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**Capturing the Spirit of the French Clavecin School: Interpreting
Couperin's *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre* and Ravel's *Le
Tombeau de Couperin***

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Abstract

This critical commentary reports on a Performance-led research project which formed part of a Master of Philosophy in Music Performance (piano). The project involved the preparation and performance of François Couperin's *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre* and Maurice Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* in the same recital, with the intention of making explicit connections, both for the performer and the audience, between the two works. The first of these works could be considered to embody an expression of the spirit of the French Baroque; the second, an evocation of it. While Ravel's work is clearly, not least by its title, related to Couperin's music, or the music of the eighteenth century Clavecin School in general, the precise nature of this relationship and its meaning for the performer has not been given much systematic attention. This critical commentary begins with a discussion of the context and salient features of the Clavecin School. It then turns to Couperin's *vingt-cinquième ordre* and considers what is involved in the interpretation and preparation of this music, including a discussion of the feasibility of its performance on a modern piano. Several features of Ravel's work are then considered in light of Couperin's work, and the effect of the performer's research into and preparation of the Couperin on the performance and interpretation of the Ravel is documented. The critical commentary concludes with reflections of the process of preparing and performing the two works as a pair.

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Introduction

I am always surprised (after the care I have taken to indicate the ornaments appropriate to my pieces, about which I have given, separately, a sufficiently clear explanation in a Method under the title The Art of Playing the Harpsichord) to hear people who have learned them without following the correct method. It is an unpardonable negligence, especially since it is not at the discretion of the players to place such ornaments where they want them. I declare, therefore, that my pieces must be played according to how I have marked them, and that they will never make a true impression on people of real taste unless played exactly as I have marked them, neither more nor less.¹

I do not ask for my music to be interpreted, but only that it should be played.²

This Critical Commentary focuses on developing an interpretation of two French works, François Couperin's *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre* (twenty-fifth *ordre*) and Maurice Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Of the two works, one is the embodiment of the French Clavecin School while the other is an evocation of it. From this notion, the idea of the spirit of the French Clavecin School came to light. By this, I refer to the spirit which pervades all aspects involved in the performance of a piece written during the time of the *Clavecinistes*. Through the study of the French Clavecin School and the performance of the works, I aimed to capture this spirit in my interpretation. In performing the works together, I also endeavoured to discover how utilising the necessary procedures in preparing Couperin's work influenced the performance and interpretation of Ravel's.

Capturing the spirit of the French Clavecin School is not a task easily defined because there is no process that clearly describes how to achieve it. Instead, a variety of elements, including the knowledge of the history surrounding a piece and relevant performance practices, can be drawn on to assist in this endeavour. Even after these have been investigated, discovering the spirit still remains a complicated task. It is intangible and can only be found once a work is completely understood.

¹ François Couperin, qtd. in Philippe Beaussant, *François Couperin*, Ed. Reinhard G. Pauly (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990) 288.

² Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Ravel*, Ed. Pierre Laumonier, Trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London: Dent, 1973) 16.

To assist in capturing the spirit of the French Clavecin School, three aspects were investigated in the study: the historical context surrounding the work, the performance practices from the French Clavecin School and the creative element of performance, which will vary between each performer. This final, less tangible, element is a necessary factor in order to bring the piece to life in performance. It is this element that prevents the music from sounding dry and mechanical. Neumann reiterated this when he wrote, “the performer’s artistry, taste, and musical intelligence must always supplement the scaffolding of historical information in order to bring an ‘early’ work to life.”³ The scope of this study does not allow for a comprehensive discussion of the creative elements incorporated by the performer, instead the study has a stronger focus on the application of substantive elements, such as the performance practices of the French Clavecin School.

The study and incorporation of the performance practices assists in bridging the gap between the score and the interpretation, a gap which Couperin noted when he said, “Just as there is a great distance between grammar and rhetorical delivery, there is also an infinitely great distance between musical notation and artistic performance.”⁴ The performance practices of the French Clavecin School, which are quite well documented in treatises, were significantly different from those of other periods and places. Couperin stated that his treatise, *L’Art de toucher le Clavecin* (1717), contains a set of rules for the performance of his works that are necessary for the successful performance of his pieces.⁵ Mellers and Tunley have both highlighted the importance of Couperin’s writings but also stressed the need to consult other historical treatises.⁶ Michel de Saint-Lambert’s treatise (1702) is another source which provides a comprehensive understanding of the French Clavecin School performance practices. Relying solely on Couperin’s treatise will not provide a complete understanding of the practices. However, Kirkpatrick assures us that although Couperin’s writings can come across as haphazard, they remain an important source that assists in the performance of his works.⁷

Ravel did not compose *Le Tombeau* solely as a tribute to the memory of Couperin as the title suggests, instead it was written as a wider tribute to the French *Clavecinistes* of the

³ Frederick Neumann, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993) xii.

⁴ François Couperin, qtd. in Frederick Neumann, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music: With Special Emphasis on J.S. Bach* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983) 10.

⁵ François Couperin, *L’Art de Toucher le Clavecin* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Breitkopf and Hartel, 1933) Preface.

⁶ David Tunley, *Francois Couperin and ‘the Perfection of Music’* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004) 100.

⁷ Ralph Kirkpatrick, “On Re-Reading Couperin’s ‘L’Art de Toucher le Clavecin,’” *Early Music* 4.1 (Jan. 1976) 11.

late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁸ To complement this work in the recital, Couperin's twenty-fifth *ordre* was chosen because it is a fine example of Couperin's mature style of composition and closely resembles the familiar structure of a suite. The suites of the French Clavecin School were composed with more freedom and flexibility in the structure and many of Couperin's *ordres* are much longer than what is now typically included in a suite. Of the twenty-seven *ordres*, fewer than five closely resemble the now familiar structure and dimensions of the suites composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, which have become the standard.⁹

Couperin's *Pièces de Clavecin* are rarely performed by pianists. One reason for this is because they are highly idiomatic to the harpsichord and most performances and recordings to date have been on this instrument. The pianist Angela Hewitt has released three CDs of Couperin's works and Grigory Sokolov has featured pieces by Couperin in his recitals. These are both highly successful adaptations of the music and through these performances it becomes clear that capturing the spirit of the French *Clavecinistes* is not a task that is restricted solely to performers of the harpsichord; it can be achieved on the piano as well.

The aim of this critical commentary is to discover how to capture the spirit of the French Clavecin School in the performance of Couperin's twenty-fifth *ordre* on the piano. This will then allow for the opportunity to discover how to capture this spirit in a performance of Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The study first provides a background of Couperin and the French Clavecin School which is then followed by a summary of the performance practices of this time. Chapter two details the performance of Couperin's *ordre*; it includes the application of performance practices and the exploitation of the piano's capabilities. The final chapter is a discussion of the influence of the study on the performance of Ravel's *Le Tombeau*; this draws connections between the two studied works and provides information on how Couperin's work impacted the performance of Ravel's.

⁸ Roland Manuel, *Maurice Ravel* (London: Dobson, 1947) 81.

⁹ David Fuller, "Suite," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed 17 May 2015 <www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

Chapter One

Couperin and the French Clavecin School

“French Clavecin School” is the name given to the French harpsichord music, its composers and performers, from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. French Clavecin music is often described as elegant and charming, reflecting the influences of the French court and the value it placed on refinement in the arts.¹ The composers of this school aimed to create music that was well crafted with polished details. Jacques Champion de Chambonnières (1602-1672) is regarded as the first great composer of the French Clavecin School and is known for innovation in adapting elements of the lute style for the harpsichord.² The composers who followed Chambonnières continued in the French Clavecin tradition: these included Louis Couperin (1626-1661), Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) and François Couperin (1668-1733). Couperin composed during the height of the French Clavecin School and his harpsichord works are widely regarded as the epitome of this musical movement.

Some of the Lute style elements adapted to the harpsichord included plucked string effects, spread chords, the overlapping of canonic entries and the *style brisé*. The *style brisé* was developed as a means of conveying polyphonic texture on the lute. The musical lines were written so that they created interplay and as a result, gave the impression of polyphonic texture. While an invention of necessity on the lute, the aesthetic results of the practice became valued in their own right and consequently, were transferred to the harpsichord where it was not of such obvious technical necessity.³

Throughout the time of the French Clavecin School, the Italian style increasingly influenced composers in France. As a result of this, Couperin believed that the perfection of music would be achieved through the combination of the French and Italian styles of music.⁴ By the time he composed his fourth book of *Pièces de Clavecin* the two styles were brought together “into an idiom of classical maturity [such] that we are conscious of the perfect proportions of the whole building, rather than of the richness of detail that goes to make it

¹ David Tunley, *Francois Couperin and 'the Perfection of Music'* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004) 7.

