

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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## RECORDINGS

**Andrew Appel, harpsichord. "Pièces de Clavecin, Volume 1: The Tragic Muse", Orchid Classics 2012, ORC 100026. Reviewed by Charlene Brendler**

What is needed to perform the harpsichord works of a great composer from a by-gone age of elegance and refinement? A sensitive touch, an understanding of the rhythmic conventions of the time, and a variable, fluid ornamentation technique to render the instrument susceptible to expression, for starters. What does the listener need? A cultivated sensibility of the aesthetics of the time, and an aural appreciation for the subtle and variable expressive sonorities heard in fine harpsichord playing. Andrew Appel, Director of the Four Nations Ensemble (New York) offers the listener his interpretation of François Couperin with the CD entitled "The Tragic Muse" on the Orchid Classics label, featuring the Third and the Eighth *Ordres* from books I and II of *Pièces de Clavecin*.

Couperin's multi-dimensional music often requires several hearings to appreciate the content or expressive meaning. It is illusive, compelling, intimate and grand, and it is demanding: He requested that his markings be scrupulously followed, and, he elevated ornamentation from a decorative to an expressive role. Touch, rhythmic sensibility, and fluid ornamentation are key elements for Couperin. Appel's recording is uneven in its presentation of these qualities. Some pieces are magnificently played, and others leave the listener unmoved.

In the first book (1713) of *Pièces de Clavecin*, Couperin introduced genre pieces with a descriptive title. These soon became popular and composers replaced the typical (binary dance form) harpsichord piece with musical portraits and other types of descriptive scenes. The Third *Ordre* opens as a melancholy suite of dances lacking only the Gigue. Appel delivers a strong sense of pacing to the momentous and tragic Allemande "*La Ténébreuse*" providing the necessary grandeur and solemnity. The two Courantes that follow offer a contrast in mood to the Allemande. They are effectively played on a single 8-foot register, with a crystalline sonority and Appel's tight, rhythmical sense.

The nine genre pieces that follow have a mechanical, matter of fact delivery. Although the facile playing is not consistently convincing, the ornamentation is sensitively expressive. A tender graciousness lends surprising musical poetry to the second part of "*Les Laurentines*," a quality also heard in the well-played "*Les Regrets*" (a very effective piece that uses a French melodic line against an Italian bass line). The *ordre* closes with "*La Favorite*," a Chaconne in duple rather than triple meter. Here, Appel's rendition disappoints the listener with a rigid use of *inégalement*. It also lacks a sense of an arching line or phrase.

The Eighth *Ordre* is one of the most substantial suites in the second book (1716-17) of *Pièces de Clavecin*. Appel Opens the CD playing a strong rendition of "*La Raphaële*," a musical portrait of the painter. It continues with a second Allemande, two Courantes, the "*Sarabande L'Unique*," A Rondeau, Gigue, another genre piece "*La Morinète*," and the big Passacaille.

One hears Appel playing at his most inspired level in this powerfully rich and expressive *ordre*. He offers a few of his personal ornaments (in good taste) in the beautifully played and dissonance laden "*Sarabande L'Unique*." Once again, sparkling upper register sonorities add to the effectively played concise rhythms in the Gigue.

The famous and majestic Passacaglia is delivered with appropriate dramatic power. Appel's approach magnifies the dimensions, ranging from intense and poignant, to voluptuous and spacious, and, he effectively prepares the musical climax that is driven over a chromatic bass line.

Appel is an accomplished player who offers a variety of musical strengths, but they are delivered inconsistently. He can play beautifully, or be rather matter of fact, using a touch that is ineffectual or unexpressive. Both ends of the spectrum can be heard on this recording. The instrument heard on this CD is an enlarged 1648 Johannes Ruckers replica, built by Rutkowski and Robinette in 1990. It adequately delivers the expressive demands of the music, and is especially pleasing on the single 8-foot registers.

**Nathaniel Mander, harpsichord, "The 18<sup>th</sup> Century French Salon" Raynham Recitals 2015. Reviewed by Meg Cotner**

What a delight it is to listen to a recording like Nathaniel Mander's *The 18<sup>th</sup> Century French Salon* and get lost in the magnificence of this glorious *musique de clavecin*. This young British harpsichordist has put together a programme of French keyboard music featuring sophisticated, exuberant, and expressive works of François Couperin, Jacques Duphy, and Claude Balbastre, and a single piece by Pierre Claude Foucquet, a talented organist who worked at the Saint Honoré Church, the Chapel Royale, and Notre Dame Cathedral during the eighteenth century.

Mander plays a harpsichord made by Alan Gotto based on a 1716 instrument by Pierre Donzelague, which Gotto describes as sounding "Flemish with a French accent". It's definitely not as naturally rich and booming in the bass as some later instruments are, but Mander manipulates that range well when necessary. His sound is clear, well articulated, and at times eerily pure, especially in the upper treble.

