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## Contexts for Couperin's *L'art de toucher le clavecin*

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## Marie Demeilliez, « Contexts for Couperin's *L'art de toucher le clavecin* »

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François Couperin's *L'art de toucher le clavecin* is one of the best-known texts associated with the 18th-century French harpsichord school. This short treatise was published in 1716 and dedicated to the young Louis XV.<sup>1</sup> A few months later, Couperin issued a revised second edition, incorporating not only a new title page but numerous revisions and corrections and, importantly, a six-page supplement listing fingerings for the pieces in his newly published second book of *Pièces de clavecin*.<sup>2</sup> Couperin's treatise provides a great deal of information for harpsichordists wishing to perform the music of his time – notably about touch, ornamentation, articulation and fingering – together with some thoughts on teaching methods. His manual has been regarded as a valuable source for interpreters of French Baroque music since at least the 19th century.<sup>3</sup> More recently, leading figures of the harpsichord world including Laurence Boulay,<sup>4</sup> Ralph Kirkpatrick,<sup>5</sup> Davitt Moroney,<sup>6</sup> Olivier Baumont<sup>7</sup> and Noëlle Spieth<sup>8</sup> have devoted essays to Couperin's text, testifying to its international interest for both musicians and pedagogues.

This article is not, however, about the value of *L'art de toucher le clavecin* for historically informed performance or for an understanding of Couperin's aesthetics. Rather, it investigates the cultural contexts that shaped its text. While the composer, with some justification, vaunted the originality of his treatise, the book can nevertheless be linked with various traditions derived from musical and other instruction manuals published in France during previous decades, and also with etiquette books that presented the rules of conduct observed at court. The following paragraphs analyse *L'art de toucher* as an eclectic amalgam of pedagogical practices, stock phrases and cultural elements derived from various types of contemporary works.

### Models for Couperin's treatise

In the 1717 edition, Couperin immediately affirmed the exceptional nature of his treatise:

La Méthode que je donne icy est unique, et n'a nul rapport à la Tablature, qui n'est qu'une science de nombres; mais j'y traite sur toutes choses (par principes démontrés) du beau-Toucher du Clavecin. J'y crois même donner des notions assés claires du goût qui convient à cet instrument, pour être approuvé des habiles, et aider ceux qui aspirent à le devenir.<sup>9</sup>

(The method I present here is unique and is not concerned with musical notation, which is merely a science of numbers; but rather, using established principles, I deal with everything pertaining to the art of fine playing on the harpsichord. Indeed, I believe I provide clear enough concepts about the style that befits this instrument to be approved by experts and to help those who aspire to become so.)

It is generally acknowledged that these words reveal the author's desire to distinguish his book from *Les principes du clavecin* by Saint Lambert (Paris, 1702), the first harpsichord method published in France.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Couperin, Saint Lambert devotes a large part of his book to 'tablature' (that is, to notation and the rudiments of music theory). The full title of this treatise introduces its subject matter: *Les Principes du clavecin. Contenant une Explication exacte de tout ce qui concerne la Tablature & le Clavier. Avec des Remarques nécessaires pour l'intelligence de plusieurs difficultés de la Musique* ('Principles of the harpsichord, containing a precise explanation of everything related

to musical notation and the keyboard, with some remarks necessary for the understanding of several difficulties of music”).



Illus.1. François de Troy, *Portrait de la famille de Franqueville*  
(© Douai, Musée de la Chartreuse, inv. no. 2777. Photograph: Daniel Lefebvre)

As the contents list of *Les principes du clavecin* reveals (see illus.2), the first 18 of the book's 28 chapters deal with various elements of 'tablature', teaching the student how to read notes, rhythms and other elements of musical notation.<sup>11</sup> After a section on fingering (ch.XIX), the remaining six chapters deal with ornaments. Overall, Saint Lambert's treatise is a valuable source for those interested in studying musical theory and the evolution of notational practices at the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup>

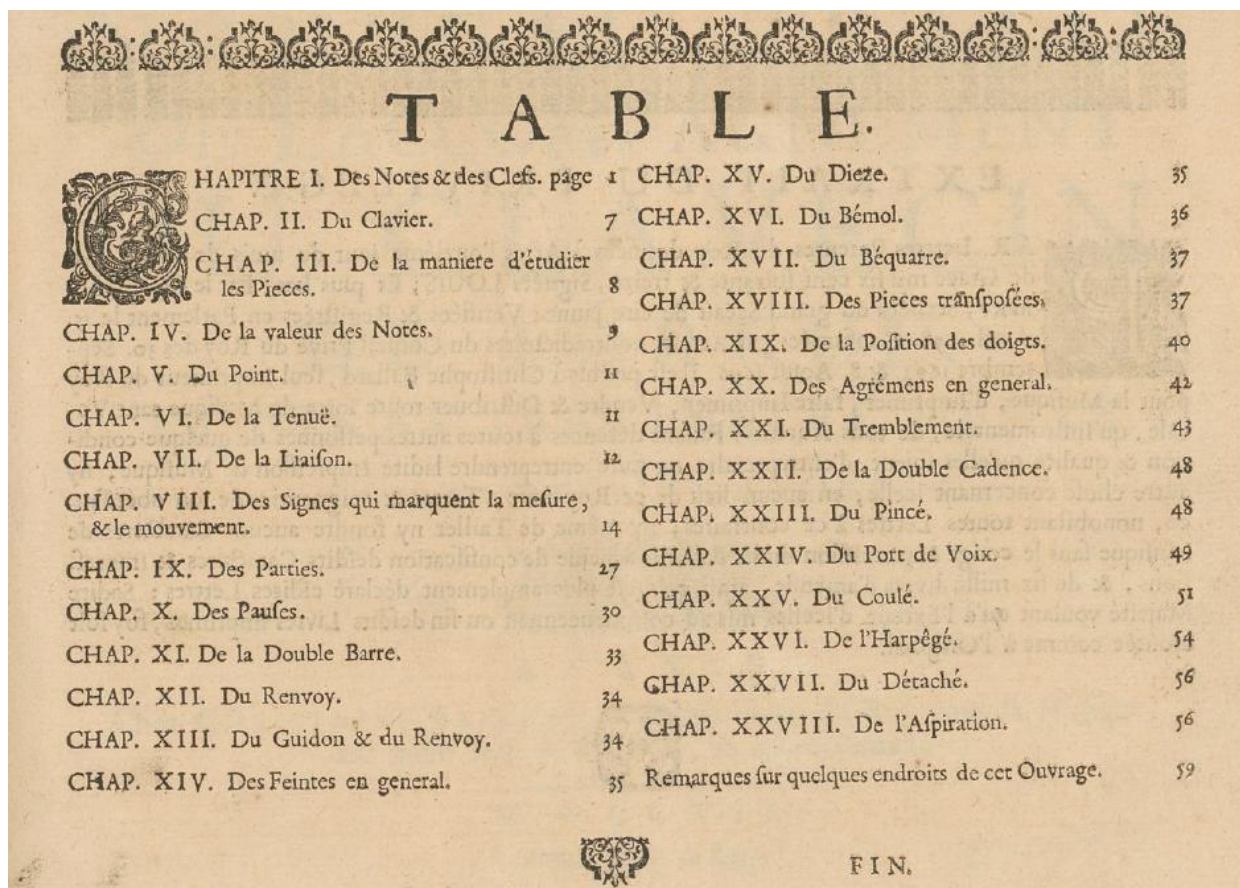
While Couperin did not deny the importance of musical notation and theory in the teaching of the harpsichord, he nevertheless assumed that it would be progressively expounded by the music master during harpsichord lessons:


Il est bon que ceux qui instruisent les jeunes gens leurs insinüent insensiblement la connoissance des intervalles, des modes; de leurs cadences, tant parfaites, qu'imparfaites; des accords, des suppositions.<sup>13</sup>


(It is desirable that those who instruct young people should instil into them gradually a knowledge of intervals, keys, perfect and imperfect cadences, chords and suppositions.)

The uniqueness of Couperin's *L'art de toucher le clavecin* (a much shorter book than Saint Lambert's *Principes*) lies in the fact that it focuses on quite a different subject: how to play

well, especially his own music. Couperin's preface underlines how closely this volume is linked to his aesthetics: 'ces principes sont absolument nécessaires pour parvenir à bien exécuter mes Pièces' ('these principles are absolutely necessary in order to perform my pieces well'). Such principles included the techniques for a legato touch particularly suited to his keyboard compositions. Couperin's emphasis on his own music is reinforced by the inclusion of eight previously unpublished preludes and an allemande, with performance indications, ornaments and fingerings, as well as fingered extracts from the first book of *Pièces de clavecin*.<sup>14</sup> Saint Lambert's *Principes*, by contrast, provides a more general account of the practices of the principal composers who published works in the later 17th century, particularly d'Anglebert, Nivers, Chambonnières and Lebègue.<sup>15</sup>



T A B L E.		
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 FIN.

Illus.2. Saint Lambert, *Les principes du clavecin* (Paris, 1702), table of contents (Bibliothèque de Genève, lb 1383 (1), <https://doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-71359>)

By choosing the title *L'art de...*, Couperin indicated that his book referred to more practical questions than denoted by such terms as 'treatise' or 'principles'.<sup>16</sup> The 1694 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* defined the word 'art' as 'the method of doing something or other well'.<sup>17</sup> In fact, such a style of title, though new to a harpsichord method, was relatively common in other areas. Among the books published in Paris in the early 18th century, there are hundreds entitled *L'art de...* on all kinds of subjects. Those issued during the decade in which *L'art de toucher le clavecin* appeared include books on preaching (*L'art de la prédication*),<sup>18</sup> marital fidelity (*L'art de rendre les femmes fidèles*),<sup>19</sup> military arts (*Observations sur l'art de faire la guerre*),<sup>20</sup> rhetoric (*La rhétorique, ou L'art de parler*),<sup>21</sup> dance (*Chorégraphie, ou L'art de décrire la dance par caractères, figures et signes démonstratifs*),<sup>22</sup> philosophy (*La logique ou L'art de penser*),<sup>23</sup> architecture (*Nouveau traité de toute*

*l'architecture, ou L'art de bâtir*),<sup>24</sup> boredom (*L'art de ne point s'ennuyer*)<sup>25</sup> and dyeing (*Le teinturier parfait, ou L'art de teindre les soies, laines, fils, chapeaux*).<sup>26</sup>

Although the title *L'art de...* was more unusual in the domain of music, it was not new. Beginning with the publication of Jean Millet's *La belle méthode ou L'art de bien chanter* in 1666, several musicians chose this style of title for their works.

Millet's title was echoed in part by Bertrand de Bacilly's *Remarques curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter* (Paris, 1668; republished 1671, 1679). The formula is also found in Danoville's *L'art de toucher le dessus et basse de viole, contenant tout ce qu'il y a de nécessaire, d'utile, & de curieux dans cette science* (Paris, 1687) and Guillaume Gabriel Nivers's *Motets à voix seule, accompagnée de la basse continue ... Avec l'art d'accompagner sur la basse continue, pour l'orgue et le clavecin* (Paris, 1689). Finally it is found in the brief guide to transposition published anonymously in 1711, *L'art de transposer toute sorte de musique, sans être obligé de conoître le ton ni le mode*.

