

## The Liturgical Function of French Baroque Organ Repertoire

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# The Liturgical Function of French Baroque Organ Repertoire



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## The Liturgical Function of French Baroque Organ Repertoire

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The historical association of the organ with Christian church services means that much of the instrument's repertoire was originally intended to serve a functional, liturgical purpose. Indeed, isolated from its contemporaneous liturgical context, some historical organ repertoire may appear to the modern musician as "unintelligible" and "much...less rich in significance."<sup>1</sup> The extant repertoire from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France is particularly extensive and provides a ready example. In contrast to modern practice, in which the organ generally accompanies congregational singing, the liturgy of this period alternated unaccompanied singing with short versets played by the organist. This meant that a liturgical chant such as the Kyrie of the Mass Ordinary would be split into several sections, with even-numbered sections being sung by the choir and the remaining ones being replaced by organ versets. This practice seems strange from a modern perspective; it meant that lengthy and theologically important sections of text would not be heard, since instrumental music was played instead. However, this

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Higginbottom, "Organ music and the liturgy," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Organ*, edited by Nicholas Thistlethwaite and Geoffrey Webber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 130.

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alternatim performance of the mass was the prescribed method of worship throughout the Catholic Church and flourished in France from the 1400s into the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

The modern organist is most likely to encounter alternatim practice in the collections of organ versets published by Nicolas de Grigny and François Couperin, which are the most widely performed of this repertoire.<sup>3</sup> However, these two publications give a somewhat problematic picture of performing practice at the time. Grigny's *Livre d'orgue* contains versets for a complete organ mass and several Gregorian hymns sung during the church year, while Couperin's collection contains two complete mass cycles. The seemingly straightforward nature of these collections gives the impression that alternatim practice was rather neat and tidy, with prescribed places for the organ to intervene in the service. In reality, alternatim practices differed greatly depending on the geographical area in question, the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the church (cathedrals came under different regulations from monastic communities, for example), and the type of service being celebrated. Most misleading is the idea that organists played previously composed music by a single composer throughout the service – in fact, alternatim performance was primarily an improvisatory practice. Without the ability to improvise, no organist at a large church could supply enough music to fulfill his daily duties. The requirement of a royal mandate for publishing meant

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<sup>2</sup> *Grove Music Online*, s. v. "Organ Mass" (by Edward Higginbottom), <http://www.grovemusic.com> (accessed 4 December 2007).

<sup>3</sup> François Couperin, *Two Masses for Organ* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1994), and Nicolas de Grigny, *Livre d'Orgue* (Miami: Edwin F. Kalmus, n. d.).

that printed music was scarce; more importantly, no collection could supply pieces of an appropriate length and style for every possible liturgical action. As organist of the Parisian church of St. Merry, for example, the composer Nicolas Lebègue would have played approximately 8,000 versets over the course of a year.<sup>4</sup> The full complexity of this liturgical tradition, therefore, is only partially revealed by examining the extant organ literature.

Some of the best evidence for the expected role of the organist comes from ecclesiastical documents known as “ceremonials.” These documents prescribe the services at which the organist was expected to be present and the portions of each service in which the organ was expected to be played. The *Caeremoniale episcoporum* of 1600 was the most important such document; drafted in Rome and approved by the Pope, it governed the celebration of the liturgy throughout the Catholic world. In the spirit of the liturgical reforms of the Counter-Reformation, it sought to “win back defectors [to Protestantism] as well as to retain the faithful by brilliant and sumptuous services.”<sup>5</sup> This ceremonial was also the first document to extend legitimacy to the practice of alternatim performance at the Mass and other liturgical offices. In it, we read that alternatim performance was expected for the Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei of the Mass Ordinary and for hymns and canticles at the various daily Offices.<sup>6</sup> This position was considered fairly liberal for its time; church authorities of a previous generation had been reluctant to

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<sup>4</sup> Higginbottom, “Organ music and the liturgy,” 140.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin van Wye, “Ritual Use of the Organ in France,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 33, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 301.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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approve any use of the organ at all during the celebration of the Mass.<sup>7</sup> The *Caeremoniale* did, however, require that the missing text of the chants be recited in an audible voice while the organ verset was being played and particularly commended the practice in which a chorister sang along with the *cantus firmus* of the organ verset.<sup>8</sup>

