

# Francois Couperin's *La Flore* (5th Ordre): Motivic Replication, Approach to III, and Analytic Methodology

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## Abstract

When I first played François Couperin's keyboard miniature *La Flore*, it immediately struck me as beautiful, restrained, and austere. This article comments on the following aspects of the piece: (1) a persistent motive and its interaction with the piece's structure; (2) how the opening measures both set up this motive and are echoed in the closing measures; (3) the somewhat circuitous route to the mediant; (4) the coda; and (5) the potential awkwardness of integrating the motive, which moves from scale degrees  $\hat{5}$  up to  $\hat{8}$  and back again, within an Urlinie structure which descends to  $\hat{1}$ . To this end, I will also look at an unpublished 2016 reading by Charles Burkhart which incorporates David Neumeyer's ideas of the ascending Urlinie and the three-voice Ursatz (Neumeyer 1987a and b).

When I first played François Couperin's keyboard miniature *La Flore*, it immediately struck me, and still does, as beautiful, restrained, and austere, suffused by a subdued clarity, like that of an intricate but distant landscape. Channan Willner has suggested that, small as it is, its influence in particular (beyond that of Couperin in general) can be observed in works by such later 18th- and 19th-century composers as Joseph Haydn, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Johannes Brahms (Willner 2006). This article will comment on the following aspects of the piece: (1) a persistent motive and its interaction with the piece's structure; (2) how the opening measures both set up this motive and relate to the closing measures; (3) the somewhat circuitous route to the mediant; (4) the coda; and (5) the potential awkwardness of integrating the motive, which moves from scale degrees  $\hat{5}$  up to  $\hat{8}$  and back again, within an Urlinie structure which descends to  $\hat{1}$ . To that end, I will also look at an unpublished reading by Charles Burkhart which incorporates David Neumeyer's ideas of the ascending Urlinie and the three-voice Ursatz (Neumeyer 1987a and b).

## The Motive

Upon repeated playings of *La Flore* I became aware of a curious sense of monotony, perhaps of *déjà vu* – a sense of seeing the same signs flash by on the highway, even as the landscape of the piece kept changing. This sense, I am convinced, derives from a persistently repeated motive, replicated on multiple levels, shown in bracketed capital letters above the music in Example 1: E-F $\sharp$ -G-(F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ )-A-G-F $\flat$ -E. This motive inhabits the upper tetrachord

of the A minor scale. It appears in different harmonic contexts, but is pitch-specific – always in the 4-octave register, and always in the right hand. It also contains some built-in chromaticism: ascending, F $\sharp$  moves to G (and sometimes to G $\sharp$ ; thence to A); descending, F $\flat$  moves to E. As shown in the brackets above the staves, the motive occurs in mm. 3–5, on a somewhat larger level in 3–8, in 8–11, 19–22, and 23–26.

In addition, a case can be made for an overarching version of the motive that embraces the individual instances and covers almost the entire piece. Example 2, a middleground sketch, shows this macro version and how it interacts with the piece's structure. Here the expansion is one-sided – the ascent from E to A (mm. 3–25) is greatly enlarged, but the descent to E is not (mm. 25–26). From E, retained all the way from the initial E Kopfton in m. 3, I read a quick Urlinie descent in mm. 26–27. Briefly put, I also read the overall bass arpeggiation as I-III-V-I. To do so, however, I somewhat devalue the I6 chords in mm. 21 and 25, seeing them not only as local tonics but, in a larger sense, as the result of a 5-6 motion from III in m. 19.

In a sense, as shown in Example 3, the motive is prepared in the first three measures by a series of unfoldings in the right hand: in the top voice, C-A, G $\sharp$ -B, A; answered by E-C, B-E, C in the middle voice. The top line of this initial gesture descends a third between C5 and A4 (mm. 1–2), and the answering gesture descends a third between E4 and C4 (mm. 2–3), leaving a gap of a perfect fourth between A4 and E4. This gap is then neatly filled in by the motive, which moves up (E-F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -A) and