

## Scene II: Going for Baroque (1707-1763)

The changes that opera underwent in the early-to-mid-18th century were significant. In less than a decade after *Dido and Aeneas* premiered (and then disappeared from the repertory) Italian composers, taking advantage of the great advances in vocal technique among sopranos, contraltos and of course the castrati, were now writing music that alternated between strophic (yet melodic) recitative in which the characters spilled out all of their emotion and delineated the drama and now quite florid arias that went on for some minutes. The much briefer solo excursions penned by Monteverdi and Lully were now considered old-fashioned and even stodgy, and the audiences of the time ate these arias up and responded with wildly enthusiastic applause. Slowly but surely, opera was turning from truly sung drama to drama interspersed with flashy, often well-written but still action-stopping arias in which a single emotion or mental state of the character was stretched out in time.

### *Alessandro Scarlatti* (1660-1725)

One early example, and actually a very fine one, was Alessandro Scarlatti's *Il Mitridate Eupatore*, which premiered in early 1707. Based on a real-life character but "sanitized" as only opera could do, Mitridate is here transformed from a despotic tyrant into a hero. The plot is complex and quite atypical of Italian opera at the time. There are elements of Aeschylus's *Choephoroi* and of the *Electra* plays of Sophocles and Euripides in it. There are several murders in the play, much subterfuge, and the central theme is retributive vengeance against past injustices. There are many political maxims in the play, and unlike Monteverdi's *Poppea* there is no love intrigue and there are no comic characters.

Since this work is scarcely ever performed, a bit of synopsis is in order. In the ancient kingdom of Pontus, Farnace has seized the throne, killing the king and marrying his wife, Stratonica. The murdered king's daughter, Laodice, has been forcibly married to a ruined nobleman, Nicomede, now reduced to working as a cowherd, although out of respect for her he has not consummated the marriage. Meanwhile her brother, Mitridate, has taken refuge in Egypt where he is using the pseudonym Eupatore. Mitridate and his wife Issicratea, using the name of Antigone, arrive at the court of Pontus disguised as Egyptian ambassadors. They promise Mitridate's head to the usurper king and queen in return for peace between Egypt and Pontus. Mitridate's mother Stratonica, agrees to the death of her own son. Mitridate meets his sister Laodice and reveals his true identity. Mitridate and Issicratea assassinate Farnace and Stratonica, and Nicomede announces to the people the return of their rightful king.

As is often the case, first attempts at changing or creating a new operatic style are generally the best, simply because no one is trying to copy the success of a previous work in that genre, and as it turns out *Mitridate* is possibly Scarlatti's finest opera as *Alceste* was Lully's finest. Some of the arias are not long at all, and in fact one of the wonderful things about *Mitridate Eupatore* is that Scarlatti keeps everything moving forward as in *Alceste*, only with more show-off coloratura passages for the singers. The only drawback in listening to a performance of it, so far as I can ascertain, is that some of the recitatives go on a bit long, but that is a flaw that afflicted many operas, and not only those in which the recits are sung. Anyone who has sat through a "complete" performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio* can assure you that the spoken recitatives, if uncut, go on rather interminably in that opera as well. Another advance in *Mitridate* is that there is not one but three duets, and even a quartet. The latter was fairly new to opera at the time. And not all the arias are flashy and brilliant. One of the soprano arias at about an hour into the performance is a very affecting lyric aria of the sort that, in later years, Handel would become master of.

Although there is no commercial recording of this work, there is a live performance from 2017 that, at this time of writing, was available for free streaming on YouTube. The cast consists of little-known singers, most of which are superb both vocally and dramatically. Interestingly, the conductor of this performance, Thibault Noally, has recast the lead role of Mitridate for contralto (Anthea Pichanik) instead of soprano, and Mitridate's nemesis, Farnace, is similarly lowered from tenor to baritone (Victor Sicard). These are distinct improvements which give the roles more *gravitas*, and nearly everyone in the case is very dramatically involved, which helps to convert this very convoluted plot into something that is easier to grasp.

Sadly, the Italian operatic tradition that worked so well from the time of Cavalli to that of Scarlatti became the most musically corrupt as time went on. Not-so-slowly but surely, the growth of the virtuoso vocalists overcame true dramatic instincts in composers, so that by 1735, when Antonio Vivaldi's *Bajazet* premiered, there was little or nothing of Scarlatti's marvelous musical style remaining. *Bajazet* is an example of decadence of Baroque opera at its worst. The slow music is moody, the fast music peppy, and there are a lot of runs, roulades and trills for the performers to sing, but in the end there isn't a single dramatic moment in the entire score. It may as well have been written as a big concerto; even if one stops to consider that it is a pastiche, using music of other composers for the villains, including Irene's famous aria "Sposa son disprezzata." The latter is a piece so bad that it goes in one ear and out the other, scarcely leaving a trace of its existence and generally forgotten even by the time the opera ends.

