

Naxos 8.555936

COUPERIN, L.: Tombeau de M. de Blancrocher / Preludes (Wilson)

Appendix: About This Recording

Harpichordist Glen Wilson offers Naxos the première of his musicological research on the works of Louis Couperin performed on CD 8.555936. In this research, Glen Wilson argues that most of the music on 8.555936 attributed to Louis Couperin since 1870 is by his brother Charles.

...l'autre Couperin deffunt...

By Glen Wilson

No other period of music history presents us with so many family dynasties as the lute and harpsichord schools of seventeenth-century France. The exasperating scribal habit of omitting first names makes for oftentimes insuperable difficulties of attribution. Among others, the names Boquet, du But, Favier, Gallot, Loeilliet, Marchand, Mercure, Monnard, Rieu, Richard, Verdier, and, most notoriously, Gaultier and la Barre, present problems in this regard. What about the most illustrious of all these dynasties, the Couperins?

The first pieces to come down to us other than under the patronym alone are the organ masses (1690) of Francois le Grand. Ironically, this unique instance of a Christian name gave rise to a misattribution; the masses were long considered to be the work of his uncle Francois (i). Every other "Couperin" piece from the seventeenth century has been attributed, since the late 19th century, to his uncle Louis. On the face of it, this seems strange, given the tendency mentioned above and the number of possible candidates, primarily Francois' grandfather Charles (i), his three sons Louis, Francois (i), and Charles (ii) (Francois' father), and Francois' cousin Marc Roger Normand, who took his mother's maiden name of Couperin. There is even the precocious young Francois le Grand himself to be considered, who lost his father Charles (ii) at the age of ten but was immediately entrusted with the succession of the organ of St. Gervais. He was put under the protection of no less a personage than Michel de la Lande, who recommended the masses to the public in print.

In the preface to *Les Gouts Réunis* (1724), Francois le Grand speaks of "les ouvrages de mes ancêtres". He must have known something more than the music of one of his uncles. I would like to examine here whether Louis' monopoly on the family business can continue to be justified.

Louis, from the beginning of research, has benefitted from the status of "chef de secte" conferred upon him by le Gallois in his "Lettre à Mlle. Regnault". He is contrasted there with Chambonnières, and repeatedly referred to as one of "ces deux grands hommes".

"L'autre methode est celle du premier mort des Couperins, qui a excellé par la composition, c'est à dire par ses doctes recherches. Et cette manière de jouer a esté estimé par les personnes scavantes, à cause qu'elle est pleine d'accords, & enrichie de belles dissonances, de dessein, & d'imitation." (p. 74)

The main source for "Couperin" pieces, the Bauyn manuscript, always seemed to support this division of the Parisian harpsichord world. The first part is devoted to the works of Chambonnières, the second to pieces by "Monsieur Couperin." Two works are dated: 135 (all

numbers according to the Gustafson catalogue), an organ *fantasie* dated December 1656, and the Chaconne 121 (1658). That, and the *Tombeau de Blancrocher*, which presumably could be dated close to the lutenist's death in 1662, seemed to place this magnificent corpus of music squarely in the purview of Louis Couperin. As far as I know, the attribution has gone unchallenged to this day, and has taken on an almost totemic aspect.

Nothing changed when a new source appeared in 1968. The Parville manuscript contained four new "Couperin" pieces which were unhesitatingly attributed to Louis. A small alarm might have gone off when one of these appeared to be an arrangement with *double* of a Rigaudon from Lully's *Acis et Galathée* from 1686 - a quarter century after Louis' death. It might have been thought that this was one of Lully's many reworkings of earlier material or even a folk tune. In an Appendix C (additions and corrections to Gustafson-79) to "A Catalogue of French Harpsichord Music 1699-1780" by Bruce Gustafson and David Fuller, these pre-eminent scholars in the field write:

"The air obviously did not originate in *Acis et Galathée* (1686) if Louis Couperin (d. 1661) was the composer of the double on it (no 76a), but no earlier source for the tune has been found. The version here is so close to the Lully score that it is difficult to imagine that they are both merely versions of an existing tune; there is no other reason, however, to question attributions in 36-Parville, or to use this one anomaly as a basis of attributing all of (Louis) Couperin's *oeuvre* to a member of the family alive in 1686."

