



Learning to Love Leclair

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Jean-Marie Leclair (1697–1764) was a legendary French violin virtuoso of the eighteenth century and a first-rate composer. Overshadowed by contemporaries Bach, Telemann, Handel, Vivaldi, and Corelli, Leclair's works are rarely considered for serious study by today's violinists. A resurgence of interest in his music has been sparked by the growth of the period-instrument movement and its quest for forgotten repertoire.

Leclair was extremely prolific, composing four volumes of twelve sonatas each. The outstanding qualities of these works, especially the late solo sonatas, make them attractive to performers of both Baroque and modern violins. Replete with the kind of challenging material ideally suited for students, Leclair's multi-faceted sonatas provide a repertoire alternative to standards such as the unaccompanied Bach sonatas and partitas, the Handel sonatas, or the Vivaldi concertos.

Leclair's music is particularly idiomatic for the Baroque violin. Initial awkwardness playing the works on a modern violin may be responsible for the sonatas' relegation to obscurity in the last two centuries. Stylistically elusive and enigmatic, these unique and under-appreciated works require a fair amount of exploration and experimentation for a musically informed performance. Teachers and students are likely to gain great satisfaction from the effort, as they discover the originality and beauty of these forgotten gems from the past.

THE STYLE

The execution and interpretation of Leclair's music is determined by studying the subtleties of his unique personal style. In addition to a significant technical challenge, the sonatas provide unique insights into almost every national style of music from the eighteenth century. Writing on the eve of the new classicism, Leclair was most heavily influenced by the Italian virtuosos of the time, but was also somewhat affected by musical trends from Germany and England. As a result, the sonatas represent a cosmopolitan style.

The most common dichotomy found in these supposedly French sonatas is the presentation of an Italian title on movements that demonstrate clear French, German, or English traits. This can be very confusing when making general interpretive decisions. Leclair's Sarabande movements, for example, are all titled with the Italianate *Sarabanda*, a form more closely related to the quick and lively Spanish Zarabanda. Leclair's Sarabandas, however, better fit the description of early Baroque

French Sarabandas, which are slow, intensely expressive, simple melodies demanding highly skilled ornamentation. Unlike a typical Sarabande, though, Leclair's plain melody is already somewhat decorated with specific French graces and trills.

The cosmopolitan nature of Leclair's Allemands also render general interpretive decisions quite challenging. These movements are given the Italianate *a* suffix—Allemanda—but sound less like Veracini than like Bach. Applying the rules of French ornamentation will help in some movements but could seem grotesque in others. A better solution is to acknowledge the characteristics and flavor of French ornamentation when Leclair specifies them in his original notation, but to be true to the character changes. A sudden shift to virtuosic sixteenth notes in a Presto, for example, should command images of Locatelli, and all thoughts of French decoration should be abandoned.

Leclair also occasionally approaches writing that hearkens to a later more Classical language. The second movement Allemanda of the Second Sonata in E Minor makes an Italianate promise from its title, but it opens with a Germanic quality that quickly turns itself over to French couplets and graces. (See Example 1.) By measure six, there are sequences worthy of Bach, and by measure nine, Haydnesque triplets appear. Haydn could have provided the bridge material that ends the first half of the movement, although it seems to be ushered in by figurations in measure 11 that evoke the style of Couperin. These dramatic changes of character in almost every phrase ultimately render this as one of the most charming movements in the opus. To treat this music as strictly Baroque misses the traits of the new Classicism.

Example 1: Leclair, Sonata No. 2, Op. 9, Allemanda, mm. 1–10.

Example 2: Leclair, Sonata No. 4, Op. 9, *Andante Spirituoso*, mm. 1-8 and 59-62.

bowing a



Example 3: Veracini, Sonata Accademiche, Sonatas No. 4 and No. 9.



Example 4: Couperin, from *Apotheose de Corelli*, *Gravement*, mm. 12-15.




Finally, perhaps the most surprising encounter is the innocent-looking finale of Sonata No. 4 with the tempo marking *Allegro assai*. It is unmistakably an English Hornpipe dance followed by a brilliant sixteenth-note variation, Corelli style. If violinists are not afraid to give in to Leclair's whims and drastic mood shifts, they will realize that his music represents an elastic tour de force spanning a stylistic and temporal range unrivaled by his contemporaries.

SOME TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Violinists attempting to perform these works on modern instruments can learn a great deal from a Baroque instrument. Separate-note legato, for example, is an articulation more naturally and easily played with a Baroque bow, but which can be replicated on a modern bow by adjusting the weight and increasing the breadth of the stroke. Separate-note legato is commonly employed for melodic passages or notes grouped harmonically but not indicated with a slur.

