

**F. COUPERIN Keyboard Music, Volume 1 • Angela Hewitt, pn. • HYPERION
67440 CDA 74:07 Livre II: Sixième Ordre. Livre III: Dix-huitième Ordre. Livre
II: Huitième Ordre - Fanfare**

Let me say at the outset that certain misgivings (to be elucidated below) fully prepared me not to like this disc. Angela Hewitt's considerable talents have been praised in these pages and elsewhere, specifically with regard to her Bach, and deservedly so. Yet this new recording, fine as it is, has not dispossessed me of my overriding concerns. I am no elitist who shuns performances on the piano of works intended for the harpsichord. I grew up with and continue to love and admire Glen Gould's Bach. But Couperin is not Bach, and Couperin is French, two facts that are profoundly germane to a review of this CD.

Bach's harpsichord works transfer easily and effectively from one medium to another because they are essentially non-representational and abstract. But François Couperin's music is pictorial—epigrammatic miniatures, descriptive vignettes, even personal character sketches, with titles like *The Warbling*, *The Gnat*, *The Gossip*, *The Turbulent One*, and so on. These pieces were conceived for and, more importantly, depend largely upon the mechanism of the harpsichord to achieve their effects. This is not an argument of period instruments vs. modern. If the instrument upon which the music depends to produce these special effects is mechanically not capable of doing so, the composer's intentions cannot be realized. Angela Hewitt's foray into the world of François Couperin, "Le Grand," will undoubtedly win some converts to a composer who, for many, may seem too finicky, too fussy, too fastidious—and dare I say it?—too French. Yet, herein lies the heart of the matter and the misgivings to which I referred above.

In a collection of his writings, American composer Ned Rorem, in typically mischievous mood, declares that everything (and everyone) can be classified as either German or French. After serving up a lot of silliness ("... yes is French, no is German; gays are French, lesbians are German"), he delivers his *coup de grace*: "Everything German is superficially profound; everything French is profoundly superficial." As with every cliché, there is at its core a kernel of truth here. Most of us have been largely acculturated in the Germanic outlook that established the paradigm of the "three Bs." But French music, from Couperin to Debussy, follows a different aesthetic. To say that Couperin's music is "profoundly superficial," is not to say that it is trivial, insignificant, or inconsequential. It is intended in the etymological sense to mean "on the surface of." And, indeed, this is music that is very much about surfaces in that special way that is so characteristically French: sophisticated, polished, refined, and elegant. With Couperin, the *medium* is the message. Scholarly tracts and treatises have been written on the subject, beginning with his own *L'art de toucher le clavecin* (1717). Couperin's fascination with the mechanics of the instrument became a fetish. He was the maven of

mordents—double, inverted, shakes, beats—you name it. For Couperin there was no such thing as a *simple* trill. His attention to affects, ornaments, and embellishments bordered on the obsessive. More to the point, these elaborately decorative devices were, one might say, genetically engineered for the instrument. These effects, no matter how much one might wish otherwise, cannot be fully or properly reproduced on a piano. Reviewers of opera and vocal music constantly complain, and rightly so, about the unsuitability of a particular voice for a given role. It's not the excellence of the singer's voice, or his or her technical abilities, that are in question; it's the appropriateness of the voice itself for the music. To say that Angela Hewitt's instrument is inappropriate for this music is not to fault her talents. It is no different really from saying that Flagstad's voice was not made to sing Mozart's Queen of the Night. Discretion being the better part of valor, she had the good judgment not to try.

This is important music. Between 1713 and 1731, Couperin wrote no fewer than 27 *Ordres* (Suites) for the harpsichord, eventually collecting them into four *Livres* (Books). Each of these *Ordres* consists of anywhere between as few as four or five to as many as 18 individual movements or pieces, adding up to a total of 226. Taken as a whole, they are the “macrocosmos” of French Baroque harpsichord style. Bach took a keen interest in Couperin's work, as did a number of later composers who actually did write for the piano (Alkan, Ravel, and Satie), assimilating and reinventing Couperin's ideas for consumption in a different medium, the most obvious example being Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Oddly enough, Hewitt's own detailed and exhaustively researched notes contradict her own argument for playing this music on the piano. Speaking of *Le tic-toc-choc ou les maillotins*, from the 18th Suite, she says, “This is a *pièce croisée* (one in which the hands play at the same point on the keyboard but on two different manuals). On a two-manual harpsichord, this is no problem. With only one, this particular piece becomes impossible. So Couperin advised putting either the left hand down an octave or the right hand up. The effect is different of course, but is still effective.” Couperin's advice was not intended for the modern piano, which did not exist at the time; it was intended for a single-manual harpsichord. But the real point is that on a two-manual harpsichord each manual can be set to have its own distinctive registration. That effect, as Hewitt notes, is impossible on the piano, and a simple octave transposition cannot achieve the effect Couperin surely had in mind.

