

## **RAMEAU'S MUSICAL FEAST**

### **An Extravaganza Fit for a King**

**by Bruce Lamott**

Will Rogers once quipped, "If you don't like the weather in Oklahoma, wait a minute and it'll change." The same could be said about Rameau's operas. Unlike the string-of-pearls alternation of arias and freely sung recitatives found in contemporary Italian *opera seria* (serious opera) such as those of Handel, Rameau's opéra-ballets are an unpredictable variety show of dances, choruses, ensembles, and shorter arias interspersed with lyrical recitatives and audacious harmonic surprises.

Rameau's orchestral palette is full of variety as well, launching a French affinity for woodwind timbres that will continue from Berlioz to Debussy to Messiaen. His compositions attest to the serendipitous presence of Jacques-Martin Hotteterre and family, who for woodwind players are what Antonio Stradivari and his Cremona contemporaries are to strings. From the first notes of the Overture, two piccolos add striking brilliance to the animated harmonies of the oboes, trumpets, horns, and bassoons. This bombast abates briefly for the graceful minuet for flute duet and strings and two flutes that it frames.

Rameau's orchestration works as musical set design, creating an atmospheric effect before a single note is sung. The Prologue begins in the cavern of Envy with a prominent duet of subterranean bassoons in dialogue with plummeting scales (*tirate*) in the violins. The bucolic scene for the *étree* of the shepherds and shepherdesses in Act I is set by the sound of the musette, a kind of housebroken bagpipe frequently seen in paintings of the Adoration of the Shepherds or pastoral concerts (*concerts champêtres*). The omnipresence of woodwinds in the French orchestra sets it apart from its Italian contemporaries, in which woodwinds are an occasional additive element used for specific imagery such as birds or the hunt.

Another departure from Italian *opera seria* of the period is the French treatment of the dialogues and monologues (*recitatif*) connecting the concerted arias and dances. Unlike the free rapid-fire delivery in the rhythm and speed of the Italian language, French recitative is subject to a pulse and very attentive to the scansion of the poetic lines. Rameau was assiduous in his attention to Voltaire's text both

in the rhythm and meaning of the words. As the author of the century's most important treatise on harmony, Rameau was particularly sensitive to the effect of chord progressions played by the harpsichord and cello (*basso continuo*) which underscore the structure and content of the text. Ever-present throughout Italian opera (hence the name *continuo*), the harpsichord is not included in Rameau's orchestral accompaniments, and the absence of its ubiquitous sparkle focuses our attention on other instrumental colors. Rameau divides the viola section into two separate parts--a characteristic of French string scoring since Lully-- In order to fill out the harmonies usually supplied by the keyboardist's right hand,

Choruses and ensembles, rarely found in *opera seria*, abound in this opera. As with French grand opera of the 19th century, there is a large role for an independent choral ensemble which changes characters with the shifting scenarios of the three acts; their various roles--demons, Muses, shepherds and shepherdesses, bacchantes, priests and priestesses, and Romans--require changes in vocal timbre as well as personality. As a major figure of the Enlightenment's classical humanism, Voltaire was well-versed in Greek drama, and at times the chorus takes on the role of the classical Greek chorus, reflecting the message rather than portraying a role.

Composers of Italian opera seria such as Handel, Vivaldi, or Alessandro Scarlatti strung arias together on a storyline set up by recitative. Aria texts were most often generic expressions of affect--vengeance, joy, ambition, sorrow--absent content specific to the particular plotline. There was a rigid hierarchy of roles, and leading characters were revealed through a series of contrasting arias in a pageant of passions. Audience demand for virtuosic display created the two-steps-forward-one-step-back form of the *da capo* aria, in which the first half of the aria is repeated from the top (*da capo*) as a vehicle for improvised ornamentation and cadenzas. Dramatic convention then dictated that the singer exit the stage, allowing for applause and even encores. Word and phrase repetitions ("Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice greatly") accommodated elaborate extensions for the purpose of vocalism and formal structure.

Not so the French. One of the hallmarks of French Baroque musical theater is the seamless transition between recitative, solo aria, and ensembles of duets, trios, and chorus. Rameau sets Voltaire's text with careful attention to the rhythmic scansion and rhyme of the libretto reflected in the phrasing, pauses, and

cadences of each line. Voltaire's text is full of grandeur and serious philosophic thought. In the Preface to *Le temple*, he states his intention to replace the vapid eroticism with something more serious and moralistic accompanied by grandiose spectacle; the occasion of a military victory--as opposed to a wedding--gave him license. Though the text itself is much more prolific than its Italian contemporaries, it passes with great dispatch absent repetitions and virtuosic extensions. Arias segué seamlessly from the recitatives without lengthy orchestral introductions, and their content relates directly to the dramatic situation at hand.

