Popular Music on French Radio and Television, by Geoff Hare

Introduction

Music, both popular and ‘serious’, has of course been present on French radio and television since the very earliest days of both media. Entertainment, musical or otherwise, alongside news and information, and the educational functions of the transmission of culture, has been an important mission associated with both broadcasting media in France as in other western countries. And a major element of the western entertainment tradition is of course popular music. While the technology associated with broadcasting has been commonly available in the developed economies of Western Europe and North America at more or less the same time, French society and politics have developed differently from their neighbours. A major distinction between France and Britain for instance has been, firstly, the role of the State within society, in this context in controlling, restricting and regulating broadcasting systems, and, secondly, governmental attitudes to an independent commercial sector providing competition to the public service tradition. Recently, as globalisation has tended to erode national autonomy in broadcasting systems and to threaten national cultural identity, and since global culture has been purveyed mainly by English-speaking cultural phenomena and multinational businesses whose ideological home is often perceived as being in the United States of America, a further French ‘exception’ has been a concern to protect the position of the French language within France and the world. This concern that has taken political form in the shape of a protectionist policy towards French cultural productions and the national media that transmit them. Hence, the French film and cinema industry, and French popular music industry and the broadcasting of French popular song, for instance, have, in the one
case, been the subject of international trade negotiations to prevent the import of cultural productions being treated like cars or bars of soap, and in the other, subject to legally enforced quotas to limit competition from American or British popular music. While some of these themes are relevant to both media and the ways in which popular music is treated by them, this chapter will deal separately with radio and then television, looking first at the chronologically earlier medium, that of radio.

Radio

To understand the relationship of radio and music in France today, some attention needs to be paid to the period where television was not a competitor, i.e. well into the sixties, and to the key period of change in the eighties. The main factors that have affected the changing profile of popular music programming on French radio in these periods, and thus popular music’s contribution to France’s exceptionalism (the ways in which France has defined itself as different from other European nations), have been as follows:

Firstly, the relative paucity of radio stations in the period up to 1981, and their concentration on programming for a mass, generalist audience; secondly the creation of a new independent and commercial radio sector following legislation in 1981, that led to a rapid multiplication of outlets for music programming, and a segmentation of the audience initially by age and later also by musical genre; and, finally, the imposition of strict linguistic quotas on music radio in the mid-1990s - as part of a long French tradition of linguistic and cultural protectionism - that effectively restricted the amount of British and American popular music that could be played by French stations, thus giving a promotional boost to the
domestic French music industry. There are thus three periods that define popular music programming on French radio, periods articulated by legislative change.

**Pre-1981: limited radio outlets for popular music**

In the inter-war period, when radio was becoming a mass medium, competition between publicly owned radio stations (and from 1923 a private sector), allowed a situation to develop where contrasting tones and functions distinguished commercial radios such as Radio Cité from State-controlled radio. Where the latter was serious and concentrated on information and the transmission of mainly high culture to the gradually increasing audiences that had access to a radio set, the other concentrated on entertainment radio and the popular audience. Commercial radio programmed popular music, initially live from the French Music Hall tradition and later recorded, from the stock of French phonographic productions. The Music Hall tradition grew in the inter-war period. The most famous Parisian music halls were the Casino de Paris and the Folies-Bergère, and post-war Bobino and the Olympia. Marc argues that they created all-round stars, like Maurice Chevalier and Mistinguett, able to perform on stage, in the cinema and then of course on radio, and that they brought in new types of music, from America, with Bechet and Josephine Baker. The staple show of the later music hall, for example produced by the best known post-war music hall impresario Bruno Coquatrix (1910-79) who ran the Olympia, was a series of evenings devoted to a single performer, or where the star performed throughout the second half. Stars like Bécaud, and Jacques Brel were created by their performances at the Olympia; they made their names in their first appearances in 1954 and 1958 respectively. When Johnny Hallyday had his first success at the Olympia in 1961 he had already had a hit record and radio shows like *Salut les copains* had already begun to promote records. The 1992 *Quid* encyclopaedia

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records 27 music halls still operating in Paris. The linked success of the music hall and the recording industry was bound to feed radio music programming.

**The post-war ‘State radio monopoly’**

In the period from the end of the Second World war to the arrival of the Mitterrand Presidency in 1981, the development of French popular music was affected by the relative paucity of licensed radio stations in France. Those that did exist were closely controlled by government, and a particular cultural ideology dominated. The paternalistic attachment of French public service radio to a programming policy of privileging elite culture restricted outlets for French popular music. France Culture and France Musique, high culture and low audience stations, were popular music deserts. The one general audience station where popular music was to be heard at different times of the day was France Inter. Music programming however, then as now, also had to share air time with all the other types of programming (news and current affairs, drama, game shows, humour etc.) that had to be provided by the one general audience station. The explanation for this situation was political. As French society and government came back to some normality after German Occupation during the Second World War, the collaborationist Vichy regime, and the gradual Liberation of the territory from June 1944 onwards, the left-wing dominated, progressive government that emerged from the Resistance Movement was unhappy to allow any broadcasting to be handed back to the ‘powers of money and big business’. What was subsequently called the State broadcasting monopoly was put in place and refined by successive governments of both the Fourth and Fifth Repubblics. In particular, President de Gaulle, from 1958 onwards, was conscious of the importance of communicating directly to the mass of French citizens in his new presidential style of regime, the Fifth Republic. Bypassing parliamentary and party politics meant using the mass media to communicate directly to the French people. A firm
believer in strong central State power, de Gaulle and his conservative successors were reluctant to give up the public service monopoly of broadcasting. Ironically, it was not until the election of the first left-wing President of the Republic in 1981 and the installation of a Socialist dominated government (including four Communist ministers indeed) that the State monopoly was to be broken, and large numbers of independent radio stations were to be authorised.