² David Fuller, “Chambonnières, Jacques Champion, Sieur de,” *Grove Music Online*, Accessed 21 July 2014 <www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

³ Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era* (New York: Norton, 1947) 169.

⁴ Wilfrid Howard Mellers, *François Couperin and the French Classical Tradition* (London: Faber, 1987) 186.

up.”⁵ This music combined the “delicacy of French music with the vivacity of Italian music”⁶ and it is this combination that Couperin presumably regarded as the “perfection” of music.

Between 1713 and 1730 Couperin composed four books of harpsichord works. These are comprised of 234 individual pieces that are divided into twenty-seven *ordres*. The *ordre* was a term first used by Couperin and refers to an ordered arrangement of pieces, allowing for more freedom in the number and type of pieces than that of the typical dance suite.⁷ It could be compiled of any number of dance and genre pieces and each *ordre* is generally unified by a single tonality, utilising both the major and minor modes. The first book of *ordres* resembles more of a collection of selected pieces than a well-structured suite but, as Couperin composed the following books, each *ordre* gained an increased sense of unity between the movements.⁸ This was achieved through continuity of character and mood within the *ordre*.

The fourth book of *ordres* is widely regarded as the height of Couperin’s achievement in keyboard writing.⁹ Couperin was plagued with sickness towards the end of his life and this is reflected by the general sombreness of mood in his last book of *ordres*. The pieces became increasingly solemn and serious, with more emphasis on the mysterious and pensive characters.¹⁰ The twenty-fifth *ordre* is no exception to this.

Performance style of the French Clavecin School

The performance style of the French Clavecin School was very distinctive and unlike any other from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Couperin noted that musicians of the French Baroque wrote their music differently from the way in which it was actually played and, as a result of this, foreigners played French music less well than the French played the music of the Italian or German Schools.¹¹ To provide an overview of the French performance style, the discussion of performance practices will be divided into two categories: the implicit elements of performance which were not marked in the score and the techniques peculiar to

⁵ Mellers 186.

⁶ Tunley 47.

⁷ Tunley 105.

⁸ Philippe Beaussant, *François Couperin*, Ed. Reinhard G. Pauly (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990) 224.

⁹ Mellers 203.

¹⁰ Beaussant 317.

¹¹ François Couperin, *L’Art de Toucher le Clavecin* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Hartel, 1933) 23.

the harpsichord and their adaptation to the piano. The application of these performance practices in Couperin's twenty-fifth *ordre* will be described in the following chapter.

Implicit Elements of Performance

When developing an interpretation of a French Clavecin piece, the score obviously provides the starting point. However, to effectively perform this music, certain expected elements of performance, not notated on the score, must be understood. The implied elements in the music were common knowledge amongst French musicians; they included the use of *notes inégales*, the over-dotting of rhythms and the use of articulatory silences.

The practice denoted by the term *notes inégales* was an expressive one designed to give more polish and elegance to the music. In this form of rhythmic alteration, consecutive notes (usually quavers) were played unequally, allowing more time for the first note and taking time away from the second. The explanation of this concept can be found in treatises from the French Baroque and although these are not in complete agreement on the execution of this technique, modern sources conclude that the frequency the technique was used, as well as the extent the inequality occurred, was up to the *bon goût* (good taste) of the performer.¹² Another form of *notes inégales* was *notes coulés*, which was performed in the opposite manner to the *notes inégales* technique.¹³ The *coulés* is included in Couperin's ornament table where it is notated with a two-note slur (see Appendix). Couperin explained that the duration of the first note is cut short to allow for a longer duration on the second note.

In a similar sense to the *notes inégales* technique, the French Overture as not written as it was to be performed. The form, established by Jean-Baptiste Lully, began with a regal opening which was then followed by a faster, and often fugal, or at least contrapuntal, section. In the opening section, it was common to encounter melodic figures called *tirades*; these were notes that rapidly rushed up or down to a longer note.¹⁴ Another characteristic of the style, not marked in the score, was the "over-dotting" of dotted rhythms. This involved lengthening the first note (dotted note) and shortening the second note to an extreme, further adding to the regal and stately character of the piece.

¹² John Byrt, "Some New Interpretations of the *Notes Inégales* Evidence," *Early Music* 28.1 (Feb 2000): 99.

¹³ Dirk Moelants, "The Performance of Notes Inégales: The Influence of Tempo, Musical Structure, and Individual Performance Style on Expressive Timing," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 28.5 (Jun 2011): 449.

¹⁴ George Gow Waterman and James R. Anthony, "French Overture," *Grove Music Online*, Accessed 11 Jan 2015 <www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

Evidence suggests that the *Clavecinistes* created articulatory silences through the use of a technique called “aeration” or “aspiration”. This refers to a practice where a note is not sustained for the full value; instead, there is silence between one note and the next. This practice was noted by Saint-Lambert, in his treatise, where he referred to it as the *détaché*.¹⁵ Although it was not always marked on the score, Couperin was among the few composers who did provide some notation for this effect. It was indicated by a marking similar in appearance to the current and widely accepted staccatissimo sign. It is not fully clear as to whether Couperin intended “aspiration” to be used only where he indicated or whether it was to be used more frequently. If his admonition to performers, quoted at the beginning of this commentary, is to be taken as face value, one could assume he only intended it to be used where indicated. In any case, the use of this technique must be adopted and mastered in the attempt to capture the expressivity of the French Clavecin repertoire.

During the French Baroque, there was no common method of marking ornamentation. Composers often devised their own system of ornament symbols and, to make sure these were deciphered correctly, provided tables with explanations for the execution of each symbol.¹⁶ In the majority of instances, the French *Clavecinistes* treated the ornaments melodically rather than rhythmically. Time was often taken to perform the melodic ornaments and they were executed expressively to enhance the melody whereas ornaments treated rhythmically were played in time in order to assist with metric stress.¹⁷ Generally, the ornaments of the French Clavecin School were played on the beat and, in his treatise, Couperin explained that the *pincé simple* were to be played on the beat within the value of the principal note.¹⁸

Dance forms and the style of French Baroque go hand in hand; this can be seen through the vast number of dance pieces in the French Clavecin repertoire. According to Mather and Karns, the spirit and soul of the French Baroque can be captured through careful observation of dance forms and their different aspects of movement and character.¹⁹ In the French Clavecin pieces, dance movement can be captured through the articulation of

¹⁵ Michel de Saint-Lambert, *Principles of the Harpsichord*, Trans. Rebecca Harris-Warrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 97.

¹⁶ For Couperin’s Table of Ornaments, see Appendix

¹⁷ Terry Lynn Hudson, “Links between Selected Works of Paul Dukas, Claude Debussy, and Maurice Ravel and the Keyboard Works of François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau,” DMA Diss. (University of Texas at Austin, 1997) 123.

¹⁸ Couperin, *L’Art de Toucher*, 15.

¹⁹ Betty Mather and Dean Karns, *Dance Rhythms of the French Baroque: A Handbook for Performance*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 134.

characteristic dance rhythms and rhythmic cadences.²⁰ In regard to this, Mather and Karns write that, “French musicians were more concerned with observing the affect and bringing out the ‘rhythmic cadence’ of each dance piece than with finding its unequivocal tempo.”²¹ They go on to explain that when the rhythmic cadence is taken into consideration, the “downbeats, upbeats and pulses ‘fall’ into place precisely and with their proper strengths.”²² These are determined by the rhythms, upbeats and downbeats characteristic to each dance form and stem from the steps typical of the dance. Unlike harmonic cadences, which occur only at the ends of phrases, rhythmic cadence can be understood to occur continuously throughout a piece, in a similar manner to the notion as found in other repetitive physical motions (as in cycling or running).

The composers of the French Clavecin School relied on the metre to imply the required tempo. Mather and Karns indicate that the traditional French metres were used far more often to give an indication of the required tempo than the standard metres used in music of the classical, romantic and modern periods.²³ On the topic of tempo and metre Couperin, himself, wrote:

I find that we confuse Measure or Time (i. e. the number of beats or pulsations in a bar) with what is called Cadence or Movement (i. e. Tempo, the degree of speed, together with accent, phrasing, etc. in short ‘Expression’ or ‘Feeling’). Measure defines the number and equality of the beats; and Cadence is literally the intelligence and the soul that must be added to it... Thus, not having devised signs or characters for communicating our specific ideas, we try to remedy this by indicating at the beginning of our pieces, by some such words as Tenderly, Quickly, etc., as far as possible the idea we want to convey.²⁴

The implied tempos in the meters could vary quite widely and as a result of this variance, descriptive indications were increasingly used throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These sometimes indicated the speed (*lentement*, *vivement*) and other times suggested the general mood of the piece (*gravemente*, *tendrement*, *gayement*,

²⁰ Mather and Karns 201.

