Concert: Visiting Artist Series 2007-8. Susan Toman, harpsichord

Susan Toman

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ITHACA COLLEGE
SCHOOL OF MUSIC

VISITING ARTISTS SERIES 2007-8
Susan Toman, harpsichord

Hockett Family Recital Hall
Friday, April 11, 2008
7:00 p.m.
PROGRAM

Nouvelles suites de clavecin

Suite in A

Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Les Trois Mains
La Triomphante
La Fanfarinette
Gavotte

INTERMISSION

Suite in G

Les Tricotets
L'Indifferante
Menuets I & II
La Poule
Les Triolets
Les Sauvages
L'Enharmonique
L'Egyptiènne

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French composers writing for the harpsichord had an intuitive sense for this intimate and noble instrument, exploiting the range, articulation, color, and expressive devices that it had to offer. Composers such as d'Anglebert, Couperin, and Rameau carefully notated the finest details, while leaving much to the performer in the way of rhythmic freedom, speed of ornamentation, and interpretation. The un-notated but expected French tradition of *notes-inégales* (unequal notes) gives the music a natural sway. And while ornaments are meticulously described, written instructions urge performers to vary their speed of execution and integrate them as though they were improvised. The sense of gesture is crucial to playing this music, as Frenchmen of the eighteenth-century were obsessed with the grace and elegance of every-day movement. A simple bow or removal of a hat was carefully practiced and cultivated so as to come off in public with ease. Similar attention to detail and gesture can be found in their music and reveal much about the cultural values of that period.

It is not known exactly when the *Nouvelles suites* were published. While eighteenth-century theorist Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg gives the date as 1726, some scholars argue that they may have been published as late as 1728-9. Whatever the exact year, we know that these were busy times for Rameau. In 1726, he not only married, but also published his *Nouveau système de musique théorique*. The *Nouvelles suites de clavecin* followed shortly after, published at his own expense. This publication was his last book for solo harpsichord, aside from the transcriptions from his opera *Les Indes Galantes* and several excerpts from his *Pièces de Clavecin en Concert*. It marks the transition between his early career, devoted to theoretical writings, harpsichord works, motets and cantatas, and his later, nearly complete devotion to opera. Coming out of a well-developed French clavecinist tradition, these self-assured suites are highly refined, with great variety and flexibility of texture.

The *Nouvelles suites* combine traditional dances and character pieces within the same publication, showing not only Rameau’s ease with both writing styles, but the diversity which existed in this period. While Rameau may have been writing in familiar genres, his main contributions to keyboard writing were technical and harmonic innovations. Virtuoso techniques, such as repetition of the same note with alternating hands, successive leaps by one hand in the same direction, and arpeggios pivoting on the thumb, all demanded a polished technique. By experimenting with enharmonic spellings and voice leadings he managed to achieve progressions that had previously been considered vulgar. Foreseeing an outcry against his audacity, he defended himself in the preface to the *Suites*, urging his listeners to keep an open mind and be receptive to new musical ideas. Of *l’Enharmonique*, he wrote: “The effect one experiences in the twelfth bar of the reprise will perhaps not be to everyone’s taste; yet one becomes accustomed provided one lends oneself to it; in fact, its beauty is felt once one has overcome the first repulsion which unfamiliarity may occasion in this case...”

The first suite begins with an *Allemande*, a colossal piece in both length and refinement. It contains much parallel motion in thirds and sixths, and each half ends with descending repeated notes. The *Courante* is made up of broad sweeps across the keyboard, striking harmonic progressions, and dramatic contrasts between high and low registers. The *Sarabande*, later used in
Zoroastre and Castor et Pollux, is dignified with its wide arpeggios and alluring chord progressions. Les Trois Mains cleverly creates the illusion of requiring three hands through hand crossings and distinction between registers. The most unexpected moments, however, occur with the rapid downward glissandi at the end of each half, as if momentarily lifting off the ground. La Fanfarinette is a lilting dance, while La Triomphante boldly sweeps across three octaves at a time with leaping figures. Last but definitely not least is the monumental Gavotte; its six variations build from modesty, to cleverness to virtuosity with the all-out octave leaps and driving rhythms of the last variation.

The second suite begins with Les Tricotets, suggesting the rhythm of knitting needles. Written in rondeau form it has an air of non-chalance, as does L'Indifférente. L'Indifférente, along with Les Sauvages and La Poulė are character pieces similar to those found in the ordres of Francois Couperin. Les Sauvages is dramatic and direct; Rameau later reworked it into a chorus in his opera Les Indes Galantes. La Poulė conjures up images of a chicken pecking, scratching, and strutting around the coop. Its clucking theme uses repeated notes, so that together with the ornamented parallel thirds, fast arpeggios, and abrupt halts Rameau's chicken has a slightly frenzied and flustered personality. Written in the upper register, Minuet I possesses great charm and innocence; it too was reworked and included in later operas. The contrasting Minuet II is in the minor mode and its skips give it a more energetic spirit. Les Troïlets is based on a traditional verse form wherein the first line is repeated after each group of three lines. With its suspensions and rising and falling melodic line it is perhaps the most poignantly tender piece in this suite. The suite concludes with L'Enharmonique, described above, and L'Egyptienne, based on a character from one of his operas - an appropriate dramatic and grandiose conclusion to his works for harpsichord.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Canadian harpsichordist Susan Toman began her keyboard training as a pianist, only to switch to early keyboards at the age of twenty-two. A Masters in Keyboard Instruments at the University of Michigan allowed her to study the harpsichord and fortepiano, after which the harpsichord became her prime focus. She is now completing her doctorate in harpsichord at McGill University, Montreal. Her teachers have included harpsichordists Edward Parmentier, Luc Beausejour, and Hank Knox. She specializes in French music of the early eighteenth century.

Her solo career is rapidly acquiring international scope, with performances and lecture-recitals in the United States, Canada, Portugal, and Belgium, where in 2007 she won fourth prize at the International Harpsichord Competition in Brugges. She has also been featured at early music festivals in Bloomington, London, and Rochester. A frequent collaborator with instrumentalists and vocalists alike, she is a founding member of Montreal-based ensembles Tarantella and Musica Tessitori, and has also appeared with ensembles Dionysos and Anaphantasia.

Susan has lectured on aspects of keyboard technology and performance practice, and has been supported by multiple granting organizations, including the Canada Council. She is currently working on a critical edition of Bernard de Bury's keyboard suites, and her first compact disc, a recording of Rameau's "Nouvelles suites," was released by Centaur Records this April.