

Joséphine Bowes Sings Nell Gwynn (Music Project 1/Arts & Humanities)

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Introduction

French Vaudeville is an interesting yet massively under-studied part of French history. This unique genre of popular theatre combined spoken dialogue with short musical numbers, parody, and satire, appealing to a broad audience in 19th-century France. Unlike grand opera or serious drama, vaudeville thrived on accessibility, humour, and topicality, often poking fun at social conventions or political figures of the day. Despite its cultural importance at the time, many vaudeville works have faded into obscurity, surviving only in fragile handwritten manuscripts that are difficult for modern readers and musicians to access. Studying and transcribing these manuscripts therefore offers not only a glimpse into the entertainment and values of the period, but also an opportunity to preserve a neglected strand of theatrical and musical heritage.

My Laidlaw project has focused on one of these plays, *Les beautés de la cour*, and the challenge of working with its original manuscripts. Over the past three months I have been transcribing and typesetting the music into MuseScore, with the aim of creating a version that is both faithful to the original and usable for modern performers or researchers. This report sets out the background to the project, the methods I used, and the difficulties I encountered when dealing with 19th-century notation. It also reflects on what this experience taught me about archival research, digitisation, and the broader significance of reviving forgotten cultural material. By combining historical context with practical transcription work, I hope to show how even a small project can contribute to making neglected art forms visible again.

Initial Research

As someone who had slightly less musical exposure prior to this project, in accordance with advice from Katherine Hambridge, my project supervisor, I ensured to give myself a brief overview of the key essentials that I would need to start this project off on the right foot. This began with taking an eight-hour Open University introduction to music theory course, which gave me the necessary grounding in reading notation, understanding rhythm and harmony, and applying these skills to the process of transcription. Alongside this technical preparation, I also undertook extensive reading into the history and cultural function of vaudeville itself, to make sure that I understood the theatrical world in which *Les beautés de la cour* would originally have been performed.

David Monod's *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment, 1890–1925* (2020) highlights the genre's importance in shaping the development of popular culture, showing how it

bridged the gap between elite and mass entertainment. Although Monod focuses on the later American context, his arguments about accessibility and hybridity were useful in framing vaudeville as a genre that constantly adapted to its audiences. Jennifer Terni's study of French vaudeville in the 1830s and 1840s (2006) was particularly relevant, as she situates the form within the rhythms of Parisian urban life, suggesting that the genre functioned as an early form of mass culture that responded directly to the politics and humour of its time. Sarah Hibberd's article on Hérold's *La Somnambule* (2004) provided another valuable angle, illustrating how vaudeville intersected with contemporary fascination with dreams and psychology, and reminding me that the music often carried subtle cultural resonances beyond the surface comedy. Finally, Johanna Danciu's research into Pierre-Yvon Barré emphasises the hybrid nature of vaudeville as a repertoire that continually reinvented itself, combining spoken theatre, song, parody, and satire in ways that resisted strict categorisation (Danciu).

Together, this preparatory work gave me both the technical musical skills and the contextual grounding to approach the manuscripts with more confidence. It also made clear that my project was not just about transferring notes into MuseScore, but about recognising vaudeville as a dynamic and significant cultural form that deserves renewed scholarly attention.

Method of Work

The foundation of this project was the set of *Les beautés de la cour* manuscripts held by the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle. These manuscripts, written in fragile nineteenth-century hand, provided both the greatest opportunity and the greatest challenge of the research. On one hand, they were the only surviving witnesses to the work, and therefore the key to making it accessible again. On the other, their handwritten nature meant that I had to navigate blurred ink, occasional corrections, and notational habits that differed from modern practice. Careful handling and close reading became a daily part of the process, as I tried to balance accuracy with usability.

To capture the music in a form that could be shared and analysed, I used MuseScore, an open-source notation software that allows for professional-looking typeset scores and automatic playback. Working measure by measure, I entered the notes from the manuscript into MuseScore, checking rhythms and pitches carefully against the original. Where handwriting was ambiguous, I sometimes had to compare passages with repeated material elsewhere in the score, or test out alternative interpretations to see which made musical sense. MuseScore proved invaluable in this respect: hearing the playback allowed me to spot obvious inconsistencies, which could then be corrected by returning to the manuscript. This process was slow at first but became faster as I grew familiar with the notational style of the scribe.

The libretto offered another crucial layer of evidence. I was able to access a printed version through Google Books, which provided the complete text of the sung numbers. This was particularly helpful when setting lyrics to the melodies I had typeset. Rather than guessing at text underlay from the manuscripts - often cramped or abbreviated - I could align the words of

the libretto with the melodic line in MuseScore. This not only clarified scansion and word stress but also gave a clearer sense of how music and comedy interacted in performance.

Occasionally, discrepancies between the libretto and the manuscript highlighted interesting editorial choices, such as slight changes in wording or additional repetitions of lines. I noted these carefully, since they may indicate performance traditions or revisions after the initial writing.