Although the *Caeremoniale episcoporum*, published by the Vatican, was intended to govern the use of the organ throughout the entire Catholic Church, individual religious jurisdictions published their own ceremonials, which sometimes conflicted with the Roman standards. For example, the Carmelite order of nuns had their own ceremonial (the *Caeremoniale divini officii secundum ordinem fratrum B. Virginis Mariae de monte Carmeli* of 1616) and by mid-century, the diocese of Paris had developed its own idiosyncratic liturgical traditions (as codified in the *Caeremoniale Parisiense* of 1662).<sup>9</sup> The different requirements of the various ceremonials are reflected in the published repertoire of the period. For example, Couperin's *Messe pour les paroisses* ("Mass for the Parishes") includes a verset for the Benedictus, in accordance with the 1662 *Caeremoniale Parisiense*, but his *Messe pour les convents* ("Mass for the Convents") omits the Benedictus verset and includes one for the Elevation, following the practice of the 1616 Carmelite ceremonial and those of other religious houses.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> van Wye, "Ritual Use of the Organ in France," 300.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>9</sup> For a graphical representation of the similarities and differences between the requirements of these three ceremonials, see Higginbottom, "Organ music and the liturgy," 134-5.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Higginbottom, "French Classical organ music and the liturgy," *Proceedings of the Royal Musicological Association* 103 (1976-1977): 27.

The requirements of the various ceremonials implicitly reveal a great deal about the musical characteristics of organ versets in the early seventeenth century. For example, the practice of singing the missing plainchant during the performance of the organ verset clearly indicates that the versets were composed in such a way as to give particular prominence to the chant melody. The works of Jehan Titelouze provide an early published example of this style. In his two collections of versets, *Hymnes de l'Église* (1623) and *Le Magnificat* (1626),<sup>11</sup> each verset uses strict counterpoint modelled after the style of polyphonic vocal compositions. In *Hymnes de l'Église*, the tune of each hymn is used as the subject of a point of imitation. Furthermore, this melody is usually heard in long notes in the bass as a *cantus firmus*. With the Magnificat, the situation is slightly more complicated; the text is a canticle sung at the daily office of Vespers<sup>12</sup> and is sung not to a strophic hymn melody but to one of many possible short recitation formulae in each of the eight church modes, which are repeated to fit the length of the text.<sup>13</sup> These recitation formulae are not well-suited to use as *cantus firmi* in long notes, but Titelouze nevertheless works them into his composition as the subject of points of imitation, in the manner of a Renaissance paraphrase mass.

Titelouze's compositions are the only surviving examples of printed French organ music from the first half

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<sup>11</sup> Jehan Titelouze, *Oeuvres complètes d'Orgue*, in *Archives des Maîtres de l'Orgue des XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles*, ed. Alexandre Guilmant and André Pirro, vol. 1 (Paris: Durand et Fils, 1899, reprint: New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> Higginbottom, "Organ music and the liturgy," 135.

<sup>13</sup> The eight tones for the Magnificat are found in *The Liber usualis*, edited by the Benedictines of Solesmes (Tournai: Desclée, 1963).

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of the seventeenth century, and so provide our only window to the characteristics of alternatim versets of this period. Indeed, the composer states in his preface that no organ tablature had been printed within his lifetime.<sup>14</sup> The only earlier known book of French organ music is a collection of anonymous versets published by Attaignant in 1531 – almost a century earlier.<sup>15</sup> This absence of printed material can be attributed, as Yvonne Rokseth suggests, to the practice of compiling manuscript collections of composed organ versets.<sup>16</sup> However, the lack of evidence for the existence of such manuscript collections suggests that improvisation was the accepted practice and that printed examples by Titelouze and others are merely exempla of this practice. In his preface to *Hymnes de l'Église*, Titelouze states his hope that his volume will “be useful to those who desire to play the organ”<sup>17</sup> and adds that he was spurred to publish his collection by the “volumes of tablatures of all kinds of instruments printed in our French; [but] it is beyond the recollection of men that any have been printed for the organ . . . [despite] the fact that we have increased its perfection in the last few years.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, he argues that the existence of printed organ music is not a necessity for his French colleagues, but will help to teach students and will demonstrate the “perfection” achieved by the French school of organists and organ builders.

