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Couperin's 'Misterieuse' fourth harpsichord book

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The four books for harpsichord, containing a total of about 220 compositions, by François Couperin (1668-1733) form one of the foundations of harpsichord literature. They offer a panorama of the *condition humaine* as he experienced it in his direct environment: portraits of women and men from his circle, and of various moods. The tragic stands next to the comic, the theatre and the pose are contrasted with real emotion, the frivolous can be found next to the serious, and satire next to deep tragedy.[1]

Couperin started publishing his music rather late in life.[2] The *Premier Livre de Pièces de Clavecin* did not appear until 1713, when he was already 45 years old. This landmark publication heralded a period in which a series of beautifully produced editions came out, not only of harpsichord pieces but also of (mainly instrumental) chamber music. But the harpsichord dominates throughout, and this magnificent series is not only opened, but also concluded with an elaborate *Livre de Clavecin*.

1713 ***Premier Livre de Pièces de Clavecin*** (Ordre 1-5)
1714 [3] *Leçons de Ténèbres* (for 1 and 2 sopranos and bc)
1716 ***L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin*** (including 8 préludes)
1717 ***Deuxième Livre de Pièces de Clavecin*** (Ordre 6-12)
1722 ***Troisième Livre de Pièces de Clavecin*** (Ordre 13-19) & *Concerts Royaux* (Concerts 1-4 for melody instrument and bc)
1724 *Les Gouts Réunis* (Concerts 5-14 for melody instrument and bc, cq. for two viols), *Apothéose de Corelli* (sonata for two melody instruments and bc)
1725 *Apothéose de Lulli* (suite for two melody instruments and bc)
1726 *Les Nations* (4 sonatas with suites for two melody instruments and bc)
1728 *Pièces de Viole* (2 suites for bass viol and bc)
1730 ***Quatrième Livre de Pièces Clavecin*** (Ordre 20-27)

It is obvious from this overview that Couperin initially concentrated on the publication of his harpsichord music. Until 1722, all of his publications were devoted to his own instrument (with only a single exception[3]): three large books complemented by a treatise. This in all likelihood forms the harvest of decades of composing and teaching. From the same year onward, a period follows in which he concentrates on chamber music, and again this includes much music which had been composed long before. The *Concerts Royaux*, for example, were composed for the chamber of Louis XIV (who died in 1715), while *Les Nations* incorporated three trio sonatas written as long ago as the early 1690s. The only music that can with some certainty be dated to an origin in the 1720s are the pieces of the Fourth Harpsichord book from 1730, on which I will concentrate later on. They must have been written between 1722 and 1727 (the terminus ante quem indicated by Couperin in his preface).

Harpsichord Music

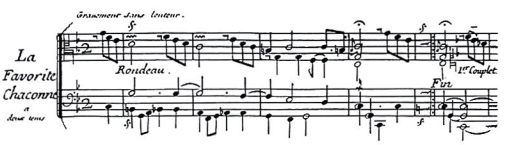
Like all of his music, Couperin's harpsichord *oeuvre* excels in a consistent quality and great stylistic unity of the music. However, there are some differences between the four books, of which I would like to single out two examples. The rondeau form which is so important in the First Book loses its central position in the later ones. By the time of the Fourth Book, only one of them (*Les Dars-homicides*) is in the straightforward refrain/couplet format common in the first three books. In the other two rondeaus (*Les Gondoles de Delos* and *L'Épineuse*) Couperin is experimenting with more complex forms: the latter contains a 'rondeau within a rondeau', while the former is a particularly ingenious synthesis of binary form and rondeau.

The most striking difference between the books, however, is the frequency with which the traditional dances allemande, courante, saraband and gigue occur. In the First Book, this 'classical' quartet still forms the basis of four of the five Ordres (1-3 and 5). But several of these dances, including all four Allemandes, have already been equipped with titles, and even in these four Ordres the *pièces de caractère* already occupy a dominating position. This is the type of harpsichord music for which Couperin became famous: pieces in which a title stands central. Although there was a tradition within the harpsichord literature, stretching back to the 17th century (in the wake of the lutenists and gambists), to add an occasional *pièce de caractère* to a suite, Couperin took the radical step of promoting them to the central genre of his harpsichord cycles. This also explains the avoidance of the term 'suite', which was probably associated too much with the abstract dances, in favour of the more neutral term 'Ordre'.