To this extent, then, Couperin's use of the expression *L'art de ...* was in line with current fashion. Moreover the number of instrumental methods had been multiplying in recent years, hand in hand with the development of amateur music-making, which now occupied a significant place among the fashionable activities in the salons of polite society; all high-quality education in France around 1700 included learning a musical instrument as an essential accessory of good taste and the pleasures of life.<sup>27</sup> Since 1687 two methods for the viol had circulated in France, respectively by Danoville and Jean Rousseau.<sup>28</sup> During the early 18th century, in addition to Saint Lambert's harpsichord treatise, further methods appeared, for oboe (Freillon-Poncein, 1700),<sup>29</sup> flute (Hotteterre, 1707)<sup>30</sup> and violin (Montclair, 1711).<sup>31</sup> But the musical discipline most represented by published pedagogical literature in France was 'accompagnement' (thoroughbass).<sup>32</sup> Fleury's tutor book of 1660 was followed by 14 methods on continuo playing, some as autonomous volumes, others integrated into collections of pieces.<sup>33</sup>

The contents of instrumental methods from the early 18th century are typified by the *Principes de la flute traversière ... de la flute à bec ... et du hautbois* (1707) by one of François Couperin's court colleagues, Jacques Hotteterre le Romain. Here, the first two chapters discuss aspects to the playing position; chapters III-VII provide detailed fingerings of notes and trills, while chapters VIII and IX deal with further ornaments. Like Couperin, Hotteterre chose not to discuss aspects of notation, since in his view 'these are things that belong to a treatise on music rather than to a treatise on the flute'.<sup>34</sup> Unlike Couperin, however, his book includes no pieces of music. He nevertheless indicates that these could be bought at his house and that he planned to publish some suites of flute pieces.

The plan announced by Couperin at the start of *L'art de toucher* sets out a similar range of topics to those found in Hotteterre's volume:

La position du corps, celle des mains, les agrémens qui servent au jeu, de petits exercices préliminaires, et essentiels, pour parvenir à bien joüer, quelques remarques sur la manière de bien doigter ; relatives à beaucoup d'endroits de mes deux livres de Pièces, huit préludes diversifiés, proportionnés au progrès que je suppose qu'on doit faire ; dont les doigts sont chiffrés ; et que j'ai entremêlés d'observations pour executer avec goust, sont les parties de cette ouvrage.<sup>35</sup>

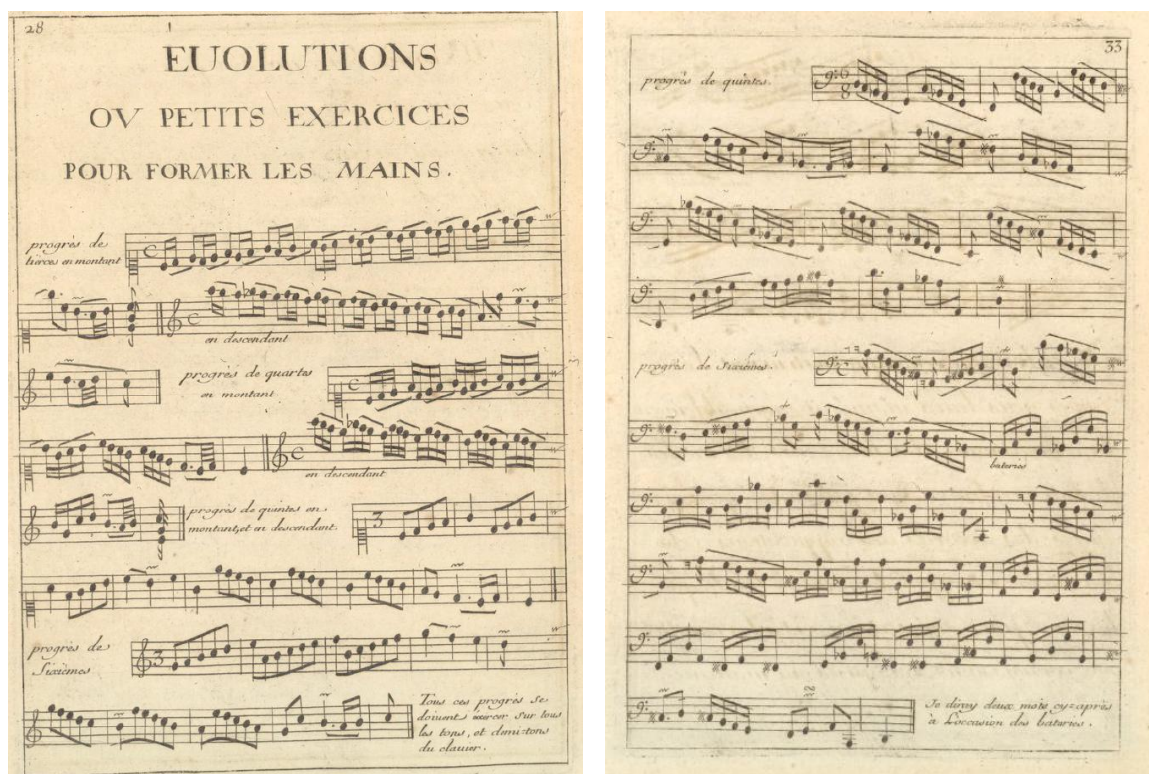
(The position of the body and that of the hands; the ornament signs used in playing; little preliminary exercises, essential to attain good execution; some remarks on good fingering applicable to many passages in my two books of [harpsichord] pieces; eight varied preludes arranged according to the progress I believe should be possible and for which fingering is provided; interspersed with observations on how to play them with taste: these are the sections of this book.)

Couperin pointed out that the preludes are ‘interspersed with observations’, a remark that could apply to the whole treatise, so numerous are the digressions and the constant oscillation between topics. This apparently haphazard nature is reinforced by the lack of a table of contents, an omission probably attributable to the publisher. Whereas the treatises by Saint Lambert and Hotteterre had been published by the Ballard family, who had long-established skill in issuing theoretical books organized into chapters listed in tables of contents, Couperin’s publisher Foucault (and his young engraver, Hue) lacked such experience.

Above all, the language and digressive structure in *L’art de toucher le clavecin* evoke a teacher improvising a lesson. *L’art de toucher* has a more human and less theoretical touch than Saint Lambert’s *Principes*, as the composer imparts his idiosyncratic advice to other harpsichord teachers and music lovers.

### ‘Little exercises to form the hands’

Among the most original and valuable pages of *L’art de toucher le clavecin* are the ‘évolutions’ or ‘little exercises to form the hands’<sup>36</sup> of the kind that a harpsichord teacher could get his pupils to practise. There is nothing of this sort in Saint Lambert: indeed, these ‘évolutions’ appear to constitute the earliest published teaching exercises in the history of French harpsichord playing. The exercises or ‘progrès’ (see illus.3) comprise sequences made up of scale-fragments organized in increasing numbers of notes, ascending and descending – each figure spanning the interval of a 3rd, then the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th and octave.



