

## One Method to Excel Them All:

### On the Musical Foundations of François Delsarte's System of Applied Aesthetics<sup>1</sup>

My presentation reconstructs the musical and epistemological foundations of François Delsarte's "Course in Applied Aesthetics," a public lecture series he developed for singers, musicians, orators, and artists, and which he taught in Paris from 1839-1870. Known as "The Great Delsarte," "The Master of Masters," and "The Newton of Aesthetics,"<sup>2</sup> Delsarte died in 1871 without publishing his research. His students included his nephew Georges Bizet, Gounod, Massenet, Saint-Saëns, and as I will show, Richard Wagner. My presentation is meant to spark discussion about the relationship between music and knowledge, about the possibility of discovering a key not only for a global musicology,<sup>3</sup> but for a global aesthetics as well because, although Delsarte's course was initially developed for singers, what it evolved into was an aesthetic theory based on a medieval epistemological system which Delsarte believed was also subject to modern scientific methods, a system that went beyond the strictly empirical or rationalist approaches to knowledge by incorporating all methodologies, including mysticism – that is revelatory knowledge – into a single unified system. In one of the last letters he wrote, Delsarte insisted that:

It must be shown that the greatest cause of error lies in ignorance of first principles and that as such we are very ignorant. Specialties – where the sciences, as taught, cramp and confine us – kill common sense, just as specialties where factories cramp and confine workers kill their intelligence. [...] There is no place assignable, in any academy, to a savant or to an artist. [...] Hence the need for a common technology since all of the sciences emanate from a common principle. [...] I must seek the

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<sup>2</sup> For "The Great Delsarte," see Philibert Audebrand, *Petits mémoires d'une stalle d'orchestre: acteurs, actrices, auteurs, journalistes* (Paris: Jules Lévy, 1885), 153; for "Master of Masters," see Philibert Audebrand, *La sérénade de Don Juan* (Paris: Société des gens de lettres, 1887), 91; and for "Newton of Aesthetics" see Gaston Demangel, "François del Sarte et l'analyse de l'âme," *Lyrica* 5, no. 57 (November 1926): 861.

<sup>3</sup> This statement is meant as an objection to a claim made by musicologist and current president of the IMS, Daniel K. L. Chua, who asserted in a recent publication that there is no key for a global musicology. See Daniel K. L. Chua, "Global Musicology: A Keynote without a Key," in *Acta Musicologica* 94.1 (2022): 109-126.

method which excels them all, and this method I have never sought from men, but from the very word of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Delsarte developed his theory not as a philosophy of art, but as a branch of Sacred Science, establishing aesthetics as the root of all philosophical and religious systems, underpinned by an Aristotelian-Scholastic view of human nature. And, because Delsarte's epistemology is scholastic, his theory avoids the critical problem of Cartesian dualism, which also means Delsarte dismissed most of the German theorists including Kant, Lessing, Novalis, Schiller, Schlegel, and Winckelmann, on the grounds that their theories were fragmentary, atomized, and all taught without a system.<sup>5</sup> In short, Delsarte dismissed any aesthetic theory rooted in idealism or materialism, aligning his system instead with the French spiritualist-realist philosophies of Maine de Biran and Théodore Simone Jouffroy. In reconstructing Delsarte's system, I will show not only how he envisioned the unification of the arts and sciences through music, but also how his "Course in Applied Aesthetics" is a likely source of Wagner's aesthetic transformation in Paris between 1839-1842.

Arguing that the greatest cause of human error lies in our ignorance of first principles, Delsarte established the Holy Trinity as the first principle of his system. However, as the definition of a first principle is: "a primary proposition, considered *self-evident*, upon which further reasoning or belief is based,"<sup>6</sup> an obvious objection is that the Trinity cannot be a first principle because, as a religious mystery, it is anything but self-evident. However, scholar John I. Jenkins has pointed out a problem with the modern understanding of what the term *self-evident* means in relation to first principles. Jenkins notes that Thomas Aquinas

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<sup>4</sup> François Delsarte and Alain Porte, *François Delsarte: Une Anthologie*, édition fac-similé, ed. Alain Porte (Coeuvres-et-Valsery: Ressouvenances, 2012), 23–24. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from French sources are my own.

<sup>5</sup> François Delsarte and Alphonse Pages, "Esthétique appliquée, cours de F. Delsarte. Exposition en neuf leçons de l'art de l'orateur, du peintre et du musicien. Offert à M. Delsarte par son élève Alphonse Pages," 1859, Delsarte Papers, box 12c, folder 40, page 1, Special Collections Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

<sup>6</sup> *OED*, emphasis mine.

recognized that certain truths may indeed be *per se nota*, that is “known in themselves” or self-evident, but that we can only apprehend for ourselves what is self-evident “by undertaking a period of training and discipline under the guidance of those more accomplished within the field, so that we may acquire the intellectual habits to apprehend what is *per se nota* as such.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a scholastic understanding of what constitutes a principle as *self-evident* pertains only to a master of a discipline, not to an uninitiated student. And so, to understand the Trinity as a first principle of aesthetics, we must submit ourselves to Delsarte’s teachings, only then can we test and judge his theory for ourselves. Delsarte insisted to his students that:

You will judge my theory eventually, and I ask that you judge it very severely. [...] If I am at fault, I have everything to gain from serious rectification. [...] Only it cannot be judged right away, it must be applied carefully, it must be experienced. It must be *judged* by experience. Do not assent, but do not dismiss.<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned, Delsarte’s lectures were addressed not to academics or theologians but to practicing artists, people who would have likely had no formal training in medieval systems of thought. And so, Delsarte developed a symbolic language to demonstrate to his students the numerous special applications that could be generated from the first principle of his system,<sup>9</sup> which I will use in my own demonstrations.

As for the principle of his system then, two things are known about the Trinity from Catholic doctrine which pertain to Delsarte’s teachings: a) the theory of processional relations, and b) the circumincession. In what Delsarte called his “Chart of Man,” which is a

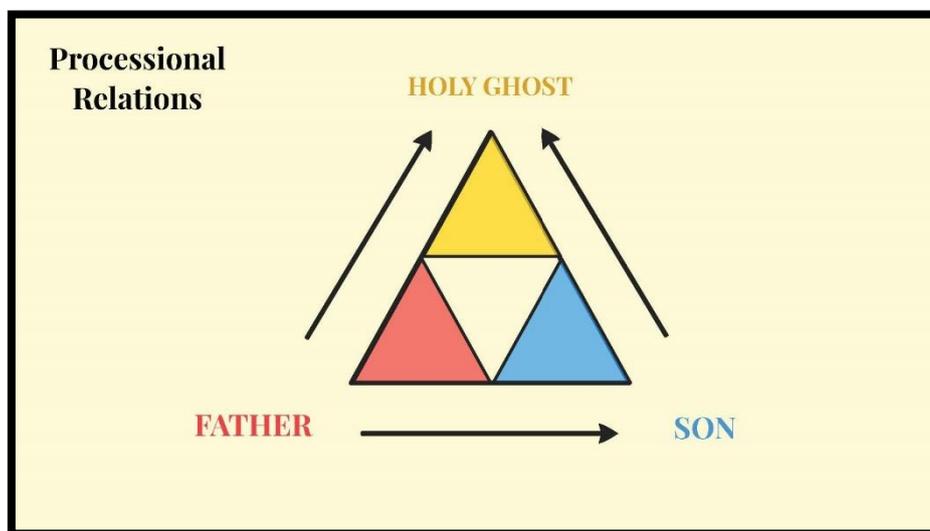
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<sup>7</sup> John I. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 49.

<sup>8</sup> François Delsarte, “Cours de Monsieur Delsarte,” 1867, Delsarte Papers, box 12b, folder 54, pages 87-88, Special Collections Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, emphasis mine.

<sup>9</sup> A symbolic language was required because Delsarte’s mission was to raise artists’ minds above the trappings of materialism, which he believed had engulfed artistic training at the time. According to Aquinas, sight is considered to be the most spiritual, the most perfect, and the most universal of all the senses because it is without natural immutation, and thus symbolism helps raise the mind to an understanding of metaphysics. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Translated by Laurence Shapcote, 8 vols., ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute, 2012), Ia Q.78 A.3.

geometric representation of a superordinate idealized human nature, shown here,<sup>10</sup> the theory of processional relations is symbolized by three arrows around a central triangle. The theory states that: *The Father begets the Son, the Son is begotten by the Father, and the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son,*<sup>11</sup> forming a trinity of persons – the Father being depicted in red, the Son in blue, and the Holy Ghost in yellow (see Figure 1). On the other hand, the circumincession was a term used by the Scholastics to express the existence of the three divine Persons in one another, whereby the Father is in both the Son and the Holy Ghost, the Son is in both the Father and the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost is in both the Father and the Son,<sup>12</sup> which is symbolized by nine triangles within three triangles within the central triangle, forming three genera and nine species (see Figure 2). In his “Chart of Man,” Delsarte depicted the circumincession as three interconnected circles of primary colours, which was surrounded by a colour wheel in order to signify the nine species generated by the entanglement of the three persons (see Figure 3).



**Figure 1**

<sup>10</sup> See François Delsarte, “Literary Remains,” in *Delsarte System of Oratory*, 4th, trans. Abby L. Alger (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1893), 502 insert.

<sup>11</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church with Theological Commentary*, ed. Rino Fisichella (Huntington IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2019), 238-248.

<sup>12</sup> *OED*.

