



JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU COMPLETE HARPSICHORD WORKS

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SIMONE STELLA

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) was one of the most important French composers and music theorists of the Baroque era. He was successor of Jean-Baptiste Lully as the dominant composer of French opera and is also considered the leading French composer for the harpsichord of his time, alongside François Couperin. Rameau's music is characterised by the exceptional technical knowledge of a composer who wanted above all to be renowned as a theorist of the art. Nevertheless, it is not solely addressed to the intelligence, and Rameau himself claimed, "I try to conceal art with art." Along with François Couperin, Rameau is one of the two masters of the French school of harpsichord music in the 18th century. There are several recordings of Rameau's complete harpsichord works. The new version by young Florentine organist and harpsichordist Simone Stella adds an interesting element to the international discography. The recording, available in HD 88.2/24, has been captured using two Sennheiser small diaphragm microphones and Prism Sound pres/converters.

Simone Stella is one of the leading harpsichordists and organists of Italy, his earlier recordings of the complete keyboard works of Buxtehude received uniform praise in the international press: "Thoroughly imaginative and engaging" (Fanfare), "Convincing and surprisingly" (Klassic.com)."

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Track-list

Disc 1 (76'33'')

Premier Livre de Pièces de Clavecin (1706)

- [1] Prélude 2'42''
- [2] Allemande 6'26''
- [3] 2e Allemande 2'11''
- [4] Courante 2'22''
- [5] 1ere Sarabande 1'36''
- [6] 2e Sarabande 1'32''
- [7] Gigue 2'41''
- [8] Vénitienne 1'48''
- [9] Gavotte 1'35''
- [10] Menuet 1'19''

Pièces de Clavecin (1724, revised 1731)

Suite n. 2 in E minor

- [11] Allemande 3'57''
- [12] Courante 1'59''
- [13] Gigue en rondeau 1'33''
- [14] 2e Gigue en rondeau 2'17''
- [15] Le Rappel des Oiseaux 3'47''
- [16] 1er Rigaudon, 2e Rigaudon Double du 2e Rigaudon 1'14''
- [17] Musette en rondeau 2'47''
- [18] Tambourin 1'18''
- [19] La Villageoise 3'04''

Suite n. 3 in D major

- [20] Les Tendres Plaintes 3'29''
- [21] Les Niais de Sologne 2'38''
- [22] 1er Double des Niais 2'11''
- [23] 2e Double des Niais 2'23''
- [24] Les soupirs 3'47''
- [25] La Joyeuse 1'32''
- [26] La Follette 1'25''
- [27] L'Entretien des Muses 3'33''
- [28] Les Tourbillons 2'32''
- [29] Les Cyclopes 4'03''
- [30] Le Lardon 0'29''
- [31] La Boiteuse 0'33''

- [32] Les Petits Marteaux 1'32''

Disc 2 (77'57'')

Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin (1727)

Suite in A

- [1] Allemande 8'00''
- [2] Courante 4'37''
- [3] Sarabande 2'26''
- [4] Les Trois Mains 5'50''
- [5] Fanfarinette 2'54''
- [6] La Triomphante 2'11''
- [7] Gavotte 1'04''
- [8] 1er Double de la Gavotte 1'00''
- [9] 2e Double 0'58''
- [10] 3e Double 0'58''
- [11] 4e Double 1'00''
- [12] 5e Double 1'03''
- [13] 6e Double 1'05''

Suite in G

- [14] Les Tricotets 2'10''
- [15] L'Indifférente 1'47''
- [16] Menuet 1'15''
- [17] 2e Menuet 1'25''
- [18] La Poule 5'42''
- [19] Les Triolets 3'55''
- [20] Les Sauvages 1'53''
- [21] L'Enharmonique 5'54''
- [22] L'Egyptienne 2'58''

Pièces de Clavecin en Concert (1741)

- from Concert n. 1
- [23] La Livri 2'58''

- from Concert n. 2
- [24] L'Agaçante 3'04''

- from Concert n. 3
- [25] La Timide – 1er rondeau 2'24''
 - [26] La Timide – 2e rondeau 2'13''

- from Concert n. 4
- [27] L'Indiscrete 1'39''

- [28] La Dauphine (1747) 4'58''

Jean-Philippe Rameau, a life to the heights of Parnassus

Rameau's early years are particularly obscure. He was probably born on 25 September 1683 in Dijon, and baptised the same day. His father, Jean, worked as an organist in several churches around Dijon, and his mother, Claudine Demartinécourt, was the daughter of a notary. The couple had eleven children, of whom Jean-Philippe was the seventh. □

Rameau was taught music before he could read or write. He was educated at the Jesuit college at Godrans, but it seems that he was not a good pupil and disturbed classes with his singing, later claiming that his passion for opera had begun at the age of twelve. Initially intended for the law, at the age of 18 Rameau decided to pursue a musical career, and his father sent him to Italy, where he stayed for a short while in Milan. On his return, he worked as a violinist in travelling companies.

The following year, he received the first of a series of appointments as organist in various cities of central France: Avignon, Clermont, Dijon, Lyon. There was also a brief interlude in Paris, but apparently the capital did not take an immediate fancy to the provincial organist. In spite of this, in 1706 he published there a fine suite of harpsichord pieces in A minor, the 'Premier livre de pièces de clavecin' (First book of Harpsichord pieces). □

Back in Clermont by 1715, Rameau signed a contract as cathedral organist for 29 years. He then settled down to investigate, in an highly original manner, the foundations of musical harmony. Intuitively basing his studies on the natural overtone series, he arrived at a system of harmony that is the basis of most 20th-century harmony textbooks. His impressive 'Traité de l'harmonie' (Treatise on Harmony) was finally published in Paris in 1722.

