
CaL
PERFORMances
Program Book

Sunday, November 8, 2026, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Jean Rondeau, *harpsichord*

PROGRAM

Louis COUPERIN (1626–1661) — Suite in D (date unknown)
- Prélude G.1
- Allemande G.35
- Courante G.42
- Sarabande G.51
- Canaries G.52
- Chaconne la Complaignante G.57

Jean-Philippe RAMEAU (1683–1764) — Prelude in A, from *Premier livre de pièces de clavecin* (1706)

Suite in A, from *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin* (1726–1728)
- Allemande
- Courante
- Sarabande
- Les Trois Mains
- Gavotte avec les Doubles

François Couperin (1668–1733) — First Prelude in C major, from *L'Art de toucher le clavecin* (1716)

Selections from *Premier livre de pièces de clavecin* (1713)
- *La Ténébreuse* (Allemande)
- *La Favorite* (Chaconne à deux tems – Rondeau)

Pancrace Royer (1703–1755) — *La Marche des Scythes* (1746)

This performance will last approximately 70 minutes and be performed without an intermission.

Cal Performances is committed to fostering a welcoming, inclusive, and safe environment for all—one that honors our venues as places of respite, openness, and respect. Please see the Community Agreements section on our Policies page for more information.

It is with Chambonnières, followed by Louis Couperin, that the harpsichord came to occupy a predominant place in French musical life during the 17th century, succeeding the lute. The repertoire of these pioneers—bringing to the musical stage works that were as prolific as they were experimental—would have a major influence on the whole succession of composers who emerged throughout the second half of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th.

Thus, from Louis Couperin to his nephew François, by way of Rameau and Royer, Jean Rondeau presents here a striking picture of the evolution of this style and the impact it had on the arts in general—in theater, painting, and beyond. The Prelude by Rameau that opens the Suite in A is nothing less than a tribute—or a *Tombeau*—to the French composers of the 17th century through its unmeasured form, a genre that Louis Couperin brought to its height.

Despite the stylistic thread that unites these works, strong contrasts bring the narrative to life: from the intimate to the flamboyant, from the theatrical to the delicate, everything here intertwines to create a narrative journey conceived and imagined for the concert itself—for this ritual that seeks to bring people together through shared emotions.

PROGRAM NOTES

LOUIS COUPERIN
Suite in D

With his brief but brilliant career, Louis Couperin launched the Couperin family as France's equivalent of Germany's Bach family, each producing generations of remarkable musicians. Born in 1626 in Chaumes-en-Brie, a small town outside Paris, Couperin was plucked out of obscurity by Jacques Champion de Chambonnières, the leading harpsichordist at the French Royal Court, who taught him, then brought him to Paris in 1650 as a court musician and organist at Paris' renowned St. Gervais church. (Subsequently, members of the Couperin family held this latter post for nearly two centuries.)

Couperin's music soon surpassed Chambonnieres' in its beauty, daring, and intensity. Inspired by French and English lutenists, he adapted some of their techniques for his harpsichord works, such as playing chords in the *brisée,* or broken fashion to enable sonorities to persist longer despite the harpsichord's quick-decaying sound. Couperin's use of harmonies was inventive, and his contemporary the Abbé Le Gaulois praised his "beautiful dissonances." However, at his death at age 35, Couperin had not published any of his prolific musical output; many of his works, in fact, were not discovered until the mid-20th century.

Especially for his preludes, Couperin developed an unmeasured writing style in which pitches were indicated in undifferentiated whole notes "threaded with long sensuous curves that show which notes are to be held," writes David Fuller. "Graceful but baffling to the eye, they demand a player with the talents of a composer to sort and shape the gestures … yet … melodic lines and motifs emerge, part-writing is suggested, and the textures coalesce into luxuriant suspended harmonies." A musician with the knowledge and imagination of Jean Rondeau, is able to reveal the beauty and excitement of Louis Couperin's music from this spare template.

The Suite in D we will hear was not composed as a set-in-stone single work; instead, the performer would select a series of individual dances—in the standard Baroque dance forms such as Allemande, Courante, and Sarabande—plus such exotic additions as the Canaries—and assemble them into an ad hoc suite. This one is launched by a long and exploratory prelude mainly in a slow, unmeasured tempo; in an ABA form, its central portion is conventionally measured, a little quicker, and dancelike. An elegant, melodious



Clément Vaysières

Allemande follows, with the steady tread of the bass line marking out the four beats. Contrasting with this stately movement, the Courante in three beats is lighter and quicker, bringing out the harpsichord's sparkling timbre. Though it's also in three beats, the Sarabande is a much more solemn dance, which stresses the second beat of the measure through lengthening it and/or adding embellishments. It is also a splendid example of the chord *brisée* technique. Originating in the Canary Islands, the Canaries is a quick, lively dance in a bouncing compound rhythm with strong accents that imitate the jumps and foot stampings of its folk-dance beginnings.

