

Recital I: 19 September 2021: The French Organ Mass

François Couperin (1668-1733)

**Messe pour les paroisses pour les fêtes solennelles
(from *Pièces d'orgue consistantes en deux messes*)**

François Couperin came from one of the most famous musical families in Europe. He took over the position of organist at the Parisian church of Saint-Gervais from his father, Charles, at the age of 18 shortly after his father's death. Charles himself was appointed organist after the premature death of his own brother and François's uncle, Louis. From 1693 François held a position in the court of King Louis XIV alongside his role at Saint-Gervais.

He produced a large and comprehensive musical output including a number of books of works for the *clavecin* (similar to a harpsichord) including an important treatise on the technique of playing this instrument, a valuable legacy which allows us to better understand the style of playing and ornamentation in use at this time. Though a busy organist, today we have only two organ works by him, both organ masses, and published in the same volume, *Pièces d'orgue consistantes en deux messes*, in 1690. The first of these (which you hear today), the mass "pour les paroisses pour les fêtes solennelles" (mass for parishes for solemn feasts) is the superior of the two and is considered the pinnacle of the genre of the French Organ Mass.

It belongs to a long tradition established in France from at least the 15th century of singing mass *in alternatim*, where the organ replaces the voices of the *schola cantorum* or choir for alternate versets (*couplets* in French) of certain prescribed parts of the ordinary of the mass (those texts which are sung and whose words do not change according to the liturgical season: Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Benedictus, Agnus Dei) but not the Creed. This style was also used in the liturgies of the Office (the daily round of prayer of the Church) particularly during the canticles of the *Benedictus* at Lauds and the *Magnificat* at Vespers, though it was also commonly used in the minor hours, with some variations for feasts and solemnities, including replacing parts of some psalms.

This style had become so widespread that its use was formalised in the *Caeremoniale Episcoporum* of Pope Clement VIII in 1600, codifying the liturgical decisions of the Council of Trent. Though this document was seen as the authoritative Roman document on rite, its restrictions on the use of the organ were considered too strict in the Gallican church in France which sought to liberate it with greater freedoms set out in the *Caeremoniale Parisiense* of 1662. This tradition continued and evolved with the changing style of music across the centuries until Pope St Pius X forbade the practice, insisting that all of the text should be clearly sung, in the motu proprio *Tra le sollecitudini* of 1903.

In the more modern form of the Roman Rite instituted after the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council, we are accustomed to the organ's role being primarily that of supporting congregational singing with the organ being heard alone often only before and after the liturgies. However, the organ historically played a much more significant role in the liturgy. Accompaniment of Gregorian chant, sung by the *schola cantorum*, is a relatively modern development and therefore, before the permitting of congregational hymns to the Mass with the Missal of Pope St John Paul XXIII, the organ had a more fundamental place within the liturgy and not simply around it.

This organ mass follows what had become by this period the traditional form of 21 movements. Couperin's *messe pour les paroisses* is based on the plainchant Kyrie IV (*Cunctipotens Genitor Deus*), perhaps the single most popular plainchant *kyriale* for this style of treatment (and the only one of the plainchant mass settings which has survived untouched from the 14th century). We are particularly pleased to be joined today by the Sister Adorers of the Institute who will sing the whole of each section of the plainchant before singing only the alternating sections of plainchant between each organ movement as it would have originally been performed during Mass.

Not all of the movements are based wholly on the plainchant. The melody of the chant is heard directly, as was customary, only in the first and fifth *versets* of the Kyrie, and in the first *versets* of the Gloria, Sanctus and Agnus Dei. The plainchant itself is not heard in any other parts of the organ *versets* which instead take their spirit from the text of the verse they replace, using a number of characteristic sounds of the French baroque organ.

The French Baroque Organ

The instruments of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France were well-developed with a wide range of sounds available to the player. Despite the highly varied tone qualities and dynamics available, French organ music developed with a surprisingly limited set of "standard" sounds or combinations of stops that were used in typical ways for certain styles of music.

A typical French baroque organ would comprise at least three (and often more) divisions: the *pédale* organ and two or more manual organs (separate keyboards). The main manual division, the *grand orgue*, is designed to be majestic in scale and of full tone, with principals and mixtures (the foundation tone of the organ, together referred to as the *plein jeu*), flutes and larger-scale reed stops (often *trompettes* or trumpets).

The second manual division, the *positif*, is a smaller-scale and more intimate version of the *grand orgue* which contains similar stops but voiced more gently to function as a *petit plein jeu* in contrast to the fuller *plein jeu* of the *grand orgue*. It often also contained more characterful stops such as the *cromorne*, similar to a clarinet.

For larger instruments with a third manual division, this would be the *récit*, containing flutes at a variety of pitches which can be combined into the highly characteristic *cornet* (very typical of the period and made up of five separate flute stops at 8', 4', 2½', 2' and 1½'), and often with the addition of colourful reed stops such as the *hautbois* or oboe.

The *pédale* was a much less-developed division in France than that which was gaining ground in Germany. Accordingly, music written for French organs of this period does not include the more complex, fast-moving contrapuntal lines that we are accustomed to hearing from composers such as Bach and Buxtehude, but instead is usually limited to slow-moving *cantus firmus* lines where a plainchant melody is heard on the *trompettes*, or softer flutes for providing an accompanimental bass line in quieter trios: its sparing use makes it exceptional rather than common in music from this period. Even large French organs of this period would have what would today be considered a small and restrictive pedal division, containing only flutes at 8' and 4' pitch and an 8' reed.

Please see the main recital series brochure for the organ specification to which the registration notes refer.

Kyrie eleison

1. Plein chant en taille (*Kyrie eleison*) (*Lord, have mercy*)

This movement utilises a highly traditional form of the use of the organ in baroque France. The manuals use all the principal stops (*plein jeu*) of the *grand orgue* with the pedal presenting the melody of the first petition of the *kyrie eleison* in long notes on the pedal reeds as a *cantus firmus*. *En taille* means “in the tenor part”: the melody, even though in the pedal, does not provide the bass of the music, but sounds above it and within the overall manual texture, between the two hands.

Registration: manuals 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9; cantus firmus (pedal) 16, 18, 24, 25

Schola cantorum: Kyrie eleison.

2. Fugue sur les jeux d’anâches (*Kyrie eleison*)

We are more accustomed to hearing fugues on clear and bright registrations as in the works of the German masters such as Bach and Buxtehude, but the French school has always (and continues) to take a different approach, instead preferring to use the reed stops (*anâches*) of the *grand orgue* and *positif* combined. This produces a firmer and rounder tone that provides increased clarity of the individual parts. This four-voice fugue modifies the melody of the third *kyrie* by creating a semitone between the first two notes rather than a whole tone.

Registration: 3, 4, 10, 11, 12, 42, 43, 50

Schola cantorum: Christe eleison. (*Christ, have mercy*)

3. Récit de Chromhorne (*Christe eleison*)

This gentle and highly ornamented couplet provides the second of the three *Christe* petitions. The theme, not related to the plainchant, is introduced on the soft flute stop (*jeu doux*) of the *grand orgue* before accompanying the principal melody spoken by the characteristic tone of the *cromorne* of the *positif* organ.

Registration: accompaniment 3; melody 42, 43, 50

Schola cantorum: Christe eleison.

4. Dialogue sur la Trompette et le Chromhorne (*Kyrie eleison*)

The fourth *kyrie* is announced by a rather bright movement in triple time, introduced on the *cromorne* before the rather stronger *trompette* of the *grand orgue* takes over the melody, first in the soprano with the *cromorne* below, and then the *trompette* is heard in the bass in some typical and rather lively *arpeggio* patterns of the period, before the piece concludes with all parts on the *trompette*.

Registration: trompette 3, 4, 10, 12; cromorne 42, 43, 50

Schola cantorum: Kyrie eleison.

5. Plein chant (*Kyrie eleison*)

As is traditional, the form of *plein chant* returns for the ninth and final petition of the *kyrie*. Similar in style to that of the first *kyrie*, this version places the plainchant in the pedal on the *trompettes* below a *plein jeu*

in the manuals, but this time is placed not in the tenor but firmly in the bass, providing a strong conclusion to this first part of the mass.