In the remaining three books, the character pieces become completely dominant, while the courante, sarabande and gigue quickly fade into the background. In the Third Book we only find a single stray courante (Ordre 17), while the Fourth Book includes a lone sarabande (Ordre 24). A completely different story, however, is the allemande. This genre already had an elevated status in the First Book, serving as a weighty opener for four lengthy Ordres (1-3 and 5). Couperin was clearly able to use a great deal of his particular sensitivity to harpsichord expressivity in the allemande genre, and he therefore does not give up this dance form. It forms the beating heart of his harpsichord music, from the opening of the First Book (*Allemande L'Auguste*) to the opening of the last, 27th Ordre (*Allemande L'Exquise*). In total he wrote no fewer than nineteen allemandes for harpsichord (the eighteen from the *Pièces de Clavecin* – including one for two harpsichords – plus the beautiful miniature in *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin*). Not only the First, but the Second and Third Book as well contain four allemandes each, and with one exception (the second allemande of Ordre 8), always as the opening of an Ordre. In Book Three the four appears in neat sucession (Ordre 15-18), and these four allemandes stand out by their expressiveness. This special attention to the allemande becomes an even stronger feature of the Fourth Book, where we find no fewer than six examples, and now no longer always as the opening number of an Ordre. I will return shortly to these fascinating late allemandes.

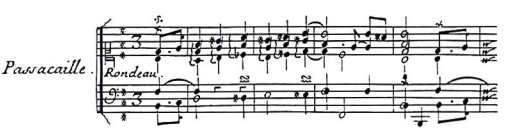
Ostinato

Another common thread in the four books is the ostinato genre (passacaille or chaconne) that is so important in the French Baroque. Each book includes only a single specimen of this genre, but all four of them belong to the absolute highlights of his harpsichord oeuvre. At the same time, they turn out to be extremely varied in both technique and character. Couperin here deals with the French tradition in a rather wayward way, which stands in striking contrast to the chaconnes and passacailles in his chamber music, which are much more conventional in scope. The First Book contains the chaconne *La Favorite* (Ordre 3) which is based on the traditional bass model of the chromatically falling fourth (ex.1). However, Couperin at the same time breaks with tradition by foregoing the usual three-time signature (usually 3/4) in favour of an idiosyncratic duple one (¢). Couperin emphasizes this unusual feature by adding *Chaconne à deux tems* to the title. At the same time the bass is not a straightforward chromatic descent but is enlivened in a melodic way. This beautiful, gloomy piece is largely written in traditional three-part counterpoint, and in terms of style is indeed not very far removed from the chaconnes attributed to François' uncle Louis Couperin (1626-61). It is conceived as a *chaconne en rondeau*, just like the famous Passacaille from the Second Book.



Ex.1 *La Favorite*, first line

This latter Passacaille forms part of the magnificent Eighth Ordre. In the first half of this Ordre Couperin applies for the last time the traditional dance structure of the suite: allemande (twice), courante (twice), sarabande and gigue. Apart from two *pièces de caractère* it contains three further 'absolute' dances: apart from the mighty passacaglia these are a gavotte and a 'Rondeau'.[5] But behind this elaborate smokescreen of tradition hides a fairly radical application of the *Goûts réunis*, which was not yet so clearly visible in the First Book, namely the fusion of French and Italian style. For example, in the opening piece, *La Raphaele*, the famous Italian Renaissance painter (who was very fashionable in Paris at the time) is honoured with a large stylized allemande combining sharp French ouverture rhythms and rich, French-tinted harmonics with Italian capriciousness and passion. The following allemande *L'Ausoniéne* is a comparable synthesis between smooth Italian sonata writing and sequencing with French ornamentation and idiomatic harpsichord use. The refrain of the Passacaille, just like *La Favorite* a combination of ostinato and rondeau, reverses the chromaticism of that work from descending into ascending lines (ex.2). However, in comparison to the Chaconne, the Passacaille has a distinctly avant-garde outlook. Its large rhythmic contrasts, dissonant harmonies and an overall Italian-coloured sense of drama make this work an absolute high point in Couperin's oeuvre.



