

## **JEAN-MARIE LECLAIR**

Dr David C F Wright

Sadly this composer seems only to be remembered because he was murdered.

His life was certainly one of intrigue.

He was born in Lyons on 10th May 1697, the eldest of a family of eight. His father was Antoine Leclair a braid maker. He was a competent bass player but there is no evidence to support the suggestion in De Bernis's *Necrologie des hommes celebres de France* that he was 'musician to Louis XIV'. He was an amateur musician called upon to perform at local events. But he clearly encouraged his family into music. The rest of his many children were Jeanne (born 1699), Francoise (b 1701) Jean-Marie le cadet (1703-1777), Francois (b. 1705), Antoniette (b. 1708), Pierre (1709-1784) and, finally, Jean-Benoit (b 1714). Four became musicians. Pierre published a book of duets for two violins in Paris in 1764, the year of his famous brother's tragic death. Jean -Marie 'le cadet' published works for two violins as well. His opus 1 appeared in 1739 and his opus 2 appeared in 1750 under the auspices of his brother. He also wrote a vocal work *Le Rhone et la Saone* about 1733.

We know nothing about Jean- Marie Leclair's early years until we read of his marriage at the age of nineteen to Marie-Rose Casthanie a dancer at the Lyons opera which marriage took place on 1st February 1716. It has been speculated that Leclair was also a dancer there and that is how they met. He was clearly proficient in the art of dancing for, in 1722, he was engaged as first dancer and master of the ballet at Turin Opera but on his wedding certificate he is described as a braid maker. He did not stay in Turin long. By October 1723 he is in Paris where he published his first set of violin sonatas dedicated to Monsieur Bonnier a powerful financier. In 1726 Leclair is back in Turin again where he met Quantz and taking violin lessons from Giovanni Battista Somis who was a pupil of Corelli. Leclair was again the master of the Turin ballet and active with the choreography for Sarri's *Didone*.

Obviously benefiting from the tuition of Somis, Leclair published his opus 2, another set of violin sonatas which appeared in 1728 when Leclair had moved back to Paris. They are dedicated to Monsieur Joseph Bonnier de la Mosson the son of Leclair's first benefactor who had since died. Leclair actually lodged in Joseph's hotel at the Rue St Dominique and became his violin teacher. During holy week 1728 he was engaged at the Concert Spirituel. Around this time his first wife who was much older than he was, died leaving no children. In 1730 he married for the second time to a young music engraver named Louise Roussel who continued with her work even after her husband's death, her last recorded engraving being of his cello sonatas. With Louise, Leclair had a daughter, also Louise, who later married the engraver Louis Quenet.

Leclair's reputation had come to the attention of Louis XV who made him his premier symphoniste. Leclair dedicated his opus 5 set of violin sonatas to the king in 1734 which were engraved by his wife as were all his subsequent works. He was now living in the Rue St Benoist near the Abaie St Germain. Leclair's court duties alternated with fellow composer, Jean-Pierre Guignon, another pupil of Somis, who, although Italian by birth became a naturalised Frenchman in 1741. This arrangement was not to Leclair's taste and, sadly, rivalry and jealousy ensued. Each composer had their own set of supporters. Guignon's playing was said to be more colourful and fanciful than Leclairs.

Leclair resigned from court and from the Concert Spirituel in 1736. He believed, as I do, that music should be unhindered by financial and political considerations and that music was a skill not a platform for showing off. He also believed passionately, and, again, so do I, that music should be performed as written and in full cognisance of the composer's intentions. To take liberties with the music was an insult to the composer. How right he was!

Leclair sought refuge in the Netherlands between 1737 and 1742 where he met the great Locatelli and had

violin lessons from him. This is shown in his fourth book of violin sonatas opus 9 dating from 1737-8. Leclair would have known Locatelli's amazing Concertos opus 3 published in 1733.

The opus 9 sonatas are dedicated to Princess Anne of Orange. It is said that she received him at her court at Leeuwaarden but Leclair's life in Holland is shrouded in mystery.

He returned to Paris in June 1743 but did not stay long being invited to the court of the Infante Don Felipe at Chambery in Spain where he stayed for some time, the Infante having a passion for French music. He was in the habit of getting up at four in the morning to play his cello and his pardessus de viole. It was to him that Leclair dedicated his second set of violin concertos opus 10.

