

AN IMAGINARY SYMPHONY

Marc Minkowski

In his *Eloge de M. Rameau*, published in 1764 only weeks after the composer's death, Michel-Guy de Chabanon voiced the widely-held view that "as a writer of operatic symphonies, Rameau never had a model or a rival". If no one today would still question the claim that Rameau was the greatest orchestral genius in France before Berlioz, no one questioned it in the composer's lifetime either. Even his enemies admitted the "symphoniste" without reservation. Thus we find the implacable Charles Collé paying him a back-handed compliment: "He wanted to write music and to this end put everything into ballets, dances and violin airs" – and he did so, moreover, at the expense of the "scenes" which, according to Collé, helped to define opera.

But for some reason Rameau never wrote for the orchestra alone. Towards 1750, audiences at the Concert Spirituel at the Tuileries witnessed the birth of the French symphonie at the hands of Blainville, Rousseau, Martin, Plessis and Gossec. We ourselves have often performed the *Diversissements de symphonies* by Louis-Gabriel Guillemain and have recorded Mondonville's six *Sonates en symphonies*, the first fruits of a genre that triumphed in Paris during Rameau's lifetime and, indeed, under his very nose. But the true genius of the orchestra left no such works of his own. His whole art is contained, rather, within the overtures and ballets in the works that he wrote for the stage.

It was, therefore, in his operas and one-act ballets that we began our search for material for the Rameau Gala that we gave at the Châtelet in 2002 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Musiciens du Louvre and was made up of both vocal and orchestral works.

6

But this was not enough. Although we owe some of our greatest pleasures and happiest hours to the five great operas *Hippolyte et Aricie*, *Dardanus*, *Anacréon*, *Platée* and *Les Boréades*, we still sorely missed the symphonie that Rameau never wrote. And so we created it ourselves.

We began with the dizzying overture to the pastoral *Zaïs*, a short symphonic poem that describes the origin of the world. And we followed this with various dances, interludes and diversissements taken from the most disparate works, adding to them the harrowing "lunary landscape" from *Castor et Pollux*, the almost Stravinskian introduction to the final act of *Les Boréades* (in both cases we simply removed the vocal line) and a new orchestration of *La Poule*, the harpsichord piece that had already been instrumented for the six *Concerts en sextuor*. In doing this, we were not aiming to usurp the composer but were attempting to pay tribute to one of the greatest masters of the orchestra ever to have walked this earth and to share with others the pleasure that it gave us to prepare it.

7