

The keyboard music of Jean-Philippe Rameau

Monograph

By Jorg Cova, 2002

Abstract

Jean-Philippe Rameau is acknowledged in music history as a composer of theatrical dramatic music. However, his devotion to opera was the last stage of his musical output since his reputation as an opera composer stemmed from the representation of *Hippolyte et Aricie*, a lyric tragedy in five acts with prologue, staged in Paris on October 1, 1733 in the *Académie Royale de Musique* (Royal Academy of Music) today the *Opéra de Paris*, which was then settled in the Royal palace, after he had turned fifty. Before that, Rameau excelled as a philosopher and music theorist for what he gained repute, and as a composer of harpsichord music. He produced three books which he published between 1706 and 1730, as well as several other pieces and self-borrowed transcriptions. A survey over this music reveals that the harpsichord meant to Rameau the laboratory where he created and perfected his musical language that would later appear in his operas with the most striking emotional and dramatical bias.

Jean-Philippe Rameau (his life overlook)

A son of an organist of Dijon, Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) received from his father his only formal musical instruction. After a brief sojourn in Italy and a term as organist at Clermont-Ferrand he undertook his first trip to Paris in 1706 where he published his first book for harpsichord at the age of twenty-three. He then succeeded his father at Notre Dame de Dijon in 1709, and shortly afterwards he was appointed organist at Lyon. In 1715 he returned to his former position at Clermont-Ferrand; here he wrote his *Traité de l'Harmonie* (Treatise of Harmony), which he published in 1722.

He returned to Paris in 1723, at the age of forty. The Parisian public then thought of Rameau mostly as a scholar, a philosopher, a wise man, but by no means as a composer. Moreover, due to his being bitter and solitary, Rameau showed himself unfit for court life. He was first acknowledged by the public once he had devoted himself entirely to the composition of opera, shortly before he had turned fifty. But, at the same time he found himself involved in quarrels, assailed by his detractors, due to the innovative character of his composition which resulted in clashes with the current taste.

His Thought

No other musical personality could be so closely related to the ideas of the 18th century French Enlightenment; no one so fully embodies its inner intellectual character. Within an era in which

Nature was believed to be ruled by a rational order and mechanical principles, Rameau's greatest accomplishment was to expose the empirical bias of musical practice in terms of a natural principle: the *fundamental bass*. His scientific thought is evidently Newtonian, similar to the celestial optic and mechanic's systematisation. Rameau has always imagined his *fundamental bass* as a Cartesian model. As a matter of fact, in the foreword of his *Traité de l'Harmonie* he states: "[...] music is a science that should be subjected to certain rules; these rules must be drawn from an evident principle, and this principle cannot be known to us out of the resort of mathematics." Insofar as Rameau's Cartesian rhetoric is not merely pure reason, he has never denied the intervening role of practice in the building up of musical theory. Should whatever musical principle becomes worthwhile, - he says -, it must rely on hearing experience: "we can only assess music throughout listening, and mind wouldn't have any authority unless it remains in agreement with the ear."

Certainly not just pure reason not even pure hearing experience! Rameau shows that "his method" is a true dialectic of theory and practice. He conceived music as a body of empirical evidence and he discovered, by means of analysis, constants which are liable to be clarified through hypothetical statements: *fundamental bass*, *fundamental generator*, *the seventh as the source of all dissonances*, *fundamental progression of the fifth*...

Could a philosopher, who so astoundingly discourses on intervals and such principles, be capable of creating practical music?

Rameau's music strongly reflects his concern about harmony and its natural basic principles. His melody is subordinated to harmonic progressions. Thus, Rameau bestows his music – says Bukofzer - with a hitherto unknown consistency, if not uniformity, of structure. Yet in his conception of melody as an outgrowth of harmony – he adds – Rameau merely rationalized the virtues and defects of his talent, which was inspired by harmony and rhythm rather than melody¹.

His harpsichord music

Rameau imposed a novel virtuosity to the keyboard which relies not only upon new technical resources, some of which Rameau considers his own invention, but also on tone colour and orchestral displays that go far beyond the reach of the harpsichord's inner qualities. Embodied with the ideals of French aesthetics, he conceived instrumental music in terms of ballet, opera and extra-musical representations.

Inspired by readings and discussions held with the Jesuits Father Castel in Paris about Kircher's writs on bird's singing, Rameau thus exposed his concern with Nature: "[...] how much I endeavoured, with the aid of the great writer [...] to create pieces which imitate the voice of Nature." Indeed, not imitation but representation of a Nature which is lyric and dramatic.

Most of Rameau's harpsichord music, except for a few pieces originally written as ensemble music and further transcribed for the harpsichord, comes from the anonymous period spent before the stage setting of his first opera in 1733. The harpsichord became Rameau's alchemist crucible where he experimented towards the final attainment of the technical and expressive resources of his musical language.

¹ Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era* (W. W. Norton, New York, 1947).

