Armand-Louis Couperin
and his keyboard instruments

Armand-Louis Couperin, the most significant musician in the Couperin family after the death of François, died in February 1789, just months before the storming of the Bastille, in what his burial notice called “one of those cruel accidents that have become so common in this capital, where one will soon no longer be able to walk.” At about 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, February 1, having finished playing the organ for a service, he was, according to one account, returning home; according to another, he was hurrying to St-Gervais to finish playing the office which had already been begun by his elder son, Pierre-Louis. As he was passing by the Port au Blé, he was knocked down by a horse that had gone out of control and thrown its rider. He received a mortal wound on the head; and the horse broke two of his ribs over the heart; he was carried home, where, without uttering a single word, and almost without giving any sign of life he died at the end of 24 hours. His funeral was attended by a crowd of people and a procession, which attested to the great esteem in which he was held. (From his eulogy, believed to be by the abbé de Feller.)

He died at home on February 2 and was buried under the organ at St-Gervais two days later. In October, Pierre-Louis died (some said out of grief) and was buried in the same vault as his father. However, four years later, their tombs were opened by order of the republic, which needed lead from coffins for ammunition, and their bones were thrown into a common grave.

The core of Armand-Louis’ musical life and reputation, as well as of his income, was in his work as an organist. He is known to have held organ posts in at least eight churches. For some of them, we do not have the details of exactly when he held the positions, his responsibilities, or his salary, but we do know that he held a number of them simultaneously:

- He held the traditional Couperin post at St-Gervais, where he succeeded his father Nicolas in 1748 and remained as organist until his death in 1789;
- He was at St-Barthélémy until 1772;
- He was appointed at Notre-Dame in 1755, with the post at first divided among four organists, each of whom took over for a quarter of the year, and he held the post until his death, numbering among his colleagues Daquin, Foucquet, Séjan, Beauvarlet-Charpentier, and Balbastre;
- In 1760, Couperin was appointed organist at Sainte-Chapelle, a position that he held for the remainder of his life;
- In 1770, he became organist at the Royal Chapel at Versailles, another position which he held for the rest of his life; with two organists each serving for six months of the year, Couperin was initially appointed as second organist, but records show that he was promoted to first organist by the middle of 1782;
- He was organist at Saint-Jean-en-Grève;
- He held the organ post at the convent of the Carmes-Billettes; and
- He was organist at Sainte-Marguerite.

Even though some of these posts would have required Armand-Louis’ services only for special festivals, he obviously could not fulfill all his responsibilities personally. Gradually, organ playing became a family enterprise. Already known as a fine keyboard player at the time of their marriage, his wife Antoinette Blanchet “had acquired such great skill as an organist that she substituted for her husband without the connoisseurs noticing” (Le Pianiste, Vol. 1, 1833). Their sons Pierre-Louis and Gervais-François, who eventually succeeded their father in some of his organ posts, must also have helped out on occasion. In 1773, Pierre-Louis was granted the right to succeed his father at St-Gervais and was already substituting for Armand-Louis before his actual succession. Their daughter Antoinette-Victoire is reported to have been playing

By Martin Pearlman

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—from an obituary by the abbé de Feller
the organ at St-Gervais by the age of 16. The works for which Couperin was most famous, and the ones mentioned in most of the contemporary descriptions, were his improvisations at the organ. Early in his career, he was already well known for his playing technique and registrations, and by the end of his life, he was widely considered one of the greatest organists of his generation. In his Historisch-Biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler (Leipzig, 1790-92), Ernst Ludwig Gerber described of him as “one of the greatest masters of his art in Paris.” The eulogy by his colleague Ferdinand-Albert Gautier may have gone a bit overboard in calling him “the most celebrated organist of his century and perhaps of all those which have preceded it and all those which will follow,” but the hyperbole does reflect the extraordinary esteem in which Armand-Louis Couperin was held by his contemporaries.

His specialty was his improvisation on the Te Deum, and, according to all reports, his playing of it made a tremendous and lasting impression on those who heard it. The organist Guillaume Lasceux tells us that Armand-Louis would set the mood and “animate his genius” by reading Edward Young’s “A Poem on the Last Day” before playing the Te Deum. In 1769, Abbé Nicolas Roze described his impressions in a letter: }

To begin with, we went to hear a Te Deum played by M. Couperin, in my opinion the best organist in Paris and in the kingdom. It took my breath away; in fact, in the opinion of the experts, he outdid himself. I was near Balbastre, who himself could not get over it; it should be said that it is only heard 2 or 3 times a year, or so it was announced. (September 22, 1769)

The following month, a letter by M. Plaisant de la Houssaye in the Journal des Beaux-Arts (October 1769) describes what may well have been the same performance:

Perhaps never has the Te Deum been performed with more pomp, majesty, and richness of harmony than at the matins of the eve of St. Bartholomew by this great man. Above all, he outdid himself in the various tableaux which he showed us about the circumstances of the last judgment.