Registration: manuals 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9; cantus firmus (pedal) 16, 18, 24, 25

Gloria in excelsis Deo

Celebrant: Gloria in excelsis Deo. (*Glory to God in the highest*)

6. Plein chant (*Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*) (*And on earth peace to people of good will*)

Once again, the traditional use of a *plein jeu* for the first petition of the *gloria* is used, with the opening motif of the plainchant used in a bright, three-part and triple-time movement, reinforcing the “three-ness” of the Trinity, before the plainsong melody itself is introduced on the reeds of the pedal organ. Using the same registration and style as the final movement of the *kyrie* provides a strong form of unity between the two first sung parts of the Mass.

Registration: manuals 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9; cantus firmus (pedal) 16, 18, 24, 25

Schola cantorum: Laudamus te. (*We praise You*)

7. Petite fugue sur le Chromhorne (*Benedicimus te*) (*We bless You*)

Literally “a small fugue on the *cromorne*” this short movement has a bright tone and develops a simple but rather elegant four-voice fugue. Again, the typical use of a reed stop for this four-part contrapuntal writing helps to increase the clarity of the different parts within the overall texture.

Registration: 42, 43, 50

Schola cantorum: Adoramus te. (*We adore You*)

8. Duo sur les Tierces (*Glorificamus te*) (*We glorify You*)

This slightly longer movement, again in triple-time, provides an excellent example of two-part writing typical of the period. Its lively nature reflects the text well, and the piquancy of the registration (using a number of mutations stops, those which sound a note other than that written) provides a huge amount of colour even though the musical lines are simple, and the large number of ornamentations in them further lift the energy of this movement.

Registration: 42, 44, 46, 48

Schola cantorum: Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam. (*We give You thanks for Your great glory*)

9. Dialogue sur les jeux de trompettes, clairons et tierces du grand clavier et le bourdon avec le larigot du positif (*Domine Deus, Rex caelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens*) (*Lord God, heavenly King, O God, almighty Father*)

The lengthy title of this couplet could not be clearer in specifying exactly the sounds of the organ the composer desired. The movement begins on the *positif* organ with a light, bright and clear registration on which the principal theme of this movement is announced. Shortly this registration becomes reduced to an accompaniment of the more developed theme in the left hand with its strong tone colour provided by the trumpets and cornet. This becomes a fine example of some typical French organ writing of the period, with

lively arpeggios and figurations, with the melody repeatedly passing from the bass in the left hand to the soprano in the right and back again, and in both the major and minor keys, which together give this movement the energy needed to reflect the text on which it is based.

Registration: grand orgue 3, 4, 10, 11, 13, 29, 31, 32, 34, 35; positif 42, 46

Schola cantorum: Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe. (*Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son*)

10. Trio à deux dessus de chromhorne et la basse de tierce (*Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris*) (*Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father*)

This much more gentle movement uses the somewhat strange sounds created by using the *cornet* of the *récit* in the bass. This highly typical French baroque organ sound, formed by the use of flutes at multiple different pitches, seems to almost decompose when used in the lower registers, and strange harmonic effects begin to be noticed as those pitches interact with one another. Combined with a two-part use of the *chromorne* in the right hand, this movement creates an evocative petition to Christ which effectively describes the text in music.

Registration: basse de tierce (left hand) 29, 31, 32, 34, 35; right hand 42, 43, 50

Schola cantorum: Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. (*You take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us*)

11. Tierce en Taille (*Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram*) (*You take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer*)

The plaintive and meditative colours of the previous movement continue in this humble petition to “receive our prayer”. The *cornet* is switched for the *tierce* with a slightly different character to provide the melody, this time in the tenor register, with the bass part provided by the flutes in the pedal. The slow-moving melody occasionally gives way to more rapid scales, almost urging the prayers of the faithful to ascend to heaven. An increased use of chromaticism and suspensions, as we often see in *en taille* movements such as this (and will see again later) create a gentle and implicative effect.

