

Doctoral Thesis

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François Couperin: Pièces de Clavecin
A noble portrait gallery in the royal court

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Franz Liszt Academy of Music

Studies in Art and Cultural History

Doctoral Program no.28

Budapest

2012

I. The preliminaries of the research

The first musicological attempt to map the history and musical legacy of Couperin family – which was present in the French music scene for almost two and a half centuries – is ascribed to Charles Bouvet who released the monograph about the Couperins titled *Une dynastie de musicien français: Les Couperin, organistes de l'église Saint-Gervais*. (Paris: Delagrave, 1919) by relying on contemporary notes and documents available in different archives and records as well as on still existing certificates. Although the book in the light of modern researches does not always prove to be correct, his pioneering work was exemplary for the researchers of the following decades. As a result, in 1926, two pieces of large-scale work were published in Paris. While in Julien Tiersot's book *Les Couperins*. (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1926) the whole musician dynasty was the treatise of the subject, Andre Tessier's *Couperin. Biographie critique*. (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1926) speaks largely of the most important member of the family, François Couperin "le grand". The composer's lifetime being drawn up, they both followed the same method: the most important events in the life course were seen from the aspect of the compositions. However their attempt to critically analyze the pieces of life-work – given the large number of compositions – stalled in the general level of analysis.

Due to the more specific research of scientists publishing in the fifties Wilfrid Mellers's *François Couperin and the French Classical Tradition*. (London: Dennis Dobson, 1950) and Pierre Citron's *Couperin*. (Paris: Du Seuil, 1956) had separate chapters devoted to François Couperin's harpsichord pieces. Although both of them attempted to methodize along styling and the principles of framing – because of the huge amount of material and the shortness of range – none of the books contains in-depth analysis. Shlomo Hofman's *L'oeuvre de clavecin de François Couperin le grand*. (Paris: A. & J. Picard & C^{ie}, 1961) was the first study to exclusively deal with Couperin's harpsichord works. Although François Couperin's statement was well-known that the choice of the titles he gave his pieces was conscious, and the titles bear not only recommendation but they are personal portraits as well and reflect on various stories, the above mentioned musicologists only made little attempt to outline the people inspiring the works and the events depicted in them.

No sufficient attention was paid to the research of the extra meaning behind the titles of Couperin's harpsichord pieces by the literature of the second half of the twentieth century. Philippe Beaussant published studies in his book *François Couperin*. (Paris: Fayard, 1980) which mostly convey moods and impressions. David Tunley's *François Couperin and "The Perfection of Music"*. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004)

highlights Couperin's compositional technique while Olivier Baumont in his concluding monograph titled *Couperin. Le musicien des rois*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1998) draws a portrait of a musician and a human being.

Jane Clark and Derek Canon's work *The Mirror of Human Life*. (Huntingdon: King's Music, 2002) is the first work which – besides the explanation of the primary meanings in the titles of the harpsichord pieces – also aims at mapping the underlying allusions highlighting the social and cultural background of the era.

II. Sources

The different nature of the guiding threads formulated in the chapters of the thesis made the processing of varied sources necessary. For the section mapping the Couperin family members' walks of life basic information was provided by Titi du Tillet's chronicle titled *Le Parnasse François*. (Paris: Jean-Baptiste Coignard Fils, 1732) and by Edward Higginbottom and David Fuller's "Couperin" article in Stanley Sadie (ed.): *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. (London: Macmillan, 2001). Refining the biographical data, the works of Charles Bouvet, André Tessier, Pierre Citron, Philippe Beaussant and Olivier Baumont provided additional help.

It would have been impossible to sketch portraits of the royal

family or other nobles as well as to determine François Couperin's role in the contemporary music scene without the historical researches on the life of Louis XIV and XV and on the events of their reign. The Duke of Saint-Simon's *Memoirs*. Transl: Pál Réz. (Budapest: Európa könyvkiadó, 1975) served as a starting point. Noel Williams's *The love-affairs of the Condés (1530-1740)*. (London: Methun & Co, 1912) gave insight to the love affairs of the Condés while Jacques Bernot's *Mademoiselle de Nantes, fille préférée de Louis XIV*. (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 2004) deals with Mademoiselle de Nantes in greater depth.

The following historical works were processed in the thesis – without intending to be comprehensive – exploring Louis XIV and XV, their reign and the custom system of the era: Pierre Gaxotte: *Le siècle de Louis XV*. (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1933), Pierre Gaxotte: *La France de Louis XIV*. (Paris: Hachette, 1946), Charles Kunstler: *La vie quotidienne sous Louis XV*. (Paris: Hachette, 1953), W. H. Lewis: *The Sunset of the Splendid Century*. (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1955), and W. H. Lewis: *The Splendid Century. Life in the France of Louis XIV*. (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1978). In addition, three books published in Hungarian, Duke of Saint-Simon: *XIV. Lajos udvara*. Transl: Vilmos Juhász. (Budapest: Officina, 1941), Frantz Funck-Brentano: *Udvári világ*. Transl: Dr. Lajos Puskás (Budapest: Athenaeum, w/o yr.) and Imre Papp: *A Napkirály. XIV. Lajos élete és kora*.

(Budapest: Kossuth, 1989) also assisted me.

Jane Clark and Derek Connon's study served as a main source when specifying the underlying contents and determining the people and events in the titles of the harpsichord pieces.

III. Method

It proved necessary to outline the history of Couperin family when unfolding the topic marked in the title of the thesis as the musical legacy which made him a composer of defining significance in the 17-18th century can only be determined in the light of his predecessors' lifetime.

The people who appear in the titles of harpsichord pieces and their description with historical authenticity can be found in the second chapter titled: "A noble portrait gallery". For writing both chapters the resource material was provided by philological researches processing period documents which are farther from musicology.

The formal analysis of the pieces in the thesis took place in the third chapter. Besides mapping the structural specialities, as a part of the same chapter, the analyzing comparison was done along the different parameters of music: tone, time signature, tempo marking.

IV. Results

Although my primary purpose was different, the Couperin family history and within that collecting the biographical data of François Couperin "*le grand*", synchronization of French and English literature and publishing them in Hungarian became a significant achievement of the research.

Though attempts have been made to depict the portraits of the people behind the titles, this kind of analysis of François Couperin's harpsichord pieces is unique in the Couperin research. It is also unusual to place the works in the Versailles court milieu and examining in that context. Portraying the noble ranks musically has not been examined so far in the Couperin research as the analysis of musical portrait painting has had no peer yet.

V. The documentation of the dissertation-related activity

François Couperin's short harpsichord pieces have invaluable pedagogical value, as the harpsichord and the piano have similar methodological presentation concerning the harpsichord's highlighted role in the French baroque. François Couperin's harpsichord pieces render excellent raw material by means of their formal richness because they allow insight into the ornamentation techniques of the age beside

the ways of *clavecin* management. At the same time the formulations in the harpsichord pieces are not only the reflections of a musical world of a given era but the founder of the French baroque royal taste. Through a comparison of the portrait originals and the characteristics of the pieces there is an opportunity to create an imagination-provoking, diverse musical performance.

The entire *ordre* or the selection from the pieces aligned in it is always a part of my concert programme presenting the art of French baroque masters. These compilations were shown in front of an audience among others in Budapest, Szombathely and Kecskemét. I had the opportunity to be more immersed in François Couperin's works on master classes held by Menno van Delft in Montisi and under the direction of Madame Huguette Dreyfus in Villecroze.