What was in these spellbinding Te Deums? What kinds of tableaux did Couperin paint? The above letter in the Journal des Beaux-Arts is followed by a poem by the same author which purports to follow the ideas and images of Couperin’s performance. It tells of nature in desolation, the righteous and guilty souls dreading the wrath of judgment, the sounding trumpet, the raising of the dead amidst peals of thunder and cries of lamentation, the void after the earth is no more, and finally a song of pomp and joy which swells up to praise the glory of God, as the poet is carried off to a happy dwelling place in the heavens. The character of this improvisation, which his contemporaries found so inspired and profound and on which so much of Couperin’s reputation rested, is lost to us today. This side of his musical personality is not evident in the more light-hearted solo keyboard works he committed to paper.

Against the glowing praise of his fellow countrymen, it is interesting to read the account of a foreign visitor. Charles Burney, visiting Paris in 1770, heard Couperin play a Te Deum at St-Gervais. His report, though less effusive than some of the French accounts, supports the general high regard for Couperin as an organist and improvisor, although it finds French taste too conservative:

This evening I went to St. Gervais, to hear M. Couperin, nephew [sic] to the
famous Couperin, organist to Louis XIV, and to the regent duke of Orleans; it being the vigil or eve of the Feast of the Dedication, there was a full congregation. I met M. Balbastre and his family there; and I find that this annual festival is the time for organists to display their talents. M. Couperin accompanied the Te Deum, which was only chanted, with great abilities. The interludes between each verse were admirable. Great variety of stops and style, with much learning and knowledge of the instrument, were shewn, and a finger equal in strength and rapidity to every difficulty. Many things of effect were produced by the hands, up in the treble, while the base was played on the pedals....

M. Balbastre introduced me to M. Couperin, after the service was over, and I was glad to see two eminent men of the same profession, so candid and friendly together. M. Couperin seems to be between forty and fifty; and his taste is not quite so modern, perhaps, as it might be; but allowance made for his time of life, for the taste of his nation, and for the changes music has undergone elsewhere, since his youth, he is an excellent organist; brilliant in execution, varied in his melodies, and masterly in his modulation...

The harpsichord

While Couperin was most famous during his life as an organist, it is as a harpsichord composer that he is best known to us today. Most of the music that has come down to us is for harpsichord, and, beyond its intrinsic value, it is of unusual interest because of the way it reflects the changes and experiments in late French harpsichord making.

Couperin was born into the musical world of his cousin François and of Rameau and witnessed in his lifetime the arrival in Paris of the modern music of Pergolesi, Stamitz, Haydn, Gluck, and Mozart. His active career continued right up to his death on the eve of the French revolution, less than three years before the death of Mozart. He was related by marriage to the Blanchet family, the leading French harpsichord makers of the period, and through this family connection, he watched at close range as various inventions were added to the harpsichord in the second half of the 18th century by François-Étienne Blanchet’s successor, Pascal Taskin. During this time, when the pianoforte Notes from the author

Back in the 1970s, I began work on a critical edition of Armand-Louis Couperin’s complete keyboard music, but, getting busy with Boston Baroque and other projects at the time, I left it incomplete. Now, having returned to finish the project more than 30 years later, it is a digital world and selling it through a publisher is no longer the only choice (and was never a very lucrative one, in any case). So, in the modern spirit of online sharing, I decided to make the edition available on my website (www.martinpearlman.com) for free download or simply for viewing to those who are interested. On the same web page is a recording that Peter Sykes and I made of the three Quatuors for two harpsichords, as well as recordings of several of the solo pieces.

