

# Jean-Philippe Rameau Pièces de clavecin en concerts 1741

# Restoration

Robert Petre ~ *harpsichord* Bronwen Pugh ~ *violin I* Graham McPhail ~ *violin II*  The Pièces de clavecin en concerts are widely acknowledged as masterworks of the baroque chamber music repertoire. The five *Concerts* are made up of dramatic movements, dances, and slow movements of often ethereal beauty, and many of them were later reworked by Rameau for his sumptuous and highly successful operas. In 1741 this music represented the height of the avant-garde. The style of composition presaged in various aspects the early classical effects of 'modern' composers such as CPE Bach and Haydn. They were among the first works to explore the new idea of solo harpsichord music coloured or accompanied by string or wind instruments (the term '*en concerts*' carries a double meaning, referring both to this new concept of ensemble writing, as well as to the formal structure, grouped in suites). The *Pièces* also made clear distinctions between those in the sublime French style and those exemplifying the then fashionable Italian mode of unrestrained operatic expression and virtuoso display, which the French found both horrifying and yet somehow fascinating. For some, the Italian style represented a foreign offence against the noble principles of *le bon goât* (good taste); for others, it was the height of modernity and artistic progress. Some, including Rameau and Couperin, believed there was a third way, of combining the best elements of both to create *les goâts réunis* (as Couperin titled his second series of *Concerts*).

The present recording differs from many familiar versions in three inter-related ways: the instrumentation, the sound balance, and various aspects of the musical interpretation, particularly tempi and rhythm.

#### Instrumentation: version with two violins

The *Pièces de clavecin en concerts* were published by Rameau in several alternative versions. The score itself is laid out for a solo harpsichord, with parts for a violin and a bass viol, and this is the version in which they are almost invariably heard. A flute is often used to replace or double the violin, as sanctioned by Rameau in this edition. Here we present the alternative version which Rameau published at the same time, but which is much less often heard or recorded: that is, for solo harpsichord, and **two** violins.

This is not a second-best or faute de mieux alternative. Rameau writes in his preface 'J'ai fait graver à part le 2e violon, dont on ne doit se servir qu'au défaut de la viole' (I have had separately engraved the 2nd violin [part], which should only be used in the absence of the viol). There are two distinct ways of reading this remark. The usual reading assumes that the viol is preferable, and that a second violin may only be substituted if this preferred option is not available. Another reading, however, makes no judgement on whether one instrument is to be preferred. Rather, it may be a simple warning ('avis') that the second violin is not to be used **at the same time** as the viol, in the way that the flute here may **either** double or replace the first violin, or in the way that some French chamber music (e.g. Couperin's *Concerts Royaux* and *Nouveaux*) allowed or encouraged the free doubling of parts by various instruments.

The title page of the *Pièces en concerts* might lead the reader to assume that first violin/flute, and viol/second violin, are equally valid alternatives. In his preface, however, Rameau makes it clear that their roles are different. The flute part is identical to the first violin part (except for a few indications in the score for adjustments



where necessary for the flute's compass), and no separately published part for it is required or provided. It is quite possible for the flute to double the first violin throughout. However, the second violin part is different in numerous significant ways from the

viol part (apart from the obvious octave transpositions), thus requiring its own separately printed part, and making it impossible for these two parts to be played simultaneously. Moreover, the differences suggest a great deal about the character and style of the music which would not otherwise be apparent (see below).

Rameau also sanctioned the performance of these pieces by harpsichord alone. In his preface he provided notes on how to adapt some of them for this purpose, and he also provided in the score separate versions of five of the pieces without accompanying instruments. In this recording we have used one of these, *La Livri*, as an introduction to the accompanied version. The solo version (and a later arrangement of the same piece for orchestra in the opera *Zoroastre*) clarifies certain aspects, such as the use of *notes inégales*, which are not obvious in the version *en concert*.

## Sound balance: harpsichord accompanied by violins

For this music we have specifically chosen a balance of sound with a noticeably forward harpsichord and relatively quiet violins – a principle followed in this recording, as in our live performances.

Rameau's concept of sound, that of the melody instruments **blending with**, and **accompanying** the harpsichord, is emphasized in the first paragraph of his preface: 'il faut non seulement que les trois instruments se confondent entr'eux, mais ... surtout le violon & la viole se prêtent au claveçin, en distinguant ce qui n'est qu'accompagnement, de ce qui fait partie du sujet, pour adoucir encore plus dans le premier cas' (not only must the three instruments blend together, but ... above all the violin & viol must adjust [their sound] to the harpsichord, distinguishing what is only accompaniment from what is thematic material, in order to soften still more in the first case).

