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Animal Acts

Captive Audiences

A Concert for the Elephants in the Jardin des Plantes

Walter Putnam

The capture, displacement, and display of wild animals posed an inexhaustible array of cultural, scientific, and philosophical questions for their Enlightenment captors. Just as is the case with modern zoos, there have been rivalries among Caesars, Popes, kings, and merchants since antiquity for possession of the rarest species of animals from the furthest reaches of the known world. Indeed, wild and exotic animals served to measure the contours of the geographic world very much like they served to define the provinces of the animal kingdom. These fragments of empire placed before Western eyes inspired reactions of wonder and curiosity among audiences across Europe. As European powers carried out far-flung exploration and colonization, travelers returned with specimens of plant and animal life that posed practical and speculative dilemmas to a world imbued with its enlightened pursuit of progress and modernity. They became markers of knowledge, helping to define the lines separating same from other, civilized from savage, center from periphery. This schematic outline of a much larger story will serve as a backdrop to a unique performance by/for two Indian elephants, Hans and Paraqui, who became objects of immense scientific and public curiosity in the early years of the new French republic. Departing from the age-old practice of inducing animals to

perform for humans, a concert was arranged for these pachyderms in hopes of observing their reactions to a range of musical stimuli.

This performance has a specific genealogy and context. Collections of animals, especially exotic species, had been the purview of the wealthy and the noble throughout the *ancien régime*. Louis XIV established at Versailles in 1665 the most prominent menagerie in Europe, including, at its peak, 222 species of plant and animal life. With the removal of the royal family to Paris in October 1789, the menagerie became a site of contention between fervent revolutionaries and the community of naturalists at the Jardin du Roi who were busy creating the field of natural history. For the former, the royal menagerie constituted a wasteful relic of aristocratic luxury and privilege while the latter argued that it could become a republican institution and a shining example of the ongoing reforms needed in education and civic moral virtue. The collections became displays, which became public spectacles aimed at honing the natural *sensibilité* of the citizens of the young republic. Finally, in 1792, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, recently appointed *intendant* of the Jardin du Roi, addressed a long, sentimental plea to the Convention, arguing that “the study of nature is the basis for all human knowledge” (Laissus

Walter Putnam has been Professor of French at the University of New Mexico since 1986. He is the author of *L'Aventure littéraire de Joseph Conrad et d'André Gide* (Anima Libri—Stanford French and Italian Studies, 1990) and *Paul Valéry Revisited* (MacMillan—Twayne World Author Series, 1994), and some 30 articles on French literature and culture of the 19th and 20th centuries. His current work deals with the uses of animals in the colonial project, whether as instruments of propaganda or in representational and discursive fields ranging from zoos to advertising.

and Petter 1993:81) and that it is crucial to scientists to be able to study living species rather than skeletons, skins, or cadavers.¹ Scientists at the Jardin would go on to insist on the superior value of eyewitness observations of nature's spectacle, preferably with as little human intervention as possible. At the same time, numerous species of wild animals were roaming the streets of revolutionary Paris, competing for food and creating potential danger for citizens. By decree, wild animals on the loose were captured and delivered to the Museum of Natural History, created officially during the Reign of Terror in 1793 and placed under the direction of Lamarck and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. The fledgling museum, situated on the grounds of the newly created Jardin des Plantes, had to compete for attention and resources with the political upheavals of the Revolution. By 1794, some 65 mammals and 25 bird species were housed in makeshift cages at the museum where scientists could study them.

