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Avec Privilège du Roi. 1731.

Joseph Bodin de BOISMORTIER

By Mia Dreese and Hans Maas

In 2005 we commemorated the 250th anniversary of the death of Joseph Bodin de Boismortier (1689-1755), for flute players one of the best known French composers from the first half of the 18th century. Who was this Boismortier, who has left us such an impressive number of chamber music works for flute?

Boismortier was born in 1689 in Thionville, a town in the northeastern part of France. In 1700 he moved some thirty miles south to Metz where he studied with Joseph Valette de Montigny (1665-1738), an accomplished composer of church music. In 1713, he was 24 years old, Boismortier followed his teacher to Perpignan, in the very southern part of France, near the Mediterranean Sea and the Pyrenees. Here he worked as a *receveur de la régie royale des tabacs* for the military troops in Roussillon, he collected the taxes on tobacco! In Perpignan Boismortier wrote quite some compositions, including a few *Airs à boire* that were published in Paris. Apparently his compositions were successful in Paris and in 1723 he decided to move to Paris with his family. In September 1724 he was granted a *privilege* (license) to engrave and publish his works, something he would continue to do for the rest of his life. From 1743 until 1745 he was first *sous-chef* and later *chef d'orchestre* at the Foire Saint Laurent and in 1745 also at the Foire St. Germain, two well-known street-theaters in Paris. As a composer Boismortier was exceptionally prolific and successful. In October 1747 the newspaper *Mercure de France* mentioned that by selling his music he had earned 500,000 ducats, which allowed him to live a luxurious life. This was very exceptional for a composer who did not have a position at either a court, a church or some nobility. As from 1753 Boismortier retreated to his estate 'La Gâtinellerie' in Roissy-en-Brie, where he died in 1755 at the age of sixty-six.

Boismortier did not write many large-scale works. There is the ballet *Le voyage de l'Amour*, performed at the Paris opera in 1736, a ballet-comique *Don Quichotte chez la Duchesse* (1743), a 'pastorale' *Daphnis et Chloé* (1747) and a 'tragédie lyrique' (opera) *Daphné* that was never performed. He also wrote a few secular cantatas called 'cantatilles', some sacred motets for solo voices with some instruments and basso continuo, a motet 'à grand choeur' and several collections of *airs à boire et sérieux*.

However, by far the largest part of Boismortiers impressive oeuvre consists of instrumental chamber music and in his chamber music the flute plays an important role. It is possible that he played the flute himself. Beside the musical compositions Boismortier wrote a book on flute playing *Principes de flûtes* that was unfortunately lost and also a method for the descant gamba. A sure reason for Boismortier to write many works for flute is the great popularity of the instrument at the time, especially with amateurs. Boismortier had a good sense for the public's taste and was perfectly willing to take that into account while composing and besides that he composed with great ease.

Musical taste in France had changed dramatically after the death of Louis XIV in 1715. The monumental pomp and circumstance at the Sun-King's court made way for the rococo period. The music, as all arts, changed to being elegant, graceful and simple instead of massive and complicated. Also, the emphasis on the French identity became less and made way for the influence of Italian music since it was no longer rejected by Louis XIV's regime. This

brought typical Italian musical forms like the sonata and the concerto to France as can be seen in Boismortier's list of compositions.

Another characteristic of France in those years is found in the idealization of life in the country. The nobility had itself portrayed in shepherd's clothes, which were in fact far from the harsh reality. The flute, traditionally a shepherd's instrument, fitted very well in this context. As did other shepherd's instruments like the bagpipe (*musette*) and the hurdy-gurdy (*vielle à roue*). It made the commercially attuned Boismortier write numerous rural suites with names like *gentilleses*, *pastorales* and *divertissements de campagne*.

It is noteworthy that Boismortier wrote a lot of his chamber music without a basso continuo: duets, trios, quartets and even quintets for flutes, oboes, violins or viola da gambas. In conformity with his commercial character the title pages of his works often suggest other possible instrumentation (i.e. 'flutes or other instruments', 'flutes, oboes or violins') in order to make a work sell better. Boismortier's 'VI Concertos' for five flutes dated 1727 deserve special notice because they are unique in this genre.

