1 Introduction

This study deals with a still unwritten part of the story of the French musical Enlightenment, having to do with the music itself. Specifically, the study focuses on dramatic expression in the *tragédie en musique* of Jean-Philippe Rameau, composer-theorist and central figure in the musical debates of the era. The study will show how Rameau achieves deeply moving effects in his dramatic settings through an interplay between rational design and the portrayal of feeling. It will further demonstrate how Rameau's search for reconciliation between reason and feeling emerges as a critical shaping factor in the dramatic scenes of his tragedies. This was by no means a simple duality, nor was there a fixed terminology that could convey the many meanings that were current during the French Enlightenment. Since Rameau was a leading composer of French *tragédie en musique*, as well as a leading theorist, his operas provide an important opportunity to consider this complex duality from a primarily musical perspective. Such a consideration marks a shift in emphasis, from what has been a strong preoccupation with the Enlightenment discourse about music, to the very object of that discourse. It also allows for further consideration of that other duality: the relationship between theory and practice.

Rameau's views were very much a part of the exhilarating spirit of the French Enlightenment. They entail an expansive belief in music's expressive and dramatic capacities, but with considerable attention to the role of reason or rational design, and especially harmonic design. The French operatic genre in Rameau's era, however, was still thoroughly immersed in the past, governed by outmoded conventions and corresponding beliefs that were essentially inhospitable not only to the spirit of the Enlightenment, more generally, but to Rameau's innovative views on musical expression, in particular. His response to operating between these powerful but opposing forces was to engage in a process of adjustment and accommodation: He never abandoned the traditional operatic model, which was emblematic of the splendor of the once powerful *ancien régime* but, rather, adjusted the model with each new opera that he wrote, finding inventive ways of making it more accommodating to his views on expression. An equally important

finding is that there was a corresponding series of adjustments related to the treatment of gender, resulting, in particular, in a more nuanced portrayal of the heroine. Issues of gender and gender distinctions, then, become an integral part of the story. By tracing the trajectory of Rameau's modifications over the course of his career, the study calls for a re-assessment of the commonly held view that there is little that changed in Rameau's treatment of the basic model from one new opera to the next (although there has been considerable scholarly recognition of Rameau's ongoing revision process of the original versions themselves, which is a somewhat different matter).

Music's duality in Enlightenment thought

Music held a special place in French Enlightenment thought: As both an expressive art form and an object of scientific inquiry, it came to be identified with one of the most fundamental issues of the Enlightenment – simply stated, the inherent tension between feeling versus rational thought. How could music embrace them both, how could it achieve reconciliation? These questions helped to assure that the musical debates of the era acquired a significance that transcended the specific issues at hand.

It was never just a simple duality, as noted, nor was there a fixed terminology, as can be seen in the following variations that were current at the time: reason versus sensibility, abstract reason versus concrete experience, reason versus instinct, mind versus body, mind versus the senses. Within science itself the opposition was between abstract reason and experimental or empirical science. And within the specific arena of operatic debates, the duality acquired a highly gendered and moral dimension: the assumed superiority of male rational control versus female sensual abandon; or the related competition between reasoned text versus sensual music. All of these were signs of a growing challenge to the once dominant Cartesian rationalism, with many Enlightenment thinkers intensely engaged in addressing the issues.

Music's duality also helped to assure a prominent place for the composer-theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau, both as participant and as subject in the ongoing debates in which some of the leading *philosophes* took part. In my earlier study of the exchanges that revolved around Rameau, I have shown how D'Alembert, Rousseau and Diderot each found distinctive ways of addressing the issues that he raised, and, above all, of dealing with music's

inherent tensions or duality.[1] D'Alembert, the mathematician, was the most insistent that the boundary line between art and science be strictly observed. Music theory was to be treated with all the scientific rigor that was possible in a physical science. Aesthetic considerations, incapable of such an approach, were to be excluded from theory. D'Alembert raised particularly strong objections to Rameau's increasingly metaphysical tendencies, his extension of the reach of music theory to make it almost all-encompassing, leaving little that was beyond its scope. Rousseau, the diametrical opposite of Rameau in almost all his views, created an analogous all-encompassing realm, only for him it was music as expressive art – a product of culture, rather than a natural science – that prevailed. Diderot went furthest in achieving a reconciliation and even synthesis between the oppositions, doing so mainly by showing that the differences were not thoroughly irreconcilable, that there were complexities and ambiguities within each of these realms. He thus avoided the "either–or" stance of the other three figures. Interestingly, these distinctive positions still resonate strongly in the musical debates of our own time – whether through the proponents of mathematical models at the purest theoretical end of the spectrum, or the post-structuralists at the other end.