As regards at least *some* of the attributions, this does somewhat seem to beg the question: why not?

I have had serious doubts about Louis' monopoly on the family business since the disappointing day when I first read through Guy Oldham's long-anticipated edition of the *pièces d'orgue*, which he discovered in London in 1958. These are in many cases signed and dated - in a handwriting which is under dispute - and are undoubtedly the work of the first of the Couperins to establish himself in Paris. It struck me very forcibly then that this was not the same composer as the beloved author of most of the harpsichord pieces that Landowska was playing by 1910 (she writes about them in a letter to Saint-Saens in 1914), and which Paul Brunold published in 1932 under Louis' name. I know I will anger many people with this assessment, but the composer of the organ pieces is in every way less competent than that of the harpsichord works. They are the work of someone solemnly going through the motions of contrapuntal manipulation; *languieurs* abound; a sense of forced improvisation prevails. The extraordinary sequence of pieces in what is loosely called the Phrygian mode - almost half the total number - shows a composer grappling, unsuccessfully, for mastery. They are certainly full of "doctes recherches" and "belles dissonances", and there is a good moment or two in every piece, but these qualities only serve to mask a general poverty of invention. Some of the duos and bass *réécits* are more interesting, and there is one really fine piece: the Prelude in the first *ton*, nr. 46. Couperin must have thought highly of it, for he designates it for an "autre livre grand livre d'Orgue"; either that, or his copyist extracted it from another book.

By contrast, the only comparable material in the harpsichord works - the fugues in the larger Preludes - could not be finer. They surpass even d'Anglebert's five organ fugues in finesse and sustained rhetorical power. This difference in quality of fugal writing between Oldham and Bauyn cannot be merely a question of a different medium.

Trolling Bruce Gustafson's magisterial "French Harpsichord Music of the 17th Century" for clues to this mystery, I came upon an item that casts doubt on the monolithic character of the Bauyn manuscript's "Couperin" attributions. Under "Burette 407 and 408", he lists a catalogue printed in 1748 of the library of the recently deceased Pierre Jean Burette, a musician, medical man and general polymath who was the son of Claude Burette, a *musicien du roi* in the previous century:

(407) Pièces de Clavecin composées par J. de la Chapelle, Sieur de Chambonnières, Ordinaire de la Musique du Roi; et par Louis & Claude Couperain, Organistes de Saint Gervais, recueillies & notées par P J Burette, D.M. MS, 1695, obl. v.m.

(408) Pièces de Clavecin, composées par divers Auteurs, recueillies & notées par P J Burette, D.M.P., MS, 1695 obl. vm.

"Claude" - the name of Burette's father - is an obvious slip of the pen for "Charles". Taken together, the order of these two manuscripts is identical with the three parts of Bauyn. I would suggest that one of the Burettes may have been the highly professional scribe of that source; unless the arrangement of Pierre's MSS is an extraordinary coincidence, they must have at least had access to it, and knowledge of its contents which has since been lost.

Another thin strand of evidence connects Claude Burette, who from 1693 was a colleague of Francois Couperin at court, with Bauyn: the only MS with a surviving work by him - 47-Gen-2356 - is one of the narrow range of MSS outside Bauyn and Parville to transmit "Couperin" pieces. Gustafson dates it to the 1690s - the same period to which he now dates Bauyn. (Gustafson discovered that the Bauyn paper cannot have been made before 1676. Davitt Moroney's theory that it was copied shortly after Louis' death as part of an agreement between the two surviving brothers can thus be discarded.) The piece by "Bura L aisé" is entitled "Brusque" - a title which appears elsewhere only in two pieces by Chambonnières contained in Bauyn and one other source. The piece itself is a clear parody of "Couperin's" *la Piémontoise*, which survives only in Bauyn.

The door is hereby opened by fragile documentary evidence - aside from stylistic issues, more on which later - to the possibility that Bauyn contains pieces by both brothers.

*

Louis and Charles were evidently closely associated in the minds of later writers, despite the difference in age of 12 years. Le Gallois makes the following references:

(p. 62) Le clavecin a eu pour illustres... les Couperins (followed by a separate reference to Francois (i) as being active "presentement")...

(p. 64) On peut dire aussi que le premier mort des Couperins a aussi excellé dans son genre: et qu'il a esté suivi par l'autre Couperin deffunt...

