François Couperin on Touch, Movement, and the Soul

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Figure 1 *Anonymous.* Couperin musicien. *Early eighteenth century, charcoal on paper. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, reproduced with permission.*

IN 1732, TITON DU TILLET opined in *Le parnasse françois* that Louis Marchand (1669–1732) had been "the best organist there ever was in terms of touch."[1] François Couperin (1668–1733, Figure 1) was still alive, and if he was aware of this encomium I think it would have galled him. It was Couperin, after all, who had published a whole treatise on the topic of touch. Tillet praised Couperin instead for "fertile and marvelous genius in composition," recapitulating the

[1] "Effectivement on peut dire qu'il a été le plus grand Organiste qu'il y ait jamais eu pour le toucher, & que ses mains ont toûjours fourni à tout ce que son beau genie produisoit: il les avoit aussi très-grandes & très-belles." Évrard Titon du Tillet, *Le parnasse françois* (Paris, 1732), 659. All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

archetype that often framed comparisons of the two men.[2] Marchand was seen as the more naturally brilliant and spontaneous musician, while Couperin was thought to have applied himself to his art with greater diligence and sophistication. These accounts probably reflect something of their public performances in earlier decades, when the people of Paris would dart between churches on a Sunday to compare their organ playing.[3] The accuracy of such portraits notwithstanding, the reception of the two musicians indicates a tension between 'natural' and 'artificial' expression—that is, between the spontaneous, direct outpouring of the fire of imagination and the skilled refinement of an expressive impulse.

The idea that Marchand's hands "supplied (*fourni*) everything that his fine genius produced" frames touch as the gateway of the artist's fantasy. For Couperin, touch was something very different. In the preface to his first book of harpsichord pieces, he writes:

> [J]e sçauray toûjours gré à ceux qui par un art infini, soutenu par le goût, pouront arriver à rendre cet instrument susceptible d'expression: c'est à quoy mes ancêtres se sont apliqués, indépendamment de la belle composition de leurs piéces.[4]
>
> I will forever be grateful to those who by infinite art, supported by taste, are able to render this instrument susceptible to expression: this is what my predecessors worked at, independently from the beautiful composition of their pieces.

Couperin acknowledges the distinction between performance and composition, but instead of characterizing performance as 'natural' and composition as 'artificial,' he affirms that both are arts worthy of cultivation. His *art de toucher* does not grant immediate access to the artist's genius, but mediates its expression. By an exquisite refinement of the mechanism of touch, the instrument becomes susceptible to the movement of fantasy, making it perceptible to a listener.

This idea was elaborated in Couperin's treatise *L'art de toucher le clavecin* (1716/17), where touch is defined as the art of giving the harpsichord a soul (*donner de l'âme à l'instrument*). One may well wonder whether this definition

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[2] "François Couperin [est] connu par son genie fecond & merveilleux pour la composition & par sa maniere d'executer sur l'Orgue, & dont nous avons grand nombre d'excellens ouvrages." Ibid., 403. "[Couperin] attiroit un grand concours de monde, & d'habiles Musiciens qui l'écoutoient avec beaucoup de plaisir, & qui admiroient son beau génie, & son heureuse exécution.… Le grand nombre des Oeuvres de Couperin fait connoître la beauté & la fécondité de son génie." Tillet, *Suite du parnasse françois* (Paris, 1743), 664–65.

[3] See, for example, Pierre Louis d'Aquin de Chateau-Lyon, *Lettres sur les hommes célèbres dans les sciences, la littérature, et les beaux-arts sous le regne de Louis XV* (Amsterdam, 1752), 105ff.

[4] François Couperin, preface to *Pieces de clavecin … Premier livre* (Paris, 1713). In this and other excerpts, original spelling has been retained but some errors have been tacitly corrected; see fn. 6.

amounts to anything more than an attractive turn of phrase; such skepticism arises from the quality of Couperin's text, which, as Ralph Kirkpatrick observed, is "singularly disjointed. In fact, at first glance it arouses questions as to Couperin's intellectual capacities and powers of exposition."[5] Notwithstanding its flashes of insight, *L'art de toucher le clavecin* is disorganized and epigrammatic.[6] Couperin, who had only limited schooling, seems to have approached the writing of prose with diffidence, and there are indications in his later prefaces that his writing was criticized by more lettered men.[7]

Couperin's treatise has thus been read primarily for the practical insights it brings to bear on questions of performance. Accordingly, Kirkpatrick glossed the key phrase "donner de l'âme à l'instrument" as "to render the harpsichord expressive," and did not consider *soul* as anything but metaphorical.[8] Others have understood *soul* as a shibboleth, a stand-in for the *je ne sais quoi* of good taste: good performances have soul, bad performances don't.[9] This begs the question, flattening Couperin's use of the concept to an empty bromide.

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[5] Ralph Kirkpatrick, "On Re-Reading Couperin's 'L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin'," *Early Music* 4, no. 1 (1976): 4; see also Philippe Beaussant, *François Couperin*, trans. Alexandra Land (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1990), 34.

[6] This may be one reason why no critical edition or commentary has yet been published. The various reprints and translations do not adequately take into account the textual differences between the 1716 and 1717 editions; nor do they distinguish between outright errors and the peculiarities of Couperin's prose style. French orthography was not standardized until the reforms of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1740), but Couperin's spelling and grammar are exceptionally idiosyncratic.

[7] "Je demande grace à Messieurs les Puristes, et Grammariens, sur le stile de mes Préfaces. J'y parle de mon Art, et si je m'assujetissois à imiter la sublimité de leur, peut-être parlerois-je moins bien du mien." Couperin, preface to *Troisiéme livre de piéces de clavecin* (Paris, 1722), ii. "Car il y a toûjours des Contradicteurs, qui sont plus à redouter que les bons Critiques, dont on tire souvent, contre leur intention, des avis très salutaires. Les premiers sont méprisables; et je m'acquite d'avance envers eux avec usure." Couperin, preface to *Les Nations: sonades et suites de simphonies en trio* (Paris, 1726). Perhaps such criticism is part of what motivated Couperin's revised edition of *L'art de toucher le clavecin*, printed in 1717: see Davitt Moroney, "Couperin et les contradicteurs: la révision de *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*," in *François Couperin: Nouveau regards*, ed. Huguette Dreyfus and Orhan Memed, Actes des Rencontres de Villecroze 3 (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1998), 163–86.

