

## **Barthélemy de Caix, the pardessus de viole, and the politics of virtuosity**

This paper is a series of musings inspired by an apparently simple story. In 1730, when he was fourteen years old, Barthélemy de Caix left Lyon with his family to work for King Louis XV at Versailles. At the age of 22, in 1738, he and his brother returned home to Lyon while the rest of the family remained at Versailles. In 1745, after seven years in Lyon, he published six bravura sonatas for two pardessus de violes, his opus 1. Barthélemy and his brother performed for the King during the summer of 1745. Soon after, he was recalled to the King's service to instruct Princess Sophie on the pardessus de viole.<sup>1</sup> Without venturing too far into speculation it is possible to flesh out some of the details.

Why did he return to Lyon? Perhaps it had something to do with his participation in the five concerts that the de Caix family performed at Versailles in 1738.

Why did he write such virtuosic music for the five-string pardessus? Probably because both its composition and performance were designed to showcase his skill at the instrument, with the goal of returning to the King's service as a pardessus teacher, a goal that he achieved. It could be inferred that when de Caix and his brother performed for the King in 1745, they played some of this newly published repertoire.

This explanation seems straightforward enough, but upon examination of de Caix's oeuvre two unexpected details give pause: the music's extreme difficulty, and its violin-like idiom.

First, de Caix's sonatas are uncharacteristically demanding for the pardessus. The five-string pardessus's main function was to borrow from the vast repertoire of baroque chamber sonatas and suites for bass viol, violin, recorder, flute and oboe for private music-making by women amateurs. Although public performers on the pardessus were reputed to perform concerti, the vast majority of the more than two hundred published works that mention the pardessus on their title page, and the fifty or so works written specifically for the instrument, fall into two basic genres: "galant" solo suites and sonatas with basso continuo, and pastoral treble duets intended to be played in combination with rustic instruments like the recorder, musette, and vielle à roue. While some works contain difficult passages, none are remotely as challenging as the de Caix, either technically or musically. Twenty-first century pardessus players categorize these sonatas as some of the hardest viol music ever written, on a par with Forqueray, Graun and Kühnel.

Next, de Caix seems to have employed every bit of idiomatic violin technique he could – bariolage, double and triple stops, high position work, complicated bowings and extended slurs, as well as using such extreme keys as A major and C minor.

Indeed, there is a strong stylistic similarity between his treble duos and the violin duos of Jean-Marie Leclair, a longtime family friend. (Leclair left Lyon in 1723 when Barthélemy was seven, but his parents and three brothers performed together with the de Caix family in the annual city-wide concert for the King's birthday until 1738.) Both composers used two distinct methods to reunite the French and Italian tastes: at times they juxtaposed French and Italian elements within one movement, at other times they alternated national styles in a

---

<sup>1</sup> Tina Chancey, *Gender, Class, and Eighteenth-Century French Music: Barthélemy de Caix's "Six Sonatas for Two Unaccompanied Pardessus de Viole"* in: *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America* 33 (1996), p. 56.

sequence of movements. For example a concerto grosso and a complex jig/perpetual motion piece would be linked by a very French sarabande.<sup>2</sup>

So, by creating very difficult music in the violin idiom for pardessus à cinq and by presenting it to the King, presumably in both written form and in performance, de Caix did the equivalent of putting a dress on a dog: he got what he wanted and it did not hurt the dog. His success not only demonstrated his compositional skill, but also revealed that the pardessus, created more for practical and social reasons than acoustic or timbral, could rise to the technical demands made upon it. And yet, while it may not have hurt the dog there is an element of disrespect, of exploitation reminiscent of the situation of the fictional Eliza Doolittle at the end of George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. While her success masquerading as a lady, pretending she was something she was not, was undoubtedly beneficial to her, she felt that she had been used by Professor Higgins to prove a point, to win a bet. It is difficult to avoid seeing a parallel between Professor Higgins and Barthélemy de Caix, choosing the pardessus to showcase his talents as a composer and performer, hoping to gain preference, totally disregarding the characteristic musical idiom with which the instrument was most commonly identified, and the musicians for whom the pardessus was invented: aristocratic women amateurs.

