

The Keyboard Music of Jean-Philippe Rameau: is this viable on the piano?

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Introduction

One of my great passions as a student was the harpsichord and its repertoire. When I turned my full attention towards the piano, it was playing the music of the French baroque in particular that I missed the most. For years, it seemed to me that this music was the exclusive domain of the harpsichordist, because it is written so idiomatically for that instrument. It was not until I heard Angela Hewitt's recent piano recordings of François Couperin that I began to challenge this long-held belief, and it is thanks to her pioneering spirit that I started to programme Rameau in recital this year. Audiences have warmed to it more than I could have anticipated, and it ended up being an extremely satisfying experience to play this music on the piano. There were, however, a number of issues and stylistic problems to contend with before I found the right approach, and it is these that I aim deal with in this paper.

The Music

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) was known as a theoretician before he was recognised as a composer. He is probably best known today for his many operas (there are over 90 acts of dramatic music), but he also wrote chamber music, sacred music (in the form of motets and cantatas), and, occupying a small part of his total output, some 50 works for harpsichord. Rameau published three volumes of keyboard music, the contents falling under the broad headings of dance music and genre pieces (with descriptive titles, and often having extra-musical appeal).¹

The first volume, entitled *Première livre de pièces de clavecin* (1706), contains 10 pieces loosely following a typical French dance suite. Written when Rameau was 23, this single suite is arranged in traditional sequence, except for the placement of the gigue before, rather than after, a pair of *sarabandes*. The only problematic movement in this suite from the performance viewpoint is the archaic prelude, whose first section is unmeasured (composed without bar lines and with imprecise rhythmical values).²

The second set, the *Pièces de clavecin* (1724), begins with a pedagogical method dealing with fingering and technique, together with a small *Menuet en rondeau* in C and a table of ornaments. The collection contains pieces in the key of E (major and minor) that together form a sort of suite. Of interest is *Le rappel des oiseaux*, a

¹ See Appendix.

² The *prélude non mesuré* is from the Chambonnières-Louis Couperin-d'Anglebert lineage. Rameau's *Prélude* is less strictly notated than those of his predecessors, as it contains passages where the rhythm is indicated, even though the bar lines are omitted. Traditionally, each note would have been written in semibreves: slurs indicated the harmonic structure, but precise lengths of notes were left to the taste of the player. The form had become obsolete by the mid 1730s. For a detailed investigation into the realisation of unmeasured preludes, see Davitt Moroney, "The Performance of Unmeasured Harpsichord Preludes", *Early Music*, Vol. 4, no. 2, (Apr., 1976), pp. 143-151.

colourful work depicting birdsong – so characteristically French. The remaining pieces in the set are genre pieces in D (major and minor); apart from *Les Niais de Sologne* and its two *doubles*, they are not designed to be played together.

The next collection of pieces is the *Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin* (1728), containing the vast Suite in A minor which ends with what is probably Rameau's best-known keyboard work, the *Gavotte and Variations*. The collection also includes 9 genre pieces in G (major and minor), among these is Rameau's other birdsong piece, *La Poule* (The Hen). As with the 1724 set, Rameau begins with a preface in which he remarks on the pieces and on different styles of music.

There are also the *Cinq pièces* (1741), the composer's arrangements from his own "*Pièces de clavecin en concerts*".³

Transcription

I have long accepted that any piano performance of music not written with the modern instrument specifically in mind can be justified when considered a transcription. It is part of this process that adjustments and adaptations from the one medium to the other occur. It is important that stylistic decisions be based on knowledge of performance practices of the period, but these should be tempered with a more personal authenticity (a belief that what one is doing *feels* right) and above all, permission to be pianistic! Before the Puritanism of the Early Music Movement in the 1970s and 80s had effectively put a ban on performances of baroque music on the modern instrument, pianists had felt free to programme everything and anything that appealed to them, and they played with a sense of style from their imaginations rather than scholarly texts. Nowadays, attitudes seem to have relaxed again, and we hear the keyboard works of Bach, Scarlatti, Handel and others frequently. The music of the French baroque, however, is still much neglected.

Much of the French repertoire is so idiomatic for the harpsichord that it can easily sound clumsy or ineffectual when transferred to any other medium. Of François Couperin's 27 *Ordres*, for example, there are quite a number of individual pieces that can work well on the piano, but very few whole *ordres*. Apart from the *Gavotte and Variations* and some of the smaller individual character pieces that crop up in the examination syllabus, Rameau's music seems largely unexplored.