(p. 74) L'autre méthode est celle du premier mort des Couperins...

Note that no given name is mentioned.

Titon du Tillet (1732), the only major documentary source for the brothers' biography, refers to "les trois frères Couperin", but later, in his paragraph on Francois (i) says: "Il n'avoit pas les memes talens que ces deux freres de jouer l'Orgue & du Clavecin; mais il avoit celui de montrer les Pièces de Clavecin de ces deux freres avec une netteté & une facilité très-grande." This is clear evidence that pieces by Charles were in circulation, taught by his brother Francois who far outlived *ces deux freres*. (Titon's index entry reads: "MM les Couperins". The only other comparable entry is for "les Gaultiers pour le luth.") A picture emerges here of two brothers who were very closely identified with one another.

Titon specifically mentions that there were only three harpsichord suites by Louis, "d'un travail & d'un goût admirable", in limited circulation among "Connoisseurs en Musique". This is a disturbing piece of information for anyone proposing to attribute more than 130 pieces to Louis Couperin. Can any trace of these suites be found? There is none in any of the lesser sources; let us return to the Bauyn MS and look closely there.

Dominique Vaisse has succeeded in discovering details of the family for whom the MS was compiled. The Bauyn-Bersans were music-loving neighbors of both Francois Couperins, uncle and nephew, and one family member must have been a student of Francois le Grand (*La Bersan, VI Ordre*). Part II of the MS they had compiled, the "Couperin" section, can be subdivided into several sections. The preludes were copied first, according to a different key-scheme from the rest of the pieces. It is a scheme followed by Lebègue, a modification of the old system of *tons*. This places it, chronologically, midway between the Oldham MS, with its chaotic attempts at arrangement by *ton*, and the second section of Bauyn II. The dances of this latter section have been rigorously reorganised according to a very modern scheme of major/minor on rising scale steps. (This is another reason for a late dating of Bauyn, one subsequent to Parville, which has a key-scheme similar to Lebègue's.)

At the end of this section comes the Pavane in the extraordinary key of f-sharp minor. (Thurston Dart proposed this as a *Tombeau* for *le vieux Gaultier* of Lyon, who died in 1661. I would suggest that it was composed by Charles Couperin for *Gaultier le jeune*, the "Paris Gaultier" who died in 1672. In *La Rhétorique des Dieux*, he began two of his *modes* with funeral pieces in f-sharp minor, and, unlike most lutenists, composed three-strain pavanés.) Then, as a kind of coda, there come two pieces quite out of order, in d minor: a chaconne (121) and a gigue (122). Both of these pieces show unusual characteristics. The chaconne is dated 1658, and is the only harpsichord piece in the MS to bear this Louis Couperin trademark. The gigue is one of two fugal giges in the collection, and has the same subject as one of Roberday's fugues, which the silversmith-composer says he received from "Mons. Couperin".

There are three other irruptions in the placid order of the dances in Bauyn II:

1) With very few exceptions, each key group is ordered in the "proper" late-17th century suite order of allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue, and chaconne/passacaille, with occasional extras tossed in. In the G major section, however, three courantes appear at the very end, like the clusters that appear in lute suites and *ballets de cour*. They have a key signature of one sharp, whereas all the other G major pieces have no sharps as a signature. The sharp signature is quite rare in the 17th century. Among harpsichordists I have found it only in Chambonnières, in Lebègue's first book (not the second), and, oddly enough, in two anonymous pieces in 47-Gen-2356, the source for Burette's only piece. Later on it is quite abandoned, reappearing only in the Geoffroy MS - a re-ordering along the lines of Bauyn, some time after the composer's death in 1694. Elizabeth Jacquet de la Guerre reinstates it in 1707. (One other

example occurs in the Dart MS: a diminutive chaconne attributed to “Couperin”, the only piece which Gustafson rejects for Louis on grounds of its dissimilarity to the other chaconnes. Could it be an early work by Louis, or perhaps the only surviving piece by another *ancestre* - Charles Couperin (i)?

These three courantes (90-92) all have strangely awkward moments, and lack the imitatory figures characteristic of the other Bauyn courantes. Nr. 90 is particularly simple and foursquare. After the double bar in nr. 91 there is an extravagant *brisé* figure unlike anything else in Bauyn, and at the end of the piece an archaic-sounding ornamental figure, also unique.