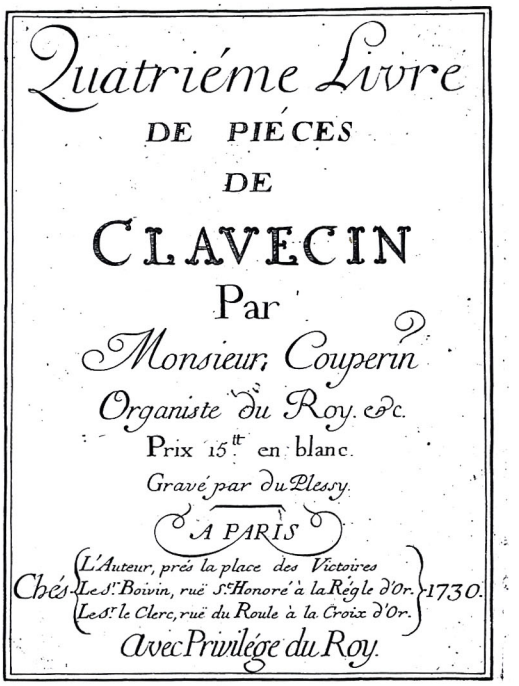
Ex.2 *Passacaille*, first line

A real passacaglia in the Italian sense – that is, without the rondeau form and with a constantly repeated bass line – can be found in the Third Book, in *Les Folies françoises* (Ordre 13). Strictly speaking, one is dealing here with a succession of twelve miniscule variations loosely based on the well-known Folia scheme, but it is obviously meant to be played in close succession, thus creating a particularly varied chaconne. Indeed, the degree of *varietas* is extreme, as Couperin gives each variation its own character and

colour ('Domino').[6] We find a very differently grounded experiment in the 'Mouvement de Passacaille' of Book Four (Ordre 24). Couperin not without reason avoids the genre name 'Passacaille' *tout sec*, for this composition is formally too liberal and therefore adds the subheading 'with the movement of a passacaglia'. The character title of this piece, *L'Amphibie*, must also be seen in this context, and refer to its strongly hybrid construction. Although set throughout in the traditional 3/4 metre, it is built from a particularly free mix of a rondeau and the variations of a true passacaglia. There is no clear-cut bass theme, instead one finds a variety of descending bass patterns. The 'refrain' (bars 1-16) is repeated after what can be seen as the first couplet (bars 33-48), but only in a highly varied form. Only at the very end of this long composition does it return unchanged, acting as a long-postponed da capo (bars 170-85). Another striking element is the lengthy central minor part (bars 97-163), which features some strong changes of affect which are unique in Couperin: the five sections are marked *Modérément*, *Vivement*, *Affectuesement*, *Marqué* and *Plus marqué*. With the last character change Couperin finds his way back to the major and with it the opening affect, and soon the concluding réprise statement of the refrain follows. The title *L'Amphibie* refers not only to the free, hybrid form but also the condition of man: perhaps both the various – often artificial – faces of the ambitious courtiers that Couperin was all too familiar with,[7] and, on a more idealistic plane, the idea that man lives simultaneously in an earthly (physical) and a spiritual reality.[8]

Quatrième Livre

The complexity and ambiguity of *L'Amphibie* can be considered typical of the Fourth and final Book (illus 1) as a whole. This very last publication by Couperin, which appeared three years before his death, has always intrigued me. Not only the title of this 'Mouvement de passacaille', but various other titles as well are puzzling, to say the least. We know that Couperin was sickly in nature, and perhaps for that reason rather withdrawn. He already complains in 1713, in the preface of the First Book, about his poor health. In the 1720s he was increasingly unable to work: in 1723 he made sure that his cousin Nicolas Couperin was appointed assistant organist and designated successor at St Gervais, and in 1730 he finally gave up his functions at the court. In the preface to the Fourth Book, published in the same year, he writes: 'It has been about three years since these pieces were completed. But since my health is declining from day to day, my friends have advised me to stop working, and since then I have not done any major work'.[9] Is it possible that the composer, locked up in his Paris apartment,[10] left traces of his rather difficult life situation in his last publication?

