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Thomas, Christensen. *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment* Cambridge Studies in Music Theory and Analysis, no. 4. Cambridge: University Press, 1993. xviii, 327 pp. ISBN 0-521-42040-7 (hardcover)

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was definitely a challenge, especially with regard to the intricate harmonic analyses. Anyone interested in German sacred music of the first half of the eighteenth century will not be disappointed by Dittrich's superb examination—it will make a fine addition to any musicologist's library.

Barbara Reul

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Between 1722 and 1762, Jean-Phillipe Rameau (1683–1764) wrote eight theoretical treatises; each one was a new attempt to prove his theory that harmony—not counterpoint or thorough-bass as was previously thought—is the foundation of all music.

There are differing opinions as to the validity of Rameau's musical theories. Some modern writers hold steadfastly to the view that he was a revolutionary, while others feel he should have contented himself composing operas and chamber music, and left theorizing to the intellectuals of the period. For instance, Cuthbert Girdlestone felt that Rameau is remembered primarily for his compositions: "Rameau lives for us through his music, and through his music only ... if he had never 'speculated' at all, we should not feel impoverished and the history of music would not have been very different."¹ It has, until now, been necessary for readers to consult many different sources before forming an opinion as to the validity of Rameau's harmonic theory. In *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*, author Thomas Christensen gives an objective portrayal of the 18th-century composer/theorist. The ten chapters provide a very readable, yet technically-precise historical survey of scientific and musical thought leading up to and during the period of the French Enlightenment. Complemented by an extensive bibliography, subject and proper name indices, as well as many plates, figures, and musical examples, Christensen's work will appeal to both "seasoned" Rameau scholars, and interested non-experts.

In his introduction, the author illuminates his purpose in writing *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*. While he readily admits that Rameau's *Traité de l'Harmonie* of 1722 is a "difficult and unwieldy body of literature [because of Rameau's] turgid and repetitious prose" (p. 2), and that much of his scientific reasoning is flawed, Christensen recognizes the contribution Rameau made in that he was "able to clarify the harmonic practice of his contemporaries with unparalleled concision, and, in turn, radically simplify the pedagogy of the thorough bass and composition" (p. 1). Although Rameau's scientific arguments were at times erroneous, Christensen argues that they were nonetheless "critical to the conception and evolution of his theory, and consequently indispensable for our own understanding of it" (p. 3). In the ten chapters that make up the book, the author is very successful in

¹ Cuthbert Girdlestone, *Jean-Phillipe Rameau: His Life and Work*, rev. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 519.

showing that "eighteenth-century science provided the essential epistemological models and language by which Rameau conceived and articulated his ideas" (p. 3) by first situating him historically in the period known as the French Enlightenment, then discussing the different scientific and musical theories both preceding and concurrent with Rameau's own writings.

In the late seventeenth century there were two scientific schools of thought in France. René Descartes, in his *Discours de la méthode*, believed that everything that was true could be found through careful reasoning. Isaac Newton, however, believed that only by experimentation and observation could one prove hypotheses to be "true." In Chapter One, Christensen compares these contrasting points of view, and their resulting disciples. This helps the reader visualize the kind of intellectual climate Rameau would have been immersed in from the moment of his arrival in Paris in 1722, just before the publication of his first theory treatise, the *Traité de l'harmonie*. Rameau was well aware of these philosophical and scientific differences, since his subsequent writings on music were judged differently by the supporters of the two philosophies. In chapters two through nine, Christensen examines the divisions within Rameau's contemporary readership (be it Cartesian or Newtonian), and the influence of both parties on Rameau's later works.

One such critic was the French mathematician-philosophe Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, a supporter of Descartes's *Méthode*. Upon the publication of the *Traité* in 1722, d'Alembert praised Rameau because "he [had] very successfully pondered on the theory of music; that he [had] been capable of finding the principle of harmony and of melody in the [fundamental bass], that by this method he has reduced to more certain and more simple laws a science which was formerly given over to arbitrary rules, or rules dictated by blind experiment" (pp. 6-7). Clearly, Rameau's approach had appealed to d'Alembert's Cartesian background. However, Chapter Nine reveals that Rameau's relationship with d'Alembert became very stormy in the 1750s, as Rameau began to use more Newtonian methods of explaining musical problems.

