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# The Philosophical Constitution of Classical Music Criticism in Part I of d'Alembert's *Discours préliminaire* (1751)

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The *philosophes* of the Enlightenment were actively engaged in music criticism, an area scholar Bojan Bujić defines as “the intellectual activity of formulating judgments on the value and degree of excellence” of music.<sup>1</sup> Although systematic exchanges of musical opinions already existed by the late Renaissance, it was not until the Enlightenment that modern music criticism began to be developed by a dedicated intellectual community.<sup>2</sup> The dialogue among the *philosophes* also contributed to the strong connection between philosophy and music criticism, which was in its infancy.<sup>3</sup> Although scholars have demonstrated that music criticism was a significant part of the *philosophes'* discourse, the effect of Enlightenment philosophies on eighteenth-century music criticism can be further explained by looking into Part I of *Discours préliminaire*, where the author, Jean d'Alembert, discusses his conception of the origins, nature and classification of all the recognized bodies of knowledge, including music.<sup>4</sup> The *Discours*, published in 1751, is a

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<sup>1</sup> See definition in Bojan Bujić, “Criticism of Music,” *The Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. Alison Latham, *Oxford Music Online* (accessed April 26, 2013). See also the intense musical discussions among the *philosophes* in Cynthia Verba, *Music and the French Enlightenment: Reconstruction of a Dialogue, 1750-1764* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1-7.

<sup>2</sup> For more on pre-Enlightenment music criticism, see Georgia Jackson Cowart, *The Origins of Modern Music Criticism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 1-20, and Alfred Richard Oliver, *The Encyclopedists as Critics of Music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), 3-6.

<sup>3</sup> Cowart shows how the Enlightenment saw “the beginnings of systematic aesthetics” and “the development of a modern aesthetic system” in *The Origins*, 87.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Le Huray and James Day, eds., observe “that so much space was given to music in the *Encyclopédie* was due doubtless to the interest that both editors had on the subject [in an intellectual manner].” *Music*

preface to the highly influential *Encyclopédie* co-edited by d'Alembert and Diderot, an ambitious project mobilizing nearly all the major scholars of the French Enlightenment to catalogue and conceptualize the interconnection of all available knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Given this background, by analyzing d'Alembert's musical remarks in Part I of the *Discours*, I hope to explain the effect of Enlightenment philosophy on early music criticism in terms of the relationship between d'Alembert's musical and philosophical ideas, and the position of music criticism in the system of knowledge the *Encyclopédie* concerns. I argue that d'Alembert's music criticism is closely tied with his humanist philosophy: that both his musical and philosophical views can be conceptualized in terms of "human potential, human progress, and human objectivity," and that music is well integrated into the system of knowledge acknowledged under Enlightenment philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

## Human Potential, Human Progress, and Human Objectivity

Throughout Part I of the *Discours*, d'Alembert emphasizes that human sensation is the basis of all knowledge.<sup>7</sup> As Figure 1 shows, d'Alembert believes that more intricate and advanced knowledge forms, like ethics and algebra, are derived from primitive perceptions of needs and of external physical objects respectively. D'Alembert maintains that music, similar to other knowledge forms, consists of "putting together beings similar to those which are the object" of physical sensations.<sup>8</sup> While sensations, of needs and of external objects for example, are common in all humankind, d'Alembert implies that high forms of knowledge, including music, are universally accessible to human beings, who all possess this innate potential to sense and

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*and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 48-50.

The object of my study is Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard N. Schwab. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1963), 3-59. My reason for choosing Part I is that the chapter addresses most directly the topic of music, and of music being part of the knowledge system.

<sup>5</sup> The *Encyclopédie* is also monumental for being the prototype of modern encyclopedias, with key features like cross-referencing among entries. The notion of an all-encompassing catalogue of existent knowledge was borrowed from Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia* (London: Printed for D. Midwinter, 1741). See Le Huray and Day, *Music and Aesthetics*, 48.

<sup>6</sup> These terms are my own interpretations of how d'Alembert's conceptualizes the potential, progress and objectivity in music, which are closely connected to his humanist philosophy in the *Discours*.

<sup>7</sup> A significant portion of Part I is devoted to discussing this topic: "the origin and generation of our ideas." Figure 1 summarizes many of the genealogical pathways described, with the sensations as the master generator of knowledge forms. D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, 5-45.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

feel.

