

PROGRAM NOTES

In early 18th-century France there was an ongoing debate between those who wanted to keep French music purely French and those who favored the increasingly popular Italian style. Ironically, the 17th-century composer held up as the model of true French music was Jean-Baptiste Lully, born in Florence and thus himself an Italian immigrant. Arcangelo Corelli was the widely imitated Italian master whose music best represented the new “foreign” style. François Couperin wrote a series of programmatic works paying tribute to both of those famous musicians, culminating in the Sonata *La Paix du Parnasse* (Peace on Parnassus), which perfectly blends the two styles. The two violin parts, designated respectively “Corelli and the Italian muses” and “Lully and the French muses,” share the same material although notated slightly differently to reflect their different traditions.

Leclair and Rameau are the best known French composers from the generation after François Couperin. These contemporaries of Voltaire continued Couperin’s trend of integrating diverse styles into their work, paving the way for the more universal musical language of the Classical era.

Jean-Marie Leclair was a French-born violinist who studied in Italy and then returned to work primarily in Paris. Although he composed an opera and other stage works, most of his music is for violin and is often quite virtuosic. In addition to many violin sonatas with continuo accompaniment, Leclair published twelve sonatas for two violins without continuo, offering two virtuoso violinists the opportunity to take turns accompanying each other. The *Allegro assai* which opens the *Sonata in F Major for Two Violins, Opus 3, No. 4*, recalls the violin concertos of Antonio Vivaldi whose work was well known and widely imitated in Paris by this time. In contrast, the *aria* which follows has all the charm and grace of a French pastoral scene. The final *Gigue* is a lively French dance, reminding us of the close connection between violin music and dancing—going all the way back to Lully whose success at the French court began when he danced with the king.

Historically Jean-Philippe Rameau is most important as an opera composer and as a theorist who codified the musical language of Corelli to establish what is still considered common-practice harmony. Rameau was also a great keyboard player who published four volumes containing some of the best harpsichord music of his generation. The *Prelude* which opens the first book of harpsichord pieces begins in the old-fashioned unmeasured style, originally derived from improvisatory lute music, and then segues into a rhythmic section in a much more orchestral vein, like the fast part to a French overture. The *Gavotte and variations* from his third book exhibits virtuosity typical of much of Rameau’s later harpsichord music.

His final work for keyboard, the *Pièces de clavecin en concert* of 1741, is described on the title page as pieces for harpsichord with accompaniment of a violin or flute, and a bass viol or second violin. Although accompanied keyboard music was becoming fashionable among amateur musicians, these *Concerts* by Rameau are unlike any other examples from the period in that even the so-called accompanying parts demand highly skilled players.

French Baroque composers often paid tribute to patrons or colleagues in the titles of their works. *La Cupis* is a tribute to the famous dancer Marie Anne de Cupis, better known by her stage name La Camargo; *La Forqueray* and *La Marais* honor the two greatest viol players of the time. Their contemporary, Hubert Le Blanc, best known for a treatise he called *Defense of the bass viol against the successes of the violin and the pretenses of the cello*, famously described Marais as playing like an angel while Forqueray played like the devil. Forqueray’s output includes pieces honoring Couperin, Leclair, and Rameau. Forqueray instructs us to play *La Couperin* nobly and distinctly.

Leclair published two large-scale instrumental suites he called “Recreations of music, in an easy style...” and designated for two violins or two flutes with basso continuo. Clearly he was targeting the growing market for amateur music-making, however we might beg to differ about how “easy” these pieces are. In any case, easy or not, this is some of the best chamber music of the High Baroque. The *Deuxième Récréation de Musique* (Second Recreation) begins with a French overture which is then followed by a series of stylish dances, culminating in a magnificent *chaconne*, and finally a raucous pair of *tambourins* meant to evoke the rustic and wild music of the peasantry.