This scrupulous respect for the poetry is further reflected in the uniquely French approach to vocal and instrumental ornamentation called *agréments*. Unlike the bravura roulades and flights of virtuosic passagework of the Italians, these *agréments* are concise and fleeting emphases of accented syllables, expressive harmonies, and rhythmic stresses using brief and frequent trills, appoggiaturas (a stepwise "leaning" into dissonance followed by its resolution), and *ports de voix*, a gentle sliding into a note followed by a brief oscillation. The frequent use of these *agréments* also make the melodic lines more pliable by cushioning large leaps and tapering phrase endings.

The diverse roles in *Le Temple* were cast from the resident ensemble of the Académie Royale de Musique, founded by Louis XIV and devoted to the exclusive performance of French opera. It developed under the strict control of Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-87), whose works continued to be performed alongside those of Rameau and Gluck a century later. This respect for the music of previous generations was rare, as opera companies generally discarded works that were not stylistically *au courant*. The five singers who created the principal roles were the leading artists in this resident company numbering about fifteen singers. Three of the five sang dual roles: Marie-Jeanne Fesch-- known to audiences as Mlle. Chevalier--was the *premier sujet* (prima donna) of the company. As Lydia, she expressed the nobility and pathos for which she was famous, but the role of Plautine gave her the opportunity to show a tender and somewhat amorous side as well. Marie Fel, soon to become a favorite of Rameau, sang the contrasting roles of Érigone and la Gloire, demonstrating both her strengths in comedic acting as well as brilliant vocalism. Pierre Jélyotte (Apollon and Trajan), known for his supple, sonorous tenor, was also described as "a unique singer, but one without acting skills or looks." Bacchus was sung by François Poirier, noted for his extensive high tenor (or countertenor) range, called *haute contre*--a voice

preferred by the French over the penchant for mezzo-soprano castratos found in Italian opera seria. The alto part in the choruses is also labeled *haut-contre*, giving it the scoring of soprano and three-part male chorus (haute-contre, tenor, bass) that continued into the nineteenth century.

The French penchant for dance is reflected in the nomenclature of this opera as an *opera-ballet*, or *ballet héroïque*. The theatrical dances which developed at the court of Louis XIV abound in this work: *passepied*, *gigue*, *entrée*, *forlane*, *gavotte*, *loure*, and, as customary, a concluding *passacaille*. The character of each dance type reflects the personality of the roles of the dancers, such as the pastoral *gigue* for the shepherds and shepherdesses, the lusty *forlane* for the bacchantes, and in the final scene, a series of *entrées* accompanying the entrances of Roman nobility, shepherds, soldiers, and youths--each appropriate to its social class.

It's quite possible that the engaging charm, lyricism, and spectacle of this operatic rarity will prompt the question: Why don't we see these works performed more often? Though performances of French Baroque opera are becoming somewhat more frequent, Rameau's operas have yet to be staged by the major opera companies in America. While Handel's Italian operas appear now with some regularity, they were created with economy in mind; Handel was an impresario subject to the vagaries of ticket sales and audience taste, and expenditures took their toll on his profit margin. Rameau and Voltaire, on the other hand, had the deep pockets of the Bourbon monarchy at their disposal. Such a large cast, dance troupe, large (in Baroque terms) orchestra, lavish spectacle, and uncertain box-office would certainly give modern producers pause. But beyond that lies another challenge: that of historically informed performance. French opera may be the last frontier in Baroque performance practices, requiring a specialized knowledge of period choreography, theatrical practice, and instrumental technique, not to mention a roster of singers who are fluent in the musical language of French declamation and Baroque vocalism. This performance brings these elements together in an unprecedented collaboration in order to give you a rare glimpse of entertainment fit for a king.

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## **NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR**

**by Catherine Turocy**

The music of Rameau has been at the very heart of my development. In 1974 at the Aston Magna Festival, with the Baroque Dance Ensemble directed by Dr. Shirley Wynne, I performed in her dramatic choreography to *La Cupis* from the *Cinquième concert*, first published in 1741. (Later, Rameau used this chamber music movement in the prologue of *Le Temple de la Gloire* for the dance of the Muses.) The music is haunting, otherworldly, tender and beautiful. In our performance, at precisely the first note, I fell in love at first sight/sound with the harpsichordist, James Richman. Little did I suspect that Rameau's music from the prologue would be the prologue to my journey in love and in dance.

