RAMEAU Pièces de clavecin

The Composer

The place of Jean-Philippe Rameau in the pantheon of the great composers is problematic. As someone who finds his music to be among the very best, forming an equilateral triangle with Bach and Handel in the empyrean of the High Baroque, the answer is simple – beauty of unimaginable intensity, combined with intellectual power rarely if ever matched among classical composers.

As Rameau himself said in his *Code de musique pratique* in 1760, 'En un mot, l'expression de la pensée, du sentiment, des passions, doit être le vrai but de la Musique.' ('In one word, the true goal of music must be the expression of thought, of sentiment, and of the passions.') For me, his *Hippolyte et Aricie* long ago displaced *Le nozze di Figaro* as the one piece I would take to a desert island, if allowed only one. My question is thus: why have rather few musicians afforded Rameau such high praise?

Rameau has suffered, as a great, domineering figure, the usual reverses of geniuses enjoying a very high place – the jealousy of rivals and critics, and the negative commentary of other great minds. At the premiere of his first great opera *Hippolyte et Aricie* in 1733 (at the age of 50!), the then dean of French opera composers, André Campra, remarked that it 'had enough music in it for a dozen operas', a judgment that was not without malice. The incredible leap that *Hippolyte* represented for French opera immediately created a vast gap in quality that was not for anyone else to fill, and Rameau was able to produce some 80 complete acts of ballet and opera averaging around 45 minutes each in the 30 years left to him, thus dominating the *Académie royale de musique* to the exclusion of all but the indomitable Jean-Baptiste Lully, whose works continued to be played all that time.

But within 20 years of single-handedly establishing a new classicism in France with *Hippolyte*, the sheer luxury of his work seems to have engendered its virtual opposite in the rather simplistic style from Italy, which was pushed by various musicians in the so-called *Guerre des bouffons*. Listening today to the difference between the sheer beauty and intellectual extravagance of Rameau in comparison to the often banal music then offered up as its equal, one can only be amazed. That Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Le Devin du village* could have been proposed as comparable to Rameau's masterworks is mind-boggling; the canard that Rousseau was a great intellectual who considered himself a composer, while Rameau was a great composer who considered himself an intellectual, fails on many levels: Rameau was a great theorist in the science of music and enough of a mind to have corresponded with the great mathematician Leonhard Euler, whereas history has proven that Rousseau was not only a mediocre composer, but also a failure as an intellectual, as the implementation of his ideas in the real world produced a great deal of suffering, as well as the most negative aspects of the so-called Enlightenment. The damage done to Rameau's reputation as he held his head high is best summed up in the title of an important volume by the notable French musicologist Catherine Kintzler: *Jean Philippe Rameau: Splendeur et naufrage de l'esthétique du plaisir à l'âge classique* (Jean-Philippe Rameau: Splendor and Shipwreck of the Esthetic of Pleasure in the Classical Age).

The Harpsichord Music

Rameau's harpsichord music is not as crucial to his renown as his operatic oeuvre, but it was very important to his development as a composer, as opposed to that of theorist, in which role he was first noticed. His harpsichord music is also very significant for its theatricality – a quality that was not the norm at the time – and he reused a great deal of it in his operas. His first book, printed in 1706 when he first arrived in Paris and likely self-financed, was not part of this. It consists of a single long Suite in A minor, rather in the old style, although the unmeasured Prelude is a newish hybrid and there is a new kind of piece in *Vénitienne*, which reflects the contemporary shift from the dances of the Baroque suite to the inventive and evocative portraits later found in all the French harpsichord books, especially in François Couperin whose first collection of 1713 is built upon traditional suites, and whose second, published in 1716–17 (after the death of Louis XIV), has but a few dances in the old style.

Rameau's last book, in 1727, also contains a Suite in A minor but this time, some 20 years later, it is the work of a mature artist with great powers of composition yielding pieces of extraordinary depth and inventiveness. The beginning (Allemande – Courante – Sarabande) consists of profound and complex works, with the remaining movements showing off the curiosity of an author looking to expand his reach: *Les Trois Mains*, with the 'third hand' crossing over, is very much reminiscent of Domenico Scarlatti (it seems as though Rameau could hardly have known that music, but some recent research suggests that he did, and that this piece is a fandango); the *Fanfarinette* where one can almost feel the *cupidons* playing their toy trumpets; *La Triomphante* with its arpeggiated spasms of victory with real trumpets; and finally the *Gavotte à six doubles* which seems to owe a great deal to Handel's E major variations (known as 'The Harmonious Blacksmith') in the Fifth Suite of his *Lessons for the Harpsichord* (London, 1720) – which Rameau likely did know.

