

# Class 3 : Fantasy Made Real

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## A. Empire and Enlightenment

1. Title 1 (Serban)
2. Chief Chicagou, Rameau, and Louis XV

In 1725, some French settlers in Illinois returned to Paris, bringing with them **Chief Chicagou** and five other chiefs to be presented to **King Louis XV**. As part of the ceremonies, **Jean-Philippe Rameau** (1683–1764) wrote a harpsichord piece which he called *Les sauvages*, or “The Savages.” Here is the beginning:

3. Rameau: *Les sauvages* (Jean Rondeau)
4. Playbill for *Les Indes Galantes*, 1736

The harpsichordist has the wonderfully musical name of **Jean Rondeau**. And it is appropriate, because like a *rondo* in music, that tune will keep coming back during the next hour; you will hear at least snatches of it four more times. Anyway, ten years after the Chiefs’ visit, Rameau wrote an opera, *Les Indes galantes* (The Amorous Indies), and incorporated his 1725 tune into it. I say an opera, but in fact it is a kind of variety show: a prologue, plus four different *opéra-ballets*, each telling a different story in a pretty much equal mixture of singing and dance. The acts (or *entrées*) are all set in foreign climes—Turkey, Persia, Peru, and the Wild West—and they are all love stories. You could see it as the French King celebrating the wide reach of his colonial explorers. You could also see it as an Enlightenment parable of human values, for “savages” though they may be, most of the foreigners eventually end up doing the noble thing. The first *entrée*, for example, is the story of a Turkish Pasha who gives up the Western woman he loves to allow her to be with her own fiancé—virtually a preview of **Mozart’s** *Abduction from the Seraglio* half a century later.

Anyway, what might this look like on the stage? Most of the available productions are updates, but you can get some idea of the style in this clip by the early music group **Ars Lyrica Houston**. This is where Rameau inserted his *Sauvages*; the action shows a peace-pipe ceremony between the American Indians and the Westerners.

5. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act IV (Ars Lyrica Houston)
6. Rameau: *Hippolyte et Aricie*

Put the orchestra in a pit and splurge for proper scenery, and you would come up with something like this, which is a French production of another Rameau opera, the tragedy *Hippolyte et Aricie*. But *Les Indes galantes* is fantasy through and through. I don’t suppose the 18th-century French really thought that Indians in either Illinois or Peru really matched their idealization of the *noble savage*, but it amused them to think so. The libretto also serves as a moral object lesson about *mores* back home. The Indian maiden in the last act, for example, refuses her Western suitors because one is too controlling and the

other makes no secret of his intent to play around. The 2003 production at the Paris Opera, directed by **Andrej Serban**, has lots of baroque spectacle, but it is not above tipping the wink to the audience: we are all in this fantasy together. [I have shown this clip in another class before, but it is very short.]

7. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act IV (Paris 2003, Serban)

8. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, scenes from the Scozzi production, Bordeaux 2014

I am going to show scenes now from two recent French productions, both of which retain some degree of fantasy, but treat it in entirely different ways. [Some of you may have seen a couple of these clips before, but most of them are new.] **Laura Scozzi**, staging the work in Bordeaux in 2014, fully embraces the opportunity for five totally different settings. Her approach is frankly comic, but it is also making some serious points about Americanization, consumerism, and the destruction of the environment. She sets the Prologue in a leafy Eden, with totally naked chorus and dancers. Then the Westerners arrive.

9. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Prologue (Bordeaux 2014, Scozzi)

10. Amel Brahim-Djelloul in *Les Indes galantes* (Bordeaux, 2014)

I'll move on now to what may be the most beautiful musical number in the score, the aria *Viens, Hymen, enchaîne-moi* ("Come, God of Wedlock, and bind me to the man I love"). I won't bother you with the plot here, but there are apparently insuperable objects in the way of their happiness. In Scozzi's production, the number opens against the background of a picture-postcard Peru, but the curtain rises in the middle of it to show a very different, and doubtless much more accurate, reality; this is typical of Scozzi's approach throughout. But don't forget to listen to the music, with the beautiful use of the flute in interplay with the voice.

11. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, "Viens Hymen" (Bordeaux 2014, Scozzi)

12. Nathan Berg and Amel Brahim-Djelloul in *Les Indes galantes* (Bordeaux, 2014)

The other clips come from Act IV, in the western United States. It begins with a perfect tableau of loggers and environmentalists in a national park. After a minute or so, I'll jump to the end. Naturally, the lumber CEOs win, and before long the stage is covered with billboards. But they don't get the girl, and my second clip begins in the love duet between her and her tree-hugger boyfriend. Now Rameau's dance comes back, this time accompanying a speeded-up sequence featuring a young married couple from magazine and TV ads getting gradually deeper and deeper into consumer culture. Eventually, our real young couple decide to leave, and take a package flight back to Eden.

13. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, scenes from Act IV (Bordeaux 2014, Scozzi)

14. — still from the above

I started out to see whether we could bring 18th-century fantasy into the world of 21st-century reality. Scozzi certainly packs her production full of modern references, but can we really speak of "reality"? I would love to hear your opinions.