Beside the enormous bulk of Rameau's output in the field of opera, cantata and motet, his harpsichord music may appear a slender legacy deprived of any true musical significance. Notwithstanding, it foreshadows the greatness of the dramatic power deployed by Rameau in his operas. Indeed, even though little in dimension, Rameau's harpsichord pieces are great in conception.

It would be a mistake to compare Rameau's harpsichord music to that of François Couperin. Albeit Rameau's being the heir of the French harpsichord tradition, he is not a straightforward descendant of Couperin, but he represents a further stage in the evolution of French harpsichord music. According to Bukofzer, in contrast with Couperin's gallant style, yet subjected to the thorough bass, Rameau's style reflects his harmonic conception. Indeed, harmony is a generating factor which provides, by means of its functional, tonal linkage, the inner bond to music. Rameau sums up all the former stages of French harpsichord music to endow it with hints of a new development; the latter representing a never reached before leap forward in terms of technical achievements.

The suite for harpsichord

In the early years of the 18th century two main types of harpsichord pieces existed in France, namely: *dance pieces*, reminders of the pleasure of dancing solely aimed at entertainment, and *genre pieces* (musical painting) whose musical appeal resided in evocative hints of persons, objects, events or situations. Their boundaries being loose, *dance pieces* often bore allusive titles or names and *genre pieces* were often written in dance rhythm.

Dance pieces are rooted in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance pairs of dances: *bass dance* – *alta*; *pavan* – *galliard*. The former was binary, melodic and “paced”; the latter ternary, rhythmic and “jumped” as their functionally determined characteristics. The same pairs of dances appear in the Baroque Period as *allemande* – *courante* which is the basic core of the suite.

Furthermore, the suite of dances was enhanced by pieces, *galanteries*, newly incorporated to the *ballet de cour* by Lulli. Some of them were typically French: *passepied*, *rigaudon*, the cheerful *bourrée* already present, together with the *chaconne*, in Louis Couperin's sketches of suites or tonally grouped pieces, *gavotte*, the majestic *loure* inspired on the Italian *gigue*, *musette*, peasant dances become court dances like the *menuet* issued from the *branle de Poitou*, even foreign dances as of the “lustful” Spanish *sarabande*.

Genre pieces are already found in the 14th century *Chansonnier du Roy*. As a matter of fact, a few pieces in the manuscript bear names like *La Manfredina* and *Lamento di Tristano*. They are both coupled by a *Rotta* which comes to complete the binary – ternary pair, thus revealing their double conception as *genre* and *dance pieces*.

Music is painting. This is one of the crucial aspects of Rameau's aesthetics. Music accurately conveys feelings and situations. Lulli's conception of musical painting was a rhetoric one: it was the counterpart of the articulated language which found its utmost representative in the *recitative*. According to Rameau, music allows, thanks to its specific embodiment, to reveal Nature by means of its own inner way: the principle of the expressive quality of chords according to their “generation”; the latter, setting new basis towards the “characterisation” of a situation, a state of mind, a feeling, or just an idea.

The three Books for Harpsichord

Despite most of the pieces held within the second and third books (1724, ca. 1728), not a single one in the first *recueil* (1706) bears name. The early 17th century suite was of a purely musical style. Inversely, suites in later *recueils* of the 18th century exploited an extra-musical appeal: the evocative side of *genre pieces*. Notwithstanding, aloof from just a simple theoretical assertion, the hinting titles reveal a crescent intimate attitude towards music.

The ***Premier livre de pièces de Clavecin*** (First book of pieces for harpsichord) (1706) stands at the boundary of a tradition: the leadership of the suite in France. It opens with a link to the past: a *Prélude non mesuré* (bar-less prelude). This toccata-like prelude, the harpsichord counterpart of the extemporized pieces for lute, was created by Louis Couperin. It consists on a series of harmonic “off gaits” out from a basic chord. Each gesture, accurately notated by means of wavy strokes, shows the far away departure from the starting point whilst the harmonic tension increases until finding release on a consonant chord, starting anew soon afterwards. Slurs between notes also mark the melodic support of the piece. The bar – less prelude, of extemporized performance, is no longer found in the music of François Couperin’s who states, by means of a precise notation of fixed note values and the indication “*mesuré*”, his breaking up from an “archaic” tradition. The initial *Prelude* which opens Rameau’s first book is a twofold composition: it has a bar-less first section and a second one in 12/8 measure depicting an Italian style *gigue* (with equal note values). Concerning its form, the former is Rameau’s only tribute to his musical ancestors, his unique homage towards a waning tradition. Notwithstanding, in terms of its inner content, this *Prelude* foreshadows a new music based upon harmony as a generating factor which endows it with its utmost inner consistency.