Fifth Suite from Six Suites de Pièces op. 35

A nice example of Boismortier's style of composition is found in his *Six Suites de Pièces pour une Flûte traversière seule, avec la Basse*. The title page mentions that "Ces pièces sont ornées de tous leurs agréments. On pourra les jouer sans basse et les apprendre par coeur, si l'on veut". ("These pieces are provided with all the ornaments. One can play them without bass and learn them by heart, if desired.") Although the suites were initially published with an accompanying bass, and two of them are still available in a modern edition with basso continuo (Schott FTR 16 and 17), they are more satisfying when played by a solo flute (Schott FTR 15, *Six Suites for Flute solo*, edited by Hugo Ruf).¹ The bassline is not missed at all when left out. In fact, when added much of the possibility of free interpretation is lost. Most of the pieces are fairly easy and can be played after four or five years of flute lessons. The *Préludes*, however, need more experience in both rhythmical and stylistic sense and should first be played without any embellishments or with a few trills at the most.

In order to play all ornaments in a correct manner, it is necessary to look into the French performance practice of Boismortier's time. Much information can be found in Betty Bang Mather's *Interpretation of French Music from 1675 to 1775*² and in *Free Ornamentation in Woodwind Music 1700-1775* by Betty Bang Mather and David Lasocki³.


The current article will focus on the fifth suite because all of its five movements are interesting and because it is written in the key of b-minor, a key that is relatively easy to play in (also on a baroque flute). The embellishments are not too difficult and their result is very rewarding which makes the piece well suited for a concert performance.


The five movements are: *Prélude (Lentement)* – *Bourrée en Rondeau* – *Rondeau (Gracieusement)* – *Fantaisie (Vivement)* – *Gigue*. In this suite the *Prélude* is the only slow movement. Even the *Rondeau Gracieusement* needs an elegant but flowing tempo.

Prélude

With this first movement you introduce yourself. When choosing a tempo imagine that you are accompanying a distinguished lady wearing a hoopskirt. She is afraid of tripping over her

dress, but is eager to reach her seat, for instance $\text{♩} = \text{MM } 54$. The time signature is alla breve, $2/2$, so there are only two beats to a measure. Many musicians tend to count four beats to a measure in slow movements with complex rhythm like these, but this always results in the incorrect four accents to a measure. In this case, as in any quadruple meter, the first quarter is a strong beat, the third quarter a little less strong, while the second and fourth quarter are weak. The upbeats of an eighth note should be played light and can be made somewhat shorter than noted, a bit *inégal*, unequal, which makes the upbeat approximately the length of a sixteenth (see example 1). This applies to all upbeats and passing eighth notes in this Prélude. The pattern of an eighth – two sixteenth notes should be played as a dotted eighth note with two thirty-seconds. Three sixteenth notes become three thirty-seconds (example 2). So, long notes become slightly longer, short notes shorter.

notation 

performance 

Example 1: Prélude, beginning.

notation 

performance 

Example 2: Prélude, m. 11.

In order to find the correct breathing points in this Prélude you can play it faster and without the ornaments. This way the phrasing becomes clear. Breathing after every long note is tempting but is not the correct way of phrasing this first movement. In the next movements of this suite the phrasing is obvious, in the Prélude you have to search for it (example 3).

Prélude – Lentement



Example 3: ' Phrasing in the Prélude.

‘Wesentliche Manieren’ or ‘Essential Graces’

Some of the ornaments in Boismortier’s suite have names:

∞ is called a ‘Tremblement simple’ or ‘short trill’: trill once or twice starting on the upper note and on the beat (example 4). When the note before the trill is the same as the upper note, repeat the upper note when beginning the trill, on the beat as in example 4. When there is a slur over these two notes, hold the first note a bit longer. The upper note of the trill is thus tied to the preceding note. It gives the performance the desired slight limp (example 5).

notation : 

performance : 

Example 4: Bourrée, m. 1 with short trill.

notation : 

performance : 


Example 5: Prélude, beginning: short trill with tied upper note.


+ is called a ‘Tremblement’. This also is a trill starting on the beat with the upper second but it is trilled longer than with the ‘Tremblement simple’. Here you trill during the whole, or almost the whole length of the note, depending on its importance in the measure. On a final note do not trill to the very end of the note.

∨ is called a ‘Port de voix’, a typical French ornament. Literally it means ‘carrying the voice’. In its most simple form it is played as a slurred grace note from the lower second. The lower second is played on the beat and its length is a matter of taste (example 6). As in trills that begin with an upper second, it takes good concentration to begin the ‘port de voix’ with a note that you don’t see in your sheet music. The lower second is not written but known to the performer.