Much lip service has been paid to this concept of balance, but the reality has been notoriously difficult to achieve, both in performance and in recordings. In effect, neither performers nor audiences (nor sound engineers) easily accept the idea of a harpsichord sound dominating an ensemble. Nevertheless, this lies at the heart of Rameau's purpose in writing and publishing this music, and its realization is crucial to achieving the results the composer intended.

In this recording, we have attempted to take Rameau's instructions literally. The blend and balance of sound he required was achieved principally by the style of playing, but was also reinforced by the placement of the instruments and microphones in the recording. The harpsichord is closer, and to the left of the sound space, with the violins to the right and further away. This is the set-up used for our concert performances as well, where the visual effect helps to project the concept of balance to the audience.

More important than the exact placement of violins is the use of dynamics and styles of articulation (all carefully specified in Rameau's preface) to achieve the desired balance between the instruments.

Following Rameau's instructions as closely as possible, we identified and located three basic modes of balance for this music. The first is where the harpsichord must be clearly heard, and the other instruments must therefore be quieter than it. This is the 'default' balance, required most frequently throughout the *Concerts*. The second is the opposite, where one or other (or both) of the 'melody' instruments should be clearly heard, and the harpsichord accompanies. The clearest example of this is the rondeau of *L'indiscrette*, where the harpsichord has a series of rolling arpeggios beneath the violins' melody. So far, perhaps, so obvious.

It is the third mode that is the most interesting and, we believe, the closest to what Rameau intended to explore by writing these pièces en concerts. This is the concept of the melody instruments **colouring** the sound of the harpsichord: that is, sitting neither below nor above it in the dynamic spectrum, but blending into it, and thereby creating another, separate, instrumental colour. This seems certainly to be the intention wherever the melody instruments double the harpsichord lines (for example, throughout La Boucon), or support it at a third or sixth (the reprises of La Timide, first rondeau), or in more subtle effects where particular notes or lines within the harpsichord texture are picked out for colouring (the opening of La Cupis, or the rondeau of La Livri).

The concept of creating a new colour by blending and fusing two or more original sounds is one that many instrumentalists are familiar with, but there are particular challenges in achieving it with a harpsichord. The harpsichord sound is not an easy or natural one to blend into, with its extremely precise and defined attack and release, and its unique tonal character very rich in high partials. More importantly, its ability to play soft or loud, though not entirely absent as some have claimed, is certainly restricted by comparison with string or most wind instruments. The means by which it achieves, or suggests, dynamic shading and phrasing, are relatively subtle and minimalist. They include the thickening or lightening of texture, the control of a wide spectrum of articulation from the lightest staccato to the richest overlegato, and the use of a range of agogic rhythmic techniques, such as timing delays or lengthenings. Composers (and harpsichordists) such as Rameau and Couperin were certainly aware of all these devices, but were nevertheless exercised by what they referred to as the difficulty of giving expression or 'soul' (l'âme) to its music. Here Rameau presents a new method of providing the harpsichord with a soul (or perhaps more justly, the means to wear its heart on its sleeve) by the explicit realization of the dynamic inflections it had hitherto only been able to suggest. Through his style of composition, and his verbal instructions, Rameau requires the melody instruments to blend with, colour, and dynamically shade, the harpsichord's lines.

# Interpretation: rhythm and tempi

The most obvious difference with the two-violin version is of course in the tessitura: two equal high parts, compared with one high and one low. At times the second violin part goes even higher than the first, and some of the doublestopping, a more natural part of viol technique, has been retained in the second violin, notably in *La Boucon*, and in the guitar-strumming effects in *La Laborde*. Further, there are several terms of *mouvement* and other instructions printed only in the second violin part (e.g. rondement for *La Rameau*; 'un peu' added to the 'Loure vive' of La *Pantomime*).

But by far the most interesting differences are the rhythmic and melodic variants in the second violin part, with their wider implications for the general character and style of performing this music, which are not at all obvious to performers unless the second violin part is used. These include: additional melodic material, decorative runs and long tied notes in the *Menuets*, *La Lapoplinière*, *La Forqueray*, and *La Cupis*, dotted rhythms in *L'Indiscrette*, and triplet movement in *La Marais*, variously suggesting styles of *inégale* rhythms and the choice of tempi.

