

It's been several years since your stroke, and three years or so since the release of your wonderful Pancrace Royer CD. How is your health now, and do you notice any lingering effects from the stroke?

My health is very good. I take a few pills every day, but otherwise fine. There are some lingering effects, not at all severe. Some are even funny at times: short-term memory problems—I have to write everything down to remember it; double vision—I was operated on for it, and now it is a little better; and some balance problems—I can't stand on one foot, for example. But none of them stop me from having a quasi-normal life.

Prior to the Marchand/Clérambault CD, your previous CD of the Rameau Pièces du clavecin en concerts received quite favorable reviews in Fanfare and elsewhere. I confess that the other names on the CD were new to me. Spanish period instrumentalists are generally not well known over here—aside from Jordi Savall, who probably doesn't like to be called a Spaniard! Are there many period instrument groups in Spain, and is early music as big an item as it is, say, in Germany, France, and the Netherlands?

For the record, our Rameau CD was nominated for an ICMA Award as Best Baroque recording of 2014—I am very proud of that.

As for Spain, it is truly one of the top countries in the world for early music. Great ensembles are being formed here all the time; luckily we are here to stay. My colleagues on the Rameau CD are two of the top European musicians without a doubt: Gutierrez is a member of Minkowski's orchestra Les Musiciens du Louvre and Comellas has worked with Dantone and Biondi, for example.

Your choice of Clérambault and Marchand for your latest CD is a bit unusual. These are not names that come immediately to mind when we think of French harpsichord music. For example, Clérambault is best known as a composer of chamber cantatas, while Marchand is remembered for the famous contest with Bach and for his tempestuous personality. Tell us how you came to this music, and what its most attractive aspects are for you.

Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, Dieupart—they also don't come to mind so easily. At this time, D'Anglebert and Louis Couperin are better known, but there are several very good musicians who we tend to forget about because they weren't devoted to the harpsichord, although they did write music for the instrument. From much later, Armand-Louis Couperin and Royer don't come to mind either, but they did write some great music for the harpsichord.

In searching through the music of less well-known composers, I realized that there were very few recordings and almost no complete recordings. I knew some of this music from my student days; I recalled it as being very worthy. It's quite different from the exuberant Royer or Rameau, much

more serious. Plenty of Louis XIV style—in a word, elegant. In this music the internal rhythm of the dance is foremost. The player is rather “corseted” so it is much more challenging to play this music than the later stuff. It is easy to bore the listener. And that was a wonderful challenge—I hope I have succeeded. I was also drawn to the music’s internal spiritual beauty. *You say, “It’s easy to bore the listener.” If you were teaching a student, what tricks or devices would you recommend in playing this music? What does a good harpsichordist need to “bring to the table” in order to make this music come alive?*

The harpsichord is an instrument that can easily bore if it is not played properly. A good comprehension of the articulation is probably the most important matter when playing the harpsichord. Then, the slight rubato: not too much or too little. Anyway, playing any instrument is not a big deal. It is just playing the right note with the right finger at the right time! [laughs] *Oh, come on—not a big deal? Maybe not for you, because you make it sound so easy—at least what comes across the speakers. But I agree with you about the ease with which the harpsichord can bore, and also the need for proper articulation. So perhaps you might reveal how you prepare yourself to record this kind of music. Do you plan out every little detail in advance, for example fingering, or do you just play instinctively and let yourself be inspired by the moment? Or perhaps a blend of the two?*

Clearly a blend; I think instinct plays a role, but it has to be taught through practice. The detail is very important, but you have to find a way of teaching your instinct to work together with the detail. A balance is needed. *I discovered that there is a very nice photocopy of the original 1703 engraving of the Clérambault Premier livre on IMSLP. When working with fairly unknown music such as this, do you prefer to work from original notation, or do you perhaps make your own edition?*

I rather prefer modern notation. It is easier to read. I make my own editions when a modern one is not available. But—and this is very important—you need to know the facsimile in order to compare and to decide what to play when things are not clear enough, or you have questions you make to yourself when practicing.

The opening movement of the C-Major Suite is an unmeasured prelude, à la Couperin. Looking at the notation of the original, I imagine that it might be very daunting for anyone coming to this music for the first time.