Illus.3. Couperin, *L’art de toucher le clavecin* (Paris, 1717): (a) p.28; (b) p.33  
(F-Pn, RES VM8 S-1)

Couperin explained the use of these exercises to train the hands:

Séparément des agrémens usités, comme les tremblemens, pincés, ports-de-voix &c., j'ay toujours fait faire à mes élèves de petites évolutions des doigts ... à commencer par les plus simples, et sur les tons les plus naturels; et insensiblement je les ay menés jusqu'aux plus Légers, et aux plus transposés; Ces petits Exercices qu'on ne sçauroit trop multiplier, sont autant de matéreaux tout prêts à mettre en place; et qui peuvent servir dans beaucoup d'occasions.<sup>37</sup>

(besides the ornaments in general use, such as *tremblemens*, *pincés*, *ports-de-voix*, &c, I have always given my pupils little finger-exercises to play [...], beginning with the simplest, and on the most natural intervals, and gradually leading them to the quickest and to those most transposed. These little exercises, which cannot be too varied or too multiplied, are so much ready-made material that can be employed on many occasions.)

After teaching the children the names of the notes on the keyboard (p.13), Couperin suggested that each hand should practise these 'progrès' in increasing intervals 'on all the tones and semitones of the keyboard' (p.28), and he then added other 'progrès' in use in the harpsichord repertoire of his time: parallel thirds, *tremblemens* and *batteries* (rapid figures).



As well as allowing pupils to explore the different keys on the keyboard, these successive exercises familiarized them with intervals, different time signatures and rhythmic values, and even cadences (the 'progrès de septièmes' for the left hand, p.34, includes perfect and imperfect cadences). After practising these exercises and imprinting them in their memories and in their fingers, students could progress to the harpsichord pieces.

In methodically exploring ever widening intervals, these 'évolutions' are reminiscent of the melodic organisation of the *exercitia vocum* habitually used in the learning of plainchant. To memorise the principal intervals, teachers would make their pupils sing sequences that broke down each interval by successive degrees, first in ascending then in descending motion (see illus.4). As an organist, François Couperin was of course familiar with plainchant. He must have remembered this type of vocal exercise, which he would have practised as a child, since the teaching at parish schools included the singing of chant.<sup>38</sup>


Another possible pedagogical model of the 'évolutions' can be found in methods of accompaniment published since 1600. These usually include practical exercises organized according to increasing intervals, particularly to teach how to select chords above an unfigured bass. Before the emergence of the 'rule of the octave' popularised by Campion in the 18th century,<sup>39</sup> one of the main tools for learning continuo accompaniment was the *tabula naturalis*, which prescribed the choice of chords for all possible movements of the bass. Thus, in Nivers's *L'Art d'accompagner sur la basse continue pour l'orgue & le clavecin*, sequences are shown for the ascending and descending major and minor second ('pour monter et descendre d'un degré'), then two consecutive tones, ascending and descending ('monter et descendre de deux tons') (C-D-E), ascending and descending thirds ('monter et descendre par intervalles de tierce'), then fourths, fifths and scales, in various modes.<sup>40</sup>

du Plein-Chant. 11

intervale en montant, on fasse une Quarte juste, c'est à dire qui ait les deux tons & demy ; Et que si l'on descend on fasse une Quinte juste, c'est à dire trois tons & demy.

Vous verrez dans les Exemples suivans une marque à la fin presque de toutes les ban les faite de cette sorte  ou . On appelle cette marque *Guidon*, par ce qu'on la met à la fin de chaque bande, quand le répons n'est pas achevé, pour denoter quelle est la note qui commence la ligne suivante.

TIERCES.



ut,

14 Methode



QUINTES.



re,

Illus.4. *Trois methodes faciles pour apprendre le plein-chant* (Lyon, 1697; 1st edn, 1689): (a) p.11; (b) p.14 (F-Pa, 8-S-14440)

The step-by-step approach taken in Couperin's 'évolutions' reproduces the technique of dividing a task into small successive stages that characterized the teaching in French schools. In learning plainsong, students first learned to read the notes using solmization syllables (*ut, re, mi...*), then memorized the intervals they sang to these same syllables, before adding words to the notes, and finally addressing the chants of the Office. Xavier Bisaro has highlighted the similarities between methods for the teaching of plainsong and of reading in 17th- and 18th-century France.<sup>41</sup> In ABC books (*alphabets*), the children first learned the letters of the alphabet, then combined these into syllables of two or three letters, then into words and finally sentences.<sup>42</sup> Reading the syllables aloud for several weeks helped the child to read an entire text. Similarly, after a pupil learned the names of the notes on the keyboard, Couperin's exercises would methodically train the hand and ear in the most common musical motifs in the current harpsichord repertoire and especially in the composer's own music---ornaments, varied rhythms, *batteries*, arpeggios and cadences---thereby providing 'much ready-made material' that would take on its full meaning when integrated into complete compositions.

## Musical performance and rhetoric

In his preface to *L'art de toucher*, Couperin established a parallel between good playing (musical *actio*) and declamation. 'Just as there is a great distance between grammar and rhetoric, so too there is an immense distance between notation and fine playing'. ('Comme il y a une grande distance de la Grammaire, à la Déclamation; il y en a aussi une infinie entre la Tablature, et la façon de bien-jouer.'). Later, in his *Troisième livre* (1722), he introduces the comma sign to mark the end of harmonic phrases. A harpsichordist, like an orator, should be sensitive to the period and punctuation: 'it is the difference between those who read without a break and those who stop at full stops and commas' ('c'est la différence de ceux qui lisent de suite avec ceux qui s'arrêtent aux points, et aux virgules', preface).

