

ENLIGHTENED AND EXOTIC

Ralph P. Locke takes Rameau's world tour in 'Les Indes galantes'

Rameau's *Les Indes galantes* (1735-6) raises a remarkable number of social and cultural issues. It consists of a prologue and four separate acts, called *entrées*. Each *entrée* presents a new set of characters and a new, self-contained plot. And each takes place in a different non-European land. Furthermore, the prologue, too, has a plot: Bellona, the spirit of war (the role is usually sung by a man), arrives, and, though some loving couples join up with her, others flee from Europe to find a safe haven elsewhere—providing justification for the four *entrées*. The prologue also sets out one of the basic themes of the opera as a whole: the proper place and use of power in the world, and, more specifically, how love, beauty, youth and freedom of choice can survive in the face of power (often misused) and social constrictions.

The decision, by the librettist Louis Fuzelier, to present a different geo-cultural locale in each of the four *entrées* made the work a primary vehicle for exploiting, intensifying and even questioning contemporary stereotypes about a number of different lands and their inhabitants. Virtue, in this work, is sometimes embodied in a European individual or group, but at other times is assigned to a foreign one, in accordance with the Enlightenment notions of the 'noble savage' and the noble ruler (no matter where he or she reigns). The world tour that results from this varied approach is systematic and nuanced, and, in that sense, echoes some of the central values of the mid-18th-century Enlightenment. But the work is also full of ambivalences and contradictions that make it fascinating today, especially in light of the intervening 284 years of colonial and post-colonial history.

Experiencing it at home today, or in the opera house, we may well wonder: where does virtue reside? How does one society, or another, define who a 'barbarian' is? How do different cultures relate to each other? How might they do so in a better world? And—a recurring question in operas of many eras—what power does a woman have over her own fate in a world that is shaped and controlled, to a large extent, by men? These and other themes play out in the work through action, through well-chosen words, and through Rameau's canny musical decisions.

In the course of the work, we see how individuals and groups suffer under oppressive and tyrannical regimes. Certain resonant words recur, such as *esclavage* (slavery), *violence* (violence or force) and *rigueur* (harshness or pitilessness). Much of this serves as commentary on the ways, or supposed ways, of non-Europeans. For example, in the first *entrée*, *Le Turc généreux*, Émilie bewails how she has been mistreated by the (presumably non-European) pirates who brought her to Turkey. She even calls them *ravisseurs*, a word that can be translated as abductors but also as seducers or even rapists. And her painful memories receive immediate reinforcement—a kind of dramatic 'echo'—from an offstage chorus of people aboard a ship that is being battered by a storm. The orchestra describes the storm powerfully, and simultaneously reveals the feelings of the endangered Europeans, who sing of their fear that, once they reach the pasha's shore, they will quickly be taken captive.

But *Les Indes galantes* often shows non-Europeans in an unexpectedly positive light. Émilie is finally allowed by Pasha Osman to return to France with her husband Valère. And, in the fourth and final *entrée*, *Les Sauvages*, the Native Americans are portrayed



■ Lisette Oropesa as Hébé in Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's 2016 Munich production

as uniformly peace-loving. The only threats in this *entrée* come from outside. Trumpets at the beginning declare the arrival of the French military, and the Spaniard Alvar, one of the two Europeans who vie for the hand of the native Zima, is so possessive towards women that—as his rival (the Frenchman Damon) warns Zima—her life in Spain would just be another form of joyless captivity and (as he puts it) *esclavage*. This reminder that a woman's life in Europe is not necessarily one of freedom and independence contrasts with Zima's own near-idyllic situation in the forests of North America: not least, she is able to select a partner on her own.

Zima chooses Adario, a fellow Native American and leader of the local warriors. Indeed, the trumpets that at first announced the arrival of the French troops ring out during the final dancing, as if to suggest that the Native Americans have now created a kind of heaven-on-earth, a peaceable kingdom, with Adario and Zima as leaders, offering safety and a pleasant life to everyone who comes to it. We may leave a performance wondering, with a sigh: 'Can such a Utopia ever come to pass?'

Recent commentators have expressed some surprise that Rameau made little effort to imitate or evoke the music of those various lands; some have gone so far as to say that the music lacks exotic colouration. This is not true: the Prologue contains a Polish dance, and the Turkish *entrée* has two lively *tambourins* for the Provençal sailors and a stomping dance for the African slaves. More basically, *Les Indes galantes* is typical of the Baroque era in that the foreign lands and people tend to be characterized most directly through the sung text, action, costumes and sets, and then reinforced musically in the composer's own *normal* style. Many moments combine music, words and visual elements to evoke traits that were thought at the time to be typical of the various peoples being evoked. For example, 'Forêts paisibles' ('Peaceful forests'), the Native American chorus in *Les Sauvages*, was based by Rameau on a harpsichord piece, likewise entitled *Les Sauvages*, that he had composed in 1728, a piece in which, as he himself described it in a letter, he 'characterized' a dance performance that he had witnessed given by two



■ *Pipe of peace: a costume design for the king of the Native Americans*

members of a Native North American tribe on a Paris stage. The dancers had been transported to Paris from 'Louisiana' (i.e., the vast French territories extending up the Mississippi into Canada).

