

Individual Spirituality in Post-nonclassical Arts Education

Edited by

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THE ORIGINS OF THE FRENCH CLAVIER SCHOOL

N. LYSINA AND V. TITOVYCH

From the mid-seventeenth onwards, the importance of the French clavier school grew until it came to the forefront of this sphere of musical performance. Its history covers almost 100 years, ending with the works of J. Ph. Rameau and his younger colleagues. By the end of the seventeenth century, the strides being taken by composers/clavecinists were evident in other European countries too. The French school, however, shone brightest for the greatest length of time: its stylistics, the elegance of its writing, and the sequence of its evolution had a great influence on contemporary schools of clavier performance. The music of clavecinists embodies the 'French taste' of its time in European harpsichord composition, performance, and teaching.

In the early stages of its development, french harpsichord music was in close contact with the traditions of the lutenists, who achieved a high standard in their works and a certain elegance of style. The lute music of the mid-seventeenth century in France was not considered to be an artform for the common people. The greatest composers/lutenists performed at court and in aristocratic salons. They were influenced by the court ballet and this gave to their dance pieces an uncommon and stylized character.

It was at this time that the founders of the French harpsichord school—Jacques de Chambonnières and his follower, Louis Couperin—became active in Paris, along with the outstanding lutenist Denis Gaultier (1603?–1672), who created many pieces for lute. These include stylized dances, sometimes with titles such as *allemande*, *courante*, and *sarabande*. In 1669, Gaultier released an album for lute called *The Eloquence of the Gods*—these pieces are small and in one character and movement [2, 517].

A particular type of French clavier suite was founded by Jacques Champion de Chambonnières (1602?–1672), the first maestro, whose two volume-work *Les Pièces de Clavessin*, witnesses the beginning of the French clavecin. The style of this music differs from the German one: it is limited almost completely to the form of the suite; it does not know the

great arrangements of chorales; it avoids strict polyphonic writing; and it does not like brilliant passages, but in the corresponding frames reaches incomparable heights of composition [1]. The highest point of French harpsichord music coincides with the time of the greatest strengthening of royal power in France, and its style certainly reflects the glitter of the court life of the Sun King. The originator of the French musical repertoire for harpsichord was Chambonnières; this repertoire reached its peak with F. Couperin the Grand; and the final exponent was Jean Philippe Rameau.

Chambonnières became head of the school to which Lebègue, d'Anglebert, and the three Couperins went. They were all trained on lute-like pieces by Chambonnières. The performance technique of the French school may be characterized by the use of various agreements and ornamentations borrowed from lute music. These ornaments are a result of the volatility of the harpsichord's sound and served to sustain and brighten the sound. The decoration of the harpsichord also became an inescapable element of artistic expression that gave elegance and grandiosity to French music. The work of the students of Chambonnières emphasizes these lines of clavecin music and each of them enriched it with new elements.

The older Louis Couperin, (1626?–1661), composed a kind of overture, called by him *Prelude*; Nicolas Lebègue (1631?–1702) weaved minor suites into distinct major parts; Jean Henri d'Anglebert (1629–1691) inserted dances from operas by Lully; and finally Louis Marchand (1669–1732) developed some dances of a more mannered and pompous character [1].

In 1703, Louis Nicolas Clérambault (1676–1749), the famous organist, released a collection of clavecin pieces by J. F. Rameau. The particular genius of Rameau, a wonderful author of the suites, was his 'opera style.'

The development of instrumental music, with its many genres, from the beginning of the seventeenth century onwards, was defined by pre-existing forms of concerts and performance. Almost every piece was created for an actual performance and musicians tended not to write music if they did not know when it would be performed. The huge number of musical compositions—ranging from simple 'couples' dances (the core of the later suite form) to developed polyphonic forms, and from concerti grosso to the old cyclical sonatas—gave the epoch a defining repertoire that satisfied the tastes and artistic needs of all ranks of society. Clavecin music presents a wide range of styles, developing from simple folk patterns to a system of contrasts—lyrical, pathetic, mournful, and dynamic [2, 488].

The imaginative content of the new clavecin music heralded a search for new thematic inventions and encouraged the development of a

compositional cycle composed of contrasting parts. The development of a thematic core occurred under the rubric of dance as well. The imagery within these cycles came to be emotionally expressive and dynamic.

The development of these instrumental genres lasted from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in parallel with the development of public performance generally. Some instruments changed their structure and their repertoire, as with the harpsichord (virginal in England) and the violin—the new chamber ensemble used two violins and basso continuo. The specifics of the instruments and their capabilities were not limited by the traditions of vocal and polyphonic structure, but instrumentalism gained ground with its concrete expression taking place on the harpsichord, organ, and violin. The influence of the organ expanded and, accordingly, the repertoire for organ was enriched. But organ music with its strict and archaic professional traditions differed in its character from the more ‘homely’ clavecin music of the salon.

The road from chorale *ricercare/canzona* to fugue mirrors that from organ composition to suite. In a similar fashion, the repertoire of the clavecin followed the common traditions of the lute. The various transcriptions of chorales used and the skills of improvisation on the clavecin were the property of the organ and organists. Music for the violin embodied the new aspirations of the instrumental style and is characterized by the form of the sonata and concerto. Naturally, these genres are closer to opera and vocal pieces, though enriched with the expressive capabilities of string instruments. It is from the violin that the sonata and the concerto transferred to the clavier and in doing so they acquired new qualities.

