

French Impressionism and the Baroque: Connection and Influence

The Rise of Early Music in France

The interest in Baroque music in France began at least partially from a sense of nationalistic pride in France in the late 19th century. At this time, publications of German music emphasized a sense of lineage and canon of composers stemming from the early Baroque, to the present day. French composers consciously began looking back to music from earlier periods in France to create their own lineage, ancestry, and canon. Composers and performers of late 19th century France, explored a variety of Baroque music, but of particular popularity were works by Jean-Baptiste Lully, Jean-Philippe Rameau, and François Couperin.

Composers of this period, including Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel turned to early French Baroque works for inspiration and imitated formal techniques, textural elements, and dance styles. Excepting "Clair de lune," Debussy's *Suite bergamasque* features stylized versions of a prelude, a menuet, and a passepied. The passepied is interesting for a number of reasons – but particularly due to its meter (4/4), which defies the traditional use of triple meter, despite its more conventional light and quick tempo aspects. Ravel similarly composed works that harken back to the Baroque including his *Le tombeau de Couperin* and the *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. The "Menuet" from *Le tombeau* elegantly uses an embellished return to the opening material to suggest an ornamented return of the opening material.



Curtis Pavey

University of
CINCINNATI

Diémer and the Harpsichord

Along with the increased interest in music from the past, there was a pronounced fascination with early instruments and, in particular, the harpsichord. The harpsichord was displayed at the Exposition Universelle (1889) in Paris in recitals performed by Louis Diémer, a French pianist and harpsichordist. Shortly after becoming a professor at the Paris Conservatoire, Diémer founded the *Société des Instruments Anciens*, which organized additional concerts for audiences interested in early instruments.

Diémer's performances helped to popularize not only the harpsichord, but also the repertoire written for the instrument. In the early 20th century, he edited several volumes of *Les Clavecinistes Français*, which published works of F. Couperin, Rameau, Daquin, Dandrieu, and more. The work helped to educate the French public of the musical works from the past. The last volume of the work was edited by a number of important French composers and pianists including Camille Saint-Saëns, Vincent d'Indy, and Paul Dukas. Because of these efforts, works of the *clavecinistes* became an important part of the French musical canon.

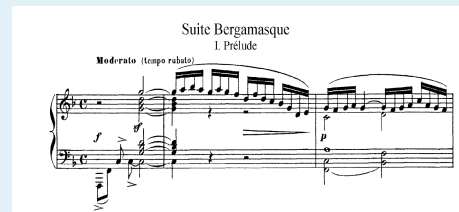


While composing his *Le tombeau de Couperin*, Ravel studied pieces by François Couperin including his *Concerts Royaux*. Pictured below, is an example from the first edition of François Couperin's work – the "Forlane" (a Baroque dance in 6/8 with metrical stresses on the second beat). Ravel copied this work out, transcribing it for the piano and it served as the basis for his "Forlane," shown above. Ravel's piece is formally constructed using the rondeau structure of Couperin's "Forlane," and even imitates coloristic changes in the final section with modal shifts.



An excerpt from Vincent d'Indy's *Pour les enfants de tout âge* (1919), "Couperin," recalls the character pieces of François Couperin's harpsichord works published in the early eighteenth century. D'Indy's work includes 24 other pieces, several of which are titled after composers of the Baroque. "Couperin" starts off with rather conservative harmonic material in D major before modulating to the dominant. The second section returns back to D major, but first it winds its way through a variety of chromatic contrapuntal ideas, including a cadence in F-sharp minor. Throughout, d'Indy uses written out gestures to imply ornaments such as trills and mordents. Additionally, the piece uses a two-part texture, reminiscent of a large amount of Couperin's compositional output.

D'Indy's collection also includes references to composers outside of France, including CPE Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. All of these pieces make excellent teaching material for late intermediate students.



Debussy's "Prelude" from his *Suite bergamasque* (above) features a variety of flowing gestures that recall the unmeasured prelude tradition of the past. Pictured below is an excerpt from the Baunyn manuscript, an important 17th century document of French keyboard music. The work, an unmeasured prelude by Louis Couperin, includes arpeggiated chordal and melodic fragments that combine to form an introductory piece for a dance suite.