²¹ Mather and Karns 134.

²² Mather and Karns 135.

²³ Mather and Karns 127.

²⁴ Couperin, *L'Art de Toucher*, 24.

légèrement).²⁵ As a result of the many factors involved in determining a tempo, there is no precise speed to accompany each time signature. Instead, the French *Clavecinistes* aspired to find a tempo that would effectively bring out the character of the piece.²⁶

The music of the French Clavecin School is believed to have been performed with flexibility in the tempo. Donington noted, “the tempo is not arbitrary, but it is not ruthless either. The tempo is flexible.”²⁷ The flexibility of tempo in the music of the *Clavecinistes* is thought to have been performed with poise and sensitivity; it was determined by the phrases and harmonic movement and was created by subtle easing or forward movement in the tempo or by a momentary pause or delay in the music.

Techniques peculiar to the harpsichord and their adaptation to the piano

During the French Clavecin era, the harpsichord was at its height of popularity and Couperin and his contemporaries composed extensively for the instrument. The treatises written by the *Clavecinistes* describe how French composers aimed to utilise the colouristic possibilities of their instrument and aimed to play with *la douceur du toucher* (the sweetness of touch).²⁸ Kosovske explains that the French had a suavity of playing and, regardless of the difficulty of a piece, it was still best performed in a graceful manner with no sign of tension or stress.²⁹ Couperin’s works are highly idiomatic to the harpsichord and to perform them on the piano calls for a different approach in order to produce a convincing performance. Adapting the music includes, but is not limited to, considering the sound and effects of the harpsichord and the extent to which these should (or should not) be approximated on the piano. In regard to emulating the harpsichord on the piano, Neumann says:

Identical sound will not convey the identical message today as it did then. Hence it could be argued that what matters in the preservation of the ‘spirit’ of a work is not sameness of sound but sameness of the message. In pursuit of this thought, sameness of the message would require adjustment of the sound.³⁰

²⁵ Mather and Karns 127.

²⁶ Mather and Karns 134.

²⁷ Robert Donington, *Baroque Music: Style and Performance: A Handbook* (London: Faber, 1982) 20.

²⁸ David Rowland, *Early Keyboard Instruments: A Practical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 50.

²⁹ Yonit Kosovske, *Historical Harpsichord Technique: Developing La douceur du toucher* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) 2.

³⁰ Frederick Neumann, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music: With Special Emphasis on J.S. Bach* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1983) 574.

Neumann's thoughts on how to achieve the same message on a different instrument were very applicable to this study. The sound of the harpsichord and piano are very different and so attempting to emulate the sound of the harpsichord on the piano will not necessarily result in the same character and message. In order to achieve the same message, a performance of a harpsichord work will require a different approach on the piano.

The performance of a harpsichord work on the piano allows for the opportunity to hear the music in a new light through the exploration of a variety of tone colours; this is achieved through the use of the pedals and differences in touch. On the harpsichord, the plucking mechanism allows for a note to vibrate and as a result the sound lingers with some resonance. In contrast to this, the piano's dampers silence the string as soon as the pianist has left the note and so resonance is determined somewhat more by the performer. As a means of gaining increased resonance, the piano's sustain pedal can be used in small amounts; too much pedal will blur harmonies and will not give the desired clarity of sound which can be heard on a performance on the harpsichord. In addition to the sustain pedal, the *una corda* pedal can also be considered. This pedal not only alters the volume but it also varies the tone of the notes, creating a more mellow, muted or distant sound.

Listening critically to the difference in sound between the harpsichord and piano is important because of the different forms of accent each is capable of utilising; the harpsichordist is largely limited to the use of agogic accents whereas the pianist can use both dynamic and agogic types. Utilising both types of accents will assist in capturing the character of harpsichord pieces on the piano. Unlike the harpsichord, dynamic shading on the piano can be varied greatly. It can be determined by the harmonic progressions, cadences and melodic direction, as well as the character. Additionally, it provides the opportunity to create contrasts between different voices and facilitates adjustments of the balance between the hands.

In French harpsichord music, legato and staccato touch were often not specified on the score. When determining the articulation, Kosovske suggests that, "the best use is to adhere chiefly to the legato, reserving the staccato to give spirit occasionally to certain passages, and to set off the higher beauties of the legato."³¹ The plucking mechanism in the harpsichord results in a shorter decay of the note, resulting a detached sound. In a performance on the piano, this detached articulation can be considered to assist in capturing the character. The harpsichord's inability to sustain notes was thought to be remedied by

³¹ Kosovske 102.

arpeggiating the chords to prolong the harmony, this is another aspect which can be considered on the piano.³²

Couperin's music is heavily ornamented and, because of the differences between the two keyboard instruments, the execution of the ornamentation will require some exploration and adjustments. Although one of the features of the harpsichord is that there is far less standardisation across instruments, it is mostly the case that the action on most harpsichords is considerably faster and shallower than that of a modern piano. On the piano, this can result in an added difficulty in the execution of the ornaments, particularly at fast tempi. Clarity, and therefore time, is necessary in the performance of the ornaments, otherwise they will blend into the surrounding texture and create unnecessary dissonance and muddiness.

³² Kosovske 102.

Chapter Two

Preparing Couperin's *Vingt-cinquième ordre*

Couperin's twenty-fifth *ordre* is found in his fourth book of keyboard pieces and it is one of his last compositions. Although the work was inspired by dance music, Couperin did not specify exactly which dance form was used for each movement. Instead, the character, metre, structure and rhythmic characteristics suggest certain dance forms. In my performance of Couperin's work, I drew on the available evidence of the performance practices of the French Clavecin School to assist in developing my interpretation. I did not attempt to emulate the sound of the harpsichord directly, instead I adapted the capabilities of the modern piano to capture the character and spirit of the work. In this chapter, the discussion of each movement is broken down into two categories: interpreting the score and execution on the piano.

Movement 1: "La Visionaire"

Interpreting the Score

The title, "La Visionaire," refers to the character of the "visionary." In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this was a person who was consumed by imagination and fanaticism; such characters were seen as irrational and could be characterised by a "state of exultation or intense excitement."¹ In the composition of this movement, Couperin utilised the French overture form. In keeping with the typical structure of the form, the first section is slow and stately. It is marked *gravemente et marqué* (grave and marked) and I interpret this character as capturing the visionary's state of exultation. The irrational aspect of the visionary may be alluded to through the demi-semi-quaver *tirades* as I interpret the unpredictability of these to represent impetuosity. The second section is marked *viste* (quickly) and the character is energetic and playful. As this section progresses, the *tirades* of the first section return, allowing for the visionary's irrational character to mix with the energetic and excitable feeling.

In determining a tempo that will most effectively bring out the character, I considered both the metre and the descriptive words. The metre is written as a 2, a symbol used almost

¹ Philippe Beaussant, *François Couperin*, Ed. Reinhard G. Pauly (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990) 332.

exclusively by the French composers of the Baroque period. In his treatise, Saint-Lambert refers to this as the binary metre, which is performed with two minim beats per bar.² This is not to be mistaken with the “cut common time” symbol, which implies two slow beats per bar; the binary metre indicates two light beats per bar, suggesting a faster and livelier tempo. In my performance, I drew from both the tempo implied by the metre as well as the descriptive words to prevent the opening from sounding too static.

The ornamentation Couperin included in this movement is the *pincé simple* (inverted mordent), the *port de voix simple* (appoggiatura with an inverted mordent) and the *tremblement* (trill). I executed each of these according to Couperin’s table of ornaments. The *pincé simple* in bars 19-21 have a rhythmic function (Ex. 2.1). Although the French *Clavecinistes* performed the mordent on the beat, I played them before the beat. I found that at the chosen tempo, playing them on the beat created a triplet effect and the rhythmic drive and flow became interrupted. On the piano, I found the execution before the beat more accurately reflected the character of the music and so in this case, I favoured character over literal replication of the French Clavecin performance practices. In my interpretation, each of the mordents remained very rhythmic to reflect the energetic and playful character of the music.



Ex. 2.1. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 1, bars 18-20.