To be sure, the many inherent tensions between reason and feeling are not the unique preserve of the French Enlightenment. Only a few decades later, in the mature classic style of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, this opposition is such a strong and pervasive presence that it can be considered one of the defining features of classic style. What sets the French phase apart is the rarity of having the leading thinkers of the era engaged in sustained dialogue with a leading composer and theorist. As a result, there is a direct relationship or correspondence between musical thought and actual practice that is seldom seen, with much of this secured through the multiple roles of Rameau. It isn't just that he was both a composer and theorist, but that he was a composer who took ideas very seriously, enough so that we can often identify the musical counterparts of his ideas in his own compositions. Perhaps no idea was taken more seriously by Rameau than the need for reconciliation between reason and feeling, resulting in a concept of musical expression that embraced them both (again, with many different versions of this duality current in Rameau's era). It is time now to deal with this unfinished part of the story, to look at how Rameau's

[1] Their views are analyzed extensively in Verba, *Music and the French Enlightenment.*

innovative views found their way into the settings of his tragedies, keeping in mind the conservative traditions of *tragédie en musique*.[2]

Reason, as it is applied in this study's analysis of Rameau's tragedies, refers to the notion of control in two different senses, although with considerable linkage between the two. The primary sense, already emphasized, refers to the presence of an element of coherence or rational design in Rameau's settings, especially coherent harmonic design, that is an integral part of his narrative strategies in the dramatic scenes. Design is present not only in the overtly structured pieces, such as the da capo or ABA arias which feature prominently in the dramatic monologue scenes of his operas, but also in the dramatic dialogue scenes, where speech-like recitative prevails and where the presence of rational structure is more covert. The second sense, more explicitly related to gender and also built into the poetic text of Rameau's operas, refers to the pervasive presence of the Enlightenment ideal of the hero as someone who conducts himself – or, at least, is expected to conduct himself – with rational control. From a musical perspective, however, the study will show that the heroine's tendency towards more intense expression of feeling prompts a counter-tendency in Rameau's settings: he reins in some of the intensity through the use of structured arias as a vehicle for expression. This moderating tendency is vividly on display in Rameau's dramatic monologue scenes, which are devoted primarily to the emotions of the heroine, and which, as noted, feature the use of the da capo or ABA aria structure. There is a special twist in the fact that the heroine's lack of control, supposedly a defect, and seemingly something that is mainly a problem for women, gives the heroine such a reward in terms of having the most moving and exquisitely structured arias. As we shall see, the nuanced treatment of gender differences also means that heroes are at times similarly rewarded, allowed to let down their guard and indulge in more intense expression.

Such is the importance of the element of design in Rameau's tragedies that the present study stays as close as possible to the composer's original version of each tragedy – that is, the first printed edition, appearing in conjunction with the opera's premiere – before the composer's almost

[2] This is a propitious moment for turning an analytical eye to the operas of Rameau for a number of other reasons. As music critic, John Rockwell notes (in a *New York Times* review, June 9, 2003, of a performance of Rameau's *Les Boréades*): "After centuries of musty obscurity, the music of Jean-Philippe Rameau and the French Baroque in general have made a startling comeback." We now have ample opportunity to attend performances and hear recordings of Rameau's major tragedies (in some cases, we can choose among multiple recordings and variant versions).

continuous process of revision and re-arrangement was fully underway. (The cumulative revisions were substantial enough in his first four tragedies that Rameau eventually brought out a revised version of each, including a second edition for the first three.) Whatever the merits or basis of the revisions, they tend to obscure the element of design.[3]

Feeling in Rameau's tragedies has further complexities, both in terms of the range of feelings expressed and the vehicles used for expression. ("Feeling" is a direct translation of Rameau's term, "le sentiment," which he views as the primary content of musical expression. As will be seen below, Rameau also uses the term "instinct," presented as the faculty that enables the listener to experience musical expression intuitively – including the harmonic laws that determine expression – without being conscious of its source.) The expressive range in Rameau's dramatic scenes covers the most tender emotions, at one end of the spectrum, to grand passions or monstrous daemonic drives at the opposite end, as well as more mixed emotions in the middle. (Traditionally falling outside of the dramatic spectrum are the French obligatory scenes of dance and spectacle, called divertissements, to be discussed below.)

