

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 13 June 2022 1.00pm

Nevermind

Anna Besson flute

Louis Creac'h violin

Robin Pharo viola da gamba

Jean Rondeau harpsichord



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre

(1665-1729)

Trio Sonata in D

Trio Sonata in G minor

Sonata in G for violin and harpsichord with obligato viola da gamba
(transcription for flute, viola da gamba and basso continuo) (1707)

I. Lent - Presto - Adagio • II. Presto • III. Presto • IV. Adagio • V. Aria

Prélude from Suite in D minor from *Premier livre de pièces pour clavecin* (1687)

Sonata in D minor for violin and harpsichord with obligato viola da gamba (1707)

I. Lent • II. Presto • III. Adagio • IV. Presto •

V. Adagio • VI. Presto • VII. Aria • VIII. Presto

Trio Sonata in B flat

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Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre flourished in and between two intertwined musical worlds: the glittering royal court of the Sun King, Louis XIV, and the city of Paris, specifically the area around Notre Dame. Baptised on 17 March 1665 on the Île-Saint-Louis, hard by the cathedral, the composer's career was shaped by the island of her birth. Île Saint-Louis was a centre for master masons (what we would now call architects), musicians, composers and instrument makers, a place where creative and business alliances were forged between artisan families, and where Jacquet's father and grandfather were master harpsichord makers with a Europe-wide reputation. Two things helped Élisabeth on her way. Her father provided an advanced musical education for both his sons *and* his daughters and her marriage – to the well-established musician Marin La Guerre – unusually helped rather than hindered her professional career, linking her to another creative dynasty. The very double surname, Jacquet de la Guerre, operated as a musical advertisement.

Élisabeth was clearly a very gifted keyboard player and singer as a young girl, giving harpsichord solos at court when she was only five, performing in ensembles in adolescence. However, focusing on Jacquet de la Guerre's status as a child prodigy or highlighting the more apparently glamorous aspects of her life and career (her performances at the Palace of Versailles, the patronage of one of the King's mistresses, Madame de Montespan) can distract from, or conceal, the years of rigorous musical training and the sheer hard work which enabled her to make the tricky transition from child prodigy to professional adult, and – particularly challenging for a woman, in any era – from performer to composer.

At just 21 years old, and three years into her marriage, Jacquet de la Guerre published her first collection of *Pièces de Clavessin*. Her address is given as Île-Saint-Louis but she was not distancing herself from the all-important court of Louis XIV, France's absolute ruler. The support and admiration of the Sun King was crucial to Jacquet de la Guerre's success throughout her life, just as his royal palaces provided vital platforms for music making. This collection of 1687 is published through royal authority, and comes complete with a servile dedication to Louis from the composer. Musically, it shows Jacquet de la Guerre to be utterly familiar with the work of both her predecessors and contemporaries (unsurprisingly, since she had been playing their music night after night through her teens at court and elsewhere) and as an expert in counterpoint. Her creation of pleasing melodic lines and the impeccable sense of balance between and across movements are complemented by moments of unpredictability and innovation. Most striking in this first collection, Jacquet de la Guerre includes unmeasured preludes, movements composed without orthodox indications of rhythm and metre. She experiments in other ways too. Her 'Chaconne l'Inconstante' (in the Suite No. 1 in D minor) moves playfully and disconcertingly between D major and minor.

One gets the sense that this is a composer who wants to be noticed. It would, however, not always be easy for the inventive Jacquet de la Guerre, who came of age during the final years of Jean Baptiste Lully's cultural dominance of French music. Even Lully's death, a few weeks after the publication of her *Pièces de Clavessin*, did not change much, particularly in opera. If you wanted audiences, you simply revived the work of Lully rather than commissioning new work. Jacquet de la Guerre may have been the first woman to have an opera, *Céphale et Procris*, staged at the Académie Royale de Musique in 1694, but it would fail. She did not compose another opera, but she certainly did not fall silent. There's a wonderful description of Jacquet de la Guerre from 1698, in a richly furnished Parisian room, with harpsichord, armchairs, tapestries and guests. Not quite a salon, but perhaps something even better: an apartment in which she could maintain her practice and identity as performer, teacher and – crucially – composer, a place to make music and connections, a place to be heard.

Céphale et Procris was far from the composer's only musical first but Jacquet de la Guerre's most remarkable achievement remained hidden for centuries. We now know that works published in 1707 (including, crucially, her *Sonates pour le Violon et pour le Clavecin*) were composed over 20 years earlier, putting her ahead of Couperin, who usually takes the honour of introducing the trio sonata to France. Although Jacquet de la Guerre takes her lead from the ground-breaking Corelli (for example, his introduction of a slow-fast-slow-fast sequence of movements), she develops the form in her own way, enhancing the role of the violin or flute, increasing the emotional intensity, and making further experiments with harmony.

Jacquet de la Guerre's compositions were explosive for their time, not least because any French foray into the (Italian) sonata form was considered at best avant-garde, at worst unpatriotic. She did something remarkable, therefore, in convincing her deeply conservative king that new music was good music. Newspapers from the time record her performance for Louis XIV at the Château de Marly in June 1707. When a brave courtier mentioned that the king did not usually like sonatas, Louis allegedly responded that the composer's work was like nothing that had come before: 'Elle est originale'. The praise continued for a few years after her death ('Madame de la Guerre had a very great genius for composition, and excelled in vocal Music the same as in instrumental') but then Jacquet de la Guerre, like so many female composers, dropped from the musical radar. Thankfully, 300 years on, her elegant, thoughtful, surprising compositions are once again finding the audience they undoubtedly deserve.

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