Was the five-string pardessus officially gendered feminine upon its invention in the late 1730s? That is complicated, like so many gender issues. The French loved hybrid instruments; indeed, the eighteenth century periodical, the *Mercure de France* featured a regular "new instrument of the month" column, introducing "violin-horns" and "reed celli". The pardessus was initially valued because of its convenience – its playing position on the lap rather than the shoulder, its small size that made it easy to navigate, as well as its G D A d g tuning that enabled players to reach high d<sup>1</sup> without shifting. Orchestral cellists played Corelli on pardessus to avoid switching to an upright playing position; young boys starting the viol played pardessus until they could hold something larger.

The pardessus quickly found a niche among aristocratic women amateurs who employed it to play the works of Italian violin composers such as Corelli in the privacy of their salons. The public acclaim won by pardessus player Mlle Levi, her sister Mme Haubault, and other women players at the Concert Spirituel in the mid-eighteenth century attracted more partisans, composers wrote for it and included its name on title pages, and the instrument enjoyed a fair measure of popularity until the French revolution spelled the death of anything the least bit aristocratic. While there were certainly male pardessus teachers and performers, more women players were celebrated, more works were dedicated to them, more of their concerts were reviewed. There was an explicit, if not total, feminine identification, so much so that in 1740 an irritated Hubert le Blanc would say:

“Les partisans de l'ancienne musique [...] semblent vouloir perpétuer leur goût en inspirant à leurs enfants et surtout aux jeunes Demoiselles, de préférer le ‘pardessus’ aux autres instruments, comme s'il était moins honnête de mettre un violon sur l'épaule qu'un pardessus entre les jambes.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Tina Chancey, *Gender, Class, and Eighteenth-Century French Music: Barthélemy de Caix's "Six Sonatas for Two Unaccompanied Pardessus de Viole"* – Part II, in: *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America* 34 (1997), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Hubert Le Blanc, *Défense de la basse de viole contre les entreprises du violon et les prétensions du violoncel*, Amsterdam 1740, trans. Barbara G. Jackson in: *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America* 11 (1974), p.25.

“The partisans of the ancient music [...] seem to be willing to perpetuate their taste, advising their children and most of all to the young ladies to prefer the ‘pardessus’ over other instruments, as if it were less honest to put a violin on the shoulder than a pardessus between the legs.”

It may seem ironic to whine because a wonderful but relatively obscure instrument receives attention, no matter what sex the enthusiast might be. However, the issue at hand is not that a male composer wrote challenging music for the pardessus, but, rather, that the *kind* of virtuosity his music demanded could be described as a masculine one, much more extroverted and self-focused than women were allowed to be in public. And yet, there were much-praised women virtuosi reviewed in the *Mercure de France* who seemed to be able to project control and competence without exhibiting inappropriate masculine aggression or ambition. How then to isolate and describe these different models of virtuosity?

First of all, it must be confirmed that “virtuosity” was not an invention of the romantic period, as is generally assumed. According to Marc Pincherle, “virtuosity existed before the words that label it.”<sup>4</sup> He reminds us of examples throughout the centuries: of celebrated composers/performers from Orpheus to Landini, from Greek aulos players three centuries before Christ to the twelfth-century Irish harpers dressed alike in blue and silver. Before the advent of public concerts in the mid-eighteenth century, Bach, Maugars, Frescobaldi and the young women of Vivaldi’s *Pietà* captivated thousands of worshippers in the grand cathedrals and the “concerto delle donne” gave breathtaking private concerts for the Duke of Ferrara. Well before the Romantic era, virtuosity was aware of itself.

Indeed, in 1703 Sebastien de Brossard’s *Dictionary* defined it as derived from “virtu”, that superiority of talent, skill or ability which makes us excel in the theory, composition and practice of the fine arts; a virtuoso is an excellent musician, an accomplished performer/composer worthy of the respect of his peers.<sup>5</sup>

How did the concept of virtuosity change, then, at the turn of the nineteenth century? According to Jim Samson’s study of Liszt’s *Transcendental Etudes*, it was not the existence of virtuosity that changed, but its nature. Enmeshed with the Romantic cult of the individual, virtuosity gave way to those extremes of display and sentiment that won it the pejorative connotations of excess, artifice and kitsch that still colour the term today.<sup>6</sup>

Representing a more mediated, idealized view of the Romantic monster, V. A. Howard’s book (ingeniously titled *Charm and Speed*) characterizes a virtuoso as someone playing the standard repertoire with a combination of the highest level of musicianship and technical proficiency, trained by coaches to absorb tradition and then to express his personal vision. A virtuoso is constructed, and then anointed as such by his audience and the critics; virtuosity as a public achievement, not a skill.<sup>7</sup> It sounds rather like the Olympics, where well-prepared athletes enter pre-established events, scored by expert judges.

