



THE PERFORMANCE OF ÉLISABETH-CLAUDE JACQUET DE LA GUERRE (1665-1729): PROBLEMS FOR THE INTERPRETER AND ANALYST ALIKE

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This article is based on traditional musicology as well as artistic research. On the one hand, I will try to cast a new light on the role of the composer and performer Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre (1665-1729). The research on her has until now mainly been focused on her life and works, not so much about her role as a performer. However, she had a vital role as a harpsichordist and organist in Paris and the court of King Louis XIV. The French gazette and literary magazine «*Mercure galant*» mentions several times her performing abilities and stated that she played and sang the most difficult pieces from sight and that she accompanied and composed on the spur of the moment. I will base my paper on this and other contemporary accounts. I will also include a discussion of the «*Prélude non mesuré*» – the non-measured prelude, which she uses in her first book of harpsichord suites. These preludes captivated listeners with their richness of dissonances and Italian-influenced timbres and were a strong indicator of her ability as a great improviser and performer on the harpsichord. For performers today, however, these preludes might sometimes be an enigma. The rhythmic flexibility of the pieces with their whole note notation maintains the sense of improvisation; however, this also refers to the main problem, since the notation is not always clear. To the modern performer, who is familiar to conventional notation, there seems to be very little rhythmic guidance in the score. However, by applying grouping of notes, stress, and duration – while at the same time noticing appropriate stylistic conventions – performers can form the prelude into a comprehensible whole: the difficulty lies in understanding the score.

Keywords: Élisabeth Claude Jacquet de La Guerre, gender, music history, *Prélude non mesuré*.

Introduction

In this article, I would like to give an overview of the background of Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre (1665-1729), both as a composer and a performer, before going into the problem of the unmeasured prelude and investigate the performative aspects of her unmeasured preludes for harpsichord.¹

Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre was born in 1665. Her exact birth year is not known, however; we know that she was baptized on March 17, 1665, so 1665 is the most probable year. She came from a long line of musicians and instrument builders and got her first lessons from her father, who was a

¹ I am indebted to Carol H. Bates and her PhD dissertation entitled *The Instrumental Music of Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre* (Indiana University, 1978) for the biographical information about Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre.

renowned organist and harpsichord builder. At the age of five, she played for King Louis XIV, who was quite impressed by the young harpsichordist. Madame de Montespan, his mistress, then took over the responsibilities of the girl and Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre grew up in the castle of the sun king (Jezic 1994: 37-40).

The young Élisabeth-Claude soon got a reputation as a wunderkind. In 1677, a reporter for the French newspaper and literary magazine «*Mercure galant*», wrote about her, who was now probably twelve or thirteen years old:

For four years a wonder has appeared here. She sings at sight the most difficult music. She accompanies herself and accompanies others who wish to sing, at the harpsichord, which she plays in a manner which cannot be imitated. She composes pieces and plays them in all the keys asked of her (*Mercure galant* July 1677: 109. Transl. in Boroff 1966: 6).

In 1678, an anonymous reviewer in *Mercure galant* (December 1678) called little Mademoiselle Jaquier/Jacquet a «*merveille de nostre Siecle*» («a wonder of our century»).

In 1687 she published her first printed edition of compositions. These were «*Les Pièces de Claveßin. Premier livre*» with four harpsichord suites, each with a «*Prélude*» (three «*Préludes non mesurés*» and a «*Tocade*») and several regular suite movements. Particularly the *Préludes*, enchanted listeners with their many dissonances and Italian-influenced timbres. Several sources mention that in the area of composition, Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre is one of the early representatives of a tradition that integrates Italian stylistic features into French music. This is particularly apparent in her «*Préludes non mesurés*» of the first volume with harpsichord works. I will come back to these a little later. This first printed edition was dedicated to King Louis XIV.

On September 23, 1684, she married the organist Marin de la Guerre (1658-1704) and thereby left her life at the court of Louis XIV behind. After her marriage, Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre continued to be an active and acknowledged artist. She regularly organized and performed concerts in her home and worked as a harpsichord teacher.

In 1694 her five-act opera – a so-called *Tragédie en musique* – «*Cephale et Procris*», was performed and published at the *Académie Royale de musique* in Paris. The work started with a prologue celebrating the glory of Louis XIV. Despite the very positive feedback, however, the opera was only performed a few times. The reason for this might be that the king himself had more or less lost interest in the genre, and also opera itself was under attack by the church. It is noticeable, though, that «*Cephale et Procris*» can be viewed as probably the first opera ever composed by a woman.