The opening *Prelude* is followed by nine pieces chained in a suite-like linkage: two *Allemandes*, the first one *grave* due to its sixteenth-note notation and its dramatic character. Issued from the former, the second one is lighter for it is written in eighth-notes. A *Courante* follows, which is written in the lutists’ style². All three seem to be the forerunners of their analogues in the third *recueil*. The *Gigue*, which boldly ranges all across the keyboard, echoes the *Prelude* in the last ten bars somewhat nuanced with a delicate lyricism. *Sarabande* and *2e Sarabande*, the former essentially melodic, it contrasts with the latter which is rhythmic in an *allemande – courante* linkage fashion. Inversely to the two *Allemandes*, both *Sarabandes* are not thematically related; the second one, mainly rhythmic, has a majestic pace thanks to its French-style dotted notation. *Gavotte* already features Rameau’s very personal style and seems to be the first sketch of *La Livri*³. *Vénitienne* reveals undoubtedly as Ramellian in its second section. Girdlestone finds its character closely related to the *barcarolle*. Yet, he suggests a moderate tempo in order to accurately convey the *cantabile* mood of the songs of *gondolieri*⁴. Both *Sarabandes* and the *Menuet* are reminders of the past that yet yield no hints of the mature Rameau of the second and third books. In general terms, the structure of the pieces within this *recueil* is less developed than that of future ones, but Rameau’s personality filters through their dramatic character.

Rameau’s second book, entitled ***Pièces de Clavecin*** (*Pieces for harpsichord*) was published in 1724, a year after Rameau’s return to Paris. It was reissued in 1731. Aged forty, he had written

² It is the *style brisé* (broken style), a staple lute music style whose trademark is a false polyphony which is only suggested by broken chords, and which is the basis of the improvised style.

³ Vide infra, *Pièces de Clavecin en Concert*.

⁴ Cuthbert Girdlestone, *Jean Philippe Rameau* (Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1969).

several motets and secular cantatas, and already published his *Traité de l'Harmonie* (Treatise of Harmony). By that time suite form had been already banned from repertory; nevertheless, Rameau continued to group his harpsichord compositions by tonality: ten in E and ten in D. Except for eight dances, they are mostly *genre* pieces, except for *Le Lardon* which shares both categories. From then on, Rameau's harpsichord pieces, among which several were issued from previous versions written for the *Theatre of the Fairground*, will recur in his operas.

Two main forms shape the whole of the second book pieces: staple binary dance form and rondo form. Among the binary ones, *Allemande* and *Courante* in E minor are rather conservative in structure and style like their analogues in the first book. *L'Entretien des Muses* is also conservatively sketched: two equally extended sections of which the second repeats the first; the latter cast anew in Rameau's opera *Les Fêtes d'Hébé*. Unmatched with them, *Le Rappel des Oiseaux* and *Les Soupirs* show no symmetry between the two sections. They are both based upon a similar ascending fourth motif put into relief in the final bars of the former piece by a ceaseless repetition.

Binary pieces reveal Rameau's harmonic conception through their tonal scheme. Thus, the dominant or the relative major stands at the end of the first section, whilst modulations and return to the tonic in the second. This was a quite common tonal scheme for binary pieces by the second half of the eighteenth century. It appears thus in Domenico Scarlatti's sonatas as well as in *opera seria* arias. Brief pieces like *Rigaudons* and *Le Lardon* are nonetheless written in one key. Structural and stylistic simplicity link 1^e and 2^e *Rigaudons* as well as *Double du Rigaudon* to the pieces in the first book.

Rondo pieces are less uniform. Except for the second *Gigue* and *Musette*, they only have two *couplets*. However, Rameau reduced the latter to two *couplets* while re-sketching it for Act III of *Les Fêtes d'Hébé*. The imitative effect of the bagpipe lends a charming bucolic Character to the piece. The tiny *Menuet en Rondeau* that opens this book, just a simple put-into-practice of Rameau's statements about fingering set out in the preface, is composed by one *couplet* only. Despite the structural contrast between the two *Gigues*: two *couplets* for the first and three for the second one, they are related by a stylistic unity being both Italian-style *gigs* (written in equal note values).

Rameau bestows thematic unity to both refrain and *couplets*. As a matter of fact, *Musette*, 1^e and 2^{eme} *Gigue*, *La Villageoise*, *Les Tourbillons*, *La Joyeuse*, *Les Niais de Sologne*, *La Follette* share a sense of unity never ever reached in Couperin's rondos. *Tambourin* is mainly through-composed and mono-thematic. The refrain returns slightly modified after the third *couplet*. It will recur in Act III of *Les Fêtes d'Hébé*.

A special consideration deserves *Les Cyclopes*: the refrain is here reduced to four measures when returning after the first *couplet* and then followed by a short development, whilst a sort of recapitulation occurs alongside the second *couplet*. So doing, Rameau approaches the piece's structure to the *da capo* rather than the rondo form.

Rameau's originality with respect to his fellow composers, particularly evident in his second and third books, resides in his endeavour to extend the boundaries of the harpsichord, considering it as an instrument capable of highly sustaining sound.