Alongside the practical work of transcription, I met regularly with my supervisor, Dr Katherine Hambridge. These meetings provided both guidance and accountability. We discussed the difficulties of interpreting manuscript shorthand, strategies for resolving ambiguities, and the broader historical significance of what I was finding. To keep track of progress, I maintained a shared document where I logged hours worked, pieces transcribed, and reflections on challenges encountered. This running record not only helped me manage the workload over the summer but also formed a valuable resource when writing this report, as I could trace the evolution of my methods and thinking.

In short, my method combined three strands: the primary manuscripts as the authoritative source, MuseScore as the tool for modern transcription, and the libretto as a textual anchor for matching music and words. Supplemented by regular supervision and reflective logging, this approach allowed me to create a reliable and usable digital edition while also developing a deeper understanding of how nineteenth-century vaudeville functioned on stage and page.

Issues Faced

Working with handwritten nineteenth-century manuscripts inevitably brought a range of difficulties. While the overall process of transcription was rewarding, there were several recurring issues that slowed progress and required practical problem-solving.

The first challenge was that manuscript cues would often differ from those in the libretto. This made it difficult to work out which number in the manuscript corresponded to which section of the printed text. In some cases, the numbering systems seemed completely misaligned. The solution here was fairly manual - I had to go through the libretto carefully and try to match songs one by one, comparing word structures and musical style until the correct pairing became clear. This slowed the pace but ensured the typeset version stayed reliable.

A second problem was the appearance of missing songs. Occasionally, a manuscript would include a number that did not appear at all in the libretto. For example, one piece labelled as number 5 in the manuscript simply did not exist in the printed libretto. It was as if the number had been cut before performance but never erased from the music. In these cases, I chose not to text set the absent lyrics but still kept the melody in MuseScore to reflect the source as it survives.

There were also times when the same number appeared more than once. A good example was number 26, which cropped up across several different pieces. Here, the only way forward was to

use stylistic judgment and textual comparison. One of the pieces labelled “26” was extremely high and very fast, which strongly suggested that it was instrumental rather than vocal. By cross-checking with the libretto, I was able to identify which of the competing “26s” matched the correct text.

Crossings-out in the manuscripts posed another difficulty. Sometimes entire numbers, and sometimes just a few measures, were heavily struck through by the copyist. This created uncertainty over whether to include or omit the material in my transcription. My approach was to read through the crossings-out and compare them against the libretto. If the words in the libretto required those notes, then I kept them in the typeset score. If not, I omitted them but always noted the decision in my log.

Finally, there was the issue of how to typeset multiple vocal parts. At first, I used MuseScore’s “voice 1” and “voice 2” functions on a single staff to show overlapping lines. After discussion with Katherine, we realised this was not the clearest option. A more professional critical edition would separate the parts onto distinct staves. For this project, the voices were left in the original format, but I highlighted this as something to improve in a future version.

Although these challenges slowed the project at times, they were also some of the most valuable learning experiences. Each difficulty pushed me to think carefully about the relationship between manuscript, libretto, and performance, and gave me confidence in making editorial decisions. They also showed me how much of research lies in small, detailed problem-solving, rather than sweeping conclusions.

Findings/Analysis

Once the transcription process was underway, it became easier to notice patterns and features in both the music and the text of *Les beautés de la cour*. Working closely with the manuscripts and libretto gave me a practical insight into how nineteenth-century vaudeville functioned as a performance genre, as well as how its humour and characterisation relied on a combination of music and words.

From a musical point of view, one of the most striking features was the brevity of the numbers. Unlike the extended arias of grand opera, vaudeville songs were short, usually no more than a page or two, and often built on simple melodic phrases. This brevity served the drama: the songs punctuated dialogue, delivered jokes, or highlighted character quirks without interrupting the flow of the play. In MuseScore, this meant that most numbers could be typed out in an afternoon, but it also highlighted how the musical material was designed to be accessible, memorable, and quickly performed.

The harmonic language of the songs was similarly straightforward. Most numbers stayed in clear major or minor keys, with uncomplicated cadences and predictable modulations. This is consistent with vaudeville’s role as a popular genre - the music was there to carry the text, not to overwhelm it with complexity. At the same time, there were moments where the harmony did

something unusual, such as an unexpected chromatic turn or a sudden shift in tempo. These moments often aligned with comedic twists in the libretto, suggesting that the musical surprises were part of the humour.

Rhythm and metre also played an important role. Several numbers used jaunty dotted rhythms or dance-like patterns, which would have given the songs an immediately recognisable style for the audience. Others switched between duple and triple time to match the flow of the text. When aligning the libretto with the melodies, I often noticed how the composer had deliberately matched stressed syllables to strong beats, ensuring that the comedy or punchline landed in rhythmically prominent places. This showed me how closely words and music worked together in vaudeville, much more so than in some operatic traditions where music could dominate the text.

Another interesting finding was the way certain numbers appeared to reuse or adapt familiar musical material. Some melodies were close to popular song styles of the period, and it is possible that audiences would have recognised them. Vaudeville often relied on parody, so slipping in a tune that resembled a well-known melody would have added an extra comic layer. Without broader comparative study, it is hard to confirm exact borrowings, but the style certainly pointed in that direction.