After marriage, many productions together and the birth of our first child, James and I combined our two companies to produce *Le Temple de la Gloire* in NYC, 1991. He was the conductor, I choreographed and danced. We did not know about the original version of the opera. With David Ostwald as the inspired stage director, our New York Times review read: "*The teeming stage activity was so well integrated that it was often hard to tell where David Ostwald's direction left off and Ms. Turocy's choreography began. To a nonspecialist, the dance, for all its antiquated stylizations, seemed convincing, possessed of a consistent logic and impulse.*"

However, the one section of the opera which always bothered me was the very quick moment when Trajan declares he would like the Temple of Glory, celebrating his own triumphs, to become the Temple of Happiness, dedicated to the right to the Pursuit of Happiness for all people, regardless of social class, sex or age. Musically, in the 1746 version, this moment almost slips by as if it were a sudden whim of Trajan's. Now, in 2017 (yes, decades later) I have the opportunity to realize the original version of the opera and to discover the original context and dramatic build to this moment from the Enlightenment preserved in Voltaire's libretto and Rameau's music. I searched the text for a political argument in Act III, but found nothing in the libretto. No, the moment is too important and controversial to put into words. The buildup to the announcement by Trajan is in the dance music. It is a mute declaration of an inner struggle by a non-participant in the dance. How perfect! As the performance reveals itself tonight, follow the thread of the dance throughout the staging to experience the

power of this mute but very expressive art. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to be involved in this historic production and I thank Nicholas McGegan, Philharmonia Baroque, the Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles and Cal Performances as well as the people and organizations who donated their resources to make these performances possible.

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## **IS TRAJAN HAPPY?**

**The Remarkable History of *Le Temple de la Gloire*  
by Victor Gavenda**

*The Grande Écurie—the Great Stable—of the palace of Versailles was alive with light, sound, and movement on this frosty November evening in 1745. The temporary theater housed within had just witnessed the premiere of a new opéra-ballet with music by Jean-Philippe Rameau: *Le Temple de la Gloire*. But leaving the Écurie behind, a tall, spindly figure emerged into the cold and set off across the vast space of the Place d’Armes, making a beeline for the palace itself.*

*The man had written the words for the evening’s entertainment, but his goal had been to provide more than mere diversion. On the surface, the opera was a conventional celebration of King Louis XV’s victory in battle. But because this author was none other than that utterly unconventional philosophe, Voltaire, the opera encoded an allegorical “lesson” for His Majesty. In the work, three kings from antiquity attempt to enter the Temple of Glory, established by Apollo and guarded by the Muses. Two of them fail, but the wise and benevolent Trajan succeeds.*

*Voltaire, eager to learn if his message found its intended recipient, entered the palace and pushed his way into the after-party. Positioning himself near the King, and perhaps with a sly grin, he is reputed to have asked—loud enough for all to hear—“Is Trajan happy?” The silence that followed, and the icy look that Louis shot in Voltaire’s direction, gave him his answer.*

Among the many valuable treasures housed in the Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library of the University of California at Berkeley is a unique hybrid book. Part manuscript and part print, the second half of the volume consists of the manuscript score of an 18th-century French opera. The first half is the lavishly

printed libretto of the same opera, prepared for the first performance of the work, which took place in 1745 at the great palace of Versailles. The two items were bound together in the 18th century, apparently to serve as a souvenir of the event.

The work itself is *Le Temple de la Gloire* (*The Temple of Glory*) and its creators comprised a dream team of their time: the words were written by the leading light of the French Enlightenment, François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), better known by the *nom de plume* Voltaire, and the music was by Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764), 18th-century France’s greatest composer.

This combination libretto-score was purchased by the University of California at Berkeley in 1976, and almost immediately scholars noticed that it included music not found in any other source.

Since then, it has been the subject of investigation by several scholars (the present writer included). Most recently, Julien Dubruque of the Institut de Recherche en Musicologie (Université Paris-Sorbonne) has completed a dissertation on the opera that includes the most comprehensive analysis of the book to date. While mysteries remain, the book’s importance as a source for a better understanding of theater, music, and politics during the reign of Louis XV has become clear.

The chief value of the book lies in the manuscript portion, which preserves the only known copy of the original version of the music as the work was first performed at Versailles in November 1745. That version remained unheard for almost 270 years, until Cal Performances at the University of California at Berkeley presented its modern premiere in the spring of 2017, using a new edition compiled by Dubruque. Nicholas McGegan conducted the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra & Chorale together with an international cast of soloists and the New York Baroque Dance Company in a production co-produced with Philharmonia and the Centre de musique baroque de Versailles.

