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COUPERIN AT THE HANDEL HOUSE

The First Six Concerts, August to December 2005

by Garry Broughton

Thirty years ago, I used to play Couperin's "Soeur Monique" (Ordre 18) as chastely as possible, since everyone seemed to agree that this was a portrait of an innocent young nun. Georges Beck, for example, in his commentary accompanying Kenneth Gilbert's recording¹ was adamant that "Here a nun, gentle and pure is depicted," dismissing any other interpretation, and Robert Woolley's Couperin disc (Meridian LP 1977) had a nun on the cover, with Nicholas Anderson's sleeve note referring to Couperin's daughter Marie-Madeleine entering the convent at Maubuisson in 1718. Then, in the April 1980 issue of *Early Music*, Jane Clark published the first results of her intensive research into the contemporary significance of the vocabulary and names used by Couperin, showing that "the character of the piece, unconvincing when dictated by the face value of its title, gradually reveals itself once the correct meaning of the title is discovered." Couperin's titles therefore "provide a vital clue to the performance of the music."²

Amongst many other revelations Jane pointed out that, according to Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universelle* (Paris 1701), the word *soeur* ("sister") was used proverbially and ironically to mean a girl of ill repute, so perhaps "Soeur Monique" should be played tongue-in-cheek with mock innocence. Jane's identification of the real people behind the names showed that previous commentators had sometimes nearly got to the truth: Georges Beck had noted that "La fine Madelon" and "La douce Janneton" of Ordre 20 were "surely inspired by two sisters, perhaps twins"³ (because the second piece quotes the main theme of the first one, albeit in the minor in b. 24-27). According to Jane, they are not twins but the same person! The actress Jeanne de

Beauval, always known as Jeanneton, was famous for the role of Madelon in Molière's "Les Précieuses Ridicules." And why is "La douce Janneton" marked to be played "plus voluptueusement?" Well, she had 28 children.

In her article Jane could not, of course, mention every one of Couperin's 230 pieces but she did in fact discuss and play all of them at a weekly evening class given at the Early Music Centre in London in 1982. I remember that, at the end of the twelve-week course, every member of the class had to play a chosen piece. After I bluffed my way through "Les Langeurs tendres" from Ordre 6 at a very languid pace, Maria Boxall kindly, or more probably ironically, offered to give me some lessons. Further research and more Couperin "marathons" organised by Jane ensued; particularly memorable were the occasions (Sutton House 1993, Rudolf Steiner House 1996) when Jane illustrated Couperin's sources of inspiration in the theatrical entertainments of his day, with Guy Callan acting as Harlequin in scenes from Gherardi's "Théâtre Italien."⁴

Jane has always been keen to encourage young talent (At the Sutton House marathon, Sophie Yates, Carole Cerasi and Pamela Nash were among the performers) and this brings us to the present Couperin series organised by Jane and the British Harpsichord Society at the Handel House in London, where a dazzling array of both young (and established) talent has been assembled. In the first five concerts we have heard David Gordon, Julian Perkins and David Wright (August 6th); Robin Bigwood, Mie Hayashi, Anthony Noble and Simon Perry (September 3rd); Jane Clark, Mie Hayashi and Aviad Stier (October 1st); Bridget Cunningham, Anna Kucharaska, Katherine May, Micaela Schmitz, Kasia Tomczak and David Wright (November 5th); Penelope Cave, Jane Clark, Anna

Parkitna, Gilbert Rowland and Paul Simmonds (December 10th).

Each piece played has been introduced either by Jane herself or by the performer and there have been some general discussion in between the orders. The informal atmosphere of Handel's rehearsal room at 25 Brook Street with the audience coming and going, listening (and talking) in adjoining rooms is perhaps similar to that of a "grand salon parisien" in Couperin's day, although the relatively sober Georgian décor is no match for the baroque splendour that surrounded Couperin. The harpsichord is a Bruce Kennedy Ruckers, not a Blanchet, and none of the performers are French. The pronunciation of the French titles of the pieces has been rather variable and a simple list of the movements would have helped the audience to follow the commentary and the performance, although, like all great music, Couperin's

can be appreciated without any reference to its background. Nevertheless, all the playing, without exception, has been of a very high standard and although, as one would expect, performing styles varied among the 19 players, in every case there was secure technique combined with naturally expressive application of historically informed performance practice; I am sure Couperin, that exigent teacher of "*l'art de toucher le clavecin*," would have been delighted.

