

# April 2024

Φ BAROQUE by Derek Katz

## The French Dispatch

**The title that Emi Ferguson has given this concert, “The French Dispatch,” is a nod to Wes Anderson’s charming 2021 film of the same name, but also suggests that the performance, like a published magazine, is a collection of news items informing us about the doings of people in other places.**

In this case, the missives are from early 18th century Paris, and give us a sense of the centrality of Paris to European musical life at the time, as well as the complex interactions between music publishers, public concert life and musicians both professional and amateur. The second quarter of the 18th century in Paris saw the beginnings of public concerts in the modern sense, especially the Concert Spirituel, begun in 1725, and initially presenting music played by members of the royal opera orchestra during Advent and Lent. This was quickly joined by a less public series of concerts presented by the exceedingly wealthy tax collector Alexander Le Riche de La Pouplinière in his own home, starting in 1731 and featuring an orchestra hired by La Pouplinière.

Despite the importance of Paris for 18th century European culture, and the rich variety of music produced and performed there, French music from this period rarely appears on our concert programs, and this program will be a welcome enhancement to our usual Baroque diet of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel. One of the reasons that we do not hear this music more often is that French Baroque style has elements that are not explicitly notated, and must be understood by performers who have immersed themselves in the music of this period. In addition, this will be an even more unusual opportunity to hear this music in the tunings that were probably used at the time. The current international standard for the pitch A (in the octave above middle C) is 440 Hertz. Baroque music is often performed with A at 415 Hertz, or approximately a half-step lower than modern concert pitch. French Baroque music, meanwhile, seem to have generally been played even lower, with A at 392 Hertz, or a full whole step below modern pitch. This will give the music a warmer and darker sound than it would have if played at a higher pitch.

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## Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)

### *Pieces de clavecin en concerts*, Concert No. 3 in A Major (pub. Paris 1741)

Jean-Philippe Rameau is one of Emi's favorite composers, and this is the second time that she is sharing one of his five *Pieces de clavecin en concerts* with Camerata Pacifica audiences, having played the first of the collection for us in November, 2021. Rameau arrived in Paris in 1722, after a fairly obscure career as a peripatetic church organist. Although nearly 40, he quickly established himself as the major figure in French musical culture, initially with a significant theoretical treatise, and then with a series of operas starting in the 1730s. His career would remain centered on dramatic music, but he was also involved with instrumental music, especially through his association with Alexander Le Riche de La Pouplinière, who appointed Rameau his director of music sometime around 1735. This brought Rameau into contact with the finest players in Paris, including the flutist Michel Blavet and the violinist Jean-Pierre Guignon, who joined La Pouplinière's orchestra in 1741, just as Rameau was completing his *Pieces de clavecin en concerts*. Emi played a flute sonata by Blavet on that same November, 2021 Camerata Pacifica program, and both Blavet and Guignon were involved in the premiere of the Telemann quartet that will conclude this program.

The *Pieces de clavecin en concerts* are Rameau's only chamber music, scored for the flexible combination of harpsichord with violin (or flute) and viola da gamba (or a second violin). While this combination resembles the scoring for a Baroque trio sonata (and that of the Telemann quartet), Rameau's harpsichord part is a fully-notated solo part, not part of a semi-improvised continuo group. That is, this is music for harpsichord accompanied by other instruments. Rameau wrote that "the violin and the viol should adapt themselves to the harpsichord, distinguishing what is accompaniment from what is part of a subject," and also prepared versions for solo harpsichord.

By his own account, Rameau was inspired to compose music for harpsichord accompanied other instruments by recent publications in France of pieces for harpsichord and violin, especially a collection by Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre.

The Concert No. 3 in A Major is in three movements. The first, in two halves, each of which is repeated, is named for La Pouplinière, Rameau's patron. The movement alternates passages in which arpeggios are tossed from instrument to instrument with ones dominated by scintillating harpsichord flourishes. The second movement is titled "The Timid One," presumably honoring a woman in La Pouplinière's circle. This movement is comprised of two Rondeaux, the first one mysterious, flowing and minor and the second perkier, major and filled with trills. Both Rondeaux are marked "gracious," and both consist of a refrain that alternates with contrasting sections. The movement concludes with a reprise of the minor Rondeau. The third and final movement is a Tambourin, modeled on a folk dance for pipe and drum. Rameau included many Tambourins in his operas and ballets, and this type of music was closely associated with him. Here the flute is the pipe, playing a simple and lively melody, and the harpsichord bangs out the danceable drum rhythm.