Moved to Paris, where he was to remain for the rest of his life, Rameau began a new and active life. A second volume of harpsichord works, 'Pièces de clavecin avec une méthode sur la mécanique des doigts' (Harpsichord Pieces, with a Method for Fingering, published in 1724), met with considerably more success than the first, and he became a very requested teacher of the instrument. A commission to write incidental music for the Fair theatres established the basis of his development as a dramatic composer. The following year, at the age of 42, he married a 19-year-old singer, who was to appear in several of his operas and who was to bear him four children.

His most influential contact at this time was Le Riche de la Pouplinière, one of the wealthiest men in France and one of the greatest musical patrons of all time. Rameau was put in charge of his excellent private orchestra, and kept this post for 22 years. The composer's family moved into La Pouplinière's town mansion and spent summers at their château in Passy. This idyllic relationship between patron and composer gradually came to an end after La Pouplinière separated from his wife, and Rameau was replaced by Karl Stamitz and Gossec. Meanwhile, however, admittance

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to La Pouplinière's circle had brought Rameau into contact with various literary talents. He was inspired to try his hand at the prestigious genre of tragédie en musique after seeing Montéclair's Jephthé in 1732. Rameau's Hippolyte et Aricie premiered at the Académie Royale de Musique on 1 October 1733. It was immediately recognised as the most significant opera to appear in France since the death of Lully, but audiences were split over whether this was a good thing or a bad thing. Some, such as the composer André Campra, were stunned by its originality and wealth of invention; others found its harmonic innovations discordant and saw the work as an attack on the French musical tradition.

At the first performance of Hippolyte was the great Voltaire, who quipped that Rameau "is a man who has the misfortune to know more music than Lully." But he soon came around to Rameau's side and wrote for him a fine libretto, Samson (which was banned for religious reasons but really because of a cabal against Voltaire). The music for Samson was lost, but the later collaboration on two court entertainments is preserved, however: 'La Princesse de Navarre' and 'Le Temple de la Gloire' (both 1745). The former was condensed and revised as 'Les Fêtes de Ramire' (1745) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.□

Rousseau, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, and other writers associated with Denis Diderot's Encyclopédie began as ardent Rameau enthusiasts but, by the mid-1750s, as they warmed more and more to Italian music, they gradually turned against him. Rousseau was a major participant in the second great quarrel that erupted over Rameau's work, the so-called 'Querelle des Bouffons' (1752–54), which pitted French tragédie en musique against Italian opera buffa. This time, Rameau was accused of being out of date and his music too complicated in comparison with the simplicity and "naturalness" of a work like Pergolesi's 'La serva padrona'. Rameau, for his part, criticised Rousseau's contributions to the musical articles in the Encyclopédie, which led to a quarrel with the leading philosophes d'Alembert and Diderot. As a result, Rameau became a character in Diderot's then-unpublished dialogue, 'Le neveu de Rameau' (Rameau's Nephew).□

Rameau composed prolifically in the late 1740s and early 1750s. After that, his rate of productivity dropped off, probably due to old age and ill health, although he was still able to write another comic opera, 'Les Paladins', in 1760. This was due to be followed by a final tragédie en musique, 'Les Boréades'; but for unknown reasons, the opera was never produced and had to wait until the late 20th century for a proper staging. Rameau died on 12 September 1764 after suffering from a fever. He was buried in the church of St. Eustache in Paris.□

"I try to conceal art with art": this is what Jean-Philippe Rameau claimed himself regarding his musical style. It was new, using techniques never known before, but it took place within the framework of old-fashioned forms. Along with François Couperin, Rameau is considered one of the finest masters of the French school of harpsichord music in the 18th century. Both composers made a decisive break with the style of the first generation of harpsichordists, who confined their compositions to the standard module of the classical suite. This reached its apogee in the first decade of the 18th century with successive collections of pieces by composers like Louis Marchand, Gaspard Le Roux, Louis-Nicolas Clérambault, Jean-François Dandrieu, Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, and others.

Rameau's harpsichord music includes pieces in the pure tradition of the French suite: imitative ("Le rappel des oiseaux," "La poule"), character ("Les tendres plaintes", "L'entretien des Muses"), works of pure virtuosity resembling Scarlatti's flawless technique ("Les tourbillons," "Les trois mains") as well as pieces where Rameau experiments as a theorist and musical innovator ("L'Enharmonique", "Les Cyclopes"). All the suites are grouped by key.

Rameau's three collections were published respectively in 1706, 1724 (successively revised in 1731) and 1726 (or 1727). After these, we know only one further single piece for the harpsichord: "La Dauphine" (written in 1747). Other works, such as "Les petits marteaux de Mr. Rameau" have been doubtfully attributed to him.

In 1741 he wrote the best known 'Pièces de clavecin en concert', which some musicologists consider the pinnacle of French Baroque chamber music. Adopting a particular formula successfully employed by Jean-Joseph de Mondonville a few years earlier, these pieces differ from trio sonatas because the harpsichord doesn't appear as a simple basso continuo to accompany other instruments (the violin, flute or viol) playing the melody, but has an equal part in the "concert" with them. Rameau also said that the pieces would be equally satisfying as solo harpsichord works — the composer transcribed five of them himself — those where the lack of other instruments would show the least.

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Harpsichord built on J. Ruckers 1628.

Sound engineer: Alessandro Simonetto

Editing: Simone Stella

Mastering: Alessandro Simonetto

Liner notes: Simone Stella

An OnClassical production.