2) There is chaos at the end of the F major section. A gigue (76), Galliarde (77) and Chaconne (78) are inserted “out of order”. All three pieces show distinguishing characteristics. The gigue is the other fugal gigue in the collection. This is a more archaic, lute-like gigue type than the others in Bauyn II, which are all of the type Lebègue calls “Gigue d’Angleterre”. Furthermore, this is the only piece in Bauyn II (except for the folkloristic Menuets) which stays in the tonic at and past the double bars. It shares this highly archaic trait, as well as a significant further resemblance, with a “Brusque” by Chambonnières. The Galliarde - if that is what it really is, for this is one of the pieces that has had its title struck out - is a bizarre example of its type, which again bears a resemblance to one of Chambonnières’ two galliardes. And the chaconne is uniquely melodious among the “Couperin” chaconnes; here again, there is a Chambonnières *Doppelgänger*. Closing this section is the *Tombeau de Blancrocher*, again with crossed-out title. (No other section of the MS has so many titles crossed out as this one.) It is assumed that this must be the work of Louis Couperin because of the date of the subject’s death, and it may very well be - but if truth be told, there is no reason why a brilliant 14-year-old apprentice couldn’t have written this lovely utterance; or for that matter, why it couldn’t have been written later in grateful remembrance of past beneficences. (We do not know what kindnesses the Couperins may have received at the hands of this wealthy amateur. Louis was in Paris for two whole years before becoming organist at St. Gervais - it was another five before he got his royal post. Perhaps Chambonnières’ recommendation got Louis and his brothers lodging at Fleury’s home near the Palais Royal. The fact that the first mention of Charles in Paris dates from 1659 in no way precludes the possibility of a longer residence in the capital. The title “Prélude à l’imitation de Mr. Froberger” - which appears only in Parville and may not even come from the composer - also does not perforce lead to an attribution to Louis Couperin. An impressionable young Charles may have met the Emperor’s organist when he passed through Paris, and he certainly had access to Froberger’s music later on.)

3) Two organ pieces mentioned above, a Fantasia (135) dated December 1656, and a Duo (136) are inserted as “extras” before the section-closing Passacaille.

The “out of order” pieces thus exhibit characteristics which further set them apart from the rest of the pieces in Bauyn II, including some instances of a striking reliance on Louis’ mentor Chambonnières.

Taking this all together, this is what I think happened when the Bauyn MS was being compiled. The family Bauyn-Bersan was given access, about 1695, either by their neighbor/teacher Francois Couperin the elder or by the young *organiste du roi*, to a significant part of the family music library. The sources included a collection of works by the old family friend Chambonnières, the preludes of Charles Couperin, the collected harpsichord pieces of Charles on loose sheets, a few works by Louis (parts of the “three suites”), and a collection of pieces by older masters. The scribe ordered the pieces by Chambonnières - at the family’s request, or on

the initiative of the orderly young scholar Burette? - according to a modern system of a rising scale, took over the formidable *Préludes en bloc* in their more archaic “Lebègue” order, organized the other harpsichord pieces as he had those of Chambonnières (inserting along the way, in their proper place in the key order, a couple of organ pieces by Louis which looked playable on the harpsichord), added two pieces by Louis Couperin which came to hand later, out of order at the end, and finished with the old masters. If the scribe was not Burette *fils*, it was someone he knew, and he was allowed to copy the copy. He added nothing to the original “Couperin” attributions, created his own titles to the sections, and from that point the knowledge of who had written what was lost, the only trace remaining in the now lost Burette MS. The Bersans later remarked to their friend Titon du Tillet how strictly the family guarded the works of the *chef de secte*.

*

Let us now consider the stylistic question. What follows are merely the words of a performer who has let this music pass through his hands often and made note of its sensations on his brain, like a literary critic trying to separate Shakespeare from Beaumont and Fletcher, or an art critic trying to distinguish between Breughels. I will be brief, and leave what is called “detailed stylistic analysis” to others, to add or detract as they can.