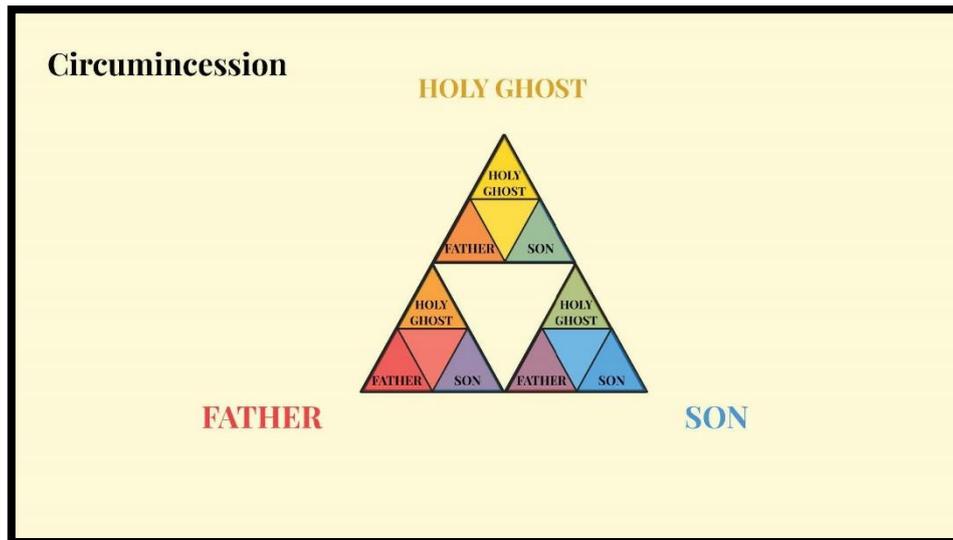


Figure 2

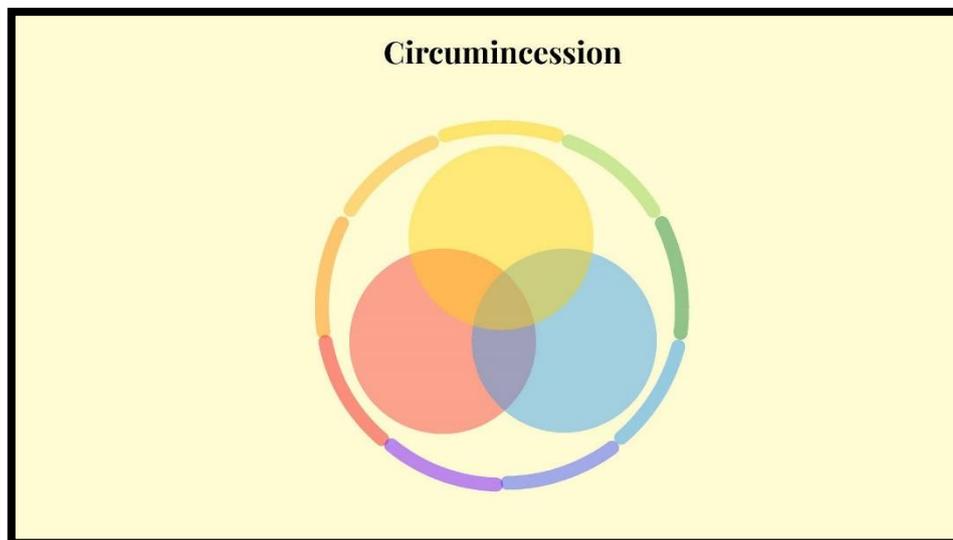
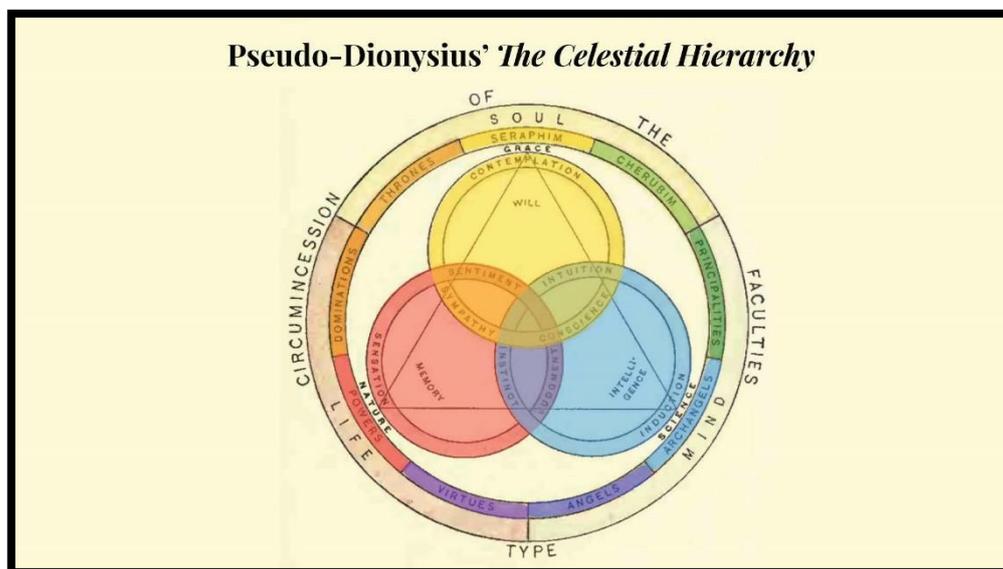


