Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 10, No. 2 Spring, 2006

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ORDRES

by Jane Clark

In 1995 The Grand Lodge of France presented me with its official centenary recording of *The Magic Flute* for "my services to the history of Freemasonry." This unexpected honour had nothing to do with Couperin but was the result of a paper about the ceilings at Ham House and Chiswick House which I had given at a conference on the exiled Stuarts at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, with the very charming Mayor of the city sitting at my elbow whispering "moi, je suis Maçon," which was somewhat unnerving.

The liner notes of the *Magic Flute* recording refer to François Couperin and the belief that he was a Freemason. This is perfectly possible because if Edward Corp is right in his suggestion that Couperin worked at the exiled Stuart Court at Saint-Germain, then he would have been among many Freemasons there.[1] The type of Freemasonry subscribed to by the Stuarts was ancient, Templar masonry, nothing to do with present day British Grand Lodge Freemasonry.

It is also likely that the Bourbon-Condé family, for whom Couperin worked, were Masons of this kind. The Duchess of Maine formed her own Order of the Honey Bee, which I initially thought was yet another of her crazy games until I found out that it was a Lodge of Adoption. Louis XIV took it so seriously he tried to stamp it out because he thought, rightly I suspect, that it was subversive. The Condés were Frondeurs and the Fronde families are held by some historians to have been Templar/Masons, and after the death of Louis XIV the Duchess of Maine had a track record of subversion.

Olivier Baumont, in a paper delivered at Villecroze in 1995, speculates as to why Couperin called his suites *Ordres*.[2] He talks about the three Orders of Architecture, which of course are the foundations of Freemasonry. I suspect it was his position as a Freemason that gave Couperin the idea. Also, as Penelope Cave pointed out to me, the number three, so sacred to Freemasons, probably has significance in the total number of the *Ordres*; three x three = nine and three x nine = twenty-seven. There are Masonic references amongst the titles of the *Pièces de Clavecin* and, importantly, the architecture of each *Ordre* is carefully considered. This is not at first glance obvious, but an understanding of the titles Couperin gave the pieces not only helps the player to understand the elusive music, but also makes the organisation of the *Ordres* clear. Those who maintain that Couperin did not expect people to take the titles seriously underestimate, I think, the rhetorical modesty of the French, which persists, elegantly, to this day.

In many instances of course, the meaning of the title does not help the player at all. Everyone has wondered endlessly about "Les Baricades Mistérieuses," and given the context in the *6ième Ordre* I think it refers to a divertissement, possibly with Masonic connotations, but this does not affect the way in which you might play the piece. Tempo seems the only matter for discussion here — there isn't a lot else you can do but go faster or slower.[3]

The first piece of all, "L'Auguste," could be either Louis Auguste, Duke of Maine, or the exiled James II of England, who was referred to as Augustus, but in either case a noble and serious allemande would be appropriate. Given the last piece in the long *Premier Ordre*, "Les Plaisirs de Saint-Germain-en-Laye," the likelihood is James II, so demonstrating Couperin's sense of symmetry. This dark and oppressive piece reflects the sombre mood of that court, with the guilt-ridden king perpetually slinking off to the monastery of La Trappe and his devout queen to the convent of Chaillot.

The title is typical of Couperin's irony.

One of the most deceptive titles is "La Sophie," always thought to be a pretty girl. If played in a gently beguiling manner it comes between the nostalgic "Gavote" [sic] and the heart-breaking "L'Epineuse" in the *26ième Ordre*. A *sofi* was in fact a whirling dervish and the music expresses this perfectly. Not only does this revelation affect the player — the inconvenient thing being that it makes it far harder,— but also it affects the architecture of the whole *Ordre*. We no longer have three pieces in a somewhat similar vein in a row; we have two gentle pieces separated by a whirlwind. So the *26ième Ordre* goes from the impressively spacious allemande, "La Convalescente," to the little "Gavote," then to "La Sophie," followed by "L'Epineuse" and finally, the strong and dramatic "Pantomime'. The only *Ordre* that does not have this sense of design is the *25ième,* which the composer confessed was not complete.

