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This is the first intellectual biography of the eighteenth-century French composer and theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau. Rameau is widely recognized as the founder of tonal harmonic theory. Through his principle of the fundamental bass, Rameau was able to explicate the structure of tonal music with unprecedented concision and clarity, earning himself in his day the popular accolade “Newton of Harmony.”

Ranging widely over the musical and intellectual thought of the eighteenth century, Thomas Christensen orients Rameau’s accomplishments in light of contemporaneous traditions of music theory as well as many scientific ideas current in the French Enlightenment. Rameau is revealed to be an unsuspectedly syncretic and sophisticated thinker, betraying influences ranging from neo-platonic thought and Cartesian mechanistic metaphysics to Locke’s empirical psychology and Newtonian experimental science. Additional primary documents (many revealed here for the first time) help clarify Rameau’s fascinating and stormy relationship with the Encyclopedists: Diderot, Rousseau, and d’Alembert.

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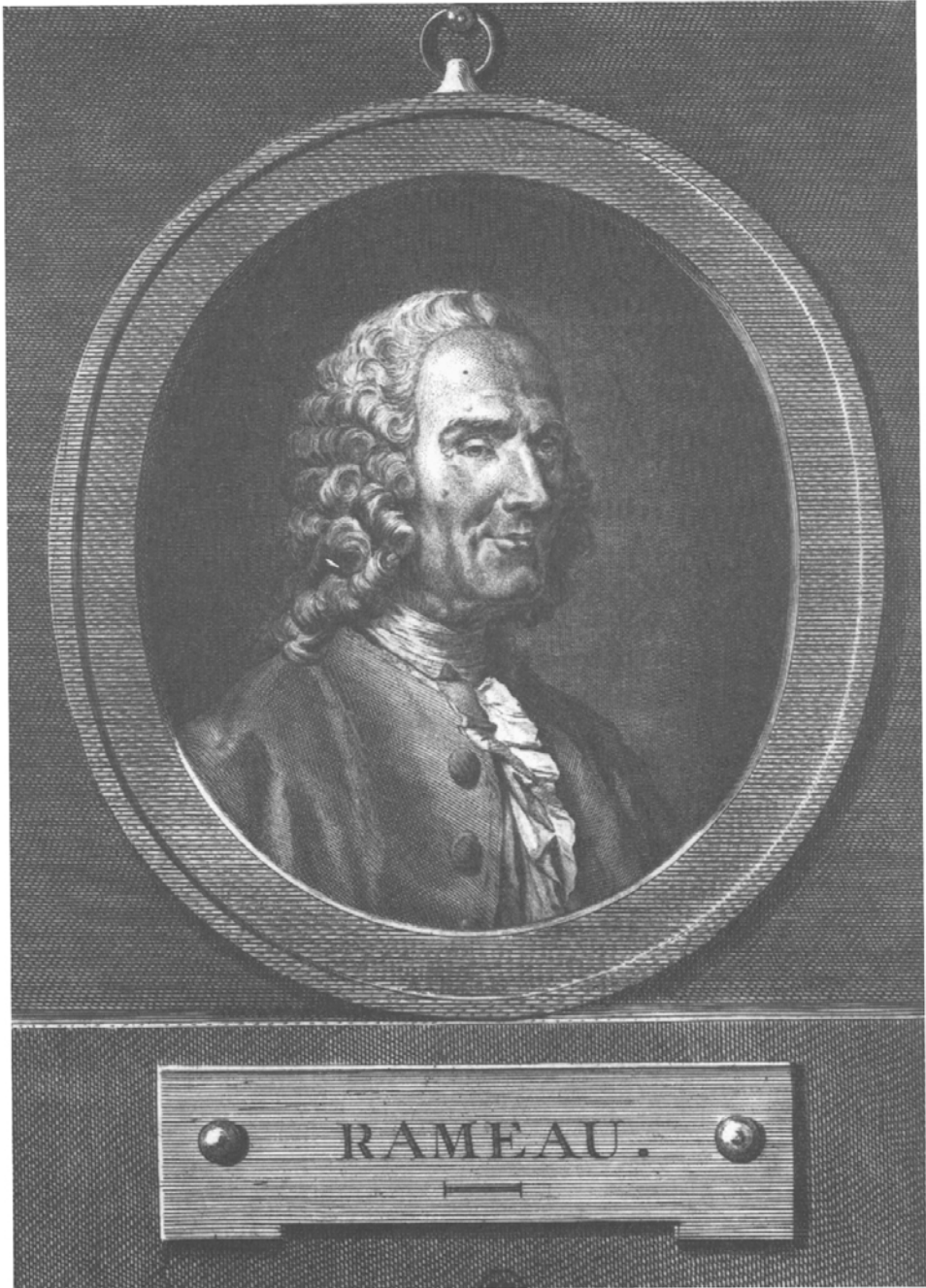
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GENERAL EDITOR: IAN BENT

