

Program Note for *Couperin le Grand* By: Saraswathi Shukla

The reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715), the longest ruling monarch in Europe, was a rich period of art and splendor in France. After the death of his wife Maria Theresa of Spain, however, he married the Marquise de Maintenon (1635-1719) in secret in 1683. Madame de Maintenon, as she was known, was devout and banned many forms of theater and spectacle at the court. Composers invested in non-theatrical forms of entertainment by writing religious music, sacred and secular cantatas, and instrumental music until Louis XIV's death in 1715.

François Couperin "le Grand" was born in 1668 into a musical family at the height of Louis XIV's reign (1643-1715). After becoming a royal organist at the court in Versailles in 1693, Couperin gave private lessons to Louis XIV's grandson, the Duke of Burgundy, and other members of the royal family alongside his duties at the court. Published in two volumes in 1722 and 1724, the *concerts royaux* represent some of the repertoire that Couperin composed for private "concerted" (chamber music) performances at Versailles. In the preface to the first volume, Couperin recounts that they were performed in 1714 and 1715 by the violinist François Duval, the oboist Anne-Danican Philidor, the viol player Hilaire Verloge Alarius, and the bassoonist Pierre Dubois, with Couperin himself at the harpsichord. The second book of these *concerts royaux* were published under the name, *Les goûts réunis*, reflecting Couperin's desire to unite French musical style, represented by Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687), and the Italian influences of Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713), whose virtuosity and walking basses he incorporated into the dance rhythms, ornamentation, and *notes inégales* (a practice of playing running passages in irregular lilting dotted rhythms) so characteristic of French music. To sell more copies, Couperin printed them on two staves so they could be performed as solo harpsichord pieces as well; it became common practice to notate music in reduced formats that allowed musicians to arrange scores for different combinations of musicians and increase their market value.

Alongside these exquisite chamber works, you will hear three cantatas whose mythological plots are drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The first one on the program is the cantata *La Mort d'Hercule* (1716) by Louis-Nicolas Clérambault (1676-1749). Louis XIV was commonly portrayed as Hercules, and his marriage in 1660 was celebrated with the premiere of Cavalli's opera *Ercole amante* and Lully's ballet *Ballet d'Hercule amoureux*. Listeners of the time would undoubtedly have seen Clérambault's cantata on the death of Hercules — published just a year after Louis XIV's death — as a reference to Louis himself. Unlike Cavalli's opera drawing on the same myth, Clérambault's *Mort d'Hercule* frames Hercules's death at the hands of an inhumane and jealous spouse as unjust. The moral, we learn, is that those inflicted by Love's darts ought to be tender, for fear, bewitchment, and constraint have no effect on fleeting desire. We are left wondering whether it is Déjanire's actions, or Love's wounds, that lead to Hercules's mortal downfall.

The second cantata on the program is an exciting opportunity to hear a newly discovered work. When renowned harpsichordist and conductor Christophe Rousset came across a cantata called *Ariane consolée par Bacchus* (Ariadne consoled by Bacchus) in a manuscript containing mostly anonymous works, he wanted to know more: numerous eighteenth-century sources reference a cantata by Couperin on the theme of Ariadne—had he found this long missing cantata? Further analysis by Julien Dubruque and him have confirmed his hypothesis: there are specificities in the notation of the figured bass that point to Couperin's

work; and the cantata, unusually, has a solo viol part, an instrument which Couperin loved and wrote for extensively (he wrote two viol suites and used the instrument in his *Tenebrae* lessons, as well as some of the *Concerts royaux*). This is a rare opportunity! The cantata tells the story of Ariadne, abandoned on the island of Naxos by Theseus, after Dionysus or Bacchus tells him in a dream to leave the island immediately.

Michel Pignolet de Montéclair (1667-1737) was heavily influenced by Italian music, and his cantata, “L’enlèvement d’Orithie,” captures the dramatic pacing of his Italian contemporaries. The cantata tells the story of Boreas, the winter northerly wind, who kidnaps Orithyia. The recitative opens in the heat of the moment: “The impetuous Boreas is consumed by the most beautiful of fires,” the cantata begins. He tries to seduce Orithyia through tenderness, but she rejects his advances. Frustrated and discouraged by the prospect of losing her, Boreas invokes the natural world and conjures a tempest. The violin and continuo accompany his injunctions with violently repeating figures to match the power of his text: “Come out, roar, furious winds! Provoke a horrible storm! Confuse the earth and the heavens such that nothing escapes your storm!” Using Italian violin techniques, such as the *stile concitato*, Montéclair describes how Boreas creates disorder – chaos in the literal sense of the word – that masks his “sweet hopes” as he kisses and seizes the “proud object of his desire” and takes her to a place where she is subject to his power. Venus voices her approval of Boreas’s daring victory and celebrates his crowning by Hymen, the god of marriage, even though he has wounded Orithyia. A solo violin air follows Venus’s jubilant air, and the cantata closes with more advice: “Lovers,” we are told, “all concedes to constancy; Love triumphs over scorn.”