A basic characteristic of the classical harpsichord sound is a sharp attack followed by a sudden decay, but a relatively long sustain, these factors causing a transparency of sound. Piano tone, in contrast, is much more resonant and the decay in sound more gradual, which can tend to make textures thicker and muddier. The obvious benefit of the piano is the ability to control volume of sound by touch, and thus clarify lines of counterpoint dynamically.

Stylistic issues involved in transcription from the harpsichord to the piano not discussed elsewhere in this article include:

³ *La Dauphine* appeared in 1747.

- Texture: using touch and articulation to clarify textures that would otherwise sound muddy on the piano. Also, taking into consideration Rameau's often bass-heavy writing by playing ornaments more slowly in the lower registers and by sketching in inner voices.
- Dynamics: not feeling bound only by terraced dynamics. Localised inflections and shapings can also be used freely, since these are suggested on the harpsichord by other means. To make full use of the resources of the piano, a wide dynamic range can be explored.
- Pedal: shallow pedals; "finger" pedalling; use of *una corda* as a stop or register on a repeat, perhaps.
- Tempo: being aware of how a particular dance moves. Sometimes a slower tempo is necessary on the piano because of the greater resonance, and the number of ornaments.
- The *Urtext* score: applying slurs, staccatos, tenutos and other subtleties of touch and articulation in a score with very few indications from the composer.

Ornamentation

The first stumbling block facing the pianist is the sheer proliferation of ornaments. As is typical of French baroque music, the score is laden with ornaments, serving a variety of purposes. Apart from the purely decorative, the ornaments also function as accents (both rhythmic and harmonic), and may serve to sustain long notes. Rameau included a table of ornaments with the first and second sets of pieces. His ornaments signs differ in some respects from those of Bach, specifically in his use of the curved line before the note head to indicate an *appoggiatura*, and after the note head to indicate a mordent.

It is outside the scope of this article to enter into a full discussion of ornamentation. Rameau's ornament tables, like those of other composers, give a guide as to the shape of the ornament but since ornaments are chameleon-like in nature it is helpful to think of them as being free and flexible within certain rules. Having ascertained the function of each ornament, we can reach possible realisations that might differ from performance to performance. Is it expressive or rhythmic, fast or slow, long or short? There is much leeway as to the speed of the ornament, how many repercussions (?) trills and mordents may have, how long the *appoggiatura* (*port de voix*) might be in relation to the principle note, and so on. Generally speaking, ornaments will begin on the beat and most trills on the upper auxiliary. Compound ornaments, where both hands have to play an ornament simultaneously, occur more frequently in French music than in Bach or Handel, and present a special problem. Usually, the *appoggiatura* in one hand can be held until the other hand has executed the trill or mordant, or the one hand can play its ornament rather slower than the other.

In purely pianistic terms, the best way to manage the ornaments is to keep them relatively light so they do not muddy the texture. One gains much more control by keeping the fingers in the keys in a trill or mordent, and to use pressure from the finger tips combined with some forearm rotation to manage the repercussions. Not only is this more efficient mechanically, it also gives a better sound with less clatter.

The French Convention of *Notes Inégales*

The practice of inequality (so-called *notes inégales*) applies to French music from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and involves the rhythmic alteration of (sometimes slurred) pairs of notes that are notated equally. There are basically two sorts of inequality; long-short, or short-long (the latter sometimes referred to as lombardic), applicable under certain circumstances that would have been passed on by tradition during the period and thus understood by all trained musicians.

Frederick Neumann clearly sums up his conclusions about inequality as follows:

Characteristic of the convention is that only specific, evenly written note values in specific meters were subject to being rendered unequal, such as sixteenth notes (but not eighth notes) in C meter, or eighth notes (but not quarter notes) in such meters as 2 or 3, quarter notes (but not half notes) in meters such as 3/2. Inequality was long-short in a ratio that for all practical purposes ranged from a barely perceptible 7:5 to about 2:1, rarely going beyond this limit. The notes involved had to be binary, never ternary, had to be subdivisions of the beat, never the beat itself, and had to move basically in stepwise motion. Whenever the conditions were right, *inégalité* was mandatory unless the composer canceled it either by placing dots or dashes above the notes or by such words as “marqué,” “détaché” or “notes” or “croches égales.”⁴