The dramatic vehicles for expression also vary, from structured da capo arias to the more fluid structures of recitative dialogue scenes, where the exchanges between hero and heroine, or other central figures, surge at times into more emotional expression, but where design is more covert. If there is one generalizing principle underlying the rich and varied treatment of the range of feelings, it is that the greater the intensity of the feeling being expressed, the greater the tendency for the music to rein in some of that intensity through the injection of structural control. Viewed from a more purely harmonic perspective, when the dramatic action calls for a harsh and even radical disruption of orderly harmonic progressions, Rameau tends to anchor the "disorder" by providing a secure and stable tonal framework or other form of tonal orientation for the sequence of events: the more radical the harmonic departure, the stronger the provision for tonal orientation. As we shall see, these strategies employed by Rameau – which I refer to as "tonal anchoring strategies" – are a pervasive aspect of his dramatic settings. Such tendencies serve to highlight the importance of the interplay between reason and feeling as a critical shaping factor in these settings.

[3] Rameau's revision process has been the subject of an insightful study: Dill, *Monstrous Opera: Rameau and the Tragic Tradition*. The author views Rameau's revision process as one in which the composer's critics play an influential role. The revisions thus offer a lens into the evolving tastes and values of the era.

Between tradition and innovation

By framing the analyses of Rameau's musical practice in terms of his innovative concept of musical expression, as outlined above, the study will bring to light critical aspects of his practice, which are readily characterized as falling in between innovation and tradition. On the innovative side, one of the most forward and "enlightened" aspects of his musical thought, carried over into his musical practice, is precisely the way in which his concept of musical expression injects a rational component into aesthetic concerns, forging a kind of reconciliation between the two, and assigning harmony a critical role in the process. As we shall see, Rameau's concept of music's expressive capacity hinges on a systematic web of tonal relationships that are played out in his musical settings in a sophisticated process of harmonic unfolding. Through this process, Rameau achieves an extraordinary parallelism between the emotional progressions in the text and the harmonic progressions in the musical setting. An examination of Rameau's practice will in fact show that he sustains this parallelism not only during the course of a piece or a scene, but at times, over the course of an entire act – an innovation that was not anticipated when the present study began. All of these innovations are instances of Rameau's alignment with the progressive scientific values of the French Enlightenment.

There is an added and perhaps even more modern dimension to this reconciliation, as Rameau invokes the faculty of instinct to help bridge the gap between reason and feeling. He argues that conscious understanding of the harmonic relationships that are the source of expression is not necessary; they can be known through instinct, and perhaps even beyond that, they can be experienced primarily as a matter of physical sensation. These are alternative paths that can lead to the desired expressive result. One of the study's most important findings is that regardless of which path is taken, Rameau goes to great pains to guide the listener's experience, doing so through a heavy reliance on strategies of tonal anchoring, cited above. This concern for the listener is another progressive aspect of Rameau's musical practice. Today we take it for granted that music is an expressive language, and that expression in tonal music relies to a considerable extent on the impact of harmonic relationships. In Rameau's era, such views and practices were far from accepted, taking even his admirers by surprise. While Rameau was by no means alone in assigning harmony an important expressive role, he was forward-looking in his articulation of harmonic principles that favored a systematic approach in his musical practice.

The innovative nature of Rameau's belief in music's expressive capacity is perhaps too easily overlooked, since his primary vehicle for putting these beliefs into practice was the outmoded operatic genre, the French *tragédie en musique*, which was inextricably bound up with the conservative culture of the a*ncien régime*. Most problematic for Rameau was that the genre followed a basic model that was essentially inhospitable to Rameau's belief that music could convey meaning in its own right. Rather than abandoning the model, Rameau remained faithful, and engaged instead in an ongoing process of adjustment from one opera to the next, attempting to make it accommodate his views on musical expression. This allegiance to the traditional model, while not canceling his innovations in the realm of expression, represents a conservative side of Rameau: He was attracted to the new spirit of the Enlightenment, but not prepared to abandon tradition, all of which is captured in the study's full title.

