An Hypothesis about *La Couronne de Fleurs* by Marc-Antoine Charpentier:  
A *Pastorale* by Jean Palaprat for the *Jeux Floraux* in Toulouse in 1685?

Among the very diverse dramatic compositions of Marc-Antoine Charpentier, *La Couronne de Fleurs* holds an intriguing position. For a start, its origins can be traced to the short collaboration between the composer and the famous French playwright of the seventeenth century, Molière. Indeed a large part of the libretto of this *Pastorale* comes from the original *Églogue en Musique et en Danse* which opened *Le Malade Imaginaire*, the last play Molière wrote with Charpentier for Louis XIV in 1672. Molière stated clearly at the beginning of his text the joint purpose of his *Églogue* and his *Comédie mêlée de Musique et de Danses*: “After the glorious endeavors and the victorious exploits of our August Monarch, it is only fitting that all who write are employed for his Praise or his Entertainment. That is what we wanted to do here, and this Prologue is an attempt at Praising this great Prince, which gives an Introduction to the Comedy of *Le Malade Imaginaire*, where the purpose is to unweary him from his noble labors.”

Charpentier uses this material for *La Couronne de Fleurs* without remorse: the *Églogue en Musique et en Danse* received only a few performances before Lully used his royal privilege to forbid any revival shortly after the death of Molière in 1673. This *Pastorale* retains from the original *Églogue* the characteristics of a French prologue: the libretto is conceived as a tribute to Louis XIV, it depicts the current state of affairs of the kingdom, it celebrates the return of order, and it is presented as a feast before the feast with its singing and dancing. But if the origins of *La Couronne de Fleurs* are known, there is little evidence of its final destination, and we know nothing certain about the circumstances of the performances. Although *La Couronne de Fleurs* is clearly a circumstantial piece, its context has so far eluded most historians as its prestigious “Molieresque” origins have overshadowed the final *Pastorale*.

Preparing my staging for the Chamber Opera Series of the Boston Early Music Festival, I wanted to know more about the possible nature of the first performance of Charpentier’s creation. After looking closely at both librettos and scores and connecting them with the history of the period, I attempt here to give a new understanding of the dramaturgy of the final libretto by proposing a possible circumstance for its first performance. By identifying Jean Palaprat as the second librettist who had been working with Charpentier, I also hope to give new consideration to the importance of *La Couronne de Fleurs*.

*La Couronne de Fleurs* was not published during Charpentier’s lifetime, and like most of his other works, is known to us thanks to the survival of a manuscript score. Aside from the presence of dance numbers, the score itself doesn’t present many circumstantial clues about its possible performance. It contains, like many of Charpentier’s scores, some indications about casting, and each part is attributed to a real singer. Charpentier had been writing down his musical material with the intention to fit the musical resources of the household of Mademoiselle de Guise, where he was employed. The names of the singers, among them his own name, suggest that the score had been given a presentation in connection with the powerful French princess. But like in other works of Charpentier, some casting facts would make an actual staged performance quite difficult—for example, there would be no time for certain singers to change costumes at critical junctures given the roles assigned in the manuscript. One possible explanation of such conflicts is that Charpentier may have used the musicians who were living in the household with him to try out, to rehearse, or simply to give a preview of the work to his patron. This concert would have been of a private nature, but might have been attended by some guests of the princess. The line between the presentation of a work in progress and an actual private
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performance was thin at the time, but that would explain the large number of works by Charpentier for which performances are not clearly documented.

The reference to the Guise singers, the musical style of the Pastorale, its place in the order of Charpentier’s numbered manuscript volumes, and even the quality of the paper—everything suggests that it was written around 1685. At this time, the composer was working on a revival of Le Malade Imaginaire for the Comédie-Française, and while reorganizing his musical material, the composer may have well decided to use his music from the first version of the prologue, which had been little performed, to create a new dramatic work: La Couronne de Fleurs. Putting together this year of 1685 and the fact that, in the libretto, Flore sings about the return of peace in France, it is believed that La Couronne de Fleurs was written to celebrate a peace treaty. Given the political chronology of France, the Pastorale was almost certainly associated with the Truce of Rastibonne, signed in 1684, which ended the war which Louis XIV fought against the Holy Roman emperor Leopold I and the king of Spain, Charles II.