Even the apparently ramshackle *2ième Ordre* has a design. Most of the first part, as everyone has observed, appears to be suite of dances, but this is not, I believe, as obvious as you might think. Most people separate the *Ordre* after the "Rigaudon" and say that the character pieces begin here, simply because, as far as I can see, all the following pieces have titles. But this is not very convincing because the opening allemande, "La Laborieuse," has a title. So does the sarabande, "La Prude," and so does the next piece, "L'Antonine," which is not a dance at all.

In the *Premier Ordre*, Couperin follows his dance suite with a set of character pieces; he begins with the very impressive "Les Sylvains" and ends it, as we have seen, with the balancing "Les Plaisirs de Saint-Germain-en-Laye." A composer with Couperin's overall sense of architecture would never open a long set of pieces with the insignificant "La Charoloise." I think the *2ième Ordre* goes allemande, courante, courante, sarabande…and there it pauses. After all, Couperin's predecessors, and Purcell for that matter, ended their suites with a sarabande.

Then we have the majestic (as the composer says) "L'Antonine," which precedes a new set of dances. If, as I suspect, "L'Antonine" is Anthony Hamilton, the aristocratic Jacobite exile, expert dancer, poet and habitué of the Duchess of Maine's entourage, then it is very probable that the following dances Gavotte, Menuet, Canaries, Passepied and Rigaudon were written for the Duchess's entertainments.

So, we then have her little piece, "La Charoloise," which is followed by "La Diane" with its "Fanfare," and it is with this obvious finale that I think the first part of the *Ordre* ends. All the Duchess's friends were given mythical names, and Diane was her cousin, the Duchess of Nevers. After all, Couperin ends the first group of pieces under the general title of "La Triomphante" in the *10ième Ordre*, with a "Fanfare'.

Having finished with the Duchess of Maine, Couperin embarks on a wonderfully varied set of character pieces, opening with "La Terpsichore," surely Elizabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, who is referred to as Terpsichore in the dedication of her harpsichord pieces. This impressive opening bears a certain resemblance to her chaconne in D. All the pieces in this *Ordre,* as always with Couperin, are sharply contrasted.

To take the last three… "La Flateuse:" Couperin did not like flatterers; then "La Voluptueuse," marked *tendrement etc.*: he did like sexy girls, and this piece is absolutely sincere. Finally "Les Papillons" is not, as you might think, butterflies. All Couperin's pieces are about people, and papillons are diamond-headed hairpins that flashed as heads turned. This piece is hard as nails, sophisticatedly flirtatious, brilliant and heartless, a virtuosic conclusion to this mighty *Ordre*.

Just occasionally, Couperin's sense of humour gets the better of him. In the *8ième Ordre* the architecture is superb. It opens with the dramatic and declamatory "La Raphaéle," followed by a quick Corellian allemande, two contrasting courantes and a grand sarabande, all in *goûts-réunis* style.

Next is a gentle gavotte, a light-hearted rondeau and a gigue, all in the French style, and finally, you might think, the famous passacaille. Couperin's great "Passacaille" is a theatrical piece, a perpetual tug-of-war between the rondeau and the couplets, a human pleading with a force as inevitable as the seasons —but it is still a dance, and if played as such, the cumulative excitement is tremendous.

This *Ordre*, an exercise in the *goûts-réunis* style Couperin was so fond of, is full of angular Italian-style declamation, something he may have heard in Alessandro Scarlatti's cantata recitatives at Saint-Germain.[4] But is it all a bit much? Playing it in this declamatory way, you do arrive at the end overwhelmed, and the final piece, "La Morinéte," never fails to raise a smile. But does its presence upset the architecture?

Couperin's ever-present sense of proportion compels him to restore us to normality by ending this overwhelming *Ordre* with one of the most beguiling of all his pieces, but he has the sense to see that many people will think this spoils it all, so he pays tribute to Jean Baptiste Morin, who wrote the first *goûts-réunis* French cantatas and some of these had optional alleluya finales. So, you can either sing "alleluya, thank Heaven it's all over," or collapse in a heap, an emotional wreck. But for all the drama of the *Ordre*, there is a detachment; indeed some of the Italianate figures approach the parodies found in theatre music —hence Couperin's wish to bring us down to earth, to laugh at us gently. Couperin puts his heart and soul into a piece like "Les Rozeaux," the reeds, in the *13ième Ordre*, perhaps the most deeply touching portrayal of human frailty ever written.