The feature of radio broadcasting that had the biggest influence on the development and promotion of popular music in this period was broadcasting from across frontiers. The post-war State radio monopoly was in this sense a myth. French is spoken countries bordering France and commercial radio operators saw a French-speaking market to exploit inside France by broadcasting entertainment radio with a strong music content into France from transmitters situated just over the border. From Luxembourg, from 1933 onwards, from Monaco since 1943, from the Saarland in Germany from 1955, and from Andorra since 1958, the east, the south-east, Paris and the north, and the south-west - indeed most of France - had good long-wave reception of commercial radio and an alternative and more popular diet of radio news and entertainment. Such was the competition felt by State-controlled radio, and its masters, from these périphériques stations, that the French State bought a controlling interest in some of these 'independent ' radios and a partial interest in others. The tolerance of the existence of these périphériques was such that they were soon allowed to set up studios in Paris, and use dedicated lines owned by the State telephone company to contact their transmitters. RTL, Radio Monte Carlo, Europe 1, and Sud-Radio each however ran only one generalist station and so, while pop music did have an outlet for young French listeners, the périphériques too felt commercial pressures to broadcast to the whole of the French audience - in order, as commercial stations, to attract
revenue from advertisers wishing to sell to those who, in the 1950s, 1960s and into the 1970s still held the family purse strings. Music radio was not yet therefore a ‘genre’ in its own right.

Those programmes of popular music that remain in the French communal memory promoted music that was either on the edge of or central to that particularly French genre of ‘chanson’. Its exponents from Trenet and Piaf, through Aznavour and Montand, to Brel and Brassens appealed to a very wide audience, both in terms of age and in terms of cultural background, in just the same way that broadcasting did not differentiate, yet, in segmenting the mass audience.

Nonetheless, in the 1960s it became impossible for French radio to ignore rock and pop music since, for one thing, the French recorded-music industry and a nascent music press were producing French-language cover versions of British and American hits, a top-twenty sales chart, and promoting French stars such as Johnny Hallyday, Sylvie Vartan, Eddy Mitchell, Dick Rivers, Claude François, Sheila, and others. Indeed, Europe 1, from 1959 with the programme *Salut les copains*, was quick to win a huge youth audience with programming of chart hits. The success of Europe 1’s new youth music programming has to be put in the context of the new portability of radio through the growth of the transistor precisely at this time, which allowed the new youth audience to take radio and music out of the family sitting room or kitchen and into their own space, including into the street.

**The 1980s and 1990s: new radio outlets and more musical specialisation**

Social demand for a more diversified pattern of specialised radio provision to cater for regions or smaller localities, and for particular musical tastes was recognised too late by Radio France, the public service radio network, although it created in 1980 three experimental local radios, and a Parisian pop music station, Radio 7. The latter had not enough time to establish itself (unlike Britain’s Radio 1) before independent pop radio took
over. Radio 7 was to lose most of its audience within seven years and be closed down. That a social need for more music radio outlets existed may be seen in the experience of pirate radio in the seventies. For a few years the Giscard d'Estaing government had taken a hard line with a handful of operators of pirate radio stations attempting to break the State monopoly by playing pop music that was not getting much air time on the existing stations. It took political change in the shape of a left-wing victory in the Presidential and parliamentary elections of 1981 to bring the promise of sweeping changes in broadcasting as in many other sectors of French social and economic life.

The main push behind these new radios was musical. With the promise of legislation to come, the Mitterrand government tolerated 'free local radios' for a year before the initial anarchistic situation was gradually regulated by the new broadcasting licensing body that emerged from legislation of July 1982 on 'the freedom of communication'. Independent radio meant initially non-commercial, local FM radio, but by 1984 advertising had been allowed and by 1986, the grouping together of local stations into national commercial networks.\(^2\) It was not only the stations of Radio France that felt the competitive pinch in terms of audience. The old périphériques stations RTL, Europe 1 and RMC, lost income and market share and quickly applied for FM licences to set up networks under the new legislation.

