Les lendemains de fête...
World Music Day: Where have all the flowers gone?
*(written for Norman Lebrecht's Slipped Disk, an online music journal)*

The sun rose in Paris on June 22, 2012, the day after the *Fête de la Musique* (a.k.a. World Music Day). The city was hung over. According to press reports there had been 135 people taken into custody by the police, a couple of very severe stabbings, and a death by shotgun.

This was a sombre result for what was supposed to be a joyful, humane celebration of musical art. And it was a long, long way from what I had imagined when I first broached the idea of a solstice musical happening in France, back in 1976. I was employed at the time by the national radio station, France Musique, under siege from conservative critics for its recent opening of its airwaves to non-mainstream musical forms and styles such as jazz, early music, ragas, cabaret chansons, *e tutti quanti*.

Where were the piano recitals of yore? the critics howled. One far-right paper even intimated that all these unauthorized departures from 19th century classical repertoire were part of a Jewish plot to undermine French culture. The controversy was on the verge of getting ugly; actually, past the verge.

What can we do to generate some positive energy? was the question posed at the France Musique production meeting on that 1976 morning. "Well", I suggested, "let's do something fun. Let's have all-day and all-night music celebrations at the two moments of solstice: June 21 and December 21. Our station can broadcast nonstop [in those distant times it stopped its programs at midnight], and we can organize live musical performances on the street, some of this to be picked up and rebroadcast on the radio waves."

I loved the idea of street music because my friends at the station (Alain Durel and Inge Thaes) had recently organized a free, outdoor mini-festival in the old quarter of Aix-en-Provence; I had in fact gained entry into the world of French radio by hanging out at some of those events and chatting up the producers.

Good idea, said everybody in the room. “I'll talk about this to Maurice,” said Louis Dandrel, the station director. The late Maurice Fleuret, a music critic close to many composers of the Darmstadt crowd, was the man at the culture ministry responsible for music.

And that year there was indeed a *Saturnale de la Musique* (musical saturnalia), produced by France Musique, with some modest degree of public success, and a certain amount of favorable attention for the beleagured station.

Fast-forward five years, to 1981. François Mitterand is elected, the Socialist party takes power, Maurice Fleuret is once again in charge of music, and the first *Fête de la Musique*, closely modeled on the *Saturnales*, is declared. It runs on June 21 with music all day and all night. Amateurs are encouraged to remove their fiddles, guitars, and sarousophones from their cases and play outdoors, in the streets. It’s an immediate success, and politicians take the credit.....
I am not acknowledged by the new régime, nor ever thanked for the idea, but that's show business, as Leon Trotsky is reputed to have once said. Besides, I'm busy in my life with other things.

Nonetheless I follow the Fête de la Musique and its evolution from year to year – thirty of them now – always with a little residual twinge but with a large measure of interest. Most months of June, I'm on the European side of the puddle, so I get to see how the concept works out in lived reality.

Each year I feel (groping for a metaphor here) something like man who had a brief, passionate affair with the other fellow's wife, that attractive couple living in the house next door. He watches the cute little girl who was born soon after the liaison ended, a child whom his neighbors are bringing up, with any number of emotions all jumbled up within his heart.

In the early years, I'm delighted (I'm talking about the holiday once again, not the adulterous fantasy...). The Fête de la Musique at the outset is a 60's counter-culture dream come true. Nobody is in it for fame or money, amateur performers share their varied levels of skill, but passionately, with commitment and love.

During the first or second Fête my wife and I were visiting with her folks in Alsace. The four of us strolled by the magnificent Strasbourg Cathedral around 9 P.M., enjoying the last of the daylight. Before the cathedral, a group of choral singers led by a choirmaster who had given my singer-consort-muse some of her first professional opportunities. Hugs and greetings are exchanged all around. On this early summer evening, France feels like a family, and goodness knows, that feeling doesn't arrive very often within the scrappy, Gallic hexagon.

As I recall the love-and-peace, Kumbaya ambiance at the Fête de la Musique lasted for several years. Two things on the surface of things began to change the nature of the celebration, as well as a third, primeval lurker that none of us in that France Musique meeting room, least of all me, had even thought about at the start.

The first big thing to encourage metamorphosis from a country-wide village fair into a metallic, hard-rocking machine was success. Everybody wanted a piece of this beautiful concept, and why shouldn't they? Having villages, towns, regions, countries celebrate summer with music, and having people come together around singing and playing in peaceful conviviality – these seemed like (still seem like) self-evident boons.