What he was struggling against was a traditional belief, sustained since French opera was born – the creation of Jean-Baptiste Lully and his librettist Quinault in the early 1670s under the reign of Louis XIV – that music, by its very nature, belonged to the realm of sensual pleasure, that it was the least capable of all the arts in conveying precise meaning or emotions on its own. There was also the specific operatic issue of verisimilitude – the French *vraisemblance* – that was concerned with the unnaturalness, under normal circumstances, of having characters "speak" in song. These beliefs and concerns are reflected in the basic operatic model developed by Lully and Quinault: a restricted role for music in the serious dramatic scenes where the central conflict unfolds, primarily relying on text-oriented recitative, interspersed with brief and simple airs or songs that were similarly text-oriented, sung as solo, or possibly small ensemble as duo or trio. (There was some allowance for lengthier airs or arias, but these were assigned mainly to the dramatic monologue scenes, where they would not interrupt the natural dramatic flow.) As a counter-balance to the musical austerity of the dramatic scenes, a space was reserved for more elaborate music in the divertissement scenes, where dances, vocal airs, and choruses held sway. Typically, these were scenes of spectacle and enchantment, turning to the supernatural wonders of *le merveilleux*, beloved by the French. To be sure, the divertissements were also meant to be woven into the main story line, occasioned by some development in the plot. But differentiation from the dramatic scenes was essential.[4] This, then, was the basic operatic

[4] In Georgia Cowart's recent study of spectacle in opera and ballet during the reign of Louis XIV, *The Triumph of Pleasure*, she emphasizes that while the divertissement scenes have a peripheral

model that Rameau inherited and never quite abandoned. His adjustments, nevertheless, were substantial with each new opera that he wrote.

The main thrust of his adjustments, accomplished with considerable inventiveness from one opera to the next – with the help of his librettists – was an expansion of musical divertissement elements, not only within the divertissement scenes per se, but also within the dramatic narrative scenes, where they acquired more serious and expressive dramatic content, while also injecting a greater degree of musical structure: more set pieces, such as elaborate solo airs or air-like pieces for small vocal ensemble or chorus, analogous pieces for orchestra, as well as an increased use of vocal pieces with orchestral accompaniment. By the time we reach Rameau's two final tragedies, *Zoroastre* and *Les Boréades*, this spilling over of divertissement elements into the dramatic scenes comes close to blurring the distinction between drama and divertissement, in an almost transformative manner: Sensual entertainment is a more serious matter; and serious matters are now more frequently conveyed in musical settings with greater sensual appeal. Interestingly, Rameau commentators tend to emphasize consistency in Rameau's approach from one opera to the next over the course of his career.[5] Once again, it is perhaps too easy to overlook the importance of change – the innovative side of Rameau – when the basic model appears to remain the same.

The observed tendencies of Rameau as both innovative and conservative are particularly on display in his treatment of gender – almost inevitable, since his views on expression, as noted, have such important implications for the heroine. In this case, while Rameau seems to follow the traditional gender stereotypes that were prevalent in lyric tragedy – the active hero, ready to swing into action, the passive heroine, given to strong and conflicted emotions – his musical treatment tends to complicate these stereotypes, creating a more nuanced portrayal of the heroine – and, at times, of the

role in relation to the more central plot structures, they carry considerable ideological and political weight, which has been overlooked. More specifically, Cowart argues that the scenes of spectacle have the potential for enacting a kind of resistance to the king's absolute power, even as they continue to engage in the tradition of glorifying the king. She aptly terms this the politics of spectacle.

[5] Charles Dill argues, in *Monstrous Opera*, that while Rameau's first versions show consistency from one opera to the next, his revised versions undermine the sophisticated concept of expression that is present in his first versions. Paul-Marie Masson observes that although there are some signs of variation in his musical style, his operatic output shows enough unity to allow one to refer to his opera in the singular. *L'Opéra de Rameau*, p. 88. Graham Sadler takes a similar view, noting specific changes, but nevertheless observing that "it is remarkable how little Rameau's concept of opera seems to have changed when one views his output as a whole." "Rameau," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, vol. III, p. 1228.

hero – primarily through musical means. An important result is that the heroine gets to sing some of the most moving arias, which lends considerable prominence to her role. Beyond that, there are analogous strategies across the full range of settings employed by Rameau, again for hero, as well as for heroine.

