

Jean-Philippe
Rameau



Pièces de Clavecin
Volume 2

Steven Devine
harpsichord

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)

Pièces de Clavecin Volume 2

Steven Devine *harpsichord*

Performed on a copy by Ian Tucker of a double-manual harpsichord
by Andreas Ruckers of Antwerp (1636) with *ravalement* by
Henri Hemsch of Paris (1763)

About Steven Devine:

'[...] he [Devine] exercises restraint, but his muscular style is remarkably expressive.'
The Independent

*'[...] authoritative, suave, technically dazzling and delivers immaculately manicured
ornaments that lend brilliance and expressive introspection when required'*
BBC Music Magazine (on Rameau: Pièces de Clavecin, Volume 1)

Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin

Suite in A minor/major

- | | |
|----------------------|--------|
| 1. Allemande | [6:56] |
| 2. Courante | [4:01] |
| 3. Sarabande | [2:45] |
| 4. Les Trois Mains | [5:07] |
| 5. Fanfarinette | [3:00] |
| 6. La Triomphante | [1:42] |
| 7. Gavotte & Doubles | [8:19] |

Suite in G major/minor

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------|
| 8. Les Tricotets (Rondeau) | [2:53] |
| 9. L'Indifférente | [2:06] |
| 10. Menuet I & II | [4:04] |
| 11. La Poule | [7:16] |
| 12. Les Triolets | [3:30] |
| 13. Les Sauvages | [2:19] |
| 14. L'Enharmonique | [8:49] |
| 15. L'Egyptienne | [3:50] |

Total playing time [66:44]



Steven Devine

Jean-Philippe Rameau: *Pièces de Clavecin, Volume 2*

The third book of Jean-Philippe Rameau's (1683-1764) harpsichord works was published at a crossroads point in Rameau's life. He had just married, at the age of forty-three, to the nineteen year old Marie-Louise Mangot, which, by all accounts, was a happy union. He had published two important treatises on music which were read by many. Yet there was controversy surrounding him. Readers of Rameau's writings frequently disagreed with his views and this may have accounted for the fact that when he settled in Paris, he found it impossible to get a job as an organist at any of the major churches. In addition, until the fermier-général, M de la Pouplinière became his patron, Rameau was struggling to find any kind of employment in the musical life of the city.

The exact dating of the publication of the *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin* is open to a number of interpretations; the date is given as 1726 by Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg (1718 – 1795), in his biography of French Organists and Composers, but the title page of the collection gives Rameau's residence as a place he didn't move into until 1728.

Gustavson and Fuller suggest a later date of 1729/30 in *A Catalogue of French Harpsichord Music 1699–1780* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

What is clear is that the publication of these two suites marked an important development in Rameau's keyboard compositional technique. The 1706 collection owed much to Louis Marchand's (1669 – 1732) style and the standard suite form of the time. Developing and expanding the role of the "character" pieces, the 1724 collection (recorded on Resonus Classics (RES10131) with the 1706 collection) offered a glimpse of the innovative keyboard writing that found its apotheosis in the collection recorded here.

In 1722 Rameau had published his *Traité de l'Harmonie* in Paris, where he had just moved, and this was followed in 1726 by his *Nouveau Système de Musique*. Rameau truly believed himself an Enlightenment thinker: his theories were based on the desire to reduce the core elements of music to scientific basis and therefore to show that the most perfect music was that which was based on the laws of science and nature, especially with regard to proportion. He was clearly well-read and understood acoustical sciences, for example the writings of

Marin Mersenne (1588 – 1648), one of the most influential acoustical and musical thinkers and often referred to as a founder for the art and science of acoustics.

Several commentators have drawn parallels between certain of these compositions and works by Handel, for example (e.g. the structure of the *Gavotte et Doubles* being related to the Air and Variations from the Handel's D minor Suite). These similarities, whilst certainly interesting, detract from the uniqueness of Rameau's musical language and new technical demands. As with the previous collection, Rameau clearly felt that many players would need explanation and thus included an extended prefatory essay: the *Remarques sur les pièces de ce livre, et sur les différents genres de musique* ("Notes on the pieces of this book and the various genres of music"). However, whereas the 1724 preface (*De la mécanique des doigts sur le Clavessin* – "On the mechanics of the fingers on the harpsichord") concentrated heavily on the technical demands of his work, the latter *Remarques* describes Rameau's approach to composition and harmony in particular. This may have been influenced by his increasing desire to expand his theories regarding harmony

and melody, as highlighted in the *Nouveau Système de Musique*, especially as he was already beginning to court controversy amongst theorists and thinkers who were regarding too much scientific description as anti-musical.

Knowledge of Rameau's previous harpsichord work is expected from this preface:

On ne peut se dispenser de consulter la table des agréments, et ce qui concerne la mécanique des Doigts sur le Clavecin, dans mon livre de pièces qui a precede celui-ci, si l'on veut se metre au fait de la maniere dont ces dernieres pieces doivent être touches.

(One should not omit to consult the table of ornaments and that [preface] concerning the mechanics of fingers on the harpsichord in my book of pieces that precedes this one, if one wants to learn the manner of playing these last pieces.)

