



and a mysterious and unexplained clef replaces the usual treble clef on pages 67, 89 and 90. If Ricordi wishes to enhance their already formidable reputation, I would encourage their engraving staff to look to the exemplary and handsome models of currently ongoing complete editions, most notably those of C. P. E. Bach (Los Altos: The Packard Humanities Institute) and J. A. Hasse (Stuttgart: Carus). The musical publications and formatting techniques of the Center for Computer Assisted Research in the Humanities at Stanford University also continue to serve as a benchmark for excellence in the field of computer-aided music engraving.

ERIN HELYARD



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VOLTAIRE (FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET), *OEUVRES DE 1738–1740 (III); WRITINGS FOR MUSIC (1720–1740)*

ED. ROGER J. V. COTTE, RUSSELL GOULBOURNE, GILLIAN PINK, GERHARDT STENGER, RAYMOND TROUSSON AND DAVID WILLIAMS

Complete Works of Voltaire 18c

Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2008

pp. xxvi + 430, ISBN 978 0 7294 0913 1

VOLTAIRE (FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET), *CEUVRES DE 1742–1745 (I)*

ED. OLIVIER FERRET, RUSSELL GOULBOURNE, RALPH A. NABLOW AND DAVID WILLIAMS

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Musicologists specializing in the French Baroque owe a debt of gratitude to the Voltaire Foundation for its efforts over the past three decades. The Foundation's meticulously transcribed edition of Voltaire's correspondence, contained within its *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, amounts to nearly one hundred volumes and covers most of the eighteenth century, from 1704 to 1778. This alone would be a significant achievement, providing detailed indices and notes that are richly peopled with composers, singers, dancers, poets and – always – gossip about music. It will be some time before music scholars benefit fully from everything the correspondence holds. Meanwhile, the Foundation's series 'Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century' has approached four hundred volumes, offering a forum for some of the most specialized research available on eighteenth-century France. Here again, the editorial standards are high, and the music research and editions of period sources on music are sound and reliable. By way of comparison, the two recently completed volumes containing Voltaire's writings for musical setting cannot avoid looking small and a bit anticlimactic, and yet with them we come to the heart of the matter, those points at which Voltaire intervened directly in music history: three *livrets* for *tragédies en musique*, none of which was performed, two more for ballets successfully set to music by Jean-Philippe Rameau and some essays and poems that have some bearing on the musical and theatrical worlds of eighteenth-century France. These editions remind us that whatever were Voltaire's complaints about opera (as recorded, famously, in his 1730 Preface to the spoken tragedy *Oedipe*), the poet dedicated a remarkable amount of time during the 1730s and 1740s to working on *livrets*, and even his failed opera projects absorbed his attention later in life.

Bringing these works together in new editions recalls some basic features of Voltaire's opera projects, properties they could be said to share. First, it is remarkable, though not surprising, that his tragic *livrets*



deploy religious authorities as villains. In *Tanis et Zélide*, Egyptian shepherds find their bucolic tranquillity threatened by a newly formed theocratic state in Memphis; in *Samson*, the biblical hero is, oddly, brought down by the priests of Venus and Mars; and in *Pandore*, Prométhée battles Jupiter and his gods for the right of creation. It is difficult not to see underlying all this a persistent criticism of the Roman Catholic Church, which Voltaire articulated publicly early in this period with his *Lettres philosophiques* of 1734. Second, in light of recent musicological research, it is worth noting that Voltaire's war on romantic plots – both in spoken tragedy and in *Samson*, his *tragédie en musique* undertaken with Jean-Philippe Rameau in 1733 – extended as well to his other tragic *livrets*. (Russell Goulbourne provides an especially good introduction to this topic in his edition of *Samson*.) Both *Tanis et Zélide* (which preceded *Samson*) and *Pandore* (which followed it) show little interest in conventional gallantry. And, finally, as is so often the case with the great French poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we encounter a kind of writing that is beautiful and finely crafted, yet too wordy for musical setting. Singing takes time and requires fewer words of the poet, something for which Voltaire, like Nicolas Boileau before him, had little patience. His most satisfying collaboration with a musician was with Rameau on the comédie-ballet *La Princesse de Navarre*, where he concentrated on spoken dialogue, of which there is plenty, and left the musical *divertissements* for the composer to worry over. (And even here he made himself ill trying to accommodate Rameau's demands.) Voltaire's lyric tragedies are dramatically interesting and fun to read, but as these editions illustrate, none could have made it into a successful musical setting without abbreviation. They reveal a mind teeming with ideas for developing the *tragédie en musique*, but one with little of the practical musical experience necessary to bring them to fruition.

