

# The Marais Project

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*"Ten Years of Great Music for the Viola da Gamba (2000-2009)"*

## François Couperin's 'Leçons de Ténèbres' – a French masterpiece!

By Chris Berensen

*'That which was established only to produce a holy and beneficial remorse in Christian souls has been transformed into entertainment'* thundered one conservative eighteenth-century critic of an emerging practice in French church music. He was referring to the increasingly popular Holy Week services held at the Abbey of Longchamp near Paris where on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Saturday, settings of the highly emotive words found in the Old Testament book "Lamentations of Jeremiah" were presented. The prophet Jeremiah's writings were considered particularly apt in assisting Christians to reflect on the meaning of Holy Week. The attendees were throngs of fashionable Parisians, who in the weeks leading up to Easter, would have busily discussed where they would be 'doing Ténèbre' this year. The intriguing name, 'Leçons de Ténèbre' or 'Lessons in the Dark', owes to the fact that these services were spookily sung in the dark in accordance with Lenten regulation of the Catholic Church.

In contrast to the majority of French Baroque sacred music, which although glorious can be considered rather perfunctory, the Leçons de Ténèbres offered by a long list of composers can be considered their most eloquent and convicting works. It should not come as surprise to discover that this is because they were conceived with the intention of combining the most sophisticated aspects of French secular music with the traditions of French sacred music.

In Holy Week, it had been traditional for centuries in the western church that a great blanket of austerity descends: the ubiquitous pipe-organ, that "hi-tech band-in-a-box" of yesteryear, was silenced. The sumptuous choral arrangements were reduced to unison chanting, and candle consumption slashed considerably. Thus enters the new Ténèbres tradition at the aforementioned Abbey of Longchamp in the early eighteenth century. Away from the critical eyes of Bishops, parish priests and the strict Lenten regulations, the nuns sponsored the performance of newly composed Leçons de Ténèbres in their own attempt to find a compromise between liturgical austerity and aural excess.

Couperin's three offerings in this genre are written in the intimate semi-theatrical style known at that time as the 'chamber style', building on the refined and expressive French tradition of the air de cour. Emotional expression in

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the airs de cour, tends to be cool, classical and reserved: chromaticisms are rare, and the overall simplicity of expression is striking. Couperin combined these features of the air de cour with the moving and excitable recitation patterns originally associated with Italian opera. One of his three Leçons is composed for two sopranos, the others for one soprano. The accompaniment is to be provided not by the large church organ, which as noted was not allowed to be used in Holy Week, but by a portable chamber organ if available, harpsichord and lutes. Additionally, Couperin made specific mention of the necessity of the viola da gamba or bass viol, a bass string instrument that was most fashionable in France at the time. Couperin writes in the introduction to the published Leçons: "If a bass de viole or a bass de violon can be added to the organ or harpsichord accompaniment, that will do very well."

A slightly more controversial element of the Longchamp experience was that singing-stars from the opera and royal court were involved. One of the greatest stars of the time was Mademoiselle Catherine-Nicole Le Maure, of whom it was said an opera company could be bankrupted if she became ill. Indeed, her absence from a performance on more than one occasion caused shows to fail, and once she was imprisoned for this. At Easter time, she contributed to the Leçons de Ténèbres of Couperin and his contemporaries at the Abbey. Eventually she tired of the politicking of the secular music world and became a nun herself.

Ironically, in those far off days, opera singers were "pop stars" and it was something of a scandal for such people to sing in Church, particularly at solemn festivals such as Easter. Today, pop and rock musicians are the norm at Pentecostal churches such as "Hillsong" and even take to the platform at Catholic World Youth day, whilst opera stars are rare guests in a local Parish church!

The final word, however, must go to the music itself. Throughout the setting of the three Leçons Couperin demonstrates an extraordinary ability in the art of vocal declamation as well as a well-developed feeling for word painting. The music is rich in dissonance and chromaticism. All three Leçons conclude with the phrase, "Jerusalem, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum". (Jerusalem, turn to the Lord your God).

The Marais Project has been performing Couperin's 'Leçons de Ténèbre' individually for several years and recorded the third Leçons for the ABC in 2007. In 2008 we commenced giving at least two performances of all three Leçons at Easter time. In 2011 we will present this masterpiece on Palm Sunday at the Great Hall, Sydney University, in partnership with the Sydney Chamber Choir.

**Chris Berensen** is a freelance performer of early keyboard instruments and recently completed a Research Masters degree at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. He has performed with Salut! Baroque, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, La Folia, the New Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra of Cologne, Sydney Philharmonia Choirs, and toured nationally throughout 2007 as the Principal Continuo player with the Australian Chamber Orchestra. He is also the harpsichordist with French Music Specialists, The Marais Project.