**Independent radio in the 1980s and 1990s: the Anglo-American invasion**

While some of the new commercial stations used the new liberty of communication in the shape of talk radio, many interested in radio for commercial reasons found that the format that most easily found an audience was ‘music and news’, mostly music aimed at a youth

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and young adult audience, along the model of American radio. Initially French radio was formatted by audience age alone: under 25, 25-45, and over 45. Jean-Paul Baudecroux’s NRJ network targeting the youth audience became the most successful both in terms of number of listeners and commercial growth. A process of commercial concentration led to the construction of about eight major national networks emerging out of an initial 1500 or so locally approved stations. NRJ, Skyrock and Fun were in competition for the youth audience; young adult stations included Chérie FM, and networks taken over by the périphériques and renamed Europe 2 and RTL 2. The older segment was served by Nostalgie and after various changes of format in search of an audience, by RFM. It took until the 1990s for French commercial formats to become more musically specialised and differentiated within each age group. This followed a second wave of concentrations and take-overs that has left the French commercial radio sector in the hands of three major media groups, each controlling a major network within each age range: Europe Communications group owns Europe 1 (news and sport), Skyrock (youth); Europe 2 (young adult), RFM (adult, 'gold'), the CLT-UFA group owns the generalist RTL, the young adult network RTL2, and the youth audience Fun Radio; the relative newcomer to radio, the Baudecroux group, owns NRJ (youth audience), Chérie FM (young adult), Nostalgie (adult music), and a music and humour network Rire et Chansons.

This period of increasing concentration of ownership and competition for listeners led to a situation where the three major national commercial youth music networks gave less and less air-time to French popular music (June 1992 figures showed 13% of plays for French music on NRJ, 8% on Skyrock, 7% on Fun). For reasons of commercial competitiveness, the networks were wary of offering their listeners new and relatively unknown French artists, and preferred an overwhelming diet of already successful British
and American music. The conservative daily *Le Figaro* for example published, on 8 February 1996, an article by Claude Duneton under the title ‘Dix menaces qui pèsent sur la langue française’ (Ten threats to the French language), where he says: ‘une nation où les enfants n’entendraient plus chanter en français serait une nation culturellement en voie de disparition’ (a nation where children no longer heard people singing in French would be a culturally endangered nation). News of the loss of French popular music from youth radio was sufficient for a reaction of ‘moral panic’ within the French cultural establishment, of commercial panic within the French music industry, and a hurried resort to a traditional remedy - political control, in the form of a law enforcing linguistic quotas on popular song programmed on French radio.

**Linguistic quotas and the defence of French musical culture**

The legislation itself, the so-called ‘Pelchat amendment’, passed into French law as part of a wider Broadcasting Reform Act on 1 February 1994. It imposed on all French radio stations a compulsory minimum of 40% of French language songs in their popular music programming at times of day where there is a significant listening audience (6.30 a.m. to 10.30 p.m.). Within this 40% minimum of French songs, there was a further requirement for radios to give air time, for at least half of the quota, to new talent (‘nouveaux talents’) or newly issued recordings (‘nouvelles productions’).

The result was that by September 1998 the French Broadcasting Regulator (le Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel or CSA) had banned a regional radio from broadcasting for a day following persistent flouting of the conditions of its licence, by playing too many songs in English. In the same year ten final warnings were given to other national and regional networks. In 1999 the CSA issued further final warnings to French commercial radios. Nonetheless, in the two years between the passing of the bill and the full
implementation of its provisions, 1300 independent radios had their licensing agreements either simply renewed by the CSA, where they already respected the quota, or modified through negotiation, so that they would progressively come into line with the new law before it came into force.

It should be pointed out however that in addition to the highly publicised cultural and linguistic motivation behind this legislation, there was also a commercial and economic motivation to do with the protection of the French music industry. The economic and commercial concerns that put radio quotas on the political agenda show how much the music industry is seen to depend on radio. In the 1990s France was the fifth largest market for recorded music sales (behind USA, Japan, Germany and UK). The French market grew strongly in the 1980s under the influence of the arrival of CDs, of access by music industry to TV advertising, and of the halving of the rate of VAT applied to records. However in the early-mid-1990s the market saw very moderate growth even stagnation.\(^3\) At the committee stage of the 1994 Broadcasting Reform Act evidence was given by the French Performing Rights Association (SACEM) and by the French record-production industry on the link between radio plays and record sales, which had recently dipped. A key fact was that between 1988 and 1992 sales of French produced music recordings had fallen behind non-French sales on the internal French market (imports of recorded music - excluding classical music - outsold French discs by 10 percentage points, whereas the situation had been the reverse a few years earlier). The international music industry was of course dominated by Anglo-American music. At the same time as sales were falling, French pop music (as seen above) was getting less air time on youth radio. Independent French record producers in particular were suffering. Since there was an accepted correlation between sales and radio
play-lists, the music industry favoured regulation of radio, to save the French national music industry from following those of Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia and Germany which were all but extinct. The example of linguistic quotas in Quebec was cited.

These economic concerns coincided with much more potent and long-standing cultural concerns that gave them political legitimacy. The existence of linguistic legislation is perhaps only understood with any immediacy from a culture where English is not the native tongue. The solution of quotas fitted long-standing and wider cultural protectionism related to concerns about the status of the French language in the modern world and its links to national identity. Language is for France much more of a symbol of national sovereignty than is the French currency. In the year of the Maastricht Treaty when France signed up to losing the Franc and adopting the Euro, parliament accepted a constitutional amendment stating: ‘The language of the Republic is French.’ The ultimate fear was that French might be relegated to the status of a second-class language, and with it French culture and France itself.