Eventually, the Baroque operatic scene came to be dominated, both in Italy and later in England, by the German composers Johann Adolf Hasse and particularly Georg Friedrich Handel. Although the distance of time has separated Handel from Johann Sebastian Bach, who wrote no operas at all but large religious oratorios, in his day Handel was by far the better known and more celebrated composer, and a re-examination of his better scores shows why. He always wrote meticulously, had a firm grasp of composition, and was occasionally inspired enough to produce works that, if not transcendent, are nonetheless products of genius.

### ***Georg Friedrich Handel* (1685-1759)**

Although Handel later moved to Great Britain where he wrote operas in English, including the popular works *Semele* and *Acis and Galatea*, it is clear that his best work was written when he was still in Italy, and one of his finest—if not *the* finest—was *Giulio Cesare* (1724). I've known several people who consider this to be the only great opera Handel ever wrote, a judgment I disagree with, as I believe that a great performance of *Rodelina* can equal *Giulio Cesare*, but there is no arguing that this is one of his very best.

Handel did not arrive at this pinnacle overnight. His earlier operas *Rinaldo* (1711) and *Teseo* (1712), though extremely popular, are flashy, highly colorful in orchestration (giving us a glimpse of such future works as the *Royal Water Music* and *Royal Fireworks Music*), and include a few very touching moments. Yet they are not really dramatic works in the full sense of the word, even when they are inhabited on recordings by very fine interpreters who pull all there is out of the music. They are certainly better written than Vivaldi's horrors—Handel was too good a composer to lower himself *that* much—but in terms of opera as drama they are scarcely in the same country, let alone the same postal code, as *Giulio Cesare* and *Rodelinda*.

To begin with, there is the overture. In few of his other operas did Handel open the work with an overture that has a feeling of stature as this one does; though taken at a stately march tempo, the music is less shallow, less clearly meant to entertain the audience. It is nowhere near the opening of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* overture, mind you, but at least the opening section sounds serious and not frivolous, and even when Handel increases the tempo the music sounds less jolly than before. After an intermediary chorus, we are immediately introduced to Caesar via

the aria “Presti ornai l’egizia terra,” this opening at a slightly brisker march pace. Although including the by-now-mandatory trills and coloratura runs, a great mezzo or contralto can make this piece sound rather imperious, as it is supposed to be, but even the character of the music tells us that this is a *serious* and not a *frivolous* character. Next is a somewhat extended *secco recitative* section in which Caesar interacts with Curio, Cornelia and Sextus. We have clearly left the sung, melodic recitatives of Lully, Purcell and Scarlatti for a harpsichord and *basso continuo* accompaniment, and I for one find this a loss rather than a gain, but this was a style that stayed in fashion well into early 19th century Italian opera. Some listeners, myself included, may question the seriousness of the fast, flashy music of Caesar’s ensuing aria, “Empio, diró, tu sei,” but it’s set in B minor (an excellent key for a low female or high male voice) and there’s a certain sense of danger and menace in the music that echoes the words: “I will speak of how pitiless you are. Leave my sight! You are utterly cruel. The heart of a king is not without pity.” After a fairly brief recitative section, Cornelia responds with her own aria, the slow and touching “Priva son d’ogni conforto.” This sort of interplay and high level of musical invention continues throughout the opera; there is scarcely a weak moment (the *secco recitatives* aside) in the entire work. Cleopatra’s arias and scenes capture a regal yet somewhat flighty character, and Caesar’s famous aria with horn obbligato, “Va tacito e nascosto,” has long been held up as one of Handel’s most inspired moments.

We are extremely lucky that there are not one but two outstanding recordings of this opera, the early-1990s performance with Jennifer Larmore as Caesar, Bernarda Fink as Cornelia, Barbara Schlick as Cleopatra and countertenor Derek Lee Ragin as Tolomeo, conducted by René Jacobs, and the 21st-century recording with Marie-Nicole Lemieux in the title role, Romina Basso as Cornelia, Karine Gauvin as Cleopatra and Filippo Minicchia as Tolomeo, conducted by Alan Curtis. If my preference is for the latter over the former, it is only because I think that Lemieux’s deeper, richer contralto gives the role more *gravitas* and, at times, menace than Larmore, and on this recording Lemieux manages to rein in her sometimes loose and rattly vibrato. The other singers are the equal of their counterparts on the Jacobs set, although in my opinion Basso has a far more attractive voice than Fink. Interestingly, Curtis uses an even smaller orchestra than the one Handel himself used, but on a recording this is not a detriment; rather, it increases the feeling of intimacy that one feels in the lyric arias and duets. Whatever your preference, however, neither one really disappoints.

