

*"I AM HE WHO, BORN IN ANOTHER TIME, was known during the century; here I am, dead, naked and nobody, in the tomb, dust, cinders and food for the worms. I lived enough but too little in relation to eternity (...). I was a musician, considered good among the good and ignorant among the ignorant. And as the number of those who despised me was much larger than the number of those who praised me, music was of little honour to me but a great burden, and, as when I was born, I brought nothing into this world, in dying, I took nothing with me..."*

Thus does Charpentier introduce himself in his astonishing piece in Latin entitled *Epitaphium Carpentarii*, in which he himself appears on the stage: he imagines that he returns to earth after his death, in the guise of a shade, and looks over his life with a curious mixture of humility and bitterness.

One might say that three centuries later, Charpentier has taken a kind of revenge. Today, he is the most recorded French composer of the baroque period on disc. Since the 1950s, of his monumental output, which includes more than 550 works, more than half has been recorded. This circulation, quite exceptional, has allowed a reconsideration of Charpentier's place within the western musical landscape. However, the man still retains his mystery and, in spite of some important studies (notably those by Patricia M. Ranum), it is difficult to know exactly who he was, how he lived, what was the nature of his relationships with his contemporaries, musicians and others. Only his epitaph allows one to perceive the feelings which could have been his at a particular time of his life, probably shortly after his arrival at the Sainte-Chapelle in 1698, that is, after having completed the greater part of his career and suffered many torments.

## Paris, 1643

Marc-Antoine Charpentier was born in 1643, in the "diocese of Paris", which does not necessarily mean Paris itself, but what corresponds to the present\* region of the Île-de-France, though we do not know the exact location. The Charpentier family had in fact originally come from Meaux for several generations. His great-grandfather Denis was "master megissier", his grandfather Louis "royal hussar sergeant, and his uncle Pierre "great chaplain priest of the cathedral". It was at Paris, on the other hand, that his father, also named Louis, followed the career "master scribe", a profession which consisted of writing official documents for Parliament or the Châtelet, or for highly-placed officials. Nothing, therefore, would seem to have indicated that Marc-Antoine was destined for music. He spent (a part of or all of) his childhood and adolescence in Paris, in the quartier Saint-Séverin. He had two brothers, of whom one, Armand-Jean, would take up the same profession as his father, and three sisters, Étienne, Élisabeth and Marie. This last became a nun at Port-Royal in Paris, a community for which Charpentier would write some of his most inspired pieces. As for Élisabeth, she married, in 1662, Jean Édouard, a "dancing master and player of instruments", with whom the composer was able to maintain privileged professional relations. But when and with whom did Marc-Antoine learn the rudiments of music? We still do not know.

Aged about twenty, Charpentier left for Rome, where he stayed for three years. He rubbed shoulders notably with Giacomo Carissimi, then considered the greatest Roman composer of the time. Composer of cantatas and motets, Carissimi was above all famous for his "sacred histories" (or oratorios) which were played at the oratory of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Cross, at the church of St Marcel. Charpentier learned from this, composing many sacred histories in Latin, and would be, indeed, the only Frenchman to cultivate the genre so assiduously. His first pieces of this kind show the effects of the elder man, in the themes he chose (Abraham, the Last Judgement, the Judgement of Solomon) as much as in the compositional style itself. But there are other Roman influences in Charpentier's work, such as those of Bonifazio Graziani or Francesco

Foggia. Charpentier was also clearly impressed by the great polyphonic compositions which could then be heard in Roman churches. As he did with Carissimi's famous Jephtha, he copied assiduously the *Missa Mirabiles elationes Maris sexdecimus vocibus* by Francesco Beretta, followed by a series of remarks on Italian 16-part Masses, in which he undertakes a critical analysis; and he himself composed, some years later, a *Mass for four choirs*, the only French example of the genre.

In Rome, Charpentier also met one of his compatriots, Charles Coypeau d'Assoucy, who drew an unflattering portrait of the composer, but which was apparently inspired by the pique of being, some years later, scorned by Molière. An "original" who "has his brain ventricles rather damaged", "barking mad", who "needed in Rome (his) bread and (his) pity" -these are the terms in which he described his rival. One would need other testimony to counterbalance these obvious calumnies. Unfortunately, Charpentier's lifelong discretion has resulted in hardly anything being brought to light.