The key cultural area where Anglo-American influences were apparently taking over from French was in popular music, and this was seen as important, since popular music in the traditional French form of ‘chanson’ sits quite happily within the French establishment’s definition of culture. Brassens was awarded the poetry prize by the Académie française in 1967; Trenet was decorated with the Légion d’honneur. Unlike post-war American popular music where rhythm and beat have been the most important feature, French song has been characterised by the importance of the lyric, the text, and has been seen therefore as closer to the high-cultural literary genres. Song has not been seen as divorced from high culture

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(unlike Britain), and has been a very productive area of French artistic creativity ever since the birth of radio and the record industry. Therefore new concerns about the dwindling influence of the French language within youth music radio and the concomitant deleterious effect on creativity in French popular music put French song on the agenda of traditional French cultural protectionism.

From the point of view of the radio stations themselves, youth radio had the most problems with the regulation. The most popular national networks targeting the 15-25 year olds, such as NRJ, Skyrock or Fun Radio, had built their audiences on a diet of music containing a high proportion of American rock and pop. Stations finding it difficult to reach the quota generally claimed in their defence that there were not enough French records being produced for their particular target audience, or at least not enough of sufficient quality. NRJ claimed that whereas the French repertoire for an adult audience is very rich, the youth radios were stuck between rap and boy bands and there was very little to play. Fun Radio reacted by introducing more phone-ins at evening prime times, partly, as a way of stretching the limited amount of playable French music to the 40% of remaining programming.

One of Fun’s main competitors, the network Skyrock, seeing the difficulty it would have in reaching the 40% quota, changed its format radically in 1995, banking its future on French rap music. Its percentage of rap went from 35% in 1995 to 50% in 1996, and to 75% in the late 1990s. Its audience increased and it contributed to a remarkable flowering of French rap.

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5 Bara, Guillaume (1998), ‘Cocoriquotas ou quotallergie’, *Télérama*, (2516), 1 April.
7 Bara, G., *ibid.*
The music industry saw the quotas as a boost to new music. French rap and hip-hop were in a phase of development that coincided with the quotas. After one year of quotas, sales went up from 45% to 52% of total music sales.\(^8\) Singles benefited most. The verdict of the SNEP (the association representing major French record producers) was that the quotas seemed to have given new impetus to the ‘virtuous circle’ of ‘production - diffusion - sales’. The SNEP claimed quotas had helped French music producers to quadruple their investment in new French talent.\(^9\) One complaint was that certain artists working in France, such as Khaled, and representing the North African communities and singing in Arabic or Berber, were not counted as part of the national repertoire. This complaint took on a particular resonance in 1998, the year when the ‘black, blanc, beur’ multicoloured national football team were winning the World Cup and being touted by Left and Right as representing the new France.\(^10\)

Over the initial two-year period of monitoring, the law seemed effective in that there was an increase in the proportion of French songs broadcast. Overall French language recordings went up from 1995: 41%, to 1997: 45% of total music played. One unforeseen consequence was the increasing uniformity in the French music being played. The same French singers or bands and the same songs were being heard. Hence, overexposure of new rap stars like M C Solaar. However, French artists benefited as the percentage of the whole went up from 1995: 21%, to 1997 24%.\(^11\) New talents like Tribal Jam and Mad in Paris, Doc Gynéco, and Pascal Obispo broke through, but overall the number of plays of new talents went down - since the new talents of 1995-96 (M C Solaar, Axelle Red, Native, Iam) were

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\(^9\) Bara, G., *ibid*.
\(^10\) Bara, G., *ibid*.
subsequently counted in the category of established talents. As time went on, therefore, there was not the hoped for on-going expansion of records by new talents. However, most radios had more or less fallen in line, more French songs were being heard on radio and more records were being sold. Furthermore, 83% of the French public were in favour of quotas on radio, according to a poll commissioned by the music industry.

In the late nineties discord between the music industry and the radio sector led to an amendment to the law in the direction of flexibility. Increasing differentiation of formats had turned the quotas into a blunt instrument. The uniformity of the quotas became less and less appropriate to an increasingly diversified radio landscape, where the number of different formats has multiplied. Greater specialisation of radios led to formats being differentiated both by age of listeners and by musical style - dictated by highly competitive conditions. Specialisation in certain types of music, like dance, for example, meant it was difficult to find sufficient numbers or sufficiently good French records. The problem was illustrated by one of the most serious cases of breaking the law, that of the regional network Vibration (based in Orléans), which in order to conform to the law initially changed its format to more French rap, lost half its audience, and came back to its original wide-ranging pop-and-rock format with 60% of new releases, but without reaching the 40% target for French recordings. It claimed it needed to retain its distinctiveness in order not to lose its audience and disappear, and that the law needed to recognise this.