Rameau's word 'characterized' can be taken several different ways. The energetic arpeggiated thrusts assigned first to the harpsichordist's right hand, then to the left, can be understood as mimicking what Rameau had seen at the Native Americans' dance performance. (In *Les Indes*, these same thrusting figures are assigned to high instruments and low instruments, quasi-echoing each other.) As the *Mercure de France* reported at the time, the two visitors from across the Atlantic had mimed and danced a number of scenes: forming an alliance (by passing the peace-pipe); launching battle against an enemy tribe; experiencing the horrors of war; and rejoicing with a dance of victory. Similarly, the underlying rhythm of long-short-short

may conceivably echo what Rameau had heard: some foot-stomping, and the drum-beating with which (as the *Mercure de France* reported) one of the dancers accompanied the other's hunt for the enemy. The late musicologist Miriam Whaples proposed a less literal reading: 'Rameau was characterizing not the actual performance that he had seen [and the drum-beating that he had heard] so much as a real or imagined nobility of bearing, a natural dignity, a quality of soul.'

This revolutionary project of portraying a distant people is carried out even more dramatically in the work's second *entrée*, *Les Incas du Pérou*. And this is done, again, primarily with the normal resources available to the Western opera composer. To be sure, *Les Incas* contains several major numbers displaying features that were clearly meant to sound ancient and/or weird. These include the orchestral march and dances that form part of the Incas' Festival of the Sun, and—to bring the *entrée* to an impressive end—the orchestra's portrayal of a volcano erupting. But equally striking is what occurs in the sections that do not sound in any way foreign or strange—for example the opening pages of the *entrée*, which the Rameau authority Sylvie Bouissou has dismissed as comparatively 'weak'. Less colourful they surely are. But I would argue that Fuzelier and Rameau accomplish something crucial here, letting us see and hear the central dramatic character in this *entrée*—the Incan high priest Huascar—as he attempts to manipulate the Incan maiden Phani into marrying him.

Several moments in this section are particularly revealing of Huascar's qualities (positive and negative) and, by extension, those of the non-Western tradition that he represents. The first of these is a short but trenchant *air* that (as another Rameau authority, Cuthbert Girdlestone, once put it) conveys the Incan priest's 'blustering and domineering character'. Huascar tells Phani that 'we'—in other words, she—must

obey the will of heaven 'sans balancer' (that is, without thinking for herself), in an aria the imitative texture of which seems to symbolize the very act of blind obedience he is demanding of her. At times Huascar 'obeys' one of the two instrumental lines, and at times one of those instrumental lines echoes him. The result feels, in the context of Huascar's rhetorical onslaught, coercive. After all, Huascar's words urge Phani to deny her own desires and to submit to authority. This is the opposite of a central principle of Enlightenment thought, namely that one should weigh thoughtfully and dispassionately the evidence for and against various arguments.

Huascar here shows himself to be an unworthy ruler, one who abuses his religious authority for purely personal gain. His intended conquest of Phani is typical of the portrayals of Eastern and New World tyrants in Baroque-era works. Such a tyrannical 'Other' tends to display a variety of deplorable behaviours, such as greed, lust for power, blind rage, a desire to possess an unwilling woman (or to possess more than one woman, whether they be willing or not), and, in the case of Muslims, drunken excess. (The benevolent pasha of *Le Turc généreux* is an exception. As noted above, he embodies a universalist precept central to much Enlightenment thought: virtue can be found among all peoples.)

In the *entrées* set in an exotic land ruled by a tyrant, the inhabitants are rarely shown as resenting his oppressive rule. This suggests that they have little sense of the qualities that are appropriate for a good king and, by extension, appropriate for his subjects: that is, themselves. Admittedly, the Incas, in honouring the Sun, praise the power of nature's light and also evince their own collective social dignity. But they give no hint of envisioning a truly beneficent social structure, such as an enlightened (rational, moderate) despotism rather than the Incas' current backward (oppressive, authoritarian, ignorance-encouraging) despotism.

