

Rameau's Dardanus, notes for the English Touring Opera production, 2017

Whether reading of El Dorado or King Solomon's mines, we are readily captivated by tales of lost cities and treasures whether in fact, fiction or legend... Riches lie to be rediscovered in libraries and archives and in books and scores - and of course in theatres too. It is therefore with great anticipation that we are presenting the first fully professional production of Rameau's *Dardanus* in the UK. What's more, this treasure trove contains some newly unearthed gems which have languished unperformed anywhere since the time of Rameau himself, despite being described by the great biographer Cuthbert Girdlestone as some of the composer's finest music.

So, who is this Dardanus, and what does his story offer the composer and librettist? If his name lives on in the Dardanelles strait which separates Europe from Asia, his deeds do not. But Dardanus is a son of Jupiter and none other than the founder of Troy, and the bitter war he waged against the Phrygians and, moreover, his personal battle to win over King Teucer and his daughter Iphise, provide a fertile environment for opera.

It is a framework for Rameau to explore Enlightenment numerous themes, many of which fascinated him throughout his 30-year career, and many of which went on to preoccupy that other great composer for the Enlightenment stage, Mozart. While Rameau is most often linked with Lully (1632-87), he is very much a man of the eighteenth century. That *Dardanus* has so much in common with Mozart's first great opera *Idomeneo* (1781), for instance, is telling, the later opera being based on Danchet's *Idomenée* and set by André Campra in Paris in 1712. Both share themes of war, self-sacrifice, duty and, of course, illicit love. (*Dardanus* also originally featured a sea monster!) The questioning of superstition and religion is particularly influential too: neither Iphise's prayers to be released from loving Dardanus, nor Teucer's for victory, are answered; and it is only once Dardanus has, on Isménor's urging, rejected the decrees of the gods that he is able to find a way forward. This finds parallels in *Die Zauberflöte*. And in King Teucer we see a benign ruler who is willing to show compassion, as do those in *Les fêtes d'Hébé*, *Le temple de la gloire*, *Die Entführung* and *La clemenza di Tito*. Rameau's richly varied music brings this complex world to life.

On hearing his opera for the first time, listeners might be surprised by how much it seems to differ from contemporaneous Italianate opera, that dominated by Metastasian *opera seria*. While the latter relies on recitatives and da capo arias, for instance, French da capos are seldom exact, usually shortened and often omitted entirely. What's more, *petits airs* (short unaccompanied songs), *ariettes* (the most virtuosic solo numbers), duets, trios, quartets and choruses, orchestral battles and tempests, and numerous and varied dances – all each lasting no more than a minute or two – combine freely. The result is a heady mix which seems to flow spontaneously in ways which have more in common with Mozart or indeed with later composers such as Puccini.

We begin with a two-part Overture cast in the typical French manner. The contrasting four-note phrases in the oboes, however, seem to grant it an expressive scope which elevates it to be one of the finest Overtures of its kind, and which pre-empt's Gluck's famous operatic reforms of the 1760s.

Act 1 commences with Iphise's monologue, 'Cesse, cruel Amour, de regner sur mon âme'. Sensitive to Iphise's emotional state, Rameau employs abrupt changes of material and the most expressive six-part harmonies at his disposal to reflect her turmoil specifically. This is an excellent example of his approach, and worth a closer look. The troubled scene is set by an extended introduction in G minor, and Iphise's first pleas to Amour (Cupid) conclude – having progressed nowhere – in sorrow-filled silence. Horizons lift a little (in the relative major) as she utters the name of Dardanus for the first time, but the opening phrases soon return, now much shortened. Abruptly a wholly new idea ensues as Iphise turns instead to the spirits of the fallen warriors ('Mânes infortunés'). With no response forthcoming, and after another silence, the music changes first to recitativo ('Hélas!') and then, with Iphise unable to continue, to a kind of Schumannesque coda in the orchestra, and this remarkable air is brought to a close.

