



COUPERIN

Les Coucous Bénévoles

No need to startle the neighbours with these cheery cuckoos, says **Melanie Spanswick**: let them chirp away with a light staccato to get into the French Baroque mood

Ability rating Late beginner

Info

Key: B minor

Tempo: Allegretto

Style: Baroque

Will improve your

✓ Rhythmic precision

✓ Articulation

✓ Light staccato touch

What might 'benign cuckoos' sound like?

François Couperin – 'Couperin the Great', to distinguish him from other members of a musically distinguished family such as his father Louis – had the answer, in the Third Book of his *Pièces de Clavecin*, published in 1722.

The cuckoos call in the RH. They are punctuated by a lightly staccato series of LH chords. Taken together, the calls form a series of four-bar melodies, but it's worth bearing two things in mind as you work on the piece: that Couperin had in mind the lighter touch of a harpsichord, and that he was a magnificently gifted tone-painter. Don't lose sight or sound of the cuckoos.

Let's begin with the LH. The challenge is to sound the two notes of each chord exactly, and with an idiomatic, light staccato touch. Take one bar at a time, working on each note separately. So in bar 1, play the D, then the B, with the suggested fingering and a full tone. Now play both notes at the same time, with a deep legato touch, using firm fingers and pressing deeply into the keys. Once the chords are secure and absolutely together, you can lighten your touch and articulate each chord with a short staccato stroke of the keys.

Get your hand in position for each chord before playing it. This is especially important in bars 4-5 and 12-13. Bars 7 and 15 require a different touch. Keep the lower note of the chord held throughout the bar while sounding the upper notes with a more sonorous timbre. The D on the first two beats should be darker than the following C#. The dotted crotchet B in bar 8 must be held for the entire bar, and the final flourish at bar 16 wants a 'feminine' ending so that the



Melanie Spanswick is a pianist, author, teacher and composer. She selected the repertoire for *The Faber Music Piano Anthology*, and is author of *Play It Again: PIANO* (Schott Music), a course for those returning to playing. Melanie gives workshops in Germany, the US and the Far East; she is a tutor at Jackdaws Music Education Trust, Finchcocks Music and Piano Week, and is now a Schott composer with a new collection of intermediate piano pieces entitled *No Words Necessary*. www.melaniespanswick.com

piece is gracefully rounded off with a slight *ritenuto*.

Now for those cuckoos in the RH.

First block out each bar by sounding all the notes in the bar together, at the same time. This practice strategy will help you to learn hand positions and fingering swiftly. Lean on the top notes of each cuckoo-call (the B in bar 1, for example) by shifting your weight to the outer part of the hand and supporting the weaker fourth and fifth fingers.

CUCK-oo, CUCK-oo. Practise highlighting the top notes in bars 1-4 by using your fingertips. Then lighten the touch but keep your focus on the upper notes while sounding the accompanying F# more softly. It's worth trying out this technique for the entire piece. There is alternative fingering suggested for bars 9 and 11 that you may find more comfortable.

The semiquaver/quaver patterns in the RH should be played strictly in time. Count in semiquavers (maybe out loud) as you play the figurations. To stay in time, try using a metronome set to a semiquaver beat. Don't push ahead; sit firmly on the beat. You don't need to play up to tempo to begin with. A very slow tempo is good for focused practice at the outset, a medium speed for working with a heavy touch, and then you can move to a much faster one, closer to the tempo marking.

Take time over practising the upper mordent in bar 8. Take into account the demisemiquaver in the preceding bar, without rushing it or swallowing the last beat of the bar. Place the D on the first beat of bar 8 firmly and use a

slight lateral wrist movement to place the fourth-finger E. All three notes within the mordent will benefit from accented practice, particularly the E.

Learning Tip

The sustaining pedal isn't strictly necessary in this style of music, but it will add resonance to the ends of phrases such as at bar 8 and the final bar.

Accent every note with a heavy touch, varying the accents each time you play. Once played lightly and up to speed, the ornament should flow naturally.

Then it's time to practise with hands together. Begin by blocking out both parts, as I suggested for the RH. Follow up with patient work to sharpen the articulation between the hands. The LH must be light but rhythmically precise, with an even legato in the RH semiquaver/quaver pattern.

Pay attention to the final RH quaver in each bar. Play it absolutely on the beat to avoid rushing into the next bar. Try to hold the note over the top of the LH playing the staccato semiquaver chord beneath it.

These are benign cuckoos, not insistent ones. Your tone should be warm and gentle. Each phrase heads towards the third bar, which should accordingly be shaped with more tone. Take note of the crescendo/decrescendo markings on the second and fourth staves. The top B in the final RH triad should ring out clearly above the F# and D, without any exaggerated flourish, so that the piece is rounded off with a smile. ■