The colourful effect of the chord extensions in *Le Rappel des Oiseaux* and *La Villageoise*, as far as the great span of arpeggios ("batteries") and *roulements*⁵ employed by Rameau, betray his

⁵ Ascending and descending scales shared between both hands passing over one another.

intension to deploy instrumental resorts coming out from a much more powerful sound-sustaining instrument other than the harpsichord. The sound fullness in *Musette*, *Les Cyclopes*, and *L'Entretien des Muses* suggests an orchestral sound effect. Indeed, Rameau later orchestrated the first part of *L'Entretien des Muses* as well as *Musette* and *Tambourin* to include them in Act II and III of *Les Fêtes d'Hébé* respectively. Likewise, *Les Niais de Sologne*, with its drone bass and its melody depicting the sound of the hurdy-gurdy, was further reset by Rameau in Act III of *Dardanus*.

Rameau's harmonic musical thought yields to the plentiful use of a variety of arpeggios which allow hidden harmony to spring out from underneath the linear texture. *Les Tourbillons*, *Les Niais de Sologne*, whose *batteries* range more than two octaves, and *Les Cyclopes*, with up leaps of a 13th, "non melodic Alberti bass", as Mellers calls them, are real exponents of virtuosity resorts⁶. Two different kinds of *batteries* are present in *Les Cyclopes*: in one of them, both hands alternatively strike the keys depicting drumsticks strokes on the parchment; in the other one the left hand overruns the right one passing over it. Rameau candidly boasts about the latter as of his own invention, unaware that Scarlatti had independently created it. In the foreword Rameau says: "I believe that the latter *batteries* are of my own; at least, nothing alike has still come out; & I can say on behalf of them that the eye shares the same pleasure than the ear."⁷ Presumably, Rameau, far from being idle boaster, was indeed mindless of Scarlatti's attainments in the technical field of the keyboard. As a matter of fact, the latter was little known out of Spain and England during his lifetime. Highly estimated in London, Scarlatti prepared for the English music editor Thomas Roseingrave an edition of thirty of his sonatas, *Essercizi per gravichembalo*, the only edition of his music he achieved. It came out in 1738, so to say, fourteen years after Rameau's second book⁸. Certainly, these technical resources pervade Rameau's music with a hitherto unknown spaciousness. Notwithstanding, despite the technical virtuosity, Rameau has never neglected the dramatic utterance. This dramatic quality, not a merely theatrical one, as Mellers pejoratively calls it, is still more emotional than in the descriptive pieces of Couperin⁹. Yet another of Rameau's originalities: beside the overwhelming virtuosity of some of the pieces, there are still others, namely *L'Entretien des Muses*, *Les Tenders Plaintes*, which yield to a meditative calmness and contemplation. By the way, the latter, will appear as *Air tendre en rondeau* in the Act I of *Zoroastre*, air of *Amelite*. Since Rameau is essentially a composer of *ballet de cour*, choreographic effects are undeniable in *Les Cyclopes* probably due to an influence from *Persée* by Lulli¹⁰.

Rameau's third book, headed *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin* (New Suites of pieces for Harpsichord), has no date. The title page bears the author's address: "*Aux Trois Rois, rue des Boules*." Rameau moved to this dwell sometime between February of 1726, date of his wedding, and the birth of his first child in August of 1727. Rameau also mentions the piece *Les Sauvages* in a letter addressed to Houdar de la Motte in 1727. The second edition of Rameau's second book of 1724, which came out in 1731, bears a new address: "*Rue de Richelieu, près de l'Hôtel de la Paix*." These references allow us believe that the third book must have been edited between 1727 and 1730. It contains pieces of greater span and depth of passions than the ones in the other two *recueils*. They are among the greatest, according to Girldestone¹¹. The sweep of

⁶ Wilfrid Mellers, *François Couperin and the French Classical Tradition* (Dover publications, London, 1968).

⁷ Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Pieces de Clavessin, avec une methode pour la mecanique des doigts* (Charles-Etienne Hochereau, Paris, N.D. [1724]).

⁸ These thirty sonatas were classified by Kirkpatrick as the first thirty of his catalogs (K 1-30).

⁹ Mellers, Op. cit.

¹⁰ Cyclops appear among the personages of this opera by Lulli.

¹¹ Girldestone, *Jean-Philippe Rameau*.

the *Courante* and the *Allemande*, of a *grave* character, fashioned upon the *Allemandes* from the first book but yet embodied with the dramatic colour which is the trademark of the mature Rameau of this third book, the emotive majestic of the *Sarabande* which foreshadows the air *Tristes Apprêts* from *Castor et Pollux*, the power of *La Triomphante*, the contemplative mood of *L'Indifférente* and *L'Enharmonique*, have no precedents in Rameau's work. They stand beside lighter pieces like *Fanfarinette*, *Les Tricotets*, *Les Trois Mains*, *Les Triolets*, conceived in the mood of the previous *recueils*. *L'Egyptienne* and *Les Sauvages* stand out for a brand-new emotional character in harpsichord music¹².

