

Les Délices presents Myths & Allegories
May 14 & 15, 2011

Jean-Féry Rebel: *Ulysse*
Ouverture

Thomas-Louis Bourgeois: Les Sirènes

Jean-Philippe Rameau: Les Cyclopes

Rebel: Sonata “La Fidelle”

La Guerre: Le Sommeil d’Ulisse

Rebel: *Ulysse*
C’est vous, mon cher Ulysse
Chaconne in D major
Que c’est un plaisir extreme

Clara Rottsoik, soprano
Debra Nagy, baroque oboe & recorder
Julie Andrijeski, violin
Emily Walhout, viola da gamba
Peter Bennett, harpsichord

This weekend’s concerts are presented in honor of Early Music America’s 25th Anniversary. Early Music America (EMA) is the not-for-profit service organization for the field of early music in North America. Founded in 1985, EMA expands awareness of, and interest in, the music of the Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical periods performed on period instruments using historical performance practices. With its broad membership, including professional performers, ensembles, presenters, instrument makers, amateur musicians, and audience members, Early Music America serves as an advocate for the field throughout North America. www.earlymusic.org

Program Notes:

Homer’s *Odyssey* endures as one of the best-loved adventure tales of our time. The famous epic follows its hero Ulysses on a ten-year adventure as he returns home to Ithaca in the wake of the Trojan War. Along the way, he and his crew encounter lethargic Lotus Eaters, and the monstrous Cyclops, Polyphemus. Ulysses must also resist the not-so friendly feminine wiles of the witch Circe, the deadly Sirens, and the nymph Calypso, who keeps him and his men captive for seven years. All the while, the goddess Minerva (aka Pallas) serves as Ulysses’ guide and protector, helping him to avert disaster and overcome the many obstacles that separate Ulysses from his long-faithful wife, Penelope. The *Odyssey*’s central theme – and the source of its universal appeal - is the enduring strength of love, hope, and fidelity, and their ability to withstand tests of time and tribulation.

Scholars believe that Homer's epic was a song sung to a rapt audience before it was ever written down, so it is fitting that we return his story to music by creating a program featuring French baroque re-tellings.

Thomas-Louis Bourgeois (1676-1750) is hardly a household name, but he made a major contribution to the genre of the French cantata. At the time of *Les Sirènes'* publication, Bourgeois could regularly be heard singing countertenor at the Opéra in Paris. Following six years as *surintendant de musique* in the service of the Duke of Bourbon, he seems to have struggled to hold onto professional appointments in various provincial cities (Lyons, Poitiers, Dijon), ending his career in obscurity and poverty. *Les Sirènes* (1708) dates from the beginnings of his success as a composer. The writing is concise and strong, effectively conveying the tantalizing allure of the sirens (*L'Amour par nos vois vous appelle*) and the dangerous peril should Ulysses and his crew fall prey to them.

In the course of the Odyssey, Ulysses and his men also encounter the dreaded Cyclops, Polyphemus. (Alas, Rameau's harpsichord solo—with its repeated “hammering” figures—probably refers to a different group of Cyclops who forged lightning bolts for Zeus). Ulysses only escapes the Polyphemus' clutches by blinding him with a wooden stake, but he makes the terrible mistake of boastfully revealing his identity. As a result, Ulysses and his crew are forced to confront the wrath of Neptune (Polyphemus's father), God of the Seas.

In vain, Ulysses attempts to conceal his fleet of ships from Neptune, which is where *Le Sommeil d'Ulisse* by Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (1665-1729) picks up the story. Neptune whips up a terrifyingly dangerous storm, complete with thunder and lightning in the violin's swirling *Tempête*. In response, Minerva sweeps in to protect Ulysses, offering him refuge and respite by way of a deep, magical sleep (this *sommeil* is evoked with lilting dotted rhythms, slow-moving harmonies, and the unreal fused sound of muted violin and recorder). La Guerre rose to prominence as a child prodigy, when, at the age of five, she was already performing on the harpsichord and singing at the court of Louis XIV. She was the first woman to compose an opera in France, and one of the very few to publish her own very creative compositions. *Le Sommeil d'Ulisse* is included in her final collection of *Cantates françaises* (1715), published fifteen years before her death.

As a musical form, the cantata became enormously popular in early eighteenth-century France. Borrowing both form and function from opera, French cantatas include Italianate *da capo* arias, extravagant and dramatic instrumental interludes adapted from the stage (such as the tempest scene in La Guerre's *Sommeil d'Ulisse*), and metrically-flexible French recitatives. As in most *Tragédie Lyrique* (the French operatic form pioneered by Jean-Baptiste Lully), tributes to King Louis XIV frequently appear in the cantata repertory (in tonight's program, the story of the benevolent King Alcinous is a clear reference), and a *Deus ex machina* frequently appears at the end to save the day (cue: Minerva/Pallas). Sometimes, the final aria in a cantata may offer a moral to the audience. In the case of *Les Sirènes*, the temptation of Beauty cannot and will be denied – i.e. resistance to Love is futile!

Our program opens with the overture to Jean-Féry Rebel's only opera, *Ulysse* (1703). Rebel (1666-1747) studied both composition and violin with Lully, and steadily climbed the professional ladder at Versailles: by the turn of the eighteenth century he was performing in the opera orchestra, and became its conductor (*batteur de mesure*) by 1705. In 1718, he assumed the post of chamber composer to the King.

Rebel's earliest works are his violin sonatas and trios, which date from the last decade of the seventeenth century. Many of his sonatas bear evocative titles, such as *La Fidelle* (Faithful one), which in the context of this program, is meant to evoke the enduring hope and faith of Penelope. The sonata's searching, improvisatory opening over a bass pedal note sets the stage for a series of contrasting sections that range from a brilliant, fast-paced fugue, to a simple elegant air that devolves into heart-wrenching suspensions, to a regal *lentement* consisting entirely of double-stops,

and finally a virtuosic fantasy that recalls the musical sighs and chromaticism of the sonata's opening.

Despite its beautiful music and attractive subject, Rebel's *Ulysse* suffered the same fate as virtually every other opera written between the time of Lully and Rameau. That is, it saw only a few performances and was never revived (though excerpts from *Ulysse* did get recycled into a later operatic pastiche). The libretto for *Ulysse* loosely adapts Homer's text, creating a tangled love triangle between Circe, Ulysses, and Penelope. In the end, however – with the help of Minerva – Penelope is happily reunited with Ulysses in Ithaca (which we witness with two airs from Act 5 of *Ulysse*: *C'est vous, mon cher Ulysse*, and *Que c'est un plaisir extreme*). We're happy to present these excerpts from *Ulysse* for the first time in Cleveland, which we've edited from the surviving short score.

– Debra Nagy