Every performance at these five concerts deserves comment and I regret that lack of space precludes this, but I must make a special mention of the last two concerts, which are still vivid in my memory: On November 5th, Ordres 18, 22, 21, 7, and 20 were beautifully played by five beautiful women: it was a good job that Philippe d'Orléans wasn't in the audience (see Jane's comments on Ordres 12 and 13 in her book *The Mirror of Human Life: Reflections on François Couperin's Pièces de Clavecin*).⁵ The concert on December 10th was the high point of the series so far — superb performances by one young talent, Anna Parkitna, and three harpsichordists at the

height of their powers: Paul Simmonds, who heroically attacked and conquered the longest of all the 27 *Ordres*, no.2 with its 23 individual pieces; Gilbert Rowland in a marvellous performance of Ordre no. 15 (it was during his playing, the best I've ever heard, of "*Le Dodo ou L'amour au Berceau*" ("Bye-byes or Cupid in the Cradle"), that the youngest member of the audience, about four years old, fell fast asleep; and Penelope Cave, who in Ordre no. 26, negotiated the thorny thickets of "*L'Epineuse*" with magisterial aplomb and played the final "*La Pantomime* not only "*Gravément et marqué et d'une grande précision*" as demanded by Couperin but also with tremendous élan.

Incidentally, listening to Paul playing "*La Florentine*" made me think that the Handel House was not such an unsuitable place for Couperin after all. Both "*La Florentine*" and the Gigue from Handel's Keyboard Suite no. 9 In G Minor begin with almost identical motifs, and Pierre Citron quotes a further five Handelian borrowings or echoes.⁶



Ex. 1 Couperin, "*La Florentine*," 2me Ordre



Ex. 2 Handel, Gigue, Suite no. 9 in G Minor

The increasing popularity of the series created a safety problem because the audience was overflowing onto the stairs, so in 2006, concerts are by ticket only, rather than being open to any visitor to the Handel House. This has removed some of the informal atmosphere of the first five concerts, regrettable but necessary.

The first concert of 2006 featured two very different styles of interpretation. Ben

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van Nespen's playing avoided extreme of tempo, every phrase and ornament had room to breathe, and there was a tranquil luminosity that evoked more the interiors of Vermeer than the salons of Paris. Anna Parkitna's fiery playing was in complete contrast, taking risks with some very fast tempi, Couperin's water nymphs ("Les Ondes") becoming totally submerged in the hectic semiquavers of the 4me couplet.

Ben played Ordre no. 1, with its eighteen movements culminating in a gloomy picture of life at the Stuart courts in exile in the ironically entitled "*Les plaisirs de Saint Germain en Laye*," and Ordre no. 13 which he described as Couperin's "*Catalogue d'Oiseaux*" (Couperin's "*Les Fauvètes Plaintives*" ["plaintive warblers"] predates Messiaen's "*La Fauvette des jardins*" by about 270 years). Couperin's work was given an outstanding performance emphasizing the insistent falling minor seconds which give the piece an almost tragic dimension, the existential void that lay behind the bright chatter of the Duchesse du Maine and her fellow "*Oiseaux de Sceaux*."

Anna Parkitna introduced her two ordres in her own inimitable way:

Ordre no. 27 (the last): "all the puppets put in a box when [the] play is finished"; Ordre no. 5: "this is [a] satire on all women". It contains Couperin's "brilliant caricature"⁷ of ladies staggering under their towering coiffures held together with a lacquer called "*La Bandoline*" and one of Couperin's longest pieces, "*Les Agrémens*" (feminine ornaments) with its endless sequences satirizing the way vanity eats up time. Anna played both pieces in such a way that her own views on the matter were made very clear.

The final word must be one of thanks to Jane Clark for revealing the full extent of Couperin's unique achievement in depicting, with just two hands on a four and a half octave keyboard, the whole of French society from the King at Versailles to the beggars and cripples in the street, from town to country, from outward appearances to inner psychology —a musical "*Comédie Humaine*" to match the literary ones of Bruyère, Saint-Simon, Balzac, Zola and Proust.

1 Georges Beck, sleeve notes, Kenneth Gilbert, *Couperin the complete works for Harpsichord in Sixteen Volumes*, vol. 9-12, (RCA SER 5720-5723, 1974), a re-issue of the original recordings done for Radio Canada by Harmonia Mundi.)

2 Jane Clark, "*Les folies françoises*," *Early Music* 7:2(April 1980):163.

3 Beck, sleeve notes.

4 "*Couperin and the Stuart Court in exile at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 1691-1712*," in *The Stuart Court in Exile and the Jacobites*,, Eveline Cruickshanks and Edward Corp, eds. (London: Hambledon Press, 1995).

5 Jane Clark and Derek Connon, "*The Mirror of Human Life*": *Reflections on François Couperin's Pièces de Clavecin*. (Huntingdon: King's Music, 2002): 79-81.

6 Pierre Citron, *Couperin*, in the series *Solfèges*. (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil,1956).

7 Clark and Connon, 65.