

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# LETTERS, NEWS & VIEWS

Dear Editor,

What's in a Name?

I am sorry to say that I wasn't wholly persuaded by everything in Jane Clark's fascinating article about Couperin's *ordres* in the spring 2006 issue. I hope this letter will provoke her into giving more reasons why I should be.

She argues, first, that 'those who maintain that Couperin did not expect people to take the titles seriously underestimate the rhetorical modesty of the French.' There is certainly an elaborate display of (false) modesty in Couperin's prefaces, but this does not prevent him from spelling out very directly to his readers just how he wants his pieces played: in his own performance manual; in his unprecedentedly detailed and suggestive markings; and (as Jane Clark recognises) in the preface to Book III, where he complains in the strongest possible terms about performers' tendency to play fast and loose with his ornaments. So if the titles were crucial to how he felt he wanted the music to go one would have expected him to make that clear. But all he actually says (Preface to Book I) is this:

*"J'ay toujours eu un objet en composant toutes ces pièces: des occasions différentes me l'ont fourni. Ainsi les Titres répondent aux Idées que j'ay eues: on me dispensera d'en rendre compte."*

In other words, he is simply not going to satisfy his readers' and performers' curiosity about what the obscurer titles mean.

Similarly, if Couperin had been particularly anxious that his pieces should be played together in their *ordres*, one might have expected him to give some hint of that. But all he tells us about the *ordres* is that Book II has two more of them in it than Book I, justifying a price premium of two *livres tournois* (funny he doesn't mention that it contains fewer pages!).

On the other hand, I don't mean to suggest that neither Couperin's titles nor the assembly of pieces into the *ordres* matter a jot. On the contrary:

- Many of his titles have an obvious and straightforward read across to the texts ('*Le Réveil-matin*', '*Le Rossignol-en-amour*', etc)

whereas others are at least very strongly suggestive of the intended mood (*"La Douce et Piquante"*, *"Les Idées Heureuses"*, etc). Others again look to be evocative but deliberately cryptic and challenging teases (*"Les Baricades Mystérieuses"*, *"L'Epineuse"*, etc)

- Many others include topical references, important to an understanding of what the piece is 'about', which would have been well understood at the time by Couperin's likely purchasers even if they have since sunk into obscurity

- Others again are "in jokes" and cryptic personal references which will have been enjoyed by Couperin's circle of patrons and intimates and may have lent a particular inflection to his own performances (...*espéces de portraits qu'on a trouvé quelquefois assés rassemblants sous mes doigts*)

- It seems entirely plausible that Couperin derived intellectual satisfaction from the structuring of at least some of his *ordres* and the juxtaposition of individual pieces within them, even if he did not particularly insist on or expect complete performances of them.

There is a clear parallel, to my mind, with the founding fathers of bebop – in its early days, equally esoteric music for a coterie. Some of the titles they concocted were arcane references that only initiates would pick up: "Bags' Groove" employed the sobriquet of the great vibraphone player Milt Jackson; Charlie Parker's "Moose the Mooche" was apparently a tribute to his heroin dealer. Thelonius Monk devised a series of titles every bit as cryptically evocative as "*Les Baricades Mystérieuses*". Evidence, Epistrophy, Brilliant Corners – and Misterioso too. (But even he was stumped for an idea on one occasion and fell back on "Let's Call This"). Some titles on the other hand were straightforwardly pictorial – indeed, from an earlier generation, Bud Freeman's "The Eel" is an unconscious echo of *L'Anguille*. The origins of the obscurer names mattered little for any interpretative purpose; sometimes indeed (I'm not of course suggesting this was Couperin's practice too) they were picked more or less at random, at the urgent prompting of the producer, when a new tune had been improvised at a recording session – though

ingenious tall tales might be concocted after the event to satisfy tiresome critics in remorseless pursuit of an explanation.

