

THE ELEMENTS

Jean-Féry Rebel (arr. Nagy): Les Elements

Le Cabos

Jean-Philippe Rameau: Extraits d'Opéras

EARTH Ritournelle (Hippolyte et Aricie)

AIR Entrée de polymnie (Boréades)

WATER Fremissement des flots (Hippolyte et Aricie)

FIRE Tremblement de terre - Dans les abimes (from Les Indes galantes)

Theo Chandler: The Elements

I. Earth

II. Air

III. Water

IV. Fire

Rameau: Pièces de Clavecin (1724)

Les Tourbillons – Les Cyclopes

Rebel (arr. Nagy): Les Elements

La Terre (Loure I) – Le Feu (Chaconne) – L'Air (Ramage) – Rossignols

Loure (II) – Tambourins – Sicilienne – Air pour l'amour – Caprice

Artists:

Kathie Stewart, flute | Debra Nagy, oboe & recorder

Julie Andrijeski & Scott Metcalfe, violin

Steuart Pincombe & Jaap ter Linden, viola da gamba

Anna Marsh, bassoon | Mark Edwards, harpsichord

Program Sponsor: Charlotte & Jack Newman

Commission Sponsor: Kim Sherwin

Outreach Sponsor: Ursula Korneitchouk

Les Délices is grateful for generous support from the residents of Cuyahoga County through grants from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture, Paul M. Angell Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, and others.

Notes on the Program:

Over eighteen months ago, as I considered programming for the final concert of Les Délices' milestone 10th Anniversary season, I wanted to present a work that not only represented the apex of French Baroque style but also looked enthusiastically and unflinchingly into the future.

I immediately thought of Jean-Féry Rebel's 1737 masterpiece *Les Elemens*. Characterized by lush harmonies, replete with expression and grace, and inspired by ideals of the French Enlightenment, *Les Elemens* nonetheless broke boundaries with its unconventional form, liberal dissonance, and use of *leitmotifs* to portray each of the four elements in nature: earth, air, water, and fire.

Rebel's music has hopefully become familiar to Les Délices audiences. Over the past 10 years, we've performed several violin and trio sonatas as well as scenes from his only opera *L'Ulysse* (which framed our Odyssey-inspired *Myths & Allegories* program). Further, a few of his early "choreographed symphonies" such as the tour-de-force *Caractères de la danse* have become signature pieces for our ensemble. Programming *Les Elemens* represented an opportunity to bring Rebel's final, experimental, brilliant, virtuosic, and evocative score to life using an expanded chamber ensemble.

Already in his 70s, Rebel (1666-1747) effectively came out of retirement to complete *Les Elemens* as a commission from the Prince de Carignan. A visionary arts patron, Carignan was a great proponent of new music who underwrote the creation of many operas. Rebel's own dedication lauds the Prince for granting him the artistic freedom and independence that enabled such a self-consciously innovative work. Rebel went so far as to call *Les Elemens* a *symphonie nouvelle* (a new, re-imagined symphony). Indeed, the striking, pulsating tone clusters of the introduction *Le Chaos* (Chaos) hardly seem to speak the musical language of the eighteenth century - rather, they might be at home in the works of Stravinsky!

While Rebel's work can be seen as being way ahead of its time, it's also absolutely of its moment. The death of Louis XIV in 1715 ushered in the Enlightenment in France, allowing Paris to become a center for scientific and philosophical activities that fostered egalitarianism and ambitious projects aimed at wide distribution of knowledge such as Diderot and D'Alembert's comprehensive *Encyclopédie*. Fascinated by natural history and influenced by the widely translated and published revelations of Newtonian physics, Rebel's own introduction to *Les Elemens* makes clear reference to science and the natural order: "confusion reigned between the Elements before the instant when, subject to invariable laws, they took their prescribed place in the order of nature."

While *Les Elemens*' central message of teasing order from chaos draws directly on Enlightenment ideals, it nonetheless pushed technical and coloristic boundaries for both audiences and performers in wholly original ways. Layering motives while deftly combining details of orchestration (for instance, long, held notes and trills for flutes depict *Air* while flowing scales represent the murmuring of running *Water*), Rebel admits his daring in "combining the confusion of the Elements [motives] with harmonic confusion" in a way that reminds of us Charles Ives. He also added dissonance to the mix, explaining, "I tried to make heard all the sounds mingled together, or rather all the notes of the octave together in a chord. These notes then evolve, moving up toward a unison in the way most natural to them, leading, after a discord, to a perfect chord."

