

## *Zephyrus* Program Notes

In the Roberto Rossellini film *La Prise de pouvoir par Louis XIV*, one particularly entertaining scene features a newly instated Louis XIV demanding of the royal tailor that more and more ribbons, lace and jewels be tacked onto an ensemble he intends to wear at court. At last, the suit having reached a comical level of ornament, he asserts that as such a getup would cost the equivalent of a year's earnings for anyone in his retinue, and as the nobility of his court will feel compelled to keep pace with the new King's extravagance, he can bring them to their knees and keep them in line with the mere cost of their remaining fashionable.

Not for nothing is Louis XIV known to us as one of the greatest monarchs of European history. His seventy-two-year reign saw the stabilization of the French economy, governmental reforms that did away with feudalism, and an unprecedented expansion of the wealth and influence of the French state. Following a period of considerable unrest in France, two civil wars, an interminable regency, and numerous efforts on the part of the feudal aristocracy to destabilize the central government, Louis set about consolidating his power as soon as he took the throne. The aristocrats whose rebellious tendencies could have proved disastrous to his reign were kept in line by the immense cost of maintaining the lifestyle Louis modeled for them. The splendor and opulence of the court of Versailles can thus be viewed as the result of a cross between the guile of Machiavelli and the wealth of Croesus, a show of power and abundance calculated to make plain the extent and nature of Louis's absolute rule—verily, even unto the artists and musicians that Louis also brought under his roof. It could almost be viewed as a cynical policy of sartorial, architectural, and artistic 'shock and awe,' but thank goodness, besides all that political savvy, the man had *darn good taste*.

Most of the composers on this program were colleagues, and the French baroque style that they synthesized while working together in the court of Louis XIV was one of the richest and most nuanced musical languages ever devised.

**François Couperin** was the most significant member of one of France's great musical dynasties. Various Couperins were active in Parisian musical life from the late sixteenth century well into the nineteenth, in particular at the Church of St. Gervais, which had an unbroken succession of Couperins in its organ loft for 173 years. The *Concerts Royaux* come from a period of stylistic transition in Couperin's life—with the publication of these *Concerts*, he shrugged off the Italian trio-sonata model of his early chamber music publications and began to write in an authentically homegrown style. For Couperin, writing in the French style meant writing music that consisted, for the most part, of a single, dominant melody and continuo bassline. The four *Concerts Royaux* can be performed on solo harpsichord (the music is entirely notated on two staves), and the preface states that they'll sound well played by violin, flute, oboe, viol, and bassoon. The second of the *Concerts*, in D major and minor, may be the most intimate of the set, not hard to imagine performed for a few trusted courtiers and an aging Louis XIV, his dancing days somewhat behind him and his view of his reign and the incredible refulgence of his court taking on a somewhat melancholy, reflective turn.

**Jean-Marie Leclair** was a renowned dancer, a skilled lace-maker, and the greatest French violinist after Jean-Féry Rebel. He was also one of not many non-flute players to make any significant contribution to the flute repertoire, with the nine violin sonatas '*peut ce jouer sur le Flute Allemande*.'

**Jean-Philippe Rameau** is a fascinating figure, the dominant French composer of the generation after Lully, the most influential musical theorist of the 18th century, the composer of some of the most wonderful solo harpsichord and chamber music of his time, and evidently a rather thorny guy. owing to the thirty years of working in relative obscurity and poverty that preceded his hitting his stride in his fifties. The *Pièces de clavecin en concert*, late works in his oeuvre, are quite different from all the other pieces on our program in that the harpsichord leaves its usual role as accompanist and takes a soloistic turn, prefiguring the piano trios and quartets of Haydn and Mozart.

**Robert de Visée** was Louis XIV's guitar teacher, often called upon to play guitar at Louis's bedside and in chamber music soirées at court in Paris and at Versailles. *Logistille* is the name of a good fairy in the story of *Roland*, the French version of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* made into an opera by the dominant musician of the time, **Jean-Baptiste Lully**. This theorbo solo movement is a transcription of a short *sinfonie* that introduces an aria in which Logistille soothes the conscience of the fitfully sleeping hero.

**Marin Marais**, who is to the viola da gamba what Chopin is to the piano, lived his entire life in Paris and Versailles. In 1676, Marais joined the royal orchestra and spent the rest of his career in the service of the French court, the better part of it in the employ of Louis XIV as *Ordinaire de la chambre du Roi pour la viole*. Like most of his contemporaries, Marais's titles were about a fifty-fifty split between one-word dance titles and the evocatively named character pieces that form the most charming portion of French baroque instrumental music. *Les voix humaines* is a perfectly arresting title for the quite plaintive, deeply emotive piece to which he affixed it.

**Jean-Féry Rebel** was born into the court of Louis XIV, the son of one of Lully's favorite singers. By age eight, Rebel dazzled Lully and the king with his extraordinary virtuosity on the violin and his future was secure in Louis's court. He became one of the *24 violons du Roi* in 1705 and was shortly thereafter made conductor of that ensemble. The *Chaconne* from his 1705 publication of violin suites is nearly as theatrical as it is violinistic, showing Rebel's indebtedness to the ever-so-French orchestral Chaconnes in the operas of Lully.

**Georg Philipp Telemann** was a lifelong Francophile. Though he grew up in thrall of the immensely influential Italians Corelli and Caldara and emulated them heavily in his early works, his first employer was the ostentatious cosmopolitan Count Erdmann II of Promnitz, who demanded orchestral suites in the style of Lully. The style suited Telemann rather well, and in time, real French musicians came to admire and champion his faux-French works. The *Nouveaux quatuors en six suites* were published in Paris in 1736, and have since that time been viewed as Telemann's finest chamber music. The passacaille (*Modéré*) that caps off the E minor Quartet, the last of the set, is a monumental movement, and the perfection of the ensemble texture, mastery of harmonic motion, and divine melodic sense of the whole composition truly mark this as one of the greatest instrumental ensemble works of the 18th century.

- John Lenti