

On the Connection Between François Delsarte’s “Course in Applied Aesthetics” (1839-1870) and Richard Wagner’s Aesthetic Writings.¹

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Hello. Thank you for tuning in. My name is Bradley Hoover, I am a third-year DPhil student in Music at the University of Oxford. My presentation explores the connection between François Delsarte’s “Course in Applied Aesthetics” and Richard Wagner’s Aesthetic Writings.

My aim in the next 20 minutes is to demonstrate that a drawing produced by Wagner in 1850 is in fact based on a similar drawing created at least a decade earlier by François Delsarte, his so called “Chart of Man,” a mnemonic device Delsarte gave to students during his lectures in Paris. If true, this would mean that Wagner’s aesthetic writings are, at least in part, based on Delsarte’s “System of Applied Aesthetics.” In order to do this, I will present an overview of Delsarte’s System as depicted in his “Chart of Man,” and then compare Delsarte’s chart to Wagner’s so-called “Diagram of Man.” But first, I will begin with some background on Delsarte, who he was and why he created his course in 1839, and also show that it is possible Wagner could have attended the course during his first stay in Paris, sometime between 1839-1842.

Delsarte began his career in 1830 as a tenor at the Opera-Comique in Nicolas Dalayrac’s *Maison a vendre*,² after having been dismissed just three months earlier from the Conservatoire training program owing to the onset of vocal deterioration.³ However, two years later and without much success, Delsarte retired from the stage in order to devote himself to teaching. Throughout his career, Delsarte blamed the loss of his voice on the poor pedagogical methods employed at the Conservatoire. Through his own experiments and

¹ This document is a transcript of a presentation given at The American Musicological Society 86th Annual Meeting, which was held jointly with the Society for Music Theory. Owing to the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic earlier in the year, the conference was held online. This presentation was recorded in MP4 format on the 14th of October and posted online from the 31st of October to the 15th of November 2020. The Q&A session for this presentation was held online on the 14th of November and was recorded by The American Musicological Society. More extensive references and a complete bibliography have been added to the original AMS transcript for submission to the Oxford University Research Archive (ORA).

² A brief review of Delsarte’s debut performance was published in *Le Corsaire*, February 27, 1830, 4.

³ Unless otherwise stated, biographical information on Delsarte is taken from: François Delsarte, “Mémoire Sur La Voix Sombree (1852),” in *François Delsarte: une anthologie*, Ed. Alain Porte, édition fac-similé (Coeuvres-et-Valsery: Ressouvenances, 2012), 154–90.

observations, he developed a unique training method – one that united the Italian vocal technique to the French declamatory style – by which he was able to rehabilitate his own voice. Although Delsarte never returned to the stage, from 1840-1863 he was celebrated in the city’s salons and concert halls for his interpretation of the repertoires of Gluck, Lully, and Rameau. As a teacher, Delsarte’s more famous students included bass singer Adolphe Alizard, tenor Joseph Darcier, sopranos Caroline Miolan-Carvalho and Henriette Sontag, who sought Delsarte out as a teacher when she came out of retirement in 1849, and also Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, who became a student sometime in the 1840s when her voice began to fail, and with whom Delsarte became very close friends.⁴

In terms of the creation of his theoretical course, in 1837, Delsarte was witness not only to the moment when tenor Gilbert Duprez famously hit the high C in “chest voice” in Rossini’s opera *William Tell*, but also its destructive aftermath on young singers:

No matter how much I told my students that Duprez’s merit owed more to his style and technique than to the intensity of his voice, nothing could convince them. The *ut de poitrine* had turned their heads. They needed this *ut*, that is all. However, the technique which marked my pupils’ voices gave them the advantage over other imitators of Duprez; they were soon, to their great satisfaction and to my great despair, the most formidable bawlers in France.⁵

At first, Delsarte seems to have tolerated his students’ imitation of Duprez because it benefited both their careers and his own reputation. However, by 1839, Delsarte could no longer entertain what he saw as the decline of the operatic genre itself:

Not wanting to dabble any longer in this materialization of an art now doomed to decay, *I converted my practical lessons into purely theoretical ones*. [...] I introduced as compulsory the study of special anatomy. I taught aesthetics, psychology, and ontology, thereby proposing to raise at least some artists to the height of their mission.⁶

⁴ Apparently, Schröder-Devrient went to Paris to study with Manuel Garcia on the advice of Jenny Lind. However, being unhappy with Garcia, she sought Delsarte out instead, sometime “around 1845.” It was Delsarte who introduced Schröder-Devrient to his friend Baron Heinrich von Bock, whom she married in 1850. See Charles Bouvet, “Autres reliques Beethoveniennes,” *Comoedia*, April 4, 1927.

⁵ “J’eus beau dire à mes élèves que le mérite de Duprez tenait plus à son style et à l’ampleur de son émission qu’à l’intensité de sa voix, rien ne put les convaincre. L’*ut* de poitrine leur avait tourné la tête. Il leur fallait cet *ut*, voilà tout. Or, l’émission qui caractérisait mes élèves leur donnait l’avance sur les autres imitateurs de Duprez, ils furent bientôt, à leur grande satisfaction et à mon grand désespoir, les plus formidables brailleurs de France” (my translation). Delsarte, François, and Alain Porte. *François Delsarte: une anthologie*. Ed. Alain Porte, édition fac-similé (Coeuvres-et-Valsery: Ressouvenances, 2012), 177.

⁶ “Et, ne voulant plus tremper plus longtemps dans cette matérialisation d’un art désormais condamné à la décadence, *je convertis mes cours pratiques en cours purement théoriques*. [...] j’y introduisis comme étude

And so, Delsarte's "Course in Applied Aesthetics" was created not only in response to Duprez's achievement, if indirectly, but also as an attempt to rescue opera itself from an increasing materialist aesthetic. Between 1837-39, Delsarte received an influx of students from the Conservatoire, describing his studio then as a veritable hospital. Some of these students, whose voices were already beyond repair, blamed Delsarte for being unable to fix the damage, giving him the nickname "The Executioner of Voices." In order to save his reputation, Delsarte came out of retirement in 1840 to perform a full evening of Gluck's music, proving to his detractors that his method did not destroy voices by the very fact that he had rehabilitated his own. The concert was a great success, and his theoretical course began to attract not only professional musicians, but other artists as well.

In September of 1839, only four months after Delsarte created his course, Wagner arrived in Paris. Also, at this time, two articles appeared in the *Review et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, written by one of Delsarte's students, Adolphe Guérout. The first article appeared on the 25th of August, a month prior to Wagner's arrival;⁷ the second, on the 20th of October, one month after his arrival, which was featured on the front page of the *Gazette*.⁸ In the article, Guérout extols the virtues of Delsarte's course:

Regardless of the discredit in which abuse has often brought down the simplest and most legitimate forms of praise, I do not hesitate, at my own risk, to call to the attention of artists the fine work of M. Delsarte, to point it out to them as the most complete study of art ever achieved to my knowledge, the comprehensiveness of which time alone will understand.⁹

And so, Wagner arrived in Paris just as Delsarte was gaining recognition not only for his aesthetic theory and vocal method, but also as *the* fashionable singer to hear in the city's salons. So great was his rise to fame during this time that in November of 1841, Delsarte was granted an unprecedented solo performance at the palace for King Louis Philippe, which led at least one Parisian critic, in January of 1842, to declare that: "the first singers in the

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" (emphasis Delsarte, my translation). Delsarte, *François Delsarte*, 178.

⁷ Adolphe Guérout, "Cours de chant et de tenue dramatique par M. Delsarte: premier article," *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, no. 42 (25 August 1839).

⁸ Adolphe Guérout, "Cours de chant et de tenue dramatique par M. Delsarte: deuxième article," *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, no. 52 (20 October 1839).