Between *Giulio Cesare* and *Rodelinda*, which followed *Giulio Cesare* by a year, there was *Tamerlano*, and several Handel experts claim this to be as good as the other two operas. It is not. Not only is the musical invention not on nearly as high a level, the music—even when sung by expert interpreters who give it their all—sounds facile and shallow. The music is “pretty,” but not the least bit dramatic. It has an attractive sheen, and some of the vocal writing is brilliant on the surface, but there is no heart in it.

I first noticed the high quality of *Rodelinda* when Renée Fleming and David Daniels sang it at the Metropolitan Opera in 2004, a superb performance which I thought would never be bettered...but as you will see, I did find one even better. In this highly unique opera, Handel used a bare minimum of recitatives, which (especially in those years) was the standard method of advancing the plot of an opera, choosing instead to tell the story in a succession of arias and duets. Though the aria is a set-piece which, traditionally speaking, slows down the forward advancement of the story, Handel somehow managed to convey everything that was happening in terms of dramatic action through the arias themselves, and nearly every aria is a gem. If nothing survived of this work other than *Rodelinda*’s opening aria, it would surely impress the listener with the utter sincerity and dramatic feeling of his approach, but there are numerous other moments of similar beauty and emotional impact.

Although two of Bertarido's arias have been sung by numerous tenors, mezzos and countertenors down through the years ("Dove sei" and "Vivi, tiranno!"), it is the seldom-recognized "Chi di voi fu più in fedele" which is the crowning gem of this opera. Set in A minor, the orchestra suddenly moves into B-flat diminished in the orchestral introduction (top row, last bar on the right in the score excerpt below) with another abrupt key change on the second syllable of the word "ganno" (first bar on the left, third row), followed by a couple of other unusual dips into foreign harmonies as it progresses. In and of itself, this would mean very little, but Handel's inspiration here redoubles the impact of the words. In my opinion, this is one of the greatest arias of his entire career as a composer.

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The musical score is presented in four systems. Each system contains a vocal line (treble clef) and an accompaniment line (bass clef). The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The score is in A minor and features complex harmonic changes, including a key change to B-flat diminished on the second syllable of the word "ganno".

Unfortunately, from this point on it was the more facile and entertaining style of *Tamerlano*, and not the deep dramatic soul of *Giulio Cesare* and *Rodelinda*, which came to the fore in the rest of Handel's operas. More importantly for the point of this study, this trend towards *entertaining* rather than *dramatic* arias eventually came to sully the integrity of many a half-way dramatic work in the following two centuries. Once Giovanni Battista Pergolesi broke the string of serious operas with a fully comedic work, *La serva padrona*, in 1733, yet another wall in the

structure of opera as drama fell down. Modestly amusing though it seems to us today, in 1733 *Padrona* was a sensation. Although it was premiered in two separate intermissions of Pergolesi's failed, serious opera *Il prigionier superbo*, it soon became a stand-alone opera. Even funnier than *La serva padrona*, but far less known and not entirely by Pergolesi (he had a couple of his composition pupils write arias for it), is *Il maestro di musica*.

Now, I'm not saying that there is no place on the opera stage for comic works. That is clearly ridiculous. Even the sanctimonious Richard Wagner enjoyed a good comic opera now and then, just as he liked certain bel canto operas (particularly those by Vincenzo Bellini). It's just that as the lighter, more melodic and less dramatic operas took hold, along came *opera buffa* to seal the deal. Opera was now being pushed as entertainment, not an uplifting theatrical experience, and we shall see how this compromised things as time progressed.

### **Antonio Vivaldi**

The case of Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741), who was known as "the red priest," is one of the strangest in musical history. At age 15, he began studying to become a Roman Catholic priest, and was ordained at age 25, yet even from the beginning he was (according to Wikipedia) "given a dispensation from celebrating Mass." The Wikipedia article presumes that this was because of his delicate health, yet a few sentences later they report that he had "a habit of composing while performing Mass," although this is given without a citation.<sup>1</sup> Not everyone knows that, in addition to being a composer, Vivaldi was also a virtuoso violinist who astounded his audiences with his musicality, virtuosity, and ability to invent extempore cadenzas while playing. Fewer still know that he was also an impresario, which means that he often supervised productions of his own (and others') operas.

Although he wrote all of his instrumental music himself, Vivaldi often "farmed out" portions of his operatic scores to students and colleagues to help him finish them in time. Although these composers who helped him were *skilled*, they were not always *creative*, and there is a great difference between the two. One of the few operas that is certifiably all-Vivaldi is *Orlando Furioso*, which is now considered to be his masterpiece in that genre.

Although neither the original story nor the libretto were written by Piero Metastasio (real name: Pier Antonio Trapassi), the most famous Italian librettist of the 18th century, it has all the earmarks of his style: a convoluted plot with so many characters in it that you can't tell one from the other without a scorecard. Yet Vivaldi was so much taken by it that he wrote not one, but two different operas on the same subject. There are a couple of recordings of the original 1714 *Orlando*, but the general consensus of critics and musicologists is that the 1727 version, which we shall discuss here, is by far the superior opera.

