Three harpsichords

Played by David Warren Steel

*The Italian Harpsichord*

Toccata settima (1615) F 2.07 Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643)

Cento Partite sopra Passacagli (1637) F 2.29

*The Flemish Harpsichord*

Engelse Fortuin, SwWV 320 Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621)

Pavan: Lord Salisbury Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625)

A Fancy

Ground [passamezzo antico]

*The French Harpsichord*

Courante (1706) Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)

La Lyre d’Orphée (1728) Jean-François Dandrieu (1682-1739)

Les Graces (1756) Jacques Duphly (1715-1789)

La de Belombre (1756)

Italian harpsichord, maker unknown

Flemish harpsichord by Ray Curle

French harpsichord by Anderson Dupree

All three are property of Ronald F. Vernon and Susan Marchant

The harpsichord, invented in the late Middle Ages, was the predominant keyboard instrument in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The strings are sounded by plucking. Each key is pivoted in the center: when the near end is depressed, the far end raises up, lifting a small wooden “jack” on which a quill or plectrum plucks the string. Harpsichords were made in several sizes and regional styles.

Early in the 16th century, the Italian harpsichord emerged, lightly constructed of cypress wood and strung with brass. The Italian instrument heard today is based on the 16th-century form. Later Italian models had a larger range, but the construction changed little over the years.

In the late 16th century Antwerp makers devised a new type known as Flemish. Made of linden wood, it was more heavily constructed, and used mainly steel strings. Some Flemish instruments had two keyboards, used for transposition. The basic Flemish design was adapted by French, English and German makers.

In the 17th century, French musicians admired the Flemish model, and altered the Antwerp instruments to suit their musical needs. First of all, they extended the range upward and downward. They also altered the instruments with two keyboards so that that could play the same notes, but with different tone qualities.

**Girolamo Frescobaldi**

Frescobaldi was the finest and most influential keyboard composer of his time. His toccatas combine virtuoso runs and passages with rhapsodic harmonies and shocking modulations. According to the composer, they must be played with considerable rhythmic freedom and expression, in accord with their rhetorical design. *Cento partite sopra Passacagli,* literally, ‘one hundred variations on the passacagli,’ was first published in the 1637 edition of Book I. The passacaglio originated in the traveling music or vamp patterns *(pasacalles)* of Spanish guitar music. It usually consisted of variations on a simple strummed chord pattern in an easy triple meter, and often served as a transition between songs or dances. Frescobaldi’s monumental set contains two kinds of interpolated dance: the *corrente,* in brisk triple time, was the most popular dance of the early 17th century; the *ciaccona* was a sung Spanish dance *(chacona)* with an infectious, syncopated guitar accompaniment, based, like the passacaglio, on a repeated chord pattern. In his interpretation of the exotic Spanish guitar idiom, Frescobaldi adds considerable harmonic and motivic interest to the repeated patterns, while retaining the flamboyant rhythms and the characteristic open-string drones of the guitar original. To make this long work useful to the dance accompanist, the composer directed that the player might stop at any cadence as required. The present sequence consists of: (1) “prima parte” (passacagli in d minor), (2) corrente (d minor), (3) passacagli (d minor), modulating to (4) “altro tono” (passacagli in F major); then (5) ciaccona (F major), modulating to (6) passacagli (C major), (7) ciaccona (C major), modulating to (8) passacagli (a minor), (9) ciaccona (a minor), modulating to (10) altro tono (ciaccona in d minor); this performance concludes with (11) passacagli altro tono (d minor). The original modulates twice more and ends in e minor, presumably in order to lead into other dances (balletti and correnti) in the collection.

**Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck**

Sweelinck, called “the Orpheus of Amsterdam” lived in that city almost all his life, as teacher and organist of the Oude Kerk. His vocal works included Italian madrigals, French chansons, Latin motets and Reformed psalm settings, but he is mainly known for his unpublished keyboard works. He did not play for Protestant church services, where instrumental music was forbidden, but was hired by the city government to play twice a day, as well as before and after church services. His pupils included prominent German composers such as Samuel Scheidt, Heinrich Scheidemann and Jacob Praetorius. He was known for his keyboard variations on popular tunes, including this set on the English song “Fortune my foe.”

**Orlando Gibbons**

Though he was regarded as “the best finger of the age,” Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) largely refrained from technical display in his dignified, sonorous keyboard works. Canadian pianist Glenn Gould championed Gibbons's music, and named him as his favorite composer, though he omitted all the copious ornaments in his pieces. His Fancy in C explores several subjects, including one embellished with syncopated detail. The Pavan “Lord Salisbury” is one of his best known and most beautiful pieces. It was published in *Parthenia* (1613), the first English collection of printed keyboard music. It is unusual in that the repetitions of its three strains have not been written out by the composer. Today I will embellish these strains in a style based on that of Gibbons’ other pavans. The English term “Ground” refers to a set of variations on a bass or harmonic pattern. Gibbons’s lively piece is a setting of the well-known *passamezzo antico,* also set by many other keyboard composers. In the last two variations, Gibbons follows the example of his teacher William Byrd by concentrating on contrapuntal depth and complexity rather than ostentatious passage-work.

##### Jean-Philippe Rameau

Rameau is recognized as France’s leading composer of the eighteenth century, and as an important music theorist. His great accomplishments in opera and other dramatic music were products of his middle and old age, beginning with *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733), while most of his important harpsichord works date from the period 1724-1747. A native of Dijon, his earlier life was spent in relative obscurity in the provinces. In 1706, however, on a brief visit to Paris, the young Rameau published a single suite of keyboard pieces. These early pieces partake much more of the style and tradition of the earlier harpsichord masters than do those of his later books. All the pieces show a remarkable harmonic assurance and skill, introducing complex and altered chords into a clear and logical overall pattern, as befits the “father of modern harmony.”

**François Couperin**

Couperin was born in Paris to a prominent musical family. As organist of St.-Gervais and harpsichordist to the court of Louis XIV, Couperin published two organ masses and four books of harpsichord pieces. His chamber works often show Italian influence, as does this short prelude, included here to demonstrate the “buff” stop which imitates the sound of the lute.

**Jean-François Dandrieu**

François Couperin excelled in the creation of brief character pieces, but others, including Dandrieu, also composed excellent examples of this genre. This one, from his second book of Pièces de clavecin, evokes the plucked strings of the ancient lyre, and the emotional power of music in the hands of the hero Orpheus.

##### Jacques Duphly

During the course of the 18th century, French keyboard music developed from the stereotyped patterns of dance music toward more extensive character pieces, often dedicated to a patron or friend of the composer. The works of Jacques Duphly represent some of the most successful adaptations of the Italian sonata style of Domenico Scarlatti, while retaining much of the graceful melody and ornamentation of François Couperin and Rameau. They were written during the final flowering of the French harpsichord, when it was threatened by competition from the pianoforte.