⁹ "quel que soit le discredit dans lequel l'abus ait fait tomber les formules d'éloge les plus simples et les plus légitimes, je ne crains pas d'appeler à mes risques et périls l'attention des artistes sur les beaux travaux de M. Delsarte, et de les leur indiquer comme l'élude d'art la plus complète qui ait jamais été faite à ma connaissance, comme une œuvre dont le temps seul peut faire comprendre la portée" (my translation). Guérout, "deuxième article," 411.

universe are M. Duprez and M. Delsarte.”¹⁰ And so, it would appear that Wagner was witness to Delsarte’s rise to fame. The question is: was he influenced by Delsarte’s aesthetic theory at this time? And before I present evidence on this, I will explain a bit about how the Delsarte system works.

On the screen is a drawing of Delsarte’s “Chart of Man,” a representation of an idealized concept of Human Nature.¹¹ At the centre of the drawing is a triangle, in which is written “Memory, Intelligence, and Will,” or, “Memory, Understanding, and Will.” This concept comes from St. Augustine’s image of the Holy Trinity in man, as found in both *The Confessions* and *De Trinitate*, and is considered the first “theory of mind” in the Western tradition.¹²

To show how the image of the Trinity works in terms of Human Nature: According to Catholic doctrine, The Father is the generative principle, which begets The Son, and from both The Father and Son proceeds The Holy Ghost. In terms of Augustine’s theory of mind: The Father corresponds to our capacity for Memory, The Son to our Understanding, and The Holy Ghost to our Will. In terms of cognition then, Memory corresponds to the faculty of Sense Perception, then, following the relations of the Trinity itself: images formed in the Mind from Sense Perception, without the help of the recollection of The Will – that is directly from Father to Son – are called “Phantasma.” These images, which belong to the Imagination proper, are considered dangerous because, according to St. Augustine, “the mind has a great power to imagine not only things forgotten, but things that it never saw.”¹³ On the other hand, images formed by both Memory and Understanding in a higher spiritual synthesis, that is by the procession of The Holy Ghost, are called “Phantasia.”¹⁴ These images are considered more real and thus more trustworthy because Memory roots the Imagination to reality by way of experience.¹⁵ In terms of knowledge then, Memory corresponds to past events, Understanding to the present. And so, images formed from both the past *and* present, from both Memory and Understanding, have the power to “reasonably” predict the future.

¹⁰ *Les Coulisses*, “Coulisses du monde élégant: un Pari fashionable,” January 13, 1842, 2.

¹¹ See Abbé Delaumosne et al., *Delsarte System of Oratory*, 4th (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1893), 502-503.

¹² See Augustine, *On the Trinity: Books 8-15*, Edited by Gareth B. Matthews. Translated by Stephen McKenna (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹³ Augustine, “On the Trinity,” in *On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-nicene Fathers of the Christian Church III (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), XI.5.8.

¹⁴ Marianne Djuth, “Veiled and Unveiled Beauty: The Role of the Imagination in Augustine’s Esthetics,” *Theological Studies*, 68, no. 1 (2007): 80.

¹⁵ See Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 164–67.

Thus, the “Phantasia” of The Will is associated with future events. And this is how St. Augustine’s theory of mind serves as the foundation for Delsarte’s concept of Human Nature.

Taking a look now at Delsarte’s chart, he divides human nature into three parts: Life, Mind, and Soul – which is akin to the ancient concept of the Tripartite Soul. Life, in red, corresponds to Sense Perception, the same as in St. Augustine, but Life by itself, which is common to all animals and children, still consists of Memory, Understanding, and Will, with the power of Sensation playing the dominant role. Thus, Memory, Understanding, and Will intersect, or are entangled in, all three aspects of Human Nature. And so if I remove the red circle, we can see that the Mind is still present in Life by the power of Instinct in blue, and the Soul by the power of Sympathy (or Affect) in yellow. Delsarte’s concept of Life, then, is prior to full human consciousness. Now, when a child grows to be an adult, the Understanding begins to dominate by the power of Reason. However, we can see that Life is still present in the Mind by the power of Judgement in red, and the Soul by the power of Consciousness in yellow. So, the Mind, like Life, consists of Memory, Will, and Understanding, but with Inductive Reasoning playing the dominant role.