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## Louis-Nicolas Clérambault (1676-1749) *Pirâme et Tisbé* (1713)

Although the best-known cantatas today are the Lutheran church cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach, the origins of the cantata are in 17th century Italy, where they provided a secular alternative of modest dimensions to Biblical oratorios and elaborate operas. Usually a work for solo singer, accompanied either by a continuo group or a small ensemble, the cantata was ideally suited to aristocratic salons, private academies and to the emerging public concert life in Paris in the early 18th century. Louis-Nicolas Clérambault, by profession a church organist in service to the royal household, was also the leading composer of cantatas in Paris at this time, publishing 25 cantatas between 1710 and 1742. *Pirâme et Tisbé* is a typical example of the genre, telling a story through pairs of recitatives and airs. The recitatives, more speech-like and accompanied only by the continuo group, narrate the story in the third person, while more melodic airs, in which the voice is joined by flute and violin, express the characters' emotions in their own words.

Pyramus and Thisbe are perhaps the original star-crossed lovers. Born to rival families, they are forbidden to marry, and can only express their love for each other by whispering through a crack in a wall. They arrange to meet in secret, but Thisbe, arriving first, is scared away by a lioness with a mouth bloody from a recent meal. Pyramus, coming later to find a cloak dropped by the fleeing Tisbe and traces of the lioness's blood, assumes that Thisbe has been killed, and falls on his own sword. Thisbe returns, and, finding Pyramus's body, kills herself with his sword. The earliest literary version of this story comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but it is best known in the English-speaking world as the basis for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and also makes an appearance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where it is staged by the "rude mechanicals" in Act I.

Clérambault's setting is both vivid and moving. The first two airs provide a striking contrast between the sweet and gentle music with which Pyramus attempts to convince Thisbe to leave their families, and the slow, ominous march in which he describes the fateful tomb where they are to meet. The next air is in Thisbe's voice, and returns to a graceful and dance-like character for her loving decision to flee. The sinister encounter with the lioness is illustrated with fast, growling outbursts from the continuo players. The following lament, expressing Pyramus's anguish when thinking Thisbe dead, is the emotional core of the cantata. The flute and violin split into independent lines for the first time, creating a richer texture filled with fleetingly painful dissonances. Rousing scales from the continuo group herald Pyramus's resolve to kill himself, and the cantata ends with a surprisingly cheerful setting of wry verses about the unfairness of love.

Emi is delighted to welcome Karim Sulayman to narrate this work, and to impersonate both Pyramus and Thisbe for us.

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**Anne-Madeleine Guédon de Presles (d. ca. 1754)**  
**Four Songs (published in *Meslanges de musique*, Paris 1728-32)**  
 “Tendres amants”  
 “Vole Amour”  
 “Belle Catin”  
 “Je rencontray l’autre jour”

Anne-Madeleine Guédon de Presles, known professionally as Mlle. Guédon de Presles, was a prominent singer and actress in 18th century Paris, in the employ of the court theater and appearing in operas, at the chapel, and in chamber concerts. Even her given names were unknown until recently, but much information about her life and career has been uncovered by the British musicologist and keyboard player Davitt Moroney, currently on the faculty at Berkeley. While her professional life as a performer was in the context of public presentations supported by the royal family, and dominated by the grand spectacle of opera, her work as a composer came in the form of short songs for solo voice, published in literary journals and in collections of French and Italian songs intended for domestic use.

The four songs on this program, while brief and deceptively simple, demonstrate a surprising emotional range and substantial wit. All four are love songs, albeit in rather different ways. “Tendres amants” enjoins lovers to be generous. The vocal line is syllabic, and mostly moves in close step with the continuo accompaniment. The music follows the structure of the poem closely, with each musical phrase corresponding to a couplet of poetry. “Vole Amour” is labelled a musette, referring to a kind of bagpipe frequently used in French aristocratic circles at the time, generally to evoke pastoral scenes.

