



Armand-Louis
COUPERIN

Complete Solo Harpsichord Music

Yago Mahúgo *harpsichord*

Armand Louis Couperin 1727-1789
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Pièces de clavecin (1751)

Pieces in G

1. La Victoire	6'08
2. Allemande	10'44
3. Courante. La de Croissy	4'34
4. Les Cacqueteuses	2'36
5. La Grégoire	4'39
6. L'Intrépide	1'58
7. Menuets in G I & II	3'05
8. L'Arlequine ou La Adam	2'24
9. La Blanchet	3'46
10. La de Boisgelou	4'25
11. La Foucquet	2'38
12. La Semillante ou La Joly	5'37

Pieces in B flat

13. La Turpin	5'39
14. Gavottes I & II	3'41
15. Menuets in B I & II	1'57
16. La du Breüil	5'08
17. La Chéron	5'07
18. L'Affligée	11'10
19. L'Enjouée	4'10
20. Les Tendres Sentiments	4'24
21. Rondeau. Gracieux	2'42

Les Quatre Nations

22. L'Italienne	4'28
23. L'Angloise	2'04
24. L'Allemande	3'32
25. La Française	4'41

Other pieces for solo keyboard instruments

26. La Chasse	2'07
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A gaggle of gossips, a lady in waiting. A musical princess and a much-cherished wife. In one, very general sense, all composers are painters in sound. In another, more specific sense, Romantic composers began to refer to tone-pictures and tone-poems: translations into notes of other media, ideas originally captured by the eye on a page or in a landscape. But in a third, still more exact sense, painting and music – painting *in* music – merged and produced new forms long before Sibelius and the painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela drank and talked and listened and made art from each other's art, or Elgar sketched out his friends in the Enigma Variations. If anything, the art of portraiture in music had reached its zenith some three centuries earlier, at the courts of Louis XIV-XVI, and in a genre of character pieces for harpsichord of which this album represents a late flowering.

Like the better-known Jacques Duphy (1715-1789) and Claude Ballastre (1724-1799), Armand-Louis belongs to the last generation of French harpsichord composers. He was born in February 1727, the only child of Nicolas Couperin and Marie Françoise Dufort de la Coste. Four years earlier, Nicolas had been appointed to succeed his cousin François ('le grand') – and other Couperins before him, who had held the post since 1653 – as titulaire organist at the Église Saint-Gervais in the Marais district of Paris. Nicolas and his family lived nearby in a church property. Armand-Louis grew up in a house full of music, and harpsichords – an inventory made on his mother's death, when he was not yet 18 months old, lists eight keyboard instruments. He was brought up to follow in his father's footsteps, and duly did so at the age of 21 when Nicolas died.

At this point a shrewd but also long and loving match was made. In February 1752, Armand-Louis married Elisabeth-Antoinette Blanchet, daughter of the harpsichord-maker François-Étienne Blanchet and herself the third generation of a family of musicians and luthiers. They had four children, three of whom lived to maturity and became musicians. Youngest of them was Antoinette-Victoire (c. 1760–1812), who was playing on the organ of St Gervais by the time she was 16 years old. Armand-Louis became head of a family business, as organist not only of his home church but also

for the royal chapel, and at other institutions across Paris including Notre-Dame, the Sainte-Chapelle, Saint-Bartholémy, Sainte-Marguerite, Saint-Jean and Saint-François.

The family's eldest son was Pierre-Louis Couperin, who was probably playing for Vespers on the afternoon of Sunday 1 February 1789 when his father, on his way from the Sainte-Chapelle to take over at St Gervais, was sent flying by an out-of-control horse. Armand-Louis died of his injuries the following day and was buried under the organ at St Gervais after a funeral service and grand procession, attesting to the great esteem in which he had been held. Elisabeth-Antoinette did not remarry, but three years later she moved to Versailles and became organist of the church of St Louis; for years she had been substituting for her husband at St Gervais without even the connoisseurs noticing, and eight days before her death at the age of 86, she is reported to have equally delighted a company with her playing on the harpsichord.