The pieces enclosed in the third book, like those in the second one, are modelled upon one of the two alternative forms: binary and rondo form. But, despite the second book where the proportion for each form is more or less half for each, in the third book twelve among the fifteen pieces are binary. After the great undertakings with rondo form in the second book, Rameau seems to return to more elementary structures (A-B), carried on to the topmost development in terms of form.

Rameau balance the humble simplicity of the rondo form in *Les Sauvages*, *Les Tricotets* and *La Triomphante* with harmonic boldness: the enharmonic, depicting Italian models so far rejected by the Parisian audience and which Rameau endeavoured to experimentally introduce in his harpsichord music, and later to deploy it in his operas.

Binary forms are structurally more audacious. Some are fashioned upon the typical dance pattern where the two sections are thematically related, while others range up to two thematically independent sections. In *Fanfarinette* and *Sarabande* Rameau enlarges the second section with an episode of development. Furthermore, in *Les Triolets* and *L'Egyptienne* this development comes out at the beginning of the second section once the initial measures of the first one are repeated, depicting a sonata form in which – says Girldlestone – the development arrives after the beginning of the recapitulation instead of before it¹³. The insertion of long codas in *L'Egyptienne* and *Les Trois Mains* also constitute hints of the further sonata form.

L'Enharmonique shows an even greater complexity. Twice along the second section Rameau inserts new thematic material endowed with the harmonic change to which he largely refers to in the foreword: the *diesis enharmonica* or quarter tone between the diatonic half tone (B-C) and the chromatic half tone (B-B#) that he even imposes to modulations. According to Rameau's statements in the preface, as of to enlighten the *touché* and to hold little by little the “*Coulez*”¹⁴ (sic) whilst approaching the seizing point where one must remain for a while” as it is pointed out by a *fermata* in bar 12 of the *reprise*¹⁵.

Gavotte with six *doubles*, together with *Les Niais de Sologne* from the second book, are the only two variation forms in the whole of Rameau's harpsichord output. The theme recalls French lute music.

Rameau's third book for harpsichord moves towards harmonic fulfilment. Repeated chord and arpeggio textures stand to reinforce harmony as a generating factor. The writing is now closer to that of the piano-forte where counterpoint is almost banished.

Ramelian language will be henceforth enhanced with new orchestral effects and colours: swift

¹² Pirro called it “*lyrisme furieux*” (“raging lyricism”).

¹³ Girldlestone, *Jean-Philippe Rameau*.

¹⁴ Filling notes by step motion. The term also hints the fluency between notes.

¹⁵ Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Nouvelle Suite de Pièces de Clavecin* (Rameau, Boivin, Leclerc, Paris, 1727).

broken or *arpeggiatto* chords as a conclusive device in *L'Egyptienne*, and rapid scales before cadences like the *tirate*¹⁶ from the new orchestral *concerto* style. The latter, making their first appearance in Rameau's harpsichord music in the *Gavotte* and *Les Trois Mains*, to be farther on deployed in *Pièces de Clavecin en Concert* and *La Dauphine*. The succession of both hands in imitation all along the keyboard in the fourth *double* of the *Gavotte*, represents a typical newly introduced rococo figure.

Despite the first and second books, the third one is much more rationally approached. Rameau seems to have step forward towards a greater maturity of his genius as a composer who is innermost ready to create his topmost representatives: his operas. He seeks for the fullness in harmonic effect. The dramatic flavour is always present, but no longer attached to theatrical choreography, save for *Les Sauvages*.

La Poule (The Hen) seems to be mono-thematic. It is based on a brief clucking theme which betrays Rameau's contention to quote Nature. The inscription of *co co co co co co dai* underneath the first appearance of the clucking theme, certainly nonsense of Rameau's, could lead to a misreading allowing it to be taken as a derisive effect. All but a superfluous jest! The development of the clucking theme shows, through its permanent interplay between tension and relief, the dramatic seriousness of the piece. The clucking theme, which completes its harmony in waves as typically Rameau-style fashion, comes back, marked *fort*, in every climatic passage. Thus, it relentlessly returns to appease the tension with its centralizing effect.

The A minor *Courante* owes its majestic flavour to the perfect match of the artistic craftsmanship and emotional strength it is endowed with. Virtuosity and rationalism here merge freely. Its magic resides in the multiplicity of simultaneous rhythms, of running scales, of up and down leaping arpeggios and long sustaining notes underneath of which the pervading (sharp) motif is omnipresent.

Rameau later on grafted some of the pieces contained in the third book into his operas, namely *Les Sauvages* in Act IV of *Les Indes Galantes* (*Danse du Calumet de la Paix*), the first *Menuet* in the prologue of *Castor et Pollux* and *Sarabande* in Act III of *Zoroastre*.