13 SNEP (1997), op. cit., p. 27.
In order to take account of the diversification of French radio, and to avoid the risk of standardisation of radio in general through more and more uniform play-lists\textsuperscript{15}, the CSA floated the idea of ‘modulated’ quotas. In June 2000 parliament accepted an amendment to the law that was designed to favour the exposure of new performers on radio, but not to penalise radios that concentrate on the musical heritage (‘adult’ radios). For specific formats the CSA may now grant a 'derogation' to allow a radio either to drop to 35\% of French records provided the percentage of new talent reaches 25\% of the total, or to play only 10\% of new talent where a radio reaches 60\% of French song overall.\textsuperscript{16}

**Music radio in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century**

The differentiation of French music radio has settled down as the inevitable economic concentration of capital and competition for audiences within the sector reached a state of equilibrium as the new century dawned. Youth music radio (NRJ, Skyrock, Fun) is still able to support the French music industry in its new productions. Adult radio stations have tried to differentiate their formats between younger and older adult, i.e. between a mix of new and older songs, both French and Anglo-American, and one or two stations such as RFM playing ‘gold’ rock and pop from the sixties onwards. There remain one or two stations aiming at an over-fifties audience such as MFM or Chante France or the State network Radio Bleue, that have a higher percentage of French song and indeed a higher percentage of traditional ‘chanson’.

The quotas issue tells us that France has a diverse and flourishing radio industry. It tells us that while the interests of the music industry and of radio are symbiotically interlinked, they are not identical. They show too that that cultural-imperialism theories and


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models are alive and well in France, and that this may reflect the dominance of an older generation of French decision-makers rather than the mass of the younger generation of listeners. Radio quotas are part of a much wider anxiety among French elites about national identity and merely one of a number of policy instruments putting into effect a defence of the French language and ultimately of national identity. However, whereas French elites readily apply notions of cultural imperialism to the relations of the USA to Western Europe, French youth has been fascinated by American culture in the post-war era.

Finally, the affair reminds us that, while national identity may be a much more explicit concern in France than in most other modern states, issues of identity are central to popular music, and to radio and the mass media in general.

Television

Television is often assumed to have taken over from sound radio as the key entertainment medium of the late twentieth century. In terms of popular music the relationship is not so simple. As will be seen, television’s programming of popular music has in some ways imitated and followed trends set on radio. Like radio, television’s programming of popular music suffered for a long time from a dearth of channels and therefore of air time. Two other main factors affecting French television’s changing relationship to popular music as content have been, firstly, the late commercialisation of television with the creation of independent terrestrial channels in the middle 1980s and the privatisation of the top audience channel TF1 in 1987, which created a strong independent sector entirely dependent on income from advertising and therefore needing to attract large audiences; and secondly, European

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16 Aaron, Didier (2001), ‘L’évolution de la programmation musicale en radio’,
legislation on quotas of French and European-produced programmes imposed on television from 1990 onwards, which have had a restrictive effect on music programming. Within the commercial and legal contexts created by these factors, two major television phenomena have structured music television, the French television tradition of the variety show, and the long wait for a dedicated French music channel.

**Popular music and the ‘variety show’ in the public service television era**

The genre called 'Variétés', has been, at least until the expansion of television channels from the mid-1980s, a key vehicle for the televising of popular music in France. The genre was taken from the radio format which itself was a borrowing from the Music Hall. Initially television simply filmed such performances, even radio shows. Titles such as *Radio Parade* and *Music hall à la TV* leave no room for doubt about the lack of creativity in the early use of television medium.\(^{17}\) There is a strong tradition of shows being televised from music hall theatres, such as the Olympia. From 1956 onwards the Eurovision Song Contest was a major annual showcase. Talent competitions were popular in the 1960s, for example Mireille's *Petit Conservatoire* (also inspired from radio). Johnny Hallyday, Mireille Matthieu, and Thierry Le Luron first came to a national audience in this way. The harmonica player Albert Raisner was a popular presenter in the 1960s. A variation on the Variety Show format in the 1960s was the live special devoted to a single star, or the hybrid Sunday afternoon family show *Dimanche Martin*, in the 1970s and 1980s, recorded in front of a live audience in a theatre. It involved the traditional elements of the Music Hall (song; dance, humour and speciality acts), but also game show and children's talent competition held together by the star host Jacques Martin. The Variety Show later turned into part talk show, part variety show.

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\(^{17}\) Achard, Pierre (1995), ‘50 ans de paillettes’, *Notes : le journal de la SACEM* (144), January, reprinted in *Dossiers de l’audiovisuel* (97), 2001, 14-17.
show, such as Jacques Chancel's *Le Grand Echiquier* and Michel Drucker's *Champs Elysées* in the 1980s and two decades later Drucker's *Vivement Dimanche*. These shows also revolve around star host interviewer or compere, who has his own guests, his own team and his own style; thus giving continuity to the shows, and are recorded in front of a live audience, two of them a small audience in the studio.

