

LIR CLASSICS

LIR006 - PROGRAMME NOTES

The French Harpsichord

Chambonnières - Louis Couperin - D'Anglebert - François Couperin - Royer

French harpsichord music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is remarkable for both its coherence and its diversity. The tradition of keyboard composition was personally transmitted from one generation to the next, ensuring a continuity that is not always evident in the harpsichord literature of other countries. At the same time, the eclecticism of French composers enabled them to absorb a wide variety of musical stimuli, and to demonstrate an astonishing flair for exploring the potential of the instrument. For over a hundred years, they produced music that reflects a profound commitment to the harpsichord, and a mastery of both its formal and expressive capabilities, drawing on many different influences, and yet producing something distinctively French.

David Pollock has chosen a programme that reveals much of the evolution of the French tradition. Paris was its centre; the Court was the milieu in which it flourished. And while royal favour and patronage certainly nourished the growing popularity of the harpsichord, and helped to make it fashionable as a solo instrument, other factors also made an essential contribution. One of these was the publication of the music in editions that reflected the celebrity status of the composers, and made their work available to a wider audience, while another factor was the presence of several distinguished dynasties of harpsichord makers. Often they belonged to the same social and professional network as the players and composers: for example, members of the Richard and Denis families played and wrote music in addition to building instruments, while the Blanchets and the Couperins were related by marriage. There were, of course, some fine players and makers living and working far from Paris, yet often those who risked participation in the highly competitive atmosphere seem to have benefited from the musical environment, despite the challenge of earning a living among the capricious aristocrats of the Bourbon Court.

Although Jacques Champion de Chambonnières is generally considered the founder of the French harpsichord school, this may be an injustice to his father, Jacques Champion de la Chapelle, who preceded his more celebrated son as 'joueur d'espionette du Roi'. A friend and contemporary of John Bull, Champion père has left scarcely any music from which to assess his influence: what we know of French music before the 1630s is tantalisingly incomplete. Yet it is clear that by the second half of the 17th century, French keyboard music was having an impact far beyond Paris. Constantijn Huygens knew the work of Chambonnières, and brought it to the attention of Froberger; while in England, the restoration of the

Francophile Charles II made Paris a major point of reference for performers and composers.

Chambonnières, trapped by professional rivalry at the court of Louis XIV, fell from favour and died a poor man, but his musical heritage was transmitted to his protégés, Louis Couperin and Jean-Henri d'Anglebert. Although much of Louis' music remained in manuscript, and his name was for many years eclipsed by that of his nephew, François, his contribution was central to the development of French keyboard music. He and his contemporaries absorbed the influence of Italy, and of the flourishing lute tradition in France, synthesising all the available elements into specifically native forms. The Chaconne, the Rondeau, and the unmeasured Prelude were added to the Allemande, Courante, Sarabande and Gigue, to create the French keyboard suite; while the simultaneous formalising of technique and ornamentation provided the repertoire with its own musical language, and thus its own identity.

The Pavane, 'L'Entretien des Dieux', offers an example of the way in which old and new were being combined. Chambonnières employs an old-fashioned dance form, and turns it into something new and striking, by exploiting the sonorities of the harpsichord. Similarly, Louis Couperin's Suite in F demonstrates the instrument's range of expression. An unmeasured Prelude and a sober Allemande contrast with a pair of cheerful Courantes, and a Branle de Basque, before a spacious Sarabande is succeeded by a lively Gigue.

Like Louis Couperin, d'Anglebert assembled suites of music in dance form, but on this recording he is represented by his 'Tombeau de M. de Chambonnières', written as a memorial consciously developed, and a high degree of refinement achieved in structure and technique, as well as in the expressive qualities of the instrument. Nevertheless, it is impossible to gain a clear sense of what distinguishes French harpsichord music from that of other countries without listening to it. There are - inevitably - elements that elude definition, yet which rapidly become recognisable to the hearer.

The role of the harpsichord makers is central to the sound, but what we tend to think of as the 'standard' French harpsichord is primarily an eighteenth century phenomenon, and not entirely French either. Many seventeenth century sources use the word 'épinette', rather than 'claveçin', and contemporary iconography shows that an 'épinette' could be a virginal, a bentside spinet, or a harpsichord. In many cases, the music of the French repertoire is perfectly playable on any of these. The distinctive two-manual harpsichord that we know from paintings and engravings of the eighteenth century was a later development. Instruments made by the Ruckers family in Antwerp were both rebuilt and copied by the great Parisian makers, to produce the ideal harpsichord for the solo repertoire. With a new compass of up to five octaves, a lighter keyboard action, and two independent manuals, it was perfectly suited to the technical and expressive demands of the clavecinistes.

The instrument played in the recording exemplifies the tradition. It is a copy of a harpsichord made in 1636 by Andreas Ruckers, and given a characteristic ravalement by Henri Hemsch in 1763. Built for David Pollock by Anne and Ian Tucker, it recreates the decorative scheme, as well as the sound world, of the original's eighteenth century makeover. It has three registers, one of which is at octave pitch, is strung in iron and brass, and quilled throughout in black turkey.

The pitch chosen here is A=415, and the temperaments employed are 1/4 comma and 1/6 comma Meantone. The pastoral scene on the interior of the lid dates from before the ravalement, while the mythological scenes painted on the exterior are eighteenth century. The original - still playable - is thought to have belonged to the House of Savoy until 1900, and now forms part of the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands.

Paula Woods, 2003