After his years in Italy, Charpentier returned to Paris in the late 1660s. Under the protection of Marie de Lorraine, Princess of Joinville, Duchess of Joyeuse and Duchess of Guise, he moved into his private mansion in the rue du Chaume, now the rue des Archives. He stayed there for twenty years. The last descendant of a family which had made some impact at certain points in history, Mademoiselle de Guise was the granddaughter of Henri de Guise, nicknamed le *Balafré* "Scar face", the organizer of the League and assassinated on the orders of Henry III. With such a past, it is understandable that, even generations later Marie de Lorraine had scarcely any relations with the Court. Did Charpentier suffer from these ancestral rivalries, being kept away from important positions as coveted as the Musician to Louis XIV? Like the king, Mademoiselle de Guise loved music and had set her heart on having in her circle a group of singers and players of such quality that, according to the *Mercure galant* "the noblest lady does not come near it". Apart from Charpentier, who sang (as an haute-contre) and composed also there were the flautist and theorist Étienne Loulié, the singer (an( future engraver) Henri de Baussen, as well as Anne Jacquet (nickname( Mademoiselle Manon), the elder sister of Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre Throughout these years, the composer was also in the service, of Élisabeth d'Orléans (known as Madame de Guise), the last daughter of Gaston d'Orléans, who in 1667 had married the nephew of Marie de Lorraine, Louis-Joseph de Guise. For his two patronesses and their entourage, Charpentier also wrote many sacred works (*Litanies de la Vierge* for six voices and two treble viols, *Bonum est confiteri Domino*, *Caecilia Virgo et Martyr*, etc) as well as secular (including *Actéon*, *Les Arts florissants*, *La Couronne de fleurs*, *La Descente d'Orphée aux enfers*). These *divertissements*, by their variety of character and inspiration, represent a very personal part of the composer's secular output, in which he places on stage shepherds, allegories or mythological characters. Works such as *Actéon* or *La Descente d'Orphée aux enfers* are really very close to the world of opera, not only because of their themes, but also on account of their dramatic and psychological dimension, as one may hear in the lament of Acteon and the chorus of lamentation which follows, or in the death of Eurydice and the recitative of Orpheus at the entrance to the underworld. On the borderline of the sacred and the secular, the *Pastorales on the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ* join religious emotion and the naïve and elegant atmosphere of the world of the shepherds.

## At the Court

In 1672, Molière asked that Charpentier replace Lully, with whom he had become angry, to take care of the musical part of his comédies-ballets. On 8 July, the theatre of the Royal Palace produced new versions of *La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas* and *Le Mariage forcé* with new music by Charpentier. On 30 August there followed a new production of *Les Fâcheux*, Charpentier's music for which is lost, like that for *Psyché*, a *tragédie-ballet* which would be produced in 1684. On 10 February 1673, Charpentier was able to give full rein to his talents in a new piece by Molière, *Le*

*Malade imaginaire*. Unfortunately, the dramatist died at the time of the fourth performance, thus putting at an end any further collaboration between the two artists. Moreover, the composer was the victim of letters of patent sent by Lully to Molière's troupe; he was thereby obliged to revise his score for *Le Malade imaginaire* in order to conform to the restrictions on the number of players and singers authorized by the superintendent of the King's music on stages other than that of the Royal Academy. Charpentier continued, however, to work for the King's troupe, named after 1682 the *Comédie française*: he wrote the music for plays "with machines" (*Circé*, *L'inconnu*) whose authors were Thomas Corneille and Jean Donneau de Visé. In 1682, for the revival of *Andromède* by Pierre Corneille, he wrote new incidental music, the music for the previous production having been written by d'Assoucy. In spite of increasing difficulties imposed by the all-powerful Lully, Charpentier continued his activity at the *Comédie française* with *Les Fous divertissants* (1681), *Le Rendez-vous des Tuileries* et *Médor, Vénus et Adonis* (1685) and a revival of *Le Malade imaginaire* at Versailles in January 1686. In the *comédies-ballets* written in collaboration with Molière, Charpentier's showed tremendous aptitude for the theatre music, in the composition of dances as much as in grotesque comic scenes such as "La la la bonjour!" from *Le Mariage forcé*. In the work's "with machines" such as *Circé* or *Andromède*, pieces of pure entertainment, the music placed after or within the spoke acts is only an "ornament", pride of place being given to the stage design and the extraordinary machinery which brought these pieces so much success.