While negotiations carried on between the scientific and political communities about captivity and slavery, nature and education, acclimatization and productivity, the animals of the museum were perishing in abominable conditions. The Reign of Terror had indirectly claimed numerous victims among the animal population. Their depleted ranks would soon be replenished by the armies of the republic that swept through Europe and, most notably, during the summer of 1796, when 10 carloads of animals from the menagerie of Loo in Holland were shipped back to Paris. The two elephants, a gift to the Dutch *stathouder* from the East India Company, were confiscated by the French armies. These prized tokens of empire became the spoils of war. Because of their size and temperament, transport of the pair of elephants required careful handling and frequent stops such that they only arrived in Paris two years later on 23 March 1798. The accounts of their journey confirm the long-standing reputation of elephants for displaying deep emotions:

When the elephants were separated at the outset of their journey, they showed marked signs of sadness and went into rages that required frequent and prolonged stops. Upon arrival, their reunion scene included cries of joyous recognition, caresses with their trunks, and eyes filled with tears, providing a striking sentimental counterpoint to the harsh daily reality of life in the capital (Laissus and Petter 1993:90).

These two pachyderms became popular attractions among the revolutionary crowds who admired their gentle ways and their powerful presence, continuing a long tradition that, notably since Buffon, placed elephants just below humans in intelligence, industry, emotions, loyalty, fairness, and diligence. Throngs of visitors came to see them; poems were even written about them, such as this *Epître aux éléphants de la ménagerie nationale* (Epistle to the Elephants of the National Menagerie) by the *citoyen* Vignier:

*Vous que le citoyen admire en sa patrie
Ma muse veut chanter votre rare industrie;
Assez d'autres, jadis, prodiguèrent l'encens;
Ils l'offrirent aux rois, je l'offre aux
éléphants.*

(You whom citizens of all lands admire
My muse sings of your diligent ways
Many in the past offered gifts of incense
They offered it to kings, I offer it to
the elephants; in Laissus and Petter
1993:91)²

The true measure of the elephants' *sensibilité* would be put to the test two months after their arrival, le 10 prairial (29 May) when a concert was arranged for them by 14 musicians from the Conservatory on the premises of the Jardin des Plantes.

An extensive account of the concert was published by Georges Toscan, librarian at the Museum, in two issues of the *Décade philosophique*, le 20 et 30 thermidor (6 and 16 August). Toscan makes it clear from the outset that the goal of the experiment was to

1. For an extended discussion of the debate surrounding Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's memoir, see Louise E. Robbins (2002:218).

2. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by the author.



Figure 1. "Les éléphants représentés dans l'instant des premières caresses qu'ils se sont faites après qu'on leur a fait entendre de la musique" (*The elephants shown at the moment of their first caresses upon hearing the music performed for them*). From J.P. L.L. Houel, *Histoire naturelle des deux éléphants, male et femelle, du muséum de Paris venus de Hollande en France en l'an VI (1803:43)*. (© American Museum of Natural History)

gauge the effects of music on sensitive, living creatures, adding that the experience of pleasure can achieve more than that of pain (1798:257). The concert itself provides numerous indices of this conjunction of music and natural science. Armed with flutes, oboes, and violins ("instead of scalpels and instruments of torture," as Toscan adds), the small orchestra sought to exert

the charms of their art on two sentient beings by bringing out the natural faculties that slavery has kept chained within them, by exciting, then calming them, by awakening in their primitive spirits the memory of their country of origin, and lastly, through playing the chords of joy and tenderness, bring them to the verge of a romance which cannot be fully consummated in the presence of witnesses. (258)

The musicians began their program, out of view of the elephants, with a trio of short tunes for violin and double bass in B major.

The elephants immediately stopped eating, cocked their ears in the direction of the hidden orchestra, and ran over to investigate. Toscan insists in his account on the combination of curiosity, surprise, and worry that the elephants demonstrated. The last of the three airs—"Iphigénie en Tauride" (1779) by Christoph Willibald Gluck—put them in an agitated state as they moved to the rhythms of the piece, chewed on the bars of their enclosure, and wrapped their trunks around the bars while letting off shrill, whistling sounds. They immediately calmed down when the bassoon played a rendition of Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny's popular folk air "O ma tendre musette." Toscan notes that the two subjects reacted differently: While Hanz seemed unmoved by the melody, Marguerite, as she had been rebaptized, showed signs of an emerging passion as she stroked first her partner, then her own breasts with her trunk, placed her trunk in her mouth, then in Hanz's ear. Her passion was whipped to a fever pitch by a full-orchestra version of the

Revolutionary anthem, “Ça ira,” performed in D with a particularly high-pitched piccolo. In an attempt to awaken her mate from his torpor, Marguerite resorted to kicking him, alas, to no avail. When two human voices began an air from Antonio Sacchini’s opera *Dardanus* (1785), she immediately calmed down.

