

Masterworks 3 – February 26 & 27, 2018

Les barricades mystérieuses from 2nd Book of *Pièces de Clavecin*

François Couperin
1668-1733

François Couperin, known as “*le Grand*,” was the most illustrious member of a French dynasty of composers from the late sixteenth to mid nineteenth century, rivaling the Bachs in Germany. François, among the court composers for Louis XIV and XV, composed primarily keyboard and chamber music. His major achievement was his 230 harpsichord pieces published in four books. Each book was subdivided into *ordres* (suites) of pieces in the same or closely related keys, a total of 24, plus three additional *ordres* for 27 in all.

In addition to dances, Couperin included in the collection “genre,” or character, pieces with evocative and picturesque titles – some of them indecipherable to modern scholars and often cryptically referring to people or events at Court. The composer himself noted: “In composing these pieces, I have always had an object in view, furnished by various occasions. Thus the titles reflect my ideas; I may be forgiven for not explaining them all.” Claude Debussy, among other French composers, picked up the tradition of arcane titles in his *Préludes* and other works for solo piano.

Les barricades mystérieuses is an example of an unexplained title, leaving the composer’s ultimate inspiration a mystery. In style, it most resembles one of Bach’s preludes from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, although it is much simpler in harmonic structure. It maintains throughout an ostinato motif within a simple ABA structure.

Couperin wrote a treatise titled *L’art de toucher le clavecin* (How to play the harpsichord). Unlike Bach, whose *Clavierübung* included exercises but no explanatory text, Couperin concerned himself with everything from fingering to ornamentation. This latter topic is ambiguous at best and has been plumbed by musicologists and early music performers for insight into performance practice of the time – yielding considerable and often heated discussions. Couperin’s Book III, from 1722, contains the most detailed performance instructions, including directions how to perform the ornaments exactly as indicated in the score, with nothing to be added or omitted. Baroque music subscribed to a complex musical rhetoric in which certain turns of phrase, embellishments and harmonies supposedly produced emotional effects upon the listener similar to reactions to rhetorical devices in speech. It is these musical figures that probably hold the meaning behind Couperin’s musical portraiture and his other pieces with enigmatic titles.

Three Studies from Couperin *Les amusements* *Les tours de passé-passe* *L’âme en peine*

Thomas Adès
b. 1971

Born in London, Thomas Adès best known as an opera composer, *The Tempest* and *Powder Her Face* have both been featured at the Metropolitan Opera, a venue noted for its parsimony towards contemporary composers. *The Exterminating Angel* premiered at Salzburg in 2016 and was also taken up at the Met this year. Adès is also a performing pianist and conductor,

who has appeared with the most prestigious orchestras around the world. His orchestral work, *America, A Prophecy* (1999) was eerily prescient.

In *Three Studies from Couperin*, Adès recasts Couperin's harpsichord works emphasizing rapid, subtle variations in timbre and dynamics – exactly the opposite of the sonority of the original instrument for which they were written. Virtually every note is played *sforzando*, and frequently successive notes within a single melodic line are played in relay, handed off from instrument to another with subtly different timbres. Adès has selected source pieces with melodies of the utmost simplicity, as if trying to prevent the listener from being distracted by a tune.

In the second of Adès' pieces, *Les tours de passe-passe* (the slight-of-hand), Adès also gives a modern harmonic underpinning to the melody, reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*. It is also the most dramatic of the three, gradually building in complex sonorities and dynamics.

The title of the third of Adès pieces, *Lâme en peine* (The Soul in Pain), lends itself nicely to the sighing effect of the continual *sforzandi*.

Le tombeau de Couperin

Maurice Ravel
1875-1937

If Maurice Ravel had not been deemed unfit for military service at the outbreak of World War I, he would likely have joined the hundreds of thousands of his countrymen as a victim of German shrapnel, poison gas or disease. Instead, he enlisted in the medical corps where he cared for the wounded and worked on a French Suite in memory of his patients who had died. By the time he could get around to finishing the suite in 1917, his mother had died as well, and he renamed the suite *Le tombeau de Couperin*. The word “*tombeau*,” which literally means “tomb,” is also the term for a poetic elegy.