Even though Charpentier never had an official post at Court he was nevertheless requested, on various occasions, to take part in royal ceremony. At the beginning of the 1680s, he was requested to write music for the religious offices of the Dauphin. On a visit to his son, Louis XIV had the time to appreciate Charpentier's compositions as on the day in April 1681, when arriving at Saint-Cloud, he "dismissed all his musicians, and wanted to hear those of the Dauphin until his return to Saint-Germain. They performed every day at Mass motets by M. Charpentier, and His Majesty wished to hear no others, whatever else was proposed to him." The works composed for the Dauphin are essentially *petit motets* on texts from the psalms for two female voices and a bass, sometimes accompanied by flutes, played and sung by the King's musicians, the Pièche brothers and sisters.

In April 1683, Charpentier hoping for just recognition, presented himself with thirty-five other musicians at the recruitment contest for assistant masters of music for the Royal Chapel. Unfortunately, illness prevented him from finishing the tests. Some months after the competition, the Queen of France, Marie-Thérèse, died. In order to commemorate her, Charpentier wrote three superb pieces: a kind of extended sacred history, *In obitum augustissimae nec non piissimae Gallorum reginae lamentum* followed by a *De profundis*, and the *petit motet Luctus de morte augustissimae Mariae Theresiae reginae Galliae*. Charpentier was also musically present with the royal family in order to celebrate the healing of the fistula of Louis XIV In February 1687, he received a commission from the Academy of Painting and Sculpture for the performance in the church of the Priests at the Oratory of the rue Saint-Honoré of a *Te Deum* and an *Exaudiat* "for two choirs of musicians" of his own composition in order to "give thanks to God for the restoration of the health of the King."

### Music for the Convents

During the 1680s convents such as Port-Royal, Paris, and the Abbaye-aux-Bois requested pieces from Charpentier. For the first, he wrote a Mass and some motets (*Pange lingua*, *Magnificat*, *Dixit Dominus* and *Laudate Dominum*), for the second Tenebrae Lessons with Responsories. In the 17th century, the Office of Tenebrae was one of the high points of the liturgy. It took place during Holy Week. The lessons, three per day, occurred during the first Nocturn of Matins. The texts are drawn from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, in which the prophet mourns the destruction of Jerusalem. As with many other genres, Charpentier was the only French composer of his time to have left such a large number of Tenebrae lessons. In his first lessons, for from one to three

voices, Charpentier developed a specifically French style inherited from the *air de cour*, highly ornamented, while remaining faithful to the Gregorian *tonus lamentationum*, and bringing to it the richness of his harmony. The later lessons abandon this style of writing for that of the *concertato petit motet*, with instruments.

On the death of Mlle de Guise in 1688, Charpentier entered the employment of the Jesuits at two of their Parisian establishments. He became master of music of the collège of Louis the Great, rue Saint-Jacques, then of the church of Saint-Louis, rue Saint-Antoine. In his *Catalogue of musical books*, Brossard explains the choice of the Jesuits, Charpentier having "always been known to the taste of all true connoisseurs as the most profound and learned of modern musicians. It is doubtless this which made the Reverend Jesuit Fathers of the rue Saint-Antoine take him as master of music for their church, then a splendid position". During the course of six years, Charpentier composed a significant number of pièces which reflect the great diversity of the Jesuit ceremonies: psalms, Magnificats, hymns and antiphons for Vespers, Masses, Tenebrae lessons, motets for the Virgin, for the saints, for the Holy Sacrament and so forth.

From the installation of the Jesuits in France in the mid 17th century, and the foundation of the first collèges, school theatrical presentations were quickly integrated into their educational programme. These were written in Latin, on a religious theme. Very quickly, interludes, danced or sung in French, were inserted within these tragedies. In fact, in the face of the success of Lullian opera, Jesuit theatre found it necessary to be present in this field too. Thus, the musical interludes increased in size, so that they became true tragedies in music. The finest example of this evolution was *David et Jonathas* by Fr Francis Bretonneau and Charpentier, given on 28th February 1688, together with the spoken Latin tragedy, on the same subject, entitled *Saül*. One year before, on 10 February to be exact, Charpentier had put on another work, *Celse martyr*, whose music is lost. Fortunately, *David et Jonathas* has come down to us thanks to a copy compiled by the King's librarian, Philidor the elder. As with *tragédie lyrique*, *David et Jonathas* comprises a prologue and five acts. The proportions of the work allowed contemporaries to consider it a genuine "opéra", which one may even regard as a challenge to the monopoly of the Royal Academy, even though it distanced itself from the official model played at Court in the originality of its conception and its language: there is an almost total absence of recitative, no great effects "with machines", a concentration of the dramatic interest on the characters (the importance of monologues) and on their psychology, emphasized particularly by the expressiveness and refinement of the music. *David et Jonathas* is a unique work of its kind, a masterpiece by the great Charpentier, and a valuable testimony to the dramatic musical art of the Jesuits of which so few traces remain.