The third division in Delsarte’s chart is Christian Revelation, or Genius, where the Soul is dominated by the power of Contemplation, or Mysticism.¹⁶ Life is present in the Soul by the power of Sentiment, or the Feelings, in red, and the Mind by the power of Intuition in blue. As a whole then, Delsarte’s chart represents a perfected state of Human Nature, which, when rendered in a drawing like this, appears to be static. However, the inner three circles of Memory, Understanding, and Will are dynamic in Delsarte’s system, meaning that they all turn in order to create twenty-seven different character types based on a reordering of the nine fundamental powers of Human Nature.

But how does the Delsarte System actually work in terms of operatic performance, or any other art form? Because Human Nature and the physical body are completely connected in Delsarte’s theory, the three divisions of Human Nature directly correspond to three expressive bodily agents. Life corresponds to the agents of phonation, lungs, larynx, and pharynx, as part of the respiratory and digestive systems, and is expressed by the vocal

¹⁶ According to ecclesiastical historian Dom Cuthbert Butler, the terms “contemplation” and “mysticism” are interchangeable in the Latin Church. It was pseudo-Dionysius who introduced the latter term sometime in the fifth century with the title of his treatise, “Mystical Theology.” The term “contemplation” is used by St. Augustine, St. Gregory, and St. Bernard, and refers to the phenomenon of “mystical experience,” or Christian Revelation – knowledge that has been revealed to human beings by God and preserved by the Church Fathers (also referred to by Delsarte as traditional knowledge, or common sense). Definitions of both terms are couched in the terminology of metaphysics as “The Absolute,” “Absolute Being,” and “Absolute Reality,” which is God. See Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life* (Mineola N.Y.: Dover, 2003), 4–6.

inflections, vocal tone, or song. Mind corresponds to the agents of articulation, the tongue, lips, and teeth of the mouth, as part of the brain and central nervous system, and is expressed by articulate speech, language, or oratory. The Soul corresponds to volitional movement of the body, the myologic or muscular system, of which there are three laws of motion, and is expressed by gesture or mimicry. This is how Delsarte is able to derive the arts of music, poetry, and dance – or rather, Wagner’s “three Hellenic sisters”¹⁷ – from the expressive physical agents of the body. As for the other art forms, Delsarte extends music, poetry, and dance outward from the physical body into the material realm, so that architecture becomes an extension of music, owing to its use of harmonic proportions. Instrumental music, being an extension of the human voice, belongs to the realm of sensation. For Delsarte, instrumental music was neither a language nor was it representative of the feelings. The arts of literature, history, and philosophy become extensions of poetry through the written word, while sculpture and painting become extensions of dance through the representation of anatomy in sculpture, and symbolism in painting, both of which are necessary for an understanding of gesture.

And, to provide evidence of this, on the screen is a manuscript drawing by Delsarte himself, dated 1848, and so prior to Wagner’s writings.¹⁸ The drawing depicts Delsarte’s vision for a school of the fine arts, where music, poetry, and gesture, as a plastic art, are connected at the centre, and extend outward toward more specialized forms. And, in this chart we can see that Delsarte also divides aesthetics into three-subdisciplines: music corresponds to poetics, poetry to ideology, and the plastic arts to psychology.

Moving on to the comparison with Wagner. On the screen are the drawings I mentioned earlier that Wagner drew in 1850.¹⁹ The one on the left is from the letter to Theodor Uhlig,²⁰ the one on the right is from *Opera and Drama*.²¹ And, to make the

¹⁷ Also referred to as the “three primeval sisters.” See Richard Wagner, “The Artwork of the Future,” *The Wagner Journal. Special Issue: The Artwork of the Future*, 2013, 27, and 29.

¹⁸ Delsarte Papers, MSS 1301, Oversized folder boxes 9 and 10, folder 32, item 4. Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

¹⁹ Permission to display the drawings in my presentation was kindly granted by the Nationalarchiv der Richard-Wagner-Stiftung, Bayreuth. 12/10/2020.