Continuing the parallels between music and language, in *L'Art de toucher*, Couperin drew an analogy between the French habit of imprecise writing and what he perceives as the imprecise notation of music. David Chung has shown that the composer echoed concerns shared by linguists and harpsichordists of the Grand Siècle, Saint Lambert among them.<sup>43</sup> For example, Couperin shared certain preoccupations with his contemporary Jean-Léonor le Gallois de Grimarest, author of a treatise on declamation published in 1707.<sup>44</sup> The two writers reveal a common desire for expressive discourse and a regret that 'notation', whether it be the rhythmic notation in music or the 'punctuation' of spoken language, was too imprecise to express the whole gamut of feelings. 'In my view,' wrote Couperin, 'there are defects in our way of notating music that correspond to the way we write our language. The fact is, we write things differently from how we execute them.'<sup>45</sup> In this way he justified his use of adverbs in the headings of his pieces: 'all our violin airs, our harpsichord and viol pieces, etc., denote and seem to wish to express some feeling. Thus, having devised no symbols or characters to communicate our specific ideas, we try to remedy this by indicating at the start of our pieces an approximation of the idea we wish to convey, by means of such words as 'tenderly', 'quickly', etc.'<sup>46</sup> Compare this with Grimarest's wish to complement the range of standard marks of punctuation with 'marks indicating commands, irony, contempt, rage, love, hatred, joy and pain [to help the reader convey] the meaning that an author intended in his work'.<sup>47</sup>

## Codes of civility

Little is known about Couperin's education: given his mother's financial situation after his father's death when François was only eleven years old, this was probably limited to an essentially musical training.<sup>48</sup> That would explain the woolly organization of his treatise, as well as its idiosyncratic use of French, which some commentators have described as clumsy.<sup>49</sup> But if he did not study at college, Couperin nevertheless taught pupils who had received a more thorough, aristocratic education.<sup>50</sup> He also spent part of his time each year at court. The experience of mixing with courtiers may well have filled gaps in his intellectual education: the posthumous inventory of his estate reveals a substantial library, including history books and classical literature, along with works by 17th-century authors (Molière, Madame de La Fayette, Racine, Boileau, La Bruyère, Fénelon) and contemporary works by Montesquieu, Voltaire and Lesage.<sup>51</sup>

From his attendance at court Couperin would have absorbed not only the mores of a man of breeding but also the norms of civility pertaining to courtly life. The notion of civility was defined by Antoine de Courtin's *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnestes gens*, published in 1671 and reissued throughout the 18th century.<sup>52</sup> As it explained: 'Civility [...] is nothing but the Modesty and *Decorum* that every Man ought to observe in his Words and Actions'.<sup>53</sup> The book goes on to define civilised behaviour in all circumstances of social life: entry into the house of a grandee, the appropriate behaviour to observe at the door or

in the antechambers, the manner of speech, how to hold the hands and the gloves, how to express an opinion, how to sit, get up from one's seat, curtsy, eat decently, comport oneself in a church, in a garden, in gaming, at a ball, and so on.

In *L'art de toucher le clavecin*, Couperin likewise displayed the ideal of *politesse* and refinement which governed polite society ('les honnêtes gens'). During the Grand Siècle, French concepts of *politesse* were intimately connected to musical taste and criticism.<sup>54</sup> They also permeate Couperin's discourse concerning 'bien-jouer', and are evident in his advice on how the player's posture must be characterized by 'la bonne-grace':

Pour être assis d'une bonne hauteur, il faut que le dessous des coudes, des poignets; et des doigts soit de niveau: ainsy on doit prendre une chaise qui s'accorde a cette regle.

On doit mettre quelque chose de plus, ou de moins hault sous les pieds des jeunes personnes, a mesure qu'elles croissent: afin que leurs pieds n'étant point en l'air, puissent soutenir le corps dans un juste équilibre.

La distance a la quelle une personne formée doit être du clavier est a peu près de neuf pouces, a prendre de la ceinture; et moindre a proportion pour les jeunes personnes.

Le milieu du corps, et celui du clavier doivent se raporter.

On doit tourner, un tant soit peu le corps sur la droite étant au clavecin: ne point avoir les genoux trop serrés; et tenir ses pieds vis-a vis l'un de l'autre; mais surtout le piéd droit bien en dehors.

À l'égard des grimaces du visage on peut s'en corriger soy-même en mettant un miroir sur le pupitre de l'épinette, ou du clavecin.

[...]

Il est mieux, et plus séant de ne point marquer la mesure de la teste, du corps, ny des pieds. il faut avoir un air aisé a son clavecin: sans fixer trop la vüe sur quelque objet, ny l'avoir trop vague: enfin regarder la compagnie, s'il s'en trouve, comme sy on n'étoit pas occupé d'ailleurs.<sup>55</sup>

(To sit at a suitable height, it is necessary that the underside of the elbows, wrists and fingers should be level: thus, a chair must be chosen that allows this rule to be observed. It will be necessary to place some additional support under the feet of young people, varying in height as they grow, so that their feet, without dangling in the air, can support the body in a proper balance.

The distance from the keyboard at which a trained person should be seated is about nine *pouces* (c.243 mm.),<sup>56</sup> to be measured from the waist, and proportionately less for young people.

The centre of the body and that of the keyboard must correspond.

In sitting at the harpsichord one must turn the body slightly to the right: do not have the knees too close together; and keep one's feet alongside one another, but with the right foot, especially, well outside.

With regard to facial grimaces, one can correct oneself by placing a mirror on the music desk of the spinet or harpsichord.

[...]

It is better and more seemly not to beat time with the head, the body or feet. One should adopt an easy demeanour at the harpsichord, not looking too fixedly at a single object, nor appearing too vague: in short, look at the assembled company, if there be any, as if you are not otherwise occupied.)

Couperin here described a seating position that is both practical and beautiful. He formulated the 'right balance' for the musician's body more in aesthetic and visual terms than in relation to performance, with a concern for upright posture, alignment and, especially, 'good

grace'. His recommendation of a mirror as an educational tool shows that, for him, playing the harpsichord was as much about being seen as being heard. The body must be held straight, avoiding any thoughtless gesture. Elbows, forearms, wrists, fingers and keyboard should be perfectly aligned. The turning of the shoulder to 'the assembled company' is the result of careful consideration and reminds us that the performance of music is also a social act.