In the winter of 1744/5 Leclair returned to Paris where he composed his only opera *Scylla et Glaucus* from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which the beautiful Scylla is in love with Glaucus the sea god but she is changed into a monster by Circe a jealous rival. Here the subject of rivalry and jealousy rears its ugly head again. The opera is dedicated to the Comtesse de la Mark an amateur singer and it was first performed at the Acadmie Royale de Musique on 4th October 1746 in a lavish production in which the lead was taken by the distinguished Marie Fel.

The opera was politely received but Leclair was troubled as to whether it would last. He arranged the overture transcribing it for two violins and bass to form part of his opus 13. He was not noted for his writing for the voice and he wanted parts of the opera to be remembered in a genre at which he was more capable.

In his final twenty years his powers of invention waned. His opus 12 set of violin duets and his overtures opus 13 did not please him and he was reluctant to publish anything else. Like Brahms he destroyed lots of music that he did not think was of high quality and so, as with Brahms, all his extant work is good. Leclair's lack of prodigious appointments also has a bearing on his attitudes to his own music. But in 1748 the Duc de Gramont took him under his wing making him the principal violinist and director of his private orchestra.

But Leclair was still a man of mystery and no more so than in his final years. In 1758 his marriage broke up and his wife went to live in the lodgings of a Monsieur Chavagnac, a mason in the Rue du Four-Saint-Germain. Leclair lived in a hovel in the Rude de Careme-Prenant on the outskirts of Paris but he had no need to do this. Gromant would have given him hospitality rather than his living in a most unsavoury part of the city.

Why did Leclair do this?

Why did Louise leave him?

In the early morning of 23rd October 1764 Leclair was found lying dead in the vestibule of his home in a pool of blood from three vicious stab wounds. He had been out for the evening playing billiards with a musical friend. Suspicion fell on his gardener, Jacques Paysant, who found the body and on a disgruntled nephew Francois-Guillame Val, the forty year old son of his sister Francoise who resented his uncle for not assisting him in his career. The murder remains a mystery to this day but it is likely that his wife had something to do with it. She was reduced to dire financial problems and, after his death, could then auction her husband's belongings and house to raise capital which she did.. She also reissued his works and assembled two from his unpublished material including the Trio, opus 14 and a solitary Violin Sonata, opus 15. Perhaps these were acts of penance.

The funeral took place on 25th October amid due ceremony at the Eglise Saint-Laurent and a memorial service was held much later on 2nd December 1765 at the Eglise de Feuillants in the Rue Saint -Honore where the choir and orchestra of the Concert Spirituel performed Mondonville's *De Profundis*.

Blainville once described Leclair as ' the French Corelli'. Certainly Leclair was the first great French violin

virtuoso and has to be set alongside Couperin for his inventive keyboard works and Rameau the greatest French composer of opera and, in my view, the greatest composer of opera of all time.

Before Leclair's opus 1 there were French composers of solo violin sonatas such as Francois Duval whose first book of sonatas appeared in 1704, Jean-Fery Rebel whose first collection dates from 1705, Jean Baptiste Senallie in 1710 and Francois Francoeur in 1720. The French violin concerto had to wait until 1735 with the appearance of Jacques Aubert's concertos, opus 17. Leclair's six concertos, opus 7, date from 1737 although number 3 in C could be played on an oboe or flute as directed by the composer. This is probably the best known of his concertos with expansive gestures in the first two movements but the finale is rather commonplace. The fifth concerto in a minor has a nobility and number 4 in F recalls Tartini, not Corelli. The second set, opus 10, has in number 5 in E minor and number 6 in G minor unsurpassed quality where Leclair finds an individual voice.

Unfortunately Leclair's music is usually performed as faceless music with fussiness over period instruments and ornamentation. When I have conducted them I have ensured that the allegros are really quick and lively and that the slow movements do not drag. After all, a good conductor sticks to all the composers' intentions and every detail at all times.

---

Copyright David C F Wright. This article or any part of it must not be copied or downloaded, stored in any retrieval system or used in any way without obtaining the prior written consent of the author.