The suite closes with an example of a Couperin specialty, the Chaconne la Complaignante, which translates as "the lamenting woman." The chaconne form is built over a repeating chord pattern in the bass, above which freer variations blossom. Dark and weighty, Couperin's chaconnes are emotionally powerful and complex. Opening with a dissonance, La Complaignante emphasizes the depths of the harpsichord's bass register, and its rumbling ornaments disturbingly capture the pain of grief.

JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU
Prelude in A
Suite in A

A contemporary of both Bach and Handel, Jean-Philippe Rameau lived long enough—to just days before his 81st birthday—to combine several disparate musical careers in one lifetime. During the first half of his life, he was

one of France's most renowned organists and also one of the 18th century's most important music theoreticians. Rameau was largely self-taught as a composer, and his *Treatise on Harmony* (1722) and numerous other books and articles about the principles of composition instructed musicians for generations after.

In the early 1730s, when he had reached the ripe age of 50, Rameau turned his attention to dramatic music for the Paris stage. Astonishingly, he then created some 60 operas, ballets, and sets of theatrical incidental music before his death in 1764, in the process expanding the emotional range and sheer musical quality of these genres beyond anything even his famous predecessor Lully had achieved. He became a friend of Voltaire, to whom he bore a strong physical resemblance.

Rameau's roughly 65 works for keyboard mostly date from his early, pre-operatic career and were published in four volumes between 1706 and 1741. Harpsichordist Albert Fuller describes the "colorful audacity" of Rameau's expressive style. Experimenting boldly with harmony, the composer was a less abstract musician than Bach, frequently creating very dramatic, even programmatic music that previewed the talent he would show for the operatic stage.

The Suite in A comes from Rameau's third book of clavier pieces, published about 1728. Cuthbert Girdlestone describes it as containing some of the composer's "grandest" pieces, notably its opening three movements—the Allemande, Courante, and Sarabande—and the closing Gavotte with its six brilliantly virtuosic *doubles* or variations.

The slow-tempo Allemande is very grand indeed and offers a fine demonstration of the French Baroque performance practice known as "notes inégales" or "unequal notes." In this style, notes of equal duration on the page are actually lengthened or shortened by the player, often approximating dotted rhythms. Fuller describes this practice as providing a "rhythmic ornamentation" that is as important to the music's expressiveness as is its copious melodic ornamentation of trills and mordents. The manner of lengthening and shortening notes is left up to the individual performer's imagination and judgment.

Girdlestone describes the triple-meter Courante as "one of the summits of Rameau's art" and also comments that it is "emotional, obsessive, almost nerve-racking music." Here the emphasis is on sweeping scale passages, sometimes moving from hand to hand, and surging, expansive arpeggios in the left hand.

The splendid Sarabande boasts a grave, melancholy beauty. One of the important characteristics of this dance form is an emphasis on the second of the three beats: notice how Rameau continually exploits this with fountains of decorative arpeggios.

An infectious flight of virtuosity, "Les Trois Mains" plays with the conceit of what might be possible if the keyboard player possessed a third hand. Much crossing of hands is used to conjure this illusion in a vivacious piece with a marked Spanish flavor.

Rameau's sober Gavotte melody is treated to six variations. For the final three, Rameau doubles the speed to produce the sort of jaw-dropping virtuoso display Bach never quite allowed himself.

Though it is not formally a part of this suite, Rondeau has chosen to preface it with a complimentary prelude in the same A tonality. Found in his first book of clavier pieces of 1706, it opens in slow tempo with unmeasured music in Louis Couperin's style. After this look backward, the second section leaps into Rameau's own style with a rollicking dance in 12/8 meter.

FRANÇOIS COUPERIN
Three Pieces

The nephew of Louis Couperin, François Couperin was the greatest composer of the Couperin dynasty. So firmly established were the Couperins at the court-related Parisian church of St. Gervais that François automatically inherited the post of chief organist from his father, Charles, even though he was only

10 at Charles' death; the position was covered by a "regent" until he reached his majority at 18. François' rise thereafter was breathtakingly swift. Louis XIV appointed him court organist in 1693 and was so pleased with his playing and compositions that he raised Couperin to the nobility a few years later. Eventually, Couperin became the king's chief musician and the major French composer of his era. While most of his contemporaries devoted themselves to the twin French passions of ballet and opera, he chose the more abstract world of instrumental music as his *métier*. And his chosen instrument, the harpsichord, received quantities of his greatest music.

A renowned teacher as well as performer, Couperin published in 1716 what became an influential treatise on how to play the harpsichord, *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*. Among its contents were eight preludes; Rondeau has chosen the first of these in the key of C major. Lasting only a minute, it is refined and elegant, with a delicately flowing right-hand part set over a rock-like foundation in the left hand.

