

MUSICAL AND LITERARY APPROACHES TO THE OPERAS OF JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU

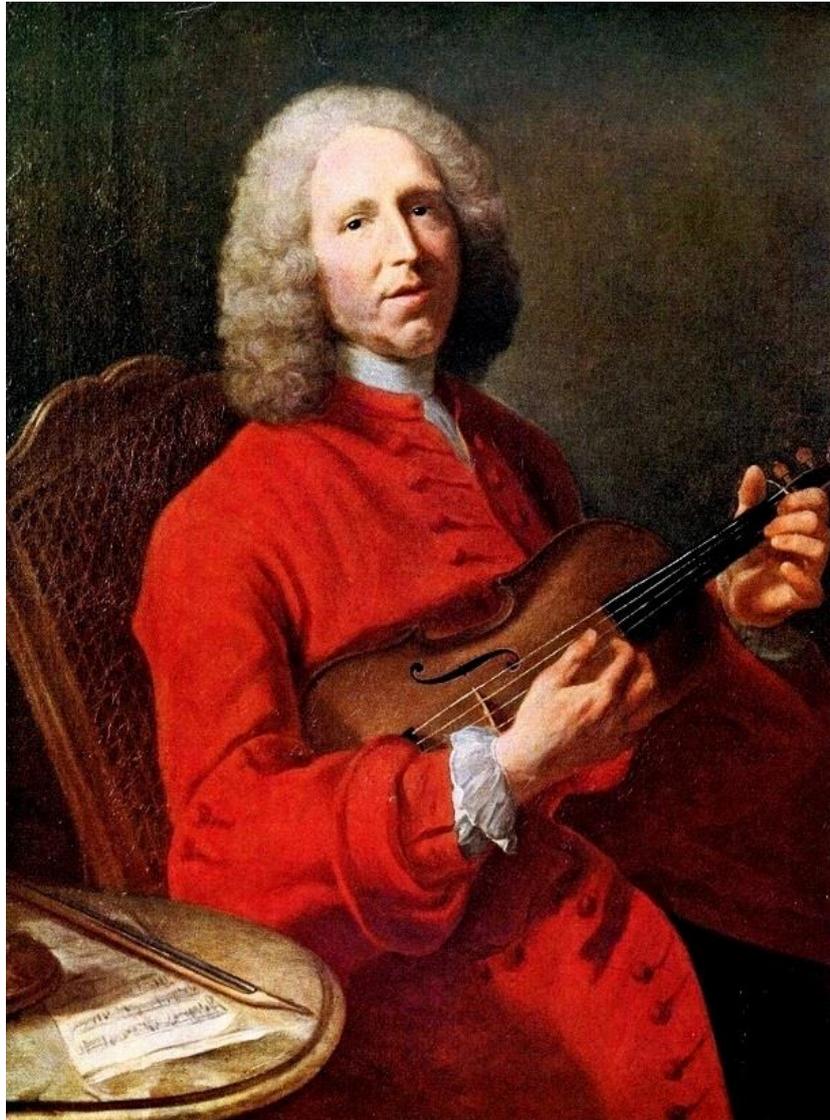
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**Friday 2 March 2018, St Hilda's College
Jaqueline du Pré Building, 5.30-7.30pm**



Overview

This two-hour seminar will explore the operas of the leading French composer and music theorist of the French Enlightenment, Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764). Join us as we unlock some of the enigmas presented by Rameau's works through the integration of literary and musical analytical techniques. This combined approach will bring us closer to these extraordinary works and help us to communicate them more fluently to a modern audience.

Rameau's works were products of a formative period in Western culture, demonstrating a sensibility which stands apart from the Italo-German practices of his contemporaries Vivaldi, Telemann, Bach and Handel. The twenty-eight surviving stage works in the Rameau corpus are among the most interesting and aesthetically complex theatrical forms of the period. Stylistically distinct elements of music, libretto, dance and spectacle combine in a complex and interconnected environment. Equally idiosyncratic are the genre-specific practices necessary for a stylistic performance.

Rameau's operas raise many fascinating questions for the modern-day performer. How can we understand these works more deeply, and perform them with sensitivity to early modern practices? What can the original performing material and period treatises tell us? How can we better understand the music itself? And – in a genre that prioritises the moment-by-moment demands of prosody – what can be learned through a deeper understanding of the text, its themes, structure and versification?

Building on his research for the Oxford-based Rameau Project, and drawing on his experiences conducting two fully staged Rameau operas during 2017, Dr Williams will outline (with audio and live demonstrations) how a musician might usefully begin to interpret the many questions raised when preparing for performance. Such issues include:

- choosing a tempo, use of rubato, and the interpretation of the frequent metre changes;
- the significance of tonality, dissonance and modulation;
- how to respond to the notation of rhythm in France;
- how to interpret the system of ornamentation;
- how to decide on phrasing and micro-dynamics;
- what the orchestration can impart;
- the influence of choreography.

We will explore further essential information found in period theoretical writings, treatises, dictionaries and memoirs. In a new approach, the seminar will also draw on the early modern literary expertise of Dr Jonathan Patterson to explore (with audience participation) how a performance of Rameau can be informed by critical study of the characteristics of French prosody – its subject matter and themes, meaning, structure, speech rhythms, pronunciation and, particularly, its versification.

Our seminar seeks to attract scholars of music and literature, without assuming equal competence in both. Students are encouraged to participate, particularly those studying Modern Languages, English, and Music (undergraduates and graduates).

If you wish to attend, or have queries, please contact jonathan.patterson@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk