

# Rameau and French Opera

- Developments since Lully (d.1687)
- Rameau's Life
- His Operas – Les Indes Gallant (1735/6) and Hippolyte et Arice (1733 and later revisions)
- The debate over the direction of Opera in France

# Post Lully

- Without Lully and with Louis XIV old and embittered, few operas of note were performed. Instead Lully's old ones were often revived.
- Andre Campra the leading composer of theatre works (with Philidor). The opera-ballet *L'Europe galante* (1697) used Italian arias as well as French. Other composers – Montclair, Marais and Rebel.
- After Louis XIV there was period of regency followed by Louis XV (reigned 1715-74) who rarely attended either plays or operas. Louis was dominated by his mistresses and not an effective patron of the arts in the way Louis XIV had been.
- For 46 years between Lully's last opera and Rameau's first the *tragedies-en-musique* that were produced were short lived failures. Perhaps because of the subordination of drama to decoration.

# Rameau's Life

- 1683-1764 – a very long productive life.
- Came from Dijon where his father was a provincial organist.
- His early career remained obscure before he came to Paris in 1725/6 to supervise the publishing of his treatise. Thus his career as a leading composer of Opera and cantatas took place when he was over 40.
- He was known as a provincial violinist and keyboardist – but primarily as a theorist.

# Move to Paris

- His treatise caused considerable debate and stayed on in Paris composing for the fair theatres.
- In 1726 at 42 he married a 19-year old singer and started a family. First big success with *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733).
- This began the controversy between the Lullists and Ramists.
- Collaborated with Voltaire in 3 operas.
- Patronised by the super rich tax-farmer A.J.J. Le Riche de La Poupliniere, through whom he met all manner of influential people of the time.

# The Theorist

- Rameau was France's leading music theorist of the eighteenth-century and produced a vast output of literary works of all aspects of theory.
- His *Nouveau systeme de musique theorique* (1726) his best known work. Advanced a more extensive and elaborate harmonic system that utilised many more keys and was based on thirds within the octave – leading to use of 7ths, 9ths and 11ths.
- In 1737 produced the *Generation harmonique* which included his ideas on temperament.
- Foremost teacher of composition and theory in Paris after 1726.

# Later Life

- 1740-4 were slack years but 1745-51 saw many new commissions, especially of operas – some for the festivities surrounding the Dauphin's marriage in 1745.
- For his work for the marriage he received a royal pension and the title *compositeur de la musique de la chambre du roy* an exceptional honor as he had no previous royal post.

# Querelles des Bouffons

- Controversy had surrounded Rameau's earlier operas as the Lullist had disliked his deviations from the Lullian opera style.
- In the 1750s a new generation of critics attacked Rameau's work as archaic and insufficiently realistic.
- Rameau falls out with the leading *philosophes* and in particular J.J.Rousseau.
- Rousseau writes an opera in 1752 to show how it should be done. *Le Devin du village* is the result. The characters are drawn from village life and meant to be both realistic and to have real emotions. It uses the Italian melodic style and was intended to show the way forward.

# Opera Comique

- There was a version of light opera in France from 1710 onwards known as *opera comique* which used popular tunes both new and existing. They were comparable to short Ballad Operas.
- In 1752 an Italian comic opera troupe came to Paris and put on Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*. This set off the debate about opera – (Quarrel of the comic actors) and the start of the war.
- Rousseau was on the side of Italian style – Rameau on the side of the old state sponsored Opera Ballet.

# Rameau's Style

- Framework that of Lully:
- 1. Five Acts with frequent long divertissements for dancing. Overture form that of Lully but longer and more complicated. Introduction of the themes that recur later in the opera.
- 2. Arioso style of declamatory recits which are precisely notated to reflect the nuances of the language.
- 3. Mix of recits and airs, choruses and instrumental interludes – with plenty of opportunity for scenic display, effects and dancing in strange costumes.

# New Elements

- Melody rooted in harmony – triadic and indicate the interesting progressions that underpin them.
- Theory of harmony on display – relationships between keys orderly and advanced. Rich palette of keys both major and minor to draw on at all times (even enharmonic modulations are possible).
- Instrumental writing some of the most advanced for the time – themes, rhythms and harmonies are distinctive and paint a picture – they are descriptive. Thunder, earthquakes, floods, storms all depicted in musical pictures.
- Orchestration advanced – independent use of woodwind, bassoons and horns. Also still using recorders and other instruments going out of fashion. Precise use of 5 part strings.
- Subtle use of dissonance inherent in the advanced chords used.
- Prominent choral writing used for moments of powerful effect.

# Hippolyte et Aricie

1. Prologue and 5 acts each with a divertissement.
2. The original and complete version never performed due to conservative pressure. It caused a great aesthetic shock.
3. Libretto supplied by Abbe Simon-Joseph Pellegrin and funded by La Poupliniere.
4. Substantially revised it was republished in a shorter version. Revived in 1742 and 1757 it established Rameau at the heart of French musical life.
5. Listen to Act IV

# Les Indes Galantes

- An *opera-ballet* produced in 1735 made up of a prologue and four acts (or *entrees*) each of which is self contained. They are in The Generous Turk, The Incas of Peru, The Persian Flower Fete and The Savages (added for later productions in 1736 in Paris and Versailles). The subject matter is linked to the general theme hinted at in the title. The locations are all exotic and link up with the enlightenment themes of interaction with other cultures.
- The costumes and scenery were of great importance as was the dance. The production featured many of the most celebrated dancers of the day this was part of its success.
- Listen to Entrée II – Incas of Peru

# Debate

- At the end of Rameau's life the debate over the future of opera was still a hot issue?
- Was it follow the old Lullian tradition of depicting Gods and heroes torn between love and duty – a grand style that seemed archaic in the enlightenment age?
- Or was it to sell out to the Italian interpretation of opera – light weight by comparison and indulgent to the singer?
- How could it be made more realistic and more connected to real life and real issues of the day?
- Could it convey real drama?
- How could French opera maintain a distinct identity while forging a new style?