Concertante harpsichord pieces

In 1731 Rameau entered under the protection of La Pouplinière. On October the 1st of 1733, his first opera *Hippolyte et Aricie* was performed at La Pouplinière's theatre in the Château du Passy close to Paris, just few days after Rameau had celebrated his fiftieth anniversary. Hence forth, Rameau seemed to have lost interest in any kind of non-dramatic music. During this period, Rameau showed himself concerned by the harpsichord's lack of dramatic resorts. Thereof, eight years after his first opera he edited a volume of five suites entitled ***Pièces de Clavecin en Concert*** (Concerted harpsichord pieces) (1741) which is the only true chamber music in the whole Rameau's production. By means of matching the harpsichord with the violin (or eventually with the flute) and viola, he tries to compensate the harpsichord's barrenness giving a greater dramatic power to the ensemble. Rameau states in the foreword that the success of modern sonatas for harpsichord and violin had encouraged him to give them to publication; no doubt, he refers to Mondonville's *Pièces de clavecin en sonates*, Op.3. These pieces are of a

¹⁶ The *tirades*, out sprung from the Italian *tirate*, already appear as ornaments proper to the French style of the lullists in *Florilleium Musicum* of Georg Muffat in 1695.

concertante Character, according to fashion in vogue at the time. Shaped in trio, they convey the same importance to the harpsichord as well as to the violin, flute or tenor viola. However - adds Rameau- when these pieces are executed in harpsichord alone, they fully satisfy all expectations to a point in which one would never suspect they are liable to bear added parts. As a matter of fact, Rameau underlined the evident independence of the harpsichord in the five arrangements for harpsichord alone he made of five selected trios. Among them, he considerably altered two of these pieces. In *La Livri*, not only in the version cast for harpsichord alone but also in the one inserted in Act III of *Zoroastre* under the form of *gavotte* fashioned upon the *Gavotte* from the first book, Rameau put aside the harpsichord parts he simply considered as an accompaniment to replace them with bass viola. In *L'Indiscrète* he substituted the broken cords of the refrain by violin parts, procedure he also undertook in *La Timide*. However, the substituted harpsichord parts considered in their own are, insofar as they are accompanying parts, of an overwhelming expressive richness. Rameau so stated it in the foreword: "I extracted from these concerts five pieces for the harpsichord alone due to some differences I remark when the the violin & the viola accompany them."¹⁷

Among the *Cinq Pièces* of 1741 (*La Livri*, *L'Agaçante*, the two rondos of *La Timide* and *L'Indiscrète*), *La Livri* is the most tragic one. It is a *tombeau* for the Count of Livri died in July of the same year. The refrain relentlessly comes back to hide into a funeral atmosphere the frail sun rays filtered through the *couplets*. *L'Agaçante* was further used by Rameau in Act II of *Zoroastre*.

Lesser and apocryphal pieces

In 1747, twenty years after the coming out of his third book, Rameau was compelled to write a slender piece: *La Dauphine*, devoted to the occasion of the Dolphin's wedding with Maria Josepha of Saxe. Rameau balanced his lack of inspiration by the virtuosity he bestowed to the piece. *La Dauphine* was kept by Decroix and further handed out by his heirs to the Paris National Library. It was first published by Camille Saint Saëns in 1895.

Rameau also arranged for solo harpsichord about thirty symphonies of his opera *Les Indes Galantes* (1735) and edited them in 1736 under the form of airs, duos, trios and quartets. They were ordered upon tonality. In the foreword Rameau states: "The symphonies are here arranged into Pieces for Harpsichord and the ornaments agree with those in my other Harpsichord Pieces."

Les petits marteaux de M. Rameau is an apocryphal piece attributed to Rameau with no certitude.

Rameau's approach to keyboard technique

Jean-Philippe Rameau outlined his revolutionary approach to harpsichord technique in the preface to his 1724 collection *Pièces de Clavecin*, specifically in his short text *De la mécanique des doigts sur le clavessin*. He emphasized a relaxed posture, curved fingers, a supple wrist, and striking keys with a smooth, dropping motion rather than hitting them. His basic principles as they are stated in the preface of his 1724 *recueil* are:

Posture and Body Positioning

Rameau instructed the player to sit initially with elbows positioned slightly higher than the

¹⁷ Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Pièces de Clavecin en Concerts* (Rameau, Boivin, Le Clair, Paris, 1741).

keyboard. This allows the hands to drop naturally onto the keys using gravity and the weight of the arms. The elbows should hang loosely and naturally by the sides of the body, remaining undisturbed except when moving across the registers of the keyboard. Once the student's hand shape and technique mature, the seat can be lowered gradually so the elbows rest just below keyboard level, encouraging a close, connected legato.