Similar advice on graceful postures for performers can be found in other treatises including Hotteterre's flute manual. Hotteterre advised that flautists should 'join as much as possible good grace with skill' ('de joinder autant qu'il est possible la bonne grace à l'habileté'), recommending the following posture:

Soit que l'on jouë debout ou assis, il faut tenir le Corps droit, la Tête plus haute que basse, un peu tournée vers l'Epaule gauche, les Mains hautes sans lever les Coudes ni les Epaules, le Poignet gauche plié en dedans, & le Bras gauche proche du Corps.

Si l'on est debout, il faut être bien campé sur ses jambes, le Pied gauche avancé, le Corps posé sur la Hanche droite ; le tout sans aucune contrainte. On doit sur tout observer de ne faire aucun mouvement du Corps ni de la Tête, comme plusieurs font en battant la mesure. Cette attitude étant bien prise, est fort gracieuse, & ne prévient pas moins les yeux, que le son de l'Instrument flâte agréablement l'oreille.<sup>57</sup>

(Whether you are standing or sitting, you must hold the body straight, the head higher rather than lower, slightly turned towards the left shoulder, the hands held high without raising the elbows or the shoulders, the left wrist bent inwards, and the left arm close to the body.

If you are seated, you must be well balanced on your legs, the left foot forward, the body resting on the right hip, all without strain. Above all, one must refrain from making any movement of the body or the head, as many people do by beating time. This attitude, when well adopted, is very graceful and flatters the eyes no less than the sound of the instrument agreeably flatters the ear.)

The descriptions of the posture of these well-balanced and graceful musicians are reminiscent of the noble corporal paradigm called 'bon air' or 'bonne grâce' developed at the court of Louis XIV.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary books on civility or etiquette advocated a mastery of posture and depicted a civilized body, dominated by moderation and invisible self-control – what Couperin calls *juste équilibre* – in which any kind of excess is avoided. Indeed, Couperin's description of the seating position at the harpsichord, echoes the recommendations in Courtin's treatise on civility, notably the chapter on 'How to regulate our Discourse in Company', which advised: 'You must be circumspect likewise in your Motion, not stamping too loud upon the Floor [...]; nor keeping time with your Head or Hands; but advancing sedately and discreetly, without staring, or turning your Head either one way or other'.<sup>59</sup>

Courtin's treatise also includes a chapter entitled 'If we have a faculty in singing, playing upon the Musick, &c. how we are to demean our selves' (p.111), in which he warns against the ridiculous affectation that may befall the musician: 'You must have a care of seeming to applaud your self by any affected or fantastical Gesture, nor any Expression that may signifie how much you are delighted your self' (p.112). In the tradition of Erasmian civility, posturing on the part of the instrumentalist would convey a lack of mastery or a misplaced desire to show off. Conversely, a refined and pleasant exterior – one criterion of belonging to this social elite – reflected the interior of a virtuous person.

The importance of the player's position described by Couperin, with the body turned slightly to the right, the knees not too close together and 'the right foot well outside', is evident in iconography. It was adopted by ladies of quality portrayed at the harpsichord<sup>60</sup>, as in the portrait of the Franqueville family (illus.1 above) by François de Troy (1711) and in the

engraving *Dame de cour jouant du clavecin* (illus.5, where the instrument is actually a rectangular spinet.)



Illus.5. *Dame de cour jouant du clavecin*, engraving published by Gérard II Jollain (?1688)  
(F-Pn, VM PHOT MIRI 14 (309))

Couperin's recommendations for an elegant position and 'graceful air' were also similar to the ideals espoused by dancing masters, whom were regularly hired by genteel families to teach their children the postures required by decorum. Pierre Rameau's *Le maître à danser*, a 'very useful work [...] for decent and polite people, and which gives them rules for walking well, greeting and bowing or curtsying suitable in all kinds of company',<sup>61</sup> recommends an elegant 'Manner of disposing the Body', and the avoidance of appearing uncomfortable, stiff or affected: 'a just Carriage requiring nothing more than a natural, free, and easy Air, which is to be only gained by Dancing.'<sup>62</sup> This 'easy Air' can be seen in the playing technique championed by Couperin, for whom 'beautiful execution [depends] much more on flexibility and the great freedom of the fingers than on the strength'.<sup>63</sup> As he said in his first book of harpsichord pieces, 'vigorous hands capable of playing the fastest and lightest passage are not always equally successful in tender and expressive pieces'.<sup>64</sup>

Thus 'good grace' was a crucial component of the aesthetic preferences of Couperin, who preferred music that touched him to the brilliance of the 'sonades' appreciated by certain

music lovers of the time, and whose excessive popularity he himself regretted.<sup>65</sup> Later in the century under Italian and Germanic influences, the renewal of French keyboard style and the development of new kinds of virtuosity would go hand in hand with a gradual transformation of the form and content of keyboard methods: a more important place was given to exercises designed to train vigorous, rapid and strong hands. This may be compared to the development in the second half of the 18th century of physical education, theorized as an art of developing the beautiful nature of the human body.<sup>66</sup>

As a reference work for those interested in French keyboard music, but also as a highly personal viewpoint on harpsichord playing at the start of the 18th century, François Couperin's *L'art de toucher le clavecin* is not merely the spontaneous expression of a celebrated musician: it is also a book situated within several publishing traditions, including textbooks, treatises on music, and conduct books describing the norms of civility and of dancing. In this, it illustrates various facets of Couperin's career – the church musician, harpsichordist and teacher who frequented Parisian salons and patricians at court, and who promoted a new style of harpsichord playing while at the same time espousing a propriety incorporating the values of Erasmian civility and refinement.

*Translation: Graham Sadler*

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<sup>1</sup> *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin. Par Monsieur Couperin. Organiste du Roy, &c. Dedié A Sa Majesté* (Paris: author, Foucaut, 1716).

<sup>2</sup> *L'Art De toucher le Clavecin. Par Monsieur Couperin. Organiste du Roy, &c. Dedié A Sa Majesté* (Paris: author, Boivin, Le Clerc, 1717). Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from this second edition.