Furthermore, d'Alembert claims that music currently "holds the last place" of all the fine arts because the practitioners "[lack] sufficient inventiveness and resourcefulness."<sup>9</sup> He explains that music so far has been restricted to depicting passions such as joy and sadness, which are products of sensations. A higher level of music, he argues, would express the sensations themselves. This superior method of depiction would need to be "grasped by the man of genius, perceived by the man of taste, [and] understood by the man of intelligence."<sup>10</sup> In other words, d'Alembert demands that musicians reach deeper into the basic and universal human sensations in order to create art that better reflects the process of learning and understanding. This view of *human potential* in music involves not only d'Alembert's humanist philosophy, but also his attempt of systematizing knowledge production.

A separate idea arises simultaneously out of d'Alembert's proposal for improving music. By following their innate potential, human beings are capable of bettering knowledge. Just as the natural development of human ideas and society could advance knowledge from basic need-perceptions to advanced forms like ethics and law, musicians could improve music by expressing more directly their raw perceptions.<sup>11</sup> D'Alembert implies that a natural law governs the process of understanding across knowledge forms, and the notion of *human progress* is underscored in d'Alembert's vision of musicians' *potential* for improving the current state of music.

Thirdly, d'Alembert stresses the importance of reasoning, upon which imagination is built. Figure 2 shows d'Alembert's chart of knowledge classification printed at the end of *Discours préliminaire*.<sup>12</sup> In d'Alembert's definition, memory, the record of sensations, constitutes the most fundamental category of knowledge. The next category level is reasoning, consisting of organizing and rationalizing memories. Finally, the highest level, imagination, is attainable after the essential grounding of reasoning.<sup>13</sup> This key stage of *objectivity*, or reasoning, which, by the natural *progress* of knowledge attainment, allows an individual to advance from the most sensorial memories to the most abstract imaginings, and, as d'Alembert argues, mastering the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>12</sup> Recall that Part I is dedicated to explaining the origin, nature and classification of all the available knowledge forms in the Enlightenment. The chart serves to elaborate the last point. In the *Discours*, d'Alembert describes the "encyclopedic tree," moving through each of the levels from memory to reason to imagination, *ibid.*, 50-59.

<sup>13</sup> "Placing reason ahead of imagination appears to us to be a well-founded arrangement.... Imagination is a creative faculty, and the mind, before it considers creating, begins by reasoning upon what it sees and knows." *Ibid.*, 51.

organization and rational process of the “reasoning” stage is necessary for mastering the fine arts such as music.<sup>14</sup>

## Why Consider Music Criticism and Enlightenment Philosophy?

In considering d’Alembert’s musical remarks in his philosophical framework, it becomes clear that philosophy nourished early music criticism in a one-way stream. The prestige of the *Encyclopédie* as a publication as well as d’Alembert’s active role as a *philosophe* signifies that the values, terms and ideas presented in the *Discours* are certainly representative of the philosophical discourse in the Enlightenment.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, since philosophy was also an integral part of social life in the era, these ideas would have also been made aware to the general public.<sup>16</sup> The public would have understood music, for example, as a body of knowledge worth discussing in an educated and intellectual manner, instead of as simply a light background entertainment.

In this paper, my investigation of the relationships between the philosophical and musical views in Part I of d’Alembert’s *Discours préliminaire* has led to an explanation of how both demonstrate the concepts of human potential, human progress, and human objectivity. I conclude by observing philosophy’s influence on early music criticism, which had significant intellectual and social implications at the time. There are many ways of expanding the scope of this research, of course, by considering also d’Alembert’s philosophical contemplation in the remaining two parts of *Discours* as well as in other music criticism texts such as the *Éléments de musique théorique et pratique*, or even works and views by other *philosophes*. It would also be beneficial to examine further implications of d’Alembert’s music criticism in the *Discours* specifically: for instance, examples of music criticism elsewhere in Europe, the influence of the *Discours* and the *Encyclopédie*, and the present-day applicability of the *Discours*. The twentieth-century music critic Alex Ross, for example, actively promotes the values of twentieth-century music to the society with his book *The Rest is Noise*.<sup>17</sup> This is potentially a legacy of the human-centric music criticism from the Enlightenment.