It is a popular myth that the *Traité* was the first written theory of harmony, and that everything before that dealt with thorough-bass or counterpoint. In Chapter Three, Christensen explains that, in fact, there is plenty of evidence to show that some musicians were thinking harmonically a century before Rameau. Germans such as Burmeister, Harnish, and Lippius were developing triadic theory in the first half of the seventeenth century. France, meanwhile, was very conservative in its teaching of music, and did not begin incorporating triadic formulations until after 1650. It was at this time as well that French musicians began using the Italian basso continuo or thorough-bass. Christensen gives an excellent account of how thorough-bass practice among players of strummed-instruments (such as guitars and theorbos) led to performers thinking of music in vertical, harmonic terms, culminating in François Campion's treatise of 1716, *La règle de l'octave*. What Rameau did was to attempt to account for every possible realization of a thorough bass line through scientific means.

Much of Rameau's early work relies heavily the division of the monochord to produce "naturally occurring" intervals. The monochord was a single-

stringed instrument used by the ancient Greeks to devise mathematical ratios between intervals. In Chapter Four, Christensen discusses the history of the use of the monochord, from ancient times to the great sixteenth-century Italian theorist Zarlino to Rameau and his contemporaries.

Chapters Five and Six deal with the development of Rameau's "corps sonore" and his subsequent theory of overtones accounting for consonances and dissonances. These are found in his *Génération harmonique* of 1737. There were a number of different theories of vibration and frequency among scientists in the eighteenth century; Christensen focuses on those of Mersenne, Sauveur, and Mairan. There were also several attempts to relate sound and light after Newton's *Opticks* treatise was published, with its "corpuscular emission theory" of light.

Rameau thrived in this richly intellectual period in France. He desperately wanted recognition from the scientific community, and constantly sought new and better explanations of harmonic theory. Through d'Alembert he was kept current on the world according to the *Encyclopédistes*, and submitted many of his treatises to the Académie des Sciences for review and, ultimately, their approval. By setting the scene of the French Enlightenment as such an innovative, yet tumultuous time, Christensen is very convincing in his presentation of Rameau as a sincere and diligent man who, in many ways, was a product of his environment. Like any good scientist, he would never knowingly have falsified his data. The reader gets the impression that, because of the influx of knowledge at the time, it would have been very difficult to keep up-to-date on the many ideas and theories permeating scientific thought in Europe. It makes sense that, in order to gain credibility with the academic world, Rameau would not only keep updated, but would also apply theories that were "accepted" into his own work. Rameau was likely not the only writer of his generation to misinterpret and confuse the facts, with so many to deal with.

One can only applaud Christensen's thoroughness in his examination of the many theories of science and music in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, it is to the author's credit that he presents his research with clarity and objectivity. His grasp of diverse subject areas is impressive; he seems as comfortable reproducing mathematical formulae like Bernoulli's "trigonometric expansion series" (p. 154) as he is analyzing figured bass lines (p. 130).

Christensen's work is a boon to researchers of this time period trying to sort out the chronology of the major treatises and "who influenced whom." With its extensive bibliography, it points the way to other sources for anyone thinking of studying this era further. It is a wonderful companion to other studies of the period, including the author's own article on the subject, "Eighteenth Century Science and the Corps Sonore: The Scientific Background to Rameau's Principle of Harmony,"² Joel Lester's *Compositional Theory in the Eighteenth Century*,³ or alongside any source readings from Rameau's treatises themselves. With *Rameau and Musical Thought in the Enlightenment*, Thomas Christensen has truly created one of the most impressive examples of Rameau scholarship in recent times.

Jan L. Tripe

² *Journal of Music Theory* 31 (1987): 23–50.

³ Published by Harvard University Press, 1992.