<sup>3</sup> This treatise is abundantly cited, for instance, in the advice on interpretation of 17th- and 18th-century keyboard works in A. Méreaux, 'Tablettes du pianiste et du chanteur: Les clavecinistes de 1637 à 1790', *Le Ménestrel*, xxx/1 (7 December 1862) – xxxi/49 (6 November 1864).

<sup>4</sup> L. Boulay, 'En relisant *L'art de toucher le clavecin*', in *Mélanges François Couperin, publiés à l'occasion du tricentenaire de sa naissance 1668-1968* (Paris, 1968), pp.115-18.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kirkpatrick, 'On re-reading Couperin's *L'art de toucher le clavecin*', *Early Music*, iv/1 (1976), pp.3-11.

<sup>6</sup> D. Moroney, 'Couperin et les contradicteurs: la révision de *L'art de toucher le clavecin*', in *François Couperin, nouveaux regards* (Paris, 1998), pp.163-86.

<sup>7</sup> O. Baumont, 'En relisant *L'art de toucher le clavecin*', *Clavecin en France*, December 2004: <https://www.clavecin-en-france.org/spip.php?article56>.

<sup>8</sup> N. Spieth, 'Le toucher du clavecin à la lecture de François Couperin, Saint Lambert et Rameau', *Clavecin en France*: <https://www.clavecin-en-france.org/spip.php?article111>. See also P. Montan, *L'art de toucher le clavecin de François Couperin: autour du doigter* (Bern, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Couperin 1717, Préface.

<sup>10</sup> D. Moroney, 'Couperin, Marpurg and Roeser: a Germanic Art de toucher le clavecin, or a French Wahre Art?', in *The keyboard in Baroque Europe*, ed. C. Hogwood (Cambridge, 2003), pp.111–30, at p.115.

<sup>11</sup> Chapters II and III, despite titles that seem unrelated to musical notation, focus on the relationship between the notes in the score and their position on the keyboard.

<sup>12</sup> For an English translation and commentary, see R. Harris-Warrick (trans.), *Principles of the Harpsichord by Saint Lambert* (Cambridge, 1984), Introduction.

<sup>13</sup> Couperin 1717, p.34.

<sup>14</sup> *Pièces de clavecin composées par Monsieur Couperin ... Premier livre* (Paris, 1713).

<sup>15</sup> Harris-Warrick (trans.), *Principles of the harpsichord by Saint Lambert*.

- 16 The significance of the term 'L'art' was briefly noted by Moroney, 'Couperin, Marpurg and Roeser', p.116.
- 17 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 1694: 'la methode de bien faire quelque chose que ce soit'.
- 18 J. Gaichies, *L'art de la prédication, ou Maximes sur le ministère de la chaire* (Paris, 1712).
- 19 M\*\*\*, *L'art de rendre les femmes fidèles* (Paris, 1713).
- 20 Vaultier, *Observations sur l'art de faire la guerre* (Paris, 1714).
- 21 B. Lamy, *La rhétorique, ou L'art de parler* (Paris, 1715), 4th edn.
- 22 R. A. Feuillet, *Chorégraphie, ou L'art de décrire la danse par caractères, figures et signes démonstratifs* (Paris, reed.1713).
- 23 A. Arnauld and P. Nicole, *La logique ou L'art de penser* (Paris, 6th edn, 1714).
- 24 J.-L. de Cordemoy, *Nouveau traité de toute l'architecture, ou L'art de bâtir* (Paris, 1714).
- 25 A.-F. Boureau-Deslandes, *L'art de ne point s'ennuyer* (Paris, 1715).
- 26 C. Jombert, *Le teinturier parfait, ou L'art de teindre les soies, laines, fils, chapeaux* (Paris, 1716).
- 27 A. Ausoni, 'À la cour et à la ville: art de plaire, musique et mode', in *Regards sur la musique au temps de Louis XIV*, ed. J. Duron (Wavre, 2007), pp.1-23.
- 28 Danoville, *L'art de toucher le dessus et basse de viole* (Paris, 1687); J. Rousseau, *Traité de la viole* (Paris, 1687).
- 29 J.-P. Freillon-Poncein, *La véritable manière d'apprendre à jouer en perfection du hautbois, de la flûte et du flageolet* (Paris, 1700).
- 30 J.-M. Hotteterre-Le-Romain, *Principes de la flûte traversière* (Paris, 1707).
- 31 M. Pignolet de Montclair, *Méthode facile pour apprendre à jouer du violon* (Paris, 1711).
- 32 See R. Zappulla, *Figured Bass Accompaniment in France*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2000.
- 33 Most of these methods, by Fleury, Bartolotti, Corbetta, Carre, Grenerin, Perrine, Nivers, d'Anglebert, Delair, Derozier, Boyvin and Saint Lambert, are reproduced in facsimile in volume 1 of the series *Méthodes & Traités. Basse continue. France 1600-1800*, ed. J. Saint-Arroman (Courlay, 2006).
- 34 Jacques-Martin Hotteterre-Le-Romain, *Principes de la flute traversiere ou flute d'Allemagne. De la flute a bec, ou flute douce, et du haut-bois, divisez par traites* (Paris, 1707), preface: 'ce sont des choses qui appartiennent plutôt à un Traité de Musique, qu'à un Traité de Flute'.
- 35 Couperin 1717, p.1.
- 36 Couperin 1717, pp.28-34.
- 37 Couperin 1717, pp.8-9.
- 38 See X. Bisaro, 'Singing the Community: Plainchant in Early Modern "petites écoles"', *Listening to Early Modern Catholicism*, ed. D. Filippi and M. J. Noone (Leiden, 2017), pp.94-111.
- 39 F. Champion, *Traité d'accompagnement et de composition, selon la règle des octaves de musique* (Paris, 1716).
- 40 G.-G. Nivers, 'L'Art d'accompagner sur la basse continue pour l'orgue & le clavecin', included in *Motets à voix seule* (Paris, 1689), pp.149-68. See also D. Delair, *Traité d'accompagnement pour le théorbe et le clavecin* (Paris, 1690): 'Regles pour les Intervalles', [n.p.], and the example 'pour monter et descendre par tous les intervalles' in the brief method by d'Anglebert, 'Principes de l'accompagnement', in *Pièces de clavecin avec la manière de les jouer* (Paris, 1689), p.28.
- 41 X. Bisaro, 'Une Tradition en chantier: les méthodes de plain-chant "nouvelles et faciles" sous l'Ancien Régime', *Acta musicologica*, 87/1 (2015), pp.1-29. See also: <https://www.cantus-scholarum.univ-tours.fr/>.
- 42 M. Sonnet, 'La lecture dans les petites écoles', *Dix-huitième Siècle*, 18 (1986), pp.33-43.
- 43 D. Chung, 'Revisiting "le bon goût": observations on the irregularities and inconsistencies in French harpsichord music. 1650-1730', *Music & Letters*, 92/2 (May 2011), pp.183-201.
- 44 Jean-Léonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, *Traité du récitatif. Dans la Lecture, Dans l'Action Publique, Dans la Declamation, Et dans le Chant* (Paris, 1707).
- 45 Couperin 1717, p.39. 'Il y a selon moy dans notre facon d'écrire la musique, des deffauts qui se raportent à la manière d'écrire notre langue. C'est que nous écrivons différemment de ce que nous exècutons.'
- 46 Couperin 1717, pp.40-1: 'tous nos airs de violons, nos Pièces de clavecin, de violes &c. désignent, Et semblent vouloir exprimer quelque sentiment. Ainsi, n'ayant point imaginés de signes, ou caractères pour communiquer nos idées particulières, nous tâchons d'y remédier en marquant au commencement de nos pièces par quelques mots, comme, Tendrement, Vivement &c.'
- 47 Grimarest 1707, pp.47-8: 'des Points de commandement; d'ironie; de mépris; d'emportement; d'amour, & de haine; de joie, & de douleur [afin d'aider le lecteur à donner à sa prononciation] le sens qu'un Auteur auroit mis dans son ouvrage.'