After her husband's death in 1704, she continued her musical activities. In 1707, she published the six *Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord* as well as the «*Pièces de Clavecin qui peuvent se joüer sur le Viollon*» («*Pieces for harpsichord that can be performed with a violin*»). With the publication of the first volume of vocal works, her French cantatas of 1708, she founded a new genre of composition that would later be continued by other French composers such as Louis Nicolas Clérambault, Jean-Baptiste Morin, Sébastien de Brossard, and André Campra. All of the above-mentioned works were dedicated to King Louis XIV as well.

Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre stopped her public performances around 1715. After that, she worked primarily as a harpsichord teacher as well as selling her printed compositions. In 1721 she was commissioned to compose a «*Te Deum*», to celebrate that King Louis XV had recovered from a smallpox illness, and she then made a final public appearance.

Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre died at the age of 64 on 27 June 1729. After Jacquet de la Guerre's death, King Louis XV commissioned the mintage of a medal in her honor with the inscription «*Aux grands musicien j'ay disputé le prix*» («*I have competed for the prize against the great musicians*») and her portrait.

La Guerre's Legacy

During her lifetime, Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre was considered a well-known and loved artist. This is partly because of the continued patronage of King Louis XIV, and she was thus able to continue her career as a child prodigy into adulthood without interruption. She was, without doubt, a very gifted performer. Her family had consisted of musicians and instrument builders, and later, when she was brought up at the court; her talent had very good opportunities for development and flourishing. At this time, it is noticeable that women in Paris had very good possibilities if they worked towards a musical career. In addition to singers, women harpsichordists and organists were particularly favored, could thus be able to earn a living from performing and teaching activities in Paris. This might explain how Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre, being a wife and later a widow, could continue her musical activities publicly.

One of the most extensive early accounts of Jacquet de La Guerre's life is that of Evrard Tilton du Tillet (1677-1762), who assembled a Mount Parnassus of leading French composers and Jacquet de La Guerre was the only woman to merit inclusion there. Tilton du Tillet commended her highly. He placed her at the side of five other musicians: Jean-Baptiste Lully, Michel-Richard Delalande, André Campra, Marin Marais and Philippe Néricault Destouches (Tillet 1732).

With the words from the reviewer in *Mercure Galant* as the wonder of our century, it is evident that this refers to both her role as a composer as well as a performer. *Mercure galant*, July 1677, mentions that she performed at the court and played at house concerts of the nobility. It was reported that she played and sang the most difficult pieces from sight and that she accompanied and composed on the spur of the moment (*Mercure galant*, July 1677). Tilton du Tillet also said about her that one «can say that never before did a person of her gender possess such a great talent for musical composition and for the admirable way in which she played the harpsichord and the organ» (Tillet 1732: 636. Cited in Schweitzer 2008: 1).

She was also well known outside of France. In the German «*Musikalisches Lexikon*» published in 1732, Johann Gottfried Walther wrote in detail about her works and background (Walther 1732, reprint 2001: 267). In this encyclopedia, there is also an article of the French composer François Couperin (Ibid: 174-175). If we compare the length of these two articles, it is evident that La Guerre's article is much longer and more substantial than her male colleague François Couperin. Today, however, the more famous composer is by every means F. Couperin. Sir John Hawkins also writes in his «*A general history of the science and practice of music*» about La Guerre. It is interesting to note that he mentions first her ability as a performer, then as a composer:

Elizabeth Claude Jacquette de la Guerre, a female musician, the daughter of Marin de la Guerre, organist of the chapel of St. Gervais in Paris, was born in that city in 1669, and instructed in the practice of the harpsichord and the art of composition by her father. She was a very fine performer and would sing and accompany herself with so rich and exquisite a flow of harmony as captivated all that heard her. She was also an excellent composer, and, in short, possessed such a degree of skill, as well in the science as the practice of music, that but few of her sex have equaled her. An opera of her composition, entitled *Cephale et Procris*, was represented in the Royal Academy of Paris in the year 1694, and is extant in print. She died in the year 1729 and lies buried in the church of St. Eustache in Paris (Hawkins 1853: Vol. 2, Chap. CLXII: 779).

Tillet also reported on La Guerre of whom it was said that

All great musicians and connoisseurs of music were very keen indeed to hear her at the harpsichord. In particular, she had a wonderful talent enabling her to perform preludes and fantasies on the spur of the moment, and sometimes she followed, for an entire half-hour, the flow of her ideas in a prelude and a fantasy with extraordinarily varied melodies and chords, as well as excellent goût, that enchanted all listeners (Tillet 1732: 636. Cited in Schweitzer 2008: 2).