Several factors have suggested our choice of some significantly slower tempi than are often heard in this music. In general, there is a sense that too much is lost when it is played too fast – as Jean-Marie Leclair wrote, 'je n'entend point par le terms d'allegro, un mouvement trop vite; c'est un mouvement guay. Ceux qui le pressent trop ... rendent le chant trivial, au lieu d'en conserver la noblesse' (I do not at all mean by the term allegro a tempo that is too fast; it is a cheerful tempo. Those who rush too much ... make the melody trivial, instead of preserving its nobility) (Op.13, 1753). His warning applies equally to slow movements. Mere speed can also be too easy a solution to interpretative problems - a treacherous substitute for acuity of rhythmic inflection. Familiarity with baroque dance style, technique, and structures will often suggest a steadier tempo. A more integral prevalence of notes inégales, in a wide range of flexible interpretations of that term, generally leads to a tempo where this rhythmic 'inequality' has its proper expressive effect. More specifically, many tempo indications are open to misinterpretation: most in fact are indications of Affekt or mood rather than tempo, as Leclair noted, and some can be precautionary rather than prescriptive. Vivement or un peu vive may mean 'don't play as gently/quietly/slowly as the notation may suggest', rather than 'play fast'. Rondement, the term Rameau uses to head 7 of the 16 movements, seems to have a wide range of possible interpretations. Its modern (and possibly more developed) sense has led to the assumption that its use in a slow movement like La Cupis must be an error. On the contrary, this suggests to us a more generous interpretation of the term: literally 'roundly' in the sense of 'unhurried'. There also seems to be a more than coincidental connection with the word rondeau - now a term simply describing a formal structure, but at that time also carrying connotations of a 'noble' and 'gracious' Affekt.

#### Notes on the individual movements

The personal names heading many of the movements should not mislead the listener into imagining they are portraits – they are simply dedications, or compliments from or to those named. In his preface Rameau writes: 'plusieurs personnes de goût & du métier ... [ont] bien voulu me faire l'honneur d'en nommer quelques-unes' (several persons of taste & professional judgement ... have wished to do me the honour of naming some [of the pieces]). Note that the use of the feminine article *la* does not indicate a female subject or dedicatee; it is merely a shortened version of *la pièce intitulée*...

Some of the movements, however, are certainly descriptive, whether or not the pictorialism is con-

nected with the title – see notes below on *La Laborde*, *La Timide*, and *Pantomine*. With others, such as *La Coulicam*, it is not possible to know whether the title is descriptive (a version of *Kubla Khan* – by extension, a representation of barbarian hordes riding into battle?), or simply the nickname of a friend or colleague who wished to remain anonymous, and therefore having no relation whatever to the particular style of the movement. Three of the movements – the *Menuets*, *Tambourins* and *Pantomime* (a *loure*) – are named as specific dances, but others are obvious dance types: *La Timide* (a *musetle*), *L'Indiscrette* and *La Marais* (*gavottes*). The structures and rhythms of the French *danse noble* are, however, everywhere to be heard, even in the movements which also display typical Italian virtuoso features, such as *Le Vézinet* or *La Forqueray*. **Notes by Robert Petre** 

I<sup>er</sup> Concert Coulicam (ambiguous); see above Livri (Le comte de Livri, a patron); an elegaic rondeau Le Vézinet (a fashionable promenading area near Paris); an Italian moto perpetuo.

2<sup>e</sup> Concert Laborde (J.-B. de Laborde, a pupil); pictorial effects of Spanish guitars and castanets Boucon (Anne-Jeanne Boucon, Mme de Mondonville, a famous harpsichordist); muted violins doubling the harpsichord's richly ornamented texture Agacante (a provocative or annoying person) Menuet (an intricately patterned couple dance); alternating major and minor rondeaux within rondeaux

3<sup>e</sup> Concert: an 'outdoors' suite, or fête champêtre

*Lapoplinière* (Le Riche de la Pouplinière, a patron); a relaxed country ramble *Timide* (gentle nature); the *1*<sup>er</sup> *rondeau* is a *musette*, the symbol of pastoral innocence, imitating the flat, uninflected sound of the shepherd's hurdy-gurdy or bagpipe drones; the *2*<sup>e</sup> *rondeau* represents rustling leaves, bird calls, and running water or fountains *Tambourin* (a military dance); shrill fifes and rattling drum.

4<sup>e</sup> Concert Pantomime: designated a loure, a stylized slow dance, but within that structure, a commedia dell'arte scene, with themes for the stock characters such as Harlequin, Columbine, Punchinello, and dramatic leaps, runs, and pauses Indiscrette (an indiscreet person); a gavotte en rondeau Rameau (a family member? or perhaps a favourite movement which the composer named for himself); an Italianate display.
5<sup>e</sup> Concert Enzymeray (Antoine Enzymeray or his son lean-Baptiste both virtuoso viol-players and

5<sup>e</sup> Concert Forqueray (Antoine Forqueray, or his son Jean-Baptiste, both virtuoso viol-players and composers); a 'fugue' in Italian concerto style Cupis (the composer, François de Cupis, or his sister, Marie-Anne, the famous dancer known as La Camargo); a slow sarabande Marais (Marin Marais, renowned viol-player and composer); a gavotte.

