macédoine: Nouvelles des théâtres', *Journal des beaux-arts* 7 (1848), 271.

⁶ See Philibert Audebrand, *Petits mémoires d'une stalle d'orchestre: acteurs, actrices, auteurs, journalistes* (Paris: Jules Lévy, 1885), 153; Audebrand, *La sérénade de Don Juan* (Paris: Société des gens de lettres, 1887), 91; Gaston Demangel, 'François del Sarte et l'analyse de l'âme', *Lyrica* 5/57 (1926), 861–62 (p. 861).

⁷ Apparently, the 'Phonoptique' applied to the tuning of stringed instruments in general, whilst the 'Guide-accord' applied to pianos only. See Louis Figuier, 'Revue Scientifique', *La Presse*, 4 December 1858. In 1859, Berlioz wrote an article backhandedly praising Delsarte's invention. See Hector Berlioz, 'Delsarte's Method for Tuning Stringed Instruments without the Aid of the Ear', in Joseph Delaumosne, Angélique Arnaud, François Delsarte, Marie Géraudy, Alfred Giraudet, Francis A. Durivage, and Hector Berlioz, *Delsarte System of Oratory*, 4th edn (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1893), 596–98.

⁸ Delsarte received the Order of Merit for Science and Art in 1861, and the 4th class Cross of the Knight of the Guelphic Order in 1865. See Franck Waille, 'Corps, arts et spiritualité chez François Delsarte, 1811–1871: Des interactions dynamiques' (PhD dissertation, Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3, 2009), 881 and 883.

⁹ Georg Fischer, *Musik in Hannover* (Hanover: Hahn'sche Buchhandlung, 1903), 195–96, 205, 208, and 215. Waille suggests a possible connection between Delsarte and tenor Albert Niemann, who was hired by King George V, and who sang the title role in *Tannhäuser* in Paris in 1861. Waille notes that Delsarte's correspondence with the king began around the time that Niemann returned from Paris to the court of Hanover. Waille, 'Corps, arts et spiritualité', 37 n205.

¹⁰ 'Ce cours si instructif avait peu d'auditeurs, car Delsarte était peu connu du grand public; son action ne s'étendait guères en dehors d'un cercle assez restreint admirateurs, rachetant son petit nombre par la qualité.' Camille Saint-Saëns, 'Notes et souvenirs, volume Bonnerot, manuscrits Saint-Saëns. Volume 2', Bibliothèque nationale de France, Dieppe, Bibliothèque Camille Saint-Saëns, FJB CSS MAN 2, 341.

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Alphonse de Lamartine, playwright Alexandre Dumas, and actors Émilie Madeleine Brohan, Benoît-Constant Coquelin, Steele MacKaye, and Madame Pasca. Amongst the clergy, Delsarte's pupils are believed to have included Père Hyacinthe, Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, Jacques-Marie-Louis Monsabré, and French-Canadian priest and academic Thomas-Étienne Hamel.¹¹ In the fine arts, Edgar Degas, Claude Ferdinand Gaillard, Victor Orsel, and Ary Scheffer are believed to have attended his course.¹² Finally, Delsarte is known to have taught some of the greatest singers in Europe, including Adolphe Alizard, Caroline Barbot, Marie Cabel, Marie Caroline Miolan-Carvalho, Joseph Darcier, Jean-Baptiste Faure, Marie Rôze,¹³ Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient (to whom I will return), Henriette Sontag,¹⁴ and Max Staegemann, to name a few. Thus, judging from the calibre of the artists Delsarte is believed to have taught, his influence on nineteenth-century music, oratory, and the plastic arts appears to have been immense.

Although Delsarte's achievements were forgotten in France soon after his death, the publication of a number of his manuscripts in English translation, as well as a handful of treatises written by his former students, sparked a widespread cultural movement in America now known as Delsartemania.¹⁵ Delsarte's name achieved an almost mythic status in fin de siècle America, one of his more enthusiastic disciples insisting that 'In the aesthetic art, study Phidias, Michelangelo, Raphael, Shakespeare, Blake; in the art of life, study Plato, Christ, Delsarte. . . . Delsarteism will be the name of the culminating civilization of man.'¹⁶ Today in American scholarship, the so-called Delsarte System of Expression is associated with the establishment of early actor training programmes in that country, popular elocution classes and deportment manuals, the women's clothing reform movement, and the aesthetic foundation of the American modern dance movement. Although Delsarte trained as an opera

¹¹ Delsarte is known to have taught a course in homiletics that was reserved for clergymen. See Angélique Arnaud, 'The Delsarte System', *Delsarte System of Oratory* (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1893), 340.

