

## Platée – Jean-Philippe Rameau

COMÉDIE LYRIQUE en un prologue et trois actes.

Livret d'Adrien-Joseph Le Valois d'Orville, d'après la comédie de Jacques

Autreau. Créé le 31 mars 1745 à la Grande Ecurie de Versailles.



### Synopsis

#### Prologue

After a night of partying, the actor Thespis is woken from a drunken stupor by his equally drunken friends. They urge him to continue his praise of Bacchus. Momus (the personification of Satire), and Thalie (the Muse of Comedy), join the party. They ask Thespis to join them in creating a new form of drama which would satirize the faults both of humans and gods. Momus suggests they should base their satire on Jupiter's famous attempt to cure Juno of her jealousy. Amor interrupts them, declaring that it would be impossible to stage this new entertainment without him. Led by Thespis, they invoke Bacchus to help them create their new form of drama.

#### Act 1

Mercury explains to Citheron that Jupiter has instructed him to deal with the problem of Juno's jealousy. Citheron has the perfect plan: Jupiter should pretend to be in love with Platée, a ridiculous and unattractive nymph who believes every man she meets to be madly in love with her. Juno is to be made jealous of Jupiter's supposed new mistress and intercept them together. When Juno discovers how absurd Platée is, she will realise how unreasonable her jealousy has been, and the heavenly couple will be reunited. This will also allow Jupiter to continue unimpeded with any future amorous liaisons. Platée now appears with her attendant Clarine. In spite of his constant denials, Platée is convinced that Citheron is madly in love with her. But when Citheron and Mercury inform her that Jupiter has fallen under her spell, she changes her attentions and her ambitions: Platée prepares to meet the King of the Gods...

#### Act 2

Mercury has persuaded Juno to search for her unfaithful husband in Athens, allowing him and Citheron to develop their plan in peace. Platée arrives and waits for Jupiter. The great God appears, first as a cloud, then as a donkey, then as an owl, before finally appearing as himself, preceded by a flash of lightning. Jupiter's friends also arrive and pretend to admire Platée, while actually ridiculing her. Finally, La Folie herself makes a surprise appearance. She sings of the power of Love and Music, while recounting the tales of Apollo and Daphne, and Zephyre and Flora. Platée's delight at her impending marriage continues to grow.

#### Act 3

Having failed to find Jupiter in Athens, Juno returns home in fury. She is persuaded by Mercury to hide. Platée and Jupiter enter together with Jupiter's friends, who pretend to celebrate the impending union. When Platée wonders why Amor and Hymen have not come to bless their marriage, Mommuss, one of Jupiter's attendants, is quickly transformed into a makeshift Amor. La Folie also joins the party. As Jupiter and Platée prepare for bed, Juno storms in. As soon as she sees Platée she bursts out laughing, finally realizing that the whole thing was nothing but a joke. Everyone joins her in uproarious laughter. Jupiter and Juno are reconciled and return to their heaven, while Platée, ridiculed and humiliated, is left alone on earth.

**Robert Carsen**

## To read before the show

*Platée* is an oddity: Rameau's most famous work though unique in his oeuvre and in the official repertory of the time, of an outstanding outcome and yet without any forerunner or successor. Unless *Platée* is but the visible part of a still unknown continent, that of secondary popular entertainments, and announces – at court and under the signature of the most renowned artist of his time – the relevance, grace and fertility of comedy.

The subject is drawn from the second century classic *Description of Greece* by Pausanias. In 1741 a painter and modest satirical author, Jacques Autreau, drew a ballet from it, *Platée ou Junon jalouse*, published with no intent to produce it on stage. Following a prologue that celebrates Bacchus and Comedy, Juno's jealousy is chastised by a stratagem around *Platée* who, originally a statue, becomes a nymph not ugly but ludicrous in the ballet. Out of favor at the Comédie-Italienne, Autreau sold the rights to his libretto to Rameau.

Famous since the success of *Hippolyte et Aricie* at the Paris Opera in 1733, Rameau wished to try something new after his latest tragedy, *Dardanus*. Why not in the style of carnival? Although he was known for his austere character and his speculative mind, Rameau worked from 1723 to 1726 for the youthful and impertinent fairground Opéra-Comique, with a liking for satire which was his trademark. While Autreau ended his days in an almshouse, Rameau had *Platée* modified by Adrien- Joseph Le Valois d'Orville for the purpose of his music and so as to spread the buffoonery Autreau had applied only to ballets (in which “the nymphs at *Platée*'s court are wearing the color of frogs, a yellowish white front and a green back”). Even if the Opéra's repertoire had discarded comedy under Lully, the advent of ballet in the great French tradition had marked its official return by the end of the reign of Louis XIV.

