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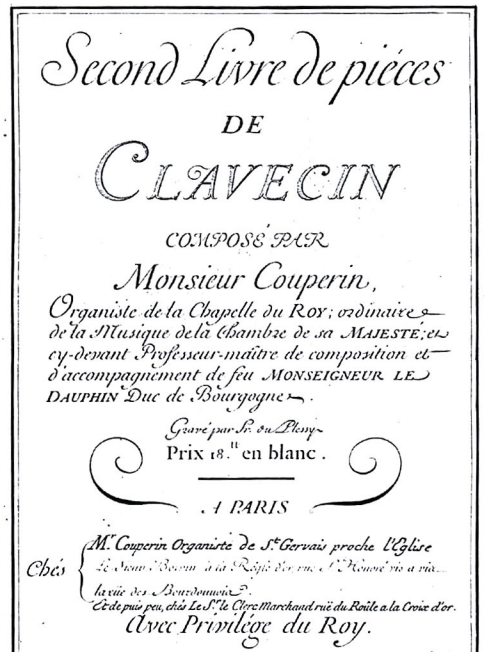
Performing François Couperin's *Les Baricades Mistérieuses*

Claudio Di Veroli

Recorded performances of Couperin's short masterpiece *Les Baricades Mistérieuses* show astonishing variety, reflecting the many details in the score that can appear puzzling to the modern performer. I will try to clarify these issues and suggest a reconstruction of the manner of performance likely to reproduce the composer's intentions.

The score

No autograph survives of any of François Couperin's more than 230 harpsichord pieces.[1] The few extant handwritten copies were not written by members of his circle; and scholars agree that the best sources are the composer's own engraved editions. For this piece, the source is his *Second Livre de piéces de Clavecin* (illus.1), first issued most likely in January 1717.[2] A few corrections were made to this *Livre* for its 2nd and 3rd impressions (1722), but the plates for *Les Baricades* remained unchanged.[3] Nothing is known about the puzzling title *Les Baricades Mistérieuses* ('Mysterious barricades') which may refer to a contemporary episode or perhaps to a painting.[4]


Second Livre de piéces
DE
CLAVECIN
COMPOSÉ PAR
Monsieur Couperin,
Organiste de la Chapelle du Roy; ordinaire de la Musique de la Chambre de sa MAJESTÉ; et cy-devant Professeur-maître de composition et d'accompagnement de feu MONSEIGNEUR LE DAUPHIN Duc de Bourgogne.
Gravé par Ste du Plessy
Prix 18.ll en blanc.
A PARIS
Chés M.r Couperin Organiste de St Gervais proche l'Eglise
Le Sieur Boivin à la Régie de vin, à Nevers vis a vis la rüe des Bourdonnois.
Et depuis peu, chés Le S.r le Clerc Marchand rüe du Roule a la Croix d'or.
Avec Privilége du Roy.
gravé par Berey

Illus.1 Title page of Couperin's *Second Livre de piéces de Clavecin* (Paris, 1745). This was the last edition produced with the composer's original engraved plates.)

All modern editions[5] have changed the right hand original alto clef (C clef on the 3rd line, which most present day keyboard players find very hard to read, ex.1), into the bass clef. For some reason, however, as kindly communicated to me by David Pickett, they have omitted the original *suspension* signs. Whenever referring below to specific bars in the piece, I use the numbers that appear in the editions by Kenneth Gilbert and Pierre Gouin.[6]

The instrument: range, manuals and registration

Range. At the time this piece was published, harpsichords with bass down to FF and treble up to e''' and even f''' had already been built in France, and Couperin had famously scored a single FF as optional in *La Bandoline* in his *Premier Livre*, first issued in 1713. However, most harpsichords had then the common GG or AA-d''' keyboard compass.[7] Remarkably, this piece uses only the lower range of the instrument, going no higher than g'.

Manuals. Quite a few recordings of *Les Baricades* use both manuals, mostly one for the Rondeaux and the other for the Couplets. Alternatively, 'in a rondeau ... a couplet and its answering rondeau might be played on a different manual'.[8] However, directions from the Baroque era for manual changing in Rondeaux are exceedingly rare. Baroque audiences were very familiar with the common Rondeau form, and they did not need a manual change to notice the section changes between Rondeaux and couplets, even more so when the player produces the *suspension* the composer marked at the end of each section of this piece. Playing it on one manual is perhaps better in agreement with the continuous movement depicted in the score.