Toscan at this point draws a parallel between animal and human passions. “In nature,” he says, “[they both have] a rhythmic, absolute character, independent of all education and habit” (1798:261). Music therefore serves to bring out that character, either accentuating or diminishing its degree. Nevertheless, Toscan goes on to state, animal passions are closer to nature, therefore simpler and easier to direct and control; whereas human passions are “composed” and rely more on the interrelations of two individuals (261). Nothing proved the elephants’ sensitivity to pitch better than a second version of “Ça ira,” played this time in F instead of D. They were much less agitated at this second rendition. After several other pieces, including the overture to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Devin du village* (1752) and Henry the Fourth’s “Charmante Gabrielle” (1593), the orchestra played a third version of “Ça ira,” once again in D but this time adding voices. This piece sent the female elephant into a frenzy, causing her to trot about, leaping to the beat and adding her own trumpetlike cries to the harmony. Marguerite again approached Hanz with flapping ears and insistent caresses to the sensitive parts of his body, soon followed by kicking, falling to the ground, rising on her hind legs, and pressing against the bars. Her ardor became quickly dampened by the realization that they were being observed by an audience, leading Toscan to a long discussion of the famous reticence of elephants to mate in public, including in the presence of their own species. Only in the latter portion of the concert did Hanz seem to be aroused by

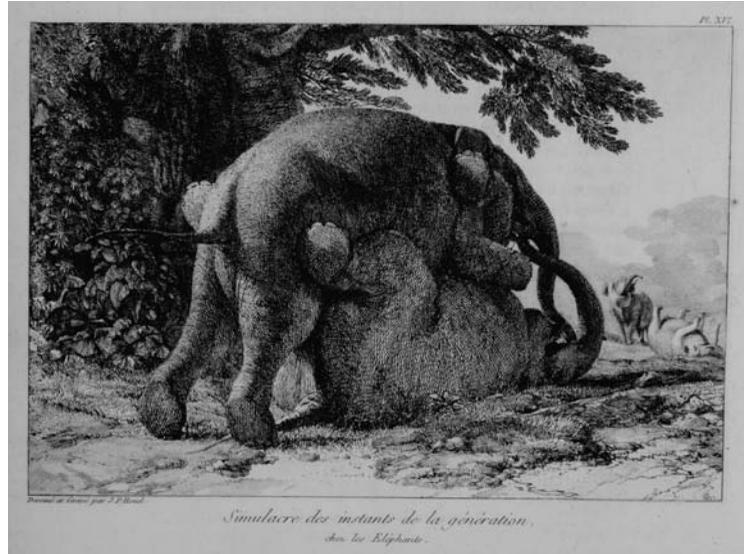


Figure 2. “Simulacre des instants de la génération chez les Eléphants” (*Simulation of elephants in the act of procreation*). From J.P. L.L. Houel, *Histoire naturelle des deux éléphants, male et femelle, du muséum de Paris venus de Hollande en France en l’an VI* (1803:105). (© American Museum of Natural History)

the music, but then only in a passing fashion, and no mention is made of his directing his desires toward Marguerite. (Naturalists at the time did not know that elephants copulate for a very short time, usually about 30 seconds.) The elephant handler later claimed to have witnessed a mating scene between Hanz and Marguerite although, even if true and even if repeated, we know that the couple did not produce offspring during the 17 years of their residence in Paris. Toscan goes on to catalog the reactions of a range of animals to human sound, including dogs, fish, and insects.

The concert for the elephants raises several important issues, three of which I wish to highlight briefly: (1) Is it about music or is it about animals? Or is it about something else? (2) Why was it never duplicated or systematized? (3) In an age obsessed with spectacle and performance, did this concert in some way change the value of performance?