The variety show is essentially family television and it is no coincidence that its peak popularity was at the time when there were only one or two channels, and limited broadcasting time, so little opportunity for narrow-casting to a niche audience. Stars such as Henri Salvador and Gilbert Bécaud could be regarded as appealing to a family audience. The mid-sixties onwards saw a major leap in the number of television sets in French homes: from 6 million in 1965 to 16 million in the late seventies. The second channel came on stream in 1964 and a third channel (with some regional programming in 1972). It was not until the mid-1980s that France saw a huge expansion of supply of programming with the deregulation of its State controlled television system. The State-controlled public service monopoly was broken with the creation in 1984 of the subscription channel Canal Plus, and in 1986 of a fifth and sixth commercial privately owned channel (the fifth channel was to go bankrupt and cease transmission in 1992). This period also saw the extension of hours of broadcasting. The major break with tradition however was the privatisation and commercialisation of the biggest audience channel, the first channel, TF1, in 1987 that brought far more money and competition into terrestrial television.

**Popular music and the ‘variety show’ in the era of commercial TV**

The traditional TV Variety Show genre did not die overnight. It received a boost by the creation of commercial television. Letailleur has traced the history of the genre through the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s, more international music, especially American and British,
and a greater range of music in general, was heard in France following the changes discussed above in the radio scene. This was bound to affect television programming. Whereas the typical Saturday night family variety show, such those hosted by Sacha Distel (*Sacha Show*), on American lines, but using mainly French talent such as Brassens and Montand, along with guests such as Duke Ellington, were replaced by new faces and a new tone. A new era was heralded, in 1982, on the second channel, by the programme *Les Enfants du rock*, that gave a showcase for punk, hard rock and new wave, and set a new tone that was built on by Antoine de Caunes (among others) on Canal Plus and certain commercial channels. This was the beginning of a division of the audience by age in television music programming. The Variety Show could no longer be used to attract all age groups. In the era of the star presenter as the key to audiences, the main commercial channel TF1 ‘bought’ key figures from the public service channels, and programmed more variety shows in the key audience period following the main (8 p.m.) evening news, in the hope of keeping the audience all evening. Regulation allowed two advertising breaks in such shows, whereas one was the maximum for a cinema film. In 1990 42% of variety shows were at this time of the evening. A new structure of show was introduced to reduce the risk of losing an audience through changing channel through the newly available remote control: stars announced at the start to appear later, often at the end of the show. The key name here is Michel Drucker with *Champs-Elysées*.

The first showing of Michael Jackson's video *Thriller* in 1983 on *Champs-Elysées* was another landmark in French music television. It brought back a certain number of young viewers to the Variety Show as it programmed youth music, and also foreshadowed a new genre and a new type of television that is picked up by the commercial channel M6 (see below). Initially it brought a reliance by television on stars that emerged from the

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18 Letailleur, Laurent (2001), ‘Les variétés à la télévision’, *Dossiers de*
programming of the major music radios, and the accusation by the music industry that TV was merely using established music stars and not taking risks on new talent. The situation was further complicated by the arrival of legislation imposing minimum quotas of French and European 'audiovisual works'.

**Effects of television quotas on the variety-show genre**

The Uruguay round of GATT talks (1986-1993) culminated in a French-inspired European Union defence of cinema film and television programmes as artistic products and not as ordinary consumer products. This successful negotiation enabled cultural products to be treated as a ‘cultural exception’ to free-trade rules and therefore potentially subject to quotas or other forms of protectionism. Under French pressure, this notion of cultural quotas has been applied to European Union audiovisual policy through the ‘Télévision sans frontières’ directive of 1989 and in its revision in 1997, at least in the form of a political aspiration expressed as ‘where practicable’. This has enabled France legally to maintain its own quotas of European produced television programmes.19

By a decree of 17 January 1990 television channels, both public service and private/commercial, were obliged to programme a certain annual volume of European-produced and French-language material. As regards popular music, the variety show did not count among these home-grown quotas. 15% of the previous year's turnover had to be put into the creation of new French works. Each channel had to programme 120 hours of French or European programming beginning in the peak time of 8-9 p.m. This meant in effect 60 to 80 evenings reserved for telefilms or magazine programmes. As Letailleur points out, once

one adds cinema films and sports events, there is precious little time left for entertainment shows such as variety shows at this time of the evening on the main audience channels.  

Furthermore, a new television genre became popular and further shrunk the prime time televising of popular music on the big channels: the reality show, whether crime-related, the search for missing people, or psycho-therapy for exhibitionists. The effect of the above changes on variety programming may be seen by figures showing how many of the genre appeared in the fifty top audience shows in 1992 (2) compared to 1990 (19).  

**Radio killed the variety star**

As regards the relation of radio to TV (as seen above), the nineties saw a move to much narrower formatting by age, a segmentation of musical tastes, and a reduction in the range of French song played. The variety show had been based predominantly on French song and on a diversity or range of types and genres of song. Letailleur argues that the narrower musical range and exclusivity of taste being promoted by the commercial radio sector helped kill off the variety show as the main vehicle for French popular music, as audiences withered for those shows that were left. Two music shows worth recalling differ from the standard variety show format: TF1's daily weekday afternoon show *La chance aux chansons*, from 1984 onwards on TF1, a long-standing show based on traditional French song (that no self-respecting young person would admit to watching), and *Taratata*, from 1993 on the second channel, a late night contemporary music show, where all the acts played live and aimed

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precisely at a young audience. Both depended to a great extent for their (very different) styles on their presenters Pascal Sevran and Nagui. The former is very *vieille France*, and the latter, of North African origins, much more trendy in dress and language.

