

CLASS 2 : VISIONS OF EMPIRE

A. LES SAUVAGES

1. Class title 1 (*Indes in Paris*)

This is an expansion of the first hour of a class I gave a year ago in my course *Opera and Real Life*. But given the topic of last week's class, I think you will see that this repeat is inevitable. However, I will be playing exactly twice the amount of music as before, and taking a rather different approach. I'll play extended scenes soon enough, but forgive me for starting with something a little more polemical.

2. Section title A: 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. Title page of *Les Indes Galantes*, 1736

Ten years after the Chiefs' visit, Rameau wrote an opera, *Les Indes galantes* (The Amorous Indes), and incorporated his 1725 tune into it, as a duet with chorus called “*Forêts paisibles*” or “Peaceable forests.” It comes at the end of the final act, and accompanies a peace-pipe ceremony between the Native Americans and the Europeans. Before we go any further, I would like you to compare three versions of it: a staged concert by the early music group **Ars Musica Houston**, a 2003 production at the Paris Opera directed by **Andrei Serban**, and a film made in 2017 by French director **Clément Cogitore**. Given our discussion last week, what do you make of them?

5. Rameau: *Les sauvages* (Houston)

6. Rameau: *Les sauvages* (Serban)

7. Rameau: *Les sauvages* (Cogitore)

8. Stills from all three

An opera that consists entirely of a series of encounters between Westerners and people from different continents—in addition to the American West, we have Turkey, Persia, and Peru—is ripe for **cultural appropriation**. How do you think these three fare? The first is probably pretty authentic to Rameau's original, but the Indians, of course, merely illustrate an idea. The second was a big hit at the time, and is obviously tongue-in-cheek, but I must say I find the grinning tom-tom player demeaning, in a way I did not with Serban's Chinese figures in *Turandot*. The last is not a stage production at all, but a standalone film that Cogitore made with choreographer **Bintou Dembélé** as a kind of audition for a full production of the opera; I'll be showing more of that in the second hour. It seems the most honest of the lot, facing up to the colonial legacy in a city with housing projects filled with the human fallout from colonialism,

yet honoring them by using their own culture and giving them a place on the stage. The competitive dance style is apparently called **krump**.

9. Serban/Cogitore (14 years)

It is interesting that the gap between the Serban production and the Cogitore film is only 14 years. What was possible in 2003, when white actors were routinely appearing in colored makeup, had become unthinkable by 2016. When *Les Indes* was new, the American Indians were seen as curiosities, but when they came to visit, they were treated with respect. It is only quite recently that we have come to see how patronizing this attitude is.

10. *Indes* recordings

So what is *Les Indes galantes*? Not so much an opera as 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. “Look at all the funny people from around the world,” it seems to be saying; “but hey, at heart they are just like us!” Cultural appropriation? Undoubtedly. Patronizing? Sure. But with no intention to be demeaning.

B. SCOZZI: COLONIALISM AS SATIRE

11. Section title B: Stills from the Laura Scozzi production

In the rest of the class, I shall play as much as possible of the opera, from two different productions. After the break, we’ll see the Paris stage production that Clément Cogitore got to do in 2019; he addresses the ethnic issue full on, as we have seen, but his basic approach is poetic, even heroic. In the rest of this hour, however, let’s sample the **2014 staging in Bordeaux** by **Laura Scozzi**. She has the insight that the piece is, at heart, a romantic comedy, and she treats it as satire throughout. But she seldom if ever laughs at the foreigners in it. Rather, her targets are diverse: environmentalism, consumerism, globalization, feminism, veganism—you name it. Each of the five sections has a completely different setting, linked only by a **trio of female tourists** who blunder in from time to time; you can see them at bottom right.

In Rameau’s 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. Scozzi interprets this as environmentally, as an idyllic Eden invaded by the same kind of *Conquistadors*, ancient and modern, that raped South America.

12. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Prologue clip 1 (Scozzi)

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

Scozzi's Cupid arrives first in more or less normal guise, shooting pink arrows all over the stage, but she returns as an airline hostess for an outfit called **Eden Voyages**. The scene is rather silly, with the tourist trio coming back again and again in different costumes, but Cupid's aria is beautiful. And I need to show at least a short clip because it sets up the metaphor that Scozzi will use to connect the four acts to follow; we'll see that airport gate again at the end!

14. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Prologue clip 2 (Scozzi)

C. SCOZZI: CONSUMERISM AS SATIRE

15. Section title C: Scozzi: Consumerism as Satire

In Acts I, II, and III, Rameau and Scozzi take us in turn to Turkey, Peru, and Persia. I'll include an aria from the Peruvian act in the second hour, but for now I want to skip ahead to **Act IV**, which is set in the American West. With luck, I can play it virtually complete, and it is one where you should have no difficulty following the story. In the original, the American Indian princess **Zima** is courted by explorers from both France and Spain, but she rejects the Spaniard because his love is too controlling and the Frenchman because he is too fickle; she prefers to stick with her own Indian lover, **Adario**. Now Scozzi is not always successful in avoiding ethnic stereotyping—her Persian act would surely cause great offence to Muslims—but she has a brilliant way of finessing the Indian problem: her characters are not people of color, but **white environmental activists**. In the end, though, they lose their battle to save the forest, and all go off again with Cupid to find a different Eden someplace else!

16. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act IV (Scozzi)

17. Class title 2 (still from the above)

D. ANATOMY OF AN ARIA

18. Section title D: Anatomy of an Aria

From the first hour, you might think that staging *Les Indes galantes* is largely a matter of finding the comedy and hitting the targets. But nobody would revive baroque operas just for that reason; they would only do it if they were beautiful and if they gave opportunity for visual and musical spectacle. This is my agenda for the second hour. I will start with the most sheerly lovely aria in the score, "*Viens, Hymen*" (Come, god of marriage). The situation is simple: the Inca princess **Phani** has fallen in love with a Spanish officer, **Carlos**, but she first has to escape from the control of the Inca priest **Huascar**. Huascar is the only out-and-out villain in the piece; **Laura Scozzi** makes him a drug lord, as you will see. I'll play her version back to back with **Clément Cogitore's**, then as you to compare them. But above all, listen to the music, which is astonishingly spare: really just the voice, a flute solo, and a simple bass.

19. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act II, “Viens, Hymen” (Scozzi)
20. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act II, “Viens, Hymen” (Cogitore)
21. — stills from the above

What did you make of those? **Laura Scozzi** is basically telling a story, framing the aria between the man she loves and the man she doesn't. **Clément Cogitore** is more abstract; he allows Phani to sing alone, as indeed is written in the score. But he parallels the flute with that extraordinary flex-dancer, **Calvin Hunt**, an American from Brooklyn. I find it uncannily effective.

E. SO THIS IS OPÉRA-BALLET?

22. Section title E (Clément Cogitore and Bintou Dembélé)

I credited that piece to Clément Cogitore, as he was the director and the basic idea must have been his. But the poetry surely comes more for the choreographer **Bintou Dembélé**. She is a 30-year veteran of hip-hop and street dancing, and now has her own company, with the specific platform of viewing dance through the prism of colonial and post-colonial French history. Entirely appropriate.

23. *Indes* productions: original and Serban 2003

I mentioned that Rameau did not call his work *opéra* but *opéra-ballet*—a form in which singing, orchestral playing, and dance all carry an equal weight. It is easy to see this in the old prints, such as the engraving of the 1735 première shown here. And Andrei Serban's 2003 production was clearly an attempt to reproduce the aesthetic in more modern terms. But Cogitore and Dembélé are going for something different, in effect reinventing the form. I'm going to shut up now, except for giving you the context of the three ten-minute scenes I am going to play from their production; between them, they should show the range of theatrical devices they have brought to bear on their task.

24. Scene from Act I

I am playing a scene from Act I, largely because its plot is so similar to that of *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, which we'll be seeing in three weeks' time. **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....

25. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act I clip (Cogitore)

26. — still from the above

I'm not even going to bother to give you the plot of Act III, which is set in Persia; Rameau himself wrote two different versions, both involving gender-switching disguises. Suffice it to say that at the point where I shall begin the misunderstandings have already been resolved, and the two couples settle down for a truly gorgeous quartet. This is real opera. Then follows the ballet section, which is the main point of

the act, a series of dances called “**Festival of the Flowers.**” The music is longer than Cogitore and Dembélé can entirely fill, but look for a passage of truly spectacular **break-dancing**, and then a charming scene where the flutist comes onstage as a kind of Pied Piper.

27. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act III clip (Cogitore)

28. — still from the above

We’ve seen opera in one clip, and opera followed by ballet in the second clip; now is the time to see the two media fully integrated in the love-duet and celebration that we have already watched in the Scozzi production. I think you’ll find this a quite different experience from her *Good Housekeeping* approach!

29. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act IV clip (Cogitore)

30. Class title 3 (same as title 1)