Fortunately, modern-day harpsichordists, among them, Christophe Rousset and Davitt Moroney, have given us wonderful recordings of much of Couperin's music. Also still available, and at bargain price, is Kenneth Gilbert's complete 1971-1974 traversal of all four *Livres*, each in a separate boxed set, in Harmonia Mundi's “Musique d'abord” series. As I flipped back and forth between Hewitt's disc and my Gilbert CDs in a piece-by-piece, A/B comparison, I could not help but note that tempos are everywhere virtually identical, and that Hewitt's execution is flawless; yet each time I switched to Gilbert in the same piece, the music came alive and lit up the room in a way that made the Hewitt sound drab and plain.

For those readers who desire to hear this music played on the piano, you will not find better (in fact, you're not likely to be spoiled for choice, since most pianists have steered clear of undertaking this music in large measure, and for good reason). Considerable preparation and care have obviously gone into this project. The commitment on the part of the artist is sincere and genuine, and her talent incontestable. With a CD so finely played and produced as this one, it is all the more difficult to draw the conclusion that the enterprise was doomed from the start, not for lack of artistic merit, but because the idea behind it was ill-conceived. No matter how good a driver you are, you cannot drive a Humvee through a flowerbed and expect to emerge holding a bouquet of roses.

Jerry Dubins

F. COUPERIN Pièces de Clavecin, Book 4: Ordre 25; Ordre 21 ; Ordre 24; Ordre 26; Ordre 27 • Angela Hewitt, pn. • HYPERION 67480 CDA 73:05 - Fanfare - Book 2

Couperin is one of those composers of music that is intimate, radiant, and at the same time simple in appearance and extremely sophisticated in craft. There is not a single work of his that has reached the popularity of Handel's *Messiah* or Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, for example. Yet the ensemble of his works continues quietly to enchant listeners and secure staunch followers—but all this in such a discreet way that it remains music for the connoisseur.

Most pianists who have already taken possession of great slices of the harpsichord repertoire (such as the keyboard *œuvre* of both Bach and Scarlatti) have tended to leave Couperin alone, the province of the harpsichordists. That calculated distance stems from the far-from-pyrotechnic effect of the music, and the rather lukewarm response it gets from the audience. (In my own concerts, I find that my favorite piece tends to be a Couperin, but it is never the crowd pleaser.) It is also due to the extremely idiomatic writing of Couperin, which fits the harpsichord like a glove but presents innumerable problems for the pianist.

Angela Hewitt has been specializing in Bach for a while and has been extremely successful with that choice. Turning to Couperin, rather than the more accessible Scarlatti (who has seen fabulous piano interpretations from Horowitz to Pletnev) or even Handel is a surprising, audacious development. We hope it will have the effect of calling attention of all piano-lovers to this undervalued master.

Hewitt has worked on these pieces with the utmost seriousness and dedication. It is immediately obvious that she feels a strong kinship with the repertoire, that she has heard it on its original instrument, and that she is aware of the latest performance-practice trends in Baroque music. Stylistically correct, her playing is sweet, with all phrases clearly delineated, ornaments carefully performed (a good example is *Les ombres errantes*, where the trills—never just a gratuitous show of virtuosity—manage to sound like the tremor that shapes the voice, when it is overtaken with emotion), excellent use of pedal, all voices distinctly etched. The

piano tone is mellow and light, privileging the high register and creating a fine and elegant weave.

Hewitt chooses to approach these works with a reverent bow both to the composer and the instrument that inspired him, never making excessive use of dynamics, and keeping the gestures in a deliberately narrow emotional scope. Her musicality is always present but never blatantly displayed, emotions kept in check with refined restraint. In this economy of means, she seems to mirror Couperin's writing itself: frequently the French master writes both hands on one clef, and rarely does he use the whole extension of the instrument. As Pierre Citron says, "Homogeneity in sound is at the basis of Couperin's art in all genres, but mainly at the harpsichord; it demands that the different sound planes be not too separated one from the other." Even the dynamic limitations of the harpsichord make it ideal for Couperin's courteous phrases.