The relationship between the manuscripts and the libretto also revealed performance practice. Discrepancies between the two suggested that alterations were made during rehearsals or early performances. Crossings-out, missing numbers, and repeated cues hinted at a flexible approach, where material could be adjusted depending on the audience or pacing of the show. Rather than treating the manuscript as a fixed text, it seems more accurate to view it as a working document - one that evolved alongside the practical realities of performance.

Beyond the musical features, the libretto itself revealed cultural and linguistic distinctions between characters. One of the clearest patterns was the way social status was reflected in speech. Characters of lower social standing used more colloquial French, with contractions and abbreviations such as *j'te* instead of *je te*. These choices gave their lines a more casual, everyday feel, and marked them out linguistically from the more formal characters. By contrast, higher-class figures spoke in polished, grammatically correct French, which aligned with their roles in the courtly or aristocratic settings of the play. This linguistic coding would have been instantly recognisable to nineteenth-century audiences, reinforcing class stereotypes while also making humour out of them.

This use of language differences mirrors what I observed in the music. Just as harmonic simplicity or rhythmic quirks supported comic characters, linguistic variation signalled social hierarchies and played into audience expectations. Together, the musical and verbal styles created a multi-layered performance where humour, parody, and satire worked through both sound and speech.

What this analysis showed me most of all is that vaudeville was not simply light entertainment but a carefully balanced combination of cultural cues. Short, catchy melodies, accessible

harmonic language, and text tailored to character types made the genre widely appealing, while also allowing space for subtle satire. The transcription process did not just produce a clean score in MuseScore - it provided a window into how humour, class, and performance interacted on the nineteenth-century stage.

Reflection and Personal Development

Looking back over the summer, one of the most important parts of the Laidlaw project for me was not just the finished transcription, but the process of working through the difficulties and realising how much I could adapt and learn along the way. At the beginning, I had less musical background than many people who take on this type of work, and that worried me slightly. However, by deliberately investing time in training - through the Open University course in music theory and the contextual reading on vaudeville - I gave myself a foundation that made the project possible. What felt daunting at first gradually became manageable once I had the right tools.

Another key development was learning to deal with ambiguity. Handwritten manuscripts rarely give clear answers, and there were many moments when I had to decide whether to trust the libretto, the notation, or my own musical instincts. At first, I found this frustrating, since I assumed there must be a "right" solution hidden in the documents. Over time, I came to see that part of the job of a researcher is to make reasoned judgments, while also keeping a record of why those decisions were made. This helped me shift my mindset - instead of waiting for certainty, I learned to become comfortable with carefully argued uncertainty.

The regular meetings with Katherine were also a big part of my development. They provided a structure to the project and a chance to test my ideas in a supportive but rigorous environment. I became better at articulating my reasoning and also at listening to constructive criticism. Having to explain my progress each week kept me accountable and made sure that I did not let small problems accumulate. The shared log of progress also turned out to be unexpectedly useful. Writing notes about what I had done, what had gone well, and what had been difficult forced me to reflect on my own working habits. By the end, I could look back through the log and see how my confidence had grown across the three months.

On a personal level, the project gave me a much stronger sense of independence. Unlike coursework or shorter assignments, this was a sustained piece of research where there was no set formula to follow. I had to set my own timetable, keep myself motivated, and find solutions to unexpected problems. That experience taught me how important self-discipline is, but also that I am capable of it when I care about the subject.

Finally, I came away with a deeper appreciation for the importance of preserving and re-presenting cultural material. Vaudeville may not be the most famous or prestigious part of French history, but working with *Les beautés de la cour* showed me how much life, humour, and cultural value is hidden in genres that are often overlooked. Being able to contribute, even in a

small way, to making this material accessible felt rewarding and worthwhile. It also reminded me why research matters - not just for academic audiences, but for keeping cultural history alive.

Conclusions

This project set out to transcribe and typeset the handwritten manuscripts of *Les beautés de la cour*, a nineteenth-century French vaudeville held at the Bowes Museum. What began as a task that felt slightly overwhelming, especially given my limited musical background, developed into a rewarding process that combined historical research, musical transcription, and personal growth.

By working systematically through the manuscripts in MuseScore and aligning them with the libretto, I was able to produce a usable digital score that captures both the music and the text of the play. Along the way, I confronted numerous challenges - from mismatched cues and missing numbers to crossings-out and repeated numbering. Each of these difficulties forced me to engage critically with the sources, to make careful editorial choices, and to reflect on the flexible nature of vaudeville as a performance genre.

The analysis of the music and libretto revealed much about the character of vaudeville itself. Short, simple melodies supported witty and often colloquial lyrics, while linguistic variation reinforced class distinctions within the play. Together, the text and music created a lively and accessible form of entertainment that spoke directly to contemporary audiences.

More broadly, this project has shown me the value of giving attention to genres that have been understudied or neglected. By producing a digital edition of *Les beautés de la cour*, I hope to have taken one small step towards making vaudeville more accessible for both performers and researchers, and towards recognising its role in the wider story of nineteenth-century cultural life.

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