The truce was made public in October 1684, though preparations for its celebration were put on hold during the icy winter that followed. It was fully celebrated in France during the spring and summer of 1685 by large parties, including the one given by the Marquis de Seignelay at the castle of Sceaux, near Paris, in July 1685: during this lavish celebration, the Ydille sur la Paix by Racine and Lully was first performed. Charpentier was also commissioned to compose for the commemoration of the truce. During the summer of 1685, the Duc de Richelieu was planning a big party in honor of the king in his castle of Rueil. He wanted to celebrate both the centenary of the birth of his uncle, the famous cardinal, and the first anniversary of the Truce of Ratisbonne. For these circumstances, Charpentier composed La fête de Rueil, an ambitious score with a rich orchestration well suited for an outdoor entertainment. But the King changed his plan to attend, the party was cancelled, and the piece was not performed. Did a similar fate overtake La Couronne de Fleurs? It is possible and would explain the lack of information about the performance. The text of the work gives some indications about the time of its planned performance. Flore not only sings about the return of peace in France, but she also states clearly the time of her presence: “The cold weather, having withdrawn / To its somber refuge, / Allows the spring / To rejuvenate our fields”. The action of La Couronne takes place in spring, when the goddess Flore displays her powers. The specific mention of the cold weather—the month of January 1685 was especially cold in Europe—should bring the date of a possible performance to the spring of 1685.

Springtime has been always associated with Flore. The goddess of flowers and vegetation is the central figure of the libretto: she is the first character who appears on stage—Charpentier takes great care in his score to mention “Flore alone”—and she is marking her empire by rejuvenating the fields and has flowers growing under her steps. This goddess has been closely related to the spring season since early times, and she once had her own festival: the Floralia, also called the Florifertum, was the ancient Roman festival dedicated to Flora. It symbolized the renewal of the cycle of life, marked with dancing, poetry, and flower display, and was held starting four days before the Calends of May, from April 27 through May 3. These dates are important, since in La Couronne de Fleurs, Flore also invites Shepherdesses and Shepherds to celebrate in a festival. But aside from this allusion to the Floralia of classical antiquity, Flore’s festival for the glory of the king had closer resonances for the French audience of the seventeenth century.

In fact, in La Couronne de Fleurs, the celebration Flore is organizing is a contest. The goddess makes clear that “To whomever will best sing the glorious deeds / Of the famous conqueror who ends our tears, / [her] hand will bestow the honors / Of this Crown of Flowers.” She will award the prize to the most
eloquent singer: it is a poetic contest, not a singing joust. The contest is evocative of the poetic competitions that France has been so keen about since the Middle Ages, and which by the 1680s were spreading through the kingdom. This proliferation of poetic contests was mostly a result of the creation of many royal academies in France. In addition to the royal protection given in 1672 to the Académie Française in Paris, an academy was created in Arles as early as 1668, another in Nimes in 1682, and one in Angers in 1684, to name only a few. These academies were organizing yearly contests: in 1681, the Académie d’Arles instituted two prizes, “one for prose and the other for the verses, to the two writers who will have composed in these two languages, in the most dignified and eloquent manner, to the honor of His Majesty.” Praise to the king became the main official inspiration. The same year, the subject of the contest of the Académie Française was, “One always sees the King being calm, although always in perpetual motion.”

There is a similarity of inspiration between these official subjects and the ones the shepherds of La Couronne de Fleurs choose for their contributions. The first contestant compares Louis’s energy to the strength of a rushing stream, and the second to the powers of the natural elements. The third contestant boasts about the mythic heroes from ancient times who were as nothing compared to Louis, while the last shepherd affirms the unique place Louis will take in history. The four poems were already in Molière’s Églogue, but Charpentier composed a new musical setting for each of them. He retained most of the original melody, but before each small ritornelle ending the songs of the first version, he inserts a chorus, which by its growing contrapuntal structure develops in a most glorious way the final praising lines from the contestant’s song: the envoi. The musical treatment illuminates the royal nature of the four poems, as each contestant creates wording akin to a motto at the end, a small sentence aiming at describing Louis XIV.