La Guerre was one of the most renowned, successful and prolific Baroque composers. The quality of her works showed that she mastered both instrumental and vocal forms. In addition, she was a well-known performer particularly known for her great ability to improvise on the keyboard. According to recent research, such improvisations of preludes resulted in the unmeasured prelude, which I will go more into in the following paragraphs.

The Unmeasured Prelude

La Guerre's keyboard music can be categorized to be in the style of «style brisé»: a style that tried to transfer the broken, arpeggiated style of the lute, to keyboard instruments. In this style, thick chords were avoided, and instead, «foreign» notes were included, in order to color the harmonic progressions. La Guerre uses this style in her unmeasured preludes, which are used as the first movement in all her suites, and these are very varied regarding notation, as well as character. These preludes do not use regular musical notation since they lack bar lines, they lack regular meter, and the note values are not «absolute», which means that the performer is free to give personal expression to the preludes, which also could vary a lot from one performance to the next.

In France, the popularity of the unmeasured prelude lasted about a century, from 1630 to around 1730. There are now approximately 100 surviving French unmeasured preludes for the harpsichord (Gustafson 2009). Meghan Goodchild et al list up several characteristics of the unmeasured prelude. First of all, it is a semi-improvisatory genre, which is open to interpretative freedom and personal expression. The preludes do not have a meter indicated (although a duple meter is mostly natural), and tempo fluctuations match the performer's interpretation of the musical structure. Performance can in many ways clarify analysis and musical structure. The preludes allow for considerably more interpretative freedom regarding tempo and tempo choices than measured music (Goodchild et al 2016).

Before going further into the interpretation of these pieces, we can take a brief look at some historical sources, where the preludes are mentioned. Several contemporary authors tried to define what an unmeasured prelude was and what its function was. Pierre Richelet in his «Dictionnaire françois» gave a musical definition: an instrumental work which should engage its listeners (Richelet 1680). Four years later, the composer Nicolas-Antoine Lebègue stated that a prelude is only a preparation for pieces in one tonality, so the performer can try out the instrument (Lebègue 1684). Antoine Furetière in his «Dictionnaire universel» from 1690 thought that the function of the prelude was to make sure that the instrument was tuned properly and for the performer to warm up (Furetière 1690). However, he also added that some preludes, improvised by masters, were more elaborate and had a greater significance. François Couperin's comments are the most specific about the functions of a prelude: to present the tonality, to warm up and loosen up the fingers, and to test unfamiliar instruments. Couperin praises the genre as being one of the places where the performer could use his or her imagination and freedom in performance (Couperin 1716). The theorists and composers have different viewpoints, however; the preludes have one common feature: they were an introduction or preface to the following pieces in the same key, which were often in the form of dance movements, or suites.

The notation for preludes varies: some use only white-note notation – like whole notes – while other mix conventional notes with whole notes. The pieces using mixed note values seem more precise: one can there distinguish between ornamental notes (short note values) and more significant notes, notes that are central to the harmonic movement. More problematic, though, are the pieces using only white-note notation. How can a modern performer interpret these strange looking pieces? To answer this and other questions about unmeasured preludes, we can turn to a provocative perspective from the musicologist and harpsichordist Davitt Moroney in an article in «Early Music». According to him, French unmeasured preludes suffer from three basic problems: «[T]hey are French; they are unmeasured; they are preludes» (Moroney 1976: 143-151). And here Moroney points directly to the problems. First of all, the French have historically had a notorious reputation for notating scores that do not reflect rhythmic performance conventions. François Couperin addresses this subject directly:

It seems to me that there are defects in the way we write music that correspond with the manner in which we write our language. It is that we write differently than we play: this explains why foreigners play our music less well than we play theirs. On the contrary, the Italians write their music in the actual note values that they intend. For example, we dot several consecutive stepwise eighth notes; and yet we write them equally; our convention has enslaved us; and we carry on with it (Couperin 1974: 49).

The closing sentences describe the tradition of «notes inégales», probably the most well-known rhythmic performance practice of French Baroque music. The notational experiments done by harpsichord composers such as La Guerre would seem to characterize the genre of the unmeasured prelude as unquestionably French.

Moroney's second problem is the designation unmeasured. The notation omits not only conventional signs that group notes into large (and regular) metric patterns, but also specific durations for the notes. Moroney claims that the most important thing for a performer to consider is the difference between an unmeasured notation and an unmeasured performance (Moroney 1976). Chords that are written as whole notes are free to be played however quickly or slowly as the player wishes. The durational values of the pitches also have a secondary function: to show the hierarchical importance of a note, which has some application for harmonic analysis. In D'Anglebert's preludes, for instance, Moroney observes that chordal pitches are written as white (whole) notes and melodic configurations as black notes that can be beamed. This applies to de La Guerre and more generally extends to mixed notation also, where some successions of arpeggiated chords appear as half or quarter notes, and ornamental pitches as values that can be flagged or beamed together.

