

Editorial

JEAN-MARIE LECLAIR L'ÂÎNÉ (1697-1764)

IN THE EARLY 1960s, when I first studied and performed Leclair's music, a number of his works weren't available at all and many of the modern editions that did exist were of an old-fashioned type, with continuo realizations intended for the piano and lots of anachronistic slurs, dynamics, accents, bowings, fingerings, etc. added. Whatever the historical value or musical merits of such editions, they posed a problem for someone like me, who was interested in matters of 18th-century performance practice. Most of the recordings available then — and there weren't many — were unimpressive technically and problematic stylistically. How times have changed! Now we have access to first-rate editions and recordings of almost all of his output, and even published facsimiles of the original editions of much of his *œuvre*. (His opera *Scylla et Glaucus* aside, there is no manuscript tradition, presumably because Leclair's autograph manuscripts were consumed during the process by which his wife, Louise, engraved his works; the manuscripts that do exist prove to have been copied from the printed editions, which must be regarded as *Urtexts*.)

In the world of *belles lettres* interest in Leclair has focused not on his formidable violin technique or his appealing music, but on his grotesque murder. Despite a rather extended investigation, the Parisian police proved unable to solve the crime, which has inspired a number of fictional — and supposedly non-fictional — accounts and “solutions”. Most of these attempts at reimagining what happened to Leclair in his house in a Paris *faubourg* during the night of 22-23 October 1764 are of modest literary or historical merit, with one happy exception: Gérard Gefen's *L'assassinat de Jean-Marie Leclair, une des plus grandes énigmes criminelles du XVIII^e siècle. Récit* (Paris, Belfond, 1990). Those who like to read police procedurals and are interested in French culture of the mid-18th-century will enjoy this fictional romp.

Musicians who have spent time learning and performing Leclair's music universally recognize its beauty, brilliance and quality. Nonetheless, his music, which centers on the violin, is not as popular among baroque-music aficionados as the iconic instrumental works of his contemporaries Bach, Handel, Telemann, and Vivaldi. Admittedly, Leclair composed much less than his better-known German and Italian contemporaries, with very little vocal music and no sacred music. But the same could be said for Corelli, a composer who never lacks for exponents. Perhaps Leclair's particular synthesis of Italian and French styles — the *goûts réunis* or *gemischt Geschmack* that so fascinated musicians north of the Alps at the time — is an acquired taste.

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Or perhaps it's something else. In an article originally titled 'Effing the Ineffable', Susan McClary has intriguingly documented the difficulties that many non-French musicians had in understanding and enjoying the music of the *ancien régime*. French music was seen by many foreign musicians either as including something disturbing or as lacking something that was necessary, or both. Apparently it was too French! Perhaps, then, even though Leclair studied in Turin with Corelli's pupil, Somis, his initial training as a French dancing master and pit musician for the stage works of Lully "spoiled" his *italianità*. In an era when leading voices called for a hybrid style, this rings strange. But if you wish to comprehend it, you will have to launch your own forensic investigation of Leclair's music. I recommend it.

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¹. McCLARY, Susan. 'Temporality and Ideology: Qualities of Motion in Seventeenth-Century French Music', in: *Echo: A Music-centered Journal*, 11/2 (Fall 2000), <www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume2-Issue2/mcclary/mcclary.pdf>.