

## Selections from *Dardanus*

### Jean-Philippe Rameau

The name of Jean-Philippe Rameau heads the roster of French theater composers of the late Baroque thanks to the stream of stage works that poured from his pen from 1733 to 1760. Anyone watching Rameau's career unroll would have found this a most surprising achievement for a composer who showed no particular aptitude for the stage in the first decades of his career. In fact, Rameau celebrated his 50th birthday a week before his first large-scale stage work was premiered. That was the opera *Hippolyte et Aricie*, and he would continue to produce theatrical works at an average of one each year throughout the ensuing 26 years.

Rameau had been far from a slacker in the time leading up to his breakthrough into the world of the stage. Born into a family of musicians, he developed into an expert organist and for two decades, beginning in 1702, moved through a series of posts as a church organist in Avignon, Clermont (two separate stints), Dijon, and Lyons. During this period of his life he produced a good deal of sacred music, as well as secular cantatas and harpsichord works. He also developed an interest in music theory, and in 1722 he moved to Paris, apparently to oversee the publication of his lengthy *Traité de l'harmonie réduite à ses principes naturels* (*Treatise on Harmony Reduced to its Natural Principles*), the first of many influential, though controversial, theoretical tracts he would author. The young Hector Berlioz tried to teach himself harmony from this book, but ended up deciding, as he reported in his *Mémoires*, that "It is a treatise on harmony for those who already know harmony."

In 1733 *Hippolyte et Aricie* set off a storm of passionate debate among Parisian intellectuals, who were either captivated or appalled by its avant-garde tendencies. The composer

persevered, and before the decade was out he had unveiled 5 of the 13 stage works he would produce in his lifetime. *Dardanus*, his second stage-work of 1739, is a full-scale example of *tragédie lyrique*, the most exalted operatic genre of the French Baroque. Typically cast in five acts, the plots of *tragédies lyriques* were derived from Classical mythology or Renaissance Italian epics, and the main story was usually preceded by a prologue metaphorically extolling the French monarchy. Texts were set in a series of relatively imposing *airs* (solo arias), more modest *petits airs*, and *récits* (recitatives), with interruptions for dances and more extended balletic *divertissements*.

*Dardanus* was widely criticized for its almost baffling scenario, which centers on the difficult love affair between Prince Dardanus and Iphise, daughter of his royal enemy. It nonetheless played for 26 performances in its initial run, luring audiences with such plot elements as a magic ring, a sea monster, and a solar eclipse — not to mention a splendid musical score and irresistible dance numbers. Rameau effected substantial changes for revivals in 1744 and 1760. The work re-

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### IN SHORT

**Born:** in Dijon, France, where he was baptized on September 25, 1683

**Died:** September 12, 1764, in Paris, France

**Work composed:** 1739, revised in 1744

**Work premiered:** November 19, 1739, at the Académie Royale de Musique et de Danse (Paris Opéra); revised version introduced there on April 23, 1744

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances

**Estimated duration:** ca. 35 minutes

mained in the repertoire of the Paris Opéra through 1771.

Rameau stands out as one of the most colorful orchestrators of the late Baroque, a master of heightening his striking melodies through distinct instrumental timbres. Following the call-to-order of the *Ouverture*, the suite assembled here by Emmanuelle Haïm includes numerous winning examples of French dances — *menuet*, *tambourin*, *gavotte*, *rigaudon* — but even those formal types are crafted to their dramatic moments and are in no way stereotyped; compare, for example, the quite different characters of the two pairs of *tambourins*. Also included are several *symphonies*, instrumental expanses that provided dramatic underpinnings to specific scenes: a celebratory *Marche pour les différentes nations* (*March for the Various Nations*, when “The mortals of every state and

every era come to render homage to Venus”), the strutting *Entrée pour les guerriers* (*Entry of the Warriors*), the bristling *Bruit de guerre* (*Noise of War*), and the tender *Sommeil* (*Sleep*, in which Dardanus enjoys “flattering dreams”). The suite concludes just as the opera does, with an extended *chaconne* (variations on a short, repeated harmonic pattern), a musical type to which French Baroque composers characteristically turned for a grand, balletic finish.

**Instrumentation:** three recorders (soprano, treble, and tenor), two flutes (both doubling piccolo), two oboes, three bassoons, three Renaissance drums, finger cymbals, bass drum, steel chain, tambourine, triangle, string sections of two violins, violas, and basses (with the *bassi* realized by cello, bass, and bassoon), and harpsichord.

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## Anatomy of the Dance

Stylized dances appear constantly in music of the late-Baroque period, not only in that of France, where many of the dances reached their classic forms, but also from courts widely dispersed throughout Europe. The dance movements encountered in this concert provide a sampling:

**Sarabande** — From origins in Spain or Mexico, where it was decried as “a dance ... so ugly in its motions that it is enough to excite bad emotions in even very decent people,” it evolved into a stately French court dance of unimpeachable morals, in slow triple meter, often with a stress on the second beat of the measure.

**Rigaudon** — A cheerful circle dance in triple meter, emerging from the south of France, first performed at the Paris Opéra in 1684, characterized by hopping footwork.

**Menuet (Minuet)** — A triple-time dance, originally fast, although it seems to have slowed down with passing years, such that by 1768 Jean-Jacques Rousseau described it as “more moderate than quick.”

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French dance master Pierre Rameau’s manuals on dance from 1725 included instruction and notation for dances such as the minuet



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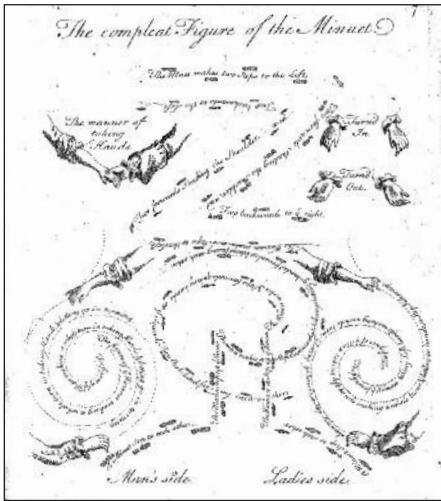
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**Gigue** — Usually cast in 6/8 time by French composers, a lively dance of Irish origins, often with asymmetrical phrase lengths and “full of dotted notes and syncopations” (according to the musical encyclopedia written in 1703 by Sébastiën de Brossard).

**Bourrée** — A dance in duple time, sometimes beginning on an upbeat. The music theorist Johann Matheson, who nearly killed Handel during a swordfight in 1704, described it in 1739: “Its distinguishing feature resides in contentment and a pleasant demeanor. At the same time, it is somewhat carefree and relaxed, a little indolent and easygoing, though not disagreeable.”

**Hornpipe** — Whereas most of the courtly dances were epitomized in France, this is an English genre, in triple time, with rhythmically eccentric phrases extending across bar-lines and dancers striking the poses of sailors looking out to sea.

**Marche** — Not normally a dance per se, but at least a piece to be moved to, often conveying pomp and ceremony — in the late Baroque, usually in duple but sometimes triple time.



**Tambourin** — A Provençal dance in energetic duple meter, played by peasants with a pipe in one hand and a tambourine in the other; much used by Rameau, who stressed its rustic simplicity, especially when evoking a Mediterranean or otherwise southerly character.

**Gavotte** — A duple-time dance whose character could vary, though by general consensus slower than a bourrée; Rousseau (1768) wrote that it was “ordinarily graceful, often gay, and sometimes rather slow and tender.”

*Elaborately drawn notation for the steps to dances such as the minuet (or minuet) began to appear in the mid-18th century, as in George Bickham's 1738 version*