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Charpentier Suite in d minor

The inner life of the emotions burns with the same fire from age to age. We connect easily still with Shakespeare because essentially we are as people have always been. Reborn with each generation, the emotional intensity we feel inside begins as amorphous sensation and searches for a container, for a form in which to present itself to the world.

It is often said today that we live in a world replete with assumed intimacies, a world in which individualism is celebrated and emotional reactions are shared with nary a thought for propriety or convention. This was not always so; expression of emotion is dependent on societal norms, the ever changing conventions of each epoch. In the France of Louis XIV the social graces were seen as essential checks on the potentially animalistic excesses of raw emotion. Reason was extolled, enabling us to live together and to reach beyond the primitive energies of pure instinct. Perhaps there is something Gallic in this idea. French writer Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt writes in one of his short stories “Marie Maurestier was theatrical and never let herself go; she always preserved her self-awareness. Some people viewed this as proof of her falseness; others saw it as an expression of dignity.” Today we might think of “theatrical” and “never letting herself go” as antithetical. But in 17th century France the dance forms gave appropriate and graceful outer shape to the inner life, sensuality cloaked in geometry.

Marc-Antoine Charpentier was one of the most renowned composers in 17th century France, albeit always less favored than his compatriot Lully who was employed in the court of Louis XIV. Charpentier studied in Rome, where he was steeped in the very singing Italian style, and wrote music for the theatrical troupe of Molière for 20 years. It is during this period, in 1680 - 81, that he wrote the Concert for four viols. This is a suite of dances intended for performance by a consort of viols, the ancestor of the modern string quartet. There is a contrapuntal prélude followed by a suite of dances. (The second prélude takes the form of an allemande, the traditional opening dance of a suite at that time.) We can easily imagine ourselves into the noble ballroom, dancing always beautifully but also with undertones of seduction, assertion of individual personality, or even aggression. There are very particular conventions of performances associated with the French baroque, such as notes inégales, in which moderately quick notes swing, as in jazz. There is also the possibility of improvised florid ornamentation, an opportunity for a splash of individuality, a vivid scarf or tie worn along with a conventional uniform. So in

fact the music becomes something both theatrical and dignified, a volatile balance which both enlivens and ennobles the proceedings.

Note by Mark Steinberg