One obituary of the time suggests that it may have been modesty that kept Couperin from publishing more of his compositions: 'He was praiseworthy for the most admirable qualities of the heart, for a truly exemplary piety inimical to all display and all ostentation, for the gentility of a sensitive and kind character, for the simplicity and the naturalness of his manner, for the delicacy of his feelings, which has more than once jeopardized his success, and above all for his modesty, which makes him conceal from the public with the greatest care everything which could reveal the brilliance of his attainments: witness the motets he composed for churches which could have made for a musician the finest reputation, but which he has never been willing to entrust to the bright daylight of publication or of publicity. He has continually refused to work for the theatre, in spite of the eager entreaties of masters of the art, who assure him of the most brilliant success.'

The modesty and success which profited Couperin handsomely during his lifetime rather dimmed the light of his creative legacy. As the obituary remarks, he published little. A cantata in 1750 was followed in 1751 by the magnificent volume of *Pièces de clavecin* for which he is best remembered. Though untitled as such, Couperin seems to have considered the volume his Opus 1, but an 'Opus II' took another 14 years to emerge: a collection of six sonatas in a then-fashionable genre for harpsichord with

obligato solo-violin accompaniment (the accomplished lady of leisure sat at the keyboard; a gentleman, if available, picked up a fiddle). Couperin's Opus 3 dates from 1770, a set of three trios, for harpsichord, violin and cello, but this appears to be his last original work of significance.

Perhaps Couperin's organist's duties really were so onerous as to curtail the hours available for composition; or perhaps his creative instincts were amply fulfilled from week to week by the improvisation required of him by the liturgy, and at which he was universally acclaimed as the supreme exponent of his day. Visiting Paris in 1770, the traveller and writer Charles Burney reported that 'Couperin seems to be between forty and fifty; and his taste is not quite so modern, perhaps, as it might be; but allowance made for his time of life, for the taste of his nation, and for the changes music has undergone elsewhere, since his youth, he is an excellent organist; brilliant in execution, varied in his melodies, and masterly in his modulation.'

At any rate, the *Pièces de clavecin* deserve consideration alongside the viol fantazias of Purcell, the Lachrymae of Dowland, as well as the self-consciously valedictory work from a generation of post-Soviet composers such as Valentin Silvestrov and Nikolai Korndorf. For all their differences, these are examples of lateness in music, where the fruit has ripened beyond high summer and in some cases become infected with an aesthetic nostalgia, a kind of noble rot equivalent to the viticultural process which results in notably complex and sweet wines. According to Grove, Couperin's music 'lacks the muscle and discipline that struggle might have imparted to it. Instead, it drifts along in the wake of the innovations of mid-century, ten or 15 years behind the leaders.'

No shortage of modern harpsichordists have demurred at this unfavourable verdict, and found much to interest them in these pieces beyond their historical value at the end of a distinguished family line and yet suspended at a liminal place in history, when the technology of keyboard instruments, the place and ambition of a composer and the nature of listening were all experiencing revolutions hardly less far-reaching than the republican fervour which would see the storming of the Bastille five months after Couperin's untimely demise. Embodying the decorative aesthetic

of the high baroque and the beginning of the true classical style, the rococo style of Armand-Louis and his contemporaries is marked by a certain irregular hesitancy and confidence, as they experiment with bold harmonies, extended forms and new technologies such as the *registre de buffles* – a leather covering to the hammers which imparted a new sweetness and softness of tone.

Couperin divided the collection into two parts by key, G major/minor and B flat major/minor. He prefaced it with a dedication, notable for its warmth of feeling, to Victoire de France, a daughter of Louis XV. Having received instruction at the harpsichord from Marguerite-Antoinette Couperin, daughter of François le grand, the princess was no mean instrumentalist herself, and a much richer and more touching tribute to her may be inferred from the volume's opening piece, 'La Victoire'. Is there a fine, upright bearing to the main theme? A confidence and flair to its elaboration reflecting a personality more rounded than might be expected from a pampered scion?