Registration: pedal 17, 19; accompagnement 3, melody 42, 44, 46, 48

Schola cantorum: Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis. (*You are seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us*)

12. Dialogue sur la Voix humaine (*Quoniam tu solus sanctus*) (*For you alone are the Holy One*)

The *voix humaine* is an unusual stop, theoretically (though rather less in reality) imitating the human voice as its name suggests. It is a reed stop (like an oboe) but its pipes are much shorter than normal producing a rather thin and nasal sound. It is typically employed with the *tremolo*, a device which in a pipe organ causes rapid variations in the pressure of the wind supplying the pipes and simulating a vibrato effect. With no *voix humaine* at our disposal on this instrument, we substitute its closest comparison: the *regale* from the *positif* organ, accompanied by the beautiful flute of the *récit*.

Registration: accompagnement 29, 40; melody 49 (played one octave higher), 51

Schola cantorum: Tu solus Dominus. (*You alone are the Lord*)

13. Dialogue en trio du cornet et de la tierce (*Tu solus Altissimus, Jesu Christe*) (*You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ*)

This movement provides a beautiful example of using similar but different tone colours to great effect. The main theme is introduced on the *positif* organ (*tierce*) before being developed more fully and with greater ornamentation on the *récit* (*cornet*). From there, in the final section of this movement, the pedals are used in their second major role for music of this period, not using the strong *trompettes* to provide a *cantus firmus* as in some earlier movements, but instead the gentle flutes providing the bass and third part to a trio, joined with the two divisions heard earlier. The two separate manual parts complement and imitate one another to great effect.

Registration: accompagnement 3; pedal 17, 19; tierce 42, 44, 46, 48; cornet 29, 31, 32, 34, 35

Schola cantorum: Cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris. (*With the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father*)

14. Dialogue sur les Grands jeux (*Amen*)

The concluding affirmatory amen of the great hymn of the angels, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, is unsurprisingly bright and grand. This is the first time in this work that we hear the sounds of the *grands jeux*: this is the combination of the reed stops (*trompettes*, *chromorne*, *hautbois*, etc.) and mutations (those stops which do not sound a unison pitch, i.e. they sound a note *other* than that being played) such as the *cornet* and *sesquialtera*. This provides a strong, weighty and heavy tone from the organ, similar to that of the *jeux d'anches* we heard in the second couplet of the *kyrie* but with added piquancy from the mutations.

Registration: cornet 29, 31, 32, 34, 35; petit grands jeux 42, 43, 48, 50; grands jeux 1, 2, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13

Offertory

15. Offertoire sur les Grands jeux

Not related to the Ordinary of the Mass, the offertory (as the priest prepares himself and the altar for the holy sacrifice) provides an opportunity for an extended musical composition, and Couperin does not disappoint. This is a large-scale and well-developed masterpiece taking both its form and style from theatrical overtures of the time. This movement is divided into three distinct sections and forms one of the very highest examples of French organ writing of the period.

The first section is, in tone colour, a *reprise* of the previous movement at the end of the Gloria, using the weighty sound of the *grands jeux* to great effect, introducing a simple melody which, after a short diversion onto the quieter and more colourful stops of the *cornet* and the *chromorne*, with pedal flutes, returns and is developed with a lively abandon.

Registration: 1, 2, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 29, 31, 32, 34, 35, 42, 43, 48, 49

The softer middle section is a trio in the minor key with the three parts respectively taken by the *chromorne* in the right hand, the *cornet* in the left hand and *flutes* in the feet. The melody, which passes around all three parts, is distinctive, mostly because of the discordant entries of each voice which clash with one of the others. This movement then moves away from the colour of its opening to the firm, roundness of the *fonds* (foundation stops) of the *grand orgue*.

Registration: pedal 17, 19; left hand 29, 31, 32, 34, 35; right hand 42, 43, 50; *fonds* 1, 2, 3, 4

The final section returns to the major key in a bright and dancing triple-time section with dotted rhythms lending a certain swagger and *joie de vivre* to the end of this substantial movement. It uses the three manuals

of the organ to great effect, as you hear (in increasing levels of volume) the *cornet* of the *récit*, the *petits grands jeux* of the *positif*, and the combination of those two with the *grands jeux* of the *grand orgue*, providing weight, stridency and fullness of tone. The effect is at once joyful and uplifting, in preparation for the most sacred part of the mass which follows.