The theatrical work enshrined in the book, *Le Temple de la Gloire*, came to be thanks to a confluence of remarkable events. Among them is the presence of Voltaire, the great gadfly of the French establishment, at Versailles (“but not at court,” he often hastened to add). In the *salon* culture of 1740s Paris, Voltaire was one of the most sought-after party guests, admired for his sparkling wit and

encyclopedic knowledge. He had become a particular favorite of one Madame d'Étiolles, and in 1745 when Louis XV took her as his mistress and ennobled her as the Marquise de Pompadour, Voltaire followed as her circle relocated to Versailles. Mme de Pompadour arranged for Voltaire to be made historiographer of France and he was assigned housing in the palace. After years of haranguing the government from the outside, Voltaire tried for a time to effect change from within.

His opportunity arrived in May of 1745 when French forces defeated an army of Dutch, British, and Hanoverian troops at Fontenoy, in what is now Belgium. Thanks to the presence at the battle of Louis XV the King's popularity reached its peak. (Ironically, this was to be the last occasion a French king would ever lead his troops into battle.)

The nation was swept up in a wave of patriotic feeling, and Voltaire was not immune. He tossed off a 350-line poem in honor of Louis and later that summer the Duc de Richelieu, chamberlain to the King and one of Voltaire's oldest friends, commissioned him to write the words for a new opera commemorating the victory with music to be provided by Rameau.

This would not be the first collaboration between the two giants; indeed, several of Voltaire's previous attempts at writing opera (all abortive) had involved Rameau. Their first joint work was *Samson* (1734), a biblical epic that displayed its author's libertarian and anticlerical bias. Plans for a production crumbled even before the work was finished. Voltaire spread the rumor that religious censorship was to blame, but modern scholars suspect the cause was rather the artistic differences between author and composer. Indeed, Rameau never finished the score and the music is lost.

The two men enjoyed an awkward relationship. They acknowledged each other's talents, but they had opposing ideas about opera. Rameau had turned the art form upside down with his dazzling music and innovative approach to the use of dance, but he had left in place the key focus of French opera: love. Voltaire, for his part, brought the same reforming zeal to opera that he had already tried to apply to society. He tried to explain himself in a letter to Rameau (probably from the fall of 1734):

Your music is admirable, but even that has made you enemies, and cruel ones at that.... mine are now spreading the slander that there are impious moments in Samson. Now I must also correct the audience's preconceptions: they will possibly find it difficult to understand an operatic heroine who is not in love at any point in the opera—and whilst my slanderers say that my work is impious, the audience will possibly decide that it is too virtuous and severe.

Fast-forward now to 1745, and we find that same aesthetic tension between Voltaire and Rameau plays a role in the curious history of *Le Temple de la Gloire*.

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The glittering premiere of the work took place on November 27, 1745 and was repeated on December 4. For all its splendor, the great Château de Versailles had no permanent opera house until 1770. Thus *Temple* was performed in a temporary theater in the Grande Écurie across the street from the palace. This theater had been put up earlier in the year for the celebrations surrounding the wedding of the Dauphin; entertainments included contributions by Voltaire and Rameau.

After these first two performances, the production was given to the Paris Opera where it was remounted but withdrawn after a handful of performances. Author and composer set to work on the piece, and the revised version had a fresh premiere on April 19, 1746, opening the post-Lenten theater season. Alas, this version had no more success than the first, and was withdrawn after less than a month.

So, what happened? Why was the initial version of *Le Temple de la Gloire* a commercial flop? What did Voltaire and Rameau do to the work to try to salvage it? And why were their efforts in vain?

For many years, these questions were difficult to answer because our knowledge of the 1745 version was incomplete. The score of neither version was ever printed, and the surviving manuscript copies known until recently transmit only the later 1746 version. All that was known of the 1745 music were the portions of the opera that did not change in the course of revision, as well as a few fragments of the original music that can be found in the “production score” preserved in the Bibliothèque de l’Opéra in Paris. This score was used for rehearsals and

performances and contains markings by the conductor (and in this case, a few pages in the hand of the composer himself).

But many copies of the libretto exist, and in the absence of music, the words can tell us much. These were printed and sold to the audience for each performance (for court spectacles they were distributed *gratis*). The librettos for the Versailles performances, like the one in the Berkeley volume, were beautifully produced, with exquisitely engraved frontispieces for each act.



