

Francois 'le grande' Couperin's *Tantum Ergo* from his 27 *petit motets*

In 1933, L'ois eau-lyre, a publisher based in Monaco, compiled the Oeuvres Completes de Francois Couperin, including the composer's masterful works for harpsichord, organ, other instrumental works as well as a couple ending volumes of sacred and secular works for voice. The referenced manuscripts came from the National Library in Paris, held in the *Bibliothèque du Roi* collection since Couperin's time. In 1852, however, an anonymous donor bought a large portion of music on behalf of Sir Frederick Ouseley, founder of St. Michael's College in Tenbury, England. The Toulouse-Philidor collection, housed in Tenbury, contains a great part of The Comte de Toulouse' collection from the 18th century. His decedents lived in exile in England. Much of the collection holds music played at the Versailles court of Louis XIV, transcribed by the hand of the king's music librarian Andre Danican Philidor (Oboussier, VIII). Philidor's job included copying the music of Couperin, who worked for the court. Then in 1934, another sixty volumes were again anonymously donated to the collection at Tenbury, including manuscripts that evaded the 1933 L'ois eau-lyre compilation. In 1970, music historian Philippe Oboussier reviewed the collection and discovered 12 previously unpublished motets. They are in Philidor's same handwriting, thereby strengthening the conclusion that these compositions are indeed Couperin's (Oboussier, 429-430).

Oboussier transcribed nine complete motets, and another three incomplete ones, which lack upper string parts that will most likely never be found (Oboussier, 430). The best dating technique places the manuscripts between the years 1702-1706, part of Couperin's earlier works while working at Saint-Gervais, Saint-Germaine en-Laye, Versaille (Gilbert, 10). L'ois eau-lyre published a new Oeuvres Completes de Francois Couperin, in 1985, meant to supplement the 1933 edition. It now includes the twelve new works, only including marks and ornaments by Couperin himself (Gilbert, 10).

All of Couperin's sacred motets, including the new twelve are *petit motets*, from between 1690 and 1705 (Gilbert, 10). In the King's mass, a *grand motet* opened and closed the service, and *petit motets*, were sung in the middle. Couperin supposedly composed some *grand motets*, but they have all been lost (Gilbert, 17). *Grand motets* appeared to be like large cantatas by Bach, including soloists, chorus and orchestra. The *petit motet*, however was usually scored for one to three voices, continuo, and occasionally with edition of one or two violins or a woodwind. The tradition comes from the Italian chamber cantatas of Carissimi and Rossi. French composers like Lully and Charpentier (a student of Carissimi) first began employing this genre in France (Oboussier, 20). In addition, Italian influence in the form of *petit motets* emerged at the court of the King in 1693 when composer Lorenzani, a big fan of the *petit motet*, was commissioned to write service music (Gilbert, 11).

Much of the mass music glorified King Louis XIV (1643-1715), and entertained courtiers attending services. The Mass included three motets, smaller ones at low services, and larger ones at high services (Oboussier, 20). We know that as Couperin's senior, Michel-Richard DeLalande held a monopoly of all of the royal musical posts during Couperin's working life. He was well versed in the *grand motet*,

and mostly likely provided most them (Oboussier, 20-21). Couperin was appointed only as an organist, not a composer, to the Royall Chappel, hence the lack of large motets (Tunley, 12).

Many of Couperin's motets are further categorized as *Elevations*, including *Tantum Ergo*. These are typically for 1-4 voices, usually a capella or with violins and flutes, and through-bassed. The elevation portion of the mass exalted the Body of the Saviour, celebrating the moment of transubstantiation (Gilbert, 17). Despite knowing much about the 'who' and 'what' components of these rediscovered manuscripts, the 'where' and 'why' parts remain under considerable contention.