In seeking a fitting tribute to his French comrades, Ravel harked back to the Baroque dance suite, a form that had originated in France and developed by François Couperin “*le grand*.” Couperin was primarily a composer for harpsichord who had honored his own predecessors, Jean-Baptiste Lully and Arcangelo Corelli, with musical *tombeaux*. As a tribute to “the Great” harpsichordist, Ravel composed the original version of his suite for piano.

The premiere of the piano version in 1917 had to be postponed because of a bombardment of Paris. In the interim, Ravel orchestrated four of the six movements for chamber orchestra. A master orchestrator, whose transcription of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* still beats out the countless competing arrangements, Ravel wove a delicate orchestral texture with a large number of solos, giving *Le tombeau de Couperin* the character of a concerto for orchestra. The two movements left un-orchestrated were the fugue – perhaps the most melancholy of the movements – and the *toccata*. Although neither is actually a dance, they are both common Baroque forms primarily, but not exclusively, associated with the keyboard.

Le tombeau, however, is by no means a slavish imitation of a Baroque suite. Instead of the slow, stately prelude – originally conceived so that Louis XIV, an exceptional dancer, could make an appropriate balletic entry – Ravel's *Prélude* seems to bubble over with excitement – and no little anxiety since the opening oboe solo is a classic audition piece. Nor is the work in any sense funereal. This is a celebration of all that was great in French culture. Ravel also replaced standard dances in the Baroque suite with three less common dances of the period:

forlane, minuet and *rigaudon*.

Le tombeau de Couperin pinpoints a psychological change in Ravel. Accustomed to suppressing his feelings under a veneer of irony and wit, he became deeply depressed by both his personal loss and the horrors of the war. He expressed his mood not through musical hand-wringing or sentimentality, but rather with a creative brush that honors the past but recasts it in contemporary and forward-looking guise, asserting a creative force that presses onward even in the face of adversity.

Symphony No. 101 in D major, “The Clock”

Franz Joseph Haydn
1732-1809

The long life of Franz Joseph Haydn spanned one of the great upheavals in the economics of the musical profession. It marked the demise of the aristocratic “ownership” of music and musicians and the rise of the middle class as patrons, supporters and chief consumers of the arts. No one bridged this transition more effectively than Haydn, who spent most of his career as the valued erudite servant of an Austro-Hungarian aristocrat to become in his later years the darling of London's merchants – without offending either.

On New Year's Day 1791, Haydn made the first of two extended trips to London at the invitation of the impresario Johann Peter Salomon and actually considered settling there for good. Salomon, violinist, conductor and concertmaster of his own orchestra, had been writing to Haydn for some time in an attempt to get him to come to London, but to no avail. When Haydn's lifelong patron, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, died and the family disbanded the orchestra, the composer was suddenly a free agent. Capitalizing on the situation, Salomon personally went to Vienna to “fetch” Haydn with a princely lure of £1200, and Haydn bit. He composed numerous works for performance at Salomon's concerts, primarily his last twelve symphonies (Nos. 93-104, known today as the “London” or “Salomon” symphonies). These performances, like most concerts of the time, went on for hours and were a mixed bag, including vocal, chamber and orchestral pieces. For the decade of the 1790s, their star attraction was Haydn's music.

The Salomon concerts were so successful that a rival organization, the Professional Concerts, tried to seduce Haydn away from Salomon with even higher fees than he was already getting. Always a man of principle, Haydn refused, and the Professional Concerts hired his former student Ignace Pleyel to provide a new work for every concert, now openly suggesting that Haydn was past his prime anyway. But by 1793, the Professional Concerts had gone under, and the old man reigned supreme.

The theme of the slow introduction foretells the cheerful and vigorous main theme of the first movement. This is uncommon in Haydn's symphonies, where the introduction and first movement are usually thematically unrelated. The second movement, *Andante*, with its ‘Clock’-like repeated figure, was probably a concession to the London public's appetite for sensation; many of the ‘London’ symphonies have some “trick” in their slow movement.

The Minuet of the third movement, as that of the other ‘London’ symphonies, is a broad symphonic movement, only vaguely related to the stately minuets danced at the Esterházy court; in the trio, the flute and bassoon hold a wonderfully soaring conversation. The cheerful finale starts somewhat tentatively, then bursts forth in what can only be described as a joyful

celebration; when the theme returns after the development, it is in the form of a pianissimo fugue before it progresses to the exultant conclusion.

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