Such manipulation of the material, guided by the text and the emotional environment, and largely free from overriding musical structures, is a hallmark of Rameau's style. It's not just the harmonies and structures which are influenced by the text though, it is part of the very DNA of the melodies too. In the libretto's *vers libre*, the text is sometimes cast in a mixture of 8- and 10-syllable lines; most frequent though is the prestigious 12-syllable 'alexandrine', where fixed stresses lie on syllables six and 12. Additional stresses may occur on any other

syllables, varying from line to line. It is setting this highly particular versification which contributes to Rameau's distinctly French melodic style. Nowhere is this more idiosyncratic than during recitative where frequent time signature changes ensure the music remains responsive to the text. The result is a style of delivery which the composer Telemann colourfully described as 'bubbling forth like champagne'.

Act 1 continues with the arrivals of Teucer and Antéonor, and a thrilling unbroken chain of music and drama is instigated: recitatives and airs, a duet in three sections, a quartet and a Phrygian woman's solo (which morph into choruses using the same material) each unfold as the beleaguered and desperate Phrygians prepare to return to war. The act culminates in the grimly fervent duet and chorus 'Mars, Bellone'. How thrilling to hear two baritones singing in unison at the top of their range! Ignored and silent since the beginning of the act, Iphise decides to ask Isménor for help.

This Sarastro-like figure is introduced with a monologue in the very latest instrumental style from Germany and Italy; its vigorous motion seems to be forged from an elemental energy, at once mysterious and irresistible, while the wide-ranging vocal line describes in sound his far-reaching power. Once again da capo form is eschewed. The conversations with Isménor (and with Dardanus disguised as Isménor) play out in recitative intermingled with fiery dances and imperious airs. The brevity of scene 6's 'Quittons ces lieux' for Dardanus only heightens its beauty. Antéonor's air, 'Monstre affreux', removed after 1739, is widely considered to be one of Rameau's finest; we have included it here as a strong conclusion to the end of Act 2.

Unusually, Act 3 opens with two monologues, one each for Iphise ('Ô jour affreux!', again through-composed) and Antéonor, 'Amour, cruel auteur', a miniature da capo air (ABA). Fascinatingly, Rameau's score reveals that at some point during the 1744 performances he took the bold step of striking out both Iphise's air and the first A section of Antéonor's in order to improve the pacing of the drama – this despite having to sacrifice some beautiful music to do so. The arrival of the lynch mob and Antéonor's inner conflicts are vividly portrayed with freely flowing music of great variety (with much of scenes 3 and 4 being performed here for the first time since 1744) and the act closes with two dance 'parodies': a Menuet which becomes the ravishing 'Volez, plaisirs', and two Tambourins which become the joyous 'Chantons tous'.

With Act 4 we come to one of Rameau's most highly praised acts. Beginning with what Paul-Marie Masson describes as his greatest height of monologue, 'Lieux funestes' tells of Dardanus's misery in prison, accompanied by heart-rending dissonances and plangent bassoons. The prison, now seemingly a place out of time, allows space in the subsequent scenes for extended passages of great beauty: the arrival of Isménor, his 'Tristes lieux' and *ariettes* for both Dardanus (the virtuosic 'Amour, Amour') and Isménor ('L'Amour reçoit un hommage si tendre'). The dramatic arrivals of Iphise (her footsteps described by a pizzicato cello) and Antéonor (with the sounds of battle raging around him), however, call for a return to the spontaneous style of Acts 2 and 3. Here follow four scenes which Girdlestone considers the best in Rameau's entire output. High praise indeed! With them we are propelled without a break into Act 5 and the opera's dramatic climax.

Of all the parts of the 1744 version, it seems from his production score that Rameau struggled the most with how the opera should finish. Several versions exist featuring various solos in praise of Amour and extended sequences of songs, dances and choruses for Vénus and a newly arrived troupe of shepherds and shepherdesses. The libretto for the triumphant 1760 revival (the last in Rameau's lifetime), however, shows a neater and more prompt conclusion using a dance and 'Chorus of Nations' from the newly omitted prologue and, of course, the mighty Chaconne in G. In deference to Rameau's final thoughts on the matter, it is this ending that we present this evening.

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