

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 4 October 2024
7.30pm

Les Barricades Mystérieuses

Jean Rondeau harpsichord

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)

Prélude in A minor from *Premier livre de pièces de clavecin* (pub. 1706)

From *Suite in A minor from Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin* (c.1729-30)

Allemande • Courante • Sarabande • Les trois mains • Gavotte et 6 doubles

François Couperin (1668-1733)

Prélude No. 1 in C from *L'art de toucher le clavecin* (pub. 1716)

La ténébreuse (pub. 1713)

La lugubre (pub. 1713)

La favorite (pub. 1713)

Joseph-Nicolas-Panrace Royer
(c.1705-1755)

La Sensible (pub. 1746)

La Marche des Scythes (pub. 1746)



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Although his fame arrived relatively late in life, **Jean-Philippe Rameau** became one of the most important and influential French composers of the 18th Century. In addition to being a superb organist and a noted music theorist, he made major contributions to a range of musical genres, including the cantata, the motet, opera and keyboard music. His *Pièces de clavecin*, published over a period of around 20 years, contain a dazzling array of dance movements and character pieces that, as he himself said, speak to 'the true music...the language of the heart'.

In tonight's concert, the *Prélude in A minor* from the first book of *Pièces RCT1* (1706) serves as an introduction to the *Suite in A minor RCT5* from the third and last volume, the *Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin* (dating from no later than c.1729-30). Full of rich counterpoint, it opens with a lyrical *Allemande* that only fleetingly breaks its dignified air at the end of each section with toccata-like figuration. This is followed by a *Courante*, rhythmically and polyphonically complex, that the Rameau biographer Cuthbert Girdlestone called 'one of the summits of Rameau's art'. In the noble *Sarabande*, we enter the sunnier world of A major, but one tinged with courtly tragedy (indeed, Rameau later used this movement in his tragic opera *Zoroastre*). *Les trois mains*, as its title implies, creates the impression of the harpsichordist having three hands rather than two, due to the left hand constantly crossing over the right. The final *Gavotte et 6 doubles*, however, is even more spectacular: what begins as a tender theme builds into a magnificent set of variations. Running scalic figuration in both hands and brilliant repeated notes lead to a thrilling climax, in which left hand virtuoso leaps accompany the right hand as it triumphantly sings out the theme.

Unlike Rameau, whose only musical relative was his father, **François Couperin 'le grand'** ('the great') came from a highly distinguished musical family. 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, beginning with Louis (c.1626-61, himself an extraordinary composer), who was succeeded by his younger brother, Charles, and in turn by Charles's son, François. Couperin 'le grand' was later appointed organist at Louis XIV's royal chapel, and in 1717 – by now a highly decorated man – harpsichordist to the King. Most of his harpsichord music was published in his own four-volume *Pièces de clavecin*. Instead of using the term 'suite', he grouped these pieces in 27 *Ordres*, and often gave them enigmatic titles (such as the famous *Les barricades mystérieuses*), many of which refer to contemporary entertainments and social in-jokes.

Couperin was also famed as a harpsichord teacher (his pupils, amongst others, included Louis XIV's children), and in 1716 wrote his influential treatise *L'art de toucher le clavecin* ('The art of playing the harpsichord'). Today, it remains one of the most significant and valuable guides to French Baroque keyboard performance practice,

discussing issues such as fingering, ornamentation, rhythm and touch. The treatise also includes detailed remarks on how to correctly perform the pieces in the first two books of the *Pièces de clavecin*, along with eight preludes that act both as teaching material and (as in tonight's concert, with the *Prélude No. 1 in C*) as improvisatory introductions to the *Ordres*. Despite Couperin's meticulous directions, though, it seems many harpsichordists ignored them, leading him to write despairingly in the third book of *Pièces*: 'I am always surprised, after the pains I have given myself for marking the ornaments which are suitable to my *Pièces* (of which I have given...a sufficiently clear explanation...) to hear persons who have learned them without heeding my instructions. This is an unpardonable negligence...'.

All three of the *Pièces* in this recital come from the *Troisième Ordre of Book I*, published in 1713. *The Ordre* opens with an allemande, *La ténébreuse* ('The dark one'), where the mysterious character of the title is musically depicted by the lower register of the harpsichord, moody harmonic dissonances and dense, rippling chords. *La lugubre* ('The gloomy one'), meanwhile, is a stately sarabande. The title of *La favorite* ('The favoured one') refers to Françoise d'Aubigné, Madame de Maintenon, who had secretly married King Louis XIV around 1683-4. It is subtitled *Chaconne a deux tems*, indicating two beats to a bar, and is a solemn work that features a repeated refrain (built around a chromatically descending bass line), interspersed with five couplets.

A contemporary of Rameau, **Joseph-Nicolas-Pancrace Royer** played a central role in Parisian musical life in the second quarter of the 18th Century. He held prestigious appointments at court (notably as music director of the *chambre du roi*), the Paris Opéra and the Concert Spirituel. Unfortunately, despite being a celebrated harpsichordist and organist, only one book of his *Pièces de clavecin* survives, from 1746; the pieces it contains, though, are striking for their eccentric, exciting style. The rondeau *La Sensible* ('The sensitive one') is built on a plaintive ornamented melody against a flowing accompaniment. It employs dramatic contrasts between high and low registers and different textures, including octaves and arpeggios.

Nowhere is the extravagance of Royer's harpsichord style displayed better than in the last and most famous piece from the book, *La Marche des Scythes* ('The March of the Scythians'). Marked 'Fièremment', it certainly lives up to its name: based around a driving, almost rock-like refrain that obsessively returns again and again, it is a wild, virtuosic showpiece filled with hysterical broken figuration, brilliant running passages, and a mad headlong dash to the end in its final pages. For those hearing this music for the first time, the stately world of Louis XIV's court must have suddenly seemed a long way away.

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