Amidst his busy schedule at the Royal Court, Couperin in 1713 took out a printing license and for the next 20 years published his own music. That same year, he brought out his wondrous *Premier livre de pieces de clavecin*, from which Rondeau has selected two works that combine Couperin's skill as a musical portraitist with his mastery of the standard Baroque dances. Working within Louis XIV's culturally dazzling court, the composer was inspired by poets and painters and considered his music to be allied with their expressions. As Couperin wrote: "In composing these pieces I have always had an object in view ... thus the titles reflect ideas which I have had ... it would be as well to point out that the pieces that bear them are in a sense portraits."

In the style of a four-beat allemande *La Ténébreuse* ("The Mysterious One") begins solemnly in the harpsichord's depths, but in its second section slightly accelerates and rises into the bell-like upper register. Ranked by Couperin scholar Wilfred Mellers as the First Book's greatest piece, *La Favorite* is set as a chaconne on two themes. As we'll hear again with Royer's *La Marche des Scythes*, this follows the French *rondeau* form with a repeating, descending refrain surrounding five beautifully modulating episodes. Mellers: "This piece demonstrates superbly how Couperin's technique depends on a dialogue between soprano melody and bass, for the bass line is throughout of a wonderfully cantabile character, always balancing the somber articulation of the main melody."

PANCRACE ROYER
La Marche des Scythes

Born three generations after Louis Couperin, the Italian-born Pancrace Royer was a man of the theater, whose music is much more extroverted than that of the Couperins. Moving from Turin to Paris in 1725, he became a French citizen and the *Maître de musique des enfans de France* (Music Teacher of the Royal Children). He directed the renowned Concert Spirituel series, which Mozart was to visit two decades later. And in his last years, Royer was composer and leader of the orchestra of the Paris Opera.

Comments Jean Rondeau: "To the world, he was a good-natured man, a public servant of the highest class, but his music is wild and fanciful, mining treasure in the farthest reaches of the imagination. Daring, surprises, contrasts, humor—he was dizzyingly inventive."

Rondeau has chosen a Royer piece of almost barbaric splendor and jaw-dropping virtuosity: *La Marche des Scythes* (the Turkish Scythians), which he calls "a creative extravaganza that veers between drama and comedy." This march follows the Baroque rondeau form, in which a refrain keeps returning around freer episodes of cascading scales, swirling arpeggios, and dramatic rising sequences. Pounding and fierce, the march tune, repeated twice on each appearance, portrays the colorful Scythian warriors relentlessly advancing, merrily crushing all resistance.

— © Janet E. Bedell

Harpsichordist **Jean Rondeau** is a global ambassador for his instrument. Combining a profound respect for the past with boundary-pushing programming, Rondeau is at the forefront of the movement to bring the harpsichord into the 21st century: as remarked by *Gramophone* magazine (2023), Rondeau teaches us "what a flexible and expressive medium the harpsichord can be—perhaps more than any of us had realized before."

During the 2026–2027 season, Rondeau is Artist in Residence at London's Southbank Centre, where he will perform projects ranging from early to contemporary music, including two of his more daring programs: *Sisyphus*, an improvised solo harpsichord recital and *UNDR*, a piano and drums format co-created with drummer Tancrède D. Kummer. The two projects are also featured at the Interfinity festival in Basel, and he returns to the Philharmonie de Paris and Centro Nacional de Difusión Musical in Madrid with the *Sisyphus* project.

Other highlights of the season include his current North American recital tour of 17th-century French repertoire, with performances at Carnegie Hall, Vancouver Recital Society, Salle Bourgie Montreal, and Club Musical de Québec, among others. Rondeau will also appear as soloist in Poulenc's *Concerto champêtre* alongside the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Prague Symphony Orchestra, and Bruckner Orchester Linz. Other key collaborators include the Ricercar Ensemble, cellist Nicolas Altstaedt, lutenist Thomas Dunford and the Baroque quartet NEVERMIND, which he co-founded.

Signed to the Warner Classics/Erato label, Rondeau has recorded a number of critically acclaimed albums. November 2025 brought the release of *Louis Couperin: The Complete Works*: described as a "life-enhancing release" by *The Arts Desk*, Rondeau's CD and DVD release earned him an Opus Klassik Award and was just named *Gramophone*'s Recording of the Year for 2026. Previous albums include *Gradus Ad Parnassum* (2023), hailed "a triumph" by *Gramophone* and described as "quietly audacious" by the *New York Times*, and his recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (2022), which was described by *Gramophone* as "mesmerizing" and earned a 5-star review from *BBC Music Magazine*. Further releases include *Imagine* (2015), *Vertigo* (2016), *Dynastie: Bach Concertos* (2017), *Scarlatti Sonatas* (2018), *Barricades* (2020, recorded with Thomas Dunford), and *Melancholy Grace* (2021).

Rondeau studied harpsichord with Blandine Verlet at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris, followed by training in continuo, organ, piano, jazz, improvisation, and conducting. He completed his musical education at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. In 2012, Rondeau became one of the youngest performers ever to take First Prize at the International Harpsichord Competition in Bruges (MAfestival 2012), aged 21.