

Pichon's French Baroque: From Chaos to Rameau and Gluck

Friday, May 1, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Raphaël Pichon, conductor · Julie Roset, soprano · Stéphane Degout, baritone

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	REBEL 1666–1747 <i>Le Chaos, from 'Les Éléments'</i>	8'
2	RAMEAU 1683–1764 <i>Excerpts from the operas (Dardanus, Les Indes galantes, Les Boréades and others)</i>	35'
3	GLUCK 1714–1787 <i>Scenes from 'Orfeo ed Euridice' and 'Iphigénie en Tauride'</i>	18'
TOTAL MUSIC		61'

Jean-Féry Rebel

1666–1747

Le Chaos, from 'Les Éléments'

THE COMPOSER

Jean-Féry Rebel (1666–1747) was a French Baroque composer and violinist, a child prodigy spotted and taught by Jean-Baptiste Lully himself. He spent his career at the centre of French royal music, joining the king's famous string band, the Vingt-quatre Violons du Roi, and eventually becoming Chamber Composer to the King. Though much of his output consists of elegant violin sonatas and dance music, he is remembered above all for one astonishing piece: the prologue 'Le Chaos' to his late ballet Les Éléments, in which he anticipated the harmonic experiments of the twentieth century by nearly two hundred years.

ABOUT THE WORK

This is one of the most astonishing few minutes in all of early music. 'Le Chaos' is the prologue to Jean-Féry Rebel's ballet Les Éléments ('The Elements') of 1737–38, and it sets out to depict, in sound, the primordial chaos before Creation: the four elements (earth, water, air, fire) tangled together before they separate into order. To represent that confusion, Rebel did something unprecedented: he opened the piece with a shattering dissonance in which all seven notes of the D

8 minutes

harmonic minor scale are sounded at once. It is often described as the first notated ‘tone cluster’ in the history of Western music. He knew exactly how daring this was, writing that he had ‘dared to undertake to join to the idea of the confusion of the elements that of confusion in harmony.’

From that crunching, chaotic chord, the music gradually sorts itself out: over the course of the piece the elements emerge one by one, the dissonance resolving, order arising from disorder, until harmony is finally established. It is a vivid piece of musical storytelling and a genuine shock to hear, proof that the Baroque era could be every bit as experimental as our own. As the opening of Raphaël Pichon’s French Baroque programme, it is the perfect curtain-raiser: chaos giving way to the elegance and order of Rameau and Gluck that follow.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Everything is in the very first sound. Listen for the opening chord: not a clear, consonant harmony but a thick, grinding cluster of clashing notes, all the notes of the scale piled on top of one another, held by strings, bassoon and harpsichord. To ears expecting Baroque elegance it is genuinely startling, almost like something from a modern score.

Then follow the process of creation: listen for how, out of that chaos, individual lines and clearer harmonies gradually emerge, the music sorting itself into order, with dance-like sections representing the different elements taking shape (brilliant violin runs for fire, piccolo trills for air, flowing flute lines for water, sustained bass notes for earth). The journey from that first dissonant shock to the eventual establishment of clear, ordered harmony is the whole drama of the piece in miniature: the birth of cosmos from chaos, painted in sound three centuries ago.

Jean-Philippe Rameau

1683–1764

*Excerpts from the operas (*Dardanus*, *Les Indes galantes*, *Les Boréades* and others)*

THE COMPOSER

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) was the towering figure of the French Baroque, both its greatest composer and its most important music theorist. Born in Dijon, he spent the first half of his life as a provincial organist, publishing in 1722 his landmark *Treatise on Harmony*, which laid the founda-

35 minutes

tions of how we still understand tonal harmony today with its theory of the ‘fundamental bass’. Astonishingly, he was nearly fifty before he turned to the stage, and then he transformed French opera, succeeding Lully as its dominant figure with a series of dazzling tragédies lyriques and opéra-ballets: Hippolyte et Aricie, Les Indes galantes, Castor et Pollux, Dardanus, Platée and, at the very end of his life, Les Boréades. His operas are filled with some of the most inventive, colourful and rhythmically vital orchestral music of the eighteenth century, above all in their wealth of dances, and his orchestration was later admired by Berlioz.