Registration. Any 8' combination appears suitable. Possibly a single 8' (as on a spinet) will produce the delicate yet accurate attack this piece requires. On a French Baroque-model harpsichord, I prefer the lower 8' for the quality of its bass notes and also because, in most instruments, it is slightly louder than the upper 8'.

Metrical Levels

In Philippe Beaussant's words, *Le style luthé, rarement employé de manière aussi systématique...* ('The lute style, rarely used in such a systematic manner')[9] would not have misled any contemporary performer: far from being anything like an unmeasured prelude, *Les Baricades* contains very carefully measured and conceived counterpoint in four parts. This is confirmed by the bass part of the Rondeau being a Passacaille-like basso ostinato sequence: B♭ F B♭ F G D E♭ F.

The time signature is '2', meaning two minims per bar. The metrical levels are similar to a typical Baroque dance,[10] and in this case there is a direct binary progression:

- The movement (or tap, see below) is in quavers. This is the level that in many French pieces is performed with *notes inégales*.
- The pulse is in crotchets: 1 pulse beat=2 taps.
- The beat is in minims: 1 beat=2 pulses (this is the level usually associated with a metronome click)
- The bar has two minims: 1 bar=2 beats.
- The phrase has two bars: 1 phrase=2 bars.

The Rondeau contains four phrases, the 1er couplet has 6, the 2e couplet has only 3 and the 3e couplet has eleven. Pages could be written on the remarkable symmetries and delightful harmonic progressions in this piece.

Tempo

It is apparent that the '2' and the marking 'Vivement' do not suggest a very fast tempo: they are just meant to prevent a slow performance. Modern performances however show astonishing variety: some play the piece very slowly, others very fast, others with sweeping tempo changes. I find it hard to understand the reasons for this diversity. Let us scrutinize the different approaches.

Very slow. Some players have recorded this piece as slow as a lethargic minim=58. As I have just noted, this contradicts both the signature '2' and the indication 'Vivement'.

Very fast. There is more than one reason to avoid a really fast tempo. We need a reasonable tempo to perform with clarity the ornaments (more on this below). Also, many details in the careful part writing are lost in a fast performance. Conversely, a moderate tempo allows to enjoy as much as possible the masterly harmonic progressions in this gem of the Baroque repertoire.

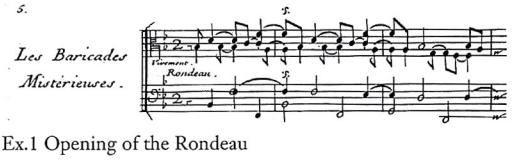
Very metronomical. Typical of performances up to about 1960, these are unlikely to reflect the composer's intentions, particularly given the already mentioned *suspensions* included in the score.

Very variable. For some decades now, quite a few recordings have exhibited ostensible ritardandos down to about minim=56, as well as accelerandos up to minim=110. Some performances are almost completely unmeasured. However, the composer's intentions are very clear in this respect: among his final recommendations in his treatise (the final edition of which was published in the same year as the first edition of the *Second Livre*, which included *Les Baricades*) he tells us to *Prendre bien garde à ne point altérer le mouvement dans les pièces réglés* ('Take great care never to change the tempo in measured pieces').[11]

Conclusion. When all the above considerations are put together, it appears that the composer meant a performance keeping a very steady beat, and mostly a steady pulse as well, with a modicum of flexibility in the quavers (often called 'micro rubato') due to the ornaments and *suspensions*. The tempo should be around minim=81, not slower than 78 and not faster than 84.

Notes inégales

Pieces written in lute style with many parts - and also indications such as 'Vivement' - are a textbook case where Baroque French musicians would play *notes égales*. This said, two passages break away from the lute-style counterpoint and strongly suggest *notes inégales*: 1) In bar 4 of the Rondeau, the second beat breaks away from the two-part counterpoint: we have a diatonic sequence that, with the trill, strongly suggests *inégalité* (whereby the right hand plays the quavers e♭' and c' delayed and shorter). This yields a most natural and beautiful effect, and the trill on d' can be played without either a hurried realisation or a significant slowdown. 2) The rh one-part diatonic passage in bar 29, sixth bar of the 2e Couplet.