In 1673, Molière had already given the poetic contest the characteristic of a collective event to celebrate the deeds of the king. But inspired by the singing contests described by the Greek and Roman writers, Molière chose to have only two participants enter the contest. It was a duel based on a constant attempt to surpass in eloquence what the other had just sung. If the idea of a progression is kept in La Couronne de Fleurs, the duel becomes a real contest with many shepherds entering the competition. This number of participants is a major change from Molière’s classically based setting, and gives a very modern feeling to the piece. This shift to an evocation of Charpentier’s time is seen in another difference, the one of sex, as women enter now the arena and aspire to the crown of flowers. The other major change from Molière’s version, the one that gives the most evident clue about a possible context for the commission of La Couronne de Fleurs, is the crown of flowers itself. In Molière’s Églogue, the prize the shepherds were contesting for is not stated clearly by Flore, and each shepherd’s main motivation is to win the hand of his beloved. There is a mention of two crowns, and they appear very briefly as props in the description of a Dance number, at the end of the prologue. The words “couronne de fleurs” are never sung by the characters. In his Pastorale, Charpentier himself announces directly with his title, La Couronne de Fleurs, the shift of interest. Flore specifically declares, in the libretto, that the crown of flowers will reward the poet who will best sing the deeds of the king. When the contest is interrupted, the crown is not bestowed; Flore instead dismantles it and gives a single flower to each of the contestants. What the librettist of La Couronne de Fleurs is describing is, in short, a poetic contest taking place in May where men and women singing the deeds of Louis XIV received flowers as prizes.

This description of events is especially evocative of one the most famous poetic contests of the time: Les Jeux Floraux of Toulouse, the major city of southwest France. This literary event, the “Floral Games,” whose name and dates derive from the Floralia of ancient Rome, took place at the end of April and the beginning of May. The Toulouse festival originated in the fourteenth century, and had
poets reciting their work in front of the audience and the judges. Winning poetic compositions were awarded flowers as prizes: the Violet, the Eglantine, and the Marigold. These flowers were made of precious metals, gold or silver, and therefore had both symbolic and financial aspects. Beyond these prestigious prizes, small flowers of lesser value and honor were also awarded to encourage rising talents. According to the rules from the original competition in 1323, everyone could enter the contest: “All persons, of whatever quality they are and country they come from, of one and the other sex, may aspire to the Prize.” This is reflected in La Couronne de Fleurs where both shepherds and shepherdesses receive for their efforts the prize of a single flower each. All these common points seem to establish La Couronne de Fleurs as a dramatized evocation of the event.

Whoever adapted Molière’s Églogue as a Pastorale for Charpentier must have had in mind the celebration of the Jeux Floraux of Toulouse. Among the writers active at the end of the seventeenth century in this city, Jean Bigot de Palaprat appears as a possible librettist: his life and activities all make him a likely candidate. He was a great admirer of Molière, whom he considered a “great actor and one thousand more times greater writer”, and he is mostly known today for his comedies. Born in Toulouse in 1650, Palaprat “always had since childhood a genuine affection for our old Floral Games,” and first entered the contest when he was still young. We know for sure that by the age of twenty-one he had thrice been awarded a prize, a Marigold, for a Chant Royal; this accomplishment allowed him to become a judge of the contest. Being a lawyer from a noble family, he was also part of the social elite of the town. Appointed twice as Capitoul, which is similar to being the provost of the merchants, Palaprat had as his goal to seize all opportunities to rejuvenate the cultural life of Toulouse. For his first tenure, in 1676, fireworks for the birth of a royal heir were followed by big plans to build a Royal square and a project to erect a new statue of Louis XIV. During his second mandate in 1684, Palaprat wanted to create a Royal Academy that would unite the Compagnie des Jeux Floraux and another literary society in the town, Les Lanternistes. To promote his idea he organized a public celebration, which was presented with all the features of a Festival: “In this respect, we believed it was necessary to take advantage of joining together the opening of the Floral Games with the presentation of these proposals. We put on all that was customary to attract the world; we succeeded too well, and the multitude of people, always in love with novelty, prevented some from being able to hear well all the ways we used to interest people about the benefits of the establishment of this Academy in honor of the King.”

