



Philippe Beussant, Former Lecturer in French in an Australian University, Member of the Académie française (1930–2016)

Ian Laurie

Philippe Beussant¹ was the first member of the Académie française to have begun his academic career as a lecturer in French at an Australian university. He was appointed, following consultation between Trevor Fennell and myself, as a foundation member of staff at Flinders University even before it opened its doors to its first students in 1966.

The appointment was made almost entirely on the strength of his early book on Romanesque architecture: *Le Jeu de la pierre et de la foi* (1962). There was also the fact that he came from a family of French aristocrats in the navy with a long tradition of travel and residence in distant lands. He seemed a promising candidate for residence in Australia.

Once arrived in Adelaide, Philippe and I joined forces to share a house for a few months until other members of our families arrived. This enabled us to get to know each other rapidly. The first thing to emerge was his devotion to baroque music. This revelation took place as dramatically as the music itself. I heard a loud cry of anguish coming from his bedroom.

¹ Philippe Beussant is the author of over twenty-five books, ranging from musicology and art history to fiction. *Lully ou le musicien du soleil*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992, obtained three prizes, the Prix de la critique, the Prix d'Histoire de l'Académie française and the 1993 Prix Goncourt de la biographie. Among his best-known novels are *Héloïse*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993 (Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française) and *Le rendez-vous de Venise*, Paris, Fayard, 2003 (Prix de la Ville de Nantes). He was also awarded the 2001 Prix de la langue française for his life's work.



Ian Laurie

Alarmed, I knocked on his door and discovered the reason. Philippe had brought with him some very French record playing equipment and had just unpacked it to set it going. Alas! The tempo was weird, disturbing the pitch of the notes. The reason, we wondered, might be that the equipment had been designed, admittedly with the correct voltage, but with a phasing different from that characteristic of Australia.

Setting aside this musical misfortune, we hit it off very well, not least because Philippe on the one hand was a talented chef and, on the other, I had had the good fortune to be given a personal introduction to winemaker Cyril Henschke, long before his increasing fame put his Hill of Grace out of reach for the everyday quaffing which soon assured our very South Australian friendship.

Philippe took to his duties on teaching French civilisation at Flinders with verve and, to our delight, he also became a committed member of the local Alliance française, soon becoming president and raising funds to extend, improve and redecorate its premises.

Philippe was a talented flautist and put this to use in his foundation of a musical group, *The Armidian Players*, devoted to baroque music. The group was able to perform at a national level, making great use of local talent, including in Lully's *Armide*, Étienne Fennell, Trevor's gifted wife, who played the role of Armide, and also Patricia Szondy, harpsichordist, who opened up to him the riches of the Elder Conservatorium.

At the same time, perhaps by some direct intervention of the spirits of Rameau, Lully and Couperin, Dene Barnett, lecturer in philosophy at Flinders, was in the process of achieving international fame as an expert on gesture and performance in baroque opera. He and Philippe struck up a close working relationship. Philippe was able to put this to very practical use when he returned to France and founded his *Centre de la musique baroque* in Versailles. These activities and also the steady stream of learned and creative works from his pen eventually drew him to the attention of the Académie française which elevated him to its ranks in 2007.

These distinctions in no way distracted him from maintaining the friendships he had made in Australia. They included Michèle and Gabriel Brossard who, in 1966, had been working for the South Australian Department of Education in Adelaide. When he eventually found a house of his own in Adelaide, he immediately shared it with them.



Philippe Beussant (1930–2016)

We all kept in touch over the years and met again, for example, in 2010, at the Brossard house near Versailles. The company included Albert Salon, who had been Cultural Counsellor at the French Embassy in Canberra during the period which Philippe spent in Australia and organised the concerts of *The Armidian Players* in Canberra. The conversation over dinner at the Brossard table inevitably turned to events which had taken place half a century earlier. It was closely observed by Fabrice Humbert, who had just published his novel, *L'Origine de la violence*. Fabrice's comment, which worried us a little in case we were to find a place in some future novel either by him or, more probably, by Philippe himself, was that we all reminded him of the final act in Proust.

I saw Philippe for the last time two years ago in Beauce, in a dying and somewhat desolate village called Mesnil Thomas. There he had bought a house of the same period as the baroque music he so much admired, together with a carriage-house full of what looked like carpenters' tools of the same vintage with which he proposed himself to make the house more habitable. I did venture to ask him what had persuaded him to live in such an inaccessible place, while maintaining his weekly obligations to be present at the meetings of the Académie française in Paris to work on its dictionary of the French language. 'Well', he said, gesturing towards a grassy knoll just over the back fence, 'I bought the house because I had been assured that Monteverdi had once passed this way'. Then with the tragical look which had come over him at the time of the malfunctioning of his record playing equipment so long ago in Adelaide, he told us: 'Alas! After long and more careful research, I discovered that there was no foundation to this story'.

We can only hope that, if there is indeed a world to come, the composers of the baroque, led perhaps by Monteverdi, are ready to give their devoted jongleur a royal reception.

Flinders University