Let's try to simplify the plot as much as possible. Prince Medoro (originally a castrato contralto, nowadays either a female mezzo or a countertenor), survives a horrible shipwreck with the help of the enchantress Alcina (mezzo-soprano) and flees into the arms of his beloved Angelica (soprano). The knight Orlando (originally a castrato contralto, generally a female contralto today) is jealous of the Prince's love for Angelica, but the latter lies to him, saying that Medoro is her brother. And if this love triangle isn't enough, Alcina develops a crush on one of Medoro's knights, Ruggiero (castrato contralto, now sung by a tenor or counter-tenor), who is in love with the female warrior Bradamante (apparently, Medoro's army was coed). And there is yet one more person involved in this love hexagon, the knight Astolfo (bass), who loves Alcina but is tormented by her attraction to others. You have to have a scorecard to keep all of these crossed love affairs straight.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio\\_Vivaldi#Priesthood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Vivaldi#Priesthood)

On a high Alpine mountain, Medoro and Angelica swear their love and faithfulness to each other before parting ways. To get rid of Orlando, Angelica sends him off to fight a monster who, she claims, guards a vase containing the elixir of youth which Medea supposedly used to revive the dying King Aeson. In reality, the cave to which Orlando is sent is an enchanted one controlled by Alcina; once Orlando is inside, Alcina makes escape impossible. Yet somehow, Orlando is smart enough to escape the monster and strong enough to defy Alcina's spell and dig his way out.

Angelica and Medoro marry in the countryside at the foot of a tree, onto which they carve their names and the marriage vows. Orlando, discovering this tree, finally becomes Furioso, thus fulfilling the title of the opera. First, he starts destroying trees, thus causing Global Warming; then goes after them. But because of the trap that Angelica sent him into, everyone thinks Orlando is dead. Astolfo enlists the help of Bradamante and Ruggiero to plot revenge against Alcina, whose magic powers come from an urn with Merlin's ashes in it which is locked up in the temple of Hecate.

Inside the temple, Bradamante disguises herself as a man; Alcina falls in love with "him." Orlando, still insanely angry over Angelica's marriage, starts destroying the temple statues, and inadvertently smashes the urn, thus ruining Alcina's power. On a deserted island, Alcina tries to attack the sleeping Orlando but is prevented by Ruggiero and Bradamante. Astolfo returns to arrest Alcina as Orlando, regaining his sanity, forgives Angelica and Medoro.

It's easy to see why Vivaldi was drawn to this story. If you take away the "monster" and Alcina's magic powers, it's a fairly interesting story involving several mere mortals involved in the passions of love as well as a power struggle against the enchantress Alcina.

After the typical tripartite "overture" of the day—actually, a trio sonata consisting of three sections, fast-slow-fast—the opera begins with a recitative. There are a LOT of recitatives in *Orlando Furioso*; wisely, Vivaldi realized that, at least within the musical conventions of his day, this is where the drama moved forward, not in the arias, but when just listening and not watching the opera, they can become tiresome unless the singers imbue their lines with excellent dramatic interpretation. And this brings us to another sticking-point. Just how dramatically did singers of the 18th century interpret the recits? This is questionable. Although we know from reading Pier Francesco Tosi that certain singers of that century could and did interpret their arias and duets by either imbuing them with "pathetic accents" or by fiery delivery of both words and music, acting onstage as such was still in its infancy. We today are a bit spoiled by having Baroque opera singers who are also fine dramatic interpreters but, just looking at the music of the recitatives on paper, one is not tempted to call them dramatic—yet they are. Vivaldi was very conscientious about varying both the tempo and the orchestration of these recits, trying to create as varied a pattern as possible. As would be expected, the arias reflect the characters' states of mind at various stages in the drama, thus Angelica's first aria, "Un raggio di speme," is all about her love for Medoro while Alcina's first aria ("Alza in quegl'occhi") is about the "warlike gaze" in the eyes of her latest beloved, Ruggiero. No matter how formulaic an aria like this may strike us today, it is miles above the generally inferior quality of such arias written a century later by one of the Bel Canto Boys.

Indeed, as one continues listening to the complete opera, one notes how good these arias are. As a rule, they do not overdo the coloratura effects except when presenting feelings of rage or warlike emotions; the lyric arias are graceful without being cloying, and the often fast pace of the recitatives, which sometimes involve up to six characters at once, are surprisingly varied and, for the most part, interesting. Those listeners who also recognize Vivaldi as a master of orchestration will appreciate his varied approach to the orchestra as well, creating unusual effects with "snapping" strings and unusual crescendos which create tension and variety, particularly at the

ends of recitatives where the rhythm of the instruments matches the rhythms of the sung words. Orlando's "Nel profondo" will particularly pick up your ears with its clever rhythms and interplay of swirling violins against "snapping" violas and cellos in the introduction, and this continues into the accompaniment to the singer. The Angelica-Medoro duet "Quanto somigli tempestoso" opens, surprisingly, with clarinets in their chalumeau (low) register, playing against a harp and basso continuo—surely a novel orchestral touch for 1727. In another recitative, the bass, holding a low A while the harpsichord improvises for a bit in the minor, suddenly increases in volume and breaks off as Orlando begins to get *furioso*. These may seem like small things, but if so, why did no other opera composer of Vivaldi's time come up with them? And they surely enhance the *dramatic* quality of the music. Not to mention delighting the ear with orchestral variations that sounded like no other composer. Small wonder why it's so easy to spot the inferior composers who helped him assemble some of his other operas. They had absolutely no tricks up their sleeve like these.

He also changed both meter and rhythmic accents in his arias. Orlando's "Troppo e fiero," for example, is in 6/8, which seems straightforward enough, but with the violins often playing against the rhythm and the singer slightly varying the stress of the beats within each bar. Act II opens not with any played or sung music, but a simple (but dramatic) recitative between Alcina and Astolfo which leads into a strange aria for the former in which the meter shifts around and even stops occasionally. Astolfo's aria "Benche nasconda" is a fast-paced aria in which Vivaldi, like Rossini a century later, let the linguistic flow of Italian consonants dictate the rhythms of the music, the difference being that here it is used in a dramatic rather than in a comic fashion. In the second half of this aria, Vivaldi has one of the basses slap his strings, a device scarcely known to classical music, but adopted nearly two centuries later by jazz bassists.

Yet the most interesting thing about *Orlando Furioso* is that, somehow or other, Vivaldi keeps the drama moving forward; there are no sluggish lapses in pace and considerable variety in both the vocal and instrumental writing. This is clearly a valid musico-dramatic style for its place and time, and although it would later be superseded by other composers, listening to or watching a performance of *Orlando Furioso* holds your attention. Only in the case of harmony was Vivaldi rather conservative for his day, yet his rapid key changes remain intriguing and valid. Except for a very few reflective, slow arias, *Orlando Furioso* will keep you on the edge of your seat. You never know what's going to come next unless you've already heard a performance of it.

The old 1970s recording with Marilyn Horne (Orlando), Victoria de los Angeles (Angelica) and conductor Claudio Scimone was actually a surprisingly good one, with a lean orchestra conforming to the HIP practices of that time...except that the opera was not only cut, but with arias presented out of the correct order. Thus I must recommend the recording with Marie-Nicole Lemieux (Orlando), Blandine Staskiewicz (Medoro), Veronica Cangemi (Angelica), Jennifer Larmore (Alcina) and Lorenzo Regazzo (Astolfo), conducted by Jean-Christophe Spinosi, which is not only complete and well-sung throughout but also a highly dramatic in interpretation.

### ***Johann Adolf Hasse***

The old adage that time and tide wait for no man clearly applies to the story of Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783), who wrote an astonishing 70 operas of which only a few are known today. This body of work includes titles, and thus subject-matter, that were familiar to operagoers of his time and, in fact, were titles (and subjects) recycled by others in later years, i.e. *Antony and Cleopatra*, *La Semele*, *Artaserse*, *Siroe*, *Atalanta*, *Antigono*, *Il re pastore*, *La clemenza di Tito*, *Olimpiade*, *Partenope* and for you fans of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Yet all of these, and scores of others, have dropped out of sight as though they never existed, despite having libretti by Metastasio (an astonishing number of them, in fact)

and Stefano Pallavicino. Giovanni Mancini, a castrato soprano who sang in many of Hasse's operas as well as being a voice teacher and an author, declared Hasse as the "father of music," yet shortly after his death his works disappeared from the repertoire as if they had never existed.

In listening to one of his few operas to have been recorded complete, *Cleofide* (1731), one hears both the excellence and the flaws. In the former camp is the fact that Hasse, like Meyerbeer in the 19th century, was a very careful composer who spent long hours fretting over the exact right key for each scene in his works and the right tone to convey the emotions of the character or the mood of the drama. In the latter is the fact that Hasse, much more so than Scarlatti or Handel, was the one who used the *secco recitative* style accompanied only by the harpsichord exclusively. He did this in order to shorten what were exceedingly long works (a full performance of *Cleofide* runs nearly four hours, and trust me, folks, it's not really worth your sitting on your fanny in an opera house for that long a time to hear and see), but in doing so he caused a musical rift between recits and arias that Lully, Scarlatti and even Handel had worked hard to integrate. It would take another century before the *secco recitative* was finally ditched by opera composers of all nationalities.

Moreover, despite his use of different keys to convey the feelings of specific characters and arias that are clearly well crafted, craft was all you really hear in Hasse's operas. Too many of the arias go on far too long and are not nearly as varied in musical material as those of Handel at his best. *Cleofide*'s first aria, for instance, runs over eight minutes and really has little to say musically as opposed to textually, and even a theatrical genius singer like Diana Damrau could not save this music. Yes, in later repetitions of the aria's theme he adds little technical fillips to enliven one's listening experience, but too many of these arias tend to go in one ear and out the other. What was a serious endeavor on Hasse's part became a trial for the operagoer, and with the later advancements as well as the popular-oriented form of arias, no one wanted to sit through his stage works.

### ***Jean-Philippe Rameau***

Meanwhile, over in France, an entirely new form of opera was emerging, thanks to the incomparable genius of one man. Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) seemed to come out of nowhere; almost nothing is known of his early life, but in the 1720s, when he was around 40 years old, he suddenly became a major music theorist with the publication of his *Treatise on Harmony* (1722) and his further publication, the following year, of some particularly brilliant pieces for harpsichord which circulated throughout Europe (which means that even Johann Sebastian Bach knew of them, and probably admired them).

Although he was one of the greatest and most influential opera composers of his time, Rameau didn't write his first opera, *Hippolyte et Aricie*, until he was 50. Based on Racine's tragedy *Phèdre*, much of the music in the first act sounds more festive than tragic, but even here Rameau dazzles the ear with recitatives—sung, not semi-parlando—accompanied by an ear-ravishing variety of instruments, including flutes, and even at times (most unconventionally) by a full chorus, making commentary on the soloist's narrative like the choruses of early Greek dramas. In his recitatives, too, Rameau varied both tempo and harmony in addition to the instrumental accompaniment. Nowadays we listen to a work like this and marvel at his unflagging, inspired invention, but French audiences of 1733 were baffled because there was very little that was conventional in the score for them to "hang onto." Arias suddenly pop up out of nowhere; sometimes they go on for the length of a normal and expected aria, but as in the case of Lully, more often than not they change tempo and/or key and sometimes turn into duets—and even, unlike Lully, trios. In short, Rameau's style both harked back to the best of Lully and Scarlatti while advancing the form into something more complex. The constantly moving and shifting musical "cells" that Rameau used



can still create a sense of disorientation in the inattentive listener, despite the music being resolutely tonal. To put it as succinctly as possible, Rameau's approach to opera combined the best features of Monteverdi, Lully and Scarlatti, but at warp speed.

Yet if one is seeking out opera as drama, Rameau is *the* go-to 18th-century composer. Even more so than Handel at his very best, Rameau sucks you into his musico-dramatic sound world. If the minimal amount of arias upsets you, just go back and listen to Hasse. You'll get more arias than you can shake a stick at, if that's your idea of a good time. Rameau was not a crowd-pleaser. He wrote what he wrote, and if you liked it, fine. If you didn't, that was fine, too.

Since this opera, like those of Monteverdi, opens with a fairly long Prologue, one cannot fully judge the impact of Rameau's music until the opera proper starts. And it is here that we finally get some proper arias, starting with Aricie's "Temple sacré," an ornamental rather than a dramatic piece, but the ensuing sung recitative scene "Princesse, quels apprêts me frappent" is extremely well crafted, projecting the mental and emotional states of the two name characters, and when Phèdre makes her entrance with "Quoi! la terre et le ciel contre moi sont armés!," we are thrust into the very heart of Greek drama, with stabbing syncopated figures played by the cellos and basses behind the soloist, which is cut off suddenly and unexpectedly with a hard chord as other characters enter and the dramatic dynamic changes. Rameau has suddenly upset your presumption that this opera was going to play out according to the route that other operas had taken. He was going his own way whether you liked it or not. In the opening of Act II, for instance, he actually combines the sung recitative with orchestral accompaniment with a bit of an aria, later moving into slower *recits* in which the accompaniment moves back and forth between harpsichord, harpsichord with basso continuo, and sometimes other instruments before suddenly doubling in tempo with the singers performing a duet with the vocal lines in rhythmic opposition to one another—all of it written and sung in a very dramatic fashion, with the singers inflecting their lines with vivid characterization.

Surprisingly, despite its unconventionality, the lightning speed of *Hippolyte et Aricie* appealed to audiences, particularly those seeking a relief from the standard aria-dominated Italian opera of their time, and you can hear an outstanding performance of it by tenor Mark Padmore, soprano Anna-Maria Panzarella, bass Nathan Berg and the outstanding mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson as Phèdre. Interestingly, like his Italian and German-turned-Italian colleagues, Rameau also tossed in a few decorations in the vocal line, mostly fast turns (mordents) and trills, and not exclusively for the women. The tenor gets his share in this score as well. Compared to what came later in the Classical and early Romantic operas, they are fairly minimal, but Rameau clearly revived the idea that Monteverdi had of making trills and "shakes" a dramatic rather than a purely ornamental feature of the music.