It is the starting point. You look at it and you see only whole notes like ping-pong balls and you ask yourself: “What in the world?” Once you get over your disbelief and you examine the music carefully, you can see harmonies, cadences, even bar lines! And suddenly you understand it. It takes time and patience, but eventually you can play it.

In the booklet it says, “Harpsichord after Johannes Ruckers (1638).” Who is the builder?

It is an improved William Horn harpsichord. I say “improved” because Alessandro Simonetto, himself a harpsichordist, recording engineer, and the producer of this recording, has modified several things, especially in the mechanism, in order to make a great instrument for recordings.

Is this perhaps the same instrument that you used for the Royer CD?

Exactly the same one.

I notice that the recording venue is in Italy—presumably that’s where the instrument is housed as well. That means in order to make a recording there, you have to budget a fair amount of travel and acclimatization time.

Do you enjoy making recordings, or are they just a hassle? I’m thinking here of someone like Gustav Leonhardt, for whom recordings were a “necessary evil.”

I enjoy it a lot. It is more comfortable to record in Madrid, where I live, of course, but to travel is for me not at all a hassle. Nor are the recordings.

You have to know that to record is not to play a concert. During the recording sessions you may have to repeat some pieces in order to avoid, for instance, wrong notes or an undesirable change of tempo. That is normally a task of the producer: to be very attentive and identify these kinds of little mistakes in order to make a great recording.

Well, do you then prepare for a recording by first playing the pieces in public? I imagine that with little-known music, this can be especially helpful.

Exactly. Two weeks before the recording I played a private concert for a few friends and fellow musicians. That helped me a lot to see where to focus my practice and also to get some feedback.

Now that you’ve exposed a bit of the “dark side of the moon,” so to speak, of French harpsichord music, what’s next? You hinted at Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre earlier—some of her suites, perhaps?

[Laughs] No, I shouldn’t say just yet. I can tell you that it will be more French music but from a somewhat later period. I have just closed a three-CD contract with Brilliant to record works by three different composers: Armand Louis Couperin, Balbastre, and Fiocco. There might be some “complete” recordings as well.

I’m sure we’ll be watching with great anticipation for your future releases.

 **CLÉRAMBAULT Suites: in C; in c. Prelude in G. MARCHAND Suites: in d; in g. La Vénitienne. Badine. Gavotte** • Yago Mahúgo (hpd) • BRILLIANT 94790 (77:20)

In this second CD of French harpsichord music from the brilliant young Spaniard Yago Mahúgo, the name most likely to be familiar to the record-buying public is that of Louis-Nicolas Clérambault (1676–1749). Record collectors are more apt to have a recording of the secular chamber cantatas—he is considered to be the inventor of that genre. Clérambault

was one of many lesser lights in the musical establishment of Louis XIV; that he managed to survive and prosper at Versailles despite the oppressive presence of Lully is no doubt traceable to Clérambault's parallel career as a church organist and to the Sun King's mistress Mme. Maintenon, in whose household Clérambault found regular employment.

Louis Marchand (1669–1732) is a fascinating and somewhat enigmatic figure. There is, of course, the alleged “contest” between Marchand and Sebastian Bach, which may or may not have ever happened. There is also the composer's strange, erratic, even combative behavior; this is substantiated by several of Marchand's contemporaries. That aspect of Marchand's personality, it seems to me, is plainly evident in the dramatic, edgy, minor-mode music on this CD.

The liner notes call Clérambault and Marchand “important figures in the development of French harpsichord music.” That's a bit of stretch if you ask me, as both inherited the fully developed tradition of the early *clavecinistes* Chambonnières and D'Anglebert, not to mention the others who followed such as Louis Couperin and Etienne Richard. The music of Clérambault and Marchand is planted firmly within that tradition; they expanded upon it but in the final analysis created nothing new. In order to appreciate how these works fit into the totality of French harpsichord music, 21st-century listeners certainly need to be conscious of the stylized dance forms—allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue—that populate the suites on this CD. But beyond that, it helps to have a certain familiarity with the rarified language and gesture of this music, otherwise it can tend to sound somewhat superficial.

