

## Reason and Time in the French Baroque: François Couperin's *Leçons de ténèbres pour le mercredi saint (1714)*

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**Abstract:** *The present paper aims to investigate the manner in which the structure of a certain musical discourse can suggest the superiority of reason above senses, as well as the static or flowing quality of time. In this sense, François Couperin's (1668-1733) Leçons de ténèbres pour le mercredi saint (1714) was analyzed, striving to observe the manner in which the composer approaches certain parameters of the musical discourse (rhythm and metre, tempo, dynamics, ornaments) in order to suggest the meaning of the sacred text and to induce the listener a certain feeling of withdrawal, the absorption of the senses that can eventually lead to the mystical union with the Divine, accomplished through reason. The paper strives to highlight the differences between the Italian and French Baroque, as reflected in the work of Couperin, who strove to accomplish in his compositions the union between the French and Italian styles and forms. The question that arises is whether music is capable to express the passive state of devotion and contemplation, despite its unfolding in time, and whether it is possible to conceive the musical discourse in a manner that refrains from the anticipation of its future evolutions?*

Key-words: *François Couperin, French Baroque, time, rhythm, stillness*

### 1. Introduction

As in the previous centuries, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries music remained many-hued, owing to stylistic diversity and the particular manner in which various nations conveyed their musical message using the means of Baroque music. French and Italian music suggest contrasting outlooks and

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temperaments (natures): the Italian artists seemed to be more extroverted and passionate, expressing their joys and sorrows directly and spontaneously, while the French strove to search for logical reasons before expressing their feelings in a refined and delicate manner. This led to the emergence of divergent mentalities, as may be observed in the differing ways in which artists and musicians expressed their feelings and ideas through art. Italian music appears more impetuous and theatrical, owing to the richness and originality of musical forms and bizarre elements. Italian composers sought to employ dissonances and sudden modulations as means of expression, while on the other hand, French music seemed to manifest as a reaction to this emotional outburst, its expression is refined, intellectual, and sophisticated, based on clear musical forms and offering precise rules regarding performance. Tunley considers that the term *Baroque* is scarcely appropriate when referring to French music composed before the second half of the seventeenth century, and then also is only partly applicable (Tunley 2004, 10).

François Couperin (1668-1733) composed during a time when French music gradually became more interested in and sought to assimilate certain features of Italian music, which would eventually lead to the transformation of the French tradition that had been influenced by the figure of Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687). Yet, despite the expansion of the Italian influence, eighteenth century French music preserved its particular features: impressive musical gestures were preferred to the intensity and brilliance of expression. Nonetheless, the entire discourse acquired a greater sense of movement. Couperin's contribution to the evolution of French music is based on the French tradition, inherited from his predecessors, but the composer aimed for a harmonious union of French and Italian styles and forms, expressing his belief that it was only through this union that music could be refined and brought to perfection (Tunley 2004, 9).

Suspension outside space and time is a feature which may be associated with French music, art, and architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Artworks are devised in a manner that leads the receiver of the artistic message to desire the merging into the present moment, becoming one with the work that inspired these emotions. This perception of timelessness is reflected in the construction and sound of the musical discourse: the composers create the illusion of a static discourse, with bland and simple harmonic support, urging the composer and performer to linger over every detail, refraining from the anticipation of future unfoldment (McClary 2012, 243). In a similar fashion, Couperin's sacred work, the

*Leçons de ténèbres pour le mercredi saint* (1714) suggests the depth of the spiritual experience induced by the music, the connection between reason and emotion that eventually leads to the absorption into the Divine, beyond time.

## **2. Jansenism and Quietism in the France of Louis XIV**

The musical works of a particular epoch may offer countless pieces of information with regards to the social, religious, or philosophical context. Analysing certain French compositions from the seventeenth century, McClary observes that these pieces seem to induce the listener a state which resembles absorption outside the present moment, the suspension of consciousness outside the linear time (McClary 2012, 242). This particularity of the musical art may be associated with the ideas promoted by such theological movements as Jansenism or Quietism. Despite the fact that these doctrines were not approved by King Louis XIV and were considered heresies by the Catholic Church, nonetheless it is necessary to emphasize the fact that ideas reflected within the musical discourse of the period need not correspond with the dissensions that manifested in the real world (McClary 2012, 255).

As maintained by the pessimistic theology of Jansenism, mankind could be saved from the original sin only through divine grace, while Quietism believed in the superiority of intellectual stillness and inner passivity. According to these concepts union with (or absorption into) the Divine, as well as the spiritual comprehension of ideas otherwise obscure to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and passivity. In line with these ideas, it is interesting to question whether the aim of the musical discourse is to reveal the meaning of each particular sound (passive state), or to anticipate through its construction the future directions of musical evolution (active state)? Despite the fact that music operates with and unfolds in time, is it possible for composers to devise their musical discourse in a manner which refrains from foreshadowing future unfoldings and prevent thoughts from expecting certain constructions?