[8] Kirkpatrick, "On Re-Reading," 6.

[9] See, for example, Skip Sempé, "Touch Lightly: On the Elusive Music of Chambonnières," *The Musical Times* 135, no. 1811 (1994): 15 and Susan McClary, "Temporality and Ideology: Qualities of Motion in Seventeenth-Century French Music," *ECHO: a music-centered journal* 2, no. 2 (2000), accessed August 15, 2017, http://www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume2-Issue2/mcclary/mcclary.html. Revised versions of McClary's article have been published under the same title as Chapter 9 in McClary, *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California

Yet it seems to me that Couperin was of an intellectual disposition; the voluminous and detailed prefaces to the keyboard books and *L'art de toucher* bear this out. "As far as grammar is from eloquence in declamation," retorted Couperin to his critics, "so there is an infinite chasm" between the mere science of tablature and the true art of playing well.[10] This challenged his detractors to engage with the content of *L'art de toucher* rather than the foibles of its form. Typically (and endearingly), Couperin's rhetorical parry falls short of a perfectly balanced simile in its false parallelism, and yet its thrust is powerful and persuasive. Taking it on board, I believe Couperin's concept of *soul* should not be dismissed as mere window-dressing. His education would have been acquired over the course of his decades at Court, particularly during his service with the Duc de Bourgogne between 1693 and 1707, when he first came into regular contact with Paris's literary and aristocratic classes.[11] In light of his patchy yet protracted exposure to philosophy and literature, one need neither be surprised to find Couperin invoking learned concepts, nor tie oneself into knots over his often incongruous blending of ideas, nor explain away his syncretism as an inadequacy. In what follows, I bring together the various fragments from Couperin's writings that deal with soul, touch, taste, and expression, compare them to other contemporaneous writings on the same topics, and offer an interpretation of how Couperin and his readers might have understood them.

Soul in General

To speak of 'the soul of music' conjures the idea of something ineffable which music has the power to give a voice. The idea is an ancient one, but it is perhaps more familiar to us in its Romantic reincarnation as a metaphor for the struggle

Press, 2012), 241–58; and as Chapter 12 in McClary, ed., *Structures of Feeling in Seventeenth-Century Cultural Expression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 315–37. Further references are to the 2013 version.

[10] "La Méthode que je donne icy … n'a nul rapport à la Tablature, qui n'est qu'une sçience de Nombres; mais j'y traite sur toutes choses (par principes demontrés) du beau Toucher du Clavecin.… Comme il y a une grande distance de la Grammaire à la Déclamation; il y en a aussi une infinie entre la Tablature, et la façon de bien-joüer." Couperin, preface to *L'art de toucher le clavecin*, rev. ed. (Paris, 1717).

[11] On Couperin's education, see David Tunley, *François Couperin and 'The Perfection of Music'*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 3–4; Wilfrid Mellers, *François Couperin and the French Classical Tradition*, rev. ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 5–7; Beaussant, *François Couperin* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1990), 34–35; and Kirkpatrick, "On Re-Reading," 10.

to express some preverbal idea, state of being, identity, or affect. Take this characteristic excerpt from the correspondence of William James:

> Your last letter was, if anything, a more unmitigated blessing than its predecessors; and I, with my curious inertia to overcome, sit thinking of letters, and of the *soul-music with which they might be filled if my tongue could only utter the thoughts that arise in me* to youward, the beauty of the world, the conflict of life and death and youth and age and man and woman and righteousness and evil, etc., and Europe and America! *but it stays all caked within and gets no articulation, the power of speech being so non-natural a function of our race*.[12]

Words fail him, but by invoking music James could express a subjectivity of feeling, contingent on his life and experience; "soul-music" is both the medium and the content of his inwardly apprehended truth. Mendelssohn's well-known rhapsody on the exquisite specificity of musical meaning is in this vein:

> The thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too indefinite to be put into words, but on the contrary, *too definite*.… Only the song can say the same thing, can arouse the same feelings in one person as in another.… Words have many meanings, but music we could both understand correctly.[13]

The soul of 'Soul Music' (in the Top-40 sense) can also be understood in this way. Soul artists seek "to reclaim and revitalize a musical tradition that had been repeatedly co-opted by mainstream and corporate culture."[14] In this way, Soul is a signifier of Black identity, pride, and the struggle for power; the concept maps those affective states onto specific music-stylistic features consciously borrowed from gospel and rhythm and blues. Like the sympathy of feeling described by Mendelssohn, Soul as a shared musical practice becomes an expression of and a participation in an ineffable "authentic Blackness."[15]

The powerful tendency to associate the concept of musical soul with a kind of

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[12] Letter to Miss Frances R. Morse, 20 July 1900, in *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James, 2 vols. (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 2:133, emphasis added.

[13] "Das was eine Musik ausspricht, die ich liebe, sind nicht zu unbestimmte Gedanken, um sie in Worte zu fassen, sondern *zu bestimmte,* … weil nur das Lied dem einen dasselbe sagen, dasselbe Gefühl in ihm erwecken kann, wie im andern.… Das Wort bleibt vieldeutig und die Musik verständen wir beide doch recht" (emphasis original). Letter to Marc André Souchay, 15 October 1842, in Helmut Loos and Wilhelm Seidel, eds., *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy Sämtliche Briefe*, 12 vols. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2008–17), 9:74. English translation from Gisella Selden-Goth, ed., *Felix Mendelssohn Letters* (New York: Pantheon, 1945), 314. See also Leo Treitler, "Language and the Interpretation of Music," in *Music and Meaning*, ed. Jenefer Robinson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 26–28, esp. n. 8.

[14] Joel Rudinow, *Soul Music: Tracking the Spiritual Roots of Pop from Plato to Motown* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 9–10, 17–19.