We know that between the years of 1690 and 1705, Francois Couperin held three positions, one as the Organist at St. Gervais, Paris, a second for the exiled English Stuart court at Saint-Germain en Laye, and a third as an organist at the Royall Chapel of Louis XIV at Versailles. Couperin acquired the latter of these in 1693 when called to play at the mass services of the King. He would spend nine months of the year in Versailles playing for services and instructing the young Bourbon royals (Corp, 446). Before this, in 1685, Couperin inherited the post of his father at St. Gervais. Being too young to fulfill the role, Michel-Richard Delalande took the position until Francois came of age (Corp, 445). We know that Couperin accepted a fifty percent cut in his salary at St. Gervais in 1697 due to a significant decrease in attention and time he paid them. He continually needed to find substitutes for portions of the three months of organ playing he owed them when not at Versaille (Corp 449). As his position at the royal court did not advance until 1717, the pension Couperin received for work at the Stuart court must have filled the monetary cut he accepted from St. Gervais (Corp, 448). The small amount of time he spent at St. Gervais combined with the nature of his post would precluded the rediscovered motets from being composed there. This leaves either the Versailles court or the Stuart court. Though we do not know where Couperin lived before 1710—from January to March he would have been at Versailles—scholars found a lease copy to a house in St. Germain-en Laye dated 1710 (Corp, 450). This at least confirms his tie to the Stuart court post *facto*.

Contemporary scholar Edward Corp contends that Francois 'le grande' Couperin worked extensively at the Stuart court at Saint-Germain en-Laye from 1691-1712 (Corp, 445). The "Glorious Revolution" of 1688-89 displaced James II of England and his Jacobite court to France after the conquest of William of Orange. One of James II friends was a Scotsman David Nairne, who had been living in Paris, not far from St. Gervais. Nairne knew the Abbe Jossie who had been one of Couperin's caretakers after his father's sudden death in 1679 (Corp, 447). Corp argues that it was probably Nairne who introduced Couperin to the Stuart court in 1691, after the publication of his two major organ masses. De Lalande, who by this time moved on to the court at Versaille also held connections to the Stuarts. His family took care of the gardens and chateau at Saint-Germain en Laye. De Lalande may have also taken part, then, in the first introductions (Corp, 447).

The Chapell Royale at Saint-Germain en-Laye employed a few singers, including John Abel, a renowned counter-tenor. In the fall of 1692, Louis XIV asked Queen Mary of Modena, James' II queen, which psalm she would like set to music. De Lalande set Psalm 13 for her as a *grand motet*, and Couperin subsequently wrote a

setting of the same text for countertenor, probably for Abel. The composition caught the attention of the exiled queen who was looking for a new organist (Corp, 448). Furthermore, Couperin most likely wrote music for the confirmation of the Prince of Wales (*Laudate puer Dominum*), because Louis XIV, who attended the ceremony, demanded that a copy of the motet be made for the French Court (Corp, 448).

In 1710, however, the Treaty of Utrecht forced James II to move his court to Bar-le-duc. Couperin did not follow. Louis XIV grants him a pension in 1714-1715 and in 1717, Couperin advanced to a full post at the French Court. This definitively ended his ties to the Stuarts. Corp summarizes these final years writing:

After the death of Louis XIV in 1715 the French government under the Regent (Due d'Orleans) changed its foreign policy and made an anti-Jacobite alliance with the new Hanoverian regime in England. Couperin's appointment as D'Anglebert's successor [at Versailles] thus coincided with the expulsion of James III from Lorraine, and then from Avignon, on the orders of the Regent Couperin needed to cover his traces, and play down his Jacobite background. Even in his piece *Les Culbutes Ixcxbnxs*, referring to the various Jacobite setbacks of the years 1716-20,...he felt the need to disguise the second word of the title with Xs and substitute an N for a T, to avoid making a specific reference to the Jacobite movement with which he had been so long associated (Corp, 450).

