WOMEN OF GENIUS

Louis-Nicolas Clérambault: Prelude from *Leandre et Héro* (text by Marie de Louvencourt)

Mademoiselle Duval: Suite from *Les Genies ou Les Caractères de l’Amour* (1736)

- Ritournelle
- Passacaille
- Tambourins

Julie Pinel: Airs from *Nouveau recueil d’airs sérieux et à boire* (1737)

- *Sombres lieux, obscures forêts*
- *Ruisseaux, suspendez votre cours*

François Couperin: Prelude no. 1 in C major from *L’Art de toucher le clavecin* (1716)

- *Rossignol, vous chantez les douceurs du printemps*

Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre: Violin sonata no. 3 in F major (1707)

François Couperin: *La Favorite* from 1er Livre de pieces de clavecin (1713)

Louis Couperin: *Veritas de terra* from 7 versets from Psalm 84 (1704)

for Marguerite Louise Couperin

Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre: Judith (1708)

Performers
- Clara Rottsolk, soprano
- Debra Nagy, oboe
- Julie Andrijeski, violin
- Rebecca Reed, viola da gamba
- Mark Edwards, harpsichord

Notes on the Program:

Women of Genius honors the contributions of remarkably accomplished, creative women in 17th and 18th century France. While harpsichordist and composer Elisabeth Jacquet de la
Guerre is often upheld as an example of isolated “genius,” we hope to challenge that notion. Instead, we want to consider the histories of female poets, performers, and composers who not only made their voices heard but exerted a stronger cultural influence than many realize.

While Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre's wide-ranging publications constitute an amazing record of her work, one has to dig a little deeper, read between the lines and in the margins, and even review contemporary lists of who's who to reconstruct the lives and careers of the other women featured on this program. The works of these women may lack attribution or wide distribution, but they were no less accomplished or influential.

These were the daughters, the nieces, and the cousins of musical families like the Couperins. They were poets, translators, and librettists for airs, cantatas, and operas. They were brilliant improvisers and arrangers whose celebrated performances were attested to but whose works were never published. They were singers, keyboard, and theorbo players whose intimate work impressed and delighted. They were Women of Genius.

Our program begins with a brief prelude for *Leandre et Héro*, one of seven Clérambault cantatas with a text by Marie de Louvencourt. Louvencourt's texts inspired almost one third of Clérambault's cantatas; she was not only a poet but also an accomplished singer and theorbo player.

Though we don't know Mademoiselle Duval's first name, she was only the second woman (after Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre) to have her opera performed at the Académie Royale de la Musique. Her sole surviving stage work *Les Génies ou Les caractères de l'Amour* (1736) delights in the sort of spectacle and brilliant orchestral effects that deserved to be featured alongside her operatic peers like Jean-Philippe Rameau.

Julie Pinel was born into a family of renowned lutenists but it's not so easy to identify her early work. As with other women's names, hers was often abbreviated or otherwise masked in publications. However, enabled by a royal privilege, she immediately put out two books of vocal chamber music beginning in 1736. The songs on our program are full of pastoral imagery - from the sweetness of springtime to happy coupling birds - but look a bit deeper and they're clearly full of imagery that suggests a world of intense attachments and secret trysts.

What is perhaps most remarkable about Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre's achievements is our extraordinary record of them. She was a child prodigy who was privileged to gain the attention and patronage of the most influential man in all of France if not Europe, King Louis XIV. She was well-educated and was able to see her works not only performed but most importantly published. There are books of harpsichord pieces, violin sonatas, trio sonatas, cantatas based on both mythology and also on tales from the bible, as well as her opera, *Céphale et Procris*.

By the late 1690s, she was clearly taken with the fashion for all things Italian that was sweeping through Parisian salons. Influenced by the work of Antonio Corelli, she tried her
hand at writing extensive violin sonatas that dispensed with dance rhythms and instead explored new types of instrumental expressions and vigorous virtuosity. The Sonata in F major from her 1707 collection of violin sonatas is a prime example.

One of the more useful sources for learning about artists from France's Ancien Régime is Évrard Titon du Tillet’s *Le Parnasse François*, an extended biographical dictionary of France’s greatest artists, poets, and musicians. While du Tillet writes a glowing entry for Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, he follows it immediately with reference to four remarkable young women that most early music aficionados have likely never heard of.

How I would have loved to hear the playing of Marie-Françoise Certain. Her repertoire included her own arrangements of all the symphonies from Lully’s operas, as well as the keyboard pieces of Louis Couperin, Chambonnière, and Marchand. She was also apparently a remarkable accompanist, giving concerts in her home and welcoming the best composers. Even the great writer Jean de la Fontaine (famous for his fables) praised her and her concerts:

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Certain, in a thousand ways equally charming,
And in a thousand fine arts equally learned,
Whose rare genius and brilliant hands
Surpass Chambonnières, Harde, the Couperains.
Of this amiable child the unique harpsichord
Affects me more than Isis and all his music.
I want nothing more, and there’s nothing better
To please the mind, and the ear, and the eyes;
but to see her once a week.
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Titon du Tillet also described Marguerite-Louise Couperin as ‘one of the most celebrated musicians of our time, who sang with admirable taste and who played the harpsichord perfectly.’ Her extraordinary prowess earned her rare honors: her name was published with works she sang and she had special permission to sing in the Royal Chapel (where women were typically excluded) alongside singers including Marie-Anne and Jeanne Delalande. In Louis Couperin’s *Veritas de terra*, the musical language projects confidence and righteousness in keeping with the text and invites us to imagine Marguerite-Louise's brilliant and flexible voice.

Our program concludes with Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre's cantata on the old testament story of Judith & Holofernes. *Judith* vividly immerses us in an ancient story of the righteous assasination of a brutal and lusty conqueror at the hands of the least-powerful: the subjugated woman.

Jacquet de la Guerre draws an almost cinematic effect from her music and text: she takes us on a journey that begins with the wide-angle scenery of a besieged city to the finest focus of heroine Judith's conscience. Following the trumpet blasts of the opening prelude that effectively usher in the warrior Holofernes, we hear him sing a blustering, flirtatious aria
claiming that glory can't hold a candle to Judith's charms. Later, it seems that an inner voice urges Judith to follow a path of seduction in "Enfoncez le trait qui le blesse" and quicken Holofernes' intoxication leading to a fateful sleep.

Jacquet de la Guerre's colorful and brilliantly specific musical writing enlists the players and singer equally in the rhetoric. While the singer advances the story and explores the characters, it's the instruments who often depict the moments of critical action. For instance, the violin relates the murder-- in Euripidean fashion “off stage”-- illuminating the gravity and struggle in Judith's action.

– Debra Nagy