Notation can vary in these preludes, and according to Richard Troeger, one can find three ways in notating the unmeasured prelude:

- 1) The earliest, like in the preludes of Louis Couperin, where the notation only shows pitches in one value (like whole notes). Curving lines indicate which notes that are sustained together, and sometimes show groupings. The way of notating music was inherited from French lutenists.
- 2) The second notational appeared first in the 4 preludes (where one of them is called *Tocade*) by Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre from 1687. It is also shown in the preludes of Jean-Henry D'Anglebert, that came two years later. Here we find two types of note values. Passing tones are in black notes, usually eighth notes, and whole notes are used for sustained harmonic notes.
- 3) The third way is to use all types of rhythmic values, from the breve to the 64th note. This notation appeared with Nicolas Lebègue's printed harpsichord pieces in 1677, and in later pieces by composers such as Rameau, Marchand, Clérembault (Troeger 1992).

Troeger claims further, that flexibility is naturally the ruling factor. «However, the extremes of flexibility that the unmeasured notation suggests to the modern eye were apparently tempered, in the Baroque era, by influences that are less immediately evident today» (Ibid., 90). And he points here right to the issue: these «whole notes» provides no apparent rhythmic guidance to a performer who is used to conventional music notation. However, was it also so in the Baroque era? Troeger argues that the term unmeasured is used more often in the 20th century than it was used in the Baroque era. Then preludes, whether measured or unmeasured, were simply called preludes. It can also be seen that many unmeasured sections are very «measured», there is no clear-cut distinction between the two. Troeger further claims that there was a gradual continuum from unmeasured notation to totally measured; however, the performance of these pieces might be the same. The use of the word «unmeasured» might therefore be a bit anachronistic, because it may suggest a difference in performance style (measured versus unmeasured), whereas «the gradation of notational styles shows that there is no such clear line of demarcation» (Ibid., 91).

For a modern performer, though, it is difficult to figure out what an «unmeasured» playing style entails. If we look at the sources, we find three sources that talk about this: the preface to Couperin's

«Pièces de clavessin» of 1677, which I quoted earlier, a letter from Nicolas Lebègue (1684), and the comment in Francois Couperin's «L'art de toucher le clavecin» (1716/17). The preface to Lebègue says:

I have tried to present the preludes with all possible simplicity, as much for [notational] consistency as for harpsichord technique, whose style is to separate [i.e., arpeggiate] and immediately restrike chords rather than to hold them as on the organ; if anything is found to be a little difficult and obscure I ask the intelligent [readers] to be willing to supply what is lacking, considering the great difficulty of rendering this method of prelude intelligible enough for everyone (Quoted in Troeger, and transl. by Troeger 1992, 92.)

This preface might give the modern performer some clues for performing preludes. Lebègue mentions consistency, as an important factor, which might imply that his notation with several different note values must have some literal meaning. The reason for using reiterated chords in the unmeasured style is to sustain the tone. Troeger also suggests as an implication, that the multi-value style was developed so amateurs would play and buy his music. This indicates that the single-value style was for professional musicians (Ibid.). And at the end, Lebègue also concludes interestingly enough, that the performance of unmeasured preludes was played in a way that was difficult to communicate.

For a modern performer, it does not mean that the preludes lack meter and rhythmic regularity. While the word «rhythm» may typically call to mind notions of meter and note durations, these two parameters are by no means the only components of rhythm in music. An enlarged concept of rhythm includes how musical (both melodic and harmonic) events are ordered, how they are grouped, and how they are stressed. Moreover, the notation for unmeasured preludes does include information about these other components. Thus order, at least for each staff singly, is normal by reading left to right, even though a harpsichord performer would not play the notes vertically. The straight or curving lines also imply ordering and rhythm, but more importantly, duration and the grouping of notes as well. Moroney claims that we can group the slurs into three categories:

- 1) Sustained notes, that form a chord. Sustained sound and chordal cohesion together give such notes the weight of a strong beat. Any notes falling between the notes becomes a kind of passing note.
- 2) Slurs indicated that a series of notes belong together, either having ornamental or melodic significance.
- 3) Slurs can also isolate notes from what precedes and what follows. Usually, a slur would start in the bass and up through the right hand (Moroney 1976).

