

Une Larme – Rosario Conte

In an enclave from time, in the peaceful atmosphere of the Convento dell'Annunziata de Rovato, I've been lucky enough to share in feelings that have been forever transformed into sound. The recording pays homage to the great Italian guitarist Francesco Corbetta and to Robert De Visée, often considered to be his disciple. Thanks to the transparent and delicate sounds of the baroque guitar, feelings as to the fleeting nature of all beauty and the inevitable triumph of time arise within us.

Corbetta was born in 1615 in Pavia. In 1639 the publisher Monti e Zenaro published Corbetta's first book of guitar compositions. The book's title is *De li scherzi armonici trovati e facilitati in alcune curiosissime suonate sopra la chitarra spagnola*. On the front page of his second opus, *Varii capricii per la ghittara spagnuola*, published in 1643 in Milan, he refers to himself as a member of the Accademia bresciana degli Erranti, under the pseudonym Capriccioso.

At this time he began his journeys throughout Europe where he was to be increasingly in demand as a guitarist in the royal courts. Between 1644 and 1653 he spent time in Austria, Spain, the Netherlands and Germany. In 1648 he published his third opus in Brussels. His fourth work to include compositions for guitar was published in the 1650s in Spain.

From about 1644, he started to give regular recitals at the French court where – under the influence of Cardinal Mazarin – there was great appreciation for Italian music. Corbetta reports that he was in Paris in 1656 as a fellow musician of the composer Jean-Baptiste Lully. He played the basso continuo there and furthermore composed an entry for several guitars in Lully's *Ballet de la galanterie du Temps*.

He was to be a regular visitor to the French Court until the end of his days when he worked as guitar teacher to the Roi Soleil, who was a huge admirer of the instrument. After Corbetta's death Robert De Visée would take over this role.

His presence in Paris allowed Corbetta to meet Charles II, the son of the English king who – due to the Civil War, that had been raging since 1640– was spending his exile in France. After the beheading of King Charles I in 1649, Charles II, who passionately loved the guitar, came to the throne. From that moment on, with the return of the English court to their homeland in 1660, Corbetta would live almost uninterruptedly in England. He would often return to Paris and in 1671 received permission to publish in France what would be his penultimate book of guitar compositions, even though it was dedicated to the King of England.

This book is considered to be his magnum opus: it is the first edition of *La Guitarre Royale* (Paris, Bonneuil, 1671). All the pieces by Corbetta on the CD are taken from this book.

Corbetta's last work of the same title ('La Guitarre Royale') was published in 1674 in Paris. However, this time it was dedicated to the Roi Soleil. In this last publication one can observe a technical simplification of the pieces. For this book, Corbetta almost exclusively composed what are called Batteries, – a strumming technique for the right hand allowing the musician to produce chords in quick succession. In the preface to his work, Corbetta himself gives the reason for this simplification. He explains that he had to proceed this way in order to meet the limited technical abilities of the king.

The guitar was amongst the most commonly played instruments in the French court. The nobility highly esteemed the guitar and procured themselves the instruments of the best guitar makers, with which they aimed to produce the clearest and most gallant sounds.

They would often bring the guitar along to feasts and play it under the open sky, thus adding a bucolic touch to these occasions.

For four of the a solo pieces to be found in *La Guitarre Royale* of 1671, Corbetta composed versions for voice and other instruments that can be found at the end of the book. One is the vocal version of the ‘Allemande cherie de son Altesse le Duc d’York’ in F major (Track 8) and another that of the ‘Allemande du Roy’ of the Suite in b minor (Track 15). Both pieces were rearranged for two sopranos, bass, guitar and basso continuo. There are also the vocal versions of the ‘Gavotte aymée du Duc de Montmouth’ (Track 20) as well as that of the ‘Sarabande de Madame’ (Track 23), each for soprano, bass, guitar and basso continuo.

The ‘Sarabande de Madame’ and the ‘Tombeau de Madame D’Orléans’ (Track 12) were compositions written to commemorate the death in 1670 of the young Henrietta Anne Stuart. It is said that she killed herself at the age of 26 by taking arsenic. Henrietta Anne Stuart, referred to as Madame D’Orléans or simply as Madame, the wife of the Duke of Orleans – himself a brother of the Roy Soleil – was loved by the whole court. In the France of this time, the news of her death was received with great mourning. In his compositions, Corbetta shows his reverence for her virtue and beauty, which were put to such an abrupt end in the flush of womanhood. He composed a ‘Tombeau’ for her death. This composition is rightfully regarded as a most singular, indeed astounding, piece in which Corbetta develops characteristics of the guitar sound which the instrument had never known before. In doing so, Corbetta had worked out a musical language of great depth without, however, renouncing the idiomatic characteristics of the instrument. The tension of the melodic lines pushes the instrument, in terms of the duration of the sound, to its very limits and thereby creates a wonderful and surprising composition, full of twilight, breached by sudden glimmers. This piece which is written in the classical form of an Allemande grave ends with an Exclamatio in a major key that then returns in a reprise. In the ‘Caprice de chaconne’ as well as in the piece called ‘L’autre chaconne’, two different kinds of batteries may be found. In the Italian and French preface to *La Guitarre Royale* of 1671 Corbetta meticulously describes the execution of the two types of batteries and thus furnishes us with one of the few didactic contributions of the time concerning this technique.

Whether Robert De Visée really studied with Corbetta, nobody knows for sure but – as a young guitarist – he almost certainly considered Corbetta as a reference, since Corbetta was about 35 years older than him and enjoyed a universal reputation as one of the greatest living guitarists of the time. The proof of the high esteem in which De Visée almost unquestionably held the Italian master is the Composition of an Allemande Tombeau de Monsieur Francisque that can be found in his first book, the *Livre de Guittarre* (Paris, Bonneüil 1682). This piece, which is written in the typical form of an Allemande grave and is preceded by a Prelude, shows us a De Visée in complete mastery of the entire expressive palette of the guitar. With this work, De Visée added another precious pearl to the repertoire of the baroque guitar.

Corbetta died in 1681 in Paris. His life as a travelling musician and cosmopolitan flowed into his compositions and especially into the *La Guitarre Royale* works of 1671. His music speaks an international language in which diverse styles – the Italian and Spanish as well as the French and English – come together.

Corbetta’s music speaks the timeless language of the best music throughout the ages. His music has always deeply touched me, both during the recording though also right from the moment I played the ‘Caprice de chaconne’ for the first time – it was a summer’s night,

and I was in the most beautiful theatre in the world: a bay in Sardinia called Tramariglio. Corbetta's music melds delicacy of style, profound knowledge of the instrument and depth of language; in this music resonant silence can always be heard, through the ground and in the delicate sounds of the guitar – sounds with which the silence is in everlasting dialogue. After the end of the final note, silence re-conquers its place, just as death does with our lives.

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