It is certainly useful to seek out evidence of what Couperin's wider contemporary audience would clearly have understood some of his titles to mean. Much that Jane Clark has to say here is highly illuminating; for example, why Saint-Germain-en-Laye took its *plaisirs* so sadly (though I don't quite find the piece positively "oppressive"), and what derogatory connotations were attached to "L'Amphibie" or "the amphibious thing" in contemporary literature. And while the satiric spirit of some of the pieces is very obvious from the music itself, an informed theory of just what was being satirized is helpful. But I wonder (this is probably pure envy speaking) whether some of her assertions don't rely on an excess of erudition and ingenuity:

- "La Sophie": why does this have to be about a sofi, or whirling dervish, rather than Sophie's piece, or a portrait of Sophie? And, if it really was, would it not have been *Le* rather than *La* (compare "Le Croc-en-jambe", "Le Turbulent")?

- "La Terpsichore": why does this have to be about Elizabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, rather than simply the muse of dancing? (Anyway, de Menerville's epigram does not quite refer to her as Terpsichore; rather, it says that either the muse sitting at the keyboard and popularly thought to be Terpsichore is actually Jacquet instead or there must be ten Muses rather than nine).

- "Les Papillons": according to Dr. Clark, this "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." But why can't it be inspired by butterflies, and what is the evidence that it isn't? To the tiresomely literal-minded, at least, Couperin's pieces are not "all about people", unless the gnat is not a gnat, the alarm-clock is not an alarm-clock, the orchards in flower are not orchards in flower, the reeds are not reeds (I do not quite follow how "Les Rozeaux", exquisite piece though it is, can be read as "... perhaps the most deeply touching portrayal of human frailty ever written"). The marking is *tres légèrement*, which seems to fit well with

butterflies, and with a sequence of gentle pieces (from "Les Idées Heureuses" onwards), marked *tendrement sans lenteur, affectueusement, légèrement, affectueusement, et tendrement* etc and, as for "virtuosic", on a good day, even I can get round a fair proportion of the notes (all right, perhaps not at the rapid tempo implied by the 6/16 time signature).

- The total of 27 *ordres*: Jane Clark, following Penelope Cave, suggests that this held Masonic significance (3x3x3) and implies as detailed and systematic a structural organisation for the Pièces overall as one finds in Lord Burlington's Chiswick villa: but if so, why did he arrange them in four books rather than three and would one not have expected a more overt and consistent display of symmetry in the layout of each *ordre*? Might the last few *ordres* not just have been the point at which the ailing composer ran out of steam?

What do others think, and what more can Jane Clark herself tell us?

Yours sincerely

Michael Faulkner October 2006

Dear Mr. Faulkner,

I am glad you find Couperin's instructions as to how his pieces should be played clear. Most of us find them lamentably lacking in clarity!

In order to "satisfy his readers' and performers' curiosity about what the obscurer titles mean" he would have needed to write a book, as have I, with Professor Derek Connon. Perhaps you have not read it! Couperin was woefully inarticulate in words and sublimely articulate in music. More than that, sharply defensive when he felt people did not understand his prose. Perhaps you have not read Davitt Moroney on "L'Art de toucher le clavecin" either.

I have never implied that the *ordres* have to be played complete, only that it is necessary to understand the structure in order to understand individual pieces. This article was intended as a pendant to our book because I had not realised the importance of the architecture when I wrote it, nor why Couperin chose to call his suites *ordres*. To take one example from your list, "La Sophie". Once the structure of the *ordres*

becomes apparent and with it the fact that Couperin always contrasted adjacent pieces (his theatrical sense), a whirling dervish makes complete sense, as I say. And as for the literal meanings of the "back to nature" titles, no Frenchman at that time portrayed this literally, Rousseau came later. But there is no harm in people taking them literally if they want to, they simply miss the point.

It takes all sorts to make a world and I do not expect people to agree with my ideas on Couperin, but they are based on years of thinking about 18<sup>th</sup>-century values and of playing the complete *Pièces de Clavecin* over and over again.

Yours sincerely,

Jane Clark, January 2007

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Dear Editor,

I thoroughly enjoyed Volume 10, No.2; especially the fascinating article by Chris Barlow on the Clavisimbalum (although a couple of diagrams of the action could have made it even better).

As you are particularly interested in topics concerning Mozart this year, may I suggest some that have always intrigued me?

Which of Mozart's keyboard concertos were written for the harpsichord?

Other than the JC Bach arrangements, all of them are always played on the piano/fortepiano - but did he have access to a fortepiano throughout these years? I have read (I think by Richard Maunder) that he got his first fortepiano in 1777.