¹² 'François del Sarte', *L'Action française*, 13 April 1925.

¹³ Rôze seems to have had a close friendship with her teacher. Upon his death in 1871, Delsarte bequeathed to her 'Beethoven's pistol', which he had received in 1860 from Heinrich von Bock upon the death of his wife, Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient. Beethoven had apparently given the pistol to the singer after a performance of *Fidelio* in Venice in 1822. The pistol is currently housed at the Musée de l'Opéra. See Charles Bouvet, E. Droz, and J.-G. Prod'homme, 'Nouvelles Musicologiques. Documents', *Revue de Musicologie* 8/21 (1927), 40–47 (p. 43).

¹⁴ It is not known when Sontag studied with Delsarte, or for how long, but it is assumed she sought him out as a teacher around the time that she came out of retirement in 1849. See Franck Marie, 'Revue Musicale. Concerts. Salle Herz: Audition des Archives du chant, de François Delsarte', *La Patrie*, 18 June 1857; and Delsarte, 'Mémoire sur la voix sombre', 169.

¹⁵ The term was apparently coined by modern dancer Ted Shawn. See Waille, 'Corps, arts et spiritualité', 26.

¹⁶ David Lesser Lezinsky, 'Delsarteism', *California Illustrated Magazine*, 3/2 (1893), 279.

singer,¹⁷ his aesthetic system is rarely associated with music or opera today, despite Saint-Saëns' claim in his memoir that Delsarte 'played an important role in the musical evolution of the nineteenth century',¹⁸ and that some of the greatest composers of the century are believed to have attended his course, including Adolphe Adam, Georges Bizet (Delsarte's nephew), Charles Gounod, Henri Reber, Saint-Saëns, and, as I will show, Wagner.

Drawing on archival materials and historical documents, evidence has come to light in the form of autograph drawings which suggest that Wagner knew about Delsarte's aesthetic system, and that his early aesthetic treatises, namely *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* and *Oper und Drama*, written almost a decade after his first sojourn in Paris, appear to be influenced by Delsarte's teachings.¹⁹ The drawings in question appear in Wagner's manuscript of *Oper und Drama* and in a personal letter to his friend Theodor Uhlig, and are well known to scholars. However, what has not been known is their origin, that the drawings appear to be a partial rendering of a psychological system which Delsarte taught as part of his 'Cours d'esthétique appliquée.' That Wagner knew of this psychological system suggests that he attended Delsarte's course in Paris – most likely when he was living in the ninth arrondissement within a twenty-minute walk from Delsarte's studio.²⁰ That Wagner appears to have attended Delsarte's course provides a possible answer to what John Deathridge has called an 'almost chameleon-like transition from mediocrity to genius' during the composer's first sojourn in the city, 'which most commentators, including Wagner himself, have been at a loss to explain.'²¹ By examining Delsarte's rise to fame as both a teacher of aesthetics and a celebrated interpreter of Gluck's repertoire during the years that Wagner

¹⁷ Upon being dismissed early from the Conservatoire training programme by Cherubini, Delsarte performed roles at the Opéra Comique from 1830 to 1831, the Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique in 1831, and the Théâtre des Variétés in the spring of 1832, before retiring from the stage to become a professor of singing and declamation.

¹⁸ 'Delsarte mal éclairé sur bien des points, guidé plutôt par une intuition que par une véritable érudition, a joué cependant un rôle important dans l'évolution musicale du dix-neuvième siècle.' Saint-Saëns, 'Notes et souvenirs', ii: 347.

¹⁹ In 1927, English actress Rose Meller O'Neill claimed that not only did Wagner know about Delsarte's system, but that the school he planned to open at Bayreuth was to be based on his method of training. See Rose Meller O'Neill, *The Science and Art of Speech and Gesture: A Comprehensive Survey of the Laws of Gesture and Expression, Founded on the Art and Life Work of Delsarte, with His Exercises* (London: C. W. Daniel, 1927), 110.

²⁰ From 1837 to 1844, Delsarte's address is listed as 4 rue Montholon in the 9ème arrondissement. On 15 April 1840, Wagner moved to the Rue du Helder, also in the 9ème arrondissement – roughly a twenty-minute walk from Delsarte's studio. See Waille, 'Corps, arts et spiritualité', 868–71; and Wagner, *My Life*, trans. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 181.