It is possible to extend the ‘port de voix’, for instance on a long note. You can play another lower second after reaching the main note: a mordent or ‘battement’, as it is named in France and with Quantz (example 7). Both ways of playing the ‘port de voix’, simple and extended, can be used throughout the suite at the performer’s own taste.

The three ornaments mentioned above can be used to elaborate all movements of the suite.

notation 

performance 

Example 6: Prélude, beginning with simple 'port de voix'.

performance 

Example 7: Prélude, beginning with extended 'port de voix'.

'Willkürliche Veränderungen' or 'Extempore Variations'

One of the things that make these pieces so much fun to play is the use of Extempore Variations (free embellishments), both written and un-written. They can appear as connecting notes in large intervals, they have no specific name and can be added according to taste and experience. It is remarkable that Boismortier inserted some in the Prélude, as if to help the amateurs of his time 'play around' the written notes. The added chains of notes are noted in smaller notes and should be played rather quickly but beware that they receive the attention they deserve. It was Marcel Moyse who said that unimportant notes do not exist: Every note, however small or short must be a part of your melody. Imagine the feeling you have on a slide. You start at the top and slide in a free movement down to the bottom. That is where you are going and nowhere else. Between top and bottom, or in music also from bottom to top, you have a certain amount of freedom but the beat should not be disturbed. When playing the Prélude you can first play the printed free embellishments and in the repeat change them a bit or add some notes. For instance: in measure 1 add some notes between the C# and the F# and/or from the F# going to the B in measure 2; in measure 4 between the D and the G and between the B in measure 16 and the E in measure 17. Look into books to get some more good ideas.

On the high D in measure 7 you can add a 'flattement', a vibrato, as an ornament. On a baroque flute you can play this with the right hand ring finger, on a modern flute you could trill with the left thumb or play an exaggerated vibrato with the lower jaw.

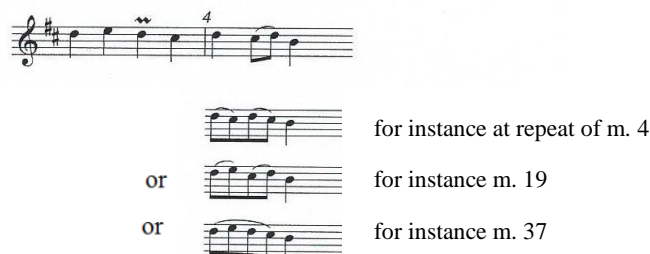
Bourrée en Rondeau

A Bourrée is a jumping dance, so play this movement with short notes. The time signature says 2, but the pulse is per whole measure (♩ = appr. MM 116). There are a few ornaments ('strike' a very short trill) on a first, a third and sometimes even on a fourth quarter. They give these notes extra attention. Play the slurred eighth notes as a sigh, with a diminuendo under the slur, in order to heighten the expression you can put into this quick movement.

Its musical form is a rondo: a principle theme called refrain A, (m. 1-8) is alternated with two

so-called couplets, B (m. 9-16) and C (m. 25-32), forming an A-B-A-C-A structure. You can use dynamic differences to show that you understand the structure of the rondo and to convey it to your audience. For instance: play A₁ *forte*, *piano* on the repeat; B *forte*; A₂ *piano*; C *mezzo forte*; A₃ *forte*.

Ornaments can be added in places where the music tends to become boring because of the many repeats. In this case an ornament can be added at the end of the antecedent phrase of A, in measure 4, 19 and 37. Various figures can be used, see example 8.



for instance at repeat of m. 4

or for instance m. 19

or for instance m. 37

Example 8: Bourrée, refrain m. 4 with examples of ornaments.

Couplet C can be played with a larger, broader tone quality. This part has less leaps, the emotion, the ‘affect’ is milder. Beware in measure 31: the port de voix is the same as the trill, but in reverse. To add some spectacle to the end of this rather simple movement you can think of some free ornaments and fast runs (example 9).



short / long, no suffix

Example 9: Possible free ornaments at the end of the Bourrée.

Rondeau: Gracieusement

Play this Rondeau graciously but fast, a bar to a beat, ♩ = MM 54. This makes it compact and appealing. The sixteenth notes can be played inequal, the second note of a pair is played slightly late and thus becomes shorter. This livens up the three-eighth movement. Most of the trills appear on consonances. Begin them with a distinct upper note to bring out the intended dissonant tension. However, regarding the trill in measure 4 (and all other places where the refrain returns), the main note A♯ on the first beat is a dissonance with its resolution, the B, on the third eighth. Play the prefix to this trill very short (example 10).

correct performance:

incorrect:

Example 10: Rondeau, refrain m. 1-4.