Also, in a letter to his father concerning Stein's instruments, Mozart says he has up until that point preferred Späth's. We always assume he means Späth's fortepianos - could these possibly be Späth's tangent pianos?

Distinction between keyboard instruments did not seem to be as important in the eighteenth century as it is to us now (or string instruments either - violone, anyone?)

Keep up the good work - I look forward to the next article with relish.

Regards,

Anders Henry

Dear Anders,

We can't answer all your questions, but you'll note this issue has a good amount on Mozart's preferred instruments.

The Editor.

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Dear Editor,

The Editor asked the author about his personal experience with Bradley Lehman's "Bach tuning".

I must confess that I found Lehman's hypothesis that J. S. Bach encoded a temperament in the "squiggle" that decorates the manuscript of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* delightful. This idea, like the squiggle itself, seems playful, virtuosic, and natural — qualities that I admire in Bach's music, too. I'd be delighted to learn that this was really Bach's intention — but we will never know for sure. On the other hand, the temperament that Lehman derives from the design can be tuned and heard. I've found it very telling that most of the critics of Lehman's hypothesis (and there have been plenty) have not complained about the tuning.

I am primarily a fortepianist, and so do not play much Bach. In my own practice I have been tuning 5-octave pianos (late 18<sup>th</sup>-century replicas) in a more or less Valotti temperament, and have been generally satisfied for Mozart and Haydn. I had been keeping my Graf copy (6-1/2 octave, 1819) in equal temperament, especially since I like to play the Schubert *Impromptu in Gb* (try that in Valotti sometime...). But I was intrigued by Lehman's article, and one aspect of his tuning immediately caught my attention: the asymmetrical relationship between the sharps and flats. In Valotti, the major thirds get progressively wider as you move further from C Major, so that C, G and F Major have the best thirds, and the chords get "spicier" as you add either sharps or flats. D Major and Bb Major, with two accidentals, have equally wide thirds, A Major and Eb Major still wider, and E Major and Ab Major even wider. Intuition however, suggests something quite different. Pieces in sharp keys truly seem "sharp", while pieces written in flat keys usually have a gentler, smoother character.

Lehman is concerned with Baroque repertoire, but this characterisation seems just as true for Mozart and Beethoven.

In preparation for a recent trio tour with violinist Elizabeth Wallfisch and cellist Jaap ter Linden, I set Lehman's tuning on the Graf. The repertoire seemed particularly well suited to the test. The two major works were on opposite sides of the circle of fifths: Beethoven's Ghost Trio in D Major, and Schubert's Bb Major Trio. (The third work on the program, the single movement WoO39 by Beethoven, is also in Bb.) In Valotti - or equal temperament! - these two keys would sound the same; Lehman's temperament gave a noticeable edge to D Major, and a sweetness and roundness to Bb that seemed entirely appropriate.

To my delight, the string players were entirely happy with the temperament. Both of them are extremely experienced with a variety of temperaments, but had not yet played with this one. Valotti poses a problem for violinists that don't want to match the very narrow A-E fifth, no such problem here. Five concerts later we were all still satisfied, so I kept the tuning.

The next assignment for that instrument was a performance of Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* (using the ornaments found in the 1835 Diabelli edition – worth a look, if you don't know about it). Everything went swimmingly, until the final song, the "Brook's Lullaby", in a heavenly E Major. Unfortunately, the E-G# third is so wide in Lehman's tuning, and the restful, resigned mood at the end of the piece is so important, that we had to modify the tuning. Lowering G# by two cents took care of it, though; and that is where I have left the piano ever since.

One of the side effects of the "squiggle" controversy has been to refocus attention on tuning, and that has been a good thing, in my opinion. The harpsichord students at Oberlin College Conservatory, where I teach, have become wildly enthusiastic about the "squiggle" and it has replaced Valotti as our house tuning. And although many keyboard players may wish that the temperament problem would go away, a heightened awareness of the actual sounds coming out of our instruments can be nothing but positive.

Thanks,

David Breitman, Oberlin University

**Hubbard's useful booklet** is back in print. Frank Hubbard, "Harpsichord Regulating and Repairing", edited and revised by **Hendrik Broekman**. (American Piano Supply Co, 1995). Available from Hubbard Harpsichords [www.hubharp.com/books\\_forsale.htm](http://www.hubharp.com/books_forsale.htm)

**Robert Deegan** is the builder responsible for the new harpsichord for the National Trust after William Smith c1720. It was recently delivered to **The Wordsworth House**, Cockermouth in the Lake District, UK. The instrument will be frequently played and an inaugural concert will be held when the house re-opens in the spring.

