CHAPTER 12

Time and Space as Manipulated Materials in Rameau’s Les Cyclopes

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Time and space are integral to the experience of listening to music. In tangible sound, time as intangible substance is expressed in the forms of measure, rhythm, duration, and repetition. Space is also unseen substance and is defined through blocks or chunks of time with prescribed limits. Thus these two properties are materials that the composer may shape and manipulate in several, creative ways. Time and space ultimately produce modulation or movement over the course of a piece of music. They govern the listener’s experience in elemental ways and cooperate with musical components such as the fundamental bass, a compositional tool Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) devised in order to understand harmonic particularities, relationships, and eventually modulation or movement. This order of harmonic concepts was established in his earliest published treatise Traité de l’harmonie (1722) and again used in the late stages of his writing career in Code de musique pratique (1760). It is an order rooted in the medieval educational system, which continued through the eighteenth century.

Rameau published his second book of harpsichord pieces two years after Traité de l’harmonie in 1724. This collection featured Les Cyclopes, a violent, virtuosic piece whose figures, conceptual design, and emotional substance were largely unprecedented. The subject of the work is centered on the race of one-eyed giants as portrayed in Homer’s Odyssey. Rameau himself expressly cites Les Cyclopes as a piece of characterization in a letter written to Houdar de la Motte (1672–1731), a librettist at the Académie française, on October 25, 1727. Rameau writes: “If you will but come and hear how I have characterized the song and dance of the Sauvages who appeared in the Italian Theater one or two years ago and how I carried out the following titles, les Soupirs, les Tendres Plaintes, les Cyclopes, les Tourbillons...you would then see that I am not a novice in the art and that above all it does not seem that I show a great display of science in my productions, where I endeavor to conceal art within itself....”

these statements. Earlier in the letter, he trivializes composers who so obsess themselves with mere “combinations of notes” that they sacrifice “commonsense, emotion, feeling, reasoning.” Rameau’s ultimate goal in characterizing the Cyclops is that emotional aspects of the Cyclops and features of the story are eventually represented and reflected in his “combination of notes.”

The original myth in Homer’s *Odyssey* tells of an episode during Ulysses’ journey in which he and his seafaring crew encounter a race of one-eyed giants called the Cyclops. Polyphemus, a brash, brutish, irascible, and violent, monster, kills some of Ulysses’ crew, eats them, and imprisons Ulysses within his cave. Polyphemus asks Ulysses for his name, which he states, in Greek, as “Nobody.” Polyphemus tells Ulysses that he plans to eat him as well soon. Over the course of the evening, Polyphemus drinks himself to sleep, during which Ulysses grabs a spear and impales Polyphemus’ single eye. Polyphemus’ compatriots investigate the source of Polyphemus’ screaming rage, asking, “Who has hurt you?” to which Polyphemus replies, “Nobody has hurt me.” During all of the commotion, Ulysses manages to evade and escape his captor. If Ulysses tried to take on Polyphemus in a physical fight, he would surely have quickly and embarrassingly lost, and perished like his crew. Ulysses, however, uses something far superior to brute strength to beat the Cyclops: his wisdom, his ability to strategize. These were qualities that Polyphemus undervalued. He also disrespected lawfulness and the gods, particularly Zeus, who Ulysses attempts to use as a reason to be set free. The Cyclops is a monster with which one cannot reason; wisdom and rationality were useless. It is a story of David versus Goliath.

Musicologists have failed to note the origin of the subject of this work. Girdlestone simply states that he knows of no other work with this title, while mentioning that *Persée* (1682), a *tragédie mise en musique* by Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687), which contains a Cyclops character wholly unlike that portrayed in Rameau’s work, was revived around the time that Rameau published this book of pieces. The attitude that musical works could only be inspired by other musical works does Rameau’s piece a grave disservice by suppressing its meaning and inspiration, a meaning that held considerable weight in eighteenth-century French culture and that, due to its Homeric origins, relates to profound themes found in both art and literature.

The seen and unseen materials of time and space, with which Rameau works, are inextricably woven with the subject and meaning of *Les Cyclopes*. This essay examines how these two properties aid Rameau in realizing them

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2 Ibid., p. 75.