One rarely finds in Couperin's keyboard pieces the elaborate constructions so common in Bach, and even when Couperin does use counterpoint, he deploys two, at most three voices, and this is often a temporary device, not a defining feature of a whole piece.

So Hewitt's gentle touch and almost minimalist conception is entirely adequate to the music she plays. Passions are never worn on the sleeve, and the sleeve that does show underneath the outer coat is pure silk. She thus effectively conveys all of the delicacy one has grown to expect of a harpsichord, but some of the instrument's sharp edge gets lost in this world of lace and sighs. However paradoxical this may seem, the harpsichord is one of the instruments more apt to reproduce aggressiveness and violence—suffice it to remember Hanta'i's wildly vigorous interpretations.

I took this CD to my university class and listened to it with my doctoral students, 10 of whom are pianists. My question was, "When you hear this CD, do you miss the harpsichord?" I myself felt that the excess of gentleness ends up weakening the music's impact, and I do miss the harpsichord's angularity and brutality. But the answers were balanced, five "yes" to five "no." At the end of the class, seven of these pianists said they were going to acquire the CD immediately. Coming from keyboard players who have never played a single Couperin piece (hélas!), this says much for Hewitt's accomplishment.

Laura Rónai

Couperin: Keyboard music/Hewitt - Vol. 1 - ClassicsToday

Reviewer: Jed Distler Artistic Quality: 10 Sound Quality: 10

Couperin on piano? The idea is not so far-fetched as it may seem. After all, none other than Johannes Brahms edited his complete keyboard music for Novello (aimed at pianists, of course). Romantic-era artists such as Ignace Jan Paderewski and Harold Bauer recorded *La Bandoline* and *Le Carillon de Cythère*, while Marcelle Meyer's Couperin recordings reveal how plausible and expressive this

music can sound on the concert grand. Closer to our time, the Russian pianist Gregory Sokolov has delved into Couperin's oeuvre in concert, though not yet on disc.

However, Angela Hewitt's first of three projected Couperin releases may well become a paradigm, a reference point for future pianists wishing to explore this repertoire. Anyone who claims that a modern grand's sonority is too heavy or stylistically incongruous for doing justice to Couperin's delicate textures and intricate embellishments simply hasn't heard Hewitt. She's a master of balancing lines against each other so that they stay vibrant and alive at any tempo, scaling dynamics with the utmost subtlety, and timing cadences with perfectly spaced single notes or rolled chords. Notice, for example, how Hewitt's aptly chosen rubatos for *Les Barricades Mistérieuses* intensify the composer's intended phrase displacements, or how Hewitt's shifts in register replicate the harpsichord's two-manual effect without drawing attention to them. And I wager that Hewitt's early background as a dancer informs her unerring tempo choices. Hyperion's excellent engineering plus Hewitt's articulate, well-researched annotations enhance this altogether delectable release. [6/14/2003]

Couperin: Livres de Clavecin - 6th, 8th et 18th Ordres: Vol. 1

Angela Hewitt - The Guardian

Reviewer: Andrew Clements Rating: 4*/5*

The keyboard music of François Couperin is generally regarded as the exclusive preserve of harpsichordists. Here, though, in the first instalment of what is projected as a complete survey, Angela Hewitt makes a plausible case for its viability on the piano too.

Her playing has all the flexibility established in her outstanding Bach recordings, though for this repertoire she has rationed her palette of tone colour, compressed her dynamic range and apparently foresworn the use of the sustaining pedal, so that the contained sound world is more chaste and more limpid than you'd expect - closer, in fact, to the plucked notes of a harpsichord.

In all three of the *Ordres* here, Hewitt finds plenty of variety, and she is always punctilious in her observation of the nuances of Couperin's ornamentation - even if from time to time the grandeur of the music eludes her.

