

Fanfare – L'Unique

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I am not entirely sure how “unique” the harpsichord works of François Couperin really are, given that even during his lifetime he was frequently imitated, and today numerous harpsichordists see his music as a sort of rite of passage. Here, Jory Vinikour has recorded three of the later “orders” or suites, Nos. 6–8, which were published as the first three sets of the second volume of his harpsichord pieces in 1717. Three years earlier he had published the first set, and already he began to insert what today might be called character pieces into the succession of dances comprising each ordre. These early suites interspersed titled pieces in between the conventional dances, and this seems to have been his *modus operandi* at the beginning. Here, however, he decided that each and every suite should consist of named pieces, and even the eighth ordre, which does return to the conventional dance movements of the first three, still has a couple of these co-titled with his rubrics (*Allemande l'ausonienne*; *Sarabande l'unique*). The trick is to discern exactly what Couperin meant by these titles, whether they were sort of intellectual inside jokes or more evocative character pieces.

In any case each of the first two on this disc have eight movements, while the eighth add two extras before the final *Passacaille*. Many are somewhat generic: in the seventh ordre, four are called *Les petits âges*, or youth. Beginning with *La Muse naissante* (The Muse born), it travels through childhood (*L'enfantine*) to adolescence (*L'adolescente*) before ceasing at the more enigmatic *Les délices* (The Delights, whatever they may be). One might well ask if this was some sort of coming of age set, but the surrounding movements bear no connection to these four. There are enough recordings out there of the Couperin works so that the individual movements don't really need discussion. It is harpsichordist Jory Vinikour's performance that should be the focus. He has a knack for finely nuanced interpretation. In the enigmatic *Baricades mystérieuses*, for instance, the rolling theme floats like a continuous stream, with his playing emphasizing the sort of proto-Minimalism of the movement. The theme wisely seems a bit in the background, emerging mysteriously from the bubbling accompaniment. In “*La Basque*” of the seventh ordre, the lightness of the twirling line is like a comic dance, and this is followed by the lengthy “*La chazé*,” where he uses a darker sound, an anodyne to the superficiality of the preceding movement. This ordre concludes with the soft “*Les amusements*,” indicating to the listener that the entire set was a nicely intellectual jest. The more conventional eighth ordre contains more conventional dance movements, such as the mincing *gavotte*, the brief and pompous *rondeau*, and a *gigue* that can best be described as more contrapuntally complex than it ought to be, even if it does retain the compound meter of the dance form. This, the longest suite in the set, concludes with a *Passacaille* that could be right off the dance floor with its rhythmic continuity of the variations, the slow and stately upper voice variations, and final flourish in the last of the chain of variations.

As one might expect, the performance choices of registration by Vinikour are entirely suited to this music, offering variety and yet some interesting contrasts. His phrasing makes the music come alive, rather than the usual focus on the often difficult ornamentation Couperin requires that offers the pitfall of each movement being just an exercise. This is an excellent disc, and one that, in my opinion, is preferred for its sensitive and well-played interpretation.