Hand and Finger Mechanics

The first (thumb) and fifth fingers should rest near the front edge of the keys. The inner fingers (second, third, and fourth) must remain naturally curved in front of the accidental (sharp/flat) keys, forming a unified, graceful line. Finger movement must originate entirely from the root/knuckle joint where the finger joins the hand, never from stiffening the hand or lower arm. The wrist must remain flexible and relaxed at all times to absorb tension and facilitate fluid motion.

Touch and Articulation

Fingers should drop onto the keys rather than strike or hammer them aggressively. Successive notes should flow and glide smoothly into one another (*coulent*), producing an articulate, singing tone (*cantabile*) that mimics the inflection of the human voice rather than producing a dry, mechanical clatter.

Reception history

Around 1760, Rameau's harpsichord music, as well as his operas, began to fall into oblivion. When Chabanon pronounced Rameau's eulogy in 1765, a year after Rameau's death, it was hardly played. Chabanon deplored this injustice and praised the virtues of Rameau's music which, according to him, combined with a captivating charm two qualities seldom found in music: "chant" and "execution" ...¹⁸ As a matter of fact, Jean-Philippe Rameau's lush theatrical works faded into a two-century eclipse after the 1700s. A mid-20th-century early music movement — sparked by conductors like John Eliot Gardiner, a landmark 1975 staging of *Les Boréades*, and period-instrument specialists — restored his operas (*Les Indes galantes*, *Platée*) and radical baroque harmonies to global stages. Noteworthy were also the contributions of the Americans William Christie and Alan Curtis to the revival movement of Rameau's music.

Key Milestones of the Revival

- **The 20th-Century Reawakening:** Early pioneers began unearthing French baroque scores, shifting away from standard romantic interpretations to honour original ornamentation and phrasing.
- **The *Les Boréades* Breakthrough:** Long unperformed in full during his lifetime, the 1975 London premiere proved Rameau's final tragic masterpiece was viable and stunning on modern stages.
- **Period Instrument Movement:** Ensembles embraced 18th-century tuning, gut strings, and specific woodwinds (like expressive bassoons) to match Rameau's avant-garde colour palette.

¹⁸ M. P. G. de Chabanon, *Eloge de M. Rameau* (Lambert, Paris, 1764).

- **Modern Opera Houses:** Today, companies routinely stage theatrical masterworks like *Hippolyte et Aricie* and *Castor et Pollux*, cementing his status as a French baroque titan.
- Rameau's opera revival movement brought about a surge of interest in his harpsichord music. Complete scholarly urtext editions of his three books for harpsichord appeared from the second half of the 20th century, namely by Bärenreiter and Henle, as well as integral recordings on historical instruments, noteworthy those by Christoph Rousset, Scott Ross, Blandine Rannou, Kenneth Gilbert and Michel Kiener.

Glossary of specific terms

2nd book:

Le Rappel des Oiseaux (The Bird's Recall): The first of Rameau's *genre* pieces. The descriptive effect of the fourth up leap, depicting the sound of the clarion, constitutes the bird call theme.

La Villageoise (The Citizen): *Genre* title very often found as it is its counterpart ***La Paysanne*** (The Peasant). Its mood is merry and light, almost tender.

Les Tendres Plaintes (The Tender Grievances): Common *genre* title which points out the mood and tempo of the piece.

Les Niais de Sologne (The Fool folks of Sologne): This title recalls the proverb: « Fool of Sologne who fools around, but for his own profit ». It was said that the Solonians¹⁹ had foolish manners and appearance which disguised a canning and acute nature.

Les Soupires (The Sighs): *Genre* descriptive piece which depicts the sighs by means of syncopated eighth notes and an ornament known as suspension (*appoggiatura*). The latter compels a given note to enter delayed with respect to the bass, thus creating a feeling of expectation. With long notes, the effect is intensified by the addition of a trill (*port- de-voix pincé*).

La Joyeuse (The Joyful): *genre* piece. The title itself suggests the tempo.

La Follette (The Foolish): *Genre* piece. It is an Italian style gig (in equal note values). Long mordents alternatively played by the right and the left hand could suggest madness.

L'Entretien des Muses (The Muses' Appointment): A very lyric and descriptive piece, which evokes Watteau's paintings. It is written to allow both hands remain close together in the soft register area of the keyboard. Its quiet mood aims to depict a conversation between Muses in their dwelling place.

Les Tourbillons (The Swirls): Descriptive piece depicting «whirls of dust being swirled by strong winds» - says Rameau in a letter to Houdar de la Motte. It is a *tour de force*, a dazzling display of virtuosity in which the *batteries* range over more than two octaves.

Les Cyclopes (The Cyclops): Descriptive piece, depicting the gods who forge the thunderbolt. Its eruptive, theatrical character foreshadows the cataclysms of the *Tragédies Lyriques*.

Le Lardon (The Bacon): Descriptive, culinary piece. The left-hand fingers overlap the chords held by the right-hand resembling slices of bacon. It is a slender piece if compared with the ones which require a high level of skill, or to the deeply meditative ones.