**Music and ‘post-television’**

The variety show has not traditionally been a recyclable genre in the sense that, unlike cinema films or series, it has not been broadcast in the form of repeats. The public-service educational (fifth) channel, (la Cinquième) has distributed two series of half-hour musical documentaries, each one devoted to a music-hall or *chanson* stars from Mistinguett to Pierre Perret (*Les Lumières du Music-Hall*) that are a valuable resource for study of French popular music, and which uses archive footage from early and more recent television to what they claim to be (the beginnings of) an encyclopædia of French song.\(^{23}\) Neo-television or post-(modern) television, which one might define as self-referential television - programming that talks about itself in a self-celebratory mode - has found a way of recycling the variety show genre as a form of nostalgia. Archives formed the basis of *Les rendez-vous du dimanche soir* on France 3, *Dansez maintenant* on France 2 (stars of bygone eras) and TV archives plus a round table of guests to reminisce about extracts in *Telle est la télé* (TF1). These programmes have however been short-lived.

**Dedicated music channels: France versus America**

From the mid-eighties there was much talk of creating a television channel dedicated to music, especially French music, and indeed linked in to the French music industry in the same way that Canal Plus was linked to the French cinema industry. It was seen as a response to an audience demand, but also as a way of protecting and promoting another French cultural industry. It was achieved in part in terms of French free-to-air television.

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\(^{22}\) Letailleur, L., *ibid.*
The creation of the American global music channel MTV for distribution on satellite and cable was a further spur to create a French competitor.

**The search for a commercial music channel on terrestrial television**

In the 1990s, partly as a response to the quotas problem, the amount of contemporary popular music programmed on free terrestrial television went down by 16% over the decade. Two commercial channels showing dramatic falls were particularly to blame: the main audience channel TF1 dropped from 197 hours to 77, and Canal Plus from 329 to 26 hours. Public service TV on the other hand increased its programming to 480 hours from 302, particularly on its popular audience channel France 2.\(^{24}\) The proportion of music programming on terrestrial channels is low, 6.9% of total air time (of which 1% is devoted to classical music). This compares to 12.1% devoted to cinema, 4.7% to sport, and 9.5% to news and current affairs.\(^{25}\) This situation highlights the continuing importance of the minority audience terrestrial commercial channel M6, whose music programming certainly fell in the 1990s, marginally, but from 2614 hours in 1990 to 2400 hours in 2000. M6 is not however the dedicated music channel that some hoped it might be.

When the first free-to-air commercial channels were created in March 1986, the sixth channel franchise was awarded to a consortium including the advertising agency Publicis and the radio broadcaster NRJ. The franchise stipulated that it was to be aimed at the under-25s (who watched little TV) and was to programme half of its time to music, to publish 100 music videos per year and devote 50% of its programming to French-made programmes. This long-argued for link between the popular music industry and television was however short-lived. A change of government within 3 months of the channel’s opening allowed the

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\(^{23}\) See the channel’s website: [http://www.lacinquieme.fr/](http://www.lacinquieme.fr/)

new Prime Minister Chirac, as a part of changes to the media landscape created by the outgoing socialist governments, to reallocate the franchises for the new commercial channels to more politically acceptable partners. The replacement channel was to be less exclusively musical.

**M6 and the youth music audience**

The new franchise was won by Metropole TV (M6), run by the Luxembourg company CLT and the French utility company Lyonnaise des Eaux, and presided by Jean Drucker. It agreed to maintain a young target audience (15 to 35 years) and to devote 40% of its programme time to popular music, half of which should be French. Its audience grew to about 16% in terms of audience share (20% of the under-50s), and it reached its all-time record with the French version of *Big Brother, Loft Story*, in 2001 (up to 38% on certain evenings) - a programme that appealed particularly to the youth audience.26

The broadcasting licensing authority saw M6 as a way of offering musical programming to the French youth audience, as competition to English-language music channels on cable and satellite. M6 initially broadcast 25 hours per week of popular music, produced 100 music videos per year and organised concerts to be later broadcast.27 Its requirement to devote 40% of its programming to contemporary music was reduced to 30% in the reallocation of its franchise in 1996. It was gradually trying to reduce its image as merely a video jukebox created by programmes such as *Boulevard des clips*, and to promote its image as a generalist channel. But its specificity is indeed the air space given to music videos and its investment in their production: in 1999 it broadcast 1700 hours of *vidéo clips*

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25 Leboeuf, D. and Samyn, C., *ibid.*
and co-produced 150. It concentrates its music programming into morning, afternoon and late-night slots, with a prime time music magazine on Saturday evening. M6 also has an important stake in music publishing and sponsors pop concerts and festivals. It is not the television equivalent of youth music radios, but youth is its target audience when it come to music.