Once we accept the possibility of Charles Couperin being the “Couperin” behind the majority of the Bauyn pieces, a highly unified body of work emerges, one which belongs to a different epoch from Louis’ organ pieces and the pieces I suspect come from the “3 Suites”. French harpsichord music actually changed surprisingly little between Chambonnières and le Roux, Siret, and Rameau’s modest *Premier Livre*. This is quite in line with the standardizing influence of the royal taste. Still, I think a certain progression can be observed, corresponding with the birth dates of the major composers:

Chambonnières ca. 1602
Louis Couperin 1626
d’Anglebert 1628
Lebègue 1630
Charles Couperin 1638

Chambonnières, the elegant founder of the school, often comes dangerously close to vapidness. Louis Couperin brings a powerful infusion of provincial blood and an association with Froberger, but, arriving in Paris at the fairly advanced age of 24, he struggles to integrate the influences he finds around him into a new, more masculine style; he still belongs mainly to the epoch of Louis XIII’s harpsichordist Chambonnières, and in organ playing, to the transition from Raquet, through du Mont and Richard, to Nivers. His works for viols and shawm band serve to fix him even more clearly in this epoch. D’Anglebert, who becomes royal harpsichordist after Louis’ graceful refusal (1658), advances the art considerably. Louis XIV assumes power in the year of Louis’ death (1661). Lebègue makes a major contribution, initiates a new key scheme, and contributes to the practice of writing down *préludes non mesurés*. Charles, extremely fortunate in all his associations, and of an age to assimilate everything he can take from the older masters, caps the development of harpsichord music in the *grand siècle*.

The preliminary role of d’Anglebert is somewhat veiled by the extreme degree of ornamentation in his late published work. The pieces in Bauyn II are bare by comparison, but

one can imagine what they might have looked like if Charles had lived until 1700 and printed pieces at the end of his career, as Chambonnières and d'Anglebert did. The differences between MS sources and the prints of these two masters is instructive. The sarabande in the still-unpublished A minor Suite in the Oldham MS, one of the few *undated* pieces in that source, shows more ornamentation than in its Bauyn concordance. (If those who think the handwriting in Oldham is that of Charles Couperin are correct, then I think he put this suite at the end of his harpsichord book, where by key it would belong, before beginning to transcribe his brother's organ pieces, working those of the 5th *ton* in around it.)

Charles' pieces - as I will now take the liberty of referring to them - seem to me clearly the work of someone who has assimilated the lessons of d'Anglebert and surpassed him. Particularly the preludes, the incomparable summit of this form, relegate even d'Anglebert's gorgeous efforts to second place. They are unthinkable without Froberger, but can they have existed in this form without the later recitative of Lully, from the 1670's? In fact, the orchestral elaboration of Charles' pieces I think clearly shows a familiarity with Lully's fully developed orchestral style. Lully's first chaconne, from the ballet *Alcidiane* (1658), may have inspired Louis' D minor chaconne (121) of the same year. But the monumentality of many of Charles' pieces, particularly the G minor passacaille, seems to partake of the grandeur of the *tragédies lyriques*, which commenced only in 1673 with *Cadmus et Hermione*. (Big chaconnes and passacailles only become fixtures of Lully's finales in the late 1660's.)

The next step upwards from Charles is logical and clear: the magnificent organ masses of his son, offered to the public only 11 years after his death. Francois le Grand was 10 years old when his father died, and obviously would have been taught by him from an early age. His next teacher and "second father", according to Titon, was Thomelin, one of the performers Le Gallois complains about making "beaucoup de bruit". But it was the music of his *ancêtre* which was his great stepping-stone. One imagines his uncle Francois dropping by the organist's house at St. Gervais every day, worrying about him, continuing to teach him his father's harpsichord pieces - always well-lubricated with wine, as Titon tells us.

Louis Couperin died on the cusp of a great stylistic revolution, and had a part in shaping it. He was lucky enough to have his younger brother to pick up the torch. Charles appears to us in one of the greatest portraits of a 17th-century musician. Its painter - Lefebvre, another genius who died too soon - shows him sitting with a look of friendly self-confidence at a chamber organ, alongside a young student, the artist's daughter. I find it impossible to believe that this personage, one of *ces deux frères*, would have left no music to the world.

Perhaps the correct attitude to take in this question is that adopted by Bruce Gustafson in his admirable editions of the works of Richard and Labarre, where he declines to make any attributions to specific members of these families. My only wish here is to offer an hypothesis and open a dialogue.