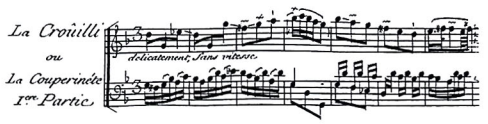


Illus 1: *Quatrième Livre*, title page

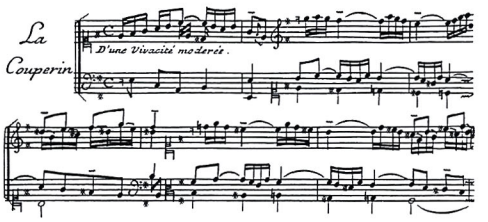
We are emphatically put on this track by a piece from the first Ordre of this book (Ordre 20), namely *La Croüilli ou La Couperinette* (ex. 3) Couperin had inherited the title Sieur de Croüilly from his father; the Couperin family still had possessions in Chaumes-en-Brie, including a tiny estate with that name. François visited it regularly in his youth. He only used this rather obscure title on the title page of his *Pièces d'orgue* from 1690, and then no more. Once he had set foot on the court, which happened a few years later, this title was no longer relevant because it was obviously far too provincial. Moreover, he had acquired the title of 'nobleman' in 1697 and was named Knight of the Order of Laterans in 1704 or 1705 – both incomparably more important titles. *La Croüilli ou La Couperinette* is a sort of lullaby that apparently recalls his childhood, when he often stayed in Chaumes – a nostalgic autobiographical piece therefore.[11] And it becomes even more nostalgic in character when the piece in a second part evolves into a musette, with a *contre-partie* for the bass viol – probably an evocation of domestic music-making in Chaumes.

This autobiographical tendency is continued in the central piece from the following (21st) Ordre: an allemande entitled *La Couperin*. Couperin regularly used a powerful allemande to portray important people (mostly from his immediate surroundings): the former English King James II or Louis XIV (Ordre 1), Count Logy (Ordre 5), the

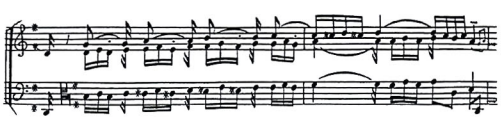
painter Raphaël (Ordre 8), the Regent Philippe d'Orléans (15), the Prince de Conti (Ordre 16) or the viol player Forqueray (Ordre 17). Thus, at the end of his life, Couperin consciously places himself in this illustrious company. But it is very striking that the allemande *La Couperin* does not act as the opening movement, but is placed third (this happens twice more in Book Four, in Ordre 22 and 25). Two elements stand out in the ravishing *La Couperin*. In the first place the use of the chromatic falling fourth in the lowest voice: it occurs twice immediately after the opening formula (ex.4). The chromatically descending fourth, which we already encountered in the chaconne *La Favorite*, is traditionally the emblem of a lament. The use of syncopated chordal tones (ex.5) falls into a related affective category. This is in its turn closely related to the *suspension*, the ornament sign for 'postponing' notes which Couperin introduced in his Premier Livre (ex.6); this rather exotic sign disappears again from the Second Book onwards. The specific shape which this syncopation takes in *La Couperin* functions like real sighs, as *soupirs*. I henceforth use the Latin term *suspiratio* ('sighing') for this phenomenon.



Ex.3 *La Croüilli ou La Couperinette*, first line

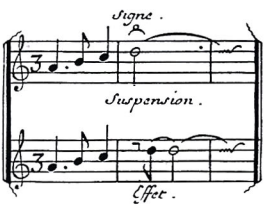


Ex.4 *La Couperin*, first two lines



Ex.5 *La Couperin*, first line of p.15

Both characteristics of *La Couperin*, the lamento-bass and the *suspiratio*, can, in my view, be interpreted autobiographically. Couperin was seriously ill when he wrote this music, and certainly so by the time it appeared in 1730. He had plenty to complain and to sigh about. The unique tempo indication that he added to this piece, *D'une Vivacité moderée* ('with a moderate liveliness'), is apparently meant in this context with some self-irony.