A good rule of thumb is that the inequality should be subtler in slower expressive pieces, such as *allemandes*, but can be sharper in more rhythmical pieces, such as *gavottes*. For example, in the following extract from the *allemande* from the Suite in A minor (*Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin*), the lower staves give one possible realisation of inequality, and this is notatable only very approximately:

Ex. 1, *Allemande*, bars 1 – 3

The image displays a musical score for the first three bars of an *Allemande*. It is written in C major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The score is presented in two systems. Each system contains a treble staff and a bass staff. The first system covers the first two measures, and the second system covers the third measure. The notation includes various note values, rests, and slurs, illustrating the concept of notes inégales. The lower staves provide a specific realization of inequality for the first two measures.

⁴ Frederick Neumann, *New Essays on Performance Practice* (University of Rochester Press, 1992), p. 66.

In the first bar, I play the ascending scale with a fairly gentle inequality (a ratio of 3:2, approximately) but prefer a triplet division when the note pattern changes (the broken thirds in the second bar, for example). Disjunct note patterns, such as the broken triad on the second beat of bar 2, are usually played equally, although the inequality could certainly continue here for these three notes. The final four semiquavers of the bar might be played more sharply, to energise the cadence. Another feature of style is the permissible and often preferable desynchronisation of the hands when both hands are playing the same note values simultaneously. In the case of the second half of the first beat in bar 2, an approximate division of three in the right hand against a division of five in the left actually gives a smoother, less clumsy result. The pianist might have a built-in aversion to splitting the hands in this way (a reaction against the excesses of our nineteenth century forebears?), and indeed it might not be as necessary on the piano as on the harpsichord, given that the left hand can be played much softer to create a similar effect.

In the second example (the *Gavotte* from the *Première Livre de Pièces de Clavecin*), we find instances of the lombardic from of notes *inégales* indicated by paired slurs:

Ex. 2, *Gavotte*, bars 1 - 4



The character of the gavotte implies a sharper inequality, and the triplet division I suggest could be sharpened up slightly, or even dotted.

A final word about inequality: when more than two notes are placed under a slur, these notes should be played equally. Indeed, it was standard practice for the harpsichordist to hold down throughout the length of the slur. This overholding (or finger pedalling) can be utilised very effectively on the piano, where actual pedalling would add too much resonance to the texture.

Neumann stresses that this “fully developed and integrated French system” was only known and understood within France, and that every musician would have been brought up with it. The fact that the German theorists Muffat and Quantz had tried to introduce the French system to German music in their writings may have lead later scholars, spearheaded by Arnold Dolmetsch and later taken up by Robert Donington and others, to assume that the tradition was disseminated to, and adopted by German musicians of the time. Neumann disputes that the convention of inequality did ever

spread to Germany, and concludes that it is not applicable to the music of Bach or other German composers, even in their works in the French style.⁵

Appendix

JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU'S WORKS FOR SOLO KEYBOARD

PREMIÈRE LIVRE DE PIÈCES DE CLAVECIN (1706)

Prélude
Allemandes 1 and 2
Courante
Gigue
Sarabandes 1 and 2
Vénitienne
Gavotte
Menuet

PIÈCES DE CLAVECIN (1724)

Menuet en rondeau	Les tendres plaintes
	Les niais de Sologne (with 2 <i>doubles</i>)
Allemande	Les soupirs
Courante	La joyeuse
Gigues en rondeaux 1 and 2	La follette
Le rappel des oiseaux	L'entretien des Muses
Rigaudons 1 and 2 (with a <i>double</i> of 2)	Les tourbillons
Musette en rondeau	Les cyclopes
Tambourin	Le lardon
La villageoise	La boiteuse

NOUVELLES SUITES DE PIÈCES DE CLAVECIN (1728)

Allemande	Les tricolets
Courante	L'indifférente
Sarabande	La poule
Les trois mains	Menuets 1 and 2
Fanfarinette	Les triolets
La triomphante	Les sauvages
Gavotte and 6 <i>doubles</i>	L'enharmónique
	L'Égyptienne

CINQ PIÈCES (1741) – from “*Pièces de Clavecin en Concerts*”

La livri
L'agaçante
La timide
L'indiscrete
La Dauphine (1747)

⁵ Neumann, p. 68.