

## Alice Baldwin's DM Harpsichord Recital #2

### François Couperin (1668-1733)

Considered to be one of the greatest French composers of the late Baroque, François Couperin wrote extensively for the harpsichord, publishing four books of harpsichord music (*Pieces de clavecin*), as well as *L'art de toucher le clavecin* ("The Art of Playing the Harpsichord"), between 1713 and 1730. The compositions in his four *Pieces de clavecin* books are organized into what he called "Ordres," which, instead of being made up solely of dance movements as in the much more common organizational system of the "Suite," are comprised mainly of descriptive pieces with a few dance movements occasionally thrown in. All pieces within a Couperin *ordre* are written in a single key and its parallel (such as G Major and g minor, for example), with the single exception being the first movement of the *ordre* on my program – the *Vingt-cinquième ordre* (from *Quatrième livre de pièces de clavecin*) – which is in E-flat Major, while the rest of the pieces in the *ordre* are in either C Major or c minor. The titles of the movements in the *Vingt-cinquième ordre* are as follows:

- *La Visionaire* – "The Visionary"
- *La Misterieuse* – "The Mysterious One"
- *La Monflambert* – meant as a portrait of the wife of a councillor from Châtelet
- *La Muse Victorieuse* – "The Victorious Muse"
- *Les Ombres Errantes* – "The Wandering Shades" or "The Wandering Souls"

One of the additional curious elements of this *ordre* is the inclusion of a small drawing on its first page in the original printing. It is the only illustration of *any* kind to be found in all of Couperin's *Pieces de clavecin*. The image is of a face. . . perhaps it is "The Visionary"?



### **Nicola Porpora (1686-1768) and Muzio Clementi (1752-1832)**

Although Nicola Porpora composed in a variety of forms and genres, he is remembered most as a composer of opera and other vocal works. He was famous in his own lifetime, but had close ties with individuals whose fame retrospectively outshone his own: while in Rome he was the voice teacher of the castrato Farinelli, and after moving to Vienna in 1752, Joseph Haydn became both a pupil of and an accompanist to Porpora. Porpora's time in Vienna also brought with it the publication of his twelve sonatas for violin and basso (or basso continuo) (1754), the first six of which each contain a fugal movement. It is these six fugues that caught the attention of Muzio Clementi, nearly a half-century later.

Muzio Clementi was well known in his day as a composer and pedagogue (as well as for his music publishing and piano manufacturing!). In addition to his musical compositions, he wrote and published some instructional works, including his *Selection of Practical Harmony for the Organ or Piano Forte: Containing Voluntaries, Fugues, Canons & other Ingenious Pieces by the most Eminent Composers* (1801). His *Epitome of Counterpoint* is prefixed to this volume, but the majority of the work contains keyboard transcriptions of a wide variety of contrapuntal pieces, including works by "Sebastian" and "Charles Philip Emanuel" Bach, Padre Martini, Handel, Haydn, and Telemann, just to name a few. There is even a keyboard transcription of the Kyrie double fugue from the Mozart Requiem. Among the works transcribed are the six fugues from the Porpora violin sonatas. I have chosen to play two of these fugues on my program because although the keyboard versions of these works date from an era when the harpsichord was no longer in fashion, the compositions themselves are from a harpsichord-dominant time and suit the instrument nicely.

### **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

Overall the most complex of J. S. Bach's collections of keyboard suites (which include the French Suites, the English Suites, and the Partitas), the six Partitas were the last written of the suite sets, but the first of Bach's keyboard works to be published, initially being printed separately in installments starting in 1726 and then released together in 1731 as the first volume of the *Clavier-Übung* ("Keyboard Practice"). The partita on my program – Partita in B-Flat Major, BWV 825 – is the first of the collection and shares more features in common with its Bach-composed predecessors than the other partitas, particularly in regard to its length and (relatively) lighter textures throughout.<sup>1</sup> It is also rather standard

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<sup>1</sup> David Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach* (New York: Schirmer, 1992), 276-80.

in regard to the dance forms it includes (an allemande, courante, sarabande, two menuetts, and a gigue). The ways in which these forms are handled, however, are often somewhat unusual, each movement containing features not typically associated with the dance it purports to be. This is most strikingly the case in the closing gigue, which makes extensive use of hand-crossings throughout, a keyboard technique that was used rarely at the time.

### **Azzolino Bernardino Della Ciaia (1671-1755)**

Despite being born into a life of wealth and power, Azzolino Bernardino Della Ciaia quickly faded into obscurity after his death in 1755. He is most remembered (when remembered at all) for an organ he built in the church of Santo Stefano dei Cavalieri (the Church of the Knights of St. Stephen, an order of knights to which Della Ciaia belonged). The sonata on my program – Sonata in G Major, Op. 4 No. 1 – comes from a collection of keyboard music containing six sonatas for harpsichord (*Sonate per Cembalo*) and some open-score compositions for organ. The collection was Della Ciaia's fourth publication, likely first printed around 1727 (the publication is undated, but the extant copy in Bologna has a handwritten date of 1727). These keyboard pieces are the best known of Della Ciaia's music, due in large part to Béla Bartók's fascination with them; Bartók was so entranced by these harpsichord sonatas that he not only performed and published piano transcriptions of some of them in the 1920s but also based the first theme of his First Piano Concerto (1926) on the fugue subject of the second movement (*Canzone*) of the G Major Della Ciaia sonata you'll hear tonight.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, see Benjamin Suchoff, *Béla Bartók: Life and Work* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 103-5.