

PROGRAM NOTES

Jean-Philippe Rameau wrote his first operatic work, the “tragédie en musique” *Hippolyte et Aricie*, in 1733 at age fifty. By 1741, the year that he published the *Pièces de clavecin en concerts*, he had composed five operas altogether: two more tragédies en musique, *Castor et Pollux* in 1737 and *Dardanus* in 1739, and two opéra-ballets, *Les Indes galantes* in 1735 and *Les fêtes d’Hébé* in 1739. Although his *Pièces de clavecin en concerts* hark back to the solo harpsichord works of his earlier career, it is hardly surprising that the world of the theater is never far from them. In fact, several of the movements were later reworked for inclusion into his operas. Rameau’s carefully arranged textures for the three instruments—violin, viola da gamba, and harpsichord—fill the *Pièces* with all the imagination, passion, and drama that enliven his stage works. One can almost sense choreographic images in these stylistically mature pieces filled with operatic allusions, ravishing sonorities, and elevated nobleness.

The practice of adding a violin to harpsichord works was well established in France by the middle of the century. Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre’s *Pièces de clavecin qui peuvent se jouer sur le violon* was published in 1707, and so was Jean-Joseph Cassanéa de Mondonville’s *Pièces de clavecin en sonates*, Op.3, in 1734. Without mentioning Mondonville’s name, Rameau intimated the influence of his predecessor’s works in the preface to his *Pièces de clavecin en concerts*: “The success of recently published sonatas, which have come out as harpsichord pieces with a violin part, has given me the idea of following much the same plan in the new harpsichord pieces which I am venturing to bring out today.” Michel Corrette’s *Sonates pour le clavecin avec un accompagnement de violon* of 1742 and Louis-Gabriel Guillemain’s *Pièces de clavecin en sonates avec accompagnement de violon* of 1745 followed the same path, and Guillemain’s preface reflects the current vogue for composing with an accompanying violin: “My first idea was to make these pieces only for harpsichord without an accompaniment . . . but to conform to present day taste, I believed I could not avoid adding this part.”

Rameau’s musical vision is far more captivating and sophisticated than that of his contemporaries mentioned above. He raised the genre to a new level by adding the viola da gamba, an expressively sonorous instrument, to his scoring of the *Pièces de clavecin en concerts*. His writing is unusually demanding for all of the players, but especially for the harpsichordist. The obbligato part requires a tour de force of technical skills that exploits the full range and sonorous palette of a *grand ravalement* (double keyboard, five-octave) harpsichord. The *spectacle des mains* (spectacle of the hands) is displayed throughout. There is an extensive emphasis on keyboard virtuosity including hand-crossings, fast scale passages, numerous patterns of arpeggiation, and wide leaps. Rameau published the *Pièces de clavecin en concerts* in score form and suggested that the musicians play from it to achieve a heightened awareness of each other’s lines, as well as the proper blend and balance of sonority. The presence of the violin and the viola da gamba are integral to the music as these instruments serve to amplify the harmonic and melodic intentions of the keyboard part.

The French term “concerts” implies an ensemble setting—particularly for a mixed consort—rather than a “concerto” for a solo instrument and accompaniment. The pieces are grouped together in tonally unified suites, and the sequence of movements is arranged fast-slow-fast for all but the *Deuxième concert*, which contains four movements.

The sixteen individual movements that comprise the five *concerts* contain a variety of titles—from portraits and dedications, to character pieces and dances. According to Rameau’s preface, some were named by “persons of taste and skill” after he’d composed them. Although the links between the titles and the nature of the pieces may not be strong ones, it is helpful to know what the titles mean.

Premier concert

“La Coulicam” refers to Thamas Kouli Khan, a Persian king who is featured in the exotic novel, *Histoire de la dernière révolution de Perse* (1728, reissued 1742), written by André de Claustra.

“La Livri” is a tombeau for the Comte de Livri who died in 1741. He was a notable patron of musicians, actors, and playwrights. Rameau orchestrated it later as “Gavotte en rondeau” in his *tragédie en musique*, the opera *Zoroastre* (1749).

“Le Vézinet” is a town with a fashionable promenading area in what was then the countryside west of Paris.

Deuxième concert

“La Laborde” is named after Rameau’s pupil, Jean-Benjamin de Laborde, who later distinguished himself as a composer and writer, publishing *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* in 1780. He was only seven years old at the time of the dedication.

“La Boucon” celebrates the distinguished harpsichordist Anne-Jeanne Boucon (1708-1780), whom Jacques Duphy also honored in his *Premier livre de clavecin* (1744). Boucon was the niece of Jean-Baptiste Forqueray’s first wife, who married Jean-Joseph Cassanéa de Mondonville in 1747.

“L’Agaçante” derives from the French verb “to irritate.” Rameau later transcribed the piece as an Entrée in *Zoroastre*.

The “Premier Menuet” and “Deuxième Menuet” are two gracious and expressive dances, the first written in a major mode and the second, in a minor mode. The Deuxième Menuet was featured in his opéra-ballet, *Les fêtes de Polymnie* (1745).

Troisième concert

“La Lapoplinière” is dedicated to the financier Alexandre Jean Joseph Le Riche de La Poupelinière (1693-1762), an immensely wealthy patron of the arts who supported Rameau.

“La Timide” (The timid one) is made up of two rondeaux gracieux. The first rondeau is in a minor mode, and the second one is in the major mode of the same key.

“Premier Tambourin,” “Deuxième Tambourin.” A lively Provençal dance in duple meter with a characteristic drum-like accompaniment and a melody imitative of a pipe. The Premier Tambourin first appeared in *Castor et Pollux* (1737), and both the Premier and Deuxième Tambourins were arranged for orchestra and choir in *Dardanus* (version from 1744).

Quatrième concert

“La Pantomime,” a colorful spectacle on stage, designates a fast loure (dance). It was later used in the Overture of the opéra-ballet, *Les surprises de l’Amour* (version from 1757).

“L’Indiscrète” (The indiscreet one) is in the mood of the chattering gossip quickly circulating about in whirling strings and frenzied harpsichord quintuplet figures.

“La Rameau” could be a self-portrait of the composer, a portrait of his singer-wife Marie-Louise Mangot whom he married in 1726, or a sound-picture of keyboard practice in the Rameau household.

Cinquième concert

“La Forqueray” honors the viol players Antoine Forqueray (c. 1671-1745) and his son Jean-Baptiste Forqueray (1699-1782). In 1741, Jean-Baptiste Forqueray had just remarried, and the piece may have been a wedding present for him and his harpsichordist wife.

“La Cupis” celebrates Marie-Anne Cupis, known as La Camargo (1710-1770), who was a celebrated dancer of the Académie royale de la musique, and took part in the premiere of *Hippolyte et Aricie*. It could also celebrate the birth of her nephew in 1741. Her brother was a violinist and the composer, François Cupis de Camargo. The piece was later orchestrated for the opéra-ballet, *Le temple de la gloire* (1745).

“La Marais” commemorates Marin Marais (1656-1728), virtuoso viol player, or one of his numerous sons. The best known of his sons is Roland Marais, who published two viol books in 1735 and 1738.

En un mot, l’expression de la pensée, du sentiment,
des passions, doit être le vrai but de la Musique.

(In a word, the expression of thought, sentiment,
and passions ought to be the true aim of music.)

—Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Code de la musique pratique* (1760)

—Aya Hamada