²¹ John Deathridge, *Wagner's Rienzi: A Reappraisal Based on a Study of the Sketches and Drafts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), viii.

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was living in Paris, by comparing the similarities between Wagner's early aesthetic writings and Delsarte's aesthetic system, and by revealing traces of Delsarte's influence in Wagner's essay 'Über Schauspieler und Sänger', I will show that Delsarte's 'Cours d'esthétique appliquée' is the most likely source of Wagner's aesthetic transformation in Paris.

1 Delsarte's 'Cours d'esthétique appliquée'

On 18 May 1839, Delsarte opened his 'École de chant morale et scientifique', which later became known as his 'Cours d'esthétique appliquée', a purely theoretical training course for singers, composers, and musicians who received lessons in specialised anatomy, psychology, aesthetics, and ontology.²² Delsarte developed his course in response to what he saw as an ever-increasing materialist aesthetic in French Grand Opera, buttressed by what he also claimed was the radical absence of any didactic training in official education at the Paris Conservatoire.²³ This lack of proper vocal training, which had persisted in the school for decades and would for years to come, had dire consequences in 1837 when tenor Gilbert Duprez famously sang the high Cs in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* in full (mixed) voice.²⁴ Many young tenors became bent on imitating Duprez through the use of muscular effort, owing to the improper method of training they had received at the hands of their Conservatoire teachers. Delsarte, having witnessed the ruination of so many voices and careers over the following two years, and no longer willing to support the materialisation of an artform he believed was now doomed to decadence, converted his practical lessons into theoretical ones:

In order to protect my remaining pupils from the deleterious influence of a system which would successively ruin their voices, their intelligence, and their very lives, I introduced special anatomy as a compulsory subject. I taught aesthetics, psychology, and ontology, and with this, I proposed to raise at least some artists to the height of their mission, thus making them capable of one day restoring to the theatre sound notions of art.²⁵

²² Delsarte, 'École de chant morale et scientifique', Delsarte Papers Mss. 1301, box 11b, p. 1, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.

²³ Delsarte, 'Mémoire sur la voix sombrée', 178; and Delsarte, 'Esthétique appliquée. Des sources de l'Art', *L'Avenir Musical*, 3/8 (1867), 149–50 (p. 150).

²⁴ See Katharine Ellis, 'Vocal Training at the Paris Conservatoire and the Choir Schools of Alexandre-Etienne Choron: Debates, Rivalries, and Consequences', in Michael Fend and Michel Noiray (eds.), *Musical Education in Europe (1770–1914): Compositional, Institutional, and Political Challenges* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2005), 125–44.

²⁵ 'Pour mettre ce qui me restait d'élèves à l'abri de l'influence délétère d'un système qui devait ruiner successivement leur voix, leur intelligence et leur vie même, j'y introduisis comme étude obligatoire l'anatomie spéciale. J'y fis de l'esthétique, de la psychologie, de l'ontologie, enfin je me proposai par-là d'élever au moins quelques artistes à la hauteur de leur mission, et de les

The course came to be taught by Delsarte in two formats. The first, as mentioned, was a purely theoretical course consisting of ten lectures. The second was a combined theoretical and practical training course consisting of nine lectures followed by nine practical lessons: three for musicians and composers (*l'art du chant*), three for orators and preachers (*l'art oratoire*), and three for painters and sculptors (*l'art mimique*).²⁶

The reason Delsarte divided his practical lessons into music, oratory, and the plastic arts is because his aesthetic theory centred on the three corresponding languages of human expression – vocal inflection (*l'inflection/le vocal*), articulate speech (*la parole articulée*), and gesture (*le geste*) respectively.²⁷ Initially, these three languages were studied separately by students and then combined into a single, unified language. For Delsarte, every natural phenomenon, including human expression, has an underlying Trinitarian structure, which he believes to be a reflection of the Holy Trinity in the physical realm (Figure 1).²⁸ Thus, the three languages of vocal inflection, articulate speech, and gesture in Delsarte's system correspond to three human states of being – life (*la vie*), mind (*l'esprit*), and soul (*l'âme*); three kinds of bodily motion – eccentric (*excentrique*), concentric (*concentrique*), and balanced or normal (*normal*); as well as the three artforms of music, oratory, and the plastic arts. Because all of these languages, states, bodily actions, and artforms have their source in the Holy Trinity, they are not considered separate from each other in Delsarte's system, but as one – that is, one state of being, one language, one action, and one artform all consisting of the

rendre ainsi capables de restituer un jour au théâtre les saines notions de l'art.' Delsarte, 'Mémoire sur la voix sombrée', 178.