²⁰ Wagner’s letter to Uhlig was written in December of 1850 and published in English in 1890. However, the arrows Wagner drew ascending and descending along the apex of the triangle are altogether absent in the 1890 reproduction. See Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner’s Letters to His Dresden Friends: Theodor Uhlig, Wilhelm Fischer, and Ferdinand Heine*, Translated by J. S. Shedlock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 85.

²¹ This drawing was created by Wagner in 1850 and published in English in 1893. However, the arrows in this reproduction are drawn incorrectly, as they are shown both ascending and descending along the lines of the triangle leading to the apex. See Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works: Opera and Drama*, 2nd. Translated by William Ashton Ellis, vol. II (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1895), 2.

comparison easier to see, on the left-hand side of the screen now is a manuscript drawing of Delsarte's chart by one of his students, dated 1859.²² On the right is a rendition of Wagner's drawings in translation. Comparing the top third of Delsarte's chart to Wagner's diagram, the similarities are obvious. Here in Delsarte's chart in red, is the power of Sentiment, which, in Wagner's drawing, corresponds to Feeling, in the same location also in red. In Delsarte, Intuition in blue, corresponds to Reason or Intuition in Wagner, also in the same location relative to the apex. And so, at first glance, it appears Wagner has drawn the yellow circle corresponding to the Will in Delsarte, surrounded by the Imagination, or "Phantasia" of St. Augustine. However, this is not what Wagner has actually drawn. If you look at Wagner's diagram, in red, "Feeling, Tone-speech, Lyric" correspond to Vocal Tone and Music in Delsarte's theory. However, at the apex, Wagner's use of the terms "Word-speech, Understanding, Literature, and History" correspond to articulate speech and these same concepts in Delsarte, and therefore are coloured blue. So, the apex in Wagner's drawing corresponds to the Mind and Indictive Reasoning in Delsarte, which is a part of Understanding, but not the Soul and Contemplation. And so here the drawings seem to diverge, with two points in Wagner's diagram now appearing in blue. However, because the power of Intuition in Delsarte's theory intersects with the Soul, it is also yellow – properly speaking, Intuition is chartreuse in Delsarte's colour system, but I have used primary colours here to simplify things. And, of course, yellow corresponds to drama in Wagner's diagram because gesture is a necessary aspect of drama, even though Wagner does not use that term. It was Ernest Newman, in *A Study of Wagner* in 1899, who pointed out that the very use of the term "drama" here means that Wagner's theory was essentially "flawed at its very foundations,"²³ because, according to Newman, drama "does not and cannot mean, in relation to music, what it always has meant in relation to poetry."²⁴ So, perhaps if Wagner had used the term "gesture," rather than "drama," his theory might have withstood Newman's analysis. Nevertheless, with the drawing ordered in this way, and, following the two arrows that Wagner has drawn, (which are drawn incorrectly in William Ashton Ellis' translation of *Opera and Drama*)²⁵ his concepts now follow the doctrine of the Trinity. The Father in red begets The Son in blue, from which proceeds The Holy Ghost in yellow. Or in Wagner's synthesis, "Tone-speech" begets "Word-speech," from which proceeds the combined concept

²² A facsimile of this drawing can be found in Delsarte, *François Delsarte*, 110.

²³ Ernest Newman, *A Study of Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 102.

²⁴ Newman, *A Study of Wagner*, 101.

²⁵ See note 21.

of “Word-tone-speech,” which is necessarily completed in drama by the use of gesture. Thus, what Wagner seems to have drawn is Delsarte’s concept of the Mind, which would mean that Wagner’s use of the term Imagination here does not correspond to “Phantasia,” but to the more dangerous “Phantasma,” which not only St. Augustine warned against, but Plato as well in his *Republic* with the banishment of the poets from his ideal city. And so, unlike Delsarte, who is obviously aiming at Christian morality and a Medieval Christian aesthetic,²⁶ Wagner is aiming at a more ancient concept of poetry and drama – or at least this is one possible interpretation the drawing. However, with Sentiment still out of place in Delsarte’s chart, how can the two drawings now be reconciled?