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<sup>14</sup> van Wye, “Ritual Use of the Organ in France,” 299.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in van Wye, “Ritual Use of the Organ in France,” 293.

<sup>17</sup> Titelouze, *op. cit.*, English translation in Harry W. Gay, *Four French Organist-Composers, 1549-1720* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1975), 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

Titelouze's rigorously contrapuntal style became unfashionable by the end of the century. The increasing secularization of the liturgy meant that versets often bore no relation to the plainchant they were intended to replace, and were instead modelled after contemporary dance styles. Thus, the instructions of the ceremonials from the beginning of the century became increasingly antiquated. Couperin's masses, for example, consist mainly of freely-composed versets bearing no relation to plainsong, thus making it impossible for the cantus firmus to be doubled by a vocalist as described in the *Caeremoniale episcoporum*. However, the style Titelouze established in *Hymnes de l'Église*, with the cantus firmus in long notes usually played by the organ pedals and strict counterpoint in the other voices, was retained for certain key places in the liturgy and became known as the *plainchant en taille* style ("plainchant in the tenor" style). Here, the pedal line was played on the *Trompette*, the most "brilliant and penetrating" stop on the French organ of this period.<sup>19</sup> (Since the Pedal *Trompette* sounded at 8' pitch, it was heard in the tenor register; the lowest sounding voice was the bottom line of the manual part.) The use of the *plainchant en taille* texture was intended to fulfill the requirement of the *Caeremoniale Parisiense* that certain versets in the Mass Ordinary cycle present the plainchant in a pure, unornamented form<sup>20</sup> – the first and last Kyrie, the phrases "Et in terra pax," "Qui tollis peccata mundi," and "In gloria Dei Patris" in the Gloria, the first Sanctus and the first Agnus. By presenting these seven versets in

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<sup>19</sup> Fenner Douglass, *The Language of the Classical French Organ: A Musical Tradition before 1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 89.

<sup>20</sup> van Wye, "Ritual Use of the Organ in France," 321.

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*plainchant en taille* style, the organist ensured that the plainchant melody would be clearly audible. This style of verset continued to be popular for centuries after Titelouze's death and changed little; examples from as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century are essentially identical.<sup>21</sup>

Titelouze's style also heralded a flexible approach to performance practice that was typical of many later composers. In the preface to *Hymnes de l'Église*, he suggests that if his versets are too long, the organist can "finish at some period towards the middle, several of which I have marked to serve as an example."<sup>22</sup> This practice, reminiscent of the toccatas of Frescobaldi, is not explicitly endorsed by most later organist-composers, although the *Livre d'orgue* of Nicolas Gigault<sup>23</sup> contains several versets which are designed so that the organist may end the piece at two different places, depending on the mode of the chant that is to follow. In his second collection, *Le Magnificat*, Titelouze suggests that his versets for this canticle could equally be applied to the Benedictus (not the movement of the Mass Ordinary, but a canticle appointed for the office of Lauds), which was sung to a similar recitation formula.<sup>24</sup> He writes: "I have added a second *Deposuit potentes* because in the canticle "Benedictus" there are seven versets for organ, and the Magnificat has only six; you may choose to

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<sup>21</sup> Benjamin van Wye, "Gregorian influences in French Organ Music before the 'Motu proprio,'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1974): 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> Titelouze, op. cit., in Gay, *Four French Organist-Composers, 1549-1720*, 43-4.

<sup>23</sup> Nicolas Gigault, *Livre de Musique pour l'Orgue*, in *Archives des Maîtres de l'Orgue des XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles*, ed. Alexandre Guilmant and André Pirro, vol. 4. (Paris: Durand et Fils, 1899, reprint: New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> Higginbottom, "Organ music and the liturgy," 134.

play whichever one you wish.”<sup>25</sup> By providing two alternative versets for the “Deposit potentes,” Titelouze allows the same music to serve for two canticles of different lengths; the player would use both for the seven-verse Benedictus and would have the option of using either in the Magnificat.