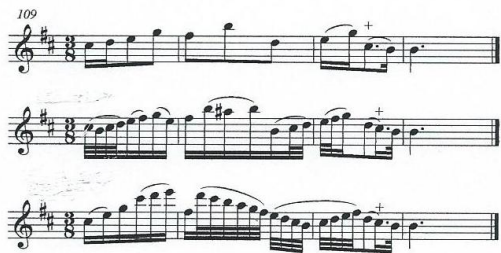
Bars 14 and 15, the end of the refrain, and similar places in this movement, can be played as a hemiola: the two groups of three eighth notes are played as three groups of two notes (example 11). This is a common practice in triple meter pieces. Play distinct accents to make it clear that you intend a hemiola.

Example 11: Rondeau, refrain m. 13-16.

The musical structure of this Rondeau is A-B-A-C-A-D-A. Again, make a distinction between the recurring refrains. The nice and helpful thing about this Rondeau is that Boismortier has already changed the refrain a bit each time it appears. Find the differences! Of course it is always possible to add some of your own variations. For instance: lengthen the dotted eighth note in bar 18, 21, 50 and/or 84 by adding a dot. The sixteenth note thus changes to a thirty-second and the phrase becomes more bouncy and playful. The grace note in bar 52 is short and should be played before the beat as a 'coulement': a passing appoggiatura that fills up a descending third (example 12).

Example 12: Rondeau, m. 49-52.

In the refrains you can fill up some of the leaps and in the one towards the end compress the note picture by adding numerous passing notes. See example 13 for some possibilities.



Example 13: Possible endings for the Rondeau.

In the D-section (m. 85-87) of this Rondeau, play the last three sixteenths very staccato as a contrast to the slurred sixteenths before them. The sixteenth notes of the arpeggiated chord in bar 88 should be played a bit broader (example 14). Subtle differences in articulation can make pieces like these full of expression.



Example 14: Rondeau, m. 85-88.

Fantaisie

This Fantaisie reminds me of Bach's Badinerie (although it is not the last movement of this suite). Play it cheerful, fast (in three!) ♩ = MM 138, bouncy and pay due attention to the melodic lines. It almost sounds as a two-voice piece, especially when you emphasize this by playing the high sixteenth notes shorter than the lower ones. Most of the groups of sixteenths may be slurred but make sure to always tongue the eighth note following them. If the repeating rhythmic movement becomes boring to you add some notes, for instance in bar 16 and 17 between the last two eighth notes. In a high tempo like this always play fast trills and short prefixes. Do not make a ritenuato at the end.

Gigue

Despite all the prescribed ornaments this movement should sound playful and light (♩ = MM 112). In a six-eight meter the first beat should be heavier than the second, so make sure not to make a crescendo towards the fourth eighth-note of the bar despite the fact that it is higher and longer than the first note.

Beware of the correct execution of all ornaments. Begin practicing at a slow speed. This movement has some unexpected difficulties in the fingering. Most breathing points are obvious but in some cases you have to make a choice. For example, in the second section

breathing points can be made in bar 20 after the first E, in bar 21 between the two D's and/or in bar 24 after the F# (example 15). The ornament on the final note, a port de voix, can be long, an eighth note or even longer. After that do not emphasize the principle note B. There is no need to add extra ornaments to this movement. Boismortier has done his best to provide one at every possible place.



Example 15: Gigue, m. 17-25.

This Suite, together with the above mentioned concertos for five flutes has been recorded on a CD by Barthold Kuijken: Joseph Bodin de Boismortier – Six Concertos à Cinq Flûtes. It is produced by the Traversières Flûte Collection and can be ordered at the Dutch Flute Association NFG. (www.nfg-fluit.nl)

¹ The Schott edition, edited by Hugo Ruf that was used for this article does not present itself as an Urtext-edition, but it seems a reliable source.

² Betty Bang Mather. *Interpretation of French Music from 1675 to 1775*, McGinnis & Marx, New York 1973.

³ Betty Bang Mather and David Lasocki, *Free Ornamentation in Woodwind Music 700-1775*, McGinnis & Marx, New York 1976.

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