Couperin: Keyboard Music, Vol. 2, Hewitt - ClassicsToday

Reviewer: Jed Distler Artistic Quality: 9 Sound Quality: 10

My favorable comments on Angela Hewitt's first of three projected Couperin piano

releases (type Q6497 in Search Reviews) apply for Volume 2. Here she offers a selection of pieces from the fourth book of the *Pièces de Clavecin*, Couperin's last published work, and proves how vibrant and expressive they can sound on a modern concert grand. Her ornaments bear the precision, point, and consistency of detail that the finest harpsichordists bring to this music. At the same time, from a pianist's vantagepoint, Hewitt's acute ear for tone color and dynamic shadings allows her to illuminate the composer's subtle harmonic surprises and lyrical introspection in pieces like *Les ombres errantes* and *La petite pince-sans-rire*. You might imagine greater spring and surface pomp in *L'Amphibie*'s dotted rhythms, or more vitality in quicker, dance-oriented selections (you get this from Gregori Sokolov's Couperin concert performances—unfortunately not available on recordings). It's clear, however, that Hewitt has invested considerable time, effort, and care in this project, and her well-written, excellently researched annotations are no less valuable. She sets reference standards for pianists brave enough to poach what many harpsichordists consider exclusive territory. I eagerly await Volume 3.

Couperin: Keyboard Music, Vol. 3, Hewitt - AllMusic
Review by James Leonard Rating: 4 1/2*/5*

With this disc, Angela Hewitt, the renowned Canadian pianist who heretofore specialized in the keyboard music of **Bach**, completes her survey of the keyboard music of **François Couperin**. While it is a highly selective survey -- Hewitt chose the works based on how well she thought the harpsichord works might sound on the modern concert grand and on her own personal interest -- it is also a highly significant survey. Because while **Bach**'s harpsichord music is standard repertoire for most pianists, **Couperin**'s harpsichord music has remained terra incognita for nearly all pianists and Hewitt's marvelously apt and wonderfully balanced performances go a long way toward providing the proof that the music can sound equally delightful on the piano. With all the Third Suite and much of the Fourth Suite from **Couperin**'s Third Book of *Pièces de Clavecin* plus 10 movements chosen from the first and second books, Hewitt's selections are all highly effective and sound as natural on the piano as they do on the harpsichord. Purists may disparage the whole notion of playing harpsichord music on the piano, but even they will have to admit that Hewitt's warmly modulated tone and virtually flawless technique make for lovely listening. Hyperion's sound is perhaps just a bit too distant, but never less than clear and

deep.

Couperin - Hewitt Vol. 3 - ClassicalNet

Pièces de Clavecin - Volume 3

- Pièces de Clavecin, Book I:
- Deuxième Ordre - Les Idées heureuses
- Troisième Ordre
- Quatrième Ordre - Le Réveil-matin
- Pièces de Clavecin, Book II:
- Dixième Ordre - La Mézangère
- Septième Ordre - La Ménétou
- Pièces de Clavecin, Book III:
- Dix-neuvième Ordre - La Muse-Plantine
- Treizième Ordre - Les Lis naissans
- Quatorzième Ordre
- Quinzième Ordre - Le Dodo, ou L'Amour au Berceau
- Seizième Ordre
- Les Folies françoises, ou Les Dominos - L'Âme-en-peine

Angela Hewitt, piano Hyperion CDA67520 70m DD

Till Angela Hewitt decided to give her attention to these works, the pieces recorded on this disc were either neglected or forgotten altogether. With this third volume of excerpts from the harpsichord music of François Couperin, Hewitt concludes her personal and far reaching survey of the French master's keyboard works, and being the baroque expert that she is, music which was previously considered the exclusive reign of the harpsichord can be winningly transferred to the modern piano. Her mammoth J.S. Bach undertaking is ample testimony to this. Contrary to her programming on the previous two volumes, Hewitt here only performs one complete 'Ordre' (Suite) – the widely entertaining 13th with its wicked parody of a perverse masked ball. She also tackles 4 pieces from the 14th and as if to celebrate her joy at having successfully ended her task, she performs a wide selection of her favourite pieces taken from Suites not previously featured. Couperin once said; 'I love much better the things which touch me than those which surprise me'. He wanted music to affect people and these pieces do just that. Full of grace, joy, light heartedness and at times even melancholy and tender sadness. These hidden miniatures also possess a hidden power that arrests the mind and touches the heart.

Hewitt's mini literary masterpiece is not only cause for exaltation, but also a source of encouragement to all those who are not familiar with such a refined style of music. An inspirational issue to complete a memorable mini-cycle which should delight and entertain those who are prepared to let themselves be regaled by these French delicacies.