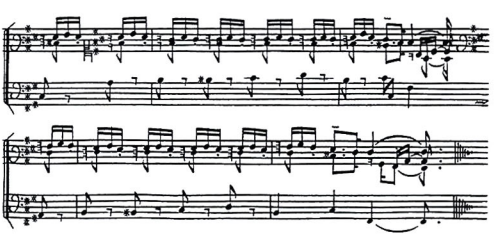


Ex.6 *Suspension* from the *Explication des Agrémens et des Signes* (First Book)

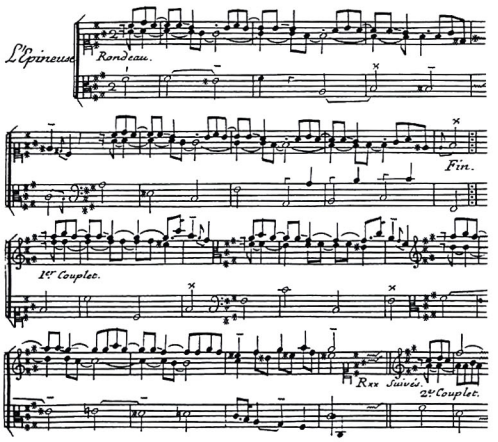
Suspiratio and chromaticism

Upon closer scrutiny it is clear that these two characteristic elements return side-by-side in various other pieces following *La Couperin* in the Fourth Book. The same Ordre (21) concludes with *La Petite Pince Sans-rire*, which is a French expression for a wry joke. In this piece the *suspiratio* is used to a limited extent (at the beginning), but the lamento fourth sounds very emphatically three times at the end. This placement seems complementary to *La Couperin*, where the two features appear in reverse order. The phenomenon of a pair of pieces in the same Ordre with both characteristics appearing in mirrored sequence occurs three more times in the Fourth Book, and precisely in the last three Ordres (25-27).[12] Are these also autobiographical in nature?

That has always been presumed for the allemande which opens Ordre 26, entitled *La Convalescente* ('The healing one'), because it clearly refers to the shaky health of the ageing Couperin.[13] The chromatic fourth occurs here a few times, at the end of the first half (in bars 8-10), while the *suspiratio* dominates the last lines of the piece (ex.7). *L'Épineuse* ('The thorny one', also in the sense of 'The tricky one') comes from the same Ordre. This trickiness is especially evident in the middle part of this roundeau, which is in F# major (six sharps!). *L'Épineuse*, a beautiful lyrical rondeau, starts its two refrains and all except one of its couplets very strikingly with a *suspiratio* (ex.8), thus again opposite to the placement of these two elements in the allemande from the same Ordre. The lamento quarter can be found here in the first couplet (bars 11-14, also in ex.8).



Ex.7 *La Convalescente*, last two lines



Ex.8 *L'Épineuse*, first four lines

The last Ordre (27) also contains two autobiographical pieces. The Allemande *L'Exquise* concludes with two chromatically descending fourths, and contains a number of subtle sighs (see bars 5-6, 15 and 17). What does the title mean in this light? This magnificent piece, which is continuously three-part, is clearly a continuation of the line of the allemandes *La Couperin* and *La Convalescente*, and I think Wilfred Mellers comes close to the truth when he writes: 'I suspect that it is homage to a spiritual condition … The "exquisite" lucidity of texture brings balm to the (B minor) suffering which is the heart of the human condition'.[14] In *Saillie*, the last part of this Ordre, we find – how could it be otherwise, in the light of *L'Exquise* – the chromatic fourth immediately after the opening gesture. *Saillie*, a rather exuberant piece though still in the B minor of this Ordre, probably means a spontaneous joke here – apparently we see a Couperin here who doesn't take himself too seriously.

Vingt Cinquième Ordre

At the head of the Fourth Book Couperin writes in a Notice that he was unable to properly complete the 25th Ordre after two pieces were lost that occupied the first and third positions of this cycle, and that this Ordre therefore now begins unusually in the relative key of E♭ major, whilst the rest of the pieces are written in an alternation of C major and C minor.

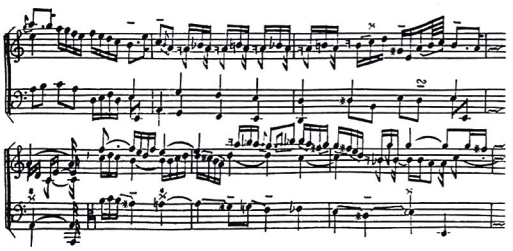
Notice about this Book.
My initial plan when I started the 25th Ordre of this Book was that it should be in C minor and major; but after [composing] the first piece in c minor, it occurred to me to also make one in E♭ major, [a key] that is relative to C minor (and with good reason). Because the first and third parts [of this Ordre] have both been lost, this Ordre is given as it is now, because it was impossible for me, because of my very weak condition, to devote myself to the state of this work. If these two pieces are still found, I will solve it myself, or at least I will instruct those who can remedy this. In that case the title cartouche on page 48 above the Visionaire will become useless. But this is not harmful to the book in general, nor to any piece in particular.[15]