To a typical mid-18th-century Parisian opera-goer, *Le Temple de la Gloire* belongs to the genre of *opéra-ballet*. This genre became popular in the early part of the century, and expresses that age's rococo taste for lightweight entertainment, as opposed to the ponderous serious operas, the *tragédies en musique*, of the preceding era of Louis XIV. Typically in three or four acts with a prologue, a single plot did not drive the action from beginning to end. The story of each act was independent of the others, but all of the acts shared a common theme—such as a specific aspect of love—which was typically set out in an allegorical prologue.

What the audience in the Grande Écurie experienced that night in 1745 was very different, however. Instead of a string of diverting love stories, they were treated to three examples of kingship: two bad, and one good. The opening Prologue set the theme: The Muses tend the Temple of Glory on Mount Parnassus, but the figure of Envy (backed up by an army of demons) tries to gain entry by force. A cohort of heroes led by Apollo repulses the attack, and Envy is subdued. Apollo proclaims that only those who possess a great heart are worthy of admission to the Temple.

Each of the three acts shows the attempt of a king from antiquity to enter the Temple. The first, Bélus, bursts in on a peaceful gathering of pastoral folk, is disgusted by their “softness,” and is rejected from the Temple for being a bloodthirsty conqueror. Bacchus, king No. 2, is turned away because his fame for inventing wine and spreading debauchery does not qualify him; only virtuous deeds can do that.

Finally, we meet Trajan. After defeating five rebel kings, he pardons them magnanimously. Glory descends with a crown of laurel and invites Trajan to enter the Temple, but he refuses the offer and asks the gods to transform the Temple of Glory into a Temple of Happiness and to welcome all of humanity. A lengthy sung and danced *divertissement* closes the opera.

The audience hardly knew what to make of this. The music was generally agreed to be excellent, but... the words! Voltaire had used his privileged situation at the heart of royal power to deliver an object-lesson in the proper behavior of an enlightened ruler directly to Louis XV: A great king, worthy of Glory, is not a conqueror or a tyrant, but one who makes his people happy. It's easy to imagine that the King would not appreciate being lectured by a social inferior (not to mention a trenchant critic of the establishment). Thus the famous—and possibly apocryphal—anecdote of Voltaire's stage-whispered "Is Trajan pleased?" and Louis' stony silence in response rings true.

When the production moved to Paris, the public was even less kind. Wags complained that if they wanted a sermon on ethics, they would go to hear a Latin cantata at a Jesuit college. Rameau and Voltaire withdrew the work from the stage and set about revamping it.

The new version that premiered in April 1746 shows the triumph of Rameau's musical and theatrical sensibilities over Voltaire's political agenda. The overall framework of the drama remains the same, but the harsh actions of the main players are softened, and love is allowed a larger role. In spite of the revisions, the work once again failed to catch fire. But bits of the opera did live on, as individual numbers were recycled in operas by Rameau and other composers as well.

In the end the event was a pivotal moment in the careers of both men. Rameau's contribution met with favor from the King, and he was rewarded with a court appointment and a royal pension for life. Voltaire, however, finally realized that he was out of his element. After signing over his share of the proceeds from the opera to Rameau, involvement in a fresh scandal soon drove him from Versailles, and years later he wrote of his time as a courtier: "Of all the time that I have wasted in my life, it was this period that I regret the most."

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The skeletal nature of the Berkeley score, including only the melody and bass parts, implies that it was intended as a model for a printed score (this kind of short score was typical of 18th-century French opera publications, equivalent to today's piano-vocal score); but plans for publication seem to have been shelved. Then the manuscript disappears from history for a time. In the early 20th century, the great French pianist Alfred Cortot acquired it, and after his death in 1962 the volume was purchased by the Berkeley music library.

The manuscript has gradually yielded its secrets under close scholarly scrutiny. It now seems clear that it was copied directly from an early state of the "production score" mentioned earlier. The scribes who wrote out the Berkeley score also worked on the production score, and their number included the principal copyist of the Paris Opera. Even more intriguing, small discrepancies between the two scores seem to indicate that the Berkeley score was copied out while the opera was still in rehearsal, and the musical content was still in flux.

For the past two decades, Davitt Moroney, Professor of Music at UC Berkeley, has been a member of the international team of experts responsible for issuing the new edition of Rameau's complete works, says of this book: "This manuscript is one of the most important documents in the Berkeley music library. It is the only source for a good deal of music by one of the greatest composers of the 18th century. Furthermore, it preserves a record of his collaboration with another of the greatest figures of his time, Voltaire, at a moment when both men are at the peak of their careers and influence."

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