

# Mr de B\*\*\* and his airs of mystery

Richard Excell

On Wednesday 2 August 2006 the Music Library at the University of Melbourne was renamed the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library, in honour of the patron and publisher whose bequest of her own outstanding private collection had finally arrived at the University a few months earlier.<sup>1</sup> Since the arrival of the Hanson-Dyer Collection, several new acquisitions for the Rare Collections of that library have been specifically chosen to complement its strengths, such as music theory<sup>2</sup> and especially 18th century French music.<sup>3</sup>

A recent catalogue from Lisa Cox Music, an English dealer in rare and antiquarian music, listed an item which was clearly of interest to us, both because the Hanson-Dyer Collection contains several comparable 18th century anthologies of French songs, and because it had an element of mystery:

1. ANON

Nouveau Recueil d'Airs Serieux et à Boire Composés Par Mr De B.... Livre Première. Paris, Le Sr. Boivin; Le Sr. Le Clair, 1731. First edition. 1f., 19pp., engraved oblong 4to. Later boards, stamped in gilt. A very nice copy.

Unrecorded: not in WorldCat,

the British Library Integrated Catalogue, CPM, BUC, RISM or the Bibliothèque Nationale Catalogue.

Alfred Cortot's copy with his book plate on front end-paper and with his autograph annotations identifying the composer as René Drouard de Bousset (1703–1760). Cortot's identification is questionable: Bousset did compose two books of *Airs sérieux et à boire* and both were published in Paris 1731 by the author (one location only cited by RISM) but the titles differ considerably from ours.<sup>4</sup>

It was easy to share the dealer's scepticism about Cortot's identification—the great pianist made worse errors of judgement than this—and the volume does indeed appear to be unrecorded elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> After extensive searching through the relevant musical dictionaries and bibliographies, however, it was also easy to see why Cortot had suggested Bousset: there is simply no other French composer of the time with a name beginning with 'B' who fits the bill any better.

We decided to buy this intriguing item, using funds from the Library Endowment Fund. When the slender

but attractively engraved volume arrived in Melbourne the mystery only deepened. While the vast corpus of *Airs sérieux* (literally 'Serious songs', though they are often not at all serious in tone) and *Airs à boire* (Drinking songs) contains many modest trifles, the contents of this book were clearly the work of a sophisticated composer, and the presence of an *air* celebrating the birth of the Dauphin even hinted at a connection with the royal court at Versailles.

The remaining hope of identifying 'Mr. de B\*\*\*' rested with tracing some of the 12 individual songs. This, however, is not a simple matter.

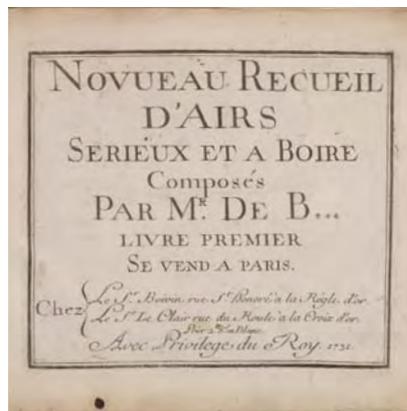
Even when we restrict ourselves to just those airs which appeared in collections published in Paris, we find that over 10,000 from the first half of the 18th century still survive. Worse still, many of these appeared anonymously or in incomplete forms, and where composers are given, we can never be sure that the airs are not parodies, plagiarisms or extracts from now lost operas.<sup>6</sup>

As it turned out, the key was to be found in one of the many further collections not published in Paris or even France. The most nearly contemporaneous collection to hand was no. 166 of the Hanson-Dyer

[François Colin de Blamont], *Novveau recueil d'airs sérieux et à boire composés par Mr. de B\*\*\* livre premier*, Paris: Boivin; Le Clair, 1731. Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections, acquired October 2007.  
Left: title page; right: p. 13.