Ex.1 Opening of the Rondeau

Articulation

Other than the passages singled out above for *notes inégales*, in this piece there are a further few breaks in the legato (or perhaps 'almost legato'): 1) Quite obviously at the end of each Couplet, after the final quaver that always carries an ornament sign, i.e. immediately before the Rondeau starts again. 2) In the 2e Couplet, bar 26 (third bar of the couplet) after the initial rh g quaver, and possibly also in bar 28 (fifth bar of the couplet) after the

initial rh c'. 3) Twice towards the end of the 3e Couplet, in bars 47 and 49, the composer marked an interruption of the four-part flow with a crotchet rest in the tenor voice: accordingly, the bass part should also be detached, audibly separating the low D minim from the preceding minim.

Ornaments

This piece includes a few mordents and trills that can be tricky for the student. Two general principles apply to these ornaments: 1) Trills and mordents are to be played starting on the beat, for this piece and indeed for the whole Baroque repertoire.[12] 2) A recent fashion is to play some trills and mordents quite slowly: however, all the extant Baroque evidence shows that these ornaments were always meant to be played fast, when not indeed as fast as possible.

Suspensions. The composer wrote *suspension* signs over the last note of every Rondeau and Couplet (see the facsimile below). As he explained elsewhere,[13] this means a rh 'breath' or staggered execution, but in this context the sign is most likely to show mainly a slight hesitation before starting the next section 'a tempo'. There is an exception: no *suspension* sign is found at the end of the 1er Couplet. This may be because there was no space left to engrave it over the compound trill sign, or else because a *suspension* may imply a staggered execution that delays the beginning of the ornament; this is to be avoided here, because we need all the time available for the ornament's six-note realisation. One way or another, this trill makes our recommended hesitation-before-Rondeau inevitable.

Short trIllus. There is one in the Rondeau and another at the end of the 2e Couplet. A modern tendency is to play the former without the upper auxiliary, to avoid a repeated note, but there is plentiful historical evidence that this repetition is precisely what Baroque composers meant. Whenever a trill over a note is preceded by a note at the same pitch as the trill's upper note, this note should indeed be repeated as the first note of the trill.[14]

Long trill. Only one long trill is found in this piece, in the 1er Couplet. The composer and others recommended to play long trills 'accelerando'.[15] The termination in semiquavers is conventional: the performer is expected to play it quite fast, regardless of the tempo chosen for the piece.

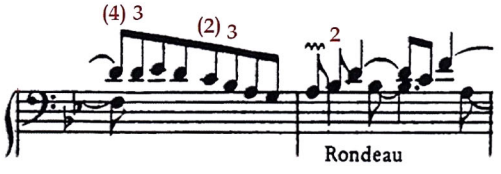
Compound trill. Written at the end of the 1er Couplet, it is to be played as fast as possible. Occasionally this ornament has been performed as a simple turn, but this is contradicted by the notated 'trill and turn' sign. The performer is expected to 'linger' on this quaver a little, not just to have the time to play the six notes d' c' d' c' b♭ c', but also because an end-of-section 'hesitation' is to be assumed here, by analogy with the other Couplets and Rondeau.

Mordents. There one at the end of the Rondeau, the other at the end of the 3e Couplet. Being placed over quavers, these are short mordents (three notes, i.e. a single repercussion).

Fingering

Lute style in four parts is very unusual in Couperin, and not surprisingly no fingering example from *L'Art de Toucher* applies directly to this type of counterpoint. However, some of the fingering devices described in *L'Art de Toucher* do apply to a few passages of *Les Baricades*:

Cross-fingering in scales. In bar 29, rh top part, I finger the 2nd quaver d' with 3, thus reaching the 4th quaver c' with 2, then I 'cross fingers' by playing b♭ with 3 (ex.2). This fingering helps the *inégalité*, the crossing being from long to short note.[16]



Ex.2 Les Baricades Misterieuses, bars 29-30, with fingerings suggested by the author, in agreement with the composer's directions and examples in *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin.*

Finger substitution (changing a finger while holding the key down). This allows us to hold long notes, for example for the lh c in bar 8 and the lh G in bar 27.