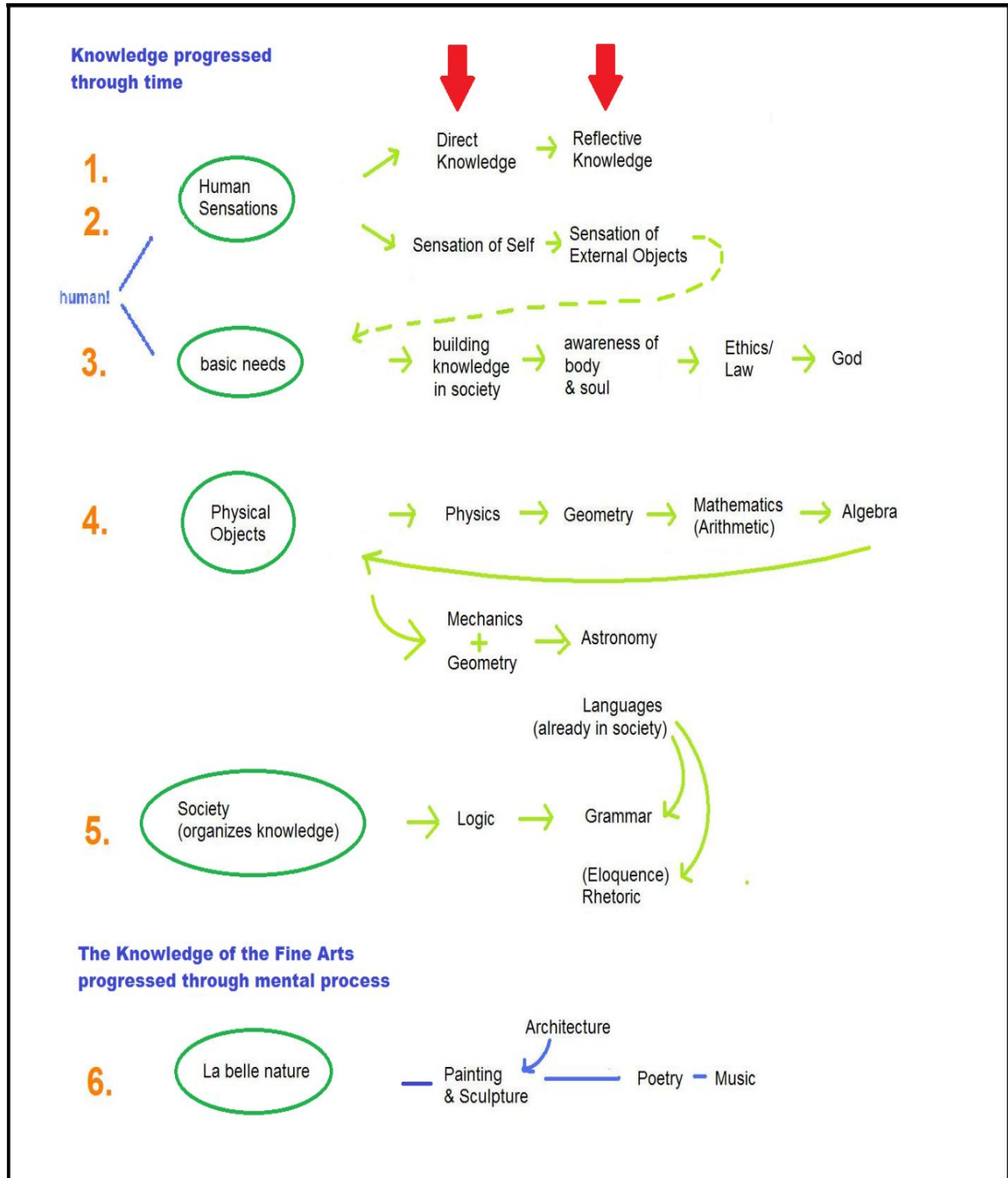
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<sup>14</sup> “If we examine the progress of reason in its successive operations, we will again agree... [that] reason in a way leads to imagination by the last operations which it makes on objects.” Ibid., 51.

<sup>15</sup> Le Huray and Day observe that the *Encyclopédie* was widely published, in six cities between 1751 and 1782, and was so popular that “they were copied, plagiarized and adapted in practically every late-eighteenth-century work of reference.” *Music and Aesthetics*, 48.

<sup>16</sup> See the role of public gathering places and printed materials in the dissemination of Enlightenment philosophical ideas in Richard Taruskin in *Music in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, vol. 2 of *Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 461.

<sup>17</sup> Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).



.Figure 1 Genealogy of knowledge forms in *Discours préliminaire*, Part I.