Many Baroque composers, including Leclair, intended a legato sound even though they did not mark slurs in the score. The opening of Leclair's Fourth Sonata from Book 4, for example, does not contain slurs, but this passage need not be played off the string. (See Example 2.) This is a songful aria, and Urtext editions reveal that many of the most melodic Baroque arias were originally notated with a paucity of slurs. "But Who May Abide" from Handel's *Messiah* is a notable example. The idea that legato writing is only represented by the slur can endanger some of the most beautiful Baroque writing.

The Baroque bow is easily maneuvered with simple finger motion to produce an appropriate style of separate-note legato. The same technique can be adapted to a modern bow through careful planning and attention to harmonic groupings and impulse gestures. In Example 2, harmonic groupings follow the bass line, and modern editions might slur the



violin line to match it (marked by dotted lines). This makes good musical sense and gives an impression of how Brahms, for example, might have notated the same melody had he composed it. But the *Spiritoso* character here can be compromised if the notes are slurred.

A more informed approach might include slurring only the impulse gestures—shown in Example 2 as solid slur marks—which are revealed in the continuo line. The songful separate-note legato hidden in a modern bow now reveals itself. Technically, it is a slow stroke, motivated almost entirely by the fingers and played into the string.

In general, examining the bass lines of these sonatas, or any Baroque writing, will reveal important clues as to inflecting the solo line. This process will also reveal Leclair's truly eclectic nature. His continuo parts are extremely active, as was more traditional in French Baroque writing. But his violin writing is lyrical in the songful nature of Italian aria, or virtuosic as in florid Italian *passagio*. In the first movement of Leclair's Fourth Sonata (Example 2), the violin writing looks convincingly like Veracini. (See Example 3.) Yet the very active continuo line often moves chord figures on every eighth note, reminiscent of Couperin. (See Example 4.) This reveals the importance in Baroque sonatas of the supporting harmonic structures. When studying Leclair, an awareness of this harmonic structure combined with a general sense of the national styles he draws upon provide important clues for interpreting the music.

Ornamentation is a difficult but highly instructive issue in Leclair's music. Much of the writing seems to demand ornamentation, yet the writing is so extravagant to begin with, anything more than simple flourishes (or those graces specifically notated by the composer) tend to sound excessive. Leclair's virtuosity as a player finds its mark on the written page, as he was clearly writing for himself. Ironically, this quality in his music is another reason why it is particularly suited for students. It stands beautifully unadorned when played simply with French nuances and does not necessarily require the performer to be versed in the intricacies of French Baroque ornamentation to deliver a convincing performance.

UNDERSTANDING THE BAROQUE VIOLIN AND BOW

Violinists can familiarize themselves with the playing characteristics of a Baroque bow to develop techniques suitable for playing the Leclair sonatas with a modern bow. While the Baroque bow lacks the power of its modern counterpart, it demonstrates its strengths with its ability for nuance, range of articulations, and subtleties of inflection. In addition, a Baroque bow promotes ease of string crossings, rapid bow changes, the ability to modulate tone color under single notes and, most dramatically, an ease with articulating separate-note legato. On the other hand, Baroque bows are not well suited for sustaining long pitches and executing highly articulated *martelé*-type strokes at

the tip of the comparably longer modern bow. Not surprisingly, this collection of playing characteristics matches the overall style of the music written when the early bow was in use.

The desire to perform on an historically accurate instrument should not lead to the exclusion of great repertoire if a Baroque violin is unavailable. A few simple alterations can be made to a modern violin to bring it closer to its original condition. I like to perform these sonatas with my modern violin made by Carlo Giuseppe Testore, refitted with a Baroque tailpiece, gut strings tuned to A = 415, no chinrest, and with a Baroque bow. I have not changed the fingerboard, soundpost or bridge as that is certainly not a simple operation and would render the instrument unsuitable for later repertoire.

Although Testore made this particular violin in 1703, it was modernized in the early nineteenth-century along with most stringed instruments in Europe. This modernization process consisted of making the neck and fingerboard considerably longer and increasing the sizes of the resonating fittings (soundpost, bass bar, and bridge). Modernization not only increased the power of these Baroque instruments, but drastically changed their quality of sound.

To refit a modern instrument that was refitted from its original Baroque fittings would mean reversing the surgery originally performed, and most violinists are not willing to alter their instruments in this way. It is feasible however, to try some of the modifications mentioned above. At the very least, gut strings and a Baroque bow will prove to be a most interesting experience and will bring the modern player closer to the sound and feel of a pre-nineteenth century instrument.

A VEHICLE FOR EXPLORATION

Barring the drastic step of altering a modern instrument, today's players should be able to manipulate their modern instruments and technique to suit these pieces. Leclair's music must be approached as a puzzle, with the sorting out of different styles as a sound starting point. An attempt to find a single set of rules will ultimately stifle the interpretation.

Above and beyond any of the rules touted by the masters, the voice of the individual performer is imperative. Leclair's music has the advantage of being free of fifty years of definitive recorded renditions. His music allows and demands a high degree of committed expressive playing by the performer. It is a perfect vehicle for advanced students to begin to truly explore their own musical voices. **AST**

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