Titelouze’s suggestions are illuminating for the performer of this repertoire; they point to the possibility that versets labelled for one purpose could well have been used for another. His versets seem to be designed for the Magnificat, including text incipits in the score indicating which section of the Magnificat corresponds to each verset, but Titelouze’s preface suggests that his pieces could fit other canticles as well. This practice of recasting versets for one text to fit another may explain the near-total absence of published settings of the Benedictus, the Nunc dimittis (a canticle for the office of Compline), or the Propers of the Mass.<sup>26</sup> After all, Titelouze’s settings would have been attractive to organists with less experience in improvisation; if such organists worked at small parish churches with few services per week, the repertoire of published versets could be sufficient to meet their needs. Rather than improvising new versets for the more obscure chants, they would be attracted by Titelouze’s suggestion of reusing versets designed for a different liturgical purpose. Titelouze explicitly states in the introduction to *Le Magnificat* that he has designed these versets to be easier to play than his previous published collection, so as to be accessible to “those who lack learning (since it is for them that I have

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<sup>25</sup> Titelouze, *Oeuvres complètes d’Orgue*, 96. Translation mine.

<sup>26</sup> Higginbottom, “Organ music and the liturgy,” 134.

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made this volume).”<sup>27</sup> The commercial success of Titelouze’s works demonstrates that he appealed to this audience quite successfully. Because later Parisian organist-composers were even more liberal than Titelouze in following ecclesiastical prescription, it is likely that organ versets of this period could have been used in a wide variety of liturgical contexts, not only the ones suggested by their titles.

An examination of the *livres d’orgue* by French composers from the later half of the century demonstrates this great versatility. In the preface to his *Premier livre d’orgue*, Nicolas Lebègue states that “the Verses in this book can be played to all the Psalms and Canticles on all the tones, even to Elevations of the Mass, and to Offertories.”<sup>28</sup> The book consists of a series of versets in different modes, labelled not by their liturgical designation but by their musical genre. The titles of the pieces, such as “Fugue grave,” “Dialogue,” “Plein jeu,” or “Tierce en taille” designate the conventional character, texture and registration for each movement, but have no liturgical significance. The pieces are intended for liturgical use but are based entirely on secular models and have no connection to plainchant. Clérambault’s frequently-performed *Livre d’Orgue* is organized along similar lines; it contains several pieces with no liturgical designation grouped into suites on the first and second church tones.<sup>29</sup> It has been suggested that Clérambault’s suites could be

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<sup>27</sup> Titelouze, *Oeuvres complètes d’Orgue*, 96. Translation mine.

<sup>28</sup> Nicolas Lebègue, *Oeuvres complètes d’Orgue*, in *Archives des Maîtres de l’Orgue des XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles*, ed. Alexandre Guilmant and André Pirro, vol. 9 (Paris: Durand et Fils, 1899, reprint: New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972), Translation in Douglass, *The Language of the Classical French Organ: A Musical Tradition before 1800*, 195.

<sup>29</sup> Louis-Nicolas de Clérambault, *Livre d’Orgue* (Miami: Edwin F. Kalmus, n.d.).

used for cycles of the Magnificat,<sup>30</sup> but since they contain seven versets rather than six, it seems likely that the suites could also be designed with the Benedictus in mind. André Raison's *Livre d'Orgue* contains five Mass cycles, but he notes in the preface that "the 5 Masses can serve also for the Magnificat for those who do not need a Mass."<sup>31</sup> The performer can produce a usable Magnificat cycle from Raison's masses by dividing each mass into three suites for a total of fifteen Magnificats.

The prefaces to these *livres d'orgue* give a good idea of their intended function. Many of the composers go to great lengths to demonstrate the versatility of their compositions, and several specifically address themselves to the less experienced player. For instance, Lebègue, likely aware that poorly trained organists would be playing his works, urges his readers to play them "with the correct combinations of stops and the proper tempo for each piece; and particularly to practice them, so that they will know them well enough to play them, for the music will then show to greater advantage and have infinitely more grace."<sup>32</sup> Others, reminded perhaps of Titelouze's desire to demonstrate the "perfection" of the French school, seem to consider their works more as exempla of their style of composition. Jacques Boyvin in particular includes in his

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<sup>30</sup> Higginbottom, "Organ music and the liturgy," 138.