## **3. *Tenebrae* in the rendition of François Couperin**

Known as *Couperin le Grand*, François Couperin (1668-1733) is acknowledged for his harpsichord music, as well as his chamber music (among these works well-

known are the *Les concerts royaux*, chamber music suites written for the court of Louis XIV), organ works, and sacred works. His melodies are highly ornamented, while the harmonic support proves to be complex, with frequent dialogues between the inner voices.

A series of three sacred vocal pieces, the *Leçons de ténèbres pour le mercredi saint* (1714), is remarkable for the manner in which the composer combines the subtle and linear French vocal style with the mysticism of the musical discourse, suggesting the act of contemplation that can eventually lead to the union with the Divine.

The *Tenebrae* (meaning *darkness* in Latin) is a religious service particular for Western Christianity, performed during the three days that precede Easter. As suggested by the name of the service, it implies the gradual extinction of light (candles). The content and structure of this service may differ in modern celebrations, including reading of the *Passion of Jesus*, for example. Couperin wrote his *Leçons de ténèbres* based on the Latin text in the *Book of Lamentations*, in which the destruction of Jerusalem is mourned. The three vocal pieces were intended for the celebration of Holy Wednesday, as Couperin did not write for the services of Holy Thursday and Good Friday.

The *Book of Lamentations* consists of five poems (chapters) describing the destruction and miseries of Jerusalem. In the original Hebrew lamentations, the first four poems took the form of alphabetic acrostics: the first lines of each verse within the songs begins with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet, which leads to the laying out of the Hebrew alphabet (22 verses for the 22 letters). However, translations fail to capture this feature (due to the particularities of each language), therefore each verse is simply preceded by the original Hebrew letter (but the verse does not begin with this letter).

Couperin composed his three *Leçons de ténèbres* based on the verses of the First Chapter: the first *leçon* contains the first 5 verses (and the Hebrew letters Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Dalet, He), the second contains verses 6-9 (preceded by letters Waw, Zayin, Heth, Teth), while the third comprises verses 10-14 (and letters Yodh, Kaph, Lamedh, Mem, Nun). In each *leçon* recitatives alternate with vocalizes sung on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and each lesson ends with the lines "*Jerusalem, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum*" repeated several times.

In the Prefaces of certain scores, Couperin states that his works can be transposed or rearranged for other instruments or voices than those for which the works were initially composed for. This was also the case with the *Leçons de*

*ténèbres*: the composer intended the works to be sung by one, respectively two voices (*A une et a deux voix*), and despite the fact that the vocal writing suggests a soprano *tessitura*, in the *Avertissement* preceding the lessons Couperin explains that the works could be sung by any types of voices, implying that in his time most accompanists knew how to transpose (Couperin 1714, 3). He also suggests that the voices can be accompanied by organ or harpsichord, to which the *basse de viole* or *basse de violon* can be added. The practice of transposition or the recommendation of other voice types for the performance of a certain work was a common practice of the period (Tunley 2004, 64).

#### 4. Tempo and Metre as Means of Expression

In his work *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*, Couperin explains that French music of his time was notated differently than the music from other countries, and that musical notation does not entirely reflect the manner in which a piece is to be performed (Couperin 1716, 39). Moreover, the composer makes a strong distinction between *mesure* (metre) and *cadence* or *mouvement* (tempo), stating that *mesure* refers to the beat, while *cadence* or *mouvement* is the spirit and soul: "*Mesure définit la quantité, et l'égalité des tems et cadence est proprement l'ésprit et l'ame qu'il y faut joinder*" (Couperin 1716, 40). The composer further explains that the lack of signs that could communicate musical ideas is remedied by indications given with expressions such as *tendrement* or *vivement* (Couperin 1716, 40).

The three *Leçons* begin without any indications regarding tempo, yet according to Tunley "*at a time when French scores (unlike Italian) usually lacked tempo indications*", the musical notation used by Couperin could suggest the rather slow tempo desired by the composer (Tunley 2004, 13). Nonetheless, during the unfolding of each of the three lessons, Couperin gives precise indications regarding expression and tempo: for example, *Mineur, et mesuré lent* or *Tendrement, et proprement* (in the first *leçon*), *Tendrement* or *Lentement* (in the second *leçon*), *Un peu plus animé, Mesuré lent, or Un peu vivement* (in the third *leçon*).

While indications such as *Lentement*, *Un peu plus animé*, or *Un peu vivement* are unquestionable, expressions such as *Mineur* or *Tendrement* can be associated with a particular mood and according to Sawkins these indicated certain tempos for the Baroque musicians (Sawkins 1993, 368). The indications in Couperin's score, along with elements related to rhythm and metre, suggest a rather slow tempo

which enables the state of contemplation and absorption, while the occasional acceleration of the tempo may express the sudden emotional outburst provoked by the grief and despair that needs to be transcended.