La Boiteuse (The Lame): Descriptive piece. The rhythmic figure in the left hand (quarter note, eighth note) suggests the limpness.

¹⁹ From Sologne: a swampy region south to Paris.

3rd book:

Les Trois Mains (The Three Hands): Descriptive piece. The ranging of the register (four octaves and a half), the overlapping of the hands and the up and down leaps from one side to the other of the keyboard, create the illusion that three hands are involved in the playing.

Fanfarinette : *Genre* piece. Possible allusion to Fanfan la Tulipe.²⁰ The writing (repeated figure of three quarter-notes with a trill written over the middle one) might suggest the sound of *fanfare*. It could be regarded as a little *fanfare* which precedes the greater one of *La Triomphante*.

La Triomphante (The Triumphant): *Genre* piece. The arpeggios and up and down leaps of an octave, culminated by a trill followed with a cadence recall the fanfare themes.

Les Tricotets (The Weavings): Descriptive piece. Allusion to the dance thus named because of the rapid feet movements here depicted by the interweaving hands (the visualisation of the score yields no doubt).

L'Indifférente (The Indifferent): Is a very frequent *genre* title. The indifferent was a personage of the *Theatre of the Fairground*. The piece would have sprung from a previous cast written for theatre performance. It recalls the dreamy and superfluous look of *L'Indifférent* by Watteau.

La Poule (The Hen): It was largely discussed in the monograph.

Les Triolets (The Triplets): The title possibly refers to the omnipresent ternary rhythm. Its character resembles that of *L'Indifférente*.

Les Sauvages (The Savages): Issued from the *Danse des Deux Indiens de la Louisiane* (Dance of Two Indians of Louisiana) written by Rameau for the *Theatre of the Fairground* in 1725; it subsequently became a harpsichord piece and later the *Danse du Calumet de la Paix* (Dance of the Peace Pipe) in *Les Indes Galantes*. It soon turned into a popular tune.

L'Enharmonique (The Enharmonic): Was largely discussed in the monograph.

L'Egyptienne (The Egyptian): Descriptive piece of Rameau's impression while watching a gypsy's dance. Like the "Egyptians" in Molière's plays, this "Egyptian" has nothing oriental about her, she is nothing but a gypsy.

²⁰ A legendary French hero from a popular song. He is a jester who loves women as well as wine and who is always ready to fight for the sake of justice.

Bibliography

Beaussant Philippe, *Rameau de A a Z* (Fayard, Paris, 1983).

Bukofzer Manfred F., *Music in the Baroque Era* (W. W. Norton, New York, 1947).

Chabanon Michel Paul Guy de, *Eloge de M. Rameau* (Lambert, Paris, 1764).

Christensen Thomas, *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993).

De La Gorge Jérôme, *Jean-Philippe Rameau, Actes du Colloque International organisé par La société Rameau, Dijon- 21-24 septembre 1983* (Champion-Slatkine, Paris-Genève, 1987).

Girdlestone Cuthbert, *Jean Philippe Rameau* (Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1969).

Jacobi Erwin R., *Jean Philippe Rameau, Complete Theoretical Writings* (America Institute of Musicology, Miscellanea 3, VI volumes, 1967).

Jacobi Erwin, *Jean-Philippe Rameau, Pièces de Clavecin* (Bärenreiter, Basel, 1958, r.1972, r.1990).

Jacobi Erwin, *Jean-Philippe Rameau, Pièces de Clavecin en Concert* (Bärenreiter, Basel, 1970).

Kintzler Catherine and Malgoire Jean-Claude, *Jean Philippe Rameau, Musique raisonnée* (Stosk, Paris, 1980).

Mellers Wilfrid, *François Couperin and the French Classical Tradition* (Dover publications, London, 1968).

Rameau Jean-Philippe, *Premier livre de pièces de Clavecin* (Rameau, Roussel, Foucaut, Paris, 1706).

Rameau Jean-Philippe, *Pieces de Clavessin, avec une methode pour la mecanique des doigts* (Charles-Etienne Hochereau, Paris, N.D. [1724]).

Rameau Jean-Philippe, *Nouvelle Suite de Pièces de Clavecin* (Rameau, Boivin, Leclerc, Paris, 1727).

Rameau Jean-Philippe, *Pièces de Clavecin en Concerts* (Rameau, Boivin, Le Clair, Paris, 1741).

Reilly E. R., “Chabanon’s *Eloge de M. Rameau*” (SMC, VIII, 1983), pp.1-24.

Sadler Graham, “*Patrons and Pasquinades: Rameau in the 1730s*” (JRMA, cxiii, 1988), pp. 314-37.

Sadler Graham, *Rameau, Les Indes Galantes: the Composer’s Transcriptions for Harpsichord* (Oxford University Press, London, 1979).