

JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU

A brief account of his life and works and personal comments

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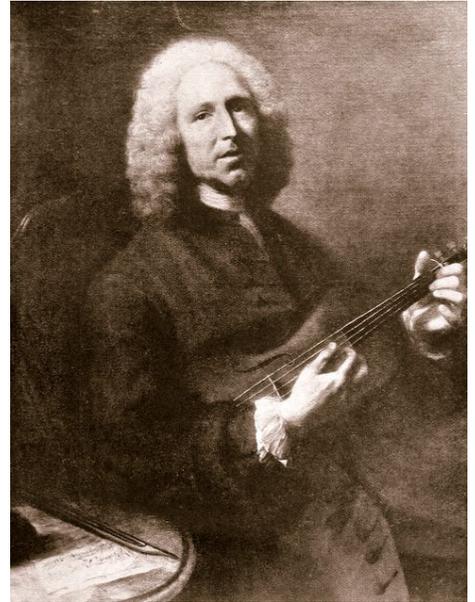
I was asked recently who was the greatest opera composer of all time.

“Rameau,” I replied.

My students were stunned and gasped with indications of incredulity.

“But, sir, you like music of the present time, not the ancient stuff!”
some eventually responded.

Rameau was the seventh of eleven children and was born in Dijon in September 1683. His father was the organist at Notre Dame in Dijon, and, despite what is asserted in some music dictionaries, Rameau was initially taught by his father.



Jean-Philippe had a splendid education and developed into an academic. He visited Italy in 1701 when he was eighteen to study Italian techniques in music. He also associated himself with a group of actors at this time and this led him to be fascinated by the theatre. Between 1702 and 1705 he was organist at Clermont-Ferrand and from there he moved to Paris for three years until 1708 and thereafter succeeding his father at Dijon from 1709 onwards. In 1714 he took up a provincial organist post at Lyons and in 1715 returned to Clermont-Ferrand.

In 1722, he had published a textbook, 'Treatise on Harmony', which was informative and highly valued in its time. But, as yet, Rameau the composer had not established himself, although he had composed a volume of harpsichord pieces in 1706. It was his reappearance in Paris in 1723 which resulted in the production of some inconsequential theatre pieces and his second volume of harpsichord pieces.

His comic opera, *L'Endriage*, appeared in 1723. *L'Enrolement d'Arlequin*, another comic opera appeared in 1726 and *La Robe de dissention* in 1726 as well, all with libretti by Alexis Piron.

For the production of his first opera he had to sign an agreement that he would be responsible for any financial loss it incurred. Strange, as for most of his life, it was said that Rameau was a miser.

In February 1726 he married Marie-Louise Margot who was a singer.

He taught the harpsichord and wrote other textbooks on theory between 1726 to 1752 as well as books on the art of organ playing, the art of accompaniment, harmony and so on.

In 1730 Rameau was taken up by the wealthy financier, La Riche de la Poupliniere, who became his patron. It is probably this that encouraged him to compose and, in 1733, at the age of fifty, his first opera, *Hippolyte et Aricie* created a storm of protests.

In this opera and, indeed, in subsequent operas, Rameau introduced unusual harmonies, that is to say harmonies with bite, and powerful orchestration as opposed to what the French were used to with their prissy, elegant, over-ornamented, predictable styles and sounds. It was expected that all composers followed on in the style of Lully, but in Rameau's music there was dynamism, adventure and originality, essential ingredients for any great composer.

His second opera, *Les Indes Galantes*, dates from 1735. It is an opera-ballet depicting various love stories.

Castor et Pollux followed in 1737 and was not well received. Rameau revised it in 1754 following years of

debate and argument over his music. The French now took sides to indicate their preference for Lully or for Rameau. In this opera there are lavish divertissements and Rameau uses spectacular music and effects as, for example, in the tremendous storm sequence. But, as with matters of the present day, modern harmonies and new ideas were savaged by those ignorant of music itself.