[15] Ibid., 10.

truth underwritten by subjective experience can make it difficult to apprehend the ancient idea at its root. This tradition—identified variously as 'Orphic,' 'Pythagorean,' or 'Platonic'—is epitomized in the prologue of Alessandro Striggio's *L'Orfeo* (set by Monteverdi):

Io la Musica son, ch'à i dolci accenti	I am Music, who with sweet accents
Sò far tranquillo ogni turbato core,	know how to quiet every troubled heart.
Et hor di nobil ira, et hor d'amore	Now with noble wrath, now with love,
Poss' infiammar le più gelate menti.	I can inflame the most torpid minds.
Io sù cetera d'or cantando soglio	Singing upon the golden Lyre, I am wont
Mortal orecchio lusingar talhora,	to charm at times a mortal ear,
E in questa guisa a l'armonia sonora	and in this way, moreover, I entice souls
De la lira del Ciel più l'alme involgio.[16]	to the sonorous harmony of Heaven's lyre.

Here, the personification of Music sings and plays, enters listeners' ears, quells and arouses passions, and thereby enjoins souls to vibrate with the harmony of the spheres. The heavenly harmony exists independent of mortals' contemplation of it, but by drawing souls out of the contingency of their bounded mortal experience, Music summons them to the eternal plane of pure Being.

The Romantic concept of soul validates individual subjectivity as sovereign, despite its contingency. By contrast, in the Platonic tradition as a microcosm of the heavenly harmony, validating an absolute, eternal truth to which human subjectivity is subordinate. Between these two poles, where might Couperin's concept of soul be located?

The Soul and Expressive Touch

With this question in mind, let us turn to the first passage in *L'art de toucher le clavecin* where Couperin invokes the concept:

> Les sons du clavecin étant décidés, chacun en particulier; et par consequent ne pouvant être enflés, ny diminués: il a paru presqu'insoutenable, jusqu'à présent, qu'on put donner de l'âme à cèt instrument: cependant, par les recherches dont j'ay appuyé le peu de naturel que le ciel m'a donné, je vais tâcher de faire comprendre par quelles raisons j'ay sçu acquerir le bonheur de toucher les personnes de goût

[16] Quoted from Nicholas John, ed., *The Operas of Monteverdi, Opera Guide* 45 (London: Calder Publications Ltd., 1992), 35. On 'Orphic' see David Lowenthal, "From Harmony of the Spheres to National Anthem: Reflections on Musical Heritage," *GeoJournal: Spatially Integrated Social Sciences and Humanities* 65, nos. 1–2 (2006): 3–15. On 'Pythagorean' and 'Platonic' see Claude Palisca, "Universal Harmony," in *Music and Ideas in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 13–28.

> qui m'ont fait l'honneur de m'entendre; et de former des éléves qui peutestre me surpassent.[17]
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> Since the sounds of the harpsichord are predetermined, each in its own way, and consequently cannot be swelled nor diminished, it had appeared until now practically untenable that one could give a soul to this instrument. However, through the researches to which I have applied the small aptitude that heaven has given me, I will endeavor to make understandable the reasons by which I have attained the happy fortune of touching persons of taste who have done me the honor of hearing me, and [by which I have] formed students who, perhaps, surpass me.

Couperin associates having a soul with the capacity to swell and diminish sound. Right away we may add detail to Kirkpatrick's gloss of soul as "expression" by specifying that expression entails dynamics. Perhaps to our embarrassment, we find Couperin plainly admitting what we all know to be true, but often find ourselves at pains to explain away: that the harpsichord has no continuous, controlled crescendo or diminuendo, and that this is a deficiency to be overcome.[18] But, of course, this is not the same as saying that the harpsichord is incapable of dynamic nuance through touch, for indeed the mechanics of the hands at the keyboard can elicit minute differences in volume and tone from a single string.[19] A famous illustration of this potential comes from a recollection of Jean Gallois published in 1680.[20] Gallois described Chambonnières as "the source of the beautiful manner of touch," whose unique "delicacy of the hand"

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[17] Couperin, *L'art de toucher le clavecin* (Paris, 1716), 15–16.

[18] This was widely acknowledged in the period as a deficiency. For example, in the year Couperin published his treatise there was advertised "a new instrument, without pipes or bellows, but with the sustained sounds of an organ. One may crescendo and diminuendo [*enfler et desenfler*] the sounds, and make vibrato [*faire la plainte*] on any note that one wishes. It may be played in two, three, four, or five parts via a keyboard. Those who wish to play it will find it as light as that of the harpsichord." See *Nouveau Mercure Galant* 4 (1716): 679.

[19] Davitt Moroney, borrowing Charles Darwin's words, aptly called this idea a "false fact." See Moroney, "Gustav Maria Leonhardt: A Personal Tribute," *Keyboard Perspectives* 5 (2012): 95–128.

[20] The author "Mr Le Gallois" has traditionally been identified with Jean Gallois (1632–1707), royal librarian, member of the Académie des Sciences, and Professor of Greek at the Collège Royal. David Fuller, following Robert Eitner, called him "Jean Le Gallois": see Fuller, "Harpsichord Playing in the 17th Century after Le Gallois," *Early Music* 4, no. 1 (1976): 22–26, and Eitner, *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Quellen-Lexikon der Musiker und Musikgelehrten*, 10 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1902), 6:111–12. Recently, Denis Herlin has linked the author with the name "Pierre Le Gallois," for which identification, however, the earliest source is from 1866: see Herlin, "La constitution d'une mémoire musicale: La collection Philidor," in *Le Prince et la musique: Les passions musicales de Louis XIV*, ed. Jean Duron (Wavre: Éditions Mardaga, 2009), 234n8.

made it possible for a listener whose back was turned to discern whether it was he or another who was playing, even from a single chord.[21]

This ability is not a raw natural gift, but is a skill cultivated "through research." Couperin explains briefly how this is done:

> L'impression-sensible que je propose, doit son éffet à la cèssation [*infra*: l'aspiration] et à la suspension des sons, faites à propos; et selon les caractères qu'èxigent les chants des préludes, et des pièçes. Ces deux agrémens par leur opposition, laissent l'oreille indèterminée: en sorte que dans les occasions où les instrumens à archet enflent leurs sons, la suspension de ceux du clavecin semble, par un éffet contraire, retracer à l'oreille la chose souhaitée.[22]

> The sensible impression which I suggest owes its effect to the apt cessation and suspension of sounds, according to the characters required by the tunes of preludes and pieces. These two ornaments, by their opposition, leave the ear undecided: such that where bowed instruments swell their sounds, the suspension of those of the harpsichord, by a contrary effect, seems to trace [i.e. represents] to the ear the desired thing.