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<sup>48</sup> M. Benoît, 'La vie de François Couperin', in *François Couperin (1668-1733)*, ed. C. Cessac (Versailles, 2000), pp.19-44 (especially pp.21-2).

<sup>49</sup> In the preface to his *Troisième livre de pièces de clavecin*, Couperin recognized some clumsiness of expression: 'Je demande grâce à Messieurs les Puristes et Grammairiens sur le stile de mes Préfaces'.

<sup>50</sup> In the preface to his first book of *Pièces de clavecin*, Couperin noted that 'il y a vingt ans que j'ay l'honneur d'estre au Roy et d'enseigner presqu'en même temps à Monseigneur le Dauphin Duc de Bourgogne et à six Princes ou Princesses de la Maison Royale'. For fuller details concerning Couperin's pupils, see Denis Herlin's informative preface in volume 1 of his complete edition of the *Pièces de clavecin de François Couperin* (Kassel, 2016).

<sup>51</sup> Couperin's *inventaire après décès* is reproduced in M. Antoine, 'Autour de François Couperin', *Revue de musicologie*, 34, n° 103/104 (December 1952), pp.109-27.

<sup>52</sup> For an edition contemporary with François Couperin, see *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnestes gens. Nouvelle édition* (Paris, 1702). English quotations in the present article are taken from a contemporary translation, *The Rules of Civility; or, the Maxims of Genteel Behaviour, As they are practis'd and observed by Persons of Quality, upon several Occasions* (London, 1703).

<sup>53</sup> *The Rules of Civility*, p.1.

<sup>54</sup> See D. Fader, 'The Honnête homme as Music Critic: Taste, Rhetoric, and Politesse in the 17th-Century French Reception of Italian Music', *The Journal of Musicology*, 20/1 (2003), pp.3-44; L. Naudeix, *La Première Querelle de la musique italienne 1702-1706* (Paris, 2018), introduction.

<sup>55</sup> Couperin 1717, pp. 3-6.

<sup>56</sup> The French 'pouce' measured 27.0 mm.

<sup>57</sup> Hotteterre, *Principes de la flute traversiere*, pp.1–2.

<sup>58</sup> See M. Bouffard-Veilleux, *Le bon air et la bonne grâce. Attitudes et gestes de la figure noble dans l'art européen (1661-1789)*, PhD, université de Montréal, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> *The Rules of Civility*, p.20.

<sup>60</sup> See F. Gétreau and D. Herlin, 'Portraits de clavecins et de clavecinistes français', *Musiques-Images-Instruments: Revue française d'organologie et d'iconographie musicale*, 2 (1996), pp.89-114; 3 (1997), pp.64-88.

<sup>61</sup> Pierre Rameau, *Le Maître à danser. [...] Ouvrage très-utile non-seulement à la Jeunesse qui veut apprendre à bien danser, mais encore aux personnes honnêtes & polies, & qui leur donne des regles pour bien marcher, saluer & faire les reverences convenables dans toutes sorte compagnies* (Paris, 1725). English translation by J. Essex (London, 1728) as *The Dancing-Master or, The Art of Dancing explained*.

<sup>62</sup> Pierre Rameau, trans. J. Essex, *The Dancing-Master*, p.2.

<sup>63</sup> Couperin 1717, p.6: 'la belle execution [dépend] beaucoup plus de la souplesse, et de la grande liberté des doigts, que de la force'.

<sup>64</sup> F. Couperin, *Pièces de clavecin: premier livre* (Paris, 1713), preface: 'les mains vigoureuses, et capables d'exécuter ce qu'il y a de plus rapide, et de plus léger, ne sont pas toujours celles qui réussissent le mieux dans les pièces tendres et de sentiment'.

<sup>65</sup> Couperin 1717, pp.35-41.

<sup>66</sup> See M. Demeilliez, 'Jouer bien et de bonne grâce: le corps dans les méthodes de clavecin françaises du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', in *Le corps dans l'histoire et les histoires du corps (XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. M. Bouffard, J.-A. Perras, É. Wicky (Paris, 2013), pp.119-47; G. Vigarello, *Le Corps redressé: histoire d'un pouvoir pédagogique* (Paris, 2001), ch.2.