However, this raises a few questions. Why was the composer unable to just write those two pieces out by heart again? Was this due to his poor health? Apparently, the critically ill Couperin was a bit confused, because that piece in the major key of E♭ major, *La Visionaire*, is a French overture with a monumental, dramatic Gravement and a smooth fugato; it is hard to imagine that this was not intended as the opening movement of the Ordre, and that something else preceded it. In addition, he leaves a page (p.55) blank after the last part of this Ordre, and in his *Table des pièces contenuës en ce livre* emphatically points to that *Planche en blanc* ('page left white').

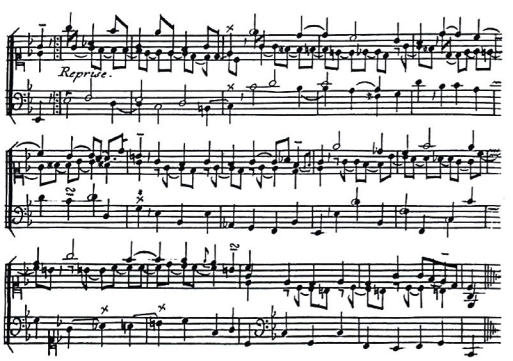
Such empty pages are notably absent in the first three *Livres*; the pages are without exception neatly filled out there. Thus, a piece is apparently missing at the end of Ordre 25. And a similar white page, also duly mentioned in the table of contents, can be found in the ensuing Ordre 26, after the Gavotte (p.59); thus, another piece may be missing here too. Are these the two lost pieces, rather than the ones that according to Couperin were to surround the *La Visionnaire* overture? Leaving those two pages open would in any case have considerably facilitated the belated addition of the missing pieces, which Couperin somewhat naively suggests in his *Notification*. The hope that he expresses, in the actual preface of the Fourth Book, that his family may take care of his extensive musical legacy and can bring it out in print was, alas, never realized. And in this way not only these two harpsichord pieces, but also, much more substantially, six further *Leçons de ténèbres* and the second part of the monumental *Les Nations* seem to have been lost forever.

Whatever the case, it is likely that Ordre 25 was the last one he composed. This Ordre also contains two pieces with the by-now familiar autobiographical key elements. In *La Misterieuse*, which is indeed a rather mysterious allemande from a musical point of view and perhaps an attempt to clarify the mystery of life (as Mellers suggests, even if perhaps a bit too grandly[16]), the *suspiratio* plays a dominant role. In ex.9 we see a part from the second half of this piece, with the *suspiratio* in the first line, here in combination with a subtle, strange chromaticism, and in the second line the lamento bass. This Ordre is concluded in its unfinished (?) form with *Les Ombres Errantes* ('the wandering shadows'), in which the sighs are stylized to the extreme and the chromatic quarter does not appear

in the bass, but hidden in a middle voice for the first and only time (ex.10, first line, bars 3-4). The *style luthé* is used just as consistently here as in the much more famous *Les Barricades Mistérieuses* (Ordre 6 from the Second Book). Christophe Rousset aptly describes the ending of *Les Ombres Errantes*: 'The piece reaches for the treble of the harpsichord, with the expression of languor becoming more intense; this makes the coda placed in the lower part of the instrument all the more tragic, with an expression of ultimate resignation'.[17] The *Ombres Errantes* as understood in Couperin's time are wandering dead souls who were searching for Charon and his boat to cross the river Styx.[18] Is this very last composition, indeed of an unearthly beauty, perhaps a feverish vision of the critically-ill Couperin?



Ex.9 *La Misterieuse*, last two lines of p.50



Ex.10 *Les Ombres Errantes*, second half

Pieter Dirksen performs as soloist on both harpsichord and organ and as continuo player with many chamber ensembles. In 1996 he received his doctorate 'cum laude' with a dissertation on the keyboard music of Sweelinck, which was awarded the Dutch Praemium Erasmianum. Further books have been devoted to Bach's Art of Fugue (1994), Sweelinck (2002) and Scheidemann (2007), as well as editions of music by Bull, Sweelinck, Cornet, Scheidemann, Düben, Buxtehude, Reincken, Lübeck and Bach. He has recorded music by Sweelinck, Scheidemann, Böhm, Louis and François Couperin, and Bach (Goldberg Variations, Art of Fugue).