The other great passacaille, "L'Amphibie," is a very different affair. The *24ième Ordre* opens with "Les Vieux Seigneurs," a sarabande grave. But unlike the other sarabandes, which, with the notable exception of "La Prude," are written in such a way that they sound magnificent whatever you do to them, simply because the harpsichord cannot help it, this one, even more than "La Prude," is written in such a high register that it is positively prevented from sounding grand.

This is a satirical portrait of obsequious courtiers, calculating every move, as marked by the composer, flattering those that matter, not very pleasant at all. Its pendant, "Les Jeunes Seigneurs, Cy-devant les petits Maitres," is, as the playwright Dufresny says, more sincere. The petits maitres, whose speech is "high and low" like the music, may be disorganised, garrulous and unthinking, but they have their sublime moments.

We then get onto the fatal ladies with "Les Dars-homicides," Cupid's fatal darts, a delightfully flirtatious piece, followed by the "Les Guirlandes," marked *amoureusement*, presumably the result of the darts. After this beautiful piece satire sets in again with "Les Brinborions" [sic], immensely long, in four sections, ruthlessly sending up feminine vanities, and this is followed by a portrait of a society lady drooling over her lap-dog, "La Divine-Babiche ou les amours badins," a marked contrast to "Les Guirlandes".

A tiny vaudeville, "La Belle Javotte, autre fois L'Enfante" separates this from "L'Amphibie," which is the final piece in this case. But the vaudeville is also an amphibie because the tune has been used to portray a girl of low rank and the Spanish Infanta. Vaudeville tunes were used over and over again in completely different situations. So, the opening courtiers were two-faced, amphibious, the petits maitres were effeminate, amphibious, and in "L'Amphibie" we are back where we started —the circle is complete.

Alexander Pope penned perhaps the most devastating portrait of "the amphibious thing" in his lines on Lord Hervey, a courtier he could not abide.[5] Couperin could not bear hypocrisy and flattery either; they rear their heads in many pieces. In "L'Amphibie" he joins Pope in portraying "wit that can creep and pride that licks the dust." To play this piece simply as a noble passacaille is to miss all

the many subtleties within it. The composer has marked it *noblement* –yes, but by the time you reach the *24ième Ordre* you will have become quite used to Couperin's irony. And in a sense it is noble. It is a piece in which you are never certain where you are, which was, of course, the intention.

The subject was treated with varying degrees of intensity in the eighteenth century. Pope was strong: "Amphibious thing! That acting neither part, The trifling head, Or the corrupted heart, Fop at the toilet, Flatterer at the board, Now trips a lady, Now struts a Lord." A speech in a play by Couperin's contemporary Boisfran, is milder; the Amphibie "leaves nothing in its natural state. He ordains that the young men of fashion are by pleasures, by appearances, by gait, by patches and by manners, made less men than women, and that women in order to give a masculine impression wear Steinkerques and daggers." Boisfran continues; the Amphibie "being neither one thing nor the other is at the same time both." Couperin's "L'Amphibie" presents quite a challenge to the performer.

By now it may be clear that in order to appreciate the architecture of the *Ordres* it is essential, in most cases, to know what the "subjects" were that Couperin had in his mind when he composed the pieces. If you do not understand the significance of Morin's cantatas, you may feel that "La Morinéte" is just another gigue and play it before the "Passacaille," thus missing the point altogether in the context of the *Ordre.* If you do not understand what amphibians implied in the eighteenth century, you miss the point of "L'Amphibie" and its relationship with the other pieces in that *Ordre.*

If you do not know about the Duchess of Maine and her circle, you mistake the design of the *2ième Ordre*, and you also miss all the fun of the *6ième*. If you don't know that the Prince of Conti had a laugh like a donkey, you do not realise that he is the subject of the radiant *allemande* that opens the *16ième Ordre* and you do not understand the irony of the next piece, "L'Hymen-amour," and how it relates to him and his marital situation.

