

CÉLINE ÉPISTOLIER

*Actes du XIe Colloque international
Louis-Ferdinand Céline*

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Céline and Couperin

In a previous communication, we argued that the affinity between Céline's « petite musique » and music proper goes deeper than matters of timbre and rhythm, or references to instruments and composers. However, there is one composer whose name recurs more than any other : Couperin.

The first explicit reference is in 1936 (in one of the sections of Bagatelles in which the author discusses his ars poetica). Yet an interest in what Couperin symbolises can be traced back much further. To his pre-war acquaintance with the frères Casadeus, one of whom founded in 1901 the Société des Instruments Anciens. To 1927 and the early play Progrès, in which Mme Doumergue informs us that she won the médaille d'or playing the épinette au concours international de juillet à l'Exposition de 1889 (P 35) – the very same Exposition during which, in reality, Louis Dufour had joué en concert sur l'un des clavecins anciens du Musée du Conservatoire, initiating the rehabilitation of 17th Century French music. To 1911, when he met Vuillermoz, music critic and member of « les Apaches », a group whose members included Ravel. Another member was Ricardo Vines, who premiered several compositions by Ravel as well as Debussy. In their campaign for a retour à la tradition française (as against the till then dominant German idiom), Couperin – in particular the harpsichord suites with which he is intimately and famously associated – was championed as embodying the epitome of Frenchness.

When for his part Céline – who described himself as musicien du français – mentions Couperin, the context is similarly one that stresses « Frenchness ». Not in the official sense, as promoted by the Académie ; but alluding to that certain refined elegance, and grâce légère ; that specifically gallic mixture of the railleur and the spirituel, the ironique and the sensible, the plaisant and the délicat.

Couperin's harpsichord music, as Céline will have appreciated, is still closely linked to dance. It also reflects this Parisian's interest in everyday town life and popular music such as street songs. Lyrical and improvisatory, it displays what Couperin called the « style luthé » - in which a lacework of arpeggios, trills and other ornaments breaks up the chords. As Philippe Beaussant says, « on dirait qu'il fait perdre à la musique sa masse et son épaisseur », creating a « polyphonie éclatée ». Striking are the parallels here with Céline's style at its maturest – in connection with which he too uses the terms « arpèges » and « trilles » - and with what we might call his « syntaxe éclatée ». Moreover, if Couperin's keyboard music is less well known than that of Bach or Scarlatti, it is because it is so intimately bound up with the possibilities of the harpsichord itself and is not easily transcribable for piano. Like Céline, Couperin is



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«untranslatable». This impressionniste avant la lettre (as Debussy admitted) not only mixes laughter and tears but is above all able to convey a sense of the fragile, ephemeral nature of existence. It is a sensitivity which pervades Céline's texts too. Yet far from being seen simplistically as evidence of some supposed nihilism, it reveals that he has, in his own words, « le sens de la précarité des musiques » (CC6, p.78). As Jankélévitch puts it, « la dimension [de la musique] est de toutes [...] la plus « évanescence », for « la mélancolie de la temporalité » is of its very essence. Composers such as Couperin have the gift of making us more aware of this fact.

Emotion too – that will o'the wisp that Céline wishes to capture – is also, as he stresses, « évanescence » (EY 504). It is when discussing « l'émotion directe », « l'authentique émotion » that the first explicit reference to Couperin is made (BM}87-8). The link is likewise present in a late interview : Ce que je cherche, c'est l'émotion, encore, toujours, la petite musique française [...] du Couperin [...]. Thus it is not just music in general, but Couperin in particular that is a symbol for what Céline is concerned with in his prose : a genuinely gallic style that will directly and convey authentic, if fleeting, emotion.

Towards the end of *Bagatelles*, Céline searches for someone to write the music for one of his ballets – someone capable of walking the tightrope « entre la mort et l'existence », « un musicien assez fragile » (BM, 374). Had he lived in the same century, there is little doubt that Couperin would have fitted the bill.