Rhythmic flexibility was used in the performance of this movement (see page 9), which allowed time for the harmony and ornamentation to be heard properly. The cadence at bars 20-21 (Ex. 2.2) acts as a full stop and so, in my performance, a *ritardando* was used here.

² Michel de Saint-Lambert, *Principles of the Harpsichord*, Trans. Rebecca Harris-Warrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 37.



Ex. 2.2. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 1, bars 20-21.

In bars 23-24 (Ex. 2.3), the cadence has a different function; it leads to the next chord and so I reflected this in the harmonic and melodic lines by playing with a sense of continuation rather than with a sense of completion. This was done through a slight flexibility in the tempo and by listening to both the bass and melody notes as they progressed from one chord to the next.



Ex. 2.3. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 1, bars 23-24.

In the preface to his third book of *ordre*, Couperin described his use of the comma marking in his music:

It is to mark the end of a melody or of my harmonic phrases, and to make it clear that players should make a little break at the end of a melodic phrase before going on to the next. Generally, it is almost imperceptible, although when this little silence is not observed people of taste feel that something is missing from the performance; in a word, it is the difference between those who read through without a break and those who stop at full stops and commas. In observing these the tempo must not change.³

³ François Couperin qtd. in David Tunley, *Francois Couperin and 'the Perfection of Music'* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004) 141.

These commas were described by Roy Howat as “poised breathing commas”⁴ and he noted that Couperin executed them with a “fractionally delayed attack”.⁵ In my performance, I interpreted the comma marked midway between shorter phrases or at minor cadence points to suggest a sense of continuation and so a slight pause or gap in the sound created the effect needed. The comma marking at major cadence points were performed with a sense of rounding off and completion; these were executed with a small *ritardando*, creating flexibility in the tempo. These comma markings occur throughout Couperin’s twenty-fifth *ordre* and in each instance I executed them in a similar manner as described here.

Execution on the piano

To assist in portraying the grand style of the overture in my interpretation, I drew from the performance techniques of the *Clavecinistes* and arpeggiated the opening chords. This added an extra depth to the tone and the arpeggiation implied a sense of grandeur. To further reflect the style of the French overture, I utilised the characteristic over-dotting of rhythms in my execution of the dotted quaver-semiquaver rhythms and *tirades*. The sustain pedal was not used in the execution of the *tirades* figures because I wanted to rely on the clarity to assist in conveying the irrational character. In a similar manner, the trills and mordents were not pedalled.

On the harpsichord, the sound of a note decays more quickly than on a modern piano, so minims and semibreves are often unable to be sustained for their full value. On the piano, these notes allow the harmony to be sustained and create a strong harmonic foundation for the melody. This aspect of the piano will be particularly helpful in bars 8-10 where both the melody and the harmony are more slow-moving. In my performance on the piano, each individual voice was projected with a different tone or dynamic to ensure they did not sound the same. This is much harder to achieve on the harpsichord because of its inability to perform graduated dynamics. Defining each voice on the piano helped with the interplay between the voices and allowed for their independence. In bars 3-4 (Ex. 2.4), the top and bottom voices begin with the same sequence, a third apart, with the middle voice filling in between the sustained notes. In bars 5-6 (Ex. 2.4), each voice has its own individual line and throughout this passage, I aimed to project the melody while playing the two other voices

⁴ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 2009) 153.

⁵ Howat 361.

with a different tone colour. Consistency of tone within each of the voices allowed each line to be easily heard.



Ex. 2.4. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 1, bars 3-6.

In my performance, I embraced the notion that the *Clavecinistes* used all the colours possible on their instrument and so, I utilised the piano's dynamic and colouristic capabilities. One example of this is the first chord in bar 8, which marked the beginning of the second phrase (Ex. 2.5). Compared to the opening of the movement, this phrase is in a higher register and the texture is thinner. As a result of this, I performed it with a chime-like tone to assist in creating the more tranquil mood. In contrast to this, the opening phrase was performed in a strong and direct manner to portray the grand and stately character.



Ex. 2.5. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 1, bars 7-8.

Throughout the second phrase (bars 8-10), I felt the descending harmony suggested a decrescendo as it moved through its progression. While this was executed, I was careful to ensure that the tone of each note remained consistent. In bars 25 and 26 (Ex. 2.6), the rising melodic line suggests increasing intensity and so a crescendo was used to create this. To capture the character of the second section (marked *viste*), I used a detached style of playing to create energy and to suggest playfulness. To further portray the character, I played the notes with a fast attack to assist in producing an articulated, clean and clear tone.



Ex. 2.6. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 1, bars 25-26.

Movement 2: “La Mistérieuse”

Interpreting the Score

The character of “La Mistérieuse” (the mysterious one) is captured mainly through unusual modulations, chromaticism and the tempo. The common time metre, implying four slow beats in a bar, as well as the *Modérément* marking suggest a slow to moderate tempo.⁶ This movement bears similarities to the Allemande, a dance form that was usually placed first or second in a dance suite and was performed at a moderate speed in quadruple metre. Mather and Karns note that the Allemande often began with an upbeat of three quick notes and the music was written in two to four voices.⁷ These are all qualities that are found in “La Mistérieuse”.

The *coulés*, found in Couperin’s ornament table (see Appendix), are indicated by a two-note slur and are executed by shortening the first note to give the second note a longer duration (see page 6). In bars 3 and 5 (Ex. 2.7), I chose to use the *coulés* ornamentation on the semiquavers on beat one to create rhythmic variety.

⁶ Jean-Claude Veilhan, *The Rules of Musical Interpretation in the Baroque Era* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1979) 1.

⁷ Betty Mather and Dean Karns, *Dance Rhythms of the French Baroque: A Handbook for Performance*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 211.



Ex. 2.7. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 2, bars 3-5.

Another of Couperin's score markings, a straight line between two notes (Ex. 2.8), is not explained in any of his writings. However, the same marking can be found in Foucquet's ornament table where it is said to be executed with a strong legato with overlapping of the notes.⁸



Ex. 2.8. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 2, bar 8.

Throughout, Couperin has marked trills over semiquaver notes. In these cases, there is not a sufficient amount of time to fit in a long trill and so I instead played this before the beat as a mordent. In bar 1, the mordent on the second semiquaver of beat two (Ex. 2.9) was played lightly before the beat, allowing for the rhythm to remain unchanged and marked.

⁸ Frederick Neumann, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music: With Special Emphasis on J.S. Bach* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1983) 76.



Ex. 2.9. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 2, bars 1-2 (with anacrusis).

Execution on the piano

Drawing from what is known of the French Clavecin performance practices, I played this movement with flexibility and freedom (see page 9). Forward motion assisted in the flow of the piece and the time taken at the end of a phrase, or to acknowledge a change in harmony, allowed for the music to breathe. This movement begins with a short motive played in an ascending sequence. To highlight the differences in register, I performed the sequence with flexibility, allowing for a slight delay during the semiquaver rest on beat two of bar one (Ex. 2.9).

In bars 9 and 10, tension is created through the changes in harmony as the rising bass line is heard against the repeated right-hand motive (Ex. 2.10). I aimed to convey a sense of breathlessness in the right hand motive by creating a forward motion with an *accelerando*. Additionally, I used a defined cut off, through the use of “aspiration”, for each G semiquaver, to ensure that the semiquaver rest was clearly heard. Tension and intensity was also created with a *crescendo* through the rising bass harmonic line.



Ex. 2.10. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 2, bars 9-10.

Balance is particularly important in this movement because there are often three voices present; these are variously used in imitation, as melody and accompaniment or in free counterpoint. Bars 2 and 3 provided an example of the interplay between the voices (Ex. 2.11). I performed each of these voices with a different colour, ensuring the tone was consistent within each voice. The top voice was played in a singing style and the bass supported this through the use of a rich and resonant tone. The middle voice was played with a mellow tone, setting it apart from the other two voices.



Ex. 2.11. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 2, bars 2-3.

Movement 3: “La Monflambert”

Interpreting the Score

It is not clear who Couperin’s inspiration for the third movement was because of the use of ‘La’ in the title. When used in a title, ‘La’ was often used as a shortened form of ‘La pièce pour’ and so “La Monflambert” does not necessarily refer to a feminine figure. It could either suggest the piece was written for François de la Monflambert, the King’s wine merchant, or for his wife.⁹ The music portrays a gentle character, which is reflected in the marking, *Tendrement, sans lenteur* (tenderly, without dragging). The 6/8 metre implies a tempo twice as fast as the French 6/4, suggesting a moving tempo.¹⁰ In my performance, the metre was felt in two beats per bar; this created a gentle rocking quality which assisted in creating the tender character. This movement could reflect the passacaille (or passacaglia) dance form. The passacaille often uses a bass line moving from scales degrees one, seven, six

⁹ Wilfrid Howard Mellers, *François Couperin and the French Classical Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) 433.