For those who study the lyric tragedy, Voltaire's text for *Samson* will be the primary destination. Goulbourne's introduction is a thorough account of the *livret's* creation, with particular attention paid to its complex chronology and to Voltaire's experiments, his oft-noted plans to use the work to criticize opera in general and as an exemplar for alternative forms of *tragédie en musique*. Begun shortly after the premiere of Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*, Voltaire treated his project with the newly famous composer as an opportunity to reconfigure lyric tragedy. The editor rightly stresses *Samson's* quirky features, which drew criticism from censors not only for the inclusion of the gods Venus, Mars and Adonis in the biblical story, but also for a Moses-like series of miracles performed by Samson in Act 2. (One wonders how, in the hypercritical environment of French theatre, Voltaire ever supposed he could get away with such embellishments.) But the principal innovations in *Samson* took place on two fronts. First, musically, Voltaire wanted to capitalize on Rameau's reputation by reducing recitative in favour of grand musical events, creating a kind of continual *divertissement*. Coming to the opera from a literary background, Goulbourne seems to miss the significance of this idea; since the early years of the century critics and audience members had worried publicly that declamation in the *tragédie en musique*, its most tragic feature, was in decline and depriving opera of suitably moving stories. With his thrilling but distracting music, Rameau was simply the latest of a long line of composers who did not treat it seriously, and Voltaire's project plays to the composer's musical strengths. Second, dramatically, Voltaire wanted to purge opera of the silly, galant love stories that had long exercised its most conservative critics. Indeed, much of what we know about Voltaire's crusade against romance we know from his correspondence on *Samson*. To me, the correspondence has always sounded as though Voltaire exploited Rameau's gifts to further his own campaign against theatrical gallantry; otherwise, it is difficult to understand why someone so conservative dramatically, someone who lambasted Antoine Houdard de Lamotte for neglecting the dramatic unities in spoken tragedy, would work with a composer who was purportedly uninterested in declaimed text. In this context, the poet's claims to minimize recitative sound more ironic than serious, as though he is using Rameau's music to sneak his serious plot past an audience expecting a love story. Unfortunately, soon after beginning the project, Voltaire fled Paris for the safety of Cirey, from which he had to correspond with Rameau, often through third parties, and could no longer promote or defend his *livret* in person.

In the months prior to the premiere of *Hippolyte et Aricie* Voltaire had already been thinking about opera and had written a *livret* entitled *Tanis et Zélide*. This work deserves reconsideration in light of *Samson*. For a writer who complained about amorous intrigue, he seems to have grasped its importance in the lyric tragedy.



His *bergers* and *bergères* beguile the princess Zélide, who has fled Memphis, with a fervour that calls to mind Hébé's choir of *Plaisirs célestes* from Rameau's *Castor et Pollux* (1737): 'Demeurez, régniez sur nos rivages; / Connaissez la paix et les beaux jours. / La nature a mis dans nos bocages / Les vrais biens ignorés dans les cours' ('Live and reign over our shores, know peace and beautiful days. Nature has placed within our groves true goodness unknown at court' (volume 18c, 131)). And as we know from the work's opening scene, Zélide has indeed fallen under their spell, having become smitten with the warrior shepherd Tanis. (Gustav Flaubert referred to Act 2 Scene 5, in which the lovers reveal their feelings, as 'étonnement'.) And yet even here we find signs of Voltaire's critical concerns. The shepherds tempt Zélide not with outright pleasure, as in *Castor*, but instead with truth and beauty, while in the final scene of Act 2, Zélide frets over responsibility and personal weakness with considerably more self-awareness than the average opera heroine.

Pandore is in some respects the most revealing of Voltaire's tragic *livrets*. He began working on it around 1740, well before embarking on his ballets with Rameau, with only vague notions of who might set it to music. While he appreciated the attention Rameau could bring to *Pandore*, he expressed doubt over the composer's ability to handle its recitative adequately. Joseph-Nicolas-Panrace Royer worked at setting the *livret* for several years, though Voltaire did not care for the results, and in the mid-1760s Jean-Benjamin de La Borde took up the project. Voltaire thus pursued the *Pandore* project with a tenacity unlike that of the previous two tragedies, returning to it over a period of thirty years. He genuinely wanted to write a successful opera.