Animals and music have a long association. Composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Camille Saint-Saëns have written music about animals, in most cases including instrumental or vocal attempts at rendering animal sounds. Historians and theorists of music have widely attributed to animals a primary role

in the development of music. That music, however, involves birdsongs more often than trumpeting elephants. And, in any case, the concert for the elephants was not designed to encourage the animals to make music. The goal of the experiment with Hanz and Marguerite was to ascertain the effects of human-made music on highly sensitive animals.

Following the premise that music is a language, the musicians of the Conservatory were trying to communicate with the elephants in some indirect and nonverbal, yet structured way. Let us remember that it was the musicians and not the naturalists who had organized the concert, so music seems to have been more at the center of their preoccupations than the actual animal response to their performance. The defining difference between human and nonhuman animals has been the mastery of spoken language as the highest form of communication. Recent experiments with various species such as dolphins and primates have led to surprising discoveries in the area of animal communication, but this did not seem to be the intended area of investigation in the Jardin des Plantes concert except in the specific area of promoting sexuality and reproduction. Music at that time was widely considered to be grounded in the larger conception of nature so pivotal to the emerging romantic period. Rousseau had set the tone by declaring that the beauty of sounds comes from nature (Fubini 1994:96), thus designating nature as the source of the harmony that elicits joy in humans. Music, according to Rousseau and Denis Diderot, was also widely considered to have a physical, acoustic quality to which the ear must be accustomed, as with any language (103). The emphasis of the concert for the elephants, however, does not seem to have been to study animal language but rather to determine their reactions to human-made, musical stimulation. In that sense, it reinforced the framework already set up by the emerging natural sciences, which assigned animals to their inferior places on the taxonomic ladder based on the overarching importance of spoken and written human language.

The concert, then, might be seen as having confirmed and reinforced the intellectual and emotional boundary between human and ani-

mal. Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm declared that music stimulated both senses and imagination (in Fubini 1994:122); elephants were reputed to have a highly sensitive emotional makeup, but there does not seem to have been any attempt to determine whether they had imaginations capable of responding to natural or social harmonies—excepting the attempts to incite them to mate. Against the backdrop of the Revolution and the Reign of Terror, the question of social harmonization took on added importance. Could aesthetic harmony translate into social harmony? At the very least, we can suggest that nature, in the form of its largest land mammals, provided consolation and solace to the inhabitants of a changing, disenchanted, modern world. With reference back to René Descartes's *Compendium musicae* (1618), Suzannah Clark and Alexander Rehding have observed:

Nature in music theory thus imposes order; it may function as a source of legitimation for the rules it proposes, as an authority from which to generate supposedly incontestable laws, and as a source of knowledge and values apparently impervious to cultural and historical changes. (2001:2)

In the fragmented, tumultuous world of revolutionary France, the prospect of a larger order, whether natural or human-made, certainly must have seemed attractive.

How does the concert intersect with ideas of performance? In one important way—but one that seems to have escaped the organizers of the concert—this curious little experiment at the Jardin des Plantes held the potential of changing the course of knowledge and understanding at a vital juncture in history. By observing animal responses to musical stimuli, they unwittingly admitted to the possibility of intra- as well as interspecies, nonverbal, kinetic communication.

The observers stood on the threshold of a doorway leading to direct access to the animal mind through observation of their reaction to human music. The astonishingly narrow history of human uses of music for animals has typically aimed at controlling them (as snake charmers do), eliciting comic