**Lindsay Kemp** has recently been appointed Artistic Director of the **Lufthansa Festival of Baroque Music** [www.lufthansafestival.org.uk](http://www.lufthansafestival.org.uk)

**26-28 April 2007 Spring meeting of the Midwestern Historical Keyboard Society (MHKS)**. Meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota. On the theme of "Replicas - The Keyboard Builder's Art in the 20th and 21st centuries". [www.mhks.org](http://www.mhks.org)

**25-27 May 2007 Next Generation™ Early Keyboard Weekend** in Winchester, UK, taught by Bridget Cunningham, Steven Devine, Julian Perkins, and Micaela Schmitz, features use of harpsichord, clavichord, and fortepiano, a showcase concert and public lectures. +44 (0) 1386 859 648 or [www.earlymusica.permutation.com](http://www.earlymusica.permutation.com)

**18-21 July 2007** Inaugural annual festival of the new harpsichord foundation, called **Piccola Accademia di Montisi (PAdM)**. Housed in a 13th century castello in Montisi, Tuscany, the PAdM will feature performances by leading harpsichord scholars, regular master classes for students, a yearly festival in July, and eventually, recordings. Harpsichord maker Bruce Kennedy is Director of the foundation, and performer/musicologist Alan Curtis is Artistic Advisor. For info., contact Antonia Farrugia at Albion Media: [antonia@albion-media.co.uk](mailto:antonia@albion-media.co.uk) +44(0) 20 7582 8522 [www.PiccolaAccademia.org](http://www.PiccolaAccademia.org)

**Sandra Mangsen** has inaugurated a series of Sunday afternoon concerts at Bishop Cronyn Memorial Church in London, Ontario.  
 smangsen@sympatico.ca

**25 July- 1 August 2007 international competitions Musica Antiqua** take place in the Provincial Court in **Bruges**. This year's edition is focused on harpsichord and fortepiano.  
 (Deadline was April 15). At the same time, the exhibition of early keyboard instruments is to be seen in the Belfry.  
[www.festivalvanvlaanderen.be/index.php?id=3&L=2](http://www.festivalvanvlaanderen.be/index.php?id=3&L=2)

**July 14-18, 2007 Fortepiano Academy** taught by Bart van Oort, Roosevelt Academy (part of University College of Utrecht University) in **Middelburg**, south of The Netherlands.  
 g.joosse@roac.nl [www.roac.nl](http://www.roac.nl)

**13 – 20 August 2007 Musica Antiga XXV International course for Early Music** with Jill Feldman - Peter Holtslug - Richard Gwilt - Wieland Kuijken - Ketil Haugsand -Ana Mafalda Castro at Convento de Cristo de Tomar, **Portugal**. Tel/Fax: 21 390 77 34  
[www.academia-musicantiga.pt](http://www.academia-musicantiga.pt)

**19-24 August 2007 CIMCIM annual Meeting, at University of Vienna, Austria** Joining with the General Conference of ICOM.  
[www.cimcim.icom.museum](http://www.cimcim.icom.museum)  
 Rudolf.hopfner@khm.at

**5-8 September 2007**, Magnano, Italy:  
 Eighth International Clavichord Symposium  
<http://www.musicaanticamagnano.com/index.php?l=en&p=clavichord&s=symposium>  
 +39 015 67 92 60

**28-30 September 2007, Amsterdam:**  
 "The clavichord in the Low Countries", to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the **Dutch Clavichord Society**  
[www.clavichordgenootschap.nl/](http://www.clavichordgenootschap.nl/)

**1 November 2007** is the deadline for submissions to The Seventh Aliénor International Harpsichord Composition Competition. The competition is held every four years. The winning pieces (solo music for harpsichord and chamber music for harpsichord with modern or period instruments) will be performed and judged

**6-8 March, 2008** at Salem College, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, USA. Details of how to submit, as well as an impressive listing of works (with sound samples) are at [www.harpsichord-now.org](http://www.harpsichord-now.org).

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