

1^r. Livre de Pieces de Violle avec une Chaconne en Trio pour une Flûte traversiere, une Violle, et la Basse Continuë, à Paris [1709], Composées par M^r. Morel, Cy devant Page de la Musique du Roi.

Anyone wishing to learn about Jacques Morel will be frustrated by an almost total lack of biographical documentation. While there are a number of later French musicians bearing the same surname, little connects them to our composer. The dedication of his 1709 *Premier Livre de Pieces de Violle* (recorded in its entirety here) is to the celebrated viol player Marin Marais, “*Ordinaire de la Musique de la Chambre du Roy*,” whom he says had served as his teacher giving him “precious advantage” while “approving of and encouraging him as a composer.” There is no evidence to say if Jacques himself was a professional viol player, and only two other examples of his work as a composer exist, one from 1706 and the other 1717 (neither for solo viol). With little to go on, it requires a bit of sleuthing to form a clearer picture of who this man really was.

One may speculate that Jacques was born in the 1680s. His earliest publication, an unusual French language translation and setting of the *Te Deum*, is dated 1706 which would probably not have occurred before he was 20 years old. And he must have died sometime after 1730 when the royal privilege that had given him permission to engrave, sell and distribute his musical compositions, initially issued at Versailles on March 9, 1709, was extended. At a very minimum, this affords a not unreasonable (for the time) lifespan of approximately 50 years, and places our composer directly into the cultural milieu of Louis XIV. His *Te Deum* offers further evidence of early familiarity with the royal household, since it was dedicated to Duke Louis Marie d’Aumont, “*Pair de France, Premier Gentilhomme de la Chambre du Roy, Gouverneur de Boulogne*,” one of the *Roi Soleil’s* most highly trusted and elite courtiers.

The title pages of all three of his musical publications proclaim Morel’s authorship saying that he was “*Cy devant Page de la Musique du Roi*.” This suggests he was possibly of noble lineage, since page boys were generally scions of other great families sent to learn manners and customs of elevated conduct. The positions were awarded starting at age 7, to boys who were not paid, but instead clothed, fed, housed and trained in the essential skills required for a position of societal privilege, and assigned studies in music (singing, instruments and composition) and board games (like chess), as well as other courtly pastimes. At age 14, a page might advance to become a squire, and by 21, perhaps even go on to become a knight. But if Jacques Morel had advanced through any of those future stages, would he not have acknowledged it in his publications over the eleven-year span from 1706-1717? His name is not in evidence as one of the musicians hired into service at court, nor have any records been found to indicate if he came to hold a musical-religious post.

“*Cy devant*” indicates that Morel’s position was held in the past, but this catch phrase was also commonly used by aristocrats after they had become dispossessed of their status or wealth and fallen into financial or social ruin. This strikes me as a logical possibility for the Morel family. Jacques’ 1709 volume of viol music was offered for sale commercially by the “widow Morel,” at her stand as a book handler in the great hall at the *Conciergerie*. This would of course not have been Jacques’ own wife (seeing as he was still alive at the time!), but perhaps his mother, a working woman, fallen on hard times. The collection was released at a time

when the viol was very popular as an amateur instrument in Paris and its environs. Morel's music would doubtless have appealed greatly to a public hungry for publications they could use at home.

The volume contains four substantial multi-movement *Suites* for 7-string *basse de viole* with figured bass accompaniment. Unusual for the time, Morel notated the music in score format saying it was "to facilitate the accompaniment, especially by those who would wish to play it on the harpsichord." This is also one of the earliest books of suites for the viol and continuo, and where the pieces are titled as such. (Only five French collections of suites for viol and continuo predate Morel's, by Le Sieur Dubuisson (1666), Le Sieur de Machy (1685), Marin Marais (1686/89 and 1701) and Louis Caix d'Hervelois (1708).) As a form, the suite was not ever entirely standardized but its primary structure linked a number of movements though a shared tonality and many of the movements were dance forms, with *allemandes*, *courantes*, *sarabandes* and *giges* as the most common elements. Those four dances are each represented in each of Morel's suites, but he creatively expands the form by adding *menuets* and *gavottes* and by incorporating extra instrumental forms (*préludes*, *fugue*, *fantasie*, *rondeau*). Throughout, there is a human element through the appendage of descriptive titles, named for people, places, objects or emotions. The *Chaconne en Trio* that concludes the collection contributes an additional form, plus adds a transverse flute (or violin or treble viol, if preferred) to the viol and continuo team.