effects (as with monkeys in circus acts or in street performances), or inciting them to work (as beasts of burden, such as camels or elephants). Despite his effort to draw strict divisions between human and nonhuman animals based on speech, Descartes recognized that animals responded to meter and could be taught to dance. The vast majority of studies of animals aimed, however, at defining human nature in opposition to animals according to a hierarchy based on linguistic proficiency. By making the elephants the subjects of an experiment, the musicians at the Jardin des Plantes momentarily reversed the dynamics of a typical performance setting and made the audience the focal point of the spectacle. The musicians understood that the elephants were not expected to react to the music they heard by analyzing it using human language. For the experiment to yield profound insights into the kinetic nature of animal performance, the observers would have had to alter and expand their assumptions about the primacy of verbal communication. Because animals move but do not speak per se, they represent challenges to symbolic capture within the representational practices of human beings, even very intelligent humans. The concert at the Jardin des Plantes recognized the importance of audience reaction and participation in the dynamics of any performance; because the elephants' performance could not be captured and represented in meaningful human terms, the experiment was never duplicated. The advent of imaging technologies in the latter 19th century would allow the reproduction of elaborate performances by animals that could be observed and studied more on their own terms, although the overwhelming reliance on human language for analytical understanding of nonhumans still prevails.³

This elaborate *mise-en-scène* underscored what John Berger has studied at length: the fact that animals are always observed and that human observation of animals is an index of our power and of the distance that separates us from them (1982:16). Hanz and Marguerite were literally a captive audience since they

were the objects of study being observed by the musical and scientific community, yet they were allowed no real margin to establish themselves as subjects. The concert thus attempted to show how the elephants might prove to be more like us, rather than drawing us toward understanding their nature and perhaps becoming more like them. This cultural hierarchization would play out in a wide variety of confrontations in the decades to come, especially in the increasingly contested fields of race and gender. In the least natural of settings, the elephants of the Jardin des Plantes were being tested on their ability to react in some recognizable way to the Western musical tradition of Joseph Haydn, Rousseau, and Gluck, or perhaps being given the chance to prove their revolutionary fervor when confronted with such popular tunes as “Ça ira.” Despite Toscan's declared goal of awakening in them the “instinct of their native land,” no attempt was made to include Indian music in the concert. The experiment therefore never became a model of scientific inquiry because it was unable to yield results that could be measured by human instruments or observation. Rather than being represented in the static, symbolic practices of human language that were the cornerstones of knowledge and discourse, the kinetic nature of animals' reactions defied collection, analysis, and codification. As a performance piece, the concert had all the complexity and dynamic structure needed to recognize a specific animal nature on its own terms. And it might have inspired further such experiments, if only the organizers had been able to get Hanz and Marguerite to overcome their performance anxiety.

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3. For a more recent attempt at using music to favor interspecies communication with animals, especially free-swimming cetaceans, see the work of Jim Nollman (2005).

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Regarding the Pain of Rats

Kim Jones's Rat Piece

Martin Harries

Since the 1970s, Kim Jones, an artist who works in sculpture, drawing, and mixed media, has also performed as Mudman. Mudman's performances vary, and have included long walks on set routes through Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York, as well as less peripatetic events confined to galleries. Jones's most notorious performance remains *Rat Piece*, from 1976. Available evidence suggests that *Rat Piece* was a slow, deliberate, even meditative performance. Over about half an hour or so, Jones—lean, muscular, face hidden under a pair of pantyhose—stripped, slathered himself with mud, donned the headpiece and wooden structure of Mudman, and, while walking through the performance space, read a reflexive statement about performing as

Mudman. He then pulled a tarp off a circular wire cage holding three live rats and some paper, sprayed the rats and paper with lighter fluid, and set the rats and paper on fire. The rats' deaths were gradual: Jones periodically fed the fire with more fluid. The panicked rats scampered up the edges of the cage, ran in circles, and screamed as they neared death. Jones briefly screamed, too. After the rats were dead, Jones slowly covered their remains with soil and stones from a few bags. He then draped the cage again with the tarp. Very deliberately, Jones removed the structure from his back, put on his pants, carefully put on his socks and boots and jacket, all without removing the mud from his body. He never removed the pantyhose covering his head.

Martin Harries teaches courses on theatre, modernism, and theory in the department of English at New York University. He is the author of *Scare Quotes from Shakespeare: Marx, Keynes, and the Language of Reenchantment* (Stanford University Press, 2000). His second book, *Forgetting Lot's Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship*, is forthcoming from Fordham University Press in early 2007.