

PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED

2. VISIONS OF EMPIRE

IN 1725, SOME FRENCH SETTLERS IN ILLINOIS returned to Paris, bringing with them six Indian chiefs to be presented to King Louis XV. As part of the ceremonies, **Jean-Philippe Rameau** wrote a harpsichord piece which he called *Les sauvages*, or *The Savages*. Ten years after the Chiefs' visit, Rameau wrote an opera, *Les Indes galantes* (*The Amorous Indes*), and incorporated his 1725 tune into it. Only one of the acts, though, is set in North America; the others take place in Turkey, Persia, and Peru. Each is a separate love story, and most involve contact between Western Europeans and native people.

The music is glorious; the stories are rudimentary; the whole purpose of the piece is to create a spectacle combining opera, ballet, exotic decors, and the titillation of seeing strange types from far corners of the globe. Nobody worried then about ethnic stereotypes or cultural appropriation, but now we do. How on earth do you bring all that together on a modern stage? We will sample two very different approaches: a largely-satirical treatment by **Laura Scozzi** in Bordeaux in 2014, and a 2019 production in Paris by director **Clément Cogitore** and choreographer **Bintou Dembélé**, who avoid ethnic characters but incorporate multi-racial performers and styles.

The class is an expansion of an hour-long segment I gave in my *Opera and Real Life* course in March 2022, but it now has twice the amount of music, mostly in longer clips. Since the four acts do not comprise a single story, I summarize them below in the order presented in class. *rb.*



2. VISIONS OF EMPIRE

26 September, 2023

A. LES SAUVAGES

Four versions of Rameau's original tune (see above).

- **Harpichord:** Jean Rondeau
- **Period dance:** ArsMusica Houston
- **Opera:** Andrei Serban, Paris 2003
- **Film:** Clément Cogitore, 2016

B. COLONIALISM AS SATIRE

In the **PROLOGUE**, the free-loving followers of **Hebe**, Goddess of Youth, are interrupted by the Goddess of War, **Bellona**. Hebe calls upon **Cupid**, who flies with them to distant climes where they think love can flourish more freely. **Laura Scozzi** interprets this environmentally, as an idyllic Eden invaded by a new army of Conquistadors.

- **Rameau: *Les Indes galantes***, Prologue (excerpts)
Amel Brahim-Djelloul (Hebe), Olivera Toplovic (Cupid), Benoît Arnould (Bellona); Bordeaux 2014, Laura Scozzi (d), Christophe Rousset (c)

C. CONSUMERISM AS SATIRE

ACT FOUR is set in the American West. **Zima**, an Indian princess, is wooed by both a Frenchman and a Spaniard, but rejects one as too controlling and the other as too flirtatious, and settles instead with her Indian lover **Adario**. **Scozzi** replaces the Indians by white environmental activists, but their fight to preserve the forest eventually loses to rampant consumerism. We shall watch almost the entire act.

- **Rameau: *Les Indes galantes***, Act IV
Olivera Toplovic (Zima), Thomas Dolié (Adario), Benoît Arnould (Alvar), Anders J, Dahlin (Damon); Bordeaux 2014

D. ANATOMY OF AN ARIA

In **ACT TWO**, which takes place in Peru, the Inca princess **Phani** loves a Spanish officer, **Carlos**, but must first free herself from the clutches

of the evil priest **Huascar**. Her aria, “Viens, Hymen” (Come, God of Marriage) is accompanied by a solo flute. We shall compare stagings by **Scozzi** and **Cogitore/Dembélé**.

- **Rameau: *Les Indes galantes***, Act II aria, “Viens, Hymen”
Amel Brahim-Djelloul (Phani); Bordeaux 2014
- **Rameau: *Les Indes galantes***, Act II aria, “Viens, Hymen”
Sabine Devieille (Phani), Calvin Hunt (dancer); Paris 2019

E. SO THIS IS OPÉRA-BALLET?

ACT ONE of the opera has a similar plot to Mozart's later Abduction from the Seraglio. **Émilie**, a Western woman, has been captured and sold to the harem of Pasha **Osman**. He holds off, hoping that her resistance will break down in time. But then there is a storm and a shipwreck. Among the castaways is her fiancé **Valère**. They rejoice to see each other, but now they are both in Osman's clutches....

ACT THREE, which is set in Persia, exists in two quite different versions. Both involve a character in disguise as someone of the other gender to discover whether their spouse is faithful. But eventually all suspicions are resolved, and all go off to enjoy the **Feast of Flowers** (which is presumably the main purpose of the act).

The remainder of the class will consist of 10-minute excerpts from each of these Acts in the **Cogitore/Dembélé** production, plus the latter part of Act IV (for synopsis, see Section B above).

- **Rameau: *Les Indes galantes***, excerpts as listed above
Sabine Devieille, Julie Fuchs, Florian Sempey, Aleandre Duhamel, Mathias Vidal, Jodie Devos, Edwin Crossley-Mercer, Stanislas de Barbeyrac; Paris 2019, Clément Cogitore & Bintou Dembélé (d), Leonardo García Alarcón (c)

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/problem-operas/>

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