Morel's writing reveals the strong influence of Marin Marais and he even provides an introductory page of explanation for his notational system and *agréments*, which he says follow exactly those of his teacher. Markings indicate the direction for the bow and slurs, as well as specific choice of fingers for notes and chords, and where fingers are meant to be held down so that the viol's resonance isn't broken. Ornaments include trills (*tremblements*), mordents (*battements*) and two types of vibrato (*plainte* and *pincé/flattement*). Morel's movement titles also have similarities to those found in Marais' second book of *Pieces de Viole* (1701), which contains among other things several *fantasies*, two *giges a l'Angloise*, a fugue, a *Follette*, *Boutade* (joke), *Echo* and movements reflecting peasant or pastoral themes by titles such as *champêtre*, *Paysane*, or *La vilageoise*.

Perhaps most noteworthy in Morel's collection is his reference to specific people and places. Alluded to in three suites is the Anglo/French region of Brittany: in the guise of a graceful girl (*La Bretonne*), or a girl from the medieval town of Guérande (*La Guerandoise*) or a Briton peasant kerchief/or pastry likely named for the headgear (*La Fanchonnette*). At the time that Morel published his book, Brittany was hardly a 'glamorous' place; the region was poor and likely had peasant or rustic connotations for the Parisian populace. *Bonnets rouges* representing both upper and lower classes had staged a rebellion against the King in 1675 protesting what they saw as oppressive royal taxation. That being said, in the year of Morel's publication (1709) there was a new baby at court, Louis, who had received the honorific, Duke of Brittany. Perhaps Morel was paying tribute, just as he did in movements named for the royal baby's father (*Rondeau Dauphin*), or to royal residential palaces such as *Fontainebleau* (famous for its echoing fountains that Louis XIV had recently installed, and also known for its lavish musical theatrical productions, from which Rameau's clouds made for a 1769 production of the opera *Dardanus* are used as the cover of this recording) or *Saint-Germain-en-laye* (where the English Stuart court in exile was currently resident, with two strong amateur viol players, David Nairne and John Caryll, in their midst). Other stereotyped female characters/personality types, whether pleasing (*L'Agréable*), pretty (*La Jolie*), dazzling (*La Brilliante*) or unfaithful (*L'Inconstante*) also make an appearance, as do a careless or crazy

man (*Le Folet*). The *Courante La Dacier* almost certainly pays homage to Madame Anne Dacier (1647-1720), an important but somewhat controversial Parisian figure at that time, who made French translations from Latin and Greek of classic literature, including Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. One additional literary reference is especially worthy of note. Morel's initial dedication of the book to Marais likens his master to Apollo, with his lyre. The image is a provocative one, since Apollo, the Greek/Roman deity, most beautiful and powerful of the gods and leader of the muses, was also one of the Sun King's favourite allegories, and there are a number of famous paintings of the *Roi Soleil* in this specific guise. What could be a more powerful symbolic image for Louis XIV than to be seen commandeering a chariot pulling the sun?



Joseph Werner painting, Louis XIV as Apollo, 1664, Versailles



1720 Apollo by Nicolas de Largillierre, Tate

Whoever the 'widow Morel' might have been who offered this collection of music for sale to a Parisian public, there are seemingly several references that connect the Morel family to books and French authors. These literary associations might hold a final clue about the family's disgrace, if in fact such a thing did occur. Anne Dacier's husband, André, was not as famous as his wife but still a prominent Parisian scholar and editor in his own right, and the son of a Protestant lawyer, originally from the southern French region of Languedoc. André's religious upbringing was certain to have been viewed critically by many royal and Parisian Catholics. Along the same lines, Jacques Morel's 1717 secular cantata *Les Tuilleries* for solo voice and continuo sets a text by poet Nicolas Jouin (1684-1757) who was little known at that time, but very soon after became renowned for his satirical verse, and especially for his staunch Jansenist leanings and the publication of 15 pamphlets "*Sarcelades*," that complained about the behaviour of the archbishops of Paris. Add to this small but seemingly meaningful list Jacques Morel's very first musical publication, that was a French language translation of the *Te Deum*, where he converted a traditional sacred Latin work into a *diverstissement sacré*. It's pure speculative observation on my part, but all of these literary connections have Protestant leanings, which makes me wonder if the Morel family experienced religious difficulties. The evidence is sparse, but Jacques Morel and his music are so colourful and delightful that I think it gives one good food for thought.