In around 1692-23, Charpentier gave composition lessons to Philip of Chartres, soon to be Duke of Orléans, then Regent on the death of Louis XIV. In order to complete his education, the composer gave him a little manuscript treatise entitled *Rules of Composition*, in which are listed the characters of the modes: C major "hard and warlike", C minor "dark and sad", D major "joyful and very warlike", D minor "serious and devout", etc. On 4th December 1693, when he was fifty years old, Charpentier produced *Médée* at the Royal Academy of Music, his only *tragédie en musique*, to a libretto by Thomas Corneille. If *David et Jonathas* had moved away from the model of the *tragédie lyrique*, *Médée* is in the Lullian mould: a prologue to the glory of the King, a large role accorded to recitative, obligatory *divertissements* such as the Underworld scene of Act III... But Charpentier could not avoid reverting to his own personal style with a remarkable melodic vein, colourful orchestration and a recondite harmonic vocabulary which takes the drama to the heights of rare beauty (the great air of *Médée* in Act III, the death of Créuse), to which the audience was not accustomed. The work thus succumbed to the "cabals of the envious and the ignorant" after a few performances. Though Le Cerf de la Viéville characterized *Médée* as "second rate opera", Brossard defended the work, claiming that "it is in this, of all operas without exception, that one may learn most things essential to good composition."

On 28 June 1698, Charpentier was appointed master of music of the children's choir of Sainte-Chapelle, where he remained until his death on 24 February 1704. This last period is also the one of the great masterpieces, with the *Missa Assumpta est Maria*, the sacred history *Judicium Salomonis* and the *Motet pour l'offertoire de la Messe Rouge* to celebrate the annual return of Parliament.

### A monumental output

Very soon after his death, Charpentier fell into an almost complete oblivion. The reasons for this silence seem to derive more from him as a man whose modest existence took place on the fringes of the powerful Court, than as an artist. Indeed, Charpentier's output does not always follow the canons of French aesthetics of the time and did not have the audiences it deserved, as the composer laments in his epitaph. Very few scores (*Médée*, serions and drinking songs) were published during his lifetime. The greater part of his work is preserved in autograph manuscripts called *Mélanges*, which make up a collection unique in France for its time. These manuscripts provide us first of all with information about the way in which Charpentier saw his work. Throughout his career, he took meticulous care to recopy his works into large notebooks which he divided into two numbered series, one in Arabic numerals (front 1 to 75), and the other in Roman numerals (from I to LXXIV). Certain manuscripts escaped this classification, and others, on the other hand, are lost (about a quarter of his output). On Charpentier's death, this precious legacy came into the hands of his two nephews, Jacques Édouard and Jacques-François Mathas. The first was a bookseller, and published in 1709 a collection of small motets which he dedicated to the Duke of Orléans, but he did not continue this enterprise, apparently unsuccessful, any further. In 1727 he sold the collection of manuscripts to the Bibliothèque Royale for the modest sum of 300 livres.

Charpentier worked in all the genres of his time, sacred and profane. He was a precursor in the realm of the sonata and the cantata, with several pieces in Italian (*Serenata a tre voci e simphonia*) and in French (*Orphée descendant aux enfers*). He also wrote thirty-five serious and drinking songs ranging from the amorous (*Auprès du feu l'on fait l'amour*) to the comical (*Beaux petits yeux d'écarlate*), and including more dramatic works (*Tristes déserts*, *Stances du Cid*). But the most important aspect of Charpentier's work is in the religious field. Here also the diversity is huge: Masses, motets, sacred histories. Charpentier is the only French composer to have been so interested in the composition of Masses at a time when they had become outmoded with the exception of compositions in the *stile antico*, or plainchant. His output (eleven vocal Masses and one instrumental) remains, from, all points of view, exceptional. The variety brought to the ensemble, liturgical function and writing is complimented by the stylistic diversity: *stile concertato* (*Mass for eight voices, eight violins and flutes*, *Mass for four voices, four violins, two flutes and two oboes for M Mauroy*, *Assumpta est Maria*, *Missa sex vocibus cum simphonia*), polychoral works (*Mass for four voices*), Requiem Masses (*Messe pour les trépassés*, *Messe des morts for four voices*, *Messe des morts for four voices and orchestra*), monody and faux-bourdon (*Mass for Port-Royal*), parody technique (*Messe de Minuit*).