An early release (*cessation*) of a note, perhaps accompanied by a very slight delay of the following note (*aspiration*), makes the second note louder; and by contrast the delayed release (*suspension*) of a note makes the following note softer.[23] These dynamic effects—illusions, really—emphasize the actual variations that the player can effect through touch. Recent psychoacoustic research has been able to quantify this. Expert players of the harpsichord can produce measurable variations in the volume and timbre of single notes and across musical phrases, and listeners can perceive them.[24] Expressive harpsichord playing is a physical reality.

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[21] Jean Gallois, *Lettre … à Madamoiselle Regnault de Solier touchant la musique* (Paris, 1680), 68ff.

[22] Couperin, *L'art de toucher*, 16.

[23] For a clarification of Couperin's discussion, see Kirkpatrick, "On Re-Reading," 6–7; see also David Ponsford, *French Organ Music in the Reign of Louis XIV* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 107ff.

[24] On the perception of varied volume and timbre, see Sarah Chiller-Glaus, Giulia Nuti, and Jennifer MacRitchie, "Biases in the Perception of Dynamics inHarpsichord Performance," in *Proceedings of the Ninth Triennial Conference of the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music, 17–22 August 2015, Manchester, UK*, ed. Jane Ginsborg et al. (Manchester: Royal Northern College of Music, 2015): 286–91; and Jennifer MacRitchie and Giulia Nuti, "Using Historical Accounts of Harpsichord Touch to Empirically Investigate the Production and Perception of Dynamics on the 1788 Taskin," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015): 183. On the perception of 'dynamics' by means of variations in timing and articulation, see for example Bruno Gingras et al., "Linking Melodic Expectation to Expressive Performance Timing and Perceived Musical Tension," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 42, no. 4 (2016): 594–609; Réka Koren and Bruno Gingras, "Perceiving Individuality in Harpsichord Performance," *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): 141; and Bruno Gingras, Pierre-Yves Asselin, and Stephen McAdams, "Indi-

Sketchy though Couperin's explanations may be, they can be read as an early contribution to the discourse of sensibility, dependent on a nascent philosophical materialism.[25] Yet *L'art de toucher* trades in terms like harmony, movement and measure, taste and pleasure, and judgment. These are concepts foundational to seventeenth-century speculative music theory.[26] Though far from a fully elaborated aesthetic philosophy, Couperin's piecemeal reflections on the mechanisms of expression are dependent on these categories, and so rely implicitly on Neoplatonist thought.[27] How might this be reconciled with Couperin's explanation of psycho-physiological phenomena in terms of physical causes?

In addressing this question, it is important to recognize that opposing perspectives can coincide historically, even when they are not mutually consistent. Mersenne can rightly be viewed as one of the first empiricists even if his philosophy is basically scholastic. Likewise, certain aspects of the later eighteenth-century writings on sense, feeling, taste, and judgment can be understood in Neoplatonic terms—reading forward, as it were—without neglecting their overarching materialism or naturalism. The sensibility discourse of the late eighteenth century did not represent a rupture so much as an incremental reassessment of old concepts that had begun in the early seventeenth century. The entry on "expression" in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768) discusses harmony and animacy in Platonic terms:

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viduality in Harpsichord Performance: Disentangling Performer- and Piece-specific iInfluences on Interpretive Choices," *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): 895.

[25] See Joshua S. Walden, "Composing Character in Musical Portraits: Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and 'L'Aly Rupalich'," *The Musical Quarterly* 91, nos. 3–4 (2008): 379–411; and Jane Clark, "Some Reflections on François Couperin's 'New and Diversified Character'," in *Interpreting Historical Keyboard Music: Sources, Contexts and Performance*, ed. Andrew Woolley and John Kitchen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 187–92.

[26] See Thomas Christensen, "The Sound World of Father Mersenne," in *Structures of Feeling in Seventeenth-Century Cultural Expression*, ed. Susan McClary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 60–92.

[27] These concepts are not solely Neoplatonist, but this was a dominant strain in seventeenth-century French music theory. Another context, not explored here, is the Cartesian discourse. Gallois, though principally a Neoplatonist, is engaged with Descartes's *Discourse on the Method* and *Passions of the Soul*. Likewise, Cartesians frequently had recourse to music and music theory in explaining the nature of the soul: see for example Antoine Louis, *Essay sur la nature de l'âme où l'on tâche d'expliquer son union avec le corps et les lois de cette union* (Paris, 1747). On the interplay between Neoplatonist and Cartesian perspectives on music theory, see Théodora Psychoyou, "Plaisirs de l'esprit, plaisirs de l'oreille: anatomie et paradoxes d'un nouveau critère théorique," in *Le plaisir musical en France aux XVIIe siècle*, ed. Thierry Favier and Manuel Couvreur (Spirmont: Mardaga, 2006), 61–78.

> Le plaisir physique qui résulte de l'Harmonie, augmente à son tour le plaisir moral de l'imitation, en joignant les sensations agréables des Accords à l'Expression de la Mélodie.… Mais l'Harmonie fait plus encore; elle renforce l'Expression même, en donnant plus de justesse et de précision aux Intervalles mélodieux; elle anime leur caractère, et marquant exactement leur place dans l'ordre de la Modulation, elle rappelle ce qui précède, annonce ce qui doit suivre, et lie ainsi les phrases dans le Chant comme les idées se lient dans le discours. L'Harmonie, envisagée de cette manière, fournit au Compositeur de grands moyens d'Expression, qui lui échappent quand il ne cherche l'Expression que dans la seule Harmonie; car alors, au lieu d'animer l'Accent, il l'étouffe par ses Accords, et tous les Intervalles, confondus dans un continuel remplissage, n'offrent à l'oreille qu'une suite de Sons fondamentaux qui n'ont rien de touchant ni d'agréable, et dont l'effet s'arrête au cerveau.[28]
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> The physical pleasure which results from harmony in turn increases the moral pleasure of imitation by joining the agreeable perception of chords to the expression of the melody.… But harmony does still more: it reinforces expression itself by giving more accuracy and precision to the melodic intervals; it animates their character, and in exactly marking their place in the sequence of modulation, it recalls what preceded, announces what must follow, and thus connects the phrases of the melody as the ideas in discourse are connected. Harmony, conceived in this manner, provides the composer with great means of expression, which [however] evade him if he seeks expression only in harmony alone; for then, instead of animating the accent, it [harmony] smothers it [melody] with its chords, and the [melodic] intervals, confounded by being constantly filled in, offer the ear nothing but a series of fundamental sounds, of which nothing is touching nor agreeable, and whose effect stops at the brain.

