

PROGRAM NOTES

J'ai toujours eu un objet en composant toutes ces pièces. Des occasions différentes me l'ont fourni, ainsi les titres répondent aux idées que j'en ai eues; on me dispensera d'en rendre compte . . . il est bon d'avertir que les pièces qui le portent sont des espèces de portraits, qu'on a trouvé quelquefois assez ressemblants sous mes doigts.

I have always had an objective in mind when composing these pieces—objects that stood out to me on various occasions. Thus, the titles reflect ideas which I have had; please exempt me from explaining them further... I should point out that the pieces which bear them are a type of portraits which, under my fingers, have on occasion been found to have a fair enough likeness.

François Couperin, preface to the *Premier livre de pièces de clavecin* (1713)

—translated by Aya Hamada

In the 18th century during the reign of Louis XV, the harpsichord enjoyed its greatest popularity in France. A wealth of music for harpsichord was composed and often printed, which reflected the popularity of the instrument among professionals and amateurs. While the music of the previous Grand Siècle is full of majestic grandeur and solemn grace, the period of Louis XV tends to favor a refined elegance and lightness. In the early 18th century French harpsichord music that had developed from the dance suites of the 17th century had added many character pieces and dedicatory portraits. Bearing enigmatic and evocative titles taken from life's experiences, the character pieces evoke moods, emotions, events, objects, natural phenomena, or specific situations. The musical portraiture shows character traits of the dedicatee, usually a patron or colleagues of the composer.

For nearly two hundred years, the Couperin family played major roles in musical life in the Ile-de France. Starting in 1653 with François Couperin's uncle Louis Couperin (c.1626 - 1661), the Couperin family lived and worked at the Eglise Saint-Gervais in Paris, as well as holding positions at Versailles. One of Louis Couperin's accomplishments was his championing of unmeasured preludes. They are notated entirely in whole notes and written without rhythms, bar lines, or meter indications. Thus, rhythmic interpretation is entirely left to the performer, which results in the music being highly flexible and improvisatory. **François Couperin** (1668 - 1733), known as Couperin "Le Grand" (The Great), was the son of Charles Couperin (1638 - 1679), younger brother of Louis. His four volumes of harpsichord music, published in Paris in 1713, 1717, 1722, and 1730, contain more than 220 individual miniature pieces grouped into "orders."

Even though it is not indicated in the title, *La Superbe ou la Forqueray* (3^e livre, 17^{ème} ordre, 1722) has the archaic gravity of the allemande, and pays homage to the great viol virtuoso, Antoine Forqueray, a contemporary and colleague of François Couperin. The firmly placed bass against an active, flowing melody line gives shape to the dignity and nobility that Forqueray undoubtedly expressed in his own playing .

Two portraits of François Couperin titled *La Couperin* follow: one is an intimate tribute by **François D'Agincourt** (*Pièces de clavecin*, 1733), and the other is a self-portrait by Couperin, himself (3^e livre, 21^{ème} ordre, 1722). Both share the same tonal key (E Minor) and compositional architecture (allemande). Born in Rouen, D'Agincourt (1683-1759) published his only surviving collection of harpsichord music, *Premier livre de clavecin*, which contains forty-three pieces for harpsichord. In its preface, D'Agincourt expressed his admiration for Couperin, particularly regarding his ornamentation and touch. Couperin himself chose a mono-thematic piece for his self-portrait. It is characterized by extended sequences, firm linear lines, and a strong tonal character, which renders this portrait one of substantial seriousness.

Born in Thionville in northeastern France, **Joseph Bodin de Boismortier** (1689 - 1755) was one of the most versatile and prolific French composers of his time. His single volume of harpsichord pieces was published in 1736, and all eighteen of his character pieces in four relatively short suites are distinguished for clarity, elegance, and light-hearted style. In *La Caverneuse* (The Cavern), discreet echo effects skillfully produce dynamic contrasts that create a mysterious impression of caves. Enticing titles such as *La Veloutée* (The Velvety), *La Frénétique* (The Frenetic) are not directly associated with individuals and seem to suggest only a musical ambience, while *La Rustique* (The Rustic) illustrates a merry peasant.