¹⁰ Veilhan 6.

and five, and the form is often in a minor key, which can be seen in this movement.¹¹ The movement could also be a minuet in compound time, which would reflect the gentle character of the music.

The ornamentation in the piece includes inverted mordents, trills, the legato line between two notes and a trill-turn combination, which is an ornament not addressed in Couperin's table of ornaments. After I consulted the realisation of other ornaments in the table, I decided to perform the trill-turn combination by beginning with a trill (this varied in length depending on the note value) and following it with a turn which lead into the following note. The first occurrence of this ornament is in bar 3 (Ex. 2.12).



Ex. 2.12. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 3, bars 1-3.

Execution on the piano

One can assume Couperin desired a sense of sustaining in this piece because of the notation of the left-hand rhythms (Ex. 2.12). Many of the notes are given longer values to show that they should be sustained for the full extent of each harmony. The harpsichord is not capable of sustaining notes for as extended a period of time as a modern piano and so my performance allowed for each note to be held for its full value; this created a fuller harmony. Instead of using the pedal to create a legato and sustained effect, I physically held these notes to maintain the clarity that would have been heard in a performance on the harpsichord. I did use the sustain pedal to add a touch of resonance to each note. However, I only used shallow pedal, changed frequently, to maintain the clarity.

I aimed to utilise the variety of colours available on the piano. Keeping this in mind, I performed the swirling semiquavers in bars 10 and 13-14 with a rounded but bright tone (Ex. 2.13). In these bars, the lower register of the left hand created the need to play with a faster, direct attack to create a clear and bright sound, rather than a mellow sound. This assisted in matching the brighter tone of the right hand in the higher register. On the harpsichord, this

¹¹ Mather and Karns 278.

semiquaver figure might sound less legato and rounded because of the plucked attack. This is one such situation where the modern piano can provide a different way of making the movement sound graceful and expressive.



Ex. 2.13. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 3, bars 13-14.

The descending bass line of the opening two phrases (bars 1-8) assists with movement in the piece, ensuring the music does not become stuck with a constant lilt. As the bass descended, I performed the phrase in a continuous motion without accenting each dotted crotchet beat. The descending bass notes move the phrase forward and the top voice of the left hand can be used to add depth to the harmony. In my performance, I played in two beats per bar, as suggested by the metre. This ensured that the left hand sounded light while still creating a lilting, graceful feeling.

While it is not necessary to emulate the harpsichord, the use of a portato touch can provide a welcome contrast to the sustained notes. I used this technique in bars 11, 15 and 19 in the left hand quavers (Ex. 2.14). In bar 12, I executed the left hand trill without taking any time in order to show the continuation of the harmonic line (Ex. 2.14). The breath mark at the end of bar 12 was only observed in the right hand while the left hand line continued through to the resolution on the first beat of bar 13.



Ex. 2.14. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 3, bars 11-13.

Movement 4: “La Muse victorieuse”

Interpreting the Score

The character of “La Muse victorieuse” is captured through the fanfare-like opening and the instruction to play *Audacieusement* (audaciously), suggesting to perform the movement in a bold and spirited manner. The 3/8 metre was known to the French *Clavecinistes* as the minor triple; they thought it twice as fast as the moderate tempo of the 3/4 metre and because of this fast speed it was often performed with a feeling of one beat in a bar.¹² I performed the movement in this manner, feeling each bar in a single dotted crotched beat. This prevented the music from sounding too heavy and allowed the energy to be conveyed more convincingly. The dance form reflected in this piece is the Canarie, a gigue-like form in triple time, which begins on the second beat.¹³ There is a sense of joy in the piece, which I attempted to portray with forward motion, driving rhythms and a sense of excitement.

The main form of ornamentation found in this movement is the trill. In some instances, the fast paced tempo and the busy rhythmic passages did not allow for the trill to be played in full; in these cases, I used a mordent instead. Bars 2-4 (Ex. 2.15) was one instance which allowed for an extended trill. In order to highlight the rhythmic function of the ornament, I began from the note above, playing on the beat in a metronomic manner; this assisted in driving the music forward.



Ex. 2.15. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 4, bars 1-4.

The ornaments in bars 5-6 also had a rhythmic function but these were played before the beat as a mordent instead of a trill (Ex. 2.16); this allowed for a more driving and energetic

¹² Veilhan 8.

¹³ Mather and Karns 231.

rhythm because the underlying pulse was not affected. It also enabled the articulation of the following semiquavers to be shorter and livelier.



Ex. 2.16. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 4, bars 5-7.

In the music, these trills are connected to the preceding note by a slur. This can be seen in Couperin's ornament table in the example with the title *tremblement lié sans être appuyé*. Here he instructs that the ornament should be tied to the preceding note, then fall to the written note to start the trill. On the last quaver of each of these bars, Couperin included an "aspiration" mark. I was careful to ensure that these notes were played in the correct manner (see page 7).

In a similar manner, I used a mordent played before the beat in bars 18 and 19 to assist in the forward movement of the rhythm (Ex. 2.17). In bar 7 (Ex. 2.16), the notation suggested Couperin's *coulés* (see page 6), which I used in my performance to create a higher level of energy through the use of the added shorter notes. In bar 73 (Ex. 2.18), the inverted mordent in the right hand was anticipated so that it could be heard distinctly from the ornamentation in the left hand (trill-turn combination).



Ex. 2.17. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 4, bars 18-19.



Ex. 2.18. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 4, bars 73-74.

Execution on the piano

This movement opens with an upbeat of semiquavers on the second and third quaver beats. I was careful to ensure that this upbeat did not land on the downbeat of bar 2 with an accent (Ex. 2.15). Instead I performed it in a light manner through an upward motion of the hand. This then allowed for a downward motion at the beginning of the trill and created a slight syncopated effect by accenting the weaker beat.

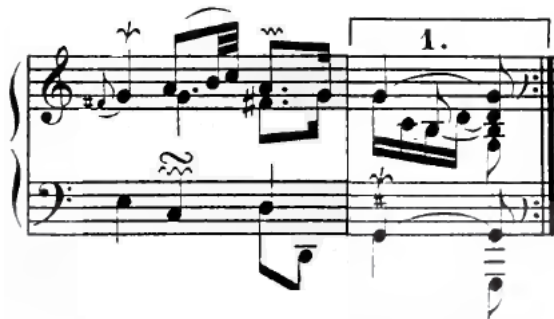
Drawing on the documented performance practices of the French Clavecinistes, I aimed to play the movement with as much clarity and precision as possible, and this assisted in capturing the spirited character. To maintain the clarity, the pedal was only used sparingly to create occasional resonance without forming unnecessary dissonances. I used a half pedal technique at the start of each bar from bars 17-23, which I released before the second quaver pulse to avoid unwanted dissonance (Ex. 2.19). This pedalling lent resonance to the bass notes while allowing the right hand notes to remain clear.



Ex. 2.19. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 4, bars 17-20.

At two of the major cadences (bars 30 and 70), Couperin included a bar with an extended duration (Ex. 2.20). These are written as if in 3/4 time and, as a result, the bars create a sense of broadening because of the difference in note grouping (crotchet grouping, as

opposed to quaver grouping). I did not incorporate a large *ritardando* at these cadence points because of the broadening effect already created by the extended bars. Instead, I used a *poco ritardando* at the arrival of the final bar in each of these cadences.



Ex. 2.20. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 4, bar 30-31.

Movement 5: “Les Ombres Errantes”

Interpreting the Score

The title “Les Ombres Errantes” (the wandering souls) refers to the lost souls of Greek Mythology who could not descend to hades.¹⁴ To assist in capturing the sorrowful character implied by this image, Couperin marked the movement with the word *Languissamment* (Languidly), meaning slow-moving and showing little vitality. This movement is composed in the binary metre (see page 12-13), implying that the music must still have a sense of movement despite the instruction to play in a languid manner. Rather than reflecting a certain dance type in the music, Couperin instead composed the movement using the *style brisé* technique, which can be seen through the suspensions of harmony and delays in resolution.¹⁵ This technique creates moments of dissonance and uncertainty in the harmonic movement as well as interplay between the main melody and the other voices, assisting in evoking the shadowy and elusive character of the wandering souls.