The record opens with Couperin's *La Visionnaire* from the 25th *Ordre*, and this is rather fitting since it's a French Overture with grand gestures. He moves

forward solidly with assuredness, transitioning into a quick, sprightly imitative section with wonderful flourishes in both upper and lower ranges of the keyboard; Mander manages to bring a wonderful sheen to the notes in this section of the piece.

He continues the first half of the recording with more selections from Couperin's 25th Ordre, as well as his 24th and 19th Ordres. Mander's interpretation of *L'Amphibie* would be an excellent remedy for when you're feeling down, as it is imbued with a sense of pure joy. Even when it moves to its parallel minor there is still joy to be found, and this minor section is surprisingly effusive as well. I also like his addition of the 4-foot register, which makes the major sections really sparkle.

The second half of the recording is spent with mid-18th century favourites Duphy and Balbastre. The Balbastre selections are from his 1759 *Pièces de Clavecin*, whereas the Duphy works are from his first three books of keyboard music from 1744, 1748, and 1756. Mander's Duphy set is one of the stronger parts of the recording and shows off his range in both virtuosity with *La De Belombre's* ornamentation and quick passages, and sensitivity with *Les Grâces*, arguably the sweetest piece on the recording. In *Les Grâces* in particular, the notes and trills bloom beautifully and gracefully. It is also the longest track, but that is not a bother at all — the impression is the player truly enjoys immersing himself in this special sound world. It draws you in like no other piece he plays.

He also includes the curious *Le Carillon de Cythere* (The Bells of Cythera) from Pierre Claude Foucquet's *Second Livre de Pièces de Clavecin* (1751). It is exquisitely onomatopoeic, and Mander creates an engaging, pure bell-like sound in the higher register at the start of the piece. He also does a fantastic job of making the distinctive long trill last with carefully timed repetitions. And he still keeps your attention during the final 13 repetitive low F notes, indicated as "*L'heure*" in the score, which sound like clock chimes. This is a truly magical piece.

Overall this is a very enjoyable recording. The only thing I would really wish for is that Mander would take a little more time between dramatic elements and changes in sections; sometimes it felt like he moves on too quickly. There are what appear to be some out of tune notes, which could have been easily attended to by the recording engineers in post-production, especially in Duphy's *La Forqueray*. Other than that, if you are a fan of the height of French baroque harpsichord music, this is a dream of a disc and worth your time for multiple listenings.

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**Sam Haywood, piano**, "Chopin's Own Piano, Cobbe Collection Trust, CFC 104, 2010. *Reviewed by Richard Troeger*

**Recorded at Hatchlands Park, 9-10 March 2010 on Pleyel Piano No. 13819 (1847-48). CONTENTS: Berceuse, Opus 57; Barcarolle, Opus 60; Scherzo No. 1, Opus 20; Fantasy, Opus 49; Ballade No. 4, Opus 52; Scherzo No. 2, Opus 31; Nocturne Opus 27/2, Polonaise In A Flat, Opus 53.**

This is a lovely recording and I urge anyone interested in fine Chopin playing to acquire it. The programme consists of very well-known repertoire, which allows a ready comparison between what the Pleyel piano can tell the listener (and the player) about the music, and what is retained in the mind from often hearing these same works on the modern piano. If there is any contest, the Pleyel wins, and so does Mr. Haywood. If he is not accustomed to Pleyels (as his brief commentary on the CD leaflet implies) he certainly made a rapid assimilation. The performances are assured, poised, and elegant; fiery and delicate by turn. Even in *fortissimo* the piano's tone is never strained (as can happen with Pleyels) and the very precise dynamic shading that the action affords is utilised with fine control and sensibility. Timing is fairly "straight," on the whole, but never constricted, and agogic stresses emerge tellingly. Every work unfolds with complete naturalness; in addition to fine detail, Haywood carries the listener through from beginning to end with no slackening of the overall line. Although his playing technique is obviously first-class (and here he is dealing with an unforgiving type of instrument), there is never an impression of fireworks for its own sake, but of unflagging musical projection.

The accompanying leaflet offers a short commentary by Haywood about playing the instrument, and a brief note by Alec Cobbe about the piano itself: "Chopin's own piano." This is the instrument the composer acquired in January, 1848, probably used in a public concert that February, and took to the UK for his concert tour in 1848. Chopin sold it to the mother of one of his pupils before returning to Paris. The piano seems to have stayed with the family for many years; was sold at auction in the late 1970s; and was acquired by Mr. Cobbe in 1988. Its relationship with Chopin was only recently identified (through the serial number) by the Chopin scholar Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger. (Home again, Chopin obtained another instrument from Pleyel: his last, No. 14810 [1848], purchased from Pleyel after his death by Jane Stirling and sent to Chopin's family in Poland. It now resides in the Fryderyk Chopin Museum, Warsaw.) The CD leaflet also presents photographs of the piano's action, the stamped serial number, the Pleyel ledger