One feels Rameau's presence throughout these volumes, even in those opera projects where he took no part. The work on *Samson* set the tone for the relationship between the two men, with Voltaire initially secure in his experience and poetic gifts, even using the composer in the *Lettre à Monsieur Rameau* (1738) to take a jab at his enemy Louis-Bertrand Castel (volume 18c, 3–23). Nevertheless, by the end of the *Samson* project, Voltaire was begging Rameau through intermediaries to continue work on the opera. And even if the poet never seriously considered Rameau for *Pandore*, it is difficult not to read the composer's influence in *Pandore*'s *trio des parques*. Voltaire's *parques* are a vicious lot who brag, 'notre gloire est de détruire' ('our glory lies in destruction' (volume 18c, 369)), and he must surely have wondered how the composer of *Hippolyte*'s infamous *trio des parques* would set this passage. By the time of *La Princesse de Navarre* (1745), however, Voltaire sounds downright frightened of Rameau. He complains that Rameau 'me mande que j'aie à mettre en quatre vers tout ce qui est en huit, et en huit tout ce qui est en quatre' ('demanded that I change into four verses all he had written in eight and [change] into eight all he had written in four' (volume 28a, 105, emphasis in the original source)). Voltaire became so upset while writing *La Princesse* that his partner, Gabrielle Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, marquise du Châtelet, wrote to the conseiller d'État, René-Louis de Voyer de Paulmy, marquis d'Argenson, pleading for a favourable reading. Months later, when working on *Le Temple de la Gloire*, Voltaire quietly gave over his dispensation to the composer, having denied a similar request while working on *Samson*. One feels something difficult to believe at this point, namely that Voltaire had become the less important of the two collaborators. After the success of *La Princesse de Navarre*, the reception of *Le Temple* was an especially cruel blow. Voltaire found his reputation directly compared with that of the composer when wags complained that *Le Temple* sounded as though Rameau had written the words and Voltaire the music.

In the end, *La Princesse* was to earn Voltaire his greatest accolades in opera. Celebrating the marriage of the Dauphin to María Teresa of Spain, it was the first important royal celebration of Louis XV's reign and an opportunity for the poet to impress the king. Louis XV built a special theatre in the Grande Écurie for the occasion, and at the work's premiere the royal family sat at the front and in the centre, as much a part of the theatrical display as the actors themselves. (Unfortunately, the stage was too high and too distant, and Voltaire's poetry could not be easily heard.) Here again, the poet could not resist the impulse to experiment, reaching back to the *comédies-ballets* of Molière and Jean-Baptiste Lully to remind his audience of the Sun King's entertainments. In writing a musical drama that contained no recitative, Voltaire could follow his own designs, and he produced a play that draws on history, political intrigue and adventure, while also offering genuinely funny scenes and sentimental ones based on contemporary French theatre. The poet took some pride as well in integrating Rameau's *divertissements* into the plot, so that they occur for plausible



reasons arising from the drama itself, especially in the first two acts. It was as close as Voltaire ever came to an operatic success on his own terms.

Readers will appreciate the presentation of these volumes, which are up to the Voltaire Foundation's high standards. Pages are thick, elegantly textured and generous in their margins: a tribute befitting the honoree. The editors have examined and described all available textual sources carefully enough to please any musicologist and have provided valuable descriptions of how the sources figured in previous critical editions of Voltaire's works. Best of all, they have presented textual variants and deletions as footnotes on the same page as the exemplar, with original poetic format preserved. This is especially helpful for the tragedies, in which the texts vary greatly; Voltaire, recognizing how controversial his projects were, took seriously every shred of advice he received, constantly adding and subtracting material in light of readers' comments. In the new editions, this material is immediately and clearly available to the reader, who need not lift a finger to compare versions. As for quibbles, these will sound niggardly when confronted with such fine editions. One might wish that the editors had shared notes with each other, because there is much here that deserves their mutually informed insights, as in the case, for example, of Voltaire's rejection of romance. Although the editors made an effort to consult musicological works, they sometimes rely on out-of-date research, which is especially unfortunate since the principal subject of the two volumes is opera. Musicologists will thus want to read the commentaries with special care, because these are rarely a comprehensive portrayal of secondary literature. Still, such quibbles are, in the end, small complaints. As additions to the new critical edition, the volumes reviewed here are valuable research tools, compiled with care and clear in what they set out to accomplish. They are outstanding contributions to our research, and our debt of gratitude can only grow accordingly.

CHARLES DILL



RECORDINGS

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GIOVANNI BONONCINI (1670–1747)

SAN NICOLA DI BARI

Lavinia Bertotti (soprano), Elena Cecchi Fedi (soprano), Gabriella Martellacci (alto), Furio Zanasi (bass) / Les Muffatti / Peter Van Heyghen

Ramée RAM 0806, 2008; one disc, 82 minutes

Despite Giovanni Bononcini's importance as one of the most successful and influential exponents of the 'new' Italian style around the turn of the eighteenth century, precious little of his important contribution to the oratorio genre is represented in the form of complete sound recordings. An important step in addressing this lacuna has been taken with the release of this impressive performance on disc by the Belgian ensemble Les Muffatti under the direction of Peter van Heyghen. Together with the singers they deliver a crisp and lively rendering of this compelling work in a clear and generally well-balanced recording.

As physical CDs become rarer with the rise of digital downloads and the general shrinking of the classical music industry as a whole, a handful of smaller recording labels are distinguishing themselves in terms of both product and repertory. Few newcomers to the industry achieve this as well as the German label Ramée. Like many of the discs in the rest of their interesting catalogue, this CD is elegantly produced in all respects. Instead of the fragile jewel case, there is a folding cardboard sleeve (with a plastic insert for the disc itself) that permits a booklet that is larger than usual; this document is also put together with care, containing well-written liner notes and translations of the libretto in English, German and French.