Jean-Philippe Rameau's (1689 - 1755) main output of harpsichord music consists of three solo collections (1706, 1724, 1726/27) and a volume of chamber music (*Pièces de clavecin en concerts*, 1741) that also contains five solo arrangements. His 1724 collection features some of the most virtuosic and progressive keyboard writing, more than that of any French predecessor. *Les Tendres plaints* (The Tender Sorrows) is a lyrically expressive rondeau which is imbued with heartfelt melancholy. He later orchestrated it in G Minor as "Air Tendre en Rondeau" in his tragédie en musique, *Zoroastre* (1749).

In the letter to the writer/librettist Antoine Houdar de la Motte (October 25, 1727), Rameau explained *Les Tourbillons* (The Whirlwinds) as a musical description of swirls of dust stirred up by high winds, and he composed it with a series of flamboyant gestures, such as brilliant arpeggios, triplets, and rapid scales. Both hands remain close to each other in a sweet register in *L'Entretien des Muses* (Conversations of the Muses). It is written with exquisite ornamentation, subtle inflection, and extraordinary gracefulness of gesture, presenting a high point in French harpsichord playing. Rameau later orchestrated the beginning of the piece for his opera-ballet *Les Fêtes d'Hébé* (1739). One of his most imaginative and theatrical harpsichord works, *Les Cyclopes*, illustrates the one-eyed “thunder and lightning” giants from Greek mythology. The writing includes rapid repeated notes, persistent left hand *batteries* (arpeggiated broken chords which Rameau claimed he invented), and driving scale passages to represent the character. The piece combines virtuosity, outrage, and humor for a breathtaking display of Rameau’s compositional mastery.

The twenty-nine *Pièces de Viole* by **Antoine Forqueray** (1671 - 1745), were published by his son Jean-Baptiste Forqueray in 1747, two years after his father’s death. The son’s version has two different instrumentations: one for viola da gamba with basso continuo and one for solo harpsichord. Jean-Baptiste may have been assisted by his second wife and the harpsichordist Marie-Rose Dubois to create the harpsichord transcriptions. They reflect their viol provenance and rarely escape the tenor tessitura, and they effectively exploit the rich sonority of the bass register on the French harpsichord. Comparison of the harpsichord arrangement with the original viola da gamba version reveals many fascinating compositional approaches and transcription techniques, such as realizing figured bass and enriching the original with harmonic and textural additions. In *La Rameau*, Forqueray captures the spirit of the composer to whom he pays homage, using deceptive cadences, exuberant sonorities, and imaginative harmonies. *La Sylva* offers an incomparably expressive core combined with exquisite passages that move in parallel thirds. Unexpected shifts from major to minor generate a sublime effect of yearning and abundant sentiment. The mythological *Jupiter* is portrayed in a virtuosic rondeau. Shaking tremolos, harmonic bravura, and fiercely impetuous arpeggios in its final couplet effectively represent the god’s powerful thunderbolt. This is the only piece in which Forqueray transposes some treble lines an octave higher to execute the idiomatic splendor of the instrument.

The life of **Jacques Duphly** (1715 - 1789) spanned two significant dates in French history. Born in Rouen in 1715, the year of the death of Louis XIV, he died on the day after the storming of the Bastille in July, 1789. Moving to Paris in 1742, he became an esteemed harpsichord teacher to wealthy families as well as one of the city’s leading harpsichord players alongside Claude-Bénigne Balbastre (1724 - 1799) and Armand-Louis Couperin (1727 - 1789). Duphly published four books of *Pièces de clavecin* (1744, 1748, 1756, 1768). Duphly pays homage to the violists Antoine Forqueray and his son Jean-Baptiste Forqueray in *La Forqueray*, exploiting the low register to match the sonorous effect of their instrument. As the title *Les Grâces* from the Greek mythology implies, exquisite ornamentation suffuses this tender piece with delicate and intimate expression. The theatrical *Chaconne* is a dance in triple meter with sweeping gestures reminiscent of the orchestral writing of a Rameau opera.

—Aya Hamada