Figure 3

From a theological perspective, or working epistemologically from the top down, Delsarte justified his theory by arguing that this nine-fold formula was analogous to the late 5<sup>th</sup> century theory by Pseudo-Dionysius of the three hierarchies and nine choirs of angels in *The Celestial Hierarchy*.<sup>13</sup> If I overlay Delsarte's chart, you can see the nine choirs depicted in the colour wheel: Powers, Dominations, and Virtues in the Strength Hierarchy in shades of

<sup>13</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 143-191.

red; Angels, Archangels, and Principalities in the Knowledge hierarchy in shades of blue; and Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones in the Sacred hierarchy in shades of yellow (see Figure 4). In the philosophic tradition, angels are known as *intelligences*, and so the nine choirs represent nine types of knowledge, to which I will return later. But first, Delsarte argued that the Christian angelic hierarchy was analogous to the nine muses from pagan antiquity, the muses representing nine distinct art forms – these being pluralistic rather than unified because the muses are from a polytheistic, rather than a monotheistic, tradition. However, in early nineteenth-century France, owing to the popularity of Chateaubriand’s *The Genius of Christianity*, which was published in 1802, Christianity itself was seen as a continuation of pagan antiquity, the author arguing that not only did Plato refer to the dogma of the Trinity in several of his works, but that the Trinity was also known in ancient Egypt, Tibet, the East Indies, and Polynesia.<sup>14</sup> And so, Christianity was seen not as a rejection, but as a grand synthesis of pagan culture, unifying previously fragmented and pluralistic systems of thought.



**Figure 4**

<sup>14</sup> See Chateaubriand, François-Réné, Vicomte de, *The Genius of Christianity* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1871), 53-59.

Now, from a scientific perspective, or working from the bottom up, Delsarte based his theory on a recent discovery in the field of optics, which is still scientifically valid today. In 1839, chemist Michel Chevreul published a treatise, *On the Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours*, his law stating that: “if we look simultaneously upon two stripes of different tones of the same colour, or upon two stripes of the same tone of different colours placed side by side, the eye perceives certain modifications which in the first place influence the intensity of colour, and in the second place, the optical composition of the two juxtaposed colours.”<sup>15</sup> Here you can see one of Chevreul’s experiments where the same colours look slightly different depending on the colour they are contrasted with.<sup>16</sup> According to scholar Jennifer Phillips, what Chevreul’s law signalled in the nineteenth-century artworld was “the ascendancy of the comparative over the absolute,”<sup>17</sup> meaning that, for example, there was no such thing as an absolute shade of red, or absolute shade of blue because the shade of colour we see is dependent upon the colours surrounding it. It appears that, by applying Chevreul’s harmonic law to music, Delsarte developed a chromatic musical system, which he combined with the medieval theory of the perfect triad as a reflection of the Holy Trinity in sound, thereby connecting science and religion.

In Delsarte’s musical system, the generation of the overtone series corresponds to the theory of the processional relations of the Trinity, whereby the sounding of the octave or tonic represents the Father as the generative principle in red. The sounding of this overtone engenders the 12<sup>th</sup> partial or dominant tone corresponding to the Son in blue, and from both of these proceeds the 17<sup>th</sup> partial or mediant tone corresponding the Holy Ghost in yellow, creating a perfect triad (see Figure 5).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Eugène Chevreul, *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors: and their applications to the arts*, trans. Charles Martel (West Chester, PA: Schiffer, 1987), 52.

<sup>16</sup> Experiment shown, see Chevreul, “Colour Plate III,” *Principles*, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Phillips, “Relative Color: Baudelaire, Chevreul, and the Reconsideration of Critical Methodology,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 33, 3/4 (2005): 344.

<sup>18</sup> Delsarte, “Literary Remains,” 484-485.



And, to show how this system was constructed, I will recreate Delsarte's criterion of the Ninth Chord – this mnemonic device forming the foundation of his entire aesthetic system. Delsarte argued that, although he borrowed the term *Ninth Chord* from music theory, he gave to it a different meaning.<sup>19</sup> If we take A as the fundamental tone, we compose a perfect triad on A, C#, and E in the bottom row corresponding to the Father. Then, composing a second triad on the dominant E, we have E, G#, and B in the top row corresponding to the Son. And, knowing the third triad must proceed from these two, another triad is composed in the centre row on the E now as the mediant, giving us a C major triad corresponding to the Holy Ghost. Delsarte's chromatic system is therefore composed of a ninth-chord *triad* on the notes A, E, and B corresponding to the primary colours (see Figure 7). Harmonically, the system is held together on E by the complementary colours of yellow and shades of purple,<sup>20</sup> corresponding to the law of simultaneous contrast (see Figure 8). The chromatic notes formed by the three interlocking triads complete the system. Note that the horizontal triads are major, while the vertical triads are minor (see Figure 9). Also, five of the seven notes in the chart, excluding the C and G of the mediant major triad, correspond to the first nine tones of the overtone series when sounded successively. The nine divisions in the chart also correspond to the mathematical division of a tone into nine commas – the idea

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<sup>19</sup> Delsarte, "Cours de Monsieur Delsarte," 112.