Rameau and his partner borrow several devices from the Fair. They introduce an allegory of Folly that becomes the organizer of the play and

the composer's mouthpiece. They entrust the part of *Platée* to a male haute-contre – the tessitura of French opera heroes. Since the 16th century male actors cast in female roles are required on stage to portray grotesque, wicked and/ or lustful women. And the nymph is both affected and nymphomaniac. Le Valois d'Orville and Rameau extend the ridicule of her manners to her language. As at the Opéra-Comique, where *Le Monde renversé* is a successful title, they apply a reversal of values proper to the burlesque, unveiling the conceitedness of the mediocre and the mediocrity of the mighty. 119 years later Offenbach did the same in his opéra bouffe *La Belle Hélène*.

In short, *Platée* parodies the conventions of the noble genre delightfully mastered by Rameau, from the mythological subject previously dealt with by Lully in *Isis* – which becomes the occasion to mock the self-importance of the mighty in *Platée* – to musical devices to the poetic style.

And to show its superiority, *Platée* integrates dance into the plot ideally as each ballet makes it possible to develop the conspiracy against the nymph. Premiered as a “ballet bouffon”, which alludes to its spirit, *Platée* was named with the noble term “comédie lyrique” in the 1749 edition of its score.

At the court of Louis XV, *Platée* was among the entertainments for the celebration of the wedding of the dauphin to the infanta of Spain. For the occasion, Rameau also wrote a more solemn work, *La Princesse de Navarre*, on a poem by Voltaire. Among other ballets and after Mouret's comédie lyrique *Les Amours de Ragonde*, which might have inspired it, *Platée* was first performed at the Grande Ecurie in Versailles on 31 March 1745, on choreographies by Laval in unique scenery as suggested by the libretto.

According to the Duke of Luynes: “It does not seem to have resulted in much contentment; the music, which is by Rameau, [was] deemed peculiar; there are however pleasant pieces, but as a whole this entertainment appeared to be too long and too uniform.” Perhaps too burlesque in such circumstances, yet the ballet was not perceived as an error of taste toward

the young royal couple. Besides, Rameau was appointed to the position of Composer of the King's Chamber Music two months later.

After changes in the directorship of the Opéra, *Platée* was presented to Parisian audiences four years later during the 1749 carnival. The sixteen performances aroused mixed opinions, expressing admiration for the music but shocked by the crudeness of the libretto. The writer Collé stated:

"Its music is fine but it is dishonorable for our nation to allow such appalling things to be performed in public." While brilliant Marie Fel still played the parts of Thalie and Folly, La Tour, who had portrayed Thespis in Versailles, replaced Pierre Jélyotte as the marsh queen. They were all faithful to Rameau.

The work was revived at the Opéra in 1750, and especially in 1754 in the midst of the Querelle des Bouffons that brought into conflict the French noble genre and the Italian comic genre. *Platée* seemed to resolve a good many contradictions. Le Mercure de France is appreciative: "The music to the opera is full of pieces of singing and genius that would suffice to make their author immortal, were he not already for his other works." Baron Grimm, who is behind the Querelle, extols *Platée*: "a sublime work in a genre created by Mr. Rameau in France, appreciated by some and judged by the multitude»."

Despite his opposition to Rameau, Jean-Jacques Rousseau answers to Grimm: "Never repent of having regarded it as Mr. Rameau's masterpiece and the most excellent piece of music so far heard on our theatre." While the Italians known as the Bouffons (Buffoons) left Paris, Rameau appeared as the herald of national music and he who made comedy compatible with the grand art on a royal stage. The Opéra-Comique, which reappeared at the Fair after a period of prohibition, could devise a full-fledged musical genre. It was to draw composers, performers and audiences of quality before its official recognition in 1762.

At the Opéra, the comic interlude that opened with *Platée* but also with *Ragonde* (1742) and *Don Quichotte chez la duchesse* by Boismortier and

Favart (1743) came to a close. After 30 performances, only the Bacchic prologue was still played from 1759 to 1773, along with works by other composers such as Rousseau's *Le Devin du village*.

Then *Platée* disappeared from the repertoire, *Castor et Pollux* being performed until 1782. Although the score was published in 1907 in Rameau's *Oeuvres complètes* irected by Saint-Saëns, *Platée* was not revived before 1917 at the Monte Carlo Opera, then in 1956 at the Festival of Aix-en-Provence under the baton of Hans Rosbaud. Michel Sénéchal prevailed in the title role until 1977, when the Opéra presented the work at the Salle Favart with Michel Plasson as conductor. In 1989 the Salle Favart was again host to the production of the Atelier Lyrique de Tourcoing directed by Jean-Claude Malgoire.

In 2014 the Opéra-Comique presents its own production of *Platée* with the dedicated cooperation of Les Arts Florissants conducted by William Christie and in a definitely satirical stage direction by Robert Carsen. Faithful to Rameau's legacy, the Opéra-Comique, on the eve of its tricentennial, testifies to the fecundity of comedy for artistic excellence.