In contrast, Jane O’Dea’s description of virtuosity is much more congruent with Brossard’s. She calls it the process by which a dedicated performer learns to interpret a piece of music, underscoring and enhancing the forms and patterns of the piece, in the same way that a photographer underscores and enhances visual elements.<sup>8</sup> This kind of interpretation also suggests cultural resonances outside the musical work that listeners find emotionally rich, which give the piece meaning for them. Virtuosity exists in the development of an aural

---

<sup>4</sup> Marc Pincherle, *The World of the Virtuoso*, New York 1963, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Sébastien de Brossard, *Dictionnaire de la Musique*, Paris 1703, p. 324.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt*, Cambridge 2003, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> V. A. Howard, *Charm and Speed: Virtuosity in the Performing Arts*, New York 2008, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> Jane O’Dea, *Virtue or Virtuosity: Explorations in the Ethics of Music Performance*, Westport 2000, pp. 59–67.

understanding of a composition, a non-verbal appreciation of patterns of tension and resolution expressed in the interplay of melody, rhythm, harmony, timbre and form. To O’Dea, virtuosity is not “charm and speed” but appears to be a more feminized, integrative act: the ability to wield this interpretative process with what I call “ease and mastery”.

Ease and mastery were important tenets of eighteenth-century court life as well. In fact, the role of courtier required qualities and skills that elite women had been trained to acquire for centuries. The ideal male courtier of Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* had “talent, beauty of countenance, comeliness of person, and that grace which will make him at first sight loveable to all”.<sup>9</sup> The courtier’s social function also mirrored the duties traditionally assigned to women. He was to spend his life “devoting his every desire and habit of manner to pleasing” his patron. He must entertain, be attentive without being intrusive, obey all honourable requests, and when chosen to be an adviser, keep the master from doing evil, correct without appearing insubordinate, and suggest without appearing superior.

This diplomatic, easy-going, non-confrontational male courtier was paired with a similar feminine ideal. Castiglione said, “she was to be of gentle birth, to have natural grace, cleverness, prudence, circumspection, and to take care to guard her reputation. She should exhibit a certain pleasing affability, a quick vivacity of spirit and be able to entertain graciously every kind of man with agreeable and comely conversation”. The rewards for successful courtiers of both sexes? Privilege, wealth, a good marriage, lands, travel, and maybe the love of a king.<sup>10</sup>

Intrigued by the initial parallels between Castiglione’s feminized courtier and O’Dea’s apparently feminized virtuosity, it would be prudent to continue exploring O’Dea’s process-centred approach. To paraphrase, since a performer in essence collaborates with the score, she must learn to search out its clues in order to translate the visual symbols on the page into sound. Once she has the understanding she needs, other performance skills enter the interpretative process – the technical dexterity needed to perform the written notes, and those “craft skills” that link the execution to expression – sculpting the notes, choosing articulations, phrasing, dynamics, agogics, ornaments. Technical drill leads to ease of execution, just as the goal of coaching, practising and rehearsing, is the mastery of these craft skills.<sup>11</sup>

However, here is where O’Dea reverts to the masculine ideal; she sees the next step in the process as quite natural – a musician plays the piece, becomes conscious that a bar, phrase or passage requires a certain dexterity or fluency she does not yet possess. Now she has a method: she drills the problem place, learns how to play it, and moves on to craft skills. All conservatory-trained musicians were taught this technique. She isolates a problem, decides how to approach it, and experiments with practice techniques until she fixes it. It is a useful process for learning music written after 1800.

But in music before 1800, a technical challenge on a page might have more of a symbolic or rhetorical function; it could be meant to express philosophic dualism, ritualized emotional distress or allegorical symbolism. The difficulty might be meant to be delineated and aurally explored, not just be reduced to an invisible bump in the road. After all, that is why early music has developed such a strong infrastructure of performance practice literature. We know from the treatises that the printed page is ripe with any number of contradictory possibilities.

So, when an early music performer discovers a problem he might have a wider range of actions available to him, ranging from drilling to perfection or using craft skills to subtly

---

<sup>9</sup> Baldesar Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano, con una scelta delle Opere minori*, 2nd ed., Bruno Maier (ed), Torino 1964.