The location of stresses or accents at different metrical levels is equally elusive in this kind of notation. At the note level, some curves are like conventional two-note slurs, implying a stronger accent on the first note. Suspensions also locate accent; as well, so do some ornaments typically indicated by a symbol. As for meter, many suggest that the preludes' underlying metric structure is likely duple, in a comparison with similar free pieces.

And yet, despite all these problems so rightly described by Moroney, unmeasured preludes do not invite to complete rhythmic freedom in performance. A countless number of realizations may exist, but not all of them will be tasteful and appropriate. Analysis of various musical aspects of a prelude can result in a performance more satisfactory than another. So as a performer one has a wide range of possibilities regarding timing and tempo. To make such a piece to music, one must make many decisions, like deciding where the musical tension and relaxation is as well as finding hierarchically organized units. Goodchild et al also discusses what influences tension? That might be melodies, melodic contour, dissonances, dynamics, chromaticism, and harmonic patterns, e.g. a new chord (Goodchild et al 2016).

Some of the aspects of the unmeasured prelude, though, are clear to the performer; as e.g. pitches, relative durations of notes and certainly some stylistic aspects for performance. Tilney explains (Tilney 1991) that a single note attached to a long curved line should be held at minimum until the termination of the line. He says that the lines «serve to impart order to the music, preventing events from happening too

fast» (Tilney 1991: 6). Moroney adds to this that «good prelude playing requires the invigoration of imaginative freedom, but the player must be liberally inclined to impose on the music that measurement and shape which his imagination dictates» (Moroney 1976: 143). We can conclude that a performer of such preludes might look at the notation as a sketch, as a point of departure for an interpretation and a musical expression.

In addition to figuring out the rhythm of the notes, performers are also expected to add to the music other ornaments, as well as look at harmonic progressions, rhythmic patterns, tempo indications (e.g. an *accelerando* on a scale moving up or down), articulation, slurring, points of arrival, lingering on the dissonances, and cadential patterns (Goodchild et al 2016).

To the modern performer, who uses normally conventional notation, there seems to be very little rhythmic or other guidance in the score. But by applying order, grouping, stress, and duration of notes – and at the same time observing appropriate stylistic conventions and harmonic structure – performers can form the prelude into an understandable, reasonable whole: the difficulty lies in understanding the score. Melody Hung also mentions that this whole-note notation does not mean that the performer shall only play whole notes, or that one is completely free in how to perform this. Important first is to identify the harmonic line (Hung 2011).

Final Remarks

There are several works in the same category as the prelude, being a freely styled type of composition: *toccata*, the slow *allemande* (*allemande grave*), most *tombeaux* and Froberger's *toccata-like allemandes*. They are unquestionably different from other types of compositions, like the contrapuntal genres, dance pieces, and the English grounds or variations. The *toccata* and prelude have some similar features as well as they are often used similarly: they often serve as preparatory movements for the performer. Both pieces are improvisatory in origin, they both serve to establish a key for the following pieces/*suite*, and they are likely to be focused on the tonic and the main chords of a scale. The preludes often have Italianate figures and stylistic traits, and thus, as in the case of *La Guerre*, they can be called *Toccata* (*La Guerre* calls her *Tocade*). The slow *allemande* and the prelude are similar that they both emphasize the tonic, as well as similar figurations. Even though there are *toccatas* that have measured notation, they still would be performed unmeasured.

For a modern student, who might not be familiar of the relationship between the French unmeasured style to the Italian *toccata*, and other styles, who are free in style but measured in notation, approaching the preludes without this knowledge, might find the preludes quite obscure. «The unmeasured notations were undoubtedly meant to ensure a freedom not suggested but conventional notation, but a freedom controlled by certain well-understood musical idioms and playing styles» (Troeger 1992:119). A dissertation about the unmeasured preludes of Louis Couperin by, Philip Chih-Cheng Chang (Chang 2011), also points directly to the problem of the notation of these fascinating pieces:

In focusing on the problems posed by the notation of unmeasured preludes, it is important to remember that the «score» of a particular piece can preserve various kinds of knowledge about that piece. Scores can represent how a piece sounds but show nothing about how the piece is constructed or how to perform it; they can instruct the performer about what to do, but reveal nothing about sounds and silences; they can signify what to play, but specify nothing about how the work should be performed. Modern musical notation accomplishes all these things to some degree, but some detail will always be lacking and the communication to the performer will not always be absolutely clear» (Chang 2011: 100).

Therefore, the only possible conclusion is, that even after all this information, both contemporary and historical sources, a prelude *non mesuré* might still be considered an enigma for the performer and analyst alike.

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