The largest explanation in the *Remarques* is for *L'Enharmonique* and Rameau expands the description of the composition of this piece into a discussion of enharmonic and chromaticism in music in general. Yet, even in this preface, Rameau seems determined to defend his compositions robustly against charges of un-musicality:



Double-manual harpsichord by Ian Tucker of an instrument by Andreas Ruckers of Antwerp (1636) with *ravement* by Henri Hemsch of Paris (1763)

J'ai inséré deux Octaves de suite dans quelques de ces dernières pièces, exprès pour désabuser ceux qu'on a pu prévenir contre l'effet de ces deux Octaves: et je suis persuadé que si l'on n'y consultoit que l'Oreille, on trouveroit mauvais qu'elles n'y fussent pas

In several of these later pieces I have inserted octaves in parallel, expressly to disabuse those who have been guarding against the effect of these parallel octaves; and I am convinced that if only one consults one's ear, one would find it wrong to not write them.

The present volume consists of two collections of pieces centred round A minor/major and G minor/major. Although Rameau uses the word "Suite" in the title to the collection, there is no demarcation within the music and the formal movement conventions of the Baroque Suite are rather loosely followed only for the first group of compositions. The pieces in G minor/major are entirely character-based with a minuet as the only dance movement.

Technical innovations throughout the collection include the elaborate hand-crossing of 'Les Trois Mains' and the 4th Double of the 'Gavotte', the latter precisely notated as to the distribution of the hands. The dance movements of

the first suite are on a fairly large scale and are much more evocations of dance movements rather than specifically adhering to the form – in a foretaste of Chopin's Waltzes, for example. The lilting 'Fanfarianette' (with extensive use of legato slurs) and orchestral-sounding 'La Triomphante' – a rousing Rondeau with two couplets – offer a martial flavour, whilst the famous 'Gavotte et Doubles' takes virtuosity to new levels in its final three variations with rapid repeated notes and fast, virtuosic semiquavers in both hands. Opening simply a charming rondeau, the second suite, like the first, creates a sense of momentum across the whole collection, making a satisfying whole for the listener and performer. Rameau's over-arching sense of texture – light, lilting quaver broken-chords at the start of 'Les Tricotets' finishing with thunderous semiquaver arpeggios in 'L'Egyptienne' – make a coherent set for performance and possibly indicate the composer's interest in larger-scale forms which were to become a key to his enormous popularity in the later years of his life in the operatic genre.

The operatic parallels are quite striking; musical portraits and characters create a very clear abstract narrative throughout both suites but most particularly in the





G minor/major. The searching pathos of 'L'Indifférente', the superficial simplicity of 'Les Triolets' and the extreme harmonic shifts of 'L'Enharmonique' provide a framework for more extrovert music.

Rameau's imitation of 'La Poule', with jerky figurations recalling a hen's pecking and movement, includes the written marking under the first notes of the right hand of the sounds "co-co-co-co-co-co-dai". The aforementioned 'L'Enharmonique' is still as striking to listen to as it must have been to its first listeners. It relies on the re-notation of certain notes to send the harmony in unexpected directions, culminating in static moments of great expressivity and exploiting to the full the Baroque rhetorical convention of tension and delayed resolution. The set concludes with the virtuosic 'L'Egyptienne', a tour-de-force of swift arpeggiated figuration and strong, powerful harmonic movement. This movement and 'Les Sauvages' perhaps reflecting the Parisian interest in the exoticism of overseas visitors being introduced to society through public displays etc.

Regularly in his writings, Rameau refers to all things finally being down to *le bon goût* – literally, good taste. Here lies the

paradox, and, ultimately the key to the understanding of his work: a sense of supreme craftsmanship based on scientific principals but "flavoured" with that most subjective and personal of all human emotions: personal expression.

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Steven Devine

Steven Devine enjoys a busy career as a music director and keyboard player working with some of the finest musicians.

He made his London conducting debut in 2002 at the Royal Albert Hall and is now a regular performer there - including making his BBC Proms directing debut in August 2007 with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE). He has conducted the Mozart Festival Orchestra in every major concert hall in the UK and also across Switzerland. Steven is Music Director for New Chamber Opera in Oxford and with them has conducted performances of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, Mozart's *La Finta Semplice* and *Il Re Pastore*, Stradella's *Il Trespolo Tutore*, Rossini's *Le Comte Ory*, Handel's *Xerxes and Tamerlano*, Arne's *Artaxerxes*, Galuppi's *Il Mondo alla Rovessa*. He has directed the first performance of the newly-acquired score of Cavalli's *Erismena* and Sallieri's *Falstaff* with the same forces. For the Dartington Festival Opera he has conducted Handel's *Orlando* and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*.

Since 2007 Steven has been the harpsichordist with London Baroque in addition to his position as Co-Principal keyboard player with the Orchestra of the

Age of Enlightenment. He is also the principal keyboard player for The Gonzaga Band, Apollo and Pan, The Classical Opera Company and performs regularly with many other groups around Europe. He has recorded over thirty discs with other artists and ensembles and made three solo recordings. His recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations (Chandos Records) has been receiving critical acclaim - including Gramophone magazine describing it as 'among the best'.

Steven is a regular member of the OAE education team, Professor of Harpsichord and Fortepiano at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and a visiting teacher, adjudicator and examiner for many other institutions. He is also Director of Development for the Finchcocks Collection of historical keyboard instruments, Kent.

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