Four years after this opera, Rameau wrote *Castor et Pollux*, but he revised it extensively 17 years later (1754) thanks to persistent requests from the Academie Royale de Musique. Both versions have been recorded, but to my mind there is almost no comparison. The revised version, which completely omits the formerly-expected Prologue, which is nonsense anyway (it has absolutely nothing to do with the story, but rather celebrates the then-end of the War of Polish Succession), gets down to the brass tacks of the drama more quickly and addresses the characters and their situation with an almost modern sense of compression and strong, emotional music. The opening scene from 1737, which depicted Castor's funeral, was moved to the beginning of Act II, where it made more sense. Though it had some fascinating musical features, including a descending tetrachord motif, it simply dragged out the drama unnecessarily, almost as a second Prologue. Acts III and IV were merged, and the work as a whole was shortened by cutting a great deal of the recitatives.

The plot, of course, centers around the twins Castor (who is mortal) and Pollux (who is immortal) and their competition for the heart of the princess Telaire who only loves the former. As in the case of some other earlier operas, the dramatic focus of the plot is rather compromised by the inclusion of fictitious characters such as the god Jupiter as well as monsters and demons in the Underworld, but the point is that Rameau paints his dramatic picture as if they were all real, and it works.

Much of Rameau's success in writing opera at a time when so many others were failing or somehow missing the mark stem from his mostly acoustic-harmonic theories to, as Kevin Mallon put it in the liner notes for the Naxos recording of this opera, "find a physiological hypothesis for the psychology of music. Experiments with the mathematical results of the vibrations of a length of string, had shown that the fundamental root note (the basic sounding tone of the string) produced second and third harmonics whose notes produced a major triad. From these he investigated the various combinations and inversions of chords that resulted. He had less success in formulating mathematical explanations for the minor triad, but this is less important than the general theories that arose. Seeing that the inversion of a chord could in itself have greater significance than the interval from the bass and feeling that counterpoint was due to the significant clashes of sound (natural intervals), Rameau began to conceive of music where the harmony was more important than the melody."<sup>2</sup> Yet despite this, anyone who has listened to his best operas cannot escape the fact that he was also quite adept at writing melodic lines, at times quite catchy ones. He just didn't overdo or dwell on them.

To translate the above into simpler terms, Rameau was constantly experimenting with how music sounded in an acoustic space. This was an innovation that, after his death, lay dormant until Gaspare Spontini revived the concept in the early 19th century. Spontini, in turn, helped to influence Berlioz and, to a lesser extent, Meyerbeer, and both Berlioz and Meyerbeer influenced Wagner, who brought the resonance of music in an acoustic space to a higher level than it has ever enjoyed, before or since. One always wonders what the operas of other composers might sound like if performed at Bayreuth, Wagner's personal play toy and performance space, but we'll probably never know since it's not going to happen.

With all of the above in mind, it's not surprising to discover all sorts of miraculous little moments in Rameau's scores. Even in an opera evidently written for enjoyment and not for drama such as *Les Indes Galantes*, he created his own unique "sound" as a composer than went beyond his trademark figures or his clever and carefully planned juxtaposition of intervals and chords. Interestingly, his sense of rhythm, particularly in his dances, had the same kind of quirky feel to them as Hector Berlioz' music. The differences were, of course, that Berlioz' sense of harmony was different, and he wrote *his* music in the 1830s, '40s and '50s, not in 1754.

One of the things that strikes you about the revised *Castor et Pollux* is how much of the music is instrumental. Despite running about two hours and 20 minutes, the full libretto for this opera, in both French and English, fits onto 15 small CD booklet pages, which in itself tells you that there's not as much singing here as in *Hippolyte et Aricie*. Even if one discounts the various dances he inserted into the score—this was clearly the beginning of the irritating French "tradition" of forcing composers to insert a ballet into every opera performed in Paris (even Verdi had to write a ballet for *Otello!*)—the majority of this orchestral music is surprisingly varied and at times quite powerful, foreshadowing the more modern orchestral sound of the late Classical era though it is used here to present typically Rameau-ian textures and harmonies. Listening to a good recorded performance, one can easily envision the music bouncing off the walls of the concert halls, particularly the smaller ones of his day, with tremendous emotional effect. Arias and

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<sup>2</sup> From the liner notes to Naxos 8.660118-19.

duets come and go, often in sung recitative but also in a more formal structure, and in a way Rameau makes them sound like adjuncts to the orchestral textures. In this way *Castor et Pollux* is a musico-dramatic totality, a somewhat more modern counterpart to Lully's *Alceste*. Of the many recordings available, the best balance between good singing and good conducting is the one put out by the Pinchgut Opera of Melbourne, Australia with Jeffery Thompson as Castor, Hadleigh Adams as Pollux, Celeste Lazarenko as Télétaire, Margaret Plummer as Phoebe and the orchestra Catillation conducted by Anthony Walker, but the best-conducted performance by far is the one led by Rafael Pichon with his Ensemble Pygmalion on Harmonia Mundi. The only reason it is not a first choice is that tenor Colin Ainsworth, as Castor, was not in good voice for the recording session, but if one is willing to replace his arias and duets here with the ones he recorded 12 years earlier with conductor Kevin Mallon for Naxos, you would have an ideal performance.

