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WILLIAM CHRISTIE AND CHARPENTIER'S *GRANDS MOTETS*

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LES ARTS FLORISSANTS

William Christie,
organ and conductor

AUGUST 1, 2022 | 8:00 PM

Cathédrale de Joliette

WILLIAM CHRISTIE AND CHARPENTIER'S *GRANDS MOTETS*

PROGRAM

Marc-André Charpentier (1643-1704)

Magnificat, H. 77

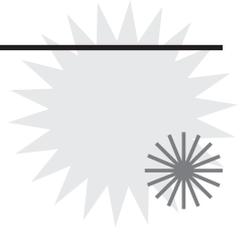
Te Deum H. 147

Pange lingua H. 61

Litanies à la Vierge H. 83

Pestis Mediolanensis H. 398 & H. 398a

Nuptiae sacrae H. 412



LES ARTS FLORISSANTS

William Christie, organ and conductor

Les Arts Florissants receives public support from the Direction régionale des affaires culturelles (DRAC) des Pays de la Loire, the Département de la Vendée and the Région des Pays de la Loire. The Selz Foundation is their Principal Sponsor, and the ensemble's Major Sponsors are Aline Foriel-Destezet and the American Friends of Les Arts Florissants. Since 2015, Les Arts Florissants has served in residence at the Philharmonie de Paris.

PROGRAM NOTES

Music in the Time of Louis XIV

The mere mention of Louis XIV conjures images of the splendour of his reign, which lasted from 1643 to 1715: the Palace of Versailles, its resplendent Hall of Mirrors, its lavish gardens. Where the arts are concerned, we might imagine the young Sun King in costume, himself a dancer in the sumptuous ballets performed at court. Or we might picture him wallowing in Lully's monumental tragédies lyriques or bursting with laughter upon discovering the most recent comedy by Molière. Such illustrious artists' masterpieces, however, were published only during the first half of his reign of more than 72 years — by far the longest in the monarchical history of France —; a more sober bearing and a certain piety characterized its second half. This shift coincided with the King's secret nuptials in 1683, only a few months after the queen had died, with the Marquise de Maintenon. Madame de Maintenon's devotion, temperance and involvement in Church institutions exerted a definite influence on Louis XIV and consequently, on secular enjoyments at Versailles, which never returned to their former grandeur. Conversely, sacred music gained in prominence.

Though musical activities became perhaps less exuberant, they certainly did not cease altogether. When the King died in 1715, the court was still employing some 200 singers and instrumentalists! Music of various kinds was performed every day, and the musicians were divided into three departments. The musicians of the Écurie (literally, the stable) were tasked with providing music for processions and outdoor performances, while those of the Chambre (the King's apartment) were responsible for private daily entertainment. Lastly, the Chapelle was comprised of singers and instrumentalists who supplied the music of religious ceremonies. Employment in one of these departments entailed enviable conditions for a musician in this period, and it was even common for such positions to be passed down through generations.

Marc-Antoine Charpentier

One might expect that a position at court during this period was a necessary condition for any musician or composer in achieving greatness or making history. Yet, Marc-Antoine Charpentier never held office at the court of Louis XIV. The King, nonetheless, held him in high esteem after hearing his sacred works in the early 1680s, while Charpentier was in the service of the Dauphin (the heir to the French throne). In 1683, the King revamped the Chapelle and organized a competition to fill new positions of *sous-maîtres*. Charpentier was among the favourites and advanced to the second round but had to withdraw from the competition due to illness. The King still offered him an annual pension, not associated with any concrete duties. Hence, it was outside of the court that Charpentier made a name for himself. He composed for various churches, private chapels, and religious orders, including the Jesuits, becoming the *maître de musique* for their largest church in Paris. Charpentier was also associated with Molière's troupe, the Comédie-Française, composing music in 1673 for the comedy-ballet *Le malade imaginaire* (The Imaginary Invalid). Lastly, in 1698 at age 55 and after a 25-year-long career in Paris, he was awarded the title of *maître de musique* of the Sainte-Chapelle, the most prestigious sacred music position save for similar functions at the Chapelle royale in Versailles.

The fate of Charpentier's output, largely comprised of sacred music, was just as unusual as his career. Indeed, with rare exceptions, his music was never published in his lifetime and was soon forgotten until its rediscovery in the 20th century. Fortunately, Charpentier himself meticulously consigned his works in 28 manuscript volumes preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. They contain a broad array of pieces written for various liturgical celebrations. The Magnificat, for instance, is sung at Vespers, the evening office for monastic orders and some lay churches, while the *Te Deum*, performed at the office of Matins, also serves on various occasions to thank and give praise to God. By extension, in France during the reign of Louis XIV, the *Te Deum* became a piece to exult the King—the rightful representative of God on Earth—and his inner circle. It was also heard for similar reasons at coronations, weddings, births, or to commemorate significant military victories.

Whatever their liturgical function, Charpentier's compositions conform for the most part to the genre of the grand motet, a sequence of various sections featuring several solo singers, in dialogue among themselves, as well as with a choir and different instruments. Charpentier's sacred music is also characterized by a wide assortment of compositional techniques, forms, durations, and instrumentation. As such, the works on this program feature 3 to 8 soloists, while the organ joins the various combinations of strings and winds. Some of Charpentier's grand motets depicting characters are classified as "dramatic motets." They relate stories, often from the Old Testament, or even tragic events in recent history. The motet *Pestis Mediolanensis* recounts the plague that broke out in Milan in the late 16th century and the role of St. Charles Borromeo in eradicating it. Composed for the Easter celebrations, *Nuptiae sacrae*, meanwhile, presents a marital dialogue between Jesus and his Church.

Did Charpentier's music enjoy the stature it merited in its time? In his musical epitaph, he claimed that "Music became to me a small honour and a heavy burden; and just as at my birth I took nothing into this world, I took nothing from it at my death." Are we to infer deep humility, a certain bitterness, or some of both? Whatever the case, Charpentier's music is regarded today as among the most powerful and original of its time.

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Benoit Brière

A passionate spokesperson

Mr. Brière is basically wedded to classical music, given that his spouse is a cellist—and in addition, Joliette-born. “A person who marries must adopt their wife’s hometown.” One might say that our Spokesperson is steeped in classical music everyday from morning to night!

“Don’t search for me this summer: I’ll be at the Festival de Lanaudière.”

Get to know him, his passion for acting and the importance of music in his everyday life. [READ+](#)



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