Based upon the very few archives that survive from the Jacobean period, we know that *Grant Motets* were not performed at the Stuart Court (Corp, 450). A group of 27 *petit motets* and six sonatas, including work by Couperin, Carissimi, Colonna, Legrenzi, and Lully were made for Lord Melfort of the Stuart court between 1691 and 1694, and a second one for Nairne's library in the late 1690's. The music within them would have been what was performed at the Chapell Royal of the Jacobit court (Corp, 451). Aside from the aforementioned details, no further facts exist tying Couperin to the Stuart court. Oboussier believes that Couperin's sacred music was composed for the King Louis XIV's private devotions in the chapel at Versailles (Oboussier, 429-430). The publishers at L'ois eau-lyre affirm this standpoint (Gilbert, 10). In 1733, Couperin's family burned all of his personal papers and musical manuscripts, therefore, we will never know the full details of his mysterious connection to the Stuart court (Corp, 450).

Thankfully, other manuscripts of Couperin's works have survived, among them the twelve *petit motets* uncovered at Tenbury, including the elevation *Tantum Ergo*. These too, however carry a bit of controversy. On the one hand, scholars advocate an Italian influence in their composition. On the other hand, assert a French lineage provides compelling information. According to Daniel Hertz, author of *Approaching a History of 18th-Century Music*, points out that the French style of the times is a reaction to and continuation of 17th century French classicism. "Incomparable lightness and sinuosity" characterize the first phase of this reaction, 1700-1730, during the working years of Couperin. He calls it *style Regence* (Hertz, 93-94).

Musicologist Wilfrid Mellers further supports this route, noting that Couperin's music, "is a matter of simplicity and honesty of response...purity of line with subtle

sensuousness of harmony". It furthermore, "shows a greater fluidity of line and freedom of harmony...a compromise between polyphonic and homophonic technique" (Mellers, 142, 154). In his book on performance practice of French Classical Music, author Timothy Schultz shares a list of French traits. They include, short symmetrical melodies characterized by a lack of motivic unity, stepwise motion, restrained chromaticism, and French ornamentation. The harmony is generally simple or modal with an avoidance of augmented and diminished chords. The texture includes short passages of imitation, a unified mood, clarity, and conciseness. They are usually in either a simple duple or triple meter, usually articulating no more than two or three notes by slur (Schultz, 4).

The other scholarly camp advocates an Italian influence. We already know that the French court absorbed much musical influence from Italy. Charpentier studied with Carissimi, Lorenzani received commissions from Louis XIV, and the music of Colonna and Legrenzi were played at the Stuart Court of Italian Mary of Modena. Additionally, Couperin wrote a treatise, *Regles pour l'Accompagnement* in the last years of the 17th century which included methods developed by the Couperin family of treating discord, and a clear familiarity with advanced Italian techniques of the same (Mellers, 271). Schultz informs us that Italian traits of the time include a melody characterized by virtuosity, length, complex counterpoint, triplets, sequences, cadenzas, and fewer, simpler ornaments. The harmony has a clear tonal direction, utilizes harmonic sequences, chains of suspensions, Neapolitan sixth chords and suspensions. The forms are more expansive, and the mood bends towards operatic (Schultz, 4-5). As the Galant style emerges, however, many divisions and pauses elaborate the melody. The rhythmic elements change, no longer lining up similar figures necessarily, and the harmony expands. In many-voiced pieces, there is a clear hierarchy of lines, a principal line with accompanying voices. Furthermore, dissonances need not always be resolved, and may last longer through excessive modulations, embellishments, and diverse passing tones (Hartz, 19-20).

While it is certainly clear that Couperin's music does not sit comfortably in either box, Hartz contends that the Baroque master may be an early precursor to the Galant Style (Hartz, 20). Wilfrid Meller asserts that Couperin, like Bach, stood between the early and modern world, with a temperament from the Renaissance and a gaze towards Classicism (Meller, 143). Indeed Couperin's music incorporates elements of both the French and Italian styles as he was duly influenced throughout his career. Oboussier comments that Couperin's music, "achieves a welding of the Italian bel canto style with soigné French embellishments" (Oboussier, 28). Typically, however, as will be seen in *Tantum Ergo*, his sacred music tends to sit in the more conservative, French box.

Both Mellers and Oboussier provide opinions of *Tantum Ergo*. They are as follows:

Mellers: *Tantum ergo sacramentum* for 2 sopranos and bass. The opening is majestically homophonic in G minor, but is pathetic since the texture is riddled with suspensions in parallel thirds or sixths. Vestigial counterpoints enter the middle section, first declining canonically down the scale, then balanced by

their inversion. The coda, with weeping sevenths and ninths, is especially beautiful (371).