# \* SYSTÈME FIGURÉ DES CONNOISSANCES HUMAINES.

## ENTENDEMENT.

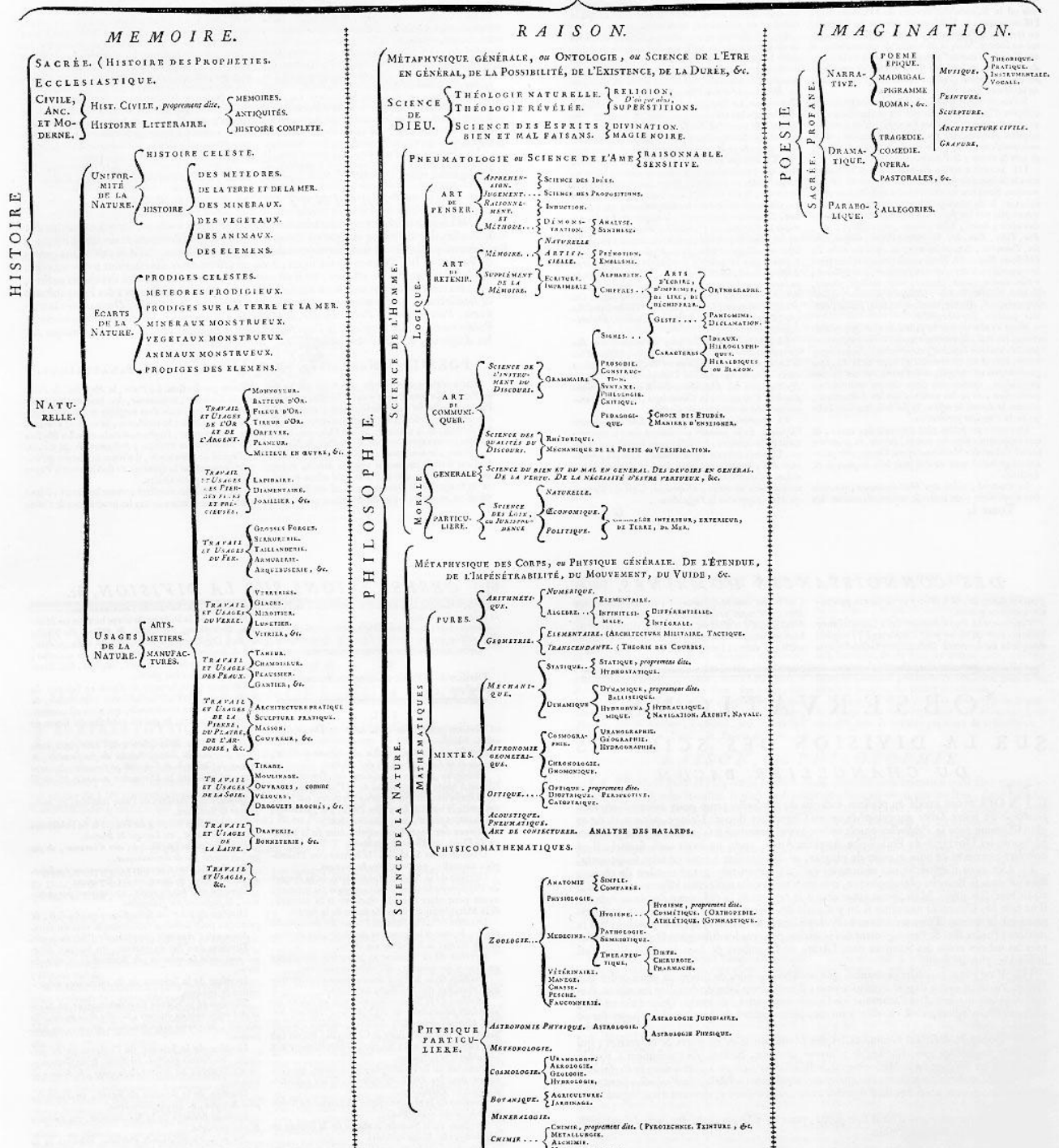


Figure 2. "Detailed System of Human Knowledge," figure, 1751, <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/content/syst%C3%A8me-figur%C3%A9-des-connaissances-humaines/>. The chart shows d'Alembert's classification of knowledge at the end of *Discours*. The realm of "Understanding" is divided into three categories—*Memoire* (memory), *Raison* (reason), and *Imagination*.

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