This is, I believe, the first complete edition of Armand-Louis Couperin’s music for one and two keyboard instruments and the first critical edition. It includes a preface of about 40 pages (biography, critical notes, facsimiles, etc.) and 200-plus pages of music, which include his published Pièces de clavecin, miscellaneous solo pieces, and four multi-movement works for two harpsichords. These duo pieces, the first large-scale French works for two harpsichords, include not only his Simphonie and the second Quatuor, but also his two other Quatuors, which had lost their second harpsichord parts and which I completed for this edition. They represent a major part of the small repertoire for two harpsichords, and I hope that this edition will make them more accessible to both players and listeners. —Martin Pearlman

Below, the first page of “La de Boisgelou” from Armand-Louis Couperin’s Pièces de clavecin.
Couperin also calls for another important invention of Taskin: knee levers, which made it possible for the player to vary dynamics and to create crescendos and diminuendos by gradually pushing stops on and off while playing.

Pictured below, a harpsichord, rebuilt in 1783-4 by Pascal Taskin with knee levers, in the Russell Collection at the University of Edinburgh. A sound file of this instrument may be heard at http://194.250.19.151/media/UEDIN/AUDIO/0035527s.mp3.
calls for piano, but as David Fuller has pointed out in the preface to Armand-Louis Couperin: Selected Works for Keyboard (A-R Editions, 1975), the dynamic markings in the Aria con Variazione would sound awkward on a harpsichord; those dynamics, as well as much of the figuration in that piece, could suggest that the piece was written with the piano in mind. The date of the piece, 1781, puts it within a time when the piano was becoming common.

Also, there is nothing in the three Quatuors for two harpsichords that would preclude performance on piano; unlike the Simphonie, these pieces do not absolutely require a double-manual instrument nor call for the harpsichord’s jeu de buffle. Fuller’s suggestion that they could even be played with one harpsichord and one fortepiano offers an alternative for performing these pieces. Couperin, however, wrote “à deux clavecin” on the second Quatuor, a term not used on the title pages of piano music.

The organ

Although Armand-Louis Couperin was most famous in his day for his improvisations on the organ, only two small pieces of his written keyboard works appear to be for organ. Both of these pieces present something of a mystery. The Dialogue, dated 1775, has notes in the extreme bass (AA) and treble (d’’, e’’, e’’’), as well as organ registrations that were not, according to Pierre Hardouin, available on any instrument in Paris at the time. It was not until six years later, in 1781, when Couperin helped dedicate the large new Cliquot organ at St-Sulpice, that such an instrument with the needed compass and registration could be found. Why Couperin would have written a small piece that could not be played has been a puzzle. A possible solution, it seems to me, is that the piece may not originally have been for organ at all, but rather for harpsichord, where the bass to treble compass is not a problem. In that case, the registrations for organ could have been added later, when Couperin was able to play on the large organ at St-Sulpice. The fact that the Dialogue bears the date 1775—the only one of the three pieces bound together to have a date—may be due simply to the fact that the copyist wanted to indicate that the piece had been written earlier.

The solo piece La chasse also has indications of “H” and “B” (referring to the upper and lower keyboards, haut and bas). These refer to the organ, since the upper manual is indicated for what appears to be the louder music, whereas, on a harpsichord, the lower keyboard would be the louder one. The “H” and “B” indications are in pencil, however, and were clearly added later. The writing in this piece, as well as the one appearance of a low “AA,” suggests that it, too, was originally written for harpsichord and later adapted for organ.

The man

We unfortunately know little about Armand-Louis Couperin’s personality, although many indications, including Burney’s account quoted above, point to a modest and amiable character. He seems to have been a religious man and well read: the inventory of his estate numbers 885 books in his library, of which the 13 mentioned by name are religious works. The following, part of the lengthy obituary presumed to be by the abbé de Feller, gives us perhaps the clearest insight into his character and suggests that it may have been modesty that kept Couperin from publishing more of his compositions:

He was praiseworthy for the most admirable qualities of the heart, for a truly exemplary piety inimical to all display and all ostentation, for the gentility of a sensitive and kind character, for the simplicity and the naturalness of his manner, for the delicacy of his feelings, which has more than once jeopardized his success, and above all for his modesty, which makes him conceal from the public with the greatest care everything which could reveal the brilliance of his attainments: witness the motets he composed for churches which could have made for a musician the finest reputation, but which he has never been willing to entrust to the bright daylight of publication or of publicity. He has continually refused to work for the theater, in spite of the eager treatises of masters of the art, who assure him of the most brilliant success.

Further Reading


Charles Bouvet, “Une lettre d’Armand-Louis Couperin (1787),” Revue de Musicologie VI (1925)


Le Pianiste (published monthly, 1833-1835). The full text of this title is available in the RIPM Online Archive


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