The dance connections to Rameau's *Ballets* and *Tragédies lyriques* culminate with the *Musette en rondeau* in the 1724 volume, which reappears in the *La Danse* entrée of *Les Fêtes d'Hébé* (1739) as the *Danse de Terpsichore*, in other words the signature piece for the Muse of the Dance, along with another *Tambourin* from this volume, which appears alongside it. For the entrée *La Musique* earlier in the same work, Rameau chose *L'Entretien des Muses* as an *Air tendre* to introduce the Oracle creating a ballet *Pas de Cinq* (for five soloists), which is danced by Apollo, Mars, Victory, Hymen (God of Marriage) and Love (Amour). It is actually a sign of how much Rameau esteemed this composition, which is indeed one of the most profound in his oeuvre, that he gave it such an important role in the theater.

For *Les Indes galantes* (1735), he revived *Les Sauvages* for the *Nouvelle Entrée* set in the forests of North America, between the French and Spanish settlements. The plot of this Entrée revolves around the princess Zima, who is wooed by a Frenchman and a Spaniard in turn – she finds the Spaniard far too passionate, and the Frenchman too blasé, and introduces them to her local admirer Adario, whom she finds to be the ideal. When the Spaniard goes for his sword, the Frenchman urges him to relax, and all the people, French, Spanish, Amazons, and Indians, do the *Danse du grand calumet de la paix* (the Dance of the Great Peace-Pipe), which turns out to be the original harpsichord piece, which had been composed on command when a pair of Iroquois were brought to Paris in the 1720s. Here it becomes a duet for Zima and Adario, *Forêts paisibles*, where a duo is laid over the original music, after which Zima sings a virtuosic *Ariette* for peace to reign in their forests, and all dance the elaborate *Chaconne*, the grand culmination of this additional Entrée (Acte de ballet).

For *Dardanus* (1739) Rameau uses *Les Niais de Sologne,* in a manner consistent with the original harpsichord meaning. Sologne was apparently thought to be the home of simpletons, thus leading to the composer's use of a deliberately simple-minded theme featuring unusual 'equal notes' as a mark of this trait. But – lo and behold –, the *doubles* of the piece reveal very complicated patterns of rhythm and of technical demands on the player, indicating that the simpletons are far cleverer than they seem. In the opera the piece is used as an *Air gai* in Act 3 (*Duo et Chœur: Paix favorable, Paix adorable*) for the people to celebrate Anténor's joy at his upcoming marriage to Iphise; he is totally ignorant of Iphise's lack of interest in him – she is in love with Dardanus – and the joy lasts only for a brief moment before Neptune sends a great wave to crush his desires.

For *Zoroastre* (1749) Rameau borrows *Les Tendres Plaintes* from the D major Suite (1724) for Act 1 Scene 3 and the great *Sarabande* from the second A minor Suite for Act 3 Scene 7. For *Castor et Pollux* (1737) Rameau revived his first *Menuet* from the G major Suite of 1727, which becomes the welcome for the return of Peace in the air *Naissez, dons de Flore, La Paix va vous animer* in the Prologue, although he uses a different second minuet.

The *Pièces de clavecin en concerts*

He then imports the *Tambourin* from the third of the *Pièces de clavecin en concerts* (1741), which naturally leads to the question of the place of this volume in Rameau's oeuvre, along with the harpsichord transcriptions of a couple of dozen *symphonies* (instrumental pieces) from the original

publication of *Les Indes galantes.* These 20-odd renderings are included in some recordings of the complete *Pièces de clavecin*, as Rameau says he is giving them in the manner of pièces de clavecin, but they are clearly arrangements for any instruments (as he says), and indeed several want a second player if they are to be performed. There are 50 true harpsichord pieces in the three volumes (1706, 1724, 1727), plus the stand-alone *La Dauphine*, which appears to be an improvisation that was later written down on command; to include all the *Les Indes* transcriptions creates a severe imbalance.

The *Pièces de clavecin en concerts* on the other hand are a kind of hybrid with a history going back to Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre (*Pièces de clavecin qui peuvent se jouer sur le violon*, 1707), and Jean-Joseph Cassanéa de Mondonville (*Pièces de clavecin en sonates*, *c.*1734), where instrument or instruments are added (and who are advised by Rameau in his preface to play 'even more softly') to accompany the harpsichord. Lest we think that this is something special to France or to some particular practice, it is important to remember that the Bach works we call 'violin sonatas' are called by Bach *Sonatas for harpsichord and violin*, and it is equally the case that the 'violin sonatas' of Mozart, Beethoven and even Brahms are titled *Sonatas for piano and violin* by these composers. As we would hardly include such works in their sonatas for piano, here it seems equally false to include them in Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin*, with the possible exception of the five he chose from 1741 to rewrite for harpsichord alone. But even here some modern players insist on recomposing some of the remaining pieces that Rameau did not choose to rework (in particular *La Cupis*, whose evocative flute obbligato Rameau featured in *Le Temple de la gloire*), thus creating even more confusion.