<sup>20</sup> It might be argued that the fundamental tone (A in this case) should hold the system together harmonically because the fundamental is the generative cause of the overtone series. However, I believe a possible explanation for Delsarte's theory is found in Rameau's treatise, *Nouvelles réflexions sur le principe sonore* (1760), whereby the author conceptualizes the three terms of the geometric triple progression (1, 3, 9) based on the consubstantiality of the three persons of the Trinity in sound: "Once the geometric proportion is engendered, it is no longer the principle that regulates but rather the mean-term (1/2) of this proportion. This mean-term, thus placed at the centre of the proportion, occasions via its freedom to direct its route from one side or the other varieties that its principle may not indulge. Since every antecedent is denied in its multiples, it must be divided into its unisons. Otherwise, it would no longer be a principle. Where else may this principle, with this unmistakable, distinctive character, be found? Only here. The ear, eye, and touch unanimously come together to make us admit as such. It is after these observations that I give the title of *ordonnateur* to this mean-term (1/2); a title that characterizes its functions and that in the mean-time distinguishes it from its generator, with which it would be all the easier to confuse, since the *ordonnateur* represents the generator, with which it is consubstantial." Jean-Philippe Rameau, *New Reflections on the Sonorous Principle*, in *Decoding Rameau: Music as the Sovereign Science*, trans. Mark Howard (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2016), 557-558.

being that because a single tone divides itself naturally in multiples of three, the Ninth Chord becomes a criterion for the division of all natural phenomena. And so, Delsarte's musical system corresponds to both the overtone series, and the division of a tone into nine parts or microtones, the microcosm of a tone corresponding to the macrocosm of the system.