Amid Rousseau's familiar emphasis on the importance of melody, a central component of his pro-Italian aesthetics, the distinction between physical and moral pleasure alludes to a Platonic psychology.[29] Rousseau does not oppose rich harmony, but rather is opposed to a facile deployment of it to appeal solely to physical pleasure. A higher "moral pleasure," which in a Platonic context means something like rational delight, arises when the succession of melodic intervals is correlated with the syntax of the harmonic progression. Harmony telegraphs expectations that can be fulfilled or deferred. When these harmonic expectations are congruent to the "character" of the melodic intervals, that character is said to be "animated."[30] Expression in this context is not some loose outpouring of feeling,

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[28] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris, 1768), s.v. "expression."

[29] Rousseau appears to be glossing the distinction between the pleasure of the body and the delight of the rational soul, which goes back to the distinction between *hēdonē* and *euphrosunē* in the *Timaeus* 80b5–8: see Elizabeth Lyon, "Ethical Aspects of Listening in Plato's *Timaeus*: Pleasure and Delight in 80b5–8," *Greek and Roman Musical Studies*, 4, no. 2 (2016): 253–72.

[30] The term "character" refers in Rousseau's writings to the quality of the melodic interval (i.e., what

but a meaningful correspondence (*ratio*) between sign (sound produced by the player) and significance (sentiment caused in the listener by such sound). This perspective helps make sense of Couperin's use of the word *raisons* to describe the means by which he was able to "touch persons of taste."

The Soul of Harmony and Rhythm

Although the ontology of the soul was widely debated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, French music theory before Rameau generally adhered to a traditional Platonic view.[31] From this perspective, the soul itself *is* harmony, materialized as an orbit, or a harmonic movement.[32] The soul's movement is an image of the universal harmony, a perfect relation of measure. Thus the harmonious sonorities of music were theorized to materialize the structure of the universe. In hearing them, the soul becomes attuned to them and so moves toward a state of perfection.[33]

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makes one interval different from another) and the associated musical sense (i.e., what a given interval signifies or causes, either referentially or affectively). It may also refer to the signs used in the notation of the interval; see Rousseau, *Dictionnaire*, s.v. "caractères de musique." For further discussion, see Georgia Cowart, "Inventing the Arts: Changing Critical Language in the Ancien Régime," in *French Musical Thought, 1600–1800*, ed. Cowart (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 224–27, and Jane R. Stevens, "The Meanings and Uses of *Caractère* in Eighteenth-Century France," in *French Musical Thought*, 23–52.

[31] For a convenient summary of the theoretical landscape, see Penelope Gouk, "The Role of Harmonics in the Scientific Revolution," in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 223–45. See also note 27 above.

[32] This model, from the *Timaeus*, is only one of many explored by Plato himself, but it is the one with the broadest reception thanks to Marsilio Ficinio's translation and commentary. Cf. *Timaeus* 47d and Palisca, "Universal Harmony," 16.

[33] In the Platonic view of musical ethics, harmoniously vibrating bodies induce moral virtue in a listener by means of a process which can be summarized approximately as follows: Hearing is a motion of the percussion of sound which ends in the liver (*Timaeus* 67b). Why the liver, of all bodily organs? The liver is both bilious and sweet; it is the seat of bitterness and fear, but it is also the seat of divination and truth (71a, 72c). As Socrates explained, "Our creators recalled their father's instruction to make the mortal race as excellent as possible, and so, redeeming even the base part of ourselves in this way, they set the center of divination here [in the liver], so that it might have some grasp of truth" (71d-e). Musical pleasure, therefore, quells distemper, fear, and bitterness and is ennobling, even divinizing. According to the Ficinian reception of the *Timaeus*, "when we enjoy harmonious sounds we intuit in them divine truth and take a first step toward the ultimate knowledge of God, which we can only reach through gradual ascent": see Palisca, "Universal Harmony," 18. In this way, music contributes both to the wisdom and moral righteousness of the individual and to the cohesion of a stable society. André Redwood has recently shown how Mersenne's ethics rely on this view: see "Mersenne and the Art of Delivery," *Journal of Music Theory* 59, no. 1 (2015): 99–119.

To take a theorist especially concerned with harpsichord music, Gallois offered a definition of the soul as "nothing but a harmony," and so was able to conclude that "harmony is itself the very soul of music."[34] Gallois argued that harmonious music is pleasing because its sounds are proportionate to the harmony of the soul, and consequently they are agreeable and morally salutary.[35] At length, Gallois theorized that the moral benefit of harmony is that it refines taste, a somatic power of perception, by giving the rational soul access to truth via the progressively more reliable and accurate perceptions of the body. Taste is a property of one's bodily disposition; it accounts for what kinds of sounds, when transmitted through the body, will engender harmony in the soul and so delight it. The perfection of taste in the body corresponds directly to the perfection of knowledge in the rational soul. Harmonious music tunes the body by degrees and leads to the soul's perfection, whence the maxim *aures animi fores* (the ears are the gateways of the soul).[36] These outlines are consistent with Rousseau's view a century later: somatic pleasure in harmony is not bad, but it is merely instrumental to the perfection and moral delight of the soul.[37]

Harmony, we might suppose at first, has to do primarily with well-ordered pitch content; this is how Rousseau uses the term. Yet, in a second passage of *L'art de toucher le clavecin*, Couperin speaks of animacy in the domain of rhythm rather than pitch:

> Je trouve que nous confondons la mesure avec ce qu'on nomme cadence, ou mouvement. Mesure définit la quantité, et l'égalité des temps, et cadence est proprement l'esprit, et l'âme qu'il y faut joindre.… Tous nos airs de violon, nos pièces de clavecin,

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[34] "[L'harmonie] est elle meme l'ame de musique, qui n'appartient qu'à l'esprit.… L'ame n'est qu'une harmonie. Il nous est comme impossible de ne pas aimer la musique, qui nous represente avec tant de plaisir ces memes accords et ces memes proportion, en qui la nature de nôtre ame consiste." Gallois, *Lettre … touchant la Musique,* 5–7.