Indeed, this poem is about shepherdesses and shepherds, and the music is a collection of pastoral devices, from the continuo, which plays long bagpipe drones, to the addition of a rustic flute, shadowing the voice in a simple harmonization. “Belle Catin” is somewhat off-color, with the singer repeatedly asking a person of low repute why their love is not reciprocated. The musical setting emphasizes the humor of the persistent questions, and there is some nice word-painting as the singer stretches out the word “Aurora” (dawn) with a long melisma, and the continuo imitates the vocal line for “I always follow in your steps.” “Je rencontray l’autre jour” is a rather cynical ditty about marriage. This is a vaudeville, a kind of folk-like satirical song. Typically, this song is unaccompanied, and has a simple, catchy melody that is repeated for each new verse of poetry.

It is not clear that these songs have ever been performed before, and, while this may or may not be a world premiere, we will certainly be sharing a very rare experience in hearing them.

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## **Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767)** **"Paris" Quartet in E Minor, TWV 43:e4 (published 1738)**

Georg Philipp Telemann is the only composer on this program who was not French, but the quartet that you are about to hear was written and published in Paris, and performed by French musicians. Telemann was one of the most prolific and cosmopolitan composers of his day, writing hundreds of works in genres ranging from opera and church music to instrumental music for a dizzying array of ensembles, and drawing from many styles of European art and folk music, including French, German, Italian and Polish. Telemann was also active in the business of music, compensating for the lack of a music publishing industry in Germany by printing and distributing his own works across the continent. The so-called "Paris" Quartets consist of two books of six quartets. The first of these collections was published in 1730 in Hamburg, where Telemann was in charge of church music for the city, directed the major opera house, and organized a university orchestra (or collegium musicum) for public concerts. The first book sold well, no doubt because of the novelty of the instrumentation. The ensemble for Telemann's quartets at first appears to be the standard grouping for a trio sonata, with two high instruments (flute and violin) accompanied by a continuo group of harpsichord and viola da gamba (or cello), but Telemann's viola da gamba is treated as another solo voice, only occasionally doubling the bass line of the harpsichord.

Telemann left Hamburg for Paris in 1737, at the long-standing invitation of "virtuosos of the place" who had been performing his published works. These virtuosos were the same instrumentalists that been performing at the Concert spirituels and collaborating with Rameau. Telemann had multiple incentives to make the trip, which lasted for eight months, having both reasons to leave Hamburg, including a failed marriage and financial problems at the opera house, and also positive reasons to be in Paris, where he could arrange to protect his right to publish his own works there and collaborate with the virtuosos who had invited him. Once in Paris, Telemann secured a royal charter giving him the exclusive rights to publish his compositions in France for the next twenty years and came out with a second set of quartets. The quartets were quickly performed at the Concert spirituel by an ensemble with Michel Blavet playing

the flute, Jean-Pierre Guignon playing the violin, and Telemann (presumably) playing the harpsichord. Telemann also sold almost 300 copies of the printed sheet music to subscribers who had pre-ordered before publication, with customers from the French nobility and from other parts of Europe, including one "Monsieur Bach of Leipzig."

The Quartet in E Minor on our program is the sixth and last of this second set. This is the most French of the "Paris" Quartets, adopting elements of French style to a greater degree than the rest of the set. These elements include the pervasive embellishments to the melodies and the gently uneven rhythms (one of those un-notated practices that performers need to understand to play this music). The opening Prélude is also in the form of a "French overture," alternating stately slow sections with lively ones. This Prélude is followed by a succession of contrasting movements, much like a dance suite, and, also like dance music, made up of repeated phrases. Most of the movements are made up of a pair of phrases, followed by a contrasting middle section and completed by a return of the opening section. Telemann finds enormous variety within these parameters. Some of this comes from combing the instruments in different ways. In the second movement, for instance, the outer sections treat the flute and viola da gamba as a little solo group, set against the sound of the full ensemble, while the middle section is just for the trio of flute, violin and viola da gamba. The fourth movement pulls a similar trick, but now with the flute and violin as soloists, accompanied by viola da gamba and harpsichord. There is also great variety of rhythm and character, most notably in the pervasively syncopated fifth movement (labelled "distracted" by Telemann).

Given that the Rameau Concert and the Telemann Quartet were published within three years of each other, were composed for the same small community of professional musicians, are scored for very similar ensembles and were presented on the same concert series, it is very possible to imagine that they might have also shared a program in the 1740s, or at least been heard by the same audiences at the time.