### 15. Clément Cogitore and Bintou Dembélé

The Paris Opera entrusted its 2019 production of *Les Indes galantes* to the young team shown here, director **Clément Cogitore** and choreographer **Bintou Dembélé**. Dembélé comes from the world of hip-hop; it would seem a total mismatch for the music of Rameau, but this production shows different. And it is relevant in an entirely different way. Instead of having to go abroad to see foreign races, Paris now has them on their own streets and housing projects. Their clothing, their body-language, their music, their dancing is different, threatening. Many of the Opéra's patrons might cross to the other side of the street if they encountered a guy like some of those you will see here. But I think it works. Take away the dancing, and this might be a fairly straight production, though I cannot say I understand many of Cogitore's design choices. But you *can't* take it away from the dancing, and that is its glory. I'll show you two of the same scenes we have watched in the Bordeaux production—the soprano aria and that Act IV sequence. Again, I have shown the last few minutes of it before, but I hope it now makes more sense in a longer context.

16. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, “Viens Hymen” (Paris 2019/Dembélé)

17. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act IV excerpt (Paris 2019, Cogitore/Dembélé)

18. Main title 2 (Cogitore)

## B. The Dark Side of the Fairy Tale

### 19. *Rusalka* posters

Those of you who took my Opera Production course will remember that I spend an entire session on *Rusalka*, the 1901 opera by **Antonin Dvorak** (1841–1904). I showed substantial clips from two different productions, plus the trailer of a third. Today I want to show you more of what was in that trailer, the remarkable production by **Martin Kusej** in Munich in 2010. In fact, I now have 8 different versions of *Rusalka*, an opera that fascinates me because of the numerous solutions that modern directors have thought up to find contemporary meaning in the old fairy tale. And no one is as radical as Martin Kusej.

### 20. The plot of *Rusalka*

Here is an outline of the story of *Rusalka*. As you see, it is basically an Eastern European variation on the *Little Mermaid* myth. And it works perfectly as fantasy, a late-Romantic fairy tale. Here is an old Czech film (1977) by **Petr Weigl**, showing *Rusalka*'s sisters and their father-figure, the **Water Goblin**, near the start of the opera. I think you will quickly catch the mood.

21. Dvorak: *Rusalka*, film by Petr Weigl

22. — stills from the above

Both the old Met production by **Otto Schenk** and the newer one by **Mary Zimmerman** have been quite happy to keep the fairy-tale mood. Here is the Latvian soprano **Kristine Opolais** singing the best-known page in the opera, the big tune in *Rusalka*'s *Prayer to the Moon*.

23. Dvorak: *Rusalka*, Song to the Moon (Kristine Opolais, Met)

24. Cover of the Kusej DVD

Kristine Opolais is also the star of the Martin Kusej production I am going to show, but she is a very different artist here. You would think that a production that advertises itself with the heroine in a fish tank wearing a bridal gown is not about to turn its back on fantasy either, and indeed Kusej conjures up a surreal nightmare in the middle act. But that's not at all how he frames it. Here is the overture. Imagine you are in the audience. It's opening night, and though you know the story of the opera, you have not read any of the publicity for this production.

25. Dvorak: *Rusalka* (Munich 2010), overture

26. Jozef Fritzl and his basement

Did you catch what is going on? Kusej is referencing the case of **Josef Fritzl**, who in 2008 was sentenced to life imprisonment in Austria for imprisoning his daughter Elizabeth in the cellar of their house, sexually abusing her, and fathering seven by her. As you see, Fritzl's basement was rather better appointed. Kusej adds the water to fit the story, and fortunately stays clear of the literal incest. All the same, **the next six minutes may be hard to watch**; turn off the picture, if you like, and just listen to the music. I won't show anything like this again, but simply have to here. The Father is played by **Gunther Groissböck**, who really had to get into his dark side.

27. Dvorak: *Rusalka* (Munich 2010), cellar scene

28. Kristine Opolais as Rusalka (Munich 2010)

That light becomes the Moon to which Rusalka will sing her song of longing. But I am going to cut past that, and past the scene with **Jezebaba** (the woman upstairs), to the end of the act where Rusalka, tottering on her new high-heeled shoes, at last meets her **Prince** (the wonderful **Klaus Florian Vogt**).

29. Dvorak: *Rusalka* (Munich 2010), end of Act I

30. Choruses from Act II

Act II, however, is a nightmare. I wish I could show it all. The best way to sum it up is probably to show you these two **Choruses**. One is surreal fantasy, the stage filled with brides (both men and women) hugging the carcasses of deer that have been hunted and skinned, oozing blood all over their white dresses. The other is almost realistic: a chorus of everyday Austrians, munching sandwiches and oozing *Gemütlichkeit* as they convey their good wishes while completely ignoring the horror of what is going on.

So Rusalka's idyll breaks apart. Where can we go from here in the third act? Not back to the cellar, certainly. Kusej's ending is a brilliant paradox: that the most real outcome is an escape from reality altogether, in the wards of a psychiatric hospital! I am sorry not to give you an uplifting finale as I could with *Les Indes galantes*. But the music is gorgeous, and Kristine Opolais' acting in the last few minutes may be the best I have seen from any opera singer on any stage anywhere!

31. Dvorak: *Rusalka* (Munich 2010), end of Act III

32. Main title 3 (still from the above)