<sup>10</sup> Bonnie S. Anderson, Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. 2, New York 1988, pp. 9–13.

<sup>11</sup> O’Dea, *Virtue or Virtuosity* (see footnote 8), p. 64.

adjust the timing and articulations to integrate the problem into the music, to the less conventional choice of making some changes in the text itself – he could simplify it, complicate it, or re-compose it. Of course, the idea of simplifying the text raises the hackles of any self-respecting musician trained in the “charm and speed” school. But preserving a difficult text no matter what can lead to that aggressive, adversarial approach to performance that produces the gunslinger-like boast one often hears after a concert, “Boy, I really nailed that piece”.

How to decide what to do? What is needed are some new analytical models, some new language to de-politicize these expanded options.

One such resource is “kinaesthesia”, a technique employed in a process called “embodied analysis”; using the body’s physical responses as one plays a piece to give the musician information about its interpretation. To quote Elisabeth Le Guin, “one can count on tiny variations of position, weight, pressure, friction and muscular distribution having profound structural and interpretational consequences”.<sup>12</sup> What performer hasn’t felt those nuanced changes? Learning how to use this muscle sense, or sixth sense to track the fluctuating progression between tension and ease teaches a player how to marry his physical perceptions to musical decisions, and thus to audible gestures. And it is not a new idea: the concept of a sixth sense was first discussed in 1719 in the Abbé de Bos’s *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*,<sup>13</sup> and expanded upon by the Abbé Etienne de Condillac in his *Traité des Sensations*.<sup>14</sup>

To give an example of embodied analysis in action, here is Marion Guck describing her process while trying to learn a difficult passage. She says, “What makes the middle section so much harder to play? It isn’t technical difficulty; my impression is that it has something to do with the contrast of affects portrayed. What is striking in performing this passage is the constant need to concentrate in order to negotiate the harmonic and tonal turns as well as the rhythmic disjunctions. Invariably, reaching a stable point is beginning a new disturbance in the tonal flow. I think the effect, for listeners, can be similar: attentiveness sharpened to concentration, as one seeks to interpret one’s tonal location and trajectory”.<sup>15</sup> She analyzes what goes on “energetically” in a particular passage, decides what she needs to do as a performer and connects that with the musical results for the listener.

Her discussion reminds me of some passages in eighteenth-century viol literature that are meant to sound difficult, not impossible, but hard; not only the de Caix sonatas but the last movement of Leclair’s *Trio Sonata in D major*, the opening of the second movement of Buxtehude’s *Trio Sonata in A minor*, the high notes in Marais’s *Opération de la Taille*. Tossing them off with nonchalant ease seems inappropriate (even if it were possible); their narratives require that the performer acknowledge and address their challenges. Otherwise, there would be no catharsis, the audience would have no subliminal experience of conflict observed, engaged and overcome.

This realization suggests that a reconciliation might be effected between aggrieved women *pardessus* players and our original insensitive interloper. If Barthélemy de Caix’s intensely virtuosic sonatas were interpreted by means of embodied analysis their performance would synthesize masculine and feminine virtuosity, resulting in an interpretation that reconciles the principles of charm and speed with those of ease and mastery, and opening the door to a new, integrative relationship between composer, performer and audience.

---

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2005, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Abbé de Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*, Paris 1719, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Abbé Etienne de Condillac, *Traité des Sensations*, Paris 1754, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Marion A. Guck, *Analysis as Interpretation: Interaction, Intentionality, Invention*, in: *Music Theory Spectrum* 28/2 (2006), p. 200.

## Further reading

Robert A. Green, *The Pardessus de Virole and its Literature*, in: *Early Music* 10/3 (1982) pp. 300–307.

V.A. Howard, *Charm and Speed: Virtuosity in the Performing Arts*, New York 2008.

Ursula Rempel, *Women and Music: Ornament of the Profession?* in: Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, Bloomington 1984.

Richard Sutcliffe, *Re-examining the Pardessus de Virole and its Literature, Part I: Introduction and Methods*, in: *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America* 37 (2000), pp. 5–30.

Richard Sutcliffe, *Re-examining the Pardessus de Virole and its Literature, Part II: Repertoire from 1722–c.1790*, in: *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America* 38 (2001), pp. 27–77.