Execution on the piano

In this movement, the music contains a sense of immense beauty mixed with sorrow. To assist in portraying this combination in my performance, I aimed to play with a mellow,

¹⁴ Angela Hewitt, *François Couperin Keyboard Music*, Vol 1. By F. Couperin, Hyperion Records, 2002.

¹⁵ Tunley 115.

rather than bright, tone; this was done to prevent the piece from sounding too direct and forced. This mellow tone was achieved by using a soft attack and by moving fluidly between each note.

The dissonances created by the *style brisé* technique were clearly heard throughout the movement by the overlapping of notes created by physically holding down the keys for the full duration indicated on the score (Ex. 2.21). However, in the instances where this was not possible, I used the sustain pedal to ensure the notes were held for their full duration, although this was only used sparingly. I also made use of the *una corda* pedal in the first and last phrases to give a sense of a more distant sound.



Ex. 2.21. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 5, bars 1-2 (with anacrusis).

Throughout the movement, Couperin used sighing figures, which I performed with a slight decrescendo from one note to the next. The opening sighing figures in the right hand (Ex. 2.21) were played in this way and I was sure to pay particular attention not to accent the trills on the second note of each figure. From bar 8, Couperin wrote the sighing figures in interplay with the melody (Ex. 2.22). I performed them clearly while being careful not to overpower the melodic line.



Ex. 2.22. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 5, bars 8-10.

Throughout, I played with flexibility and a sense of forward motion, as implied by the metre. I discovered that too much rubato would cause the pulse to become unsteady and tension would not have the opportunity to be built because of the interrupted flow. In my performance, the use of occasional rubato added to the beauty of the music while still allowing the piece to move forward.

Chapter Three

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

It is now a long time since our three great composers, after a century of German dominance, recognized the freshness, humour and refinement of our clavecin composers.¹

The decline of the French Clavecin School in the mid-eighteenth century can be attributed to political changes, the fusion of French music with other styles and the growing dominance of foreign music (both German and Italian) which lasted for a period of over one hundred years, from the mid eighteenth century to the mid-late nineteenth century. A major turning point for this period of music was France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871.² This brought about the founding of musical societies, one of them being the Société Nationale de Musique. The society's motto was "ars gallica" and their aim was to promote French music and the public performance of new music by French composers.³ In addition to this, there was an increasing interest in the older styles of music; this is reflected in a number of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century works including Ravel's *Menuet Antique* (1895) and Debussy's *Hommage à Rameau* (1904).

Ravel's composition style covered a vast range of genres. He is known for retrospectivism in a number of his compositions, which display a fusion of the old and new.⁴ Orenstein suggests that the clarity and elegance of Ravel's piano music derives from the music of Scarlatti and the French *Clavecinistes* while its colour and virtuosity can be attributed to the influence of Chopin and Liszt.⁵ Ravel regarded himself as a classicist because of his use of traditional forms and his reliance on past compositions as models for his own compositions;⁶ *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is an example of one such work.

¹ Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Ravel*, Ed. Pierre Laumonier, Trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London: Dent, 1973) 94.

² Michael Creasman Strasser, "Ars Gallica: The *Société Nationale de Musique* and its Role in French Musical Life, 1871-1891," PhD Diss. (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1998) 86.

³ Strasser 306.

⁴ Chih-Yi Chen, "Synthesis of Tradition and Innovation: A Study of Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*," DMus Diss. (Indiana University, 2013) 24.

⁵ Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975) 136.

⁶ Barbara L. Kelly, "History and Homage," *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 18.

Ravel's *Le Tombeau* was composed between 1914 and 1917 and pays homage to the French *Clavecinistes*. The term *tombeau* was first used in the sixteenth century for poetry that was written as a memorial.⁷ In the mid seventeenth century, the term became widely used in instrumental music where the genre was used not only for the harpsichord, but for the lute and viol as well. Some French Clavecin examples of the Tombeau include Louis Couperin's *Tombeau de Monsieur Blancrocher* and D'Anglebert's *Tombeau de Monsieur Chambonnières*. The term was revived by some French composers in the twentieth century as a way to establish a connection to the French musical past.⁸ Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, which began as a tribute to the French *Clavecinistes*, was interrupted by the events of the First World War. Upon returning to the composition, Ravel dedicated each of the six movements to friends who had died in the fighting. Despite the title and the dedication, the work does not have a funerary character.

Before he composed *Le Tombeau*, Ravel was already familiar with the compositions of the French *Clavecinistes*. Anthologies of French Clavecin compositions had started to be published during the second half of the nineteenth century and performances of these works were becoming more common.⁹ The first complete edition of Couperin's harpsichord works, edited by Johannes Brahms and Friedrich Chrysander, was published in 1888.¹⁰ As this was the most recent published edition available, Ravel would certainly have used this, and other French Clavecin works, as inspiration for his neo-classical compositions. Ravel was known to build on the music of others and he believed that composers should follow models developed by their predecessors. In further reference to Ravel's knowledge of the French Clavecin School, harpsichordist Wanda Landowska claimed that Couperin's *Arlequine* was Ravel's favourite piece.¹¹

In preparation for the composition of the work, Ravel transcribed for piano the Forlane from Couperin's fourth *Concerts Royaux* (Ex. 3.1). Couperin's Forlane was not composed for a specific instrument and so it can be performed by solo harpsichord or a small ensemble of instruments. In contrast to Couperin's original, Ravel's transcription makes use of closer textures and includes added notes in the middle voice to fill out the harmonies.

⁷ Michael Tilmouth and David Ledbetter, "Tombeau (i)," *Grove Music Online*, Accessed 15 Mar. 2015 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>>.

⁸ Tilmouth and Ledbetter.

⁹ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 2009) 146.

¹⁰ The next edition was not published until 1933, by Editions de l'Oiseau Lyre.

¹¹ H.H Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel: Variations on his Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Co, 1968) 173.

Ravel has written out the ornamentation, following Couperin's instructions for the execution of each ornament. However, Ravel omitted some of the ornamentation and "aspiration" markings and, in the fourth Couplet, he added acciaccatura's to the top voice (Ex. 3.2). It seems this was most likely intended as an attempt to make the work more pianistic.

The image shows a musical score for Ravel's transcription of Couperin's *Forlane*, bars 1-18. The score is in 6/8 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). It consists of four systems of piano accompaniment. The first system is labeled "Refrain" and begins with a fermata. The second system is labeled "Fin 1st Couplet". The third system is unlabeled. The fourth system is labeled "2nd Couplet" and begins with a fermata. The notation includes various ornaments and acciaccaturas in the top voice.

Ex. 3.1. Ravel's transcription of Couperin's *Forlane*, fourth *Concerts Royaux*, bars 1-18.

4th Couplet

Ex. 3.2. Ravel's transcription of Couperin's *Forlane*, fourth *Concerts Royaux*, bars 68-76.

In a similar manner to Ravel, I immersed myself in the study of Couperin and the French Clavecin School, resulting in the performance of the twenty-fifth *ordre* detailed in the previous chapter. This assisted in my attempt to capture the spirit of the French *Clavecinistes* and the influences of the study can be heard in my performance of Ravel's work; these included the use of flexibility, playing with *la douceur du toucher*, the execution of ornaments and awareness of rhythmic cadences. In *Le Tombeau*, Ravel's incorporation of French Baroque characteristics provides the first step in capturing this spirit. In the following discussion of *Le Tombeau*, I first give an overview of the suite, followed by a discussion of Ravel's incorporation of French Baroque elements and the influences of the Couperin study on the performance this work.

The Suite

In the music of *Le tombeau de Couperin*, the grace, elegance and charm that characterized 18th-century classic French music is retained. It is not a pastiche, however, for Ravel has dressed his music in 20th-Century clothes.¹²

Ravel's suite consists of six movements: Prelude, Fugue, Forlane, Rigaudon, Menuet and Toccata, and each is composed in a Baroque form. However, only the Prelude, Forlane, Rigaudon and Menuet were genres widely used by the French *Clavecinistes*. The preludes of

¹² Nancy Bricard, *Le tombeau de Couperin*, By Maurice Ravel (New York: Alfred Publishing, 2003) 9.



Ex. 3.4. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Fugue, bars 3-4.

The Forlane was a courtship dance originating in northern Italy in the sixteenth century. It was energetic and was characterised by a bright compound duple metre in *rondeau* form.¹⁷ Ravel's Forlane was composed with these qualities and in addition to this, it closely aligns with his transcription of Couperin's Forlane (Ex. 3.1 and 3.2). In the Forlane from *Le Tombeau*, Ravel used the characteristic dotted rhythm and long-short rhythm patterns (Ex. 3.5) which were used in the Couperin transcription and he has also utilised the episodic structure of the *rondeau* form.