Oboussier: 'Tantum ergo', whose frequent suspensions, diminished and augmented chords and sudden shifts of tonality are typical of Couperin's sacred style, especially in motets which are contemplative in character.' This work was almost certainly intended for the afternoon service of Benediction (a custom dating from the fourteenth century), rather than the Mass at the Feast of Corpus Christi.¹²² (Oboussier, 21-22)

The text is taken from a pair of verses at the end of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Pange lingua*. It would be performed while the Sacrament was displayed in monstrance (ornate vessels) (Wolf, 2). Aside from the factual and subjective information about *Tantum Ergo* four questions remain concerning an authentic realization of this treasure by Francois Couperin. Examining the music answers them. Three editions of *Tantum Ergo* are currently in circulation, one from the Complete Oeuvre, one edited by Philippe Oboussier, and a third edited by R. Peter Wolf.

First, could a chorus sing this motet or was it intended for three soloists? We know that Couperin usually wrote in markings that delineated parts such as 'seul' for one voice, 'a deux' for a duet and 'violins' for string parts as well as 'tous' for a tutti section (Oboussier, 22-23). The marking in *Tantum Ergo*, however is simply a 3, or for three. There are no 'tous' sections; therefore we assume he was writing for three voices. Philippe Oboussier comments, however, "This does not preclude the use of a very small chorus for some of the music written en trio" (Oboussier, 22-23). Wolf echoes this statement writing, "there is no reason why it cannot—or should not—be sung by a choir of moderate size, so long as performers are encouraged to cultivate an appropriately light sound without excessive vibrato" (Wolf, 2). So long as ensembles remember that the piece was conceived for soloists to sing in an intimate setting, relative authenticity can be achieved.

Secondly, should the piece be scored SSB or SAB? Wolf prefers the first configuration, grand staffing the top lines together. Oboussier calls the parts Dessus 1, 2, and Basse, intimating that they are of similar timbre. The Complete Oeuvre omits naming the voices at all, leaving the choice of singers up to the performers. We know that John Abel, a renowned counter-tenor, sang at the Stuart court at Saint-Germain En Laye. In lieu of a counter tenor, common practice assigns the part to altos. The tessitura of *Tantum Ergo* never strays above D5, reasonably well within the range of an alto singer or older boy singer. The final answer lies in the sonic outcome of performance. Use whichever voices maintain a light, reverent, intimate aesthetic. For ease of discussion, I will call them the Soprano and Alto lines.

Thirdly, what types of ornamentations best capture Couperin's style? This question typically yields the greatest number of responses. Types of ornamentation are central to the French, and especially the Couperin, aesthetic. It is important to keep his words about French music in mind:

"Our pieces are not played as they are notated, they have a descriptive intent, they are played freely...Cadence seems to mean lilt and subtlety of movement" (Mellers, 275).

In *Tantum Ergo* the most frequent types of ornamentation occur at cadences, represented by the symbol '+'. The three editions generally agree about when they occur, however some slight variations exist. Oboussier and Wolf add a soprano ornament to aid the alto in m.5, and likewise to the alto part to aid the soprano in m. 13. Interestingly, the complete works edition adds an alto ornament on beat one of m. 19, signifying that this part functions cadentially, or at the least as a point of arrival textually. Wolf agrees with the complete works by adding a soprano ornament to the second beat of m.27, though Oboussier omits it. Perhaps because the alto part does not share the textual cadence of the Soprano and Bass, Oboussier chooses to not illuminate the arrival point, whereas the other two editions feel the opposite (see ex. 1 for topics presentation). In m. 34, Wolf and Oboussier add a soprano ornament to compliment the alto during the cadence, and again on the second beat of m. 38. Oboussier, however, omits the alto ornament in the following measure, preferring only the soprano to further elaborate the cadence. He and Wolf, but not the complete works edition similarly joins the alto with the soprano in ornamentation in the penultimate measure preceding the final cadence. The prevailing decision for performers is, which cadences should be doubly ornamented, and which should not? Good taste informed with appropriate ornamentation figures can be the only guide.