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IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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RAMEAU  
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THOMAS CHRISTENSEN

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*To the memory of my mother  
Katharine McCarroll Christensen (1923–1967)*

CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Foreword by Ian Bent</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
Introduction	1
1 Rameau and the Enlightenment	5
2 Rameau as music theorist	21
3 Precursors of harmonic theory	43
4 The generative fundamental	71
5 The fundamental bass	103
6 The <i>corps sonore</i>	133
7 Mode and modulation	169
8 Rameau and the philosophes	209
9 D’Alembert	252
10 The final years	291
Appendix 1 A note on harmonic and arithmetic proportions	307
Appendix 2 “L’Art de la basse fondamentale” and Gianotti’s <i>Le Guide du compositeur</i>	309
<i>Select bibliography</i>	313
<i>Index of subjects</i>	321
<i>Index of proper names</i>	323



ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES

Portrait of Rameau engraved by J. J. Benoist after J. Restout, 1771. Reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale	<i>frontispiece</i>
1.1 “Le Triomphe de Rameau.” Engraving by C. N. Cochin <i>fil.</i> . Reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale	page 10
2.1 Title page to the <i>Traité de l’harmonie</i>	27
3.1 Table and transposition of “scale triads”	48
3.2 Rameau’s figured-bass notation for Corelli’s sonata Op. 5 no. 3	59
4.1 Fludd’s monochord	73
4.2 Zarlino’s syntonic-diatonic division of the octave	75
4.3 <i>Traité</i> , 4. Rameau’s string divisions	92
4.4 <i>Traité</i> , 36. Rameau’s demonstration of the inversive equivalence of triads	97
5.1 <i>Nouveau système</i> , 80–81. Opening of Rameau’s analysis of the monologue from Lully’s <i>Armide</i>	121
6.1 An illustration of Newton’s “experimentum crucis” demonstrating the refraction of light into a spectrum of seven colors. From Abbé Pluche, <i>Le Spectacle de la nature</i> (Paris, 1732), IV, 164	143
6.2 Voltaire’s correlation between Newton’s color spectrum and the seven notes of the diatonic scale	144
6.3 Illustration of some acoustical experiments from Abbé Nollet, <i>Leçons de physique expérimentale</i> (Amsterdam, 1745), III, 438	147
7.1 <i>Génération harmonique</i> , Plate 6	183
7.2 <i>Génération harmonique</i> , 43	185
7.3 Voltaire and Rameau engraved by C. de Tersan. Reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale	188
7.4 <i>Démonstration</i> , Plate C	196
7.5 <i>Démonstration</i> , Plate M	204
7.6 <i>Démonstration</i> , Plate N	205
8.1 Briseux’s <i>Traité du beau</i> , Plate 32	234
9.1 An engraving of Jean Le Rond d’Alembert; engraver unknown	254
9.2 Title page to the first edition of d’Alembert’s <i>Elémens de musique</i> (1752)	258
10.1 Frontispiece to the <i>Code de Musique</i> (1760)	293

FIGURES

4.1	Descartes’s first monochord division	78
4.2	Descartes’s second monochord division	79
4.3	Rameau’s revised illustration of his monochord division	91
6.1	Taylor’s formula for the fundamental frequency of a vibrating string	135
6.2	Modes of a string’s movement when loaded by two or three weights	151
6.3	A vibrating string at time $t$ and $t'$	153
7.1	Summary of Rameau’s derivation from the <i>corps sonore</i>	208
10.1	The derivation of sevenths by interlocking harmonic and arithmetic proportions	300

## FOREWORD BY IAN BENT

Theory and analysis are in one sense reciprocals: if analysis opens up a musical structure or style to inspection, inventorying its components, identifying its connective forces, providing a description adequate to some live experience, then theory generalizes from such data, predicting what the analyst will find in other cases within a given structural or stylistic orbit, devising systems by which other works – as yet unwritten – might be generated. Conversely, if theory intuitively understands how musical systems operate, then analysis furnishes feedback to such imaginative intuitions, rendering them more insightful. In this sense, they are like two hemispheres that fit together to form a globe (or cerebrum!), functioning deductively as investigation and abstraction, inductively as hypothesis and verification, and in practice forming a chain of alternating activities.