<sup>31</sup> André Raison, *Livre d'Orgue*, in *Archives des Maîtres de l'Orgue des XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles*, ed. Alexandre Guilmant and André Pirro, vol. 2 (Paris: Durand et Fils, 1899, reprint: New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972). Translation mine.

<sup>32</sup> Nicolas Lebègue, *Oeuvres complètes d'Orgue*, English translation in Douglass, *The Language of the Classical French Organ: A Musical Tradition before 1800*, 195.

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*Livre d'Orgue* a table of French registrations, since his book "could fall into the hands of foreign musicians."<sup>33</sup>

Although several printed collections from this period survive, there are very few manuscript sources offering an idea of local performance practices. The recent discovery of the so-called *Livre d'orgue de Montréal*, however, represents the largest single manuscript source of organ music from this period.<sup>34</sup> The manuscript was brought to Canada from Paris by the priest Jean Girard, a schoolteacher who became the organist at the Montréal church of Notre Dame, then a small parish church.<sup>35</sup> Sixteen of the pieces in the manuscript were later identified as being by Nicolas Lebègue, but the remaining ones are of unidentified authorship. The contents of the manuscript correspond well with the contents of published *livres d'orgue* of this period; the manuscript contains six masses, settings of the Magnificat and Te Deum (a hymn for the office of Matins), and a variety of versets with no liturgical designation. Since Girard was not primarily a musician, it seems likely that he lacked advanced training as an organist and may have used the collection of versets as an alternative to improvising at each service. Because the manuscript contains 398 pieces, he would likely have found this number sufficient for his needs (particularly combined

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<sup>33</sup> Jacques Boyvin, *Oeuvres complètes d'Orgue*, in *Archives des Maîtres de l'Orgue des XVIe, XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles*, ed. Alexandre Guilmant and André Pirro, vol. 6 (Paris: Durand et Fils, 1899, reprint: New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972). English translation in Douglass, *The Language of the Classical French Organ: A Musical Tradition before 1800*, 202.

<sup>34</sup> *Le livre d'orgue de Montréal*, 17<sup>th</sup>-century music manuscript, facsimile reproduction of the manuscript deposited in the Fonds Girouard de la Fondation Lionel-Groulx in 1950 (Montreal: Fondation Lionel-Groulx, 1981).

<sup>35</sup> Jiyoung Lee, "Livre d'Orgue de Montréal: Classical French Organ Performance Practice" (D.M.A. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2003), 1.

with two volumes of works by Nivers, also in his possession).<sup>36</sup> The mass settings in the book are even looser in structure than is typical of the period; only one contains any reference to plainsong, the remainder being essentially extended suites in a single church tone.<sup>37</sup>

Both printed and manuscript sources of seventeenth-century French organ music, therefore, are representations of a larger oral tradition based on improvisation. As practiced by a master of the style like Couperin, the organ mass was not a compositional genre but an improvisational practice followed by generations of organists throughout France. However, the absence of standardized musical training for organists prompted the greatest practitioners of the art to write notated examples for educational purposes. These “frozen improvisations” provide a valuable window into liturgical practices of the time. Contrary to the rather strict requirements of Catholic ceremonials, most contemporary organists seem to have taken great freedom with their versets; they were willing to introduce material from secular dance styles or reuse the same pieces in different liturgical contexts. The contemporary practice of performing this repertoire in a recital context is often historically inaccurate. For example, a common approach to this music is to perform a complete Mass cycle by a single composer as though it were a complete work in itself, a type of performance which has no precedent in seventeenth-century practices. In reality, alternatim performance was governed by a complex set of

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<sup>36</sup> Lee, “*Livre d’Orgue de Montréal: Classical French Organ Performance Practice*,” 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

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relationships that often permitted an extremely flexible approach to liturgical performance.

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