Ex. 3.5. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Forlane, bars 3-4.

The ornamentation in Ravel's transcription of Couperin's Forlane consists predominantly of upper and lower mordents and Ravel incorporated this into his Forlane. In the fourth couplet, Ravel's transcription changes rhythmically, from the dotted rhythms to a smoother quaver passage (Ex. 3.2). Ravel emulated this in the *Le Tombeau* Forlane in bars 140-155 (Ex. 3.6).

¹⁷ Hudson 92.



Ex. 3.6. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Forlane, bars 142-144.

In closely aligning the Forlane in *Le Tombeau* to Couperin's *Forlane*, Ravel achieved a clear connection to the past. To complement this, Ravel filled the music with early twentieth-century harmonic colours; this included the use of augmented, diminished, seventh and ninth chords as well as chromaticism. As a result of this, the Forlane is the clearest example of the fusion of the French musical past and present in *Le Tombeau*.¹⁸

The Rigaudon was a lively folk dance in duple metre; characterised by the simplicity of rhythm and phrasing.¹⁹ Ravel's example of the dance is in ternary form; the animated and energetic A section is interrupted in the middle by a lyrical trio (bar 37) before returning to the reprise of the A section (bar 93). The hand crossing technique and hand interlocking passages found in the movement can be seen in Rameau's *Les Cyclopes*, among other French Clavecin works.²⁰ In the B section (bar 37), Ravel marked the pedalling with no release sign (Ex. 3.7), contradicting the staccato articulation seen in both the left and right hands. In my performance, I pedalled every half bar to sustain and release each hand when needed in order to maintain clarity. I also used the pedal to give the left hand accompaniment added colour and resonance.

¹⁸ Chen 23.

¹⁹ Young Kyoung Kwon, "A Performer's Study of the Piano Sonata by Aaron Copland and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* by Maurice Ravel," DMA Diss. (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth Texas, 2009) 84.

²⁰ Chiao-Ting Lan, "The Performance of Maurice Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* based on the Analysis of Performance Practices, Interpretive Aspects and Technical Challenges," DMA Lecture Recital (University of Miami, 2007) 20.



Ex. 3.7. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Rigaudon, bars 37-40.

The Menuet in *Le Tombeau* is tender and gentle in character and, like most Menuets, it is composed in ternary form. The middle section (bar 34), a Musette, is a style of music composed with a pastorale quality and emulates the sound of musettes (a bagpipe-like instrument), which in this movement is heard through a drone bass.²¹ At the return of the A section (bar 74), the musette theme overlaps with the opening theme, creating a smooth transition into the final section of the movement. The French Baroque character is captured mainly through the homophonic texture, the simple formal structure and the use of ornamentation.

The Toccata provides a brilliant and virtuosic ending to the suite. The word toccata derives from the Italian word, *toccare*, meaning ‘to touch’ and, is typically a fast-moving, virtuosic piece. The toccata was not widely used as a specific genre in the French Baroque. However, the *Clavecinistes* did know how to compose and perform virtuosic works, which is seen in Couperin’s writings in *L’Art de toucher* as well as other treatises from the French Clavecin School. The French Clavecin virtuosic compositions were often characterised by a strong rhythmic drive and perpetual motion; some examples include Couperin’s “Le Tic-Toc-Choc ou les Maillotins” from *Pièces de Clavecin, book 3* and Rameau’s “Le Cyclopes” from *Pièces de Clavecin, Suite in D Major*.²² In my performance of the toccata, I aimed to play with clarity and evenness to reflect the style of the *Clavecinistes*.

²¹ Lan 21.

²² Hudson 116.

French Clavecin School Influences

Along with his reference to the tradition of the *tombeau*, Ravel also incorporated many other elements which assist in connecting the work to the French musical past. Bricard noted that this connection was made through the clarity of writing, ornamentation and the use of the suite form.²³ During the time of the French Clavecin School, the suite was unified by mood and tonality; as can be seen in Couperin's *ordres*. In keeping with this, Ravel unified his work by using the key of E minor for the Prelude, Fugue, Forlane and Toccata. For the two remaining movements, he used the relative major for the Menuet and for the Rigaudon, he used C major, the submediant key of E minor. In addition to this, Ravel also unified the work through the nostalgic character of the Fugue, Forlane, Menuet and the lyrical section of the Rigaudon.

In the minor-key movements, Ravel often avoided the use of the raised leading note, which results in the E Aeolian mode. The use of this mode was common in the French music of Ravel's time. His use of the mode in *Le Tombeau*, while it is not the only possible use of this mode, was to give the music an archaic quality. This did not provide a direct connection to the French Baroque, but rather allowed it to give the impression of an older style of music. There is no direct connection because by the time of the French Clavecin School, the major-minor system was relatively well established and so modes were used in the music less frequently.

Ornamentation was relied upon by Couperin and the French *Clavecinistes* to create emphasis on certain notes or to achieve heightened expression. As mentioned in Chapter One, ornaments could have either a rhythmic or melodic function; this knowledge assisted in the execution of Ravel's ornaments. Ravel drew from the French Baroque tradition and used ornamentation in four of the six movements. A majority of the time, the ornaments appear in the form of mordents and inverted mordents; these are executed in the same manner as the *pincé simple* from Couperin's table of ornaments. The mordents in the Prelude and Forlane generally have a rhythmic function (Ex. 3.8 and 3.9); as can be seen in Couperin's *La Muse victorieuse* (Ex. 3.10). In contrast to this, the mordents in the Rigaudon and Menuet have an expressive function (Ex. 3.11 and 3.12); this expressive use of ornamentation was used by Couperin in *La Mistérieuse* and *Les Ombres Errantes* (Ex. 3.13 and 3.14).

²³ Bricard 9.



Ex. 3.8. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Prelude, bar 10.



Ex. 3.9. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Forlane, bars 84-85.



Ex. 3.10. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 4, bars 3-6.



Ex. 3.11. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Rigaudon, bars 78-80.



Ex. 3.12. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin, Menuet*, bars 1-3.



Ex. 3.13. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 2, bar 1 (with anacrusis).



Ex. 3.14. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 5, bar 1 (with anacrusis).

Ravel alluded to the texture of harpsichord music through a sparser writing style than he used in works such as *Gaspard de la nuit* and *Miroirs*.²⁴ Additionally, the semiquaver patterns found in the work are reminiscent of similar patterns from the music of Couperin and other French *Clavecinistes*.²⁵ For example, the patterns that oscillate around a central note can be seen in both Ravel's *Prelude* and Couperin's *La Muse victorieuse* (Ex. 3.15 and 3.16). Ravel desired clarity in these semiquaver passages, just as the French *Clavecinistes* did in

²⁴ Hudson 124.

²⁵ Hudson 125.

their works. In a similar manner to my approach in *La Muse victorieuse*, I aimed to lend as much clarity as possible to Ravel's Prelude, rather than yielding to a more conventional temptation to make it "impressionistic." Ravel marked the uninterrupted flow of semiquavers to be played with the sustain pedal, although there are no pedal release signs. To create the clarity Ravel desired, shallow pedal, changed frequently was used in my performance.



Ex. 3.15. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Prelude, bars 1-2.



Ex. 3.16. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin, vingt-cinquième ordre*, mvt. 4, bars 10-12.

From the acquired knowledge of the French Clavecin School, it became apparent that dance music was performed in such a way that the performer brought out the character as well as capturing the dance movement. This was achieved by emphasising the characteristic rhythmic cadence of each dance form (see page 8). In the performance of these works, it is this cadence which gives the music its dance-like qualities. From the application of the rhythmic cadence in my performance of Couperin's twenty-fifth *ordre*, I was able to apply it to my performance of *Le Tombeau*. However, it was not a straightforward task because although Ravel's dance movements incorporated many of the characteristics of the particular dance form, they did not always follow the characteristic rhythmic cadences.

In Ravel's *Forlane*, the characteristic compound rhythm can be heard throughout the movement. In my performance, the rhythmic cadence was brought out wherever possible. The cadence was captured with a strong emphasis on the dotted note on beat one, followed by

a lighter semiquaver and a moderately emphasised quaver which then led to the strong emphasis on the accented note on beat two (Ex. 3.17).



Ex. 3.17. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Forlane, bars 1-3.