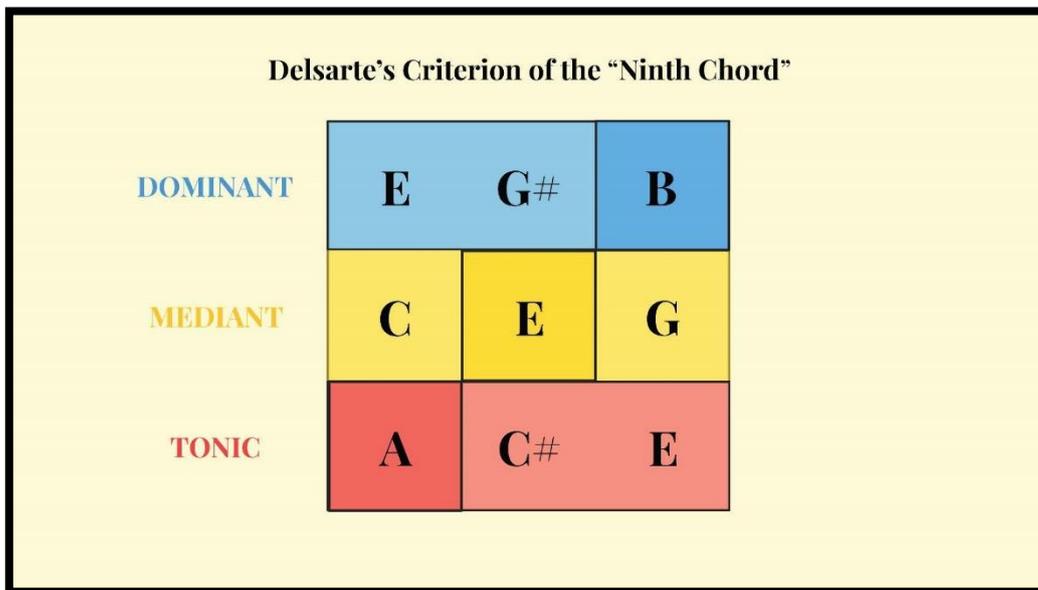


Figure 7

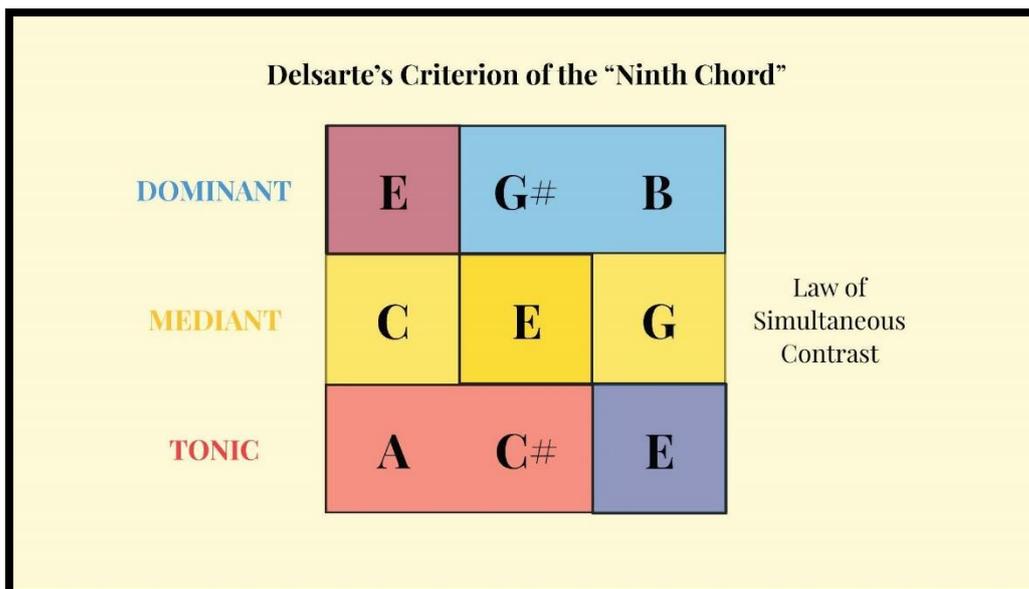


Figure 8

**Delsarte's Criterion of the "Ninth Chord"**

<b>DOMINANT</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>G#</b>	<b>B</b>	Major
<b>MEDIANT</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>G</b>	Major
<b>TONIC</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>C#</b>	<b>E</b>	Major
	Minor	Minor	Minor	

Figure 9

Although these charts are a reconstruction (Figures 5-9), meaning they are not found amongst Delsarte's extant manuscripts, we can be reasonably sure this is the system he created because, not only does it conform to the theory of the processional relations and the circumincession, as well as to an 1843 description of the criterion consisting of "a triple ninth chord,"<sup>21</sup> but also because Delsarte argued in his lectures that:

Harmony is, and can only be, the blossoming of unison, so the essential harmony is unison. I have shown the triplicity of phenomena which results from unison. This union includes within it, by means of these reverberations, prodigious harmonies. Thus, all the sounds of the gamut are in one sound.<sup>22</sup>

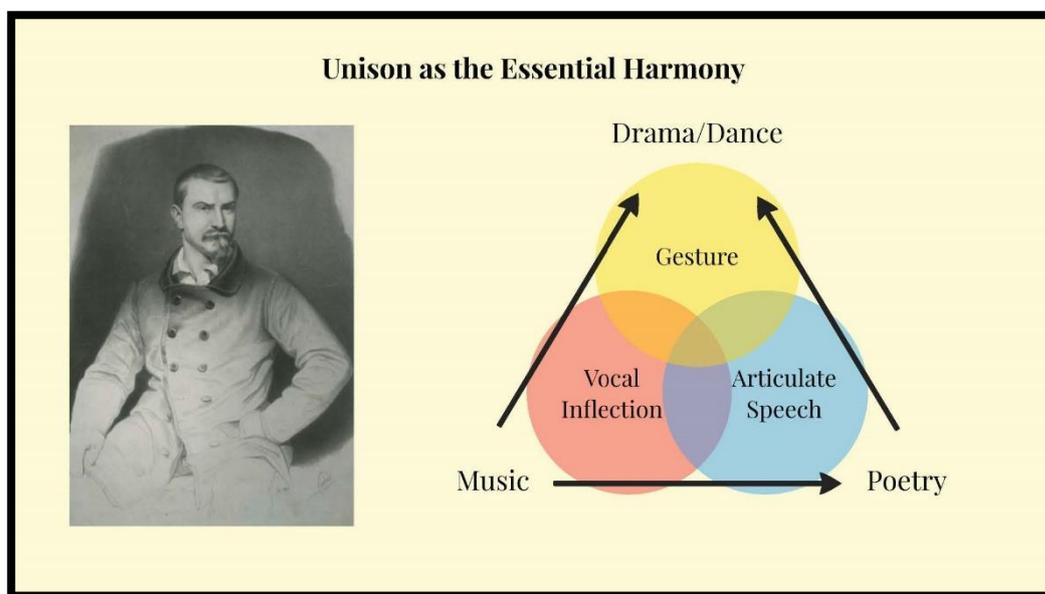
And, because harmony implies unity, Delsarte also insisted that ancient chant, sung in unison, is the most sublime expression of art because only chant contains all of the arts in equal measure, utilizing vocal inflection, articulate speech, and gesture – the three agents of human expression found in Aristotle's *Poetics* – these agents producing an interconnected unity of music, which begets poetry, and from which proceeds drama and dance (see Figure 10).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> François Delsarte, *Système De François Delsarte: Compendium* (Paris: François Delsarte, 1843).

<sup>22</sup> Delsarte, "Cours de Monsieur Delsarte," 237-238.

<sup>23</sup> Delsarte, "Cours de Monsieur Delsarte," 82-83.