Finger change (playing the same key twice consecutively with a different finger). This is useful to avoid the disruption of repeated notes. In this piece the finger change is recommended in two types of passages: (1) To help the legato (or non legato) articulation. For example in the rh alto part, in bars 46 and 50 we can play the f' crotchet with 2 and the following f' quaver with 3, while conversely in bar 47 we play the f' crotchet with 3 and the following f' quaver with 2. (2) To facilitate the above-mentioned repetition of the note at the beginning of the short trill in the Rondeau, bar 4. We finger the note before the trill with 3, and the trill note also with 3, which implies that the trill's upper auxiliary is played with 4: in other words, we repeat the e♭' by changing fingers 3 and 4.

Arpeggios

Baroque arpeggios include both 'staggered execution'

(where the right hand plays a note slightly delayed with respect to the beat) and true full chord 'arpeggio'. A recent fashion is to use staggered and arpeggio execution as a predominant device in this piece, and also in all the slow pieces. This manner has been extolled as 'natural', although there is no historical evidence whatsoever that it was deemed natural by Baroque harpsichordists.[17] Actually, throughout most of this piece arpeggios are to be avoided, first because the movement in quavers is actually a succession of slow arpeggio chords, secondly because obviously the harmonic progressions and clashes were written to be heard.

This said, there are a few places in *Les Baricades* where either staggered execution or arpeggio is indeed stylish and produces a beautiful effect, typically: (1) In the Rondeau, bar 4, we can slightly delay the rh initial dotted g crotchet. (2) In the 3^{e} Couplet, bar 35 (fifth bar of the couplet), we can slightly delay the rh e$^{b'}$ minim. (3) There is evidence of Baroque composers prescribing a final chord as 'simultaneous' (e.g. J. S. Bach writing it as a quaver followed by rests), but we have no hard evidence from Couperin. It is informative that some of his pieces have elaborated arpeggios instead of a final chord, for example *Les Silvains* (*Premier Ordre*). By writing elsewhere a simple chord, as in this piece, he might have assumed a simultaneous chord instead, or else an arpeggio as shown in other pieces: it is anybody's guess. I prefer an arpeggio.

Baroque and modern mindsets

Too much information? What we have discussed above is largely familiar fare for specialists in French Baroque interpretation. But it is not so for students and amateurs, who may wonder: isn't all this too complicated? Does all this make sense just to play a piece with such an uniform texture? Were Baroque musical minds more complicated than ours? Actually, they were simpler. We are used to play music composed in many different places, times and styles, while Baroque musicians mostly played music composed in their own time and place, or else in a style they were familiar with. What looks to us like a long recipe of conventions, was actually second nature for French musicians during the first half of the 18th century: this was their musical mental model. For us it is difficult, but also fascinating, to acquire that model, which helps us in re-discovering and re-creating their musical message.[18] When I study on the harpsichord a piece by François Couperin, my guiding ideas are: would this great composer have approved the way I play his works? Am I conveying everything this piece is meant to say?

Expressiveness

Too little information? A few musicians consider all the above as basic information only, supposedly because it would just represent a fraction of the Baroque environment: as a consequence, they find it more important to play 'expressively'. However, the meaning of this term in Baroque music needs clarification: otherwise, and inevitably, modern musicians deem 'expressive' the performance conventions of Romantic music played on the modern piano.

To find out about Baroque era expressiveness, what can be better than asking the sources? Let me describe these generally, without all the verbatim quotations and bibliography that can be easily found elsewhere. According to some leading Baroque musicians, 'expressiveness' meant mainly to perform properly the ornamentation. For some renowned Baroque French musicians, expressiveness meant mainly to perform properly the *notes inégales*. Ask a champion of post-Baroque personal expressiveness, such as C. P. E. Bach, what is the most important factor in a proper performance, and he will tell you to take care first and foremost to play with the proper tempo.

This said, there is indeed an important Baroque concept that strongly relates to our modern concept of 'expressiveness': flexibility. One item of general advice, found for example in *L'Art de Toucher*, is to play with suppleness in the movements of arms, hands and fingers. A more specific direction, found in different Baroque sources, is 'micro rubato': while keeping strictly the beat or pulsation (and many musicians, including Couperin, insisted in this as a very basic principle), divisions are played with a modicum of flexibility, especially in slow pieces. Discussed above are the different types of flexibility that apply to a few passages of *Les Baricades*: *notes inégales*, arpeggio, staggered performance and *suspension*. There are also other types of Baroque flexibility or micro rubato, which I have not included here because they do not apply to *Les Baricades*.