■ *François Lis as Huascar in Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's production, with Anna Prohaska as Phani*

Phani, however, is an exception. She responds to Huascar's threats in a manner that demonstrates her intuitive grasp of Enlightenment rationality as well as the healthy influence of her Spanish soldier-boyfriend Carlos. It also suggests that her people as a whole likewise possess great potential. Phani observes coolly—her music here is relatively unruffled—that people who 'speak in the name of the gods' are often guilty of 'imposture'. Huascar parries with emphatic and egocentric claims, set to an excitable, angular melody: 'What a heinous insult to the Gods and to me!' ('Pour les Dieux et pour moi, quelle coupable injure!'). Fuzelier, in his preface to the published libretto, worded Phani's accusation more bluntly: Huascar, he wrote, typifies 'imposture hidden under the sacred cloak of religion'. Presumably Fuzelier



intended the single word ‘religion’ to suggest that Huascar, though presented within the drama as a ‘pagan sacrificer’ (Fuzelier’s term), could also represent a prominent member of any clerical hierarchy who abuses religious authority for selfish ends—including a bishop or even a pope.

In the final phase of the exchange with Phani, Huascar reveals that he knows that she loves a Spanish soldier. Huascar even attempts to invoke a patriotic argument in order to win Phani away from his European rival:

C’est l’or qu’avec empressement,
Sans jamais s’assouvir, ces barbares dévorent.
L’or qui de nos autels ne fait que l’ornement
Est le seul Dieu que nos tyrans adorent.

It is gold that these barbarians devour so eagerly
Without ever being sated by it.
Gold—which is merely an beautifying ornament on our altars—
Is the only god that these men who act like tyrants over us adore.

The Incan priest here accuses the Spanish conquerors of being ‘barbarians’ who are motivated not by belief in one God and in salvation through Christ (as they claim), but by simple greed. Huascar’s castigating words are remarkable and reveal a nobility that even 18th-century Parisian courtiers may have admired.

Minutes earlier, Phani has warned Carlos that the ‘barbarous’ Incas might do him harm if he tries to have her flee with him. Here, by contrast, Huascar applies the word *barbares* to the supposedly civilized Europeans. Rameau places its accented second syllable on an eloquently intense high F. And he brings Huascar’s prosecutorial statement to a forceful close with what is—within the context of Rameau’s normal recitative style—an unusually emphatic cadence: two successive falling fifths in the voice part, over a strong harmonic progression.

Huascar’s tirade about the Spaniards’ thirst for gold thus shows him as an aggrieved, untiring and persuasive representative of a colonized people: an agitator against the

■ ‘What power does a woman have over her own fate’? Laura Scozzi’s 2014 production in Bordeaux



foreign oppressor. The nobility of his political stance, however, is corrupted by what he himself call his ‘amour furieux’. Huascar eventually rolls a boulder into a volcano, in order to make it erupt; his plan is that this will scare Phani into running to safety with him. Enlightenment-era writers would not have hesitated to call this an act of ‘terror’ typical of despotic governments. Huascar is here attempting to exploit the ignorance of Phani and the other Peruvians by appealing to their fear of divine retribution. Furthermore, he is strikingly juxtaposed with the rational modern European (Carlos), who, before the cataclysm begins, appears on stage to explain to Phani—by means of simple logic and scientific facts—Huascar’s heinous act and its foreseeable consequences.

Phani, her eyes now open, rejects Huascar one last time. Huascar recognizes—in accordance with the standard Enlightenment plot of ‘the tyrant corrected’—that he has betrayed the ethical injunctions of his own religion. Or, as Enlightenment thinkers might have said, he has betrayed the ethical injunctions common to all worthy religions, all unprejudiced philosophy. The music historian Catherine Cole notes another likely way of ‘reading’ Huascar that may refer to Europe itself rather than some distant land. Huascar’s manipulative use of his scientific knowledge, Cole points out, ‘perfectly illustrates the Enlightenment stereotype of a corrupt priest, a clergyman who manipulates his people by abusing their credulous “superstition” concerning the natural environment’.

Thanks to Carlos’s alertness and up-to-date knowledge, the natives and the Spaniards now run clear of the cascading lava, while the orchestra plays an extended passage that is heard (in context) as rumbling, surging and violent—and not at all as Incan. (A volcano has, of course, no ethnic identity.) Huascar sacrifices himself under the molten flow, thereby (the librettist implies) restoring the social order. One final time in this *entrée*, the actions of a mostly nefarious—but also briefly admirable—exotic leader have been deepened and intensified by music that uses all the usual (rather than exotic) resources available to a European composer of the early 18th century.

Leonardo García Alarcón conducts new productions of ‘Les Indes galantes’ at the Opéra Bastille (p. Clément Cogitore, opening on September 27) and Grand Théâtre de Genève (p. Lydia Steier, opening on December 13). There is also a concert performance, conducted by Valentin Tournet, at the Opéra Royal de Versailles on November 15.

A slightly different version of this essay first appeared, in translation, in the programme book for the 2016-17 season of Munich’s Bayerische Staatsoper.



■ Danielle de Niese in the prologue to Andrei Serban’s Paris production, 2003