[35] "[Si l'on connoît] le rapport des parties de l'air agité, avec la nature de nos esprits, et la determination particuliere du mouvement de ces parties aërienes, ce qui fait qu'un homme se plaît à une musique plûtost qu'à une autre … on auroit par là le moyen de n'émouvoir nos esprits que par des sons qui leur seroient proportionnez, et par consequent agreables." Gallois, *Lettre … touchant la Musique*, 46ff. Gallois writes with a basically Neoplatonic outlook, substituting Plato's Republic for Louis XIV's France.

[36] This formulation may be attributed to Ficino, *Epistolae* III.99v [=Letter 66 in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 7 vols., trans. Language Department of the School of Economic Science, London, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller (London: Shepheard-Walwyn, 1975–), 2:84], but the metaphor goes back to Plato (cf. *Republic* II.377b-c and *Theaetetus* 184b-d). It was a motto commonly painted on harpsichords.

[37] This is a theme of Cowart's *Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), passim, e.g., 51; *pace* McClary, "Temporality and Ideology," 324–26.

> de violes, etc, désignent, et semblent vouloir exprimer quelque sentiment. Ainsi, n'ayant point imaginés de signes, ou caractères pour communiquer nos idées particulières, nous tâchons d'y remédier en marquant au commencement de nos pièces par quelques mots, comme *Tendrement*, *Vivement*, etc, à peu près ce que nous voudrions faire entendre. Je souhaite que quelqu'un se donne la peine de nous traduire, pour l'utilité des étrangers, et puisse leur procurer les moyens de juger de l'excellence de notre musique instrumentale.[38]
>
> I find that we confuse *mesure* with that which is termed *cadence* or *mouvement*. *Mesure* denotes the quantity and equality of beats, and *cadence* is properly the spirit and soul that must be joined to it. All of our violin tunes, our harpsichord and viol pieces, etc., designate and seem to mean to express some sentiment. Thus, having not at all conceived of any signs or symbols to communicate our particular ideas, we endeavored to remedy this by marking at the beginning of our pieces, with some words like *Tenderly*, *Lively*, etc., more or less what we mean to be understood. I hope that someone will take the trouble to translate us, for the sake of foreigners, and will be able to gain for them the means by which to judge the excellence of our instrumental music.

The fact that Couperin believes words like *Tendrement* and *Vivement* capture "more or less what we mean to be understood" is a far cry from Mendelssohn's belief that his *Songs without Words* meant ineffably, "the song—just as it stands."[39] Couperin's sentiments are categorical and objective—unlike, I am tempted to surmise, the emotional outpourings for which Marchand was praised. These sentiments are animated "independently from the[ir] beautiful composition."[40] Instead, Couperin writes, *mouvement* is the soul that must be joined to *mesure* if instrumental music is to communicate these particular ideas and sentiments. In other words, the soul of the harpsichord inheres in the rhythms of performance.

Mouvement and *mesure* are, of course, workaday musical terms: *mesure* is what we would understand as meter, or the unit of the bar; *mouvement* is *mesure*'s characteristic tempo and affect—what some have perceptively compared to "lilt" or "groove."[41] But these terms acquired a special significance in speculative music

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[38] Couperin, *L'art de toucher*, 40–41.

[39] "das Lied — wie es da steht." *Mendelssohn Sämtliche Briefe*, 9:74.

[40] Couperin, *Premier livre*, [iii].

[41] For basic definitions of *mesure* and *mouvement*, cf. Bertrand de Bacilly, *Remarques curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter* (Paris, 1688), 200; and Rousseau, *Dictionnaire*, s.vv. "mesure," "mouvement." On lilt, see Mellers, *François Couperin*, 275, and Rousseau, *Dictionnaire*, s.v. "cadence." On groove, see Susan McClary, "The Social History of a Groove," in *Desire and Pleasure*, 203ff; and Lawrence M. Zbikowski, "Modelling the Groove: Conceptual Structure and Popular Music," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 129, no. 2 (2004): 272–97.

theory, which Couperin also evokes.[42] In that context, the universal harmony is the perfection of *mesure*: it is a perfect, hierarchical relation of proportions.[43] The motion of the heavenly bodies, and the soul's orbits that mimic that motion, are termed *mouvement*. In other words, *mesure* exists as an unchanging abstraction; *mouvement* is its dynamic, processual actualization.[44] It is in this speculative sense that Couperin can say that *mouvement* animates—which is to say it is the soul of—*mesure*.

What harmony is to intervals, then, movement (i.e., tempo and affect) is to meter: the former animates the latter. Thus meter acquires a soul when it is set into continuous motion, when the unchanging perfection of measure gives way to the playing-out of music in time. Such 'sounding rhythm' may be an even surer way to express musical ideas and feelings than sounding harmonious intervals, as Bertrand de Bacilly wrote in 1688:

> [Le mouvement] est une certaine qualité qui donne l'ame au Chant, et qui est appellée Mouvement, parce qu'elle émeut, je veux dire elle excite l'attention des Auditeurs, mesme de ceux qui sont les plus rebelles à l'harmonie; si ce n'est que l'on veüille dire qu'elle inspire dans les cœurs telle passion que le Chantre voudra faire naistre.… Je ne doute point que la varieté de la Mesure ou prompte, ou lente, ne contribuë beaucoup à l'Espression du Chant; mais il y a sans doute encore une autre qualité plus épurée et plus spirituelle, qui tient toûjours l'Auditeur en haleine, et fait que le Chante en est moins ennyeux, qui est le Mouvement.[45]
>
> *Mouvement* is a certain quality which gives soul to a tune. It is called *mouvement* because it moves, that is, it excites the attention of the listeners, even to those who are the most recalcitrant to harmony; indeed, one might wish to say that *mouvement* inspires in hearts whatever passion the singer wishes to engender.…

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[42] McClary recognizes this, but her discussion of these terms veils their straightforward meaning: see McClary, "Temporality and Ideology," 321–22. McClary correctly defines *mesure* as "metric structure" (i.e., meter), but theorizes that *mouvement* is a "particular way of inhabiting each successive beat." Confusingly, she associates the perception of *mesure* with the faculty of reason and the understanding of *mouvement* with the power of good taste. This inverts the normal Neoplatonic hierarchy.