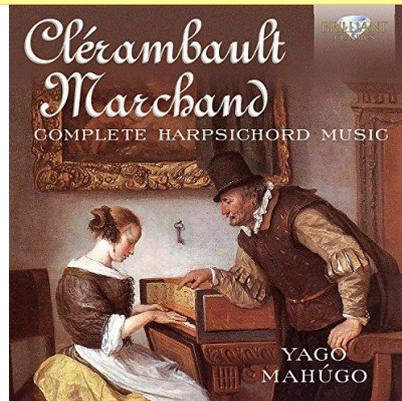
In attempting to identify what makes this arcane style so appealing to modern listeners, I began thinking of other traditions—the madrigals of Gesualdo, for example, or the music of Charlie Parker—that audiences find fascinating even though the musical syntax itself may be foreign. To assimilate such music, above all the listener needs a worthy guide, one understands the local dialect and can speak it like a native. Yago Mahúgo is such a guide, and therein lies an irony.

It's no secret that French musicians from Rameau to Ravel have held Spanish music dear. In the Baroque era, the sarabande and canary had their origins in the Spanish New World. In the 19th century, numerous French composers wrote works in the Spanish style. Well, the tables have turned. Señor Mahúgo, through some strange musical “reverse osmosis,” has imbibed the rhetoric of the French Baroque so thoroughly that it enables him to reproduce this music as if he were a native, an 18th century native, no less. In the unmeasured preludes of the Clérambault suites, he lets the music unfold naturally, while the spirited courantes and giges of Marchand, with their formidable clusters of *agréments*, are tackled with considerable energy. With this skillfully arranged program—billed as the

complete works of both composers—Mahúgo takes us on a kind of journey; the individual landmarks are perhaps less important than the total immersion in the musical landscape. I can think of few CDs of French harpsichord music that are as successful: From the performances, to the repertoire, to the instrument (after Johannes Ruckers, 1638), to the recorded sound, this disc is nearly flawless. Highest recommendation. **Christopher Brodersen**

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CLÉRAMBAULT Suites: in C; in c. Prelude in G. MARCHAND Suites: in d; in g. La Vénitienne. Badine. Gavotte • Yago Mahúgo (hpd) • BRILLIANT 94790 (77:20)



Louis-Nicolas Clérambault & Louis Marchand: Complete Harpsichord Music

AUDIO CD

Brilliant Classics



There is no doubt that the harpsichord was an instrument of choice in the France of Louis XIV, and virtually every composer around 1700, whether infected with the newly-faddish Italian style or not, toyed around with creating delicate and descriptive music. Meant mainly for publication (and therefore performance by amateurs), the pieces, arranged as suites in various books (*Livres*) not only provided character pieces, they also helped extend the range and scope of the French style with their carefully-laid-out dances and elaborate ornamentation. The disc in question here explores the “complete” works of two of the lesser composers of the period, Louis-Nicolas Clérambault (1676–1749) and Louis Marchand (1669–1732). Both were born into a world dominated by composers such as Lully, attained their professional stature under his successors like André Campra, and lived on into the post-régime age when a younger generation as exemplified by Rameau became ascendant. Clérambault came from a musical family and made his career as a musical impresario at Versailles and music master at the royally-sponsored school at Saint-Cyr. There his fame as a composer of French cantatas and motets rose, as numerous admirers came to witness his performances on the organ. Marchand, on the other hand, came to Paris from Lyon in 1689 after achieving a reputation as a child prodigy. He appears to have traveled around a bit beforehand. Biographical details of his early life are sketchy, but what is certain is that he obtained a post at a Franciscan monastery and several churches in the French capital, from which he sought to expand his fame through regular

concerts. This led to a post as court organist in 1708, but five years later he suddenly departed on a multi-year tour of Germany. He did eventually return to Paris to the semi-seclusion of the Cordeliers Monastery in 1717, ending his life giving well-received concerts there.

Marchand lived a rather controversial life, being apparently unable or unwilling to curb his tongue. Even his wife couldn't stand him and divorced him in 1701, causing a ruckus involving the King himself.