A further link between musical expression and the treatment of gender is that music in this era was often discussed in highly gendered terms, especially in dealing with issues of sensuality. As Georgia Cowart notes, critics of opera used a gendered moral vocabulary that could readily apply to the sensual pleasures of opera, as well as to female sexuality, since they came to be identified with one another.[6] It was not only that operatic heroes exemplified the Enlightenment virtues of self-control and rational behavior, while weaker heroines tended to be ruled by feelings. Music itself was suspect; it was associated with the feminine, with the realm of the sensual, incapable of conveying serious thoughts or feelings. This is still another way of viewing the restricted role traditionally assigned to music in the more dramatic scenes of lyric tragedy: music was too feminine. There is something of an irony in that Rameau's innovative views of musical expression, linking it so closely to rational and systematic harmony, may have resulted – probably unintentionally –in elevating the status not only of feeling, but also of the feminine.[7]

Inherited gender stereotypes

More needs to be said about the gender stereotypes that Rameau inherited, especially since the poetic texts in Rameau's tragedies tend to stay fairly close to the genre's conventions. In Georgia Cowart's recent study of spectacle

[6] Cowart, "Of Women, Sex and Folly: Opera under the Old Regime."

[7] A particularly close linkage between music and the feminine is highlighted in Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*. Heller emphasizes an ambivalence towards the use of "song" for women in opera, reflecting a larger intense debate waged in seventeenth-century Venice about female virtue and a constellation of issues related to femininity: "As opera began to invent rhetoric for its women, the inherent eloquence of song was something that could be both embraced and rejected. Song could represent sexual availability or vulnerability . . . or it could provide aural evidence of female virtue or vice, heightening rather than diminishing the power or perceived threat of the women to whom it was given" (p. 296). Clearly, the tradition of this linkage was widespread, and had a profound influence on the treatment of the operatic heroine. Heller also notes that by the eighteenth century, under the influence of operatic reform in Italy – as well as the spread of Enlightenment ideologies – the ambivalence had been resolved: operatic heroines were unambiguously virtuous, they were absorbed into more orderly and disciplined story lines. Similarly, singing in opera was no longer suspect; these heroines most certainly were allowed to sing.

during the reign of Louis XIV, she provides further background for understanding the origins of the gender stereotypes that became a part of the tradition in lyric tragedy. She highlights the politics of power and pleasure, revealing two aesthetics that were closely intertwined with one another in the artistic portrayal of the king: One, derived from the old court ballet, was an aesthetic of pleasure, also referred to as an "aesthetic of *galanterie*," that reflected the refined sensibility of the court's aristocracy; the other, a newer mode of representation that was superimposed on the court ballet in the late seventeenth century, that engaged in a more serious and absolutist rhetoric, emphasizing the power and heroic glory of the king.[8] It was the emergence of this newer theme that had important implications for gender, especially as it was absorbed into the *tragédie en musique* of Lully and Quinault. Heroism and glory were strictly in the male domain, although both genders were allowed to engage in the pleasures of love. Cowart notes that in their tragedies of the 1680s male dominance was carried even further, with a growing emphasis on "patriarchal power at the expense of their female characters."[9] The author's end point, however, is the "triumph of pleasure" in the early eighteenth century, coinciding with a shift of the operatic center from Versailles to Paris, along with a rising public sphere – although still very much an elite public. Cowart views this triumph in terms of a transformation from celebration of the monarch into "the utopian celebration of public entertainment as a new societal model."[10] From the perspective of gender treatment, it is worth noting that while the imagery of pleasure overshadowed the celebration of the king's greatness in the *tragédie en musique*, especially in the post-Lully era, nevertheless the themes of heroism and military victory remained staples in the opera tradition (as did the figure of the more passive heroine). All along, the French have shown a propensity for retaining old models while giving them new meaning – as they clearly did in the spectacle during the reign of Louis XIV.

In a study by Patricia Howard of the treatment of women in the tragedies of Lully and Quinault, the author observes that while Quinault places his heroines at the center of his world picture, there is little that is beneficial about this position: Quinault's heroines are "creatures at the mercy of their emotions, exploited by male ambition . . . almost always powerless."[11] Howard emphasizes that this is a harsher portrayal of woman's status than was actually the case in seventeenth-century France – citing *Les Précieuses* as

[8] Cowart, *Triumph*, Introduction, pp. xviii–xix.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 124. She adds that the shift was also at the expense of portraying love's pleasures, dwelling instead on the dangers of the excess of love.
[10] *Ibid.*, Introduction, p. xv.
[11] Howard, "The Positioning of Woman in Quinault's World Picture," 194.