If you do not know about the fallen morals of the Jacobins, the familiar name for the Dominican order of monks and nuns, you may think "Les Culbuttes Jacobines" refers to the Jacobites, and you will not understand its position in the *19ième Ordre*, a powerful sexy romp separating the innocent charm of "L'Artiste" from the beautiful portrait of the talented musician Mademoiselle de la Plante, "La Muse Plantine'.

Many of the *Ordres* have a unity, I am sure more than I have realised; for instance, the *6ième* is dominated by the Duchess of Maine, the *13ième* by the Regent, Philip of Orléans, and the *17ième* by Forqueray. The *21ième* and the *22ième* are about love affairs that go wrong: one regretful and the other comic. There is a very conscious plan in every *Ordre* and always a strong contrast between adjacent pieces. I think one of the tragedies of baroque music today is that audiences do not want to hear François Couperin. They used to. Landowska, Kirkpatrick, Albert Fuller, George Malcolm and their contemporaries had no trouble in communicating this music even if they got a lot of it wrong in our eyes.

Gustav Leonhardt said on a BBC programme on which we both appeared, that Couperin does not work in concerts these days, which is a great pity because he is very influential. But nowadays, sadly, many young players find the same. This is not because of the playing, which is usually beautiful; it is because these days we are all so conscious of style and we tend to forget character and design. Audiences still love Couperin if it is presented to them as the wonderful music-theatre it is.

I am always being asked why I play Scarlatti's sonata K238 in triplets, and people say in surprise, "It sounds so beautiful like that." My answer is that I have a recording of the song upon which he based it sung by a folk singer. This sonata appears as an example of the French style in many a textbook. So, instead of a haunting

melody sung in gentle triplet (or even *inégale*) rhythms by a lonely shepherd on the plains of Estremadura, it becomes an academic exercise in "performance practise," and ineffective as a result, its two-part texture and its position high on the harpsichord being resistant to such treatment. No one denies the importance of performance practise, but it can be too theoretically applied and so undermine the character of the music.

Couperin was clearly obsessive about his instructions being obeyed, as he said in the Preface to Book III of his pieces. Nowhere is this more important than in "La Verneüil," where he has marked an appoggiatura in the opening chord, a unique instance among his allemandes. There is a tendency to ignore this instruction and so instead of the dramatic, declamatory entrance of the great tragic actor, we have just another allemande, whereas all Couperin's allemandes have their own individual character. Couperin is, as Zuzana Ruzickova said many years ago, a very literary composer. I think he has to be understood in literary terms — and in architectural terms too.

One of the most perfectly planned buildings ever created is Lord Burlington's Masonic villa at Chiswick. This, like Couperin's pieces, is tiny, a mere seventy feet square, but every detail has a message in the overall design. I am certain that every detail in Couperin's four books of *Pièces de Clavecin* has equal meaning in the overall design.

Lord Burlington, a leading Templar/Freemason, had in his library at Chiswick Evaristo Gherardi's *Théâtre Italien*, a collection of plays Couperin refers to again and again. There are many Masonic allusions in these plays. If The Grand Lodge of France is right in its belief that Couperin was a Freemason, this may be the answer to the puzzle over his use of the word *Ordre*, and a sign that all his *Ordres* save one, the *25ième*, have an architectural plan.

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1 Edward Corp, "François Couperin and the Stuart court at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 1691-1712: a new interpretation," *Early Music* 28 (2000): 445-53.

2 Olivier Baumont, "L'Ordre chez François Couperin," in *François Couperin; Nouveaux Regards*, Actes des Rencontres de Villecroze 1995, (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1998), 27-41.

3 References to the titles are taken from *The mirror of human life': reflections on François Couperin's Pièces de Clavecin* by Jane Clark and Derek Connon. (Huntingdon: King's Music, 2002).

4 Edward Corp, "The exiled court of James II and James III: a centre of Italian music in France, 1689-1712," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 120 (1995): 216-31.

5 Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, (1735).