Charpentier's contribution to the motet is considerable. From convent to church, the composer contributed to numerous religious ceremonies of his time, from the most intimate to the most festive. There are 83 psalms, 48 motets for the elevation, 31 Tenebrae lessons, 42 antiphons, etc. The psalms are divided into three groups: those composed in the style of the grand motet, with choir and orchestra, those with choir and bass continuo only, and those of more modest dimensions for soloists. Charpentier set the *De profundis* seven times, *Dixit Dominus* and *Laudate Dominum* six times, *Beatus vir* five times, and so on. The motets for the elevation or the Blessed Sacrament were sung during the Mass or during the salutations. The vowel "O", with which the majority of the motets opens, is always treated by Charpentier in a highly expressive fashion (dissonance, chords separated by silences). Amongst the antiphons, those for the Virgin are the



most numerous. The text of the *Salve Regina* gave rise to five versions, of which one, for three choirs, is of a great beauty, containing audacious and unusual harmonies. Charpentier composed many other motets in honour of the Virgin: among the ten Magnificats, that "for three voices on the same bass as the symphonia" is the most surprising, with its descending tetrachord repeated eighty-nine times.

The sacred histories are the works in which Italian influence is most clearly felt. Thirty-five in number, these pieces in Latin are divided, according to H. WHitchcock, into three groups: *historia*, *canticum* and *dialogus*. The *historiae*, such as *Judith*, *Caecilia virgo et martyr* and *Mors Saulis et Jonathae* are the most developed, using choir, and in most cases, orchestra. The *cantica* (*Canticum in nativitate Domini*, *Pour la fête de l'Epiphanie*, etc) are of more modest proportions, and call upon an ensemble usually made up of three singers and two concertante instruments. The action in these works is limited. The *dialogi*, as the name indicates, are based on the principle of dialogue between two characters, or two groups of people (*In circumeisione Domini/Dialogus inter angelum et pastores*, *Dialogus inter Magdalenam et Jesum ...*). Charpentier's sacred histories make up a body of dramatic and religious works without precedent and which would also remain without successors.

Charpentier wrote few instrumental works, but a number of them, show a great originality. The *Messe pour plusieurs instruments au lieu des orgues*, in which the instruments (flutes, oboes, crumhorn) are chosen because of their ability to reproduce the various registers of the French organ of the time, is a case in point. Apart from the sonata, the overtures, the symphonies and the offertories for the Church, the Noëls for instruments also show the interest that this instrumental repertoire holds.

in all the genres in which Charpentier wrote, he showed the same mastery of composition. He was able to be profound and serious in his religious music, moving or light in his theatre music. He was also quite at his ease in small as well as large scale forms. His contrapuntal choral writing is magnificent, and he excelled in writing for double, triple or quadruple choir layout. Charpentier's music takes its substance and its singularity from the mixture which he achieved between the Italian and French styles. He borrowed from Italy numerous traits of his style such as the suppleness of his melodic writing, the dramatic use of silence and of modulation, the taste for chromaticism, and dissonance. Criticized for the italianizing aspect of his music, notably by Le Cerf de La Viéville, who found his works "pitiable", and his style "bard, dry and excessively stiff", Charpentier's music had some faithful defenders such as Sébastien de Brossard, who was able to recognize its beauty (its "goodness"): "it is this trade he had with Italy in his youth that some Frenchmen, excessively purist, or, rather, jealous of the goodness of his music, have taken very much amiss, in reproaching hm for his Italian taste, for one may say without flattery that he has only taken what is good from it, as his works well testify". As Charpentier so lucidly put it, "good amongst the good and ignorant amongst the ignorant"!

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Translated by Ivan Moody