Whatever his obnoxious personality, his performance abilities on the keyboard became the stuff of legend even during his lifetime, and he was often considered one of if not the best improviser of the time. Given the importance of these two composers, it is surprising to learn that neither left behind much solo keyboard music (though Marchand did write substantially for the organ). Indeed, harpsichordist Yago Mahúgo was able to record the complete works of both on a single disc. Clérambault published only one *Livre*, in 1704, consisting of two suites, both of which had appeared shortly before individually; to this can be added an eponymous brief prelude that turned up attributed to him, included as a final encore. Marchand, on the other hand, seems to have been more fond of momentary improvisation than publication. He too left behind only a pair of suites, published around the same time. There are also a couple of character pieces (included here) which hint at a production that may once upon a time have been quite similar to his colleague François Couperin. If so, they have disappeared along with any other putative harpsichord works, though a fair number of organ pieces do survive.

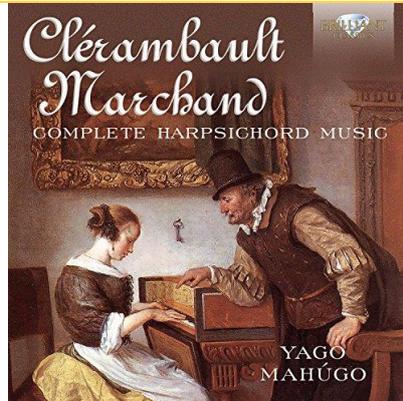
If one is expecting the style to be similar to the ebullient and effusive music of the Couperins, these two suites are not comparable. Rather, both composers chose to write in a carefully constructed and more sedate style, in which the often tortuous ornaments found in Couperin are subdued in favor of nicely constructed stylized dance movements. The fluidity of the Clérambault C-Major Suite Prelude is evident in the unveiling of the sequences in a manner that has flexibility of tempo and declamation at its core. This contrast with the gnarly harmonies of the C-Minor Prelude of the second suite, where the sequences unfold in a more steady manner but with a serious mood in the snippets of melody. Other movements are also varied as to mood and content. The C-Major Gavotte, for instance, is a lively and energetic dance, followed by an equally effective gigue. This contrasts with the gigue of the second suite, which is serious and squared off, with a thicker texture. Marchand's two suites follow a similar pattern, though the opening Prelude of the D-Minor Suite is about as improvisatory as one could imagine, with a fantasia where the lines weave in and out from each other. It is no wonder that Bach might have derived some inspiration from it. On the other hand, the two Courantes are each powerful and full-voiced, with a good, steady rhythmic foundation. The Chaconne movement evokes

the spirit of Lully, an intricate ground that is especially focused. In the second suite, the G-Major Courante has a walking bass that seems almost Handelian, while a contrast can be found in the contemplative Sarabande, a stately musical walk through the formal halls of Versailles.

Harpsichordist Mahúgo is extremely adept at choosing just the right registrations to highlight this intricate music. His touch is often feather light, and he knows just how to phrase each movement both to bring out the contrasts between them and to develop a smooth flow that reveals their harmonic and rhythmic foundations. In short, if you've had enough of the overload of the Rameaus and Couperins, or find them mechanical, this disc will serve nicely as a balance. French music aficionados will want this to fill in the gap between the two larger figures, though, as a word of warning, this could have the effect of whetting the appetite for further harpsichord music by these two figures, which, alas, has not yet been uncovered. **Bertil van Boer**

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a **CLÉRAMBAULT** Suite in C. Suite in c. Prelude in G. **MARCHAND** Suite in d. Suite in g. *La véntienne*. *Badine*. Gavotte • Yago Mahúgo (hpd) • BRILLIANT 94790 (77:20)



Louis-Nicolas Clermabault & Louis Marchand: Complete Harpsichord Music

AUDIO CD

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Two previous releases afforded me the opportunity to immerse myself in the large and important body of work produced by the French Baroque harpsichord school which spanned close to 200 years from the beginning of the 17th century to nearly the end of the 18th century, when the French revolution and the ascendancy of the piano spelled the end for this great tradition. First, on an album I reviewed in 38:6, Félix Ardanaz gave us a flyover view of the landscape, banking left and right for us to peer out the windows at the historic markers left by D'Anglebert, Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Forqueray, Louis Marchand, the Couperins (Louis and François), Rameau, and others. Then, in 39:5, harpsichordist Charlotte Mattax Moersch swooped in for a close-up look at just one of those pioneers, Jean-Henri D'Anglebert, a direct disciple of Jacques Champion de Chambonnières, who is believed to have been the patriarch of the tribe. Now, with this CD from Spanish harpsichordist Yago Mahúgo, we continue our exploration. The disc at hand is said to contain the complete harpsichord works of Louis-Nicolas Clérambault (1676–1749) and Louis Marchand (1669–1732), which suggests that neither of them wrote extensively for the harpsichord.