In many respects, but not all, a controversialist is someone who argues, disputes and/or denies what is true. Controversy is often the attempt to discredit what is true, what is fact. Therefore if I say that the composer Gesualdo was a murderer and people question or dispute that, that they are creating the controversy. They are the controversialists since Gesualdo was a murderer. If I say that Elgar's movements which he has marked *allegro* do not equate with what an *allegro* is, then I am not being controversial because what I say is correct. It is those who argue with what I say who create the controversy and are the controversialists.

Rameau's music created controversy. People were saying that it was poor music, even rubbish, because it was not in the French tradition. These people were causing the controversy, not Rameau and his admirers. Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* caused controversy, indeed a riot, at its premiere in 1913 and this controversy raged and it was based on prejudice, a prejudice which always accompanies new adventurous music. The objectors were the controversialists and trouble makers. Stravinsky's score is truly magnificent and the point of my labouring this point is to indicate how Rameau's music was received some 180 years earlier.

When the French could find no valid or sustainable objection to Rameau's music they invented accusations and claimed that he was not patriotic but treasonable in that his music was more Italian than French, an absurd remark conjured up from the knowledge that Rameau had once studied in Italy.

His subsequent operas (some of which are opera-ballets) were

• *Dardanus* (1739), *Les Fetes d'Hebe* (1739), *Les Fetes de Polymnie* (1745) *La temple de la gloire* (1745), *La Princesse de Navarre* (1747), *Les Fetes de l'Hymen at de l'Amour* (1747), *Zais* (1748), *Pygmalion* (1748) *Nais* (1748), *Zoroastre* (1749), *Platee* (1749), *Acante et Cephise*(1751), *La guirande* (1751) *Daphne et Egle* (1753), *Lysis et Delia* (1754), *La Naissance d'Osiris* (1754), *Zephire* (1757), *Nelee et Mithis* (1757), *Le Retour d'Astree* (1757), *Anacreon* (1757), *Les Surprises de l'amour* (1760), *Les Sybarites* (1760), *Les Paladins* (1760) and *Albaris ou Les Boreades* (1764).“

Of special interest is the comedy-ballet, *La Princesses de Navarre*, produced at Versailles on 23 February 1745 to celebrate the Dauphin's marriage. It was later reduced to a one-act piece and entitled '*Les Fetes de Ramire*’.

Apart from the three early comic operas, this list is an impressive one with 27 major operas written in thirty four years. There is also a tragic opera, *Samson*, of 1733, to a text by Voltaire, which is often left out of lists of Rameau's operas.

Of course there are other opera composers of the past whose theatrical works are ignored and I would cite as the next two great opera composers of the time, Antonio Salieri, with about forty operas and Johann Adolphe Hasse who wrote about an hundred operas.

Rameau also wrote some interesting chamber music. There are the 5 *Pieces de clavecin en concert* for harpsichord, viola da gamba and violin of 1741. The same year saw the publication of the 5 *Concerts* for harpsichord, violin and flute which are, in effect, chamber concerts.

Michael Kennedy in his *Oxford Dictionary of Music* states that there are three volumes of suites for the harpsichord and then he utterly confuses the issue by not numbering the suites but instead listing 56 movements. Rameau probably did not organise these 56 movements into specific suites, but, in these four collections of harpsichord pieces of 1706, 1724, 1728 and 1741, merely referred to them as separate pieces. The use of the word *suite* is therefore misleading, annoying and error that a musician would not make,

although in Kennedy's defence one set is actually called Suite Nouvelle.

On 23 August 1764 Rameau was struck with typhoid and died on 12 September. He was eighty-one years old.

His greatness lies in his originality, his sparkling and unusual and vibrant orchestration and his courage to be himself and his not being a toady or kowtowing to convention.

There will be also be those self-appointed experts who will tell us the right and wrong ways to play his music and debate and argue over trivialities without mercy but this will only serve to deter people from this very fine and rather special composer.

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