

MUSICAL PRAYER

SAMUEL LIBRA

*St. James Cathedral Associate Cathedral Organist*

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*Pièces Choiesies*

Plein jeu

Fugue

Basse de trompette

Louis Marchand

1669–1732

*Suite on the Magnificat, Second Tone*

Prélude

Récit de tierce en taille

Trio de flûtes

Dialogue

Jean-Adam Guilain

c. 1680–1739

*Messe d'orgue*

Récit de tierce en taille—*Gloria: “Domine Deus, Rex coelestis”*

Nicolas de Grigny

1672–1703

*Messe pour les Paroisses*

Offertoire sur les Grands Jeux

François Couperin

1668–1733

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The years of the Enlightenment were an incredibly prosperous time for the French. They saw their economy become the largest in Europe, their military dominated the world stage, and—under the “Sun King” Louis XIV—their command of the arts was unparalleled. Paris, once again, became the center of artistic endeavor in Europe with artists and art lovers flocking to her salons, galleries, and stages.

Music profited no less than the visual or written arts. French publishing houses proliferated and foreign composers scrambled to have their works printed there, significantly boosting their audience and potential for profits. The crown jewel of musical achievement was royal patronage. Instrument makers sought to be granted patents and privileges to have their instruments bear the King’s seal. One of the first fully professional ensembles in Europe, the *Les Vingt-quatre Violons du Roi*, was founded to provide music for the royal court, comprised of the finest string players in France.

As we all know, Louis’ megalomania extended beyond political life. Abandoning his capital, he dragged his entire government to Versailles, where he transformed the once humble hunting chateau

into the most splendid palace in Europe. To his sumptuous abode, he added his *pièce de résistance*—not the fabled Hall of Mirrors, but—the royal chapel. The most expensive section of the palace, the chapel took over thirty years to build. Its clear-paned, nearly floor-to-ceiling windows were an almost impossible extravagance for the time, but allowed the masses to see the “Sun King” in his full radiance.

The chapel had the very best Europe could offer, and was meant to be a French response to the Sistine Chapel in Rome. It was built upon ornately carved Corinthian columns, each emblazoned with the *fleur-de-lis*, the symbol of France’s monarchy. The floor was pieced together from richly colored marbles, while the ceiling was dazzlingly frescoed by the best painters of the day. The chapel overflows with the finest Italian style, but crafted by French artisans from French materials: the epitome of “I can do better.”

In the chapel’s east apse—opposite the royal balcony—stands its famous organ. First built by Robert Cliquot, and later enlarged by his grandson François-Henri, it was a model of the finest organ-building of the time. Its rococo case, flanked by Corinthian columns, exemplifies what came to be known as “French Classical” music: elegantly proportioned, but richly ornamented.

To play this instrument—and the Royal Chapel organ of *Les Invalides* in Paris—there were four *Organistes du Roi*. From the beginning, these were the finest keyboardists in France, who helped to codify the prevailing style of organ playing. The first, such as Nivers and Lebegue, were soon followed by the most famous, including Louis Marchand and François Couperin. Tonight’s program begins and ends with these two titans, bookending two organists who studied under royal organists.

Organ music of the “French Classical” school is always tied to the Catholic Mass or other liturgy. Couperin and Grigny both wrote organ masses, meant to be played in *alternatim* with a choir—the former singing half the verses of the propers, with the organ “singing” the alternating verses. To these, composers often added certain free pieces within the Mass, such as to be played at the offertory. Guilan wrote no organ masses, but did write series of pieces—much in the same *alternatim* style—based on the Magnificat, which could have been used in smaller services such as vespers. Marchand, too, left us no Mass, instead just collections of pieces that are reminiscent of the style, but without a clear origin or intention of use. Of the five books of organ pieces he wrote, only *Pièces Choisies* (“selected pieces”) was published during his lifetime.

**SAMUEL LIBRA** is Associate Cathedral Organist at St. James, previously having served as Assistant Organist and Administrative Assistant for Music. He is also a doctoral student in organ performance at the University of Washington in Seattle as a student of Carole Terry. His research focuses on symphonic and keyboard music of 19th-century France and Belgium. In 2016, he had the opportunity to travel to France for a summer course of study with Jean-Baptiste Robin at the Royaumont Foundation.

In addition to his studies, Samuel has given performances at a number of churches throughout the Puget Sound region, and frequently enjoys collaborative performances, playing harpsichord and organ in cantatas and chamber works with the University of Washington Baroque Ensemble. He has also had the opportunity to collaborate with a variety of Pacific Northwest ensembles, including the Cathedral Chamber Orchestra and Cantorei, Seattle Bach Choir, Seattle Choral Company, reSound: A Northwest Chamber Ensemble, the Sammamish Symphony, and the Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra.

Samuel is an active member of the American Guild of Organists and Organ Historical Society, having been a Biggs Fellow at the latter’s 2017 convention. For the AGO, he is formerly Member-at-Large of the Seattle Chapter board, and presented several programs on various topics at their events. He is also Deputy Convention Coordinator for the 2022 AGO national convention in Seattle.