France has always considered itself a home to learning and the arts, and performance itself a tool for the promotion of French gloire. The Ministry of Cultural affairs embarked on a program to export the Fête, via promotion and financial subsidies, to other climes, yea even unto hidebound Boston (which, typically, balked) as well as to New Delhi, Casablanca, Brisbane, and elsewhere.

But in France proper, at any rate, as local mayors and national politicians saw that a good thing was taking hold, and as professionals started clamoring for a piece of the action, the nature of the celebration changed. Inevitably. Political and artistic career ambitions entered into the picture, sometimes improving the chances for musical pleasure on June 21, sometimes not.

I remember a free concert of baroque orchestral music, by a top-of-the-line period instrument band, in the courtyard of the Louvre, as a pleasure. A professional orchestral concert was not something that

Joel Cohen Music and Memory v 2.0  page 272
could have been realized in the first years, dominated as they were by recorder consorts, little amateur choral groups, and zippo funding. Unfortunately, perhaps inevitably, as the money began to pour in, certain personal and professional ambitions clashed with others, causing over the years a lack of diversity in the programming, and an overwhelming emphasis on amplified rock and roll. There were and are other kinds of music besides rock available on the solstice day, but more often than not they are quite literally drowned out.

That's the second big spoiler in this narrative: amplification. The performances those first years were overwhelmingly acoustic: madrigal groups, Peruvian flutes, accordionists, whatever. It felt like a hundred flowers blooming, each in its own bit of turf, each respecting the right of all the others to bloom and thrive in turn.

I first noticed (heard, actually) the changeover about three or four years into the Fête. During one June 21 afternoon, on a Montmartre streetcorner, there stood a lone, scruffy guitarist pushing out riffs on his guitar, said guitar being attached and amplified by some kind of primitive, circa 1960 sound system. He was out of tune, and the amplifier was distorting like crazy; whatever. It was the tolling of the bell, the handwriting on the wall, the sound of Fate knocking at the door. “Après nous, le déluge,” to paraphrase a late French king.

The deluge was not long in coming. Whatever the merits or demerits of amplified music, it demolishes any acoustic sound nearby. It eats acoustic music for lunch, and spits out the bones. Since there was no ecology or deontology of performance practice for the Fête – remember, we were still nourishing those love-and-peace dreams – the outdoor music scene degenerated into a free-for-all. The group with the biggest (sound system) was the alpha group.

The last time I witnessed a Fête de la Musique from up close was in 2011, on Montmartre, where I occasionally occupy a minuscule apartment. Things really started getting rough in the nabe after 9 P.M. I believe there were five or six hard rock bands that had set up on the street, each with an industrial strength sound system, each with every available potentiometer turned up to maximum. The result was a solid wall of undifferentiated decibels. It would be hard to characterize the result as music, unless one were a devout John Cagean. What is was, was LOUD. And continuous. For hours.

The wall of decibels was a backdrop to the true goal of the evening, which was just plain revelry. Hundreds, nay, thousands of mostly young people jostled and squeezed each other from one end of Montmartre to the other. Some were trolling for sexual adventure, others just out to drink and roar. As a socio-anthropological phenomenon, it was impressive. Clearly, some loved it. My next-door neighbor, a fifth year medical student, returned from the street charivari with rosy cheeks and gleaming eye. “C’était beau!” she exclaimed.

As a musical experience, however, it was zero.

And here we have the third, subterranean reason for the decline and fall of the Fête de la Musique. I and the others attempted to build it on something much older, something atavistic and primeval, namely the ancient, pre-Christian Saturnalia. What took place on Montmartre was a reincarnation of that pagan rite. If Bach and Coltrane and raga music represent our superego, the Saturnalia was, and is, the Freudian id at work. Pure id, raging and roaring as it has since the creation of the world. Our Fête is but lipstick on a four thousand year old pig. We had no idea how powerful the ancient forces were.

Joel Cohen Music and Memory v 2.0  page 273
The old Adam, the slumbering giant, cares not for baroque violins and Breton folk dances and wispy, nostalgic song lyrics. He wants to raise himself up to full height, to drink and to get it off. How can we stop him? Why should we even try?

I am sorry about that recent murder, however. And I'd love to find a spot on the public calendar, somewhere, for the string quartets, the gypsy guitars, the songs and ballads. As acoustic sound, accompanied by a societal non-agression pact. Love and peace, they're wonderful.

(2012)