Collection, a set of seven volumes of a *Novveau recueil de chansons choisies* (New collection of selected songs) published by J. Neaulme in The Hague from 1731 to 1736. Each volume contains about 100 songs, preceded by indices according to genre and, mercifully, a *Table Alphabétique*. After a couple of false trails (songs with similar texts but unrelated music), the seventh volume yielded up a perfect concordance for the music of *'Etre à table, Prés d'un objet aimable'* (To be at the table, near the object of one's affections) under the very useful rubric: *'Les plaisirs de la vie. Duo de Mr. de Blamont'* (The pleasures of life. Duo by Mr de Blamont).<sup>7</sup>

Not only was the composer's identity finally revealed, it also became apparent why it had been so elusive. 'Mr de Blamont' does indeed appear in music dictionaries, but under 'C' rather than 'B'. His father was Nicolas Colin, *ordinaire de la musique du roi* (the title for a regular member of the royal music establishment), but with a strong interest also in painting. Our composer (born 22 November 1690, died 14 February 1760) was known as François Colin [or Collin] de Blamont,<sup>8</sup> while his younger brother, a painter, was Hyacinthe Colin de Vermont.<sup>9</sup> The young Colin de



Blamont's musical ability impressed Michel-Richard de Lalande, whose pupil he became. In 1719 he attained the post of *Surintendant de la musique de la chambre* and other court positions followed, with duties and rights which he defended fiercely.<sup>10</sup> His greatest success, the *ballet-héroïque: Les fêtes grecques et romaines* of 1723,<sup>11</sup> is also represented in Neaulme's *Novveau recueil*, in the form of a *'Parodie, tirée des Fêtes Grecques & Romaines. De Mr. de Blamont'* on page 39 and another similar 'parody' (i.e. new words to an existing tune) on page 41.

Once the composer had been identified it became clear that two more songs from our *Novveau recueil* of 1731, the *Air tendre: 'Heureux oyseaux, vous chantez'* (Happy birds,

you sing) and the *Vaudeville: 'La triste philosophie'* (Sad philosophy), had previously appeared under his name in the journal *Mercur de France* in 1728.<sup>12</sup> In addition *'Etre à table'* also appears anonymously in several manuscript collections now in the United States and Sweden.<sup>13</sup> One of these Swedish manuscripts has versions of three more of the simpler songs from the *Novveau recueil*, but for voice alone without the accompanying figured bass part.<sup>14</sup> The very inconsistent nomenclature for sub-genres of the French air is also in evidence: *'Air tendre'* for *'Air léger'* and *'Brunette'* for *'Vaudeville'*. These traits are all consistent with a wide but haphazard circulation of the less challenging varieties of air among enthusiastic amateurs.

There are other songs in the *Nouveau recueil*, however, which are far more vocally demanding, and were probably performed initially at court or at the *Concert Français*<sup>15</sup> by leading French singers of the day, perhaps the sopranos Mesdemoiselles Antier, Le Maure and Pélissier, and the bass Thévenard. The unaccompanied bass *Air à boire*: 'Les beaux jours de Printemps' (Drinking song: The fine days of Spring), for example, seems perfectly fitted to Thévenard's 'sonorous, supple and wide-ranging' voice.<sup>16</sup>

Identifying the composer also has a bearing on the performance of these songs. Like most French Baroque music, the songs of the *Nouveau recueil* are liberally supplied with indications of cadential trills, but here there are three distinct symbols. Two of them, a wavy line and a cross, were widely (if not consistently) used, but the third, a cross with two additional oblique strokes, is quite unusual. It does appear, however, in the last of Colin de Blamont's volumes of French cantatas,<sup>17</sup> along with a prefatory note by the composer explaining the distinct meanings of all three symbols: 'feinte', 'jettée' and 'appuyée' respectively.<sup>18</sup>

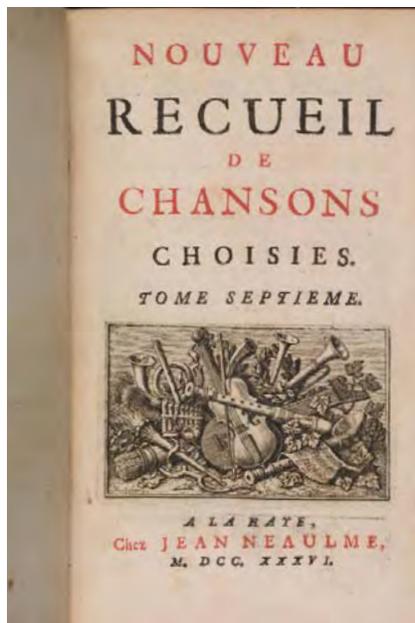
The birth of an heir in the direct royal line on 4 September 1729 occasioned great rejoicing and public



celebration. Many theatrical, literary and musical works were created,<sup>19</sup> and Colin de Blamont was heavily involved from the start. Within a month he and one of his librettists, the Abbé Pellegrin, had compiled a grand ballet, *Le Parnasse*, from various works by Lully, Campra, Destouches, Mouret and Colin himself. His own contributions to that compilation included excerpts from *Les fêtes grecques et romaines*, the *divertissement: Le retour des dieux sur la terre* (The return of the gods to earth) written for the wedding of Louis XV and

Maria Leszczyńska in 1725, and the *Idylle: Les présents des dieux* (Idyll: The gifts of the gods) created in 1727 to celebrate the birth of the couple's twin daughters. The anniversary celebrations of September 1730 saw a new *divertissement* by Colin, *Le Caprice d'Erato, ou Les caractères de la musique*.

The music of *Les présents des dieux* has not survived, but it appears that the *Air sur la Naissance de Mgr. Le Dauphin* in our *Nouveau recueil* preserves one of the numbers recycled by Colin in *Le Parnasse*. The flowery



text certainly celebrates a royal birth, but it is not specific about number or gender, and could serve equally well for the twin girls and for the long-awaited male heir:

*Enfin le doux Printemps reparroit a  
 nos yeux,  
 Bientôt nous allons voir enrichir la  
 nature  
 De fruits de fleurs et de verdure,  
 Flore et Zephyr reviennent en ces  
 lieux,  
 Chantez petits oiseaux, redoublés  
 vos ramages,*

*Apprenez aux Echos de ces rians  
 bocages,  
 Le bonheur qui nous est promis,  
 Chantez sous ces naissants  
 feuillages,  
 L'honneur et la gloire des Lys.*

(At last sweet Spring reappears before our eyes; soon we are going to see nature enriched with fruits, flowers and greenery. Flora and Zephyr return to these lands. Sing, little birds, redouble your flourishes, hearken to the echoes from these cheerful woods, the

happiness which is promised us. Sing, upon this budding foliage, the honour and the glory of the Lily [i.e. the royal Fleur-de-Lys].)

Why this one song should have been published separately two years later remains a puzzle, however. In this matter the *Dictionnaire des théâtres de Paris* by the theatre-loving Parfaict brothers provides some suggestive information. Its account of *Le Parnasse*<sup>20</sup> reveals that in the relevant section, 'La Muse Pastorale, III. Entrée', the singers were:

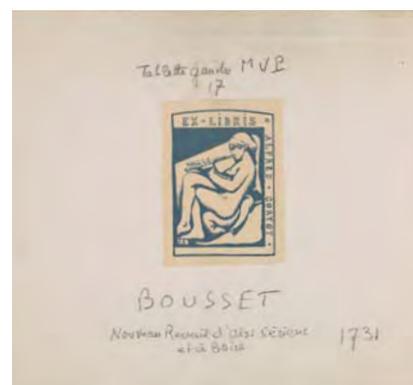
*Un Berger* (a shepherd)  
*Le Sieur Dangerville.*

*Deux Bergères* (two shepherdesses)  
*Mlles Antier & Le Maure.*

*Une autre Bergère*  
 (another shepherdess)  
*Mlle Pélissier.*

Since our *Air sur la Naissance* is for a single soprano, it is only the 'other shepherdess', Mlle Pélissier (who appears in just this scene), who could have been the singer. But at the end of its article on 'Le Parnasse', Parfaict's *Dictionnaire* tells us that due to 'indisposition' Mlle Pélissier was unable to take her role in the first

[Colin de Blamont], *Nouveau recueil*, inside front cover with Alfred Cortot's bookplate and his pencilled classification and shelfmark above ('MVP' = 'Musique vocale profane'; cf. Albi Rosenthal, 'Alfred Cortot as collector of music' in Oliver Neighbour (ed.), *Music and bibliography: Essays in honour of Alec Hyatt King*, London: Bingley, 1980, pp. 206–214) and his erroneous attribution below.



performance before the king in the *Cour de Marbre* at Versailles, playing it only later in Paris at the *Théâtre de l'Académie Royale de Musique*.<sup>21</sup> Finally there is a reason for the orphan-like position of this particular song: even a piece of music suffered a loss of status if it had not been formally presented to royalty. Paradoxically, it may owe its tenuous survival in the *Nouveau recueil* to the fact that it was *not* heard at Versailles on 5 October 1729.

In other publications François Colin de Blamont proudly parades his royal patronage, his full name and his place in the musical hierarchy. But when in this slim volume he did flirt with obscurity as 'Mr. de B\*\*\*' he was almost too self-effacing.