**New pay-TV channels and niche broadcasting**

Cable and satellite channels have followed the fragmentation of public taste in popular music that has been seen above. The late 1990s saw a jump in the number of pay-TV channels, once the digital satellite suppliers CanalSatellite (owned by Canal Plus) and TPS (a consortium dominated by TF1, but also including public service TV and M6) began broadcasting in 1996. Practically all such channels are thematic and seek niche audiences. Of the 83 thematic channels approved by the Broadcasting Licensing Authority at the start of the new century, nine were devoted to music - six of them to popular music. RFM TV and Fun TV are channels emerging from radio stations; M6 Musique is an extension of the commercial TV channel that is most active in pop music; MTV is the European version of the American all-music channel; MCM is its French equivalent; and a sixth is Zik. They have each sought their own niche market. Fun and RFM seek the 15-25 years old and the ‘golden-oldie’ markets respectively, as their radio identity would suggest. M6 Musique is looking to cater for the increasing specialisation of musical taste in the 18-35 years market, and concentrates this channel exclusively on music videos. The hourly volume of popular

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music now available on these channels now makes up for the loss of hours on terrestrial TV, but not in terms of loss of audience.29

MCM

MCM was one of the first pop music channels on cable and satellite, and in 1995 became the top audience channel in this niche. It has tried to position itself first of all in the French market, but seeks to expand internationally. Its target is the 15-24 year olds and their lifestyle: in addition to music, it programmes magazines on new fun sports (rollergliding, snowboarding, etc.) and on video games. It aims to use digital technology to allow more interactivity in choice of music videos. Along with M6 it claims to be the only French channel that seeks to promote new musical talent, whereas other channels take fewer risks. Their main competitor is MTV, with 1.5 million subscribers compared to 2.5 million for MCM. MTV banks on stars and broadcasts only 1% of French songs.30

'Le vidéo-clip'

The French music video, as seen above, is an important genre on French music television. It may have Anglo-American origins - Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody in 1975 usually being regarded as creating the genre - and it may have been Michael Jackson's Thriller that imposed it as a necessity for promoting pop songs, but, in France, it is now State-subsidised. Culture Ministers F Léotard and J Lang in 1987 and 1990 created a National Fund for ‘vidéomusiques’, managed jointly by the national Fund for Cinematography and the Fund for Musical Creation. Also at the State's behest, the sixth TV channel and its successor M6 have invested in music video production. As in many other cultural and artistic niches, the French State is keen to see France and the French language represented alongside the dominant

Anglo-American producers and artists. If commercial forces are insufficient to guarantee the maintenance of a French presence, then the State will step in - in this case in a new domain of popular culture.

Conclusion

Music programming on radio and television has moved from offering, pre-1981, a relatively standardised diet of popular music to a mass audience to offering a wide range of musical formats to segmented audiences on distinct, dedicated musical stations or channels. Radio has led this trend and has had more influence than television on the ways that French musical tastes and the French music industry have developed. From the pre- and post-war days when the French were listening to Charles Trenet and Edith Piaf on their valve radios, through the sixties when radio was taking the lead in introducing French youth to rock and pop via French cover versions of American hits, to the nineties when Skyrock helped create a French form of rap, radio has been the key medium of creation of French musical taste. Television has merely tried to follow in the wake of its more flexible and older sibling. The variety show, long the staple musical format offered to a ‘family audience’, has been superseded by more segmented offerings to a more fragmented audience, as musical tastes have diversified, initially by age group.

The case of popular music on French radio and television illustrates various paradoxes within French exceptionalism. If the role of the French State within French society is exemplified in the way it kept control of broadcasting long after Britain, for example, had introduced independent television, one of the effects of this statism was to restrict the number and range of outlets for popular music on radio and television. Did this restrict the
development of more diverse forms of French popular music beyond the traditional ‘chanson’ that was for so long the staple diet of the variety show, and that spanned the generations and the social classes in its appeal? Or was it an early form of protectionism against the feared influence of Anglo-American culture on indigenous French culture, a protectionism that has later been pursued quite overtly, since the 1990s in the form of linguistic quotas? French responses to globalisation (which is often equated with Americanisation) may also be seen as paradoxical. At different times American pop culture has been rejected as the carrier of a threat to national cultural identity. There was suspicion among decision-makers about the yéyé phenomenon of the 1960s, a French adaptation of British and American pop songs, as given wide exposure on radio Europe No. 1, and to an extent on French television. This suspicion has been recurrent at different historical moments, for example in the case of certain American-influenced rap groups such as NTM and more generally in the amount of American song that began to appear on the new independent radio sector on the 1990s. What is indisputable is the fascination of French youth for aspects of American musical culture, from rock and pop music, through Michael Jackson’s videos to gangster rap. More recently, the State has attempted to encourage and indeed to subsidise the production of certain Anglo-American-born genres of pop culture within a French context – as a kind of cultural ‘glocalisation’. A prime example is the video clip, whether as a form of television support for music or as an art form in itself. Since the Jack Lang era of French cultural policy, certain aspects of youth culture (rock, rap, techno, or video clips) can be seen as respectable forms of expression of aspects of French culture.

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