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Music: From the 18th Century Hit Parade

By Michael Walsh

It is a scene from Watteau or Boucher come to delicate, lilting life. An amorous pastoral allegory in three acts, or entrees, its dramatis personae include shepherds, sylvans and fauns. One of the greatest hits of the 18th century, Jean-Philippe Rameau's *Les Fetes d'Hebe* proclaims the potency of poetry, music and dance in the highly ornamented, graciously stylized cadences of the French baroque. But can such a gentle artifice still speak to the brutal and cynical 20th century?

A hardy band of performers is answering yes. Last week in Los Angeles, *Les Fetes d'Hebe* was given a glowing new production that reveled in each melodic appoggiatura and terpsichorean temps de courante. Directed by Roland Jullien and featuring Conductor James Richman's Concert Royal, an original instrument ensemble, and Choreographers Catherine Turocy and Ann Jacoby's New York Baroque Dance Company, the production pointed up an important trend in music today. Since the turn of the century, there has been a steady march toward authenticity in musical performance. Now the search for verisimilitude is being extended to stage works as well.

The marriage of staging and scholarship has had a remarkable effect on the way contemporary listeners evaluate old works. Modern orchestras and opera companies employ an essentially uniform approach to music, no matter what its provenance. But the rise of original instrument groups, working in a repertory that now extends from the Middle Ages to the early romantics, has gloriously revealed the crucial distinctions that separate, say, Mozart and Haydn from the 19th century. *Vive la difference.*

Several years ago iconoclastic Director Peter Sellars updated and transposed the locale of Handel's *Orlando* when he set it at the Kennedy Space Center and on Mars. This approach, however, amounts to apologizing for the libretto. A better way is to insist on fidelity to both spirit and source. The trick is to get the audience to suspend its disbelief and to care as passionately about the amours of Sappho, Princess Iphise and the god Mercury.

Tackling Rameau is a formidable task; like Havana cigars and Scotch whisky, the French baroque is an acquired taste. The operas of Rameau, Jean-Baptiste Lully and others who flourished in the late 17th and 18th centuries are subtly alluring, yet their convoluted plots, emotional restraint and refined aesthetic make them remote to modern audiences.

Rameau was born in Dijon in 1683. He studied in Italy, the wellspring of baroque art, then bumped around France as an organist before finally settling in Paris about 1722. Rather late in his career--he was 50--he turned to opera and found his real metier. The opera-ballet *Les Fetes d'Hebe*, subtitled *Les Talents Lyriques*, received nearly 400 performances beginning with its premiere in 1739, gradually fading from the repertory in the decade following the composer's death in 1764.

Rameau's music is not as muscular as Bach's nor as boisterous as Vivaldi's. Rather, it persuades by sheer beauty of utterance. Yet an unexpected harmonic twist here, a sliding dissonance there and voila: moments as dramatic as any in opera. While not as accomplished as Britain's Academy of Ancient Music, Concert Royal is nevertheless a strong ensemble, and Richman led Rameau's triptych with supple understanding. Playing three roles, Soprano Ann Monoyios sang with the clear "straight" tone that scholars believe to have been customary. There is none of the wide vibrato and stentorian projection familiar from modern operatic singing. Instead, the voice sounds as artlessly natural as a child's, although used with considerably more skill.

Even more impressive was Turocy's company, which has been celebrating the nuances of baroque dance since its founding in 1976. Although dancing and singing were both integral parts of opera at its inception, ballet was eventually relegated to a secondary role. In this production Turocy (Mrs. Richman in private life), together with Jacoby, restored it to its rightful place at the center of the action: the *pas de cinq* of *Amour and the gods* in the second act, for example, or the apotheosis of *Terpsichore's art* in the third, regally danced by Turocy. The 13 dancers went through the stately paces of *demi-coupe* (one step forward), *coupe* (two steps) and *contretemps* (a little hop) with stylish verve.

To achieve the proper style, the choreographer reconstructs the movements from such sources as the late 17th century *Beauchamp-Feuillet* notation system, which recorded step units, floor patterns and the correlation between music and dance measures; she also consults period dance treatises, paintings and sculptures. She then researches the criticism published at the time and factors in the special abilities of the dancers who originally appeared in the roles. "It is a marvelous combination of intellectuality, sensuality and & emotionality," says Turocy, 34, who has also worked in modern dance. "In baroque dance, beauty and grace mean something."

Perhaps they do, but the Met is not likely to rush *Castor et Pollux* or *Les Fetes de Polymnie* to its stage anytime soon. Reflecting public taste, the operatic and ballet repertories are still heavily 19th century in orientation. Yet it was not so long ago that Mozart's *Idomeneo* was regarded as a fringe work, and 25 years ago few people foresaw that Handel's operas would find their way back onto international stages. Busily mining the coffers of musical history, groups like Richman's and Turocy's are unearthing the riches of the past for the benefit of the future.

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