Furthermore, Delsarte recounted in his lectures a visit to La Trappe Abbey, where he was astonished to hear the monks intone the *Salve Regina* unbroken and uninterrupted because of their use of staggered breathing, describing their song as endless: “this chant did not breathe, this chant was infinite.”<sup>24</sup> For Delsarte, chant is the most complete art form because it is the closest art form to *being*. And, because the first principle of reality in Aristotelian-Scholasticism is not only *being* but *understanding*,<sup>25</sup> Delsarte was able to develop a complete system of knowledge based on his criterion of the Ninth Chord because, if you recall, the nine choirs of angels or muses represent nine distinct kinds of knowledge.



**Figure 10**

And so, to reconstruct Delsarte’s epistemological system, according to Aristotelian-Scholasticism, the acquisition of knowledge begins in the senses, *nihil in intellectu nisi prius in sensu* – that is “nothing in the intellect that is not first in the senses”<sup>26</sup> – the empirical method establishing the substantive sciences. Knowledge abstracted from the senses by the

<sup>24</sup> Delsarte, “Cours de Monsieur Delsarte,” 245-246.

<sup>25</sup> Thomistic philosopher Frederick D. Wilhelmsen points out that “whatever the intellect knows, it knows as being, as existing or as capable of existing in some order.” Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man’s Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1956), 45.

<sup>26</sup> The guiding principle of empiricism, often attributed to Aristotle.

mind, such as the abstraction of rational numbers from the division of a monochord, leads to rational knowledge and the formal sciences. And, the end point of knowledge being the discovery of first principles through the contemplation of both sense and reason, the contemplative method establishes the sacred sciences (see Figure 11). Next, dividing the generic sciences into nine specialties according to the circumincession, we begin with the Physical Sciences, which leads to Metaphysics, Mathematics, and Logic through a process of abstraction. Then from Logic we derive Ethics and Philosophy, ending with Theology at the top as the queen of the sciences – this being the pathway of the general scientist or savant. Then, by attending to phenomena rather than abstractions, we begin again in the Physical Sciences with Physiology, which then leads to Psychology, Aesthetics, and Theology (see Figure 12).<sup>27</sup> This is the pathway of the artist, as physiology, psychology, and aesthetics form the foundation of Delsarte’s “Course in Applied Aesthetics.” And so, we can see here how Delsarte envisioned the unification of the Arts and Sciences in relation to music.

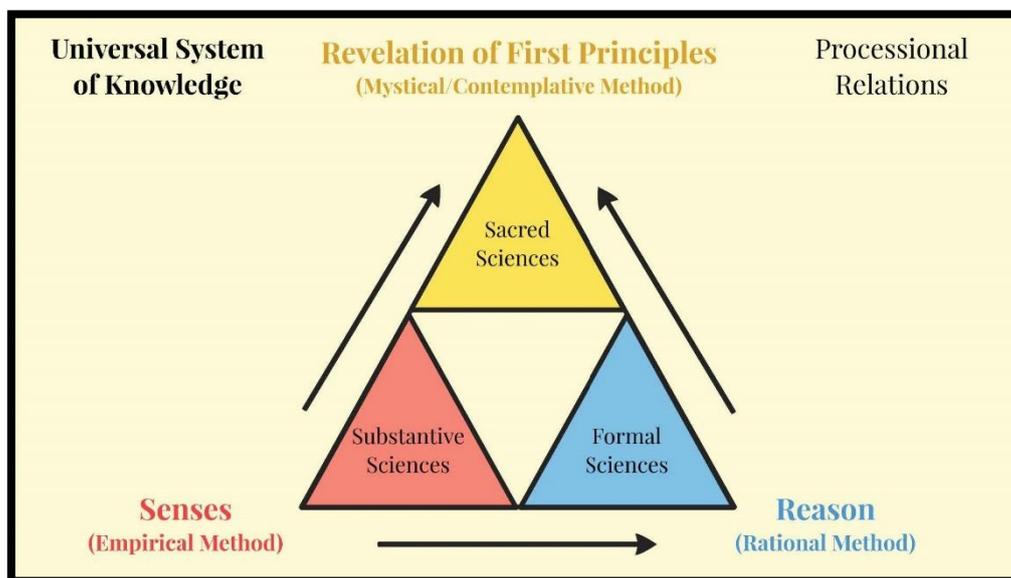


Figure 11

<sup>27</sup> My rendering of Delsarte’s epistemological system as a circumincession is based on his “Chart of Science.” See Rose Meller O’Neill, *The Science and Art of Speech and Gesture* (London: The C.W. Daniel Co., 1927), 195.

