

Music Blurb for 4-14-19 – Palm Sunday [Couperin]

News and Notes

This week in music our 10:30 service will begin in the parish hall with music by our bell choir. The choir will sing music by Spanish Renaissance composer Victoria. During communion cellist David Chentian joins singers Cheryl Stafford and Lori Minasian in singing the *Third Lesson for Tenebrae* by François Couperin. We will be of course singing “All glory, laud, and honor” while waving palms, and then we’ll go into the events of Holy Week with the dramatic reading of St. Luke's Passion narrative.

Sunday Bulletins

Today’s music at communion was composed by François Couperin (1668-1733). Couperin came from the most highly regarded family of musicians in all of France, if not all of Europe. His father was the organist at St. Gervais in Paris and died when François was only 11 years old. The replacement at St. Gervais was hired on the stipulation that when François was 18, he would take over. In addition to his duties at the church in Paris, he became the principal harpsichordist at the court of Louis XIV at Versailles. In baroque ensembles, the harpsichordist is often the conductor of the group, so being at Versailles, this was quite a high level position.

In 1713 he was granted royal privilege to publish and he went right to work setting out to publish volumes of the harpsichord music he is most well-known for. In 1714, he also published the work we are hearing today. Tenebrae services were held at that time on the Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday (which is no longer the case). The service consists of readings and the extinguishing of candles until the church is left in darkness. The three lessons from this set are from the Lamentations of Jeremiah and were traditionally sung or chanted. The three lessons are interspersed with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Couperin was commissioned to compose this music by “the religious Ladies of L.” It’s most likely he was referring to the Abbey of Longchamp, a convent under royal protection outside of Paris. The Tenebrae services at the Abbey were a popular Holy Week observance by Parisians. The music is structured in sections. The Hebrew letters are set to some of the most beautiful music from this period. The proclamation of Biblical text is set to what is called *recitatif*, which is as someone put it, “a style of musical declamation that hovers between song and ordinary speech.” Each lesson ends with the plea: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord.” Towards the end of our service today, as we sing that portion of the music, the acolytes will extinguish the candles, giving us a “taste” of Tenebrae.