### 5. The Contemplation of the Divine Expressed in Vocal Ornaments

In Couperin's musical rendition, the Latin text from the *Book of Lamentations* is not modified for the sake of music, instead the musical discourse carefully follows the text and declamation of each word. As mentioned earlier, in the original Hebrew version each verse of the first four poems is introduced by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which creates an acrostic layout. However, this acrostic may seem meaningless in the Latin version, in which the verses are only preceded by the name of the Hebrew letters but fail to begin with these same letters (as the Hebrew original does). This could be explained referring to the characteristics of the Latin language and the manner in which the text captures the sense of the original poem. Nonetheless, Couperin strives to find significance in this setting: the composer refers to the original form of the poem by using the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as melismatic preludes to each verse. The vocalizes sung on these letters may suggest the contemplation of the Divine, inducing the state of absorption discussed in the previous chapters (Figures 1 and 2), while the Latin text, where the declamation merges into lyricism, is more dramatic, thus pointing outward, to the emotions that need to be transcended.



Fig. 1. François Couperin: *Leçons de ténèbres pour le mercredi saint* (1714)  
*Premiere Leçon – A une Voix* (Excerpt)  
 Vocalize sung on the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet

Fig. 2. François Couperin: « *Leçons de ténèbres pour le mercredi saint* » (1714)  
Troisième Leçon – A deux Voix (Excerpt)

*The third leçon begins with a vocalize sung by the two voices on another letter from the Hebrew alphabet*

The vocal discourse refrains from displaying the bravura of Italian vocal works, however the declamation of the Latin text expresses a certain degree of passionate intensity, rendered in a more subtle manner, accompanied by melodic decorations. In French music from Couperin's time, ornamentation was an important element that emphasized musical expression, and correctly performed it could harmoniously meld into the musical discourse. Tunley perfectly defines the close relationship between embellishment and the original musical discourse, stating that "far from sounding as if it has been 'added' to the music, it seems to rise up from within, like a balletic movement held, extended, or embellished by the dancer" (Tunley 2004, 15-16).

The ornaments employed in the *Leçons de ténèbres* are related to the text, emphasising certain words, and bestowing the musical discourse suppleness and continuous flow. Couperin indicates the notes that need to be embellished by placing crosses above these, as the following example suggests (Figure 3):

Fig. 3. François Couperin: « *Leçons de ténèbres pour le mercredi saint*'' (1714)  
*Seconde Leçon – A une Voix (Excerpt)*

*The excerpt from the first recitativ of this leçon shows the notes intended by the composer to be embellished*

By marking the notes that are meant to be embellished, but not writing out the actual ornaments to be sung, the composer offers the performers the freedom to accomplish this according to their skills and tastes. Ornaments and trills can also suggest certain dynamic accents, thus marking the words intended by the composer to be embellished and conveying these more depth and meaning. In this sense, it is interesting for the performers to analyze the meaning of the words and notes marked with crosses, as in the example above. The art of diminutions, or the division of long notes into series of shorter values, is another distinctive feature of French music, often employed within slow movements, with the purpose of embellishing the musical discourse and conveying the phrases the sense of flow.

Although Couperin's music follows the meaning of the text, the musical discourse seems to dive beyond the sense of each word, suggesting a deep devotional experience, the absorption beyond time and space, accomplished through reason. This is also suggested by the ornaments and vocalizes: the attention of performers and audience alike is caught by the beauty of each tone, every single note seems to demand total attention, thus directing the attention to the present moment, preventing the thoughts from anticipating future unfoldings of the musical discourse. This is further emphasised by the fact that the musical phrases seem to complement each other, rather than being the result of motivic development. Couperin repeats certain words or phrases, in order to emphasise the importance of the musical message or of certain words, but often only the rhythmic contour is retained, leaving the melodic dimension open to new possibilities (Tunley 2004, 70). This approach influences the performer's perception



on temporality, as suggested by McClary (McClary 2012, 247), and surprises the audience with the unexpected, preventing speculation regarding the development of the musical discourse, as Hellmuth Margulis observes (Hellmuth Margulis 2007, 207). Couperin's approach to madrigalism (text painting) invests the work with dramatic expression, the most touching moments of the text are highlighted through the use of certain intervals, the direction of the phrases, embellishments, or dissonances.

## 6. Conclusions

Compared to other sacred works of his Italian contemporaries, Couperin's *Leçons de ténèbres* represent a different approach to the sacred discourse. In accordance with the context of the performance (Holy Wednesday), through its particularities (metre, rhythm, tempo, dynamic, ornaments, etc.) the music induces a state of meditation, a particular absorption of the senses, encouraging contemplation in performers and audience alike, as suggested by the static structure of the musical discourse. Yet despite this static quality, the discourse has a certain flow, owing to the construction of the phrases and the particular use of ornaments, a steady stream which can also be related to the connection that exists between French music and dance (McClary 2000, 95).

Despite its expressiveness, and the passion that arises within certain sections of the work, suggesting Couperin's desire to create a harmonious union between the French and Italian styles, the work clearly points to the subtlety and linearity that characterize the French style. Every dissonance and flow of the phrases points to the composer's desire to restore equilibrium, thus reflecting the withdrawal of the senses, the supremacy of reason above senses, the act of mystical contemplation outside time and space.

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