

WIGMORE HALL 125

Friday 28 November 2025
7.30pm

Jean Rondeau harpsichord

Louis Couperin (1626-1661)

From Suite in D

*Prélude No. 1 • Allemande No. 35 • Courante No. 42 •
Courante No. 43 • Sarabande No. 49 • Canaries No. 52 •
Sarabande No. 51 • Chaconne 'La Complaignante' No. 57*

From Suite in A

*Prélude 'à l'imitation de Froberger' No. 6 •
Allemande No. 100 • La Piémontaise No. 102 •
Courante No. 103 • Sarabande No. 109 •
Courante 'La Mignone' No. 105 • Sarabande No. 23*

From Suite in F

*Prélude No. 13 • Allemande Grave No. 67 •
Courante No. 68 • Branle de Basque No. 73 •
Sarabande No. 74 • Chaconne No. 78 •
Tombeau de Blancrocher No. 81*



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For 173 years, between 1653 and 1826, a long line of Couperins held the position of organist at the church of Saint-Gervais in Paris. The most famous was François Couperin 'le grand' (1668-1733), who had succeeded his father, Charles, and was later appointed organist at Louis XIV's royal chapel. The first Couperin to hold the position at Saint-Gervais, however, was Charles's elder brother, Louis. Today, Louis is recognised not only as the first historically important member of one of France's most distinguished musical families, but among the greatest keyboard composers of the 17th Century.

Little is known of Louis Couperin's early life, or his training in music. He was born in Chaumes-en-Brie, a country town south-east of Paris, and was apparently still living in that region when, according to Titon du Tillet, King Louis XIV's harpsichordist Jacques Champion de Chambonnières (c.1601/2-72) visited (probably in 1650). Tillet relates the story of how the three Couperin brothers set themselves up outside Chambonnières's door as he dined inside with his guests, and began to play. 'Agreeably surprised' by this impromptu concert, Chambonnières invited the brothers in and asked who had composed the music; Louis Couperin was presented to him, and Chambonnières invited him not only to dine at his table, but to accompany him to Paris. By 1651, Couperin was resident in the French capital and had been introduced at court. After being appointed organist at Saint-Gervais, he entered royal service as a treble viol player (*ordinaire de la musique de la chambre*) and was subsequently appointed *dessus de viole de la chambre du roi* by the king. He died at 35, the same age as Mozart; as far as we know, therefore, his career spanned little more than just a decade, making his fame and legacy all the more remarkable.

Couperin never published any of his music, and there are no surviving sources in his own hand. His works have come down to us in three principal manuscripts, of which the most important is the so-called 'Bauyn' manuscript, which contains 131 pieces, 122 of which are for harpsichord. Another, the 'Parville' manuscript, contains 55 pieces by Couperin, although only five are unique to this source. The third, known as the 'Oldham' manuscript, is in a private collection, and is the only source known to have originated in the composer's circle. Approximately two-thirds of Couperin's *oeuvre* for harpsichord is comprised of the four core movements of the Baroque dance suite: allemandes, courantes, sarabandes and giges (the last of which has a faster variant, the *canarie*). Unlike those of later composers, however, such as François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau, these dances were not organised into pre-determined suites, and are not transmitted as such in the sources. The performer is therefore free to construct their own suites by grouping together different dances in the same key, as is the case in tonight's concert.

Louis Couperin's dance movements are notably more complex than those of his contemporary Chambonnières. They display much greater harmonic, melodic and

rhythmic variety to hold the listener's attention: the sarabandes, for instance, feature more chromaticism and ornamentation, reminiscent of lute writing, whilst many of the allemandes (particularly No. 67 in the Suite in F) exhibit an expansive rhythmic profile. Couperin's music was greatly influenced by the celebrated German composer Johann Jakob Froberger (1616-67), whom he met sometime in 1651-2, during Froberger's stay in Paris. The younger composer even quoted sections of Froberger's toccatas in his 16 unmeasured preludes: one, indeed, is explicitly labelled 'à l'imitation de Froberger', heard at the outset of the Suite in A in tonight's concert; another, heard at the beginning of the Suite in F, borrows a passage from Froberger's Toccata No. 5 in D minor.

Together with his *chaconnes* and *passacailles*, these preludes are generally recognised as Couperin's greatest and most original harpsichord music. Their style has its origins in the lute repertoire of the Renaissance and the genre of the unmeasured lute prelude from the early 17th Century. As the lute declined in popularity, the improvisatory style *brisé* was transferred to the harpsichord. Although many characteristic elements of the unmeasured lute prelude can still be seen in Couperin's harpsichord preludes, such as wide spacing of chords in the lower register, rolled opening chords and fast ascending scales (known as the *trait*), they display a unique synthesis of this idiom with a keyboard genre, the organ toccata, whose principal exponent was Froberger. Despite being written in rhythmic notation, the toccata was likewise meant to be played freely, and thus provided a natural stylistic fit with the lute prelude.

Couperin's preludes present a challenge to the performer because of their seemingly perplexing notation: they are written out in undifferentiated note values, surrounded by sweeping curved lines that show which notes are to be held. It is up to the player to improvise and shape these gestures into a coherent musical narrative, bringing out the melodic lines, contrapuntal textures and luxurious suspended harmonies hidden within. Rich harmonic dissonances are also heard in many of Couperin's other harpsichord pieces, such as *La Piémontaise*. The *chaconnes*, meanwhile, feature a recurring refrain (*grand couplet*) that alternates with passages called *couplets* in different keys.

The final piece on tonight's programme, the *Tombeau de Blancrocher*, is a touching homage to the famous French lutenist Charles Fleury (Blancrocher), who died after falling down a flight of stairs. In the second section, a series of dissonances in the upper register are juxtaposed against two descending motifs in the lower, perhaps alluding to both Blancrocher's accident and his ascent into heaven. The piece exemplifies Couperin's unique expressive style, which, as his nephew François later commented, was 'always more admirable than imitable'.

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