To conclude, if in the performance of Baroque music we appropriately follow the performance manners considered 'expressive' by Baroque musicians - i.e. the prescriptions they wrote down to explain their ideas about a proper and expressive performance of their music - by all means, let us be expressive!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank musicologist Dr David Pickett, whose suggestions led to the production of this article.

Dr Claudio Di Veroli is a harpsichordist and musicologist. For decades based in Buenos Aires and later in Bray, Ireland, he recently moved to Lucca in Italy. His many public performances and publications have been praised by leading musicians and favourably reviewed.

Website http://harps.braybaroque.ie/biog.html.

Endnotes

1 Byron Sartain, 'The manuscript dissemination of François Couperin's harpsichord music', *Early Music* 41/ 3, (August 2013), 377–91.

2 François Couperin, ed Kenneth Gilbert, *Second Livre de piéces de Clavecin* (Paris, 1973), Introduction. See on p.ix a chronology of the reprints produced using the composer's original engraved plates.

3 Superimposing scans of the 1717 and 1745 editions (available from IMSLP at https://imslp.org/) no differences whatsoever can be found for *Les Baricades Mistérieuses*.

4 See, for example, Jane Clark and Derek Connon, *The Mirror of Human Life. Reflections on François Couperin's Pièces de Clavecin* (London, 3/2020) and Garry Broughton, 'The Mystery of the Barricades', *British Clavichord Society Newsletter* 17 (June 2018), 3-7.

5 I have checked the Brahms and Chrysander (Augener, 1888), Cauchie (L'Oiseau-Lyre, 1932), Gilbert (Heugel, 1973) and Gouin (Éditions Outremontaises, 2006) editions.

6 Editions of Couperin's pieces prior to the mid-20th century do not include bar numbers.

7 'This is the range typically scored by François Couperin, Handel, the young Rameau, J. S. Bach and others in the first decades of the 18th century. A significant amount of masterpieces fitting this range were composed up to the end of the Baroque era, even decades after the larger range FF-f''' had become common' (Claudio Di Veroli, 'A concise account of historical harpsichord ranges', *NEMA Newsletter* i/1 (January 2017), 10-14).

8 Gilbert (1973), xix.

9 Philippe Beaussant, *François Couperin* (Paris, 1980), 384. An English translation by Alexandra Land (Amadeus Press) is also available.

10 Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, expanded edition (Bloomington, 2001), 18, Table I: Metric Levels in Baroque Dances.

11 François Couperin, *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin* (Paris, 2/1717), 61. Modern editions and translations are available.

12 This principle is confirmed by Couperin's explanation in his *L'Art de Toucher* on p.19 and by the trill example on p.24. Readers may have heard some recordings of Baroque music on period instruments where some mordents and trills (especially when short, slurred and placed on the weak beat) are performed before the beat, or 'prebeat'. This is a real pity, because such a practice was unheard of prior to the 19th century. For a full discussion see Claudio Di Veroli, *Playing the Baroque Harpsichord: essays on the instrument, interpretation and performance, with relevant topics for the clavichord and organ*, eBook (Bray and Lucca, 3/2018), sections 2.2 and 2.3.

13 Couperin (1713), 75, last ornament: *"Suspension"*.

14 For a full discussion see Di Veroli (2018), 74, 3rd bullet.

15 Couperin (1717), 23.

16 See Claudio Di Veroli, *Baroque Keyboard Fingerings: A Method* (Bray and Lucca, 7/2016), Rule S: Crossing over the strong beat.

17 As cleverly observed to the author by Hubert Bédard in Paris in about 1970, there is a long list of performing customs in Baroque and harpsichord music that we modern musicians tend to deem either 'natural' or 'unnatural', yet extant sources and barrel-organs mercilessly demonstrate that they were precisely the opposite for musicians in the Baroque era.

18 Renowned harpsichordist Skip Sempé, as 'Ambassador of the 6th edition of European Day of Early Music' (21 March 2018) said: 'The "early music movement" was created by very individual, outspoken and persuasive militant musicians who defended the idea of discovering expressive and efficient use of the instruments known by the composers. We still need musicians who concern themselves with the composer's intentions if we are to continue to thrive as interpreters. Through both act and teaching, the preservation of tradition is the greatest contemporary art form', http://www.lfbm.org.uk/news/skip-sempe-and-european-day-early-music.