## Restoration

**Robert Petre** has specialized in the harpsichord and its repertoire from the  $16^{th}-18^{th}$  centuries for over 30 years. He completed degrees at Victoria University, Wellington in music and languages, and in piano performance with Judith Clark, and was introduced to the harpsichord by Anna Hoffmann, Roy Tankersley and Anthony Jennings. He continued harpsichord studies in Europe and North America, where his teachers included Gerhardt Kastner (Berlin) and Colin Tilney (Toronto), and he participated in courses and masterclasses given by Gustav Leonhardt, Kenneth Gilbert, Robert Kohnen, the Kuijken brothers, Jordi Savall, Wendy Hilton and others. He has worked as soloist and continuo player with numerous ensembles in New Zealand, including Sonnerie,



the Tudor Consort, and AK Barok, and was co-director of St Paul's Baroque. His edition of Purcell's *The Harpsichord Master* and articles on baroque music and dance have been published in London and in Wellington, where he has taught harpsichord for many years. *Harpsichord*: built by Paul Downie, Auckland, 1980, after an original by Benoît Stehlin, Paris, 1760, now in the Smithsonian Institute, Washington.



Bronwen Pugh completed a degree in philosophy at Victoria University of Wellington, and a diploma in violin performance at Auckland University. She spent three years at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague studying baroque violin with Sigiswald Kuijken, and became a member of several baroque or-chestras and ensembles touring Europe. Returning to New Zealand, Bronwen has worked with visiting artists and local ensembles, including AK Barok, the Tudor Consort, Cantoris, and Extempore Plus, and with orchestras and chamber ensembles in Australia. From 1990 until 2005, she was music director at Wendy Hilton's annual Workshop in Baroque Dance and Its Music at Stanford University, USA. Recent projects have included co-directing St Paul's

Baroque at the Wellington Cathedral of St Paul, working with musicians from New Zealand and Australia. *Violin:* Mirecourt school, France, late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Graham McPhail holds degrees in performance and musicology from Otago and Victoria Universities, and in education from Auckland University. He completed post-graduate study in baroque violin at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague with Sigiswald Kuijken. Graham co-founded the chamber ensemble Extempore, and has led baroque performances in Auckland for many ensembles over the last twenty years. He is the co-founder and co-artistic director of Auckland's baroque orchestra, AK Barok. In his work in music education at St Cuthbert's College, the University of Auckland and through the Suzuki movement, Graham has taught many of New Zealand's new generation of baroque instrument players. *Violin*: by Feyzeau, Bordeaux, France, 1750.



Restoration takes its name from that colourful era, the restoration of Charles II to the English throne in 1660 – the music of this time is central to the group's repertoire. The name also evokes the art-restorer's process of revealing the original colours and tramatic impact of a treasured art work. The group was formed in 1985 by Bronwen Pugh, Robert Petre, and soprano Rosalind Salas, following their extensive training and experience in Europe. They have worked with many visiting and local baroque specialists, including tours throughout New Zealand, appearances at the NZ International Festival of the Arts, the Wellington Festival of Early Music, and recordings for Radio New Zealand. Their CD *Musick all'Italliana*, recorded in London for the Meridian label, has been well received in both NZ and the UK.

#### Recording notes and acknowledgements

Recorded in Futuna Chapel, Wellington, 16–19 July 2008 by Bronwyn Officer. Futuna Chapel was designed by John Scott in 1958, and is generally regarded as one of New Zealand's finest examples of indigenous modernist architecture. *Restoration* is grateful for the support of the Friends of Futuna Charitable Trust, and the assistance in particular of Jenni Hall; to producer and sound engineer Bronwyn Officer; to Catherine Vallyon for the use of her harpsichord; to Richard and Judith Wright; and to Heather Gummer.

Listeners may notice the sound of a bird which had taken up residence on a ledge high in the roofline of the chapel, and added its chirp to many silent moments, particularly those just before or following a take! We have chosen to let some of these remain on the recording, the pastoral effect being not inappropriate to much of this music. Less appropriate are the regrettable but occasionally unavoidable intrusions of weather, traffic or aircraft noise. The 2<sup>e</sup> *Concert* was recorded with a slightly different microphone set-up, and two of its movements, *L'Agaçante* and the *Menuets*, were taken from a live performance on 15 July 2008, in the same venue, but with some evidence of the presence of the audience audible.

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#### RESTORATION CD1042, @ 2008, © 2010

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