Clérambault was primarily an organist and composer of church music. He succeeded to the post of organist at Saint-Sulpice after the death of his predecessor, Guillaume-Gabriel Nivers. During his time there, Clérambault is credited with having developed the genre of the secular French cantata, of which he wrote some two dozen. But dwarfing them in numbers were his hundreds of motets and other sacred works and his many pieces for organ. His contributions to the harpsichord repertoire appear to be limited

to the two suites and the short Prelude in G on this disc. Following in the footsteps of Louis Couperin, Clérambault adopted the practice of writing his preludes without bar lines, following them however with a sequence of traditional dance movements—Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and so on—that are barred. His two suites vary in number of movements, layout, and exact dance types, with the C-Major Suite containing 10 movements, in which a Gigue precedes three concluding Menuets. In contrast, the C-Minor Suite has only six movements, no Menuet, and concludes with a Gigue.

Like Clérambault, Marchand was also an organist, quite possibly the greatest organist of his day, so highly acclaimed and respected that employers put up with his difficult personality, colleagues deferred to him, and potential rivals feared him. Anecdotal accounts, as well as actual historical ones, are filled with stories of Marchand's bad behavior and his run-ins and dust-ups with practically everyone he came into contact with. It's reputed that he beat his wife, and when she finally left him he refused to provide for her support. At the time, Marchand was organist and composer in the employ of Louis XIV. Disapproving of Marchand's actions, the King garnished half of the composer's wages, directing they be paid to the composer's wife. In retaliation, Marchand stopped playing in the middle of a Mass and confronted the King, saying, "Sire, if my wife gets half my salary, she may play half the service." But my favorite anecdote told about Marchand relates to his making an insolent remark about the appearance of the King's ears. For the vain Louis XIV, having his looks insulted was the final straw. According to some reports, he banished Marchand to Germany. That only led to further imbroglios, though the story of Marchand failing to show up for a keyboard contest with Bach in Dresden in September 1717 has been largely discredited.

Still, by all accounts, Marchand was a real piece of work. His extant works as a composer, however, are far fewer than he is believed to have produced. According to Philip Borg-Wheeler's booklet note, "Marchand was not overly concerned with publishing and did not even bother to write many of his works down." Undoubtedly, he composed more organ and harpsichord pieces than have been preserved, and it's known that he also wrote sacred choral music and an opera on Ovid's *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

On disc, the harpsichord suites of both Clérambault and Marchand are clearly overshadowed by recordings of their organ works. At the dawn of the CD era, Clérambault's suites were recorded on LP by Kenneth Gilbert in 1981 and reviewed very favorably by Edward Strickland in 6:6. That recording has been transferred to CD and is still available, while a more recent program performed by Davitt Moroney contains an exact duplication of the works on the present disc, plus the added bonus of a piece by Nicolas-Antoine Lebègue, *Les cloches, Noël for organ*, played on

harpsichord. If you're looking for the Marchand suites and pieces alternately coupled, there's a recording by Christophe Rousset that matches them up with Rameau's *Premier livre de pièces de clavecin* on a disc reviewed by Barry Brenesal in 36:1. Barry goes into greater depth on the style and technical details of the music in his review than I have, so I would encourage you to read it.

As for the present recording by Yago Mahúgo, I can say that I enjoyed it immensely. There is something about this music that I find very peaceful, very beautiful, and very moving; and the mellow sound of Mahúgo's harpsichord, a copy of a 1638 Ruckers instrument, tuned to A=392 Hz, enhances the effect. Mahúgo studied with Robert Hill, holds a degree in historical keyboard instruments from the University of Freiburg, and completed his training under Christophe Rousset, Kenneth Gilbert, Malcolm Bilson, and Jacques Ogg. It's hardly surprising then that Mahúgo's approach to these works should reflect the technical finesse and musical intelligence and insight he gained from the two of his teachers, Gilbert and Rousset, who are themselves distinguished interpreters of this music and have recorded it. For over an hour's worth of pure bliss, strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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