Much is lost or rather buried within and between the notes in this kind of portraiture, compared to the work of Poussin and Watteau, and yet the pieces spring to life in the right hands. The fourth piece brings 'Les cacqueteuses', the gossips whose indiscreet chatter translates readily enough into music. It is hardly fanciful to surmise that 'La Blanchet', the ninth piece in the volume's first part, is a sketch of Couperin's beloved Elisabeth-Antoinette, while the following piece appears to represent Madame Boisgelou, a lady in waiting. So much else is tantalisingly present yet mysterious in the character of these pieces. Does the opening of the collection's B flat section, 'La Turpin', relate to the craze for the dashing highwayman which had swept through France as well as England after his execution in 1739? Even where all historical traces of the personages involved have been lost to history, they regain a vivid if elusive sense of identity in Couperin's musical portraiture, dignified by his care to paint them in sound with the haunting verisimilitude that lends such affecting pathos to 'L'affligée'. Birtwistle once acknowledged that his music was 'like *listening* to a painting', and the analogy holds good for the mannered society portraits of Armand-Louis Couperin.

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Chosen as the best Spanish artist of the year 2013 by the prestigious music critic Ruben Amón (El Mundo), and performer of one of the best recordings of the year 2013 (El País), Madrid-born **Yago Mahúgo**, one of the most important Spanish musicians in the field of historically informed performance, began his piano studies with Prof. Ana Guijarro in Seville. After obtaining his degree in piano performance, he pursued postgraduate studies at the Hochschule für Musik, Freiburg (Germany) with Prof. Tibor Szász. There he was introduced to period instruments and became a disciple of Prof. Dr. Robert Hill. Under Hill's tutelage, he achieved the Degree in Historical Keyboard Instruments (Harpsichord, Fortepiano, and Organ) and the MA in Harpsichord and Fortepiano. In 2016, Mahúgo earned a Ph.D. of Arts cum

laude from the Rey Juan Carlos University, Madrid, with the distinction of being awarded a special University prize for the best dissertation. He has also studied with the well-known keyboardists Christophe Rousset and Malcolm Bilson. Mahúgo has been honored with several prizes at international competitions, including the 35th International Harpsichord Competition in Budapest, and the 13th Bruges Harpsichord Competition (Belgium), the latter considered to be one of the most important competitions in the field of early music. His concert activities have led him to the most prestigious concert halls in Europe, North and South America, including his debut in February 2017 at the Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall, and the recent appearance of his baroque ensemble, Impetus Madrid, at the Frick Collection Concert Series in New York City. Yago Mahúgo is a regular guest artist (continuo) with several professional orchestras in Europe and has performed also as a soloist at various concert halls: the Palacio de Festivales in Santander, and the Auditorio Nacional and Teatro Real in Madrid, where he gave notable performances of the Harpsichord Concerto by Manuel de Falla. Mahúgo has taught harpsichord and historical performance practice at the Badajoz Superior Conservatory and Seville Superior Conservatory (Spain) and continues to teach and give lectures on these subjects in Spain and abroad (Albacete Conservatory, Barcelona Liceu Superior Conservatory, University of Michigan). He has recorded for several TV and radio stations in Spain and elsewhere in Europe (RNE, TVE, Bartók Radio, MTV). His first harpsichord album, a recording of the complete harpsichord works of the French 18th-century composer Pancrace Royer (Brilliant Classics/Onclassical.com), received rave reviews from several magazines (Ritmo, Melómano, Fanfare), and was chosen as “CD of the Month” by Scherzo magazine in April 2013 and “CD of The Year” by the Spanish newspaper El País. Yago Mahúgo is the founder and conductor of the baroque ensemble Impetus Madrid, performing exclusively on period instruments. The ensemble was nominated for the prestigious ICMA Prize 2015 in the category of Baroque Instrumental Music for their second recording, *Pièces de clavecin en concerts* of Jean-Philippe Rameau. Mahúgo’s latest solo album, *Éclectique*, has received several awards from several music magazines. Currently, Mahúgo holds a full professorship at the Royal Conservatory of Madrid.

Recording dedicated to Christophe Rousset

Recording: September 2020, Mirador de la Sierra, Madrid, Spain
Sound engineer: Iker Olabe – Phonoclasical
Master engineer: Iker Olabe – Phonoclasical
Executive producer: Yago Mahúgo
Assistant producer: José Carlos Cabello
Score: Martin Pearlman’s music edition and autograph
Harpsichord: Keith Hill, copy of Taskin 1769
Temperament & Tuning: Rameau 415 Hz
Microphones: Neumann U87 & Schoeps MK5
Artist photo: @mandragora.pro
Cover: Armand Louis Couperin (1766) by Charles-Nicolas Noel (c.1728-1798)
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