[POSTSCRIPT: Since this article was written there have been new developments with regard to this volume. The Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles has recently published an online catalogue of the works of Colin de Blamont, prepared by Benoît Dratwiczki.<sup>22</sup> A lost '*Recueil d'airs*, I' is noted, with what information Dr Dratwiczki had been able to deduce about it from other sources. He was naturally very pleased to learn that this volume is not lost after all—calling it 'excellent news' and a 'great discovery'—and a digital copy has been ordered and prepared for the CMBV.]

Richard Excell is a musicologist and librarian who currently holds the position of Rare Music Cataloguer at the University of Melbourne. He has a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in music and a Master of Arts (Librarianship) from Monash University, and is a member of the medieval music ensemble *Acord*.

#### Notes

- 1 Denis Herlin, *Catalogue de la Collection musicale Hanson-Dyer, Université de Melbourne*, Parkville: University of Melbourne, 2006; Richard Excell and Jennifer Hill, *Bowerbird to lyrebird: The Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Collection. A Baillieu Library exhibition, 3 August to 24 September 2006*, Parkville: University of Melbourne, 2006.
- 2 Including works by Giovenale Sacchi and Pietro Pontio.
- 3 Including printed and manuscript material by Marin Marais, François André Danican Philidor and Jean Claude Trial, Jean-Benjamin de Laborde, François Francoeur and François Rebel, Christoph Willibald von Gluck, Pierre-Alexandre de Monsigny and André Ernest Modeste Grétry.
- 4 Lisa Cox *Music: Catalogue 56*, Exeter: Lisa Cox, 2007.
- 5 Whether one spells the first word 'Nouveau' or, as it is printed on the original, 'Nouveau'. The latter spelling is used in this article as it avoids ambiguity. The non-standard spellings used elsewhere in the publications under discussion have been transcribed unaltered.
- 6 Tony Eastwood, 'The French air in the eighteenth century: A neglected area', *Studies in Music (W.A.)*, no. 18, 1984, p. 85.
- 7 *Nouveau recueil de chansons choisies, Tome septieme*, The Hague: J. Neaulme, 1736, pp. 53–59. At the end of this song: 'Les Paroles sont de Mr. Tanevot.' (The words are by Mr Tanevot).

- 8 James R. Anthony, 'Collin [Colin] de Blamont, François' in *Grove music online*, accessed 5 February 2008.
- 9 His godfather was the leading portrait painter at the court of Louis XIV, Hyacinthe Rigaud.
- 10 John E. Morby, 'The great chapel-chamber controversy', *Musical Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3, July 1972, pp. 383–397.
- 11 Revived many times, the last as late as 1770.
- 12 *Répertoire international des sources musicales* [hereafter *RISM*], Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1971–, *AT*: C 3333 (as '*Heureux oiseau, vous chantés*') and CC 3333a (as a '*Duo*') respectively.
- 13 *RISM A/I*: 101.712 [transposed for 2 basses]; 117.185; 190.001.508 and 190.013.777.
- 14 *RISM A/I*: 190.014.570; 190.014.619 and 190.014.751.
- 15 David Tunley, 'Philidor's Concerts Français', *Music and Letters*, vol. 47, no. 2, April 1966, pp. 130–134.
- 16 Evrard Titon du Tillet, *Le Parnasse françois*, Paris: Coignard fils, 1732; suppl. 1743, p. 797 ('*sa voix étoit sonore, moileuse & étendue*').
- 17 François Colin de Blamont, *Cantates françoises ... Livre troisième*, Paris: Boivin; Le Clair, 1729.
- 18 A brief trill at the beginning of the note, a sustained trill for the full note, and a trill which dwells on the initial upper note.
- 19 An account and anthology was published in 1731: *Histoire de l'auguste naissance de Monseigneur le Dauphin, divisée en trois parties ... par le chevalier Daudet*, Paris: Le Mercier fils, 1731.
- 20 François Parfaict and Claude Parfaict, *Dictionnaire des théâtres de Paris*, Paris: Rozet, 1767, tome iv, pp. 76–78 (online at [http://cesar.org.uk/cesar2/books/parfait\\_1767](http://cesar.org.uk/cesar2/books/parfait_1767), accessed 22 January 2008).
- 21 Whether Pélissier's indisposition was related to her rivalry with Le Maure is unclear. Their respective merits were championed by partisans known as *mauriens* and *pélistiens*. Titon du Tillet, *Parnasse*, quotes a line by Voltaire: '*Pélissier par son art, le Maure par sa voix.*'
- 22 <http://philidor.cmbv.fr/catalogue/intro-blamont>, accessed 7 May 2008.