

PROGRAM NOTES

The orchestra as we know it was an invention of the Baroque. The sheer spectacle of a large group of instrumentalists doing exactly the same thing at the same time was something very new in the late 17th century and a much commented-on aesthetic creation. And it went with a founding myth: that the orchestra was invented at about the same time in two different cities, Paris and Rome. Our program tonight examines these two cultures, and the diffusion of the 17-century orchestra beyond France and Italy to England and Germany. Our two crucial figures are Arcangelo Corelli in Rome and Jean-Baptiste Lully in Paris: their influence spread far and wide throughout Europe.

We begin our program in Rome with George Frideric Handel, who arrived there as a staggeringly gifted twenty-one-year-old in 1706. One of the first large projects he created during his relatively short time in Rome was the oratorio *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*, which was probably performed at the magnificent palazzo of Cardinal Pamphilij. Although we don't know for sure, it's likely that Corelli would have provided the orchestra, and played first violin.

Corelli's finely-honed band of colleagues must have been a revelation to Handel. He asks great things of them: the solo violins have risky ascents to high A (according to Corelli's protégé Geminiani, literally the end of the fingerboard) while the principal cello and oboes make their own virtuosic contributions, all set in a brilliant overture whose theme derives from one of Corelli's own fugues.

While Arcangelo Corelli was inventing the modern orchestra in Rome, Lully was doing the same thing in Paris, although with a rather heavier hand: apparently if any violinist chose to add an unauthorized ornament in Lully's opera orchestra, he was liable to have his instrument smashed by the irate composer. (We are not reproducing this particular historical effect tonight!) Jean-Baptiste Lully created, almost singlehandedly, most of the repertoire of the French opera in the 17th century; his works continued to be performed and cherished for over a century in Paris.

Among his most popular operas was the *tragédie-lyrique* of *Thésée*, in which the enchantress Medea nearly destroys everyone around her in her single-minded pursuit of the hero Theseus, who is happily in love with someone else. *Thésée's* dramatic *Ouverture* is in the classic French form, with a regal, sharply-dotted slow opening that gives way to a quick fugal section where a short motif is examined at length among all the parts.

From Act One, we hear a skipping *Gigue* and a slow *Sarabande*, and then the triumphant arrival of Theseus is announced by a *Marche*. The mood changes abruptly in Act Three when Medea, in her rage casts Theseus and his girlfriend into Hell, and we hear two dramatic dances as they are menaced by the local residents there. Eventually, Medea relents and transforms Hell into an Enchanted Isle in Act Four; here Lully provides some of his most subtle and delightful melodies. We close this mini-opera with a *Chaconne*, this one in a much lighter and more festive vein, with a little refrain that comes back again and again.

Our main source of information about Lully's orchestral techniques comes from Georg Muffat, who as a teenager studied for six years in Paris with members of his orchestra. Thirty years later, in Passau (Bavaria), Muffat undertook to write down the details he remembered about how the system worked. His explanatory prefaces are one of the first examples we have of someone attempting to describe historical performance practice—that is, of a person in another country and at another time trying to re-create an earlier performance style. His memory seems to have been pretty good since Muffat's discussion of the French orchestra is extensive and detailed. From him, we know dance bowing practices, articulations, even what mute to use, or how best the orchestra should tune (early and carefully, and then don't noodle).

Muffat is a crucial figure, not only for our knowledge of French orchestral practice, but also for the performance style of Roman orchestras as well since he spent some time in the 1680s working with Corelli there. He advocates bold effects for the Italian style: “at the direction *p* all are to play so softly and so tenderly that one barely hears them, at the direction *f* with so full a tone from the first note so marked that the listeners are (as it were) left astounded by such vehemence.”

Muffat published the *concerti grossi* that he wrote under Corelli's guidance in a 1686 collection called *Armonico tributo*. The great *G Major Sonata* from this volume ends with a tremendous *Passacaglia*, heard here in the trimmed-down version from his 1701 suite *Propitia sydera* or “Lucky Star.” (Muffat remarks that he “performed these pieces successfully on highly distinguished occasions, as is enigmatically implied in the titles of the pieces.”)

By many accounts, Corelli was the first in Italy to insist upon an unheard-of level of orchestral discipline. Domenico Scarlatti later wrote about the stunning effect created by Corelli's “nice management of his band, whose uncommon accuracy of performance gave his concertos an amazing effect.... Corelli regarded it as essential to the ensemble of a band

that their bows should all move exactly together, all up, or all down; so that at his rehearsals, he would immediately stop the band if he discovered one irregular bow.”

Although Corelli’s own *concerti grossi* were only published posthumously, Corelli himself was performing these works from the early 1680s with a *concertino* trio formed by himself, his longtime companion and second violinist, Matteo Fornari, his favorite cellist Giovanni Lorenzo Lulier, and the distinguished harpsichordist Bernardo Pasquini. These made up the small *concertino* ensemble, the soloists to the larger *ripieno* band. The effect of Corelli’s *concerti grossi*, as his protégé Georg Muffat remarked, is that “the ear is astonished by the contrasts of solo and tutti, forte and piano, as the eye is by the contrasts of light and shade.”

We return to France to close our program with a suite from Jean-Baptiste Rameau’s *Dardanus*. This opera was his second *tragédie lyrique*, premiered in 1739. Rameau was a revolutionary in many aspects of his harmonic practice, but he learned a tremendous amount from Lully’s own epigrammatic dance-forms. He transformed French dances into some of the most addictively kinetic music written before Stravinsky. No other Baroque dance music seems so clearly to invite its own choreography. As the famous ballet-master Claude Gardel admitted, “Rameau perceived what the dancers themselves were unaware of; we thus rightly regard him as our first master.”

Some of the *Dardanus* dances have choreographic instructions: for the *Air pour les Plaisirs*, “the Pleasures dance around the throne of Love: but their dance gradually slows down, and finally they fall asleep.” The rustic textures of the *tambourin* and the *rigaudon* offer other, earthier pleasures of sheer rhythmic propulsion. And *Dardanus*’ great *chaconne*, the classic form of cyclical harmony and order restored, becomes an occasion for a highly theatrical kind of music-making. Note particularly the wonderful moment when time stands still with everyone silent for several beats at a time, before the dance gradually returns to the deeply consoling theme.

—Robert Mealy