Endnotes

1 On this aspect, see Wilfred Mellers, *François Couperin and the French Classical Tradition* (London, 1987), 380-437; Jane Clark and Derek Connon, *The Mirror of Human Life. Reflections on François Couperin's* Pièces de Clavecin (London, 2/2011).

2 For the *Pièces d'Orgue*, published in 1690, which contains two organ masses, only the title page was printed; the music itself was copied by hand. Three modest collections of Psalm verses set for various combinations of voices and instruments appeared in 1703-5 and were explicitly composed and published *par ordre du Roy* ('by order of the King').

3 Couperin published his *Leçons de Ténèbres* from 1714 in all likelihood with a view to the old king Louis XIV, who would die the following year and who seems at old age to have developed a special preference for small-scale church music, not least that composed by Couperin.

4 See also David Fuller, 'La Grandeur du Grand Couperin', in Orhan Memed (ed), *François Couperin, Nouveaux regards* (Paris, 1998), 43-64.

5 This piece forms Couperin's only rondeau that was left without a character title. It caught the attention of none other than J. S. Bach, who took it as the starting point for the Prélude of his late Suite in F minor in French style BWV823, which is also conceived as a rondeau; see Pieter Dirksen, 'Überlegungen zu Bachs Suite f-Moll BWV 823', in Martin Geck (ed), *Bachs Musik für Tasteninstrumente*, Dortmunder Bachforschungen V (Witten, 2003), 119-31.

6 See Clarke and Connon (2011), 157f; Mellers (1987), 410-13.

7 Clarke and Connon (2011), 192.

8 Mellers (1987), 432.

9 *Il y a environ trois ans que ces pieces sont achevées; Mais comme ma santé diminuë de jour en jour, mes amis m'ont conseillé de cesser de travailler et je n'ay pas fait de grands ouvrages depuis.*

10 The building still exists, on the corner of Rue Radziwill and Rue des Petits Champs; Couperin had lived there with his family since 1724, on the second floor.

11 Some authors rather think of one of Couperin's two daughters; see Philippe Beaussant, *François Couperin* (Paris, 1980), 468f, Clarke and Connon (2011), 178 and Christophe Rousset, *François Couperin* (Paris, 2016), 176. Mellers (1987), 426, on the other hand, prefers an interpretation of the young Couperin himself.

12 Beaussant (1980), 473, 490, already noted the importance of the chromatically descending fourth in the last three *Ordres*.

13 Couperin also used the title *La Convalescente* for a trio sonata that has been preserved in a copy of the Dresden violinist Johann Georg Pisendel from 1714, the year in which he spent several months in Paris (Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, *Mus. 2162-Q-2*). Couperin later renamed it *L'Impériale* and included it in his *Les Nations* of 1726. Did Couperin write this masterpiece – arguably his best trio sonata – around 1713, when he first mentions his illnesses?

14 Mellers (1987), 435.

15 *Avis sur ce Livre. Mon premier dessein, en commençant l'Ordre 25e de ce Livre, étoit qu'il fût en Vt-Mineur, et Majeur; Mais aprés la premiere pièce en Vt-Mineur, Il me vint dans l'idée d'en faire une en Mi-bemol naturel, qui fût relative audit Ordre d'Vt-Mineur (et cela pour raison;) La premiere pièce, et la troisième s'étant toutes deux trouvées égarées, on à donné cet Ordre comme on a pû; n'ayant pas jugé a propos, dans le fort de mon incommodité, de m'apliquer a la conduitte de cet Ouvrage. Si dans la Suitte on retrouve ces deux piéces, j'y remédieray moy-même, ou du moins je conduiray ceux qui y remédieront moyennent quoy, Le Cartouche qui est page 48. au devant de la Visionnaire devient inutil. Mais cela ne fait aucun tort au Livre en general, n'y à chaque pièce en particulier.*

16 Mellers (1987), 433.

17 Rousset (2016), 177: … *s'étirant vers l'aigu de l'instrument et rendant toujours plus intense l'expression languissante; de ce fait la coda de la pièce tassée dans le grave sonne plus tragique, comme l'expression d'une ultime résignation.*

18 Clarke and Connon (2011), 194f.