There are three types of ornaments found in *Tantum ergo*. The first are *port de voix* or 'carrying of the voice' in a stepwise descent from the downbeat into the upbeat before a cadence (see ex. 2 for topics presentation). Mellers states that in a *port de voix* the ornamented note is first struck with the harmony/preceding note, the slur denoting a continuation of the first note suspended, and then trilled in proportion to the value of the note to which it is attached. On a longer note, the ornament may shake. Here it begins a tone or semitone above the essential note and gradually speeds up, sometimes finishing through a turning figure with upper and lower neighbors. C.P.E. Bach, in his writings, continues that in duple times, the *port de voix* receives half the value of the harmony note, is always slurred and louder than the note of resolution (Mellers, 288-290).

The second type of ornament occurs on the downbeat, as a mordent (see ex. 3 for topics presentation). They never anticipate the beat unless slurred, and the number of revolutions should be proportionate to the speed and length of the ornamented note (Mellers, 288). The third type only occurs once in the piece; all three editions include it. In m. 29, the middle line cadences on its own, finishing the text it had begun in canon (see ex. 4 for topics presentation). The approach is a descending minor third to the downbeat. This ornament may be treated like the second type, sung as a mordent, or filled in with a *coule* or 'passing tone' (Schultz, 19). As there is no slur, the *coule* would occur on the downbeat, lasting for an eighth-note before beginning the mordent.

In his style guide, Timothy Schultz notes that almost all accidental sharps receive trills (Schultz, 20). This would greatly increase the number of ornaments in *Tantum Ergo*, and should most likely be well reasoned before implemented. Deciding factors may include the number of singers, the performance space, and the underlying text. Vocal ornamentation always refers to the text. In Latin texts, the main concern may be the long-arched melody (Tuley, 16, 31). This element may, at

times, supersede textual needs and elicit tasteful ornamentation.

Lastly, what type of continuo should be played? Both the organ and harpsichord were available to Couperin at Versailles and therefore suitable for his works. At the court in Saint-Germain en-Laye, it is safe to assume that both were available as well (Oboussier, 27). Because *Tantum Ergo* was traditionally sung as a small trio, the harpsichord may better facilitate the chamber feel. Couperin provided figured bass for the entire piece, and an authentic realization contains few guidelines. Oboussier writes, "Normally one chord for each note of the bass, but where the bass line moves by conjunct degrees rapidly, one chord may serve for two or more notes". Generally no more than three parts in the right hand (Oboussier, 296-297). When two successive harmonies occurred, Oboussier advises that tying common notes together and to keeping the two hands close in the middle of the keyboard preserves continuity (Oboussier, 299).

The other variances among the three additions are as follows. The Wolf edition provides accents above the stressed syllables and an English translation of the text underlying the notes. Both the Wolf and Oboussier editions denote textual cadences through comma more often than the completed works. Performers may choose to adhere to their implications for phrasing and breathing, or sing from the completed works edition with greater freedom. Wolf and Oboussier also provide continuo realizations. Wolf's tends to be more horizontally conceived and nimbler, Oboussier's is more vertically and harmonically conceived with thicker chords in the right hand. All three editions include introductory sections about ornaments, with possible solutions, however only Wolf provides them for *Tantum Ergo* specifically.

When choosing to perform this *petit motet* a director has three different, yet comparably stellar editions to choose from. A choir with experience singing Baroque and French Classical music might opt for the Oeuvre Completes' allowing their singers and continuo player to improvise with good taste. A choir taking its first steps into this genre should use the Wolf edition as it supplies the most help and suggestions for *Tantum Ergo*. The Oboussier edition exists in the middle, ready for choirs looking to implement well-researched elements of style. *Tantum Ergo* like Francois Couperin's other gem-like *petit motets* deserve frequent insertion into the canon of modern performance repertoire now that they have been found, published, and thoroughly research.

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