[43] This was often represented schematically as the harmonic series or the division of the monochord.

[44] This is dealt with in Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle* (Paris, 1636–37) at I.1:11 with regard to pitch and at III.11:378 with regard to rhythm. Citations from *Harmonie universelle* follow the conventions established by André Redwood, "Mersenne and the Art of Delivery," *Journal of Music Theory* 59, no. 1 (2015): 101n6 and 102n7. Mersenne bases his view of *mesure* and *mouvement* on Aristotle's *Physics*, where time is defined in terms of the relationship between them: "Time is a measure of motion and of being moved"; see *Phys.* IV.12, 220b35. See also David Allen Duncan, "Persuading the Affections: Rhetorical Theory and Mersenne's Advice to Harmonic Orators," in *French Musical Thought*, 158ff.

[45] Bacilly, *Remarques curieuses*, 200.

> I do not doubt at all that the variety of *mesure,* whether quick or slow [i.e., meter, with its characteristic tempo], contributes much to the expression of the tune; but there is doubtless another quality, more purified and spiritual, which keeps the listener listening with bated breath, and which makes the tune less tedious: [and this quality is] *mouvement*.

What Bacilly seems to be saying is that *mouvement* is the rhythmic 'feel' of a musical performance, and it is perceptible and moving even to those who are insensible to its harmonic delights.

The Soul and Tasteful Performance

The discussion so far has focused on how music makes an aesthetic *impression* on a listener, how a listener receives and interprets music. Poetic *expression*—in a narrow sense referring to the encoding and sending of a message—occurs when an intentional will manipulates these aesthetic mechanisms. As far back as Aristotle, expression was linked to the concept of the voice.[46] The articulate human voice, being the voice of a human soul, can express thoughts and passions—the movements of reason and the senses, respectively.[47] It does so with specificity, in a way that makes the sounds of instruments no more than the witless noises of machines.[48] Bacilly, glossing Mersenne, wrote that the voice was the principal means of expressing the movements of the soul.[49] The human voice has its "principal and first cause" in the animating power of the rational soul (*la faculté ou vertu motrice de l'âme*), a force that causes a harmonic motion, or *mouvement*.[50] Voice is animate sound, and so voice is required for poetic expression. Animacy is therefore a prerequisite for expression, but it is not synonymous with expression.

This, finally, is what I take Couperin to mean when he says he was able

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[46] "Voice is a kind of sound characteristic of what has soul in it." *De anima* 420b4. I am grateful to Elizabeth Lyon for identifying the relevant citations to Aristotle.

[47] "Voice is meaningful (*sēmantikos*) sound." Ibid., 420b33.

[48] "Nothing that is without soul utters voice, it being only by a metaphor that we speak of the voice of the flute or the lyre or generally of what (being without soul) possesses the power of producing a succession of notes which differ in length and pitch and timbre. The metaphor is based on the fact that all these differences are found also in voice." Ibid., 420b5–9.

[49] "Ils leur disent à tout moment, que l'on ne peut chanter juste … sans Instrument.… C'est pour s'épargner la peine de chanter, et de faire vive voix ce que l'instrument ne fait que par des sons muets, et qui ne font qu'imiter la Voix." Bacilly, *Remarques curieuses*, 20–21; cf. Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle,* II.5.

[50] Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle*, II.4:1–3.

to endow the harpsichord with a soul: he was able to give the instrument an articulate voice, whereby instrumental music could express "particular ideas and sentiments."[51] This meant conjuring in instrumental music something ordinarily thought to be the province of vocal music, namely those exquisite articulations of the voice which are "susceptible" to—and therefore express—the passions.[52] For Mersenne and Bacilly, the need for an articulate voice to express ideas and sentiments led to a classic proof of vocal music's superiority over instrumental music: instrumental music can arouse passions but is irrational, because it has no *articulate* voice. Couperin, speaking of expression in instrumental music, turns the argument on its head: instrumental music can express precisely due to the animating force of *mouvement*. In short, his *art de toucher le clavecin* is the art of cultivating a keyboard touch as responsive to the movements of the player's soul as the voice would be. Such a 'vocal' touch is tantamount to giving the instrument a soul.

Accordingly, harpsichord expression lies principally in the domain of performance rather than composition, and moreover is different from the kind of expression which would arise from crescendos and diminuendos, as on bowed instruments.[53] The kinds of articulations which *le beau toucher* makes possible in the harpsichord's voice are minute and subtle, but "persons whose taste is exceptionally refined" will enjoy them and, indeed, accrue moral benefit from them.[54] Here I detect a trace of keyboard chauvinism in Couperin's outlook. The possible scope of articulation in the harpsichord's voice is much narrower than that of a bowed instrument, and so the gradations are subtler and require exquisitely refined taste to be sensed. This creates the illusion of great specificity in the musical utterance, because the smallest detail of sound becomes laden with significance. In other words, harpsichord expression makes a virtue out of its greatest deficiency. This entails the gradual perfection of taste, which helps us make sense of two further comments by Couperin that might otherwise seem incidental. When he says that his students will perhaps surpass him, it is not (false) modesty: it follows from the idea that harmonious music tunes the body by degrees and leads to the perfection of taste.[55] Moreover, Couperin's

[51] Couperin, *L'art de toucher*, 40–41.

[52] Couperin, *Premier livre*, [iii]; cf. fn. 4.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Couperin, *L'art de toucher*, 16.