Professionally, on the other hand, “theory” now denotes a whole subdiscipline of the general field of musicology. Analysis often appears to be a subordinate category within the larger activity of theory. After all, there is theory that does not require analysis. Theorists may engage in building systems or formulating strategies for use by composers; and these almost by definition have no use for analysis. Others may conduct experimental research into the sound-materials of music or the cognitive processes of the human mind, to which analysis may be wholly inappropriate. And on the other hand, historians habitually use analysis as a tool for understanding the classes of compositions – repertoires, “outputs,” works, versions, sketches, and so forth – that they study. Professionally, then, our ideal image of twin hemispheres is replaced by an intersection: an area that exists in common between two subdisciplines. Seen from this viewpoint, analysis reciprocates in two directions: with certain kinds of theoretical inquiry, and with certain kinds of historical inquiry. In the former case, analysis has tended to be used in rather orthodox modes, in the latter in a more eclectic fashion; but that does not mean that analysis in the service of theory is necessarily more exact, more “scientific,” than analysis in the service of history.

The above epistemological excursion is by no means irrelevant to the present series. Cambridge Studies in Music Theory and Analysis is intended to present the work of theorists and of analysts. It has been designated to include “pure” theory – that is, theoretical formulation with a minimum of analytical exemplification; “pure” analysis – that is, practical analysis with a minimum of theoretical underpinning; and writings that fall at points along the spectrum between the two extremes. In these capacities, it aims to illuminate music, as work and as process.

However, theory and analysis are not the exclusive preserves of the present day. As subjects in their own right, they are diachronic. The former is coeval with the very study of music itself, and extends far beyond the confines of Western culture; the latter, defined broadly, has several centuries of past practice. Moreover, they have been dynamic, not static, fields throughout their histories. Consequently, studying earlier music through the eyes of its own contemporary theory helps us to escape (when we need to, not that we should make a dogma out of it) from the preconceptions of our own age. Studying earlier analyses does this too, and in a particularly sharply focused way; at the same time it gives us the opportunity to re-evaluate past analytical methods for present purposes, such as is happening currently, for example, with the long-despised methods of hermeneutic analysis of the late nineteenth century. The series thus includes editions and translations of major works of past theory, and also studies in the history of theory.

That Rameau is the most significant figure in the music theory of the modern (i.e. post-medieval) era is generally accepted today. His impact on musical thought since his time has been monumental. His ideas provided a battle ground over which theorists fought for a century and a half after his death. His insights into the nature of music, brilliant and sophisticated in their day, withstood the assaults of his opponents and retain their potency for us now. Every theorist and analyst of the twentieth century is influenced by his ideas, whether consciously or unconsciously, and is conditioned by his frame of reference.

Our view of Rameau's work is, however, a stereotype. His ideas have been purveyed in a succession of simplified forms, the first being those by d'Alembert in his *Eléments de musique* of 1752 and by Rousseau and d'Alembert in the first volumes of the *Encyclopédie* in 1751. Knowledge of his original writings is nowadays largely restricted to the first of his treatises, the *Traité de l'harmonie* of 1722. This is not surprising. For a start, the discourse of French eighteenth-century music theory is unreadable without highly specialized historical knowledge. Secondly, Rameau's own use of vocabulary is inconsistent, his syntax notoriously unclear, and his capacity for organization low. Thirdly, while the treatises subsequent to the *Traité* introduced important new observations, they did so amidst a welter of revisions, modifications and recantations that failed to yield at the end of his life a definitive "theory" or even a stable formulation.