Registration: cornet 29, 31, 32, 34, 35; petit grands jeux 42, 43, 48, 50; grands jeux 1, 2, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13

Sanctus

16. Plein chant en Canon (*Sanctus*) (*Holy*)

Written for the same registration as earlier *plein chant* movements (first and last of the *Kyrie* and first of the *Gloria*), this movement places the plainchant melody of the first *Sanctus* at the start of the contrapuntal writing in the manuals. However, there is the addition of this melody into a double canon in the pedal part, so that it is heard first in the bass (left foot) and later (though still overlapping with the first) in the tenor (right foot).

Registration: manuals 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9; cantus firmus (pedal) 16, 18, 24, 25

Schola cantorum: Sanctus.

17. Récit de Cornet (*Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth*) (*Holy Lord God of Hosts*)

This movement, though in many ways very simple in its construction, shows the clear influence of the Italian school on Couperin's writing. The first part of this *récit* is typically French in style, with a slow-moving scalic melody introduced on the flute before being developed on the colourful *cornet*. However, this melody increases in pace and floridness as the movement develops with an increased use of running semiquavers, highly typical of the writing of organist composers of this period in Italy.

Registration: accompaniment 41; melody 29, 31, 32, 34, 35, 40

Schola cantorum: Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua. Hosanna in excelsis. (*Heaven and earth are full of Your glory. Hosanna in the highest*)

Benedictus (Elevation)

18. Chromorne en Taille (*Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. Hosanna in excelsis*) (*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest*)

As was common, the *Benedictus* verset entirely replaces the plainchant which is not sung. Versets at this point in the mass serve as a meditation upon the holiest part of the sacrifice of the Mass which has just taken place. The use of the *chromorne* in the tenor part (the bass being provided by the pedal flutes) provides a characteristic tone which is at once profound, relaxed and meditative. Similar to the earlier *en taille* movement, there are many uses of chromaticism and suspensions to highly artistic effect. For its period it is, in many ways, a surprisingly romantic movement.

Registration: accompaniment 2; pedal 17, 19; melody 42, 43, 50

Agnus Dei

19. Plein chant en Basse et en Taille (*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: miserere nobis*) (*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us*)

This movement which replaces the first of the three plainsong petitions of the *Agnus Dei* takes the musical ideas offered in the first movement of the *Sanctus* and develops them further. The same idea is at work: the plainsong melody is heard entering in three manual parts before being joined in long notes as a *cantus firmus*

in the pedal, forming the tenor. The manual parts are more fully developed in this movement with increasing use of forward motion through the quaver motifs. Just as the movement feels it may be about to close, a second *cantus firmus* is introduced so the two feet take a melody each for the final eight bars of this verset.
Registration: manuals 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9; cantus firmus (pedal) 16, 18, 24, 25

Schola cantorum: Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: miserere nobis.

20. Dialogue sur les Grands jeux (*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: dona nobis pacem*) (*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace*)

The third petition of the *Agnus Dei* recalls a similar musicality in the final section of the offertory. The same registrations are used for the distinctive *cornet*, *petit grands jeux* and *grands jeux* displayed artfully in shorter sections that seem to talk to one another. The main musical theme is simple and distinctive and builds in energy throughout each phrase. The contrasts between each section in colour and in volume do not detract from a seamless unity which delivers a substantial amount of elegant musicality into such a short movement.
Registration: cornet 29, 31, 32, 34, 35; petit grands jeux 42, 43, 48, 50; grands jeux 1, 2, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13

Dismissal

Celebrant: Ite, missa est. (*Go forth, the Mass is ended*)

21. Petit plein jeu (*Deo gratias*) (*Thanks be to God*)

The choice of the *petit plein jeu* of the smaller and more lightly-voiced *positif* organ for this final verset rather than the larger and more strident *plein jeu* of the *grand orgue* heard in earlier movements was typical during this period, and this is the first and only time that this particular sound is heard through this work. It may seem odd to end such a highly distinctive and masterful composition with what could be described as an underwhelming conclusion, but in many ways its brevity and its lightness form the perfect close to a work of such supreme musicianship.

Registration: 41, 43, 45, 46, 47