By considering the evolution of the organ, the clavecin, the ensemble, and violin music up to the beginning of the eighteenth century, one can get an idea of how these genres developed from their oldest historic forms to their newest. Clavecin music, as a specific area of creativity, became popular later than organ music. The founder or ‘father’ of the French organ school is considered to be the organist, composer, and poet Jean (Jehan) Titelouze (1562?–1633), whose style came from the vocal tradition of the Renaissance and was still distant from the purely French style of organ music of the seventeenth century. His hymns and choral arrangements are the first known published works of French organ music and so Titelouze is considered to be the founder of the French organ school.

Titelouze was born in Saint-Omer (the exact date is not known). In 1585 he became a priest and was an organist at St-Omer Cathedral. He then moved to Rouen in 1588 and became the organist of Rouen Cathedral. In 1600 Titelouze invited the Flemish builder of organs,

Crespin Carlier, to Rouen to work on the cathedral's organ [6]. As a result of this cooperation, the organ was considered by contemporary critics to have become the best in France. In 1610 Titelouze was appointed a canon of Rouen Cathedral, having gained an outstanding reputation as a composer, organ expert, teacher, and music theorist [6]. In 1613 he won first prize from the literary society of Rouen in the Academy Palinods for his poems. In 1623 he published a series of organ arrangements of liturgical hymns—Church Hymns/Hymnes de l'Église [7]. In 1626 he printed a second organ collection, *Le Magnificat*, which contained 8 arrangements. The music of both collections is written in the keys of C and F rather than in organ tablature! His playing and compositions were much more stable and impressive than those of Girolamo Frescobaldi, but Titelouze had no harmonic or rhythmic courage, no swiftness, and no individual character. He was not an innovator, but he did show some perfection of scientific polyphony and his style was monumental and well-established.

Titelouze was a friend of the Jesuit father Marin Mersenne, who was a musician, theoretician, mathematician, philosopher, and theologian. In their published correspondence of 1622–1633, Titelouze gave to Mersenne recommendations for the famous *L'harmonie Universelle*, printed 1634–7, where the author regreted that Titelouze, an excellent organist, did not tell how he enriched his playing of the keyboard. The polyphony of the strict style of Titelouze soon disappeared from French organ music, although its influence was still felt after his death: the Parisian composer and organist Nicolas Gigault included a *Fugue à la Manière de Titelouze* (in the style of Titelouze) in 1685 in his *Music Book for Organ/Livre de Musique pour l'Orgue* [3] and 300 years later in 1942 Marcel Dupré wrote an organ piece entitled *Le Tombeau de Titelouze*.

French organs of that time already had a very colourful sound and were used in solo performances, but Titelouze, in prefaces to both collections, was more concerned with how to make his works easier to play [4,174]. For example, he suggests playing only with hands and not using the feet to depress the pedals. He goes further, suggesting (in the preface to *Hymnes*) that the player simplify the music if they find it too complicated.

A follower of the polyphonic tradition, the well-known professor, composer, and organist Charles Racquet [Raquet or Raquette] (1598–1664), was born into a family of Parisian organists. He studied music with his father, Balthazar (1575?–1630). He lived in Paris for his whole career. In 1618, while still very young, he became organist of the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris, replacing another member of the Racquet family in

the post who had worked there for 41 years. In 1643, his son Jean became an assistant organist and later succeeded him.

Charles, following the example of his father, was the organist of the court of the queens Marie de Medici and Anne of Austria. The famous lutenist Denis Gaultier, who was probably his pupil, dedicated *Tombeau\On the Death of the Teacher* to him. Racquet was highly thought of by his contemporaries [5]. Jean Benjamin La Borde, an eighteenth century writer, called Racquet “the best organist of his time.”

Of Racquet’s music, only *Fantaisie* for organ and 12 duets that use the 146th Psalm from the *Treatise* by Mersenne (1636) remain. The fantasy, written at the request of Mersenne “to show what one can do on the organ,” is one of the most famous works of the French organ school. Under the influence of Mersenne, Racquet set 12 verses of the 146th Psalm (using the translation of Germain Habert de Cérisy) to music as duets in 12 modes. The manuscript of the fantasy, inserted into a personal copy of *L’Harmonie Universelle du Père Mersenne*, is stored in the Library of the Minimes of the National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts in Paris.

The organ fantasy by Racquet is a unique work in the repertoire of clavier music—no other of its kind was written in France. It inspired the outstanding organist J. P. Sweelinck to create pieces for organ that see one theme running through several parts.

In 1973, Pierre Cochereau, organist of Notre Dame, wrote a Bolero on a theme by Charles Racquet—at first it was an improvised piece and only later written down.

The French organ school was formed in the first half of the seventeenth century. It moved away from the strict polyphonic music of Jean Titelouze, with its unique ornaments, rich style, and characteristic forms of classical organ [7]. Within this style, Louis Couperin (1626–1661) experimented with melody, registers, and composition, while Guillaume Gabriel Nivers (1632–1714) extended the polyphonic forms by selecting new genres and styles that became the tradition of the French organ for many years. Music for clavier in the seventeenth century remains closely connected to the genre of the suite: each piece is small, confined to one movement, and retains the characteristic marks of dance.

The path of the French school of clavecinists, which culminated in François Couperin the Great, is associated with the many names stretching across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including Jean Henri d’Anglebert (1629–1691), Nicolas Lebègue (1631?–1702), Louis Marchand (1669–1732), and Gaspard Le Roux (1660–1707). Their creative efforts developed the compositional form of the suite, which, at

this time, did not have a stable form. Its primary parts were *allemande* and *courant* in the work of d'Anglebert and Lebègue, following any dance form, and finished with either the new and fashionable dances of the *gavotte* and *minuet* [2, 418], or the ancient and traditional *galliarde* and *passacaglia*, which follow the *gigue*. The French school tended more towards a free range of miniatures as a sort of concert program, than to the crystallization of a particular type of suite based on dances.

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