ABOUT THE WORK

The heart of this programme is a generous garland of orchestral and vocal excerpts from across Rameau’s operatic output: a tour through one of the richest bodies of theatre music ever written. French Baroque opera was unlike its Italian counterpart: alongside the singing it placed enormous weight on dance and on vivid orchestral ‘scene-painting,’ and Rameau was the supreme master of both. From his stage works comes an inexhaustible supply of brilliant, characterful orchestral numbers (storms and earthquakes, tender love music, exotic dances, hunting scenes) that can be lifted out and arranged into dazzling concert suites.

This selection draws on a wide span of his career: the heroic tragédie Dardanus; the exotic, globe-trotting opéra-ballet Les Indes galantes; the ballet Les Surprises de l’Amour; the pastoral Acante et Céphise; the spectacular late masterpiece Les Boréades (unperformed in Rameau’s own lifetime and only rediscovered in the twentieth century); the celebratory Le Temple de la Gloire and La Princesse de Navarre; dances from Les Paladins and La Naissance d’Osiris; and even the ‘Requiem aeternam’ from a Mass built on themes from Castor et Pollux. With two fine French singers and a period-aware conductor, it adds up to a vivid panorama of Rameau’s theatrical genius.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

This is a sequence of mostly short, contrasting numbers, so enjoy the sheer variety and colour. Listen above all for Rameau’s astonishing orchestral imagination: the rhythmic snap of his dances (gavottes, tambourins, rigaudons, chaconnes), the vivid ‘special effects’ (rushing string figures for storms and winds, rumbling basses for earthquakes), and the wonderful wind writing: piccolos, bassoons and the haunting musette evoking a pastoral world.

Listen, too, for the dramatic range: stately, noble music for gods and kings; tender, sensuous airs for the lovers (sung here by the soprano and baritone soloists); and exuberant, foot-tapping dances for celebrations and exotic scenes. Notice how modern much of it sounds: the boldness of the harmony (Rameau the theorist at work), the brilliance of the orchestration. Rather than following a single story, let this wash over you as a kaleidoscope of eighteenth-century French theatre: elegant, dramatic, sensuous and endlessly inventive.

Christoph Willibald Gluck

18 minutes

1714–1787

Scenes from 'Orfeo ed Euridice' and 'Iphigénie en Tauride'

THE COMPOSER

Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–1787) was the great reformer of eighteenth-century opera. Working in Vienna and then Paris, he set out to rescue serious opera from what he saw as its excesses: the vain display of star singers, the rigid, ornament-laden da capo arias, the neglect of drama in favour of vocal showing-off. In a famous series of 'reform operas,' beginning with *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) and culminating in the Paris masterpieces *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) and others, he aimed for 'a beautiful simplicity,' in which music served the drama directly: continuous, flowing scenes, a newly important role for the orchestra and chorus, and emotional truth above vocal fireworks. His reforms reshaped the course of opera and influenced everyone from Mozart to Berlioz and Wagner. He stands at the threshold between the Baroque world of Rameau and the Classical age.

ABOUT THE WORK

The programme moves from Rameau to his great successor in the reform of serious opera, Christoph Willibald Gluck, with scenes from two of his masterpieces. *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Vienna, 1762) was the work that launched his operatic revolution: the ancient myth of Orpheus descending to the underworld to reclaim his dead wife, told with a 'beautiful simplicity' that swept away the clutter of Baroque opera in favour of directness and feeling. *Iphigénie en Tauride* (Paris, 1779) was the crowning achievement of his reforms: a taut, continuous music-drama, the orchestra active throughout, arias flowing into recitative without a break, the music wedded at every moment to the unfolding tragedy.

Gluck's genius was for nobility and emotional truth conveyed with the simplest means; a single, perfectly shaped melody can carry overwhelming weight. From these operas come some of the most moving pages in all eighteenth-century music: Orpheus's lament for his lost

Eurydice, the serene 'Dance of the Blessed Spirits' with its famous flute solo, the storm and anguish of Iphigénie. Sung here by soprano and baritone with the orchestra, they form the emotional core of Pichon's journey through French-flavoured Baroque and Classical opera, heard between the Rameau sequences.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for Gluck's hallmark: noble simplicity. Where Rameau dazzles with colour and dance, Gluck moves us with directness: pure, beautifully shaped melodies that go straight to the heart, with nothing superfluous. The most famous example is the radiant 'Dance of the Blessed Spirits' from *Orfeo*, with its serene, consoling flute solo evoking the Elysian Fields; listen for its heavenly calm.