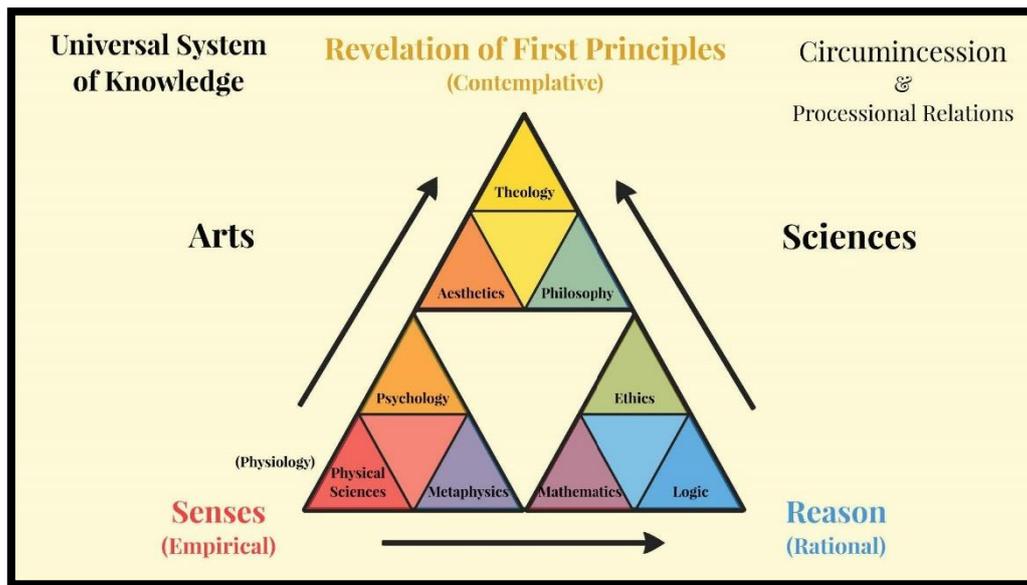


Figure 12

Now, moving on to Wagner, there is direct evidence in Wagner's manuscripts that he knew of Delsarte's theory. In 1850, Wagner drew two diagrams, one in a letter to his friend Theodore Ulich, the other in the manuscript for *Opera and Drama*, both resembling Delsarte's psychological "Chart of Man."<sup>28</sup> Comparing the charts, on the left is Delsarte's chart drawn by a student in 1867.<sup>29</sup> On the right is Wagner's drawing in translation. Three of the terms in the drawings correspond: sentiment or feeling, reasoning or understanding, and intuition. And, to align these terms, Delsarte's chart is dynamic, meaning that the three circles turn to create twenty-seven basic character types, one of which is "the poet." Delsarte argued that poets tend to lodge their hearts in their brains, meaning that their emotions manifest in the faculty of understanding where their critical judgement should be.<sup>30</sup> And so, if we replace judgment with sentiment in Delsarte's chart, the terms align, creating the psychological profile of a poet in Wagner's chart according to Delsarte's system – feeling leading to

<sup>28</sup> Permission to display the two manuscript drawings in this presentation was kindly granted by the Nationalarchiv der Richard-Wagner-Stiftung, Bayreuth. 11/08/2022.

<sup>29</sup> A facsimile of this drawing is found in François Delsarte and Alain Porte, *François Delsarte: Une Anthologie*, édition fac-similé, ed. Alain Porte (Coeuvres-et-Valsery: Ressouvenances, 2012), 110.

<sup>30</sup> Delsarte, "Cours de Monsieur Delsarte," 101-102.

understanding, understanding leading to intuition, which is shown by the processional relations of the arrows, which in Wagner's chart also depict a theory of poetic development from epic to opera. This is significant because, had Wagner published the drawing, it would have appeared at the end of the second part of *Opera and Drama*, on dramatic poetry. And, Wagner himself says in *Opera and Drama*, that drama in its highest plenitude is born equally from music and poetry, and so his chart depicts one-third of a tripartite aesthetic system – which I argue originates with Delsarte.

Furthermore, Delsarte began teaching his course in May 1839, and it was only a few months later in September that Wagner arrived in Paris. On October 20th of that same year, a month after his arrival, an article on Delsarte's course was featured on the front page of the *Revue et Gazette Musicale*.<sup>31</sup> And so, it is likely Wagner learned of Delsarte's course in the fall of 1839. Moreover, Delsarte's theory shares similar themes and concepts associated with Wagner's writings and compositions, many of which I have already mentioned: the blending of the cultural traditions of Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages; the ascendancy of the comparative over the absolute in art, not just in philosophic discourse, owing to the discovery of Chevreul's law; a chromatic musical system consisting of interlocking triads; the predominance of the ninth chord over the seventh; harmony understood as the blossoming of unison; the concept of an infinite or endless melody; also, the concept of the total work of art, Delsarte arguing, on the one hand, for ancient chant, Wagner, on the other, for musical drama, both theories being based on the interconnectedness of song, speech, and gesture; and finally, the idea of a grand synthesis of art as a processual development of opposites, music and poetry.

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<sup>31</sup> See Adolphe Guérault, "Cours de chant et de tenue dramatique par M. Delsarte: deuxième article," *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, no. 52 (20 October 1839), 409-411.

And so, my goal for this presentation was to demonstrate not only how Delsarte envisioned the unification of the arts and sciences through music, and how the Holy Trinity functions within his aesthetic system as a first principle, but also how his course appears to be the likely source of Wagner's aesthetic transformation in Paris. Hopefully my presentation sparks further discussion about the possibility of discovering a key not only for a global musicology, but for a global aesthetics as well, characterized by a colourful array of diverse specializations within an epistemologically unified discipline. Thank you.

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