But if *Hippolyte et Aricie* is a very good opera and the revised *Castor et Pollux* even better, Rameau's last opera, *Les Boréades*, is undoubtedly his masterpiece. Written when he was 80 years old, in 1763, it went into rehearsals in Versailles in April of that year, yet no performance took place. Various theories have been put forth as to why it was not performed aside from the fact that the music was considered too difficult, among them that court factions fought over it, there were subversive elements, and that the Opéra burned down during the same month as the rehearsals. The opera was given in 1770, six years after Rameau's death, at a concert performance in Lille, but that was it until September 1964 when it was performed on French radio and broadcast the following month.

The plot revolves around Queen Alphise of Bactria, who is in love with a mysterious man named Abaris whose origins are unknown. The glitch is that, as Queen, she is obligated to marry a Boread, one of the descendants of Boreas, god of the north wind. Rather than do so, Alphise abdicates her throne, which so angers Boreas that he storms into the wedding, kidnaps Alphise, and takes her to his kingdom. With the help of the god Apollo and his muse Polyhymnia, Abaris sets off to rescue her, challenging Boreas and his sons with a magic golden arrow. Apollo saves the day by descending and suddenly revealing that Abaris is his son, which he had with a Boread nymph. Now that there is no obstacle, Abaris and Alphise finally marry.

Around this somewhat silly plot Rameau constructed his most dramatic and adventurous score. Every line for the singers was carefully sculpted to match the mood as well as the words; even the sung recitatives are interesting and innovative, the first one (the scene between Alphise and her lady-in-waiting Sémire) including an occasional French horn to the harpsichord and *basso continuo*, and it blends seamlessly into the following scenes sung by Borilée and Calesis—and those following—everything is blended seamlessly. There is even some ballet music, necessary if theatrically senseless, that is folded into the score as well, the longest and most superfluous being in the fourth act. One of many masterful touches is Sémire's aria "Un horizon serein" in the first act, which features one of the first examples of a composer using coloratura runs for dramatic emphasis when the aria switches over from lyrical to fast and bracing music representing the sudden "growling of the wind" that "brings on the storm and rouses the sea." Mozart and Verdi would later raise this to a fine art in their own operas, the latter after the long hiatus of bel canto silliness in the 1820s and '30s.

Fine dramatic moments abound in *Les Boréades*, so many of them, in fact, and sometimes in such quick succession that one must constantly pay attention or one will miss some of them. In the Act II recitative between Abaris and Adamas, for instance, Rameau suddenly has the *basso continuo* downshift unexpectedly in a chromatic fashion—a small touch, but a telling one which adds tension to the scene, which is sung in high, edgy music with quick vocal shakes to indicate the tensions between them, and later in this same scene Rameau shortens the length of each singers' phrases and "jams" them against one another to heighten the tension even further.

And if this were not enough, when Alphise enters on the heels of this duet, it is to stabbing figures by the string section, her anguish heightened by high-lying lines with sustained high notes—a clear predecessor of dramatic arias by Gluck, Mozart and Beethoven to come. Eventually, the tension built up in these and ensuing recitatives is released in a spirited chorus with several of the principals chiming in. By this time, Rameau had perfected the art of the continuous musical arc which, once begun, kept on morphing and developing. Of course there are “down” moments, like a pastoral dance that follows this scene which, while pretty, goes on too long, but the tension is immediately upgraded with a fast dance that has dramatic pauses, leading into another *arioso*.

But of course, many modern listeners will not recognize or appreciate such dramatic moments if they are not used to the smaller-scale voices of this type of opera. We have become so accustomed to even the most modest-sized soprano and tenor voices belting out high Cs from the chest, which is what they take for drama, that hearing refined but well-controlled singers of this scope may seem very undramatic to them. This is yet another instance of what I referred to, early on, as one of the many ways our concept of drama in music has changed over the centuries.

The best commercial recording I’ve heard of *Les Boréades* is the one conducted by Václav Luks on the Chateau de Versailles label, but this is more for the very exciting projection of the orchestra’s big moments. Luks’ singers cannot compete, either in size or dramatic projection, to the live performance from 2003 conducted by William Christie with a cast including Barbara Bonney, Toby Spence, and Laurent Naouri. This was uploaded on YouTube at the time I wrote this, and if it is still there (not always a guarantee), I recommend listening to it as it is clearly a superior overall presentation of the score.

Although I feel that the best works of Handel and Rameau were an improvement over much of what had come before, there were bigger changes in store over the next half-century, as we shall see in the next chapter.