Returning to *Zoroastre*, Rameau uses *L'Agaçante* from the 2e Concert for Act 2 Scene 4*, Entrée des Indiens et Indiennes*, along with *La Livri* from the 1er Concert, also used as a dance in Act 3 Scene 7. The second *Menuet* from the 2e Concert appears in *Les Fêtes de Polymnie*. Both *Tambourins* (3e Concert) are used in the 1744 version of *Dardanus*. He uses *La Cupis*, from the 5e Concert, to become the *Air tendre pour les Muses* in *Le Temple de la gloire* (1745). *La Pantomime* from the 4e Concert appears in the *Ouverture* to *Les Surprises de l'amour* (1757 version). So regardless of how we feel about including these in the *Pièces de clavecin*, Rameau considered them fair game for later use in his operas.

The Harpsichord

The pieces on this recording are played on a French double-manual harpsichord modeled closely after the 1769 instrument by Pascal Taskin. It was built in 1980 by John Koster, formerly curator of keyboards at the National Music Museum, Vermillion, South Dakota and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and was recently refurbished and voiced by Claire Hammett of London and Sarasota, Florida.

Essentially everyone would agree that this is the proper harpsichord for Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin* as it was the standard in French manufacture from the early to late 18th century. It serves today as the Steinway or Bösendorfer piano does, as the universal representative of its genre. It has an 8' stop on each keyboard, with the possibility of adding the four-foot stop played from the lower keyboard, as well as coupling the upper manual, providing in theory eight different combinations for those thinking like organists: three solo stops (8', 8' and 4'), 2x8' coupled or uncoupled, 2x8'+4' and either 8'+4'.

In reality however, only three of these 'registrations' seem likely, if it is even possible to think in such organ terms: the whole instrument (2x8'+4') and the 2x8' together, or separated, as in Couperin's *Pièces croisées* and Bach's Goldberg Variations. When the idea is to separate the 8' stops, Couperin writes that one must *ôter* (take off) the coupler, implying that normally the coupler is on. This makes sense because of the history of the earlier French harpsichord, as well as its provenance as a descendent of the Italian instrument, which had a disposition of 2x8', with a pulled rank only reachable from the side of this instrument, and thus not available for registration. Perforce the two 8' stops have to be equal in volume or else it is not possible to play either the *Pièces croisées* or the Goldberg Variations, as one voice would dominate the total sound. This makes the whole idea of a solo stop dubious, as it would imply precisely this – a dominating single 8' sound.

However, the way this instrument is used by modern players does not respect this arrangement. An informal survey of a dozen or so recorded versions of the *Pièces de clavecin* of Rameau reveals that a great many pieces, over half in fact, are played by today's executants on a single stop; adding in those played with the 4' (one way or another) and we have only 30–40% of pieces at most using the 'normal' 2x8' coupled sound implied by François Couperin, and by the two extant single-manual French instruments with 2x8'. This seems most unlikely, even if many harpsichordists were also organists. The French harpsichord is quite a different instrument, more like carving pure white marble than anything dependent on color.

One final word is in order, however. John Koster's monographs on the different kinds of harpsichords, particularly those in Bach's neighborhood, answer the problem that it is impossible to play Bach's Italian Concerto on the French instrument described above. Thus our modern default instrument fails, as Koster's monograph clearly shows. Koster calls the French instrument 'chaste', which it surely is in a purely French sense, just as a lot of French architecture is similarly restrained – the 'broken façade' of the Baroque is flamboyant in Italy, whereas in France sometimes the displacement is only a couple of inches. It is the sound of the French double, which is lavish and luxuriant, and not chaste at all!

The Artist

James Richman was made a *Chevalier* in the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* of the French Republic in recognition of his contributions to the art of music. A specialist in Baroque opera, he has led over 200 performances of stage works from the 17th and 18th centuries, including over 100 of Rameau's. Having worked together with the renowned Baroque choreographer Catherine Turocy on a great deal of this repertoire, he has a unique understanding of the role of dance in period performance, both in the opera house and on the harpsichord.

A graduate of Harvard College *magna cum laude* in History of Science, he then went on to study with Max Rudolf (conducting) and Robert Levin (theory and history) at the Curtis Institute of Music, and with Albert Fuller (harpsichord) at the Juilliard School. Other studies included harpsichord with Kenneth Gilbert and conducting with Herbert Blomstedt. He was the founder of Concert Royal, the first group to present Baroque orchestra concerts in New York City, and went on to produce concert series at Alice Tully Hall and at the French Institute/Alliance Française in New York, as well as at Princeton University; Concert Royal also accompanied the Choir of Men and Boys at Saint Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue in annual performances of Handel's *Messiah* and the Passions of J.S. Bach. Since 1995 James Richman has been Artistic Director and Harpsichordist of the Dallas Bach Society, where recent recordings have included the world premieres of Handel's original 1741 version of *Messiah* and the *Saint John Passion* (both on Onyx, London), and the chamber opera *Les Arts florissants* of Marc-Antoine Charpentier (Rubicon, London).

James Richman