Jean-Philippe Rameau
Born before September 25, 1683, Dijon, France.
Died September 12, 1764, Paris, France.

Suite from Les Boréades

Rameau composed his dramatic work Les Boréades in the early 1760s, probably completing it in 1763. There is no known date of a performance in Rameau's lifetime. The orchestra for this suite of instrumental selections consists of two flutes and two piccolos, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, timpani, harpsichord, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-five minutes.

Jean-Philippe Rameau is one of the orchestral world's neglected masters. Although he is regularly acknowledged as one of the most important and influential composers of the French baroque, modern symphony orchestras today rarely play his music. When the Chicago Symphony performed Rameau's music for the first time in 1900, the program book painted him as a worthy companion to Bach, pointing out that when he died "all France mourned for him; Paris gave him a magnificent funeral, and in many other towns funeral services were held in his honor." The Orchestra played selections from his opera Castor et Pollux the next season, but Rameau's music was rarely performed again after that. In the past four decades, his name has appeared on Chicago Symphony programs just once, on a pension fund concert in 1981, when the overture to Les Paladins was performed.

A contemporary of Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi, Rameau was the greatest French composer of the eighteenth century and one of the giants of the Enlightenment. Like Bach, he was trained as a church organist and choirmaster. After working in the cathedrals in Avignon, Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon (he succeeded his father in the post there), and Lyons, he settled in Paris in 1722. That year, his treatise on music theory, the Traité de l'harmonie, was published, and it proved to be one of the most widely studied textbooks in the history of music.

Like Bruckner, another composer whose career began in the church, Rameau was a late bloomer. His success as a composer dates from 1733, when Hippolyte et Aricie, his first major stage work, was given a triumphant reception at its Paris Opéra premiere only six days after the composer's fiftieth birthday. (It was not without its critics, who found his style an affront to the tradition established by Lully in the late seventeenth century, and the score became the first musical work to be called "baroque" in the critical sense of the word.) Hippolyte et Aricie changed the direction of Rameau's career, and, over the next thirty years, he turned out another two dozen works for the stage, representing the many kinds of French dramatic music of the day—a number of hybrid forms that combine elements of opera and ballet.

The late 1740s were the most productive time of Rameau's career, and between 1745 and 1749 alone he composed nine stage works. Then, in the last thirteen years of his life, he wrote just two new operas, Les Paladins, which was premiered at the Paris Opera in 1760, and, finally, Les Boréades, composed when he was nearly eighty but not staged during his lifetime. It is now believed that this work was probably designed for private performance in 1763, and that rehearsals began but were called off before the premiere. Several explanations have been proposed, including the suggestion that Rameau's popularity was already fading at the end of his life, and that Gluck was the new favorite. It is also possible that the opera was censored because the libretto was thought to be politically subversive. In any event, the piece was long forgotten. Les Boréades disappeared into the archives and came to light only when it was exhumed for doctoral study in 1972.
Les Boréades was finally staged for the first time more than two centuries after Rameau’s death. The world premiere was given at the festival in Aix-en-Provence in 1982, in a version conducted by John Eliot Gardiner, the early music leader who appeared with the Chicago Symphony in March. Simon Rattle took it to the Salzburg Festival in 1999. Its first complete staging in the United States came only in the summer of 2003, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, by the musicians of Les Arts Florissants led by William Christie.

The plot revolves around the figure of Alphise, queen of ancient Bactria, who must choose as her husband either Calisis or Borilée, sons of Borée, the god of the north wind. But Alphise loves Abaris, a man of unknown parents who has been raised by the high priest Adamas in the temple of Apollo. When the queen decides to give up her throne and marry the man she loves, the gods unleash torrents of horrible weather as a punishment. Finally, after considerable confusion and angst, Apollo admits that Abaris is his son by a nymph who was descended from Borée, and all ends well, with happy singing and vigorous dancing.

This week’s suite of instrumental selections from Les Boréades begins with the outdoorsy overture, peppered with hunting-horn calls, and draws on the musical interludes designed for dancing that frequent eighteenth-century opera. Rameau’s knack for writing lively, rhythmical music that naturally invites dance is readily apparent, as is his gift for generous melody (the Air is marked “gracious”). The music exhibits a balance of natural feeling and formal order throughout, and, in the storm-lashed Entr’acte (Suite des vents), there is ample evidence that Rameau’s mastery of special effects, particularly in the weather department, is comparable to that of his one-time colleague Vivaldi.

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