In the vocal scenes, listen for how the music serves the drama: Orpheus's grief made almost unbearably plain and affecting (the great lament 'Che farò senza Euridice'), and the taut, continuous tension of *Iphigénie en Tauride*, where the orchestra storms and broods and the singing flows seamlessly out of it. Notice how the orchestra and (where used) chorus carry the drama, and how Gluck achieves overwhelming emotion through restraint rather than display. Set against the kaleidoscopic brilliance of Rameau, this is opera distilled to its essence.

Tonight's artists

Julie Roset *soprano*

The vocal excerpts in this programme (the tender airs of Rameau, the noble laments of Gluck) call for a soprano with both agility and purity of line, and a real feeling for the French style. Julie Roset, a rising star already closely associated with Raphaël Pichon's Rameau, brings exactly that: a luminous, flexible voice and an idiomatic command of this repertoire.

Julie Roset is a French soprano who has risen rapidly to international prominence. Grand Winner of the Metropolitan Opera's 2022 Laffont Competition, she took first prize at Plácido Domingo's Operalia in 2023 and was named 'Révélation Lyrique' at the Victoires de la Musique Classique in 2025. Especially admired in Baroque and Classical repertoire, she has worked closely with Raphaël Pichon, notably in Rameau's Samson at the Aix-en-Provence Festival, and her bright, agile, luminous soprano is ideally suited to the French repertoire of this programme.

Stéphane Degout *baritone*

Rameau and Gluck wrote some of the noblest music for the lower male voice: gods, kings and grieving heroes. Stéphane Degout, a celebrated French baritone and a frequent collaborator of Pichon's in exactly this repertoire, brings his warm, elegant voice and his deep feeling for the French style to the dramatic and lyrical scenes of the programme.

Stéphane Degout, born in Bourg-en-Bresse in 1975, is one of the foremost French baritones of his generation. A graduate of the Lyon Conservatoire, he came to international attention as Papageno at the Aix-en-Provence Festival and has since sung at the world's leading houses, admired for the beauty of his voice, his refined musicianship and his command of the French repertoire in particular. He has recorded with Raphaël Pichon and Pygmalion, which makes him an ideal partner in this French Baroque and Classical programme.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years**

Carolyn Abbate, Roger Parker, W. W. Norton 2015

A readable history of opera that sets Rameau's French tragédie lyrique and Gluck's reform of opera in context.

ACCESSIBLE **The Rameau Compendium**

Graham Sadler, Boydell Press 2014

A handy guide to Rameau's life and works, with a dictionary of people, terms and operas such as Dardanus and Les Boréades, ideal for dipping into.

DEEPER **Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work**

Cuthbert Girdlestone, Dover Publications 1990

A classic, detailed English study of Rameau's music, with chapters on the operas excerpted on this programme.

SOURCES

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2. Raphaël Pichon leads Rameau and Gluck with the Concertgebouw Orchestra, Het Concertgebouw. <https://www.concertgebouw.nl/en/concerts/11152423-raphael-pichon-leads-rameau-and-gluck-with-the-concertgebouw-orchestra>
3. Take a musical odyssey with Raphaël Pichon, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwkeest.nl/en/stories/take-a-musical-odyssey-with-raphael-pichon/>
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5. Rebel: Le chaos (Chaos), from Les Éléments (programme note), San Francisco Symphony. [https://www.sfsymphony.org/Data/Event-Data/Program-Notes/R/Rebel-Le-cahos-\(Chaos\),-from-Les-Elements](https://www.sfsymphony.org/Data/Event-Data/Program-Notes/R/Rebel-Le-cahos-(Chaos),-from-Les-Elements)
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13. Raphaël Pichon, harmonia mundi. <https://www.harmoniamundi.com/en/artistes/raphael-pichon/>
14. Julie Roset, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julie_Roset
15. Stéphane Degout, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St%C3%A9phane_Degout
16. A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393348958>
17. The Rameau Compendium, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781783271924>
18. Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780486262000>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-05-01-pichon>

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