²⁶ Delsarte's early lessons on gesture appear to have been addressed more specifically towards painters and sculptors rather than performers. See Delsarte, *François Delsarte*, 94–95; Franck Waille, *La méthode somatique expressive de François Delsarte: Histoire, esthétique, anthropologie: de la neurophysiologie à la métaphysique* (Lavérune: L'Entretiens, 2016), 82–83.

²⁷ Throughout this Element, key aesthetic terms are presented in English first, followed by their original form in brackets. Because Delsarte's epistemology, rooted in Aristotelian Scholasticism, takes sensory experience as its starting point – unlike German Idealism, which originates in a priori mental constructs – his terms denote empirical phenomena, whose objective existence ensures their meaning remains broadly consistent across languages. Thus, in contrast to culturally constructed philosophical concepts, these terms do not rely on linguistic specificity that would necessitate retention in their original form. Given that I argue Wagner's system builds on Delsarte's, this reasoning extends to comparable terms in Wagner's theory. However, I use the French and German terms when directly comparing Delsarte's and Wagner's systems in order to keep the theories distinct from one another. For a discussion on the problems of the signification of Aristotelian terminology in a modern context, see André de Muralt, 'Comment dire l'être? Le problème de l'être et de ses significations chez Aristote', in Pierre Aubenque, Jacques Brunschwig, Vianney Décarie, André de Muralt, Augustin Mansion, and Joseph Moreau, *Études aristotéliennes: métaphysique et théologie* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1985), 153–206.

²⁸ See Nancy Lee and Chalfa Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 77–78.

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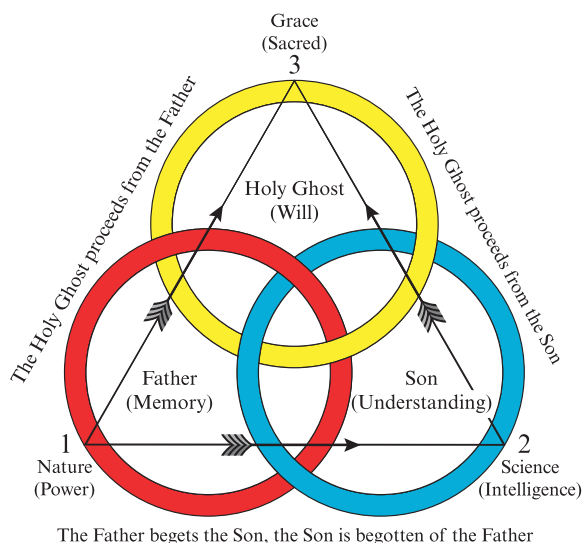


Figure 1 Delsarte's principle of the Holy Trinity. Delsarte takes as the first principle of his aesthetic system the Holy Trinity according to Roman Catholic doctrine. The doctrine of the processional relations, represented by the arrows in the chart, states that 'For in one Godhead there are three persons; the Father, who is begotten of none; the Son, who is begotten of the Father before all worlds; the Holy Ghost, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son likewise from all eternity.' For Delsarte, every phenomenon is a reflection of the Trinity in the physical realm; therefore, every natural phenomenon has an identical underlying Trinitarian structure. In the chart, the terms 'memory', 'understanding', and 'will' correspond to St Augustine's cognitive faculties of the tripartite human soul. The terms 'nature', 'science', and 'grace' correspond to the three worlds in which, Delsarte argues, human beings participate: the natural world, the intellectual world, and the supernatural world. See Catholic Church, *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. Theodore Alois Buckley (London: Routledge, 1852), 21; Augustine, *De Trinitate*, Book X; and Delsarte, 'Literary Remains', *Delsarte System of Oratory* (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1893), 381–529 (pp. 449–50).

same underlying Trinitarian structure (Figure 2). That Delsarte's teachings combined the arts of music, oratory, and the plastic arts into a single, unified system is, of course, evocative of Wagner's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Not only is the combination of music, oratory, and the plastic arts in Delsarte's system strikingly similar to the grouping of music, poetry, and dance-gesture as the three 'primal' or 'Hellenic' sisters in Wagner's *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*,²⁹ but the three languages in Delsarte's system directly correspond to the three languages

²⁹ 'drei urgeborenen Schwestern', and 'drei holdseligen hellenischen Schwestern.' Richard Wagner, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, in *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, 12 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1911), iii: 42–177 (pp. 67 and 71).