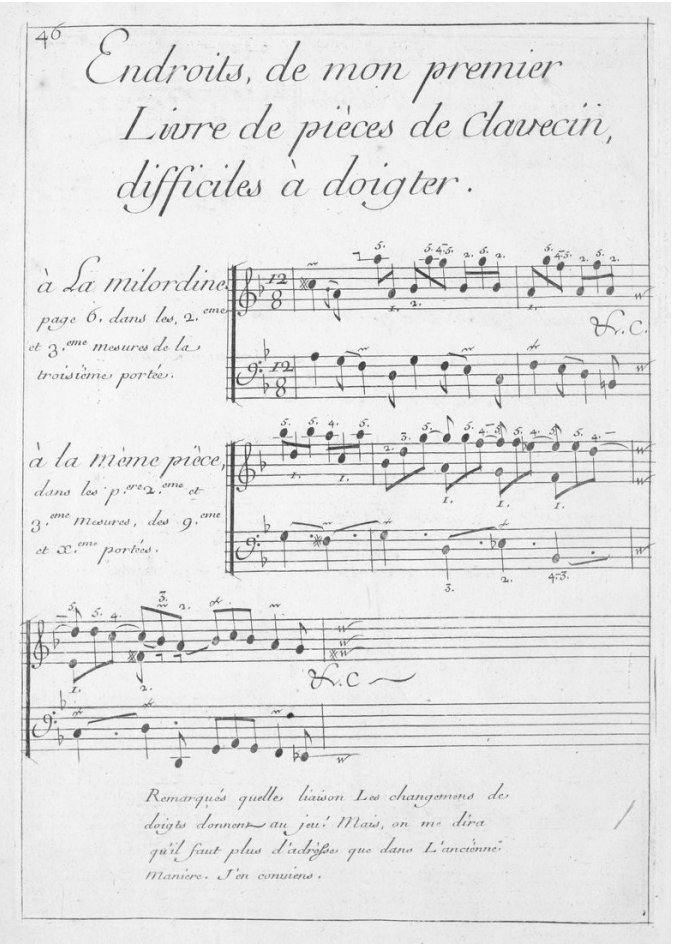

Figure 2 *"Observe what* liaison *the finger substitutions lend the playing! Some will say that this requires more skill than the old manner [of fingering]. To this I admit." Couperin,* L'art de toucher, *46. Image courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.*

comments imply that old works, beautiful in themselves as compositions, can be reanimated if they are played according to *le bon goût d'aujourd'hui* which he "endeavored to perfect."[56]

If *mouvement* is the soul of harpsichord expression, what might this mean in terms of performance style? A voice expresses ideas and sentiments insofar as it

[56] "J'ay tâché de perfectionner leurs découvertes; leurs ouvrages sont encore du goût de ceux qui l'ont exquis." Couperin, *Premier livre*, [iii].

induces movement in sound as a likeness of the movement of the soul. I perceive a reflection of this view in the remarks with which Couperin closes his treatise. *Le bon goût d'aujourd'hui*, Couperin writes, "takes care not to alter the *mouvement* in measured pieces, *and certainly not to pause on notes whose durations are finite*" (emphasis added).[57] Tortured harpsichord playing was clearly as common three centuries ago as it is now. Gallois wrote:

> Leur jeu est souvent embroüillé, & passe par dessus quantité de touches, qu'on n'entend qu'à demy, quelquefois point du tout; à cause qu'ils les passent trop viste; ou qu'ils n'appuyent pas assez fort pour les faire entendre, ou qu'ils frappent les touches au lieu de les couler.… Car ils font de si grandes contorsions de mains & de doigts; ils les élevent les uns sur les autres avec tant d'excez, en les serrant extraordinairement, que cela dégoute & fait pitié.[58]

> Their playing is often muddled and skips over many of the keys, which one only half hears and sometimes not at all, because [the notes] go by too quickly, or because [the players] do not press hard enough to make them heard, or because they strike the keys instead of flowing smoothly from one to another.… For they so contort their hands and fingers, they pass them over each other with such excess, knotting them in an extraordinary manner, that it becomes disgusting and pitiable.

Gallois is objecting to brutish touch: the strings cannot be plucked with deliberate control of timbre and volume when the hands are "contorted" and "knotted." Couperin would agree, but he goes a step further in specifying how *le beau toucher* should impinge on performance style. The gross rhythmic disturbances he condemns—violations of the finite durations prescribed by the meter (*mesure*)—confuse the frame of reference with respect to which the micro-timings of the dynamic ornaments (impossible to control without *le beau toucher*) have their meaning.

The soul of the harpsichord is therefore a grooving, lilting performance, conjured by a variety of touch and by those minutely timed articulations whose dynamic significance is dependent on a regular, unchanging meter.[59] In the absence of any of these elements, a performance becomes inanimate, inarticulate, and consequently meaningless. This helps explain why Couperin insisted that his

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[57] "Prendre bien garde à ne point altérer le mouvement dans les pièces réglées, et à ne point rester sur des notes dont la valeur soit finie. Enfin, former son jeu sur le bon goût d'aujourd'hui, qui est sans comparaison plus pur que l'ancien." Couperin, *L'art de toucher*, 73.

[58] Gallois, *Lettre … touchant la Musique*, 77–79.

[59] This comes intriguingly close to a formulation of rubato commonly associated with Chopin: a metrically strict left hand underpins subtle freedoms in the right hand. My thanks to Roger Moseley for this observation.

pieces must be performed exactly as notated, down to the fingerings he legislated, if they are to make "a certain impression on persons of true taste."[60] (Figure 2) His notation seeks to prescribe as precisely as possible the sounds which the player is to summon from the harpsichord, sounds that make manifest his expressive intention, his voice, and the movements of his soul.

[60] "Je déclare don que mes piéces doivent être exécutées comme je les ay marquées et qu'elle ne feront jamais une certain impression sur les personnes qui ont le goût vray, tant qu'on n'observera pas à la lettre, tout ce que j'y ay marqué, sans augmentation ni diminution." Couperin, *Trosiéme livre*, [ii]. Cf. "Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections of the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds" (Aristotle, *De interpretatione* 16a4).