Thomas Christensen's study is the first to present a picture of Rameau's theoretical work in its totality, including materials discovered only in recent years. It provides for the first time a lucid chronological unfolding of Rameau's ideas from before 1722 in notes now lost, through his treatises, letters, polemics and other writings, right to his death in 1764. It teases the meanings out of Rameau's intractable language, and carries us effortlessly along his laborious quest for ultimate theoretical codification. In the course of this journey, it builds up a fascinating picture of Rameau the man, and portrays vividly his contemporary proponents and antagonists. It completely rethinks Rameau's relationship to previous music theory, relates his

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[More information](#)

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## Foreword

xv

work skillfully to music practice, and – perhaps above all – succeeds in setting Rameau’s ideas and aspirations deep in the intellectual currents of his day, not only interpreting them as the product of a tension between Newtonian empiricism and Cartesian systematization, but also subtly showing how many different modes of thought and methodologies went to make up Rameau’s complex world of ideas.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is one I almost never wrote. While for many years I have been reading and publishing articles on the music theory of Rameau, when I began to pen a draft of this book in the summer of 1989 I had a quite different plan in mind. Specifically, I wished to write a “reception history” of Rameau’s theory in Germany during the eighteenth century. It had always struck me as paradoxical that German theorists like Kirnberger expressed such hostility toward Rameau, yet at the same time incorporated the basic tenets of his fundamental bass in their own theories. At the same time, ostensible disciples of Rameau like Marpurg proved upon closer examination to have distorted many of his most important ideas.

I was fortunate enough to receive generous support from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Fulbright Foundation to pursue research on this question in East Germany during the academic year 1989–90. Amidst the dizzying political and social turmoil of that exhilarating period of history, with its street demonstrations, transportation strikes, collapsing governments, and eventual tumbling walls, I somehow managed to find spare moments and energy to carry on research in various archives and libraries in East Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig. In the course of trying to explicate the German theorists’ complex interpretation of Rameau’s ideas, I kept finding myself having to return to Rameau’s own writings in order to analyze his thoughts on a given topic, and examine their connection to indigenous French intellectual currents of the eighteenth century. Little by little the prefatory and background material of my study assumed ever larger proportions. After my return to the States in 1990, it soon became clear to me that a separate study was demanded, one in which all of Rameau’s theoretical arguments would be not only analyzed systematically but oriented historically within the rich contexts of the French Enlightenment. The present book will, I hope, satisfy this need. I look forward as a future project to fulfilling my original promise made to my funding sources and completing the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of Rameau’s theory I began in 1989.

In the course of writing this book, I have accrued many debts – both of a material and an intellectual nature. Again I must cite the catalyst of the fellowships offered me in 1989 by the ACLS and the Fulbright Foundation. Without their support, as well as that of the University of Pennsylvania in providing me leave support, I should not have found the time for beginning this project. Numerous

librarians and archivists both here and abroad have also made my research much easier. For their collective help they have my sincere thanks.

While trying to sort out many of Rameau's most infuriatingly oblique theoretical ideas, I have had the benefit of many enlightening and good-humored conversations with Professor Joel Lester of the City University of New York. I owe another intellectual debt to Professor David Lewin of Harvard University, although he might be surprised to hear this. I was fortunate enough to write my doctoral dissertation under his guidance while a graduate student at Yale University. It was from David that I first discovered that Rameau still had a number of worthwhile things to say to music theorists today. His scholarship has continually been a model of inspiration and emulation for my own work with its judicious balance of analytic rigor and historical nuance. I am grateful to Jeanne Nickelsburg for her help in editing the final manuscript. Finally, I should like to thank the staff of Cambridge University Press for their help. Penny Souster has expertly supervised the arduous production of this book with patience and good cheer. Ian Bent, as series editor, has from the beginning been an enthusiastic supporter of this project. He has been ever willing to offer his sound counsel, and at the more difficult moments of production, his encouragement and consolation.

A few sections of this book, particularly Chapters 6, 7, and 9, have been extracted and revised from material contained in three earlier articles of mine: "Eighteenth-Century Science and the *corps sonore*: The Scientific Background to Rameau's Principle of Harmony," *Journal of Music Theory* 31/1 (1986): 23–50; "Rameau's 'L'Art de la basse fondamentale,'" *Music Theory Spectrum* 9 (1987): 18–41; and "Music Theory as Scientific Propaganda: The Case of D'Alembert's *Elémens de musique*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50 (1989): 409–27. My thanks to the editors of these journals for their permission to quote some of this material.