Remembering that Delsarte’s chart is dynamic, the inner circles turn to create twenty-seven different character types, one of which is “the poet.”²⁷ According to Delsarte, poets tend to lodge their hearts in their brains – Feelings pass into the realm of Understanding, Judgement into Life, and Sensation into the Soul – meaning that a poet’s heart is devoid of all Feeling. Delsarte argues that poets tend to worship an abstract concept of humanity but are quarrelsome with those around them; they are unreasonable, judgemental, and excessively driven toward sensualism. So, I think Wagner is being clever here with the Delsarte System, by depicting a psychological profile that is, according to Delsarte himself, characteristic of poets. Of course, in order to have done this, Wagner would have had to have known how Delsarte’s “Chart of Man” functioned. But, once Sentiment takes the place of Judgement in Delsarte’s chart, lodging the Feelings in the brain, the concepts now mirror those in Wagner’s diagram. Sentiment begets Reason or Understanding, from which proceeds the power of Intuition. By omitting the Life and the Soul from Human Nature, Wagner’s diagram gives prominence to an aesthetics of ideology, rather than balance Poetics, Ideology, and Psychology, as in Delsarte’s chart.²⁸

²⁶ Delsarte is often associated with the Modern Hellenist aesthetic movement of the nineteenth century. See Genevieve Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression*, 6th (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1902), which includes “thirty-two illustrations from Greek art.” However, unpublished transcripts of his lectures reveal Delsarte’s high praise of medieval aesthetics and that he believed a great darkness descended on the art world during the Renaissance owing to a return to paganism, which he equates with aesthetic materialism. Delsarte’s association with Modernist Hellenism then seems to originate after his death with the rise of American Delsartism, not with his “Course in Applied Aesthetics.”

²⁷ Properly speaking, Delsarte refers to this character type as: “people who lodge their hearts in their brains,” of which he identifies poets as one example – meaning this character type is not limited to people who write poetry. I have used the term “the poet” in my presentation as an expedient only, to demonstrate Delsarte’s chart with greater simplicity given the time constraint. Thus, this character type should not be permanently labelled as “the poet,” but should be thought of more correctly as “those who lodge their hearts in their brains.”

²⁸ Wagner’s *Opera and Drama* is of course divided into three sections: The Nature of Music, Dramatic Poetry, and The Drama of the Future, and so Wagner does include three aesthetic genres in his completed work. In the manuscript of *Opera and Drama*, Wagner’s diagram appears on the final page of section two on dramatic poetry – the section in which one would expect to find the diagram based on Delsarte’s three aesthetic divisions.

So, from this brief demonstration, it seems to me that Wagner had a very good understanding of Delsarte's system, and that his "Diagram" is clearly based on Delsarte's "Chart of Man." Now, there are of course still aspects in both drawings I have not been able to touch upon here. But, the aim of my presentation was simply to show that these drawings are connected, and to propose that it is possible for Wagner to have attended Delsarte's lectures during his stay in Paris. To conclude, although I stated in my abstract that none of these drawings were published in either Delsarte's or Wagner's lifetime, recalling the caricature of Delsarte from the beginning of my presentation, which shows him teaching in his studio in Paris, you will see on the wall behind him a simplified version of his "Chart of Man." This drawing was published in 1861, and so is evidence that Delsarte's mnemonic device was important enough to his aesthetic theory, that it too was caricatured alongside the teacher.²⁹

And so, this concludes my presentation. I would like to thank the AMS selection committee for allowing me to present my work at the conference this year. And thank you to all those who tuned in to watch, and for taking an interest in my work. I very much look forward to your comments and questions on the 14th of November. Thank you.

²⁹ Firmin Gillot (after Paul Hadol), "Delsarte," *L'Album de Gaulois*, 1861.

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