The rhythmic cadence of Ravel's Menuet generally consists of an emphasised downbeat with a lighter beat two and three. However, throughout there are instances where this is varied, such as in bar 1 (Ex. 3.18). Here emphasis is placed on both the first and third beats; Ravel indicates the emphasis on beat three with a tenuto marking and this can be seen in various places throughout the work. In bar 3, Ravel has also varied the cadence with the implication for more emphasis on the second beat as a result of the ornamentation played on this beat.



Ex. 3.18. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Menuet, bars 1-3.

The approach to phrasing and flexibility in the French Clavecin School gave me cause to think about the structure of each movement and how each phrase was to be executed in a way that reflected this particular performance practice. This included the use of articulatory silences and the observation of the movement within a phrase and connection between phrases. The articulatory silences were suggested by Ravel through the use of mezzo staccatos and slurs. In the first two bars of the Menuet, articulatory silences can be seen

through the use of mezzo staccatos (Ex. 3.18). The use of articulatory silences can also be seen in the subject of the Fugue through the slurs and mezzo staccatos; this provided many opportunities to incorporate these silences (Ex. 3.3).

Much like the flexibility for which I aimed in my performance of Couperin's *La Visionnaire* or *La Mistérieuse*, I approached Ravel's work in a similar way. Flexibility within the phrase can be heard, for one example, in the slow section of the Rigaudon; this assists with expression and lyricism. At certain points, such as the harmonic change from bars 68-69 (Ex. 3.19), time was taken to highlight the shift in harmony, rather than just glancing over it. I also performed the Fugue in this manner, allowing for the give and take of time, to prevent it from sounding monotonous. Without this flexibility during and at the ends of phrases, the beauty in the Fugue will be less apparent.



Ex. 3.19. Ravel, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Rigaudon, bars 67-69.

In the French Clavecin School, musicians aimed to produce *la douceur du toucher* (the sweetness of touch) and exploited the colouristic possibilities of the harpsichord (see page 9-10). In addition to the use of these harpsichord techniques in my performance of Couperin's work, I also incorporated it into my approach to Ravel's work. I adapted the *Clavecinistes'* intent to explore the colours of their instrument by utilising the different colours possible on the piano. This was achieved through the use of the pedals and varieties of touch applied to the instrument. Colours in the music assist in creating the mood or character of a piece, and often the composer does not provide much guidance in the score to assist with determining these colours. An exception to this is the Musette in Ravel's Menuet where he marked *sourdine (una corda)*, suggesting a mellow or distant sound. Additionally, the knowledge that a Musette imitates bagpipes, and is played with a pastore quality, assists with finding the colours needed. As well as using the *una corda* pedal, I played the right hand chords with a slow attack to create a round and mellow sound. These colours, as well as the long phrases and gentle lilt, assisted in capturing the pastore quality.

Concluding Remarks

The study of the French Clavecin School assisted in developing my interpretation of Couperin's twenty-fifth *ordre* for a performance on the piano. In transferring this work from the harpsicord to the piano, I did not attempt to directly emulate the original instrument. This allowed for the exploration of different tone colours through the exploitation of the piano's capabilities. During the study, it became evident that a French Clavecin work could not be played without a feeling of elegance and grace. This feeling was used in the approach to Couperin's work; where careful placement of beats and voicing created a sense of poise and refinement. It was then continued in Ravel's work, particularly in the Fugue, Forlane and Menuet. Many of the performance practices applied to Couperin's work were able to be applied to Ravel's, consolidating the connection to the French Clavecin School.

The study then culminated in a recital of French works; the program included Couperin's twenty-fifth *ordre*, Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and Debussy's *Épigraphes antiques*. Debussy's work embodies the ancient Greek and Egyptian civilisations and to capture the style, he relied on his imaginings of the music from each civilisation. The work tied in well with the performance of Ravel's *Le Tombeau* because of the similar manner in which the works were intended to reflect something of the past. As a result of all of the elements involved in the study, I believe that in my interpretation of both works I was able to capture something of the spirit of the French Clavecin School in my performance. The following concluding remarks will provide thoughts on my performance, the impact of the study and further applications.

The choice to perform Couperin and Ravel's works together resulted in an interesting and informed performance; one which would have been completely different if I had not studied Couperin's work first. In programming the works together, it opened up opportunities to find similarities between the two works and allowed me to use elements of the French Clavecin style to give Ravel's *Le Tombeau* a stronger connection to the French musical past. The pairing allowed my performance to have a sense of continuity within the program and it allowed the French characteristics and performance practices from Couperin's work to be clear in my mind. This then put me in the right mindset to perform *Le Tombeau* with a clear connection to the French *Clavecinistes*, using many aspects of this style in my interpretation.

This choice of programming gave the chance for audience members to be familiarised with the style of the French Clavecin School through the performance of Couperin's work. Following this with Ravel's work then invited the audience to make connections between the

style of the *Clavecinistes* and Ravel's *Le Tombeau*. The sense of continuity in the program encouraged the audience to hear similarities between the works and for those familiar with *Le Tombeau*, allowed them to hear the work in a different light.

In the study of Couperin's work, I discovered performance practices of the French Clavecin School that I had not been aware of previously. Without the knowledge of these, I would have performed the work differently. An example of this was the flexibility the French *Clavecinistes* used in the performance of their works. One view of Baroque music, particularly in piano music, is that it is to be played metronomically. However, this assumption is not true for the music of the *Clavecinistes*. Along with this, I assumed that different tone colours would not be used in the performance of Couperin's work. In fact, I discovered that the *Clavecinistes* exploited the colouristic possibilities of their instrument in order to capture the character and emotions. I was able to apply this, as well as many other performance practices, to my performance of the works by Couperin and Ravel.

Without the study of the French Clavecin School, my performance of *Le Tombeau* would have been influenced more by the impressionist style of playing rather than that of the French *Clavecinistes*. While Ravel was not strictly an impressionist composer, many of his piano works, such as *Gaspard de la nuit* and *Jeux d'eau*, use the textures and colours found in this style. The use of the term 'impressionist' was rejected by both Ravel and Debussy. However, it has come to be used to describe their music. I have approached *Le Tombeau* from the angle of the French Baroque in order to break through the impressionist generalisation.

Although it is obvious in the title that *Le Tombeau* is a tribute to the French *Clavecinistes*, without the study I would not have created a stronger connection to the *Clavecinistes* and I would not have embraced the performance practices used by them. In a performance of the Prelude, the interpretation will differ depending from which angle the work is approached. From an impressionist angle, the textures suggest heavier use of the pedal to blur the harmonies together. However, when approaching the work in the style of the French *Clavecinistes* the performer will find that the style suggests it be played with clarity, using only a light amount of pedal. Additionally, when approaching the work from this angle, I discovered that there is a sense of poise and grace used in the execution of French Clavecin works. Incorporating this into Ravel's work assisted in producing the desired sound and style of the French Baroque.

The form of programming used in this study can be applied to other works inspired by the past or by a composers' predecessor. Creating a program such as this will allow for a deeper relationship with the pieces; there will always be something to be learnt from pairing

an older work with a work inspired by it, even if it is not immediately evident. In any piece inspired by the past, the performer can assume that the composer had a specific sound and style in mind and it can be beneficial to look deeper into the connections between the piece and its inspiration from the past. In the case of *Le Tombeau*, Ravel's knowledge and understanding of the French Clavecin School would have been very different from the knowledge we have today and because of this, studying the connection between Ravel's and Couperin's pieces played an important role in discovering Ravel's intention for his work. Some examples for further study and programming include pairing Debussy's *Hommage à Rameau* with a work by Rameau or pairing Bach's *Overture in the French style* BWV 831 with a work by Couperin or another French Clavecin composer. A program of this sort will allow for an interesting and informative journey for both performer and audience alike.

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Appendix

François Couperin's Table of Ornaments

Explication des Agrémens, et des Signes.

Signe.

Pincé simple.

Effet.

Pincé double.

Effet.

Port de voix simple.

Effet.

Port de voix coulée.

Port de voix double.

Effet.

Tremblement appuyé,
et lié.

Tremblement ouvert.

Tremblement fermé.

Tremblement lié sans
être appuyé.

Effet.

Tremblement détaché.

Effet.

Accent.

Arpègement, en montant.

Effet.

Arpègement, en descendant.

Effet.

Coulés, dont les points marquent que la seconde note de chaque tems doit être plus appuyée.

Pincés diésés, et bémolisés.

Effet.

Pincé continu.

Effet.

Tremblement continu.

Effet.

Tierce coulée, en montant.

Effet.

Tierce coulée, en descendant.

Effet.

Signe. Signe.

Aspiration.

Effet.

Signe.

Suspension.

Effet.

Double. Double.

Effet.

Unisson.