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Music 100

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Music Study: Couperin and Debussy

Although both François Couperin (1668-1733) and Claude Debussy (1862-1918) were both French composers and both wrote much keyboard music, their works are very different. The music for this study is found on tracks 2:4 and 3:10 on the compact discs that accompany *Music: The Art of Listening* by Jean Ferris.

Couperin's "Le tic-toc-choc" from *Ordre 18* was composed in 1722 and is to be played on the harpsichord, a keyboard instrument that uses plucked strings instead of hammers striking the strings as in a modern piano. Couperin wrote this piece towards the end of his life, when the Baroque style was beginning to give way to the clearer sounds of the Classical period. Debussy's piano prelude, *La cathédrale engloutie*, from *Preludes, Book I*, was also written towards the end of his life, between 1909 and 1910, during the Impressionist period and was to be played on a modern piano, which has a much fuller and warmer sound, though less clear, than a harpsichord.

The form of "Le tic-toc-choc" is that of a *rondeau*, which can be represented using letters as: A B A B A C A D A. This is the typical form of what musicians call a *rondo*, where a refrain (A) keeps returning. The form of Debussy's piece is far less clear: it seems to gradually build up and die away in a large, arching kind of form without many clear divisions between sections.

While both pieces are based on tonal harmony, the chords in the Debussy piece are richer and more complex-sounding than the chords that Couperin uses. The tempo in Debussy's piece is very slow, while Couperin uses a lively tempo. Although it is easy to hear the duple meter in Couperin's music, the triple meter in the Debussy is hard to grasp, partly because of the "profoundly calm" tempo. Both pieces use a homophonic texture with a melody accompanied by chords, but in the Debussy piece the texture seems much denser than in the Couperin rondeau.

"Le tic-toc-choc" reminds one of a clock, while *La cathédrale engloutie* mirrors the story of a submerged cathedral that rises and sinks in a very picturesque way. In this sense both pieces can be said to have programmatic meaning. Both works also were meant to be listened to for enjoyment and reflection but not for worship; they are not examples of sacred music.

While both pieces were entertaining and held my interest, Debussy's music seemed much more profound to me, possibly because of the more complex form, texture and harmony but also because the image of the cathedral rising and falling in the sea was much more suggestive than the ticking of a clock. On the other hand, the clear form of Couperin's piece and the bright sounds of the harpsichord were more cheerful and upbeat. Also, Couperin's rhythms were clearer and more lively, which gave his music a more confident and happy feel.

If I had to pick out a weakness in each piece, I would say that *La cathédrale engloutie* lacked a good and memorable melody and the sounds seemed blurred by the piano. "Le tic-toc-choc" had the disadvantage of sounding a little too frivolous and fancy, without much substance, an example of the Rococo sentiment rather than deep

emotion. This was most clearly brought out by the simple dance-like quality of the music and the repetitive refrain.

I'm glad I had a chance to listen to two pieces of keyboard music by French composers. I wonder what they would sound like in a live performance.