The event must have been grand enough, as Palaprat “added to this feast all the amenities we could think about to get approval for our project. We did not spare the symphony or the chorus of music.” Although music was always part of the Jeux Floraux, Palaprat in 1684 had a double agenda: he also wanted a signal accomplishment of his administration to be “the establishment of an opera”. Time was of the essence as a Capitoul was selected only for one year. Timing was also crucial, so Palaprat tried to launch the two projects together. He later admitted: “although I did my best to attract one [opera company] to Toulouse in my year, I didn’t manage to show the town the whole delightful spectacle, but at least I used the occasion of the opening of the Floral Games to give it a magnificent sample.” This “magnificent sample,” entitled Ouverture des Jeux floraux de Toulouse, was performed on April 5, 1684, in the Town Hall of Toulouse, to mark the day when the yearly call for entering the contest was officially proclaimed. Although the piece is lost, we know that Palaprat wrote the libretto and Thibault Aphrodise, music master of the cathedral of Toulouse, composed the music.

After the success of the Jeux Floraux of 1684, Palaprat had good reason to hope the King would support his idea of a Royal Academy, and he planned to celebrate what he thought would be the first year of the new Royal Academy of Toulouse by staging another small opera in 1685. The Truce of Ratisbonne and the ensuing peace that was supposed to last for twenty years were wonderful auspices.
Palaprat was in Paris at the beginning of 1685 trying to build support, at court and in town, for his two academy projects. Looking for a suitable Parisian composer, it may have been at this time that he made the acquaintance of Marc-Antoine Charpentier. Together, they may have planned a new work for the Jeux Floraux of 1685. The composer was under significant time pressure as he not only had to compose the ambitious score of La Fête de Rueil, but he was also working on the revival of Le Malade Imaginaire. The connection between the commission of Palaprat—a piece celebrating a poetic contest—and the original material of Le Malade Imaginaire would have been quite evident to the two artists. The changes to Molière’s text are all made to heighten the connection with the Jeux Floraux and mold it into a suitable piece for such an occasion: La Couronne de Fleurs.

That Palaprat is a contributor to La Couronne de Fleurs seems likely, but was this piece performed in Toulouse in 1685? Further research in the records of the time is necessary to verify the hypothesis. What we know for sure from the Archives of Toulouse is that the festivities around the Jeux Floraux in the year of 1685 were especially lavish, and sumptuous parties were given, which all the elite of the city and distinguished guests attended. In addition to the prizes of precious metal flowers, gifts were distributed: fruit jams were given to the Ladies, and cakes to the people. The bill from 1685 is impressive, and was even quoted as a great extravagance decades later: “It cost 675 livres for the Caterer, 315 l. for the cakes, 210 l. and 16 s. for the boxes of preserves”. The Truce of Ratisbonne was an auspicious circumstance and hopes for the renewal of the Jeux Floraux were high, but in a matter of few months the situation in Toulouse had changed greatly. The kingdom was facing the most tragic event of the reign of Louis XIV: the interdiction of the Reformed religion. The projects to create a Royal Academy or an Academy of Opera were no longer a priority in a community divided and in a town in social turmoil. Palaprat, perhaps shocked by the tragic events, left for Italy and remained in Rome for two years before returning to France.

In 1694, another member of the Compagnie des Jeux Floraux completed Palaprat’s project and obtained royal protection from Louis XIV, so it became the Académie des Jeux Floraux. The French king enacted the statutes of the Academy and chose Palaprat to be one of the first academicians. Louis XIV also changed the prizes given: “And those flowers are Amaranthe Gold, which we institute and ordain by these said herein, for the first prize, and a Violet, an Eglantine, and a silver Marigold, which will be the regular prizes.” By selecting a new flower for the first rank, Louis XIV was using the allegorical language of flowers, the meaning of the amaranth being immortality. It is an odd coincidence that in La Couronne de Fleurs, among the characters that were given charming “botanical” names that had not been used by Molière—Sylvandre, Forestan, Myrtil, Rosélie, and Hyacinthe—one also finds Amaranthe. Might this idea of the amaranth have come from Palaprat? It is possible, as the amaranth, as well as the crown of flowers, appears on the seal of the new Royal Academy of Toulouse. “It is round, and standing in the middle is a woman, representing poetry, wearing a crown [of flowers] on her head, and giving by her hand an Amaranth to a poet inclined in front of her, offering some Verses. Around the seal is the inscription: “Seal of the Jeux Floraux de Toulouse”. This scene, whose similarity to the action in La Couronne de Fleurs is too striking to be dismissed, would remain for decades in France a tangible evocation of Charpentier’s elusive and fugitive pastoral.

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