Like Rebel, Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) was a brilliant orchestrator and his affiliation with the Opéra provided abundant opportunities for composing colorful instrumental tableaux. In fact, opera libretti's worlds of myth and legend enabled extensive use of supernatural elements collectively known as *merveilleux*. Frequent hell scenes, battles between jealous gods, sea monsters, and “unnatural” disasters including earthquakes and tempests allowed Rameau to infuse his works with harmonic artifice and virtuosic display. Drawing selections from Rameau's operatic *oeuvre*, we've created our own short suite representing the four elements: the grinding, earth-bound fugue of the *Ritournelle* from *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733) makes a stark contrast to the ethereal, flowing lines of the *Entrée de Polymnie* from *Boréades* (1764) while the foreboding, undulating waves of the *Frémissement des flots* give way to a terrible storm. Rameau's chilling musical earthquake from *Les Indes Galantes* (1735) depicts the wrath of an Incan high-priest hurling rocks into a volcano.

Rameau came to composing operas late in his career, but his flair for the dramatic was already on display in character pieces from his earliest publication for solo harpsichord. In *Tourbillons* (literally, whirlwind), we hear at first little eddies and swirls before the music is nearly blown off the page with huge, icy gusts. *Les Cyclopes* crackles with a different energy. Its title makes reference not to the thundering one-eyed giant, but to the blacksmiths who fashioned Zeus's lightning bolts in their subterranean forge. In this rondeau we hear them hammering steel with repeated strokes – both delicate and thunderous – as sparks fly.

We close our program with a return to Rebel's *Les Elemens* acknowledging that, at the October 1737 premiere, audiences experienced only the suite (with a choreography for six dancers) and not Rebel's remarkable introduction (*Le Cahos* was first heard along with the dance suite in March 1738). Representations of the elements and other sounds of nature are present throughout: in the first loure *La Terre* (earth), earthy bass strokes get combined with flowing water, while the chaconne *Le feu* yields to fiery display with brilliant violin flourishes. I'm always a bit confused by Rebel's annotation of *L'Eau* (water) for the swirling *Tambourins* (considering that the implied drum beats give this music such a grounded, vertical feel), but the bassoon solo of the second tambourin creates a fantastically muted, almost “underwater” color that allows me to imagine the irregular sounds of lapping waves and bubbles! The suite also contains more corporeal sounds from nature: bird songs serve as the basis for the *Ramage* and *Rosignols* while echoes of the hunt and its horn calls ring forth in the 2nd *Loure* and *Caprice*. We hope that future Les Délices performances of *Les Elemens* will provide opportunities for the creation of a new choreography!

The “new music” element of Rebel's amazing introduction to *Les Elemens* inspired me to commission a work specifically for Les Délices that would view Rebel's work through a 21st century lens. A commission is a terrific way to celebrate a musical milestone – and it seemed obvious to me to commission a new piece for period instruments that would take inspiration from Rebel's.

- Debra Nagy

Composer's Note

I wrote *The Elements* for *Les Délices*, to be programmed alongside François Rebel's *Les Elemens*. In his work, Rebel boldly breaks convention for a striking depiction of Chaos. With Rebel as inspiration, I chose to write a piece that pronounces sonic imagery as its primary focus. Composing for period



April 5, 2019 at 7:30pm

Holy Trinity Lutheran, Akron

April 6, 2019 at 8:00pm

Lakewood Congregational Church

April 7, 2019 at 4:00pm

Plymouth Church UCC, Shaker Heights

instruments allowed me to work out a vocabulary of colors and gestures that felt particularly well-suited for this project.

My piece is in four movements, each corresponding to one of the four elements. For “Earth”, I wrote unhurried, vertical music, focusing on thick, sturdy chords in the harpsichord and strings. “Air” is the least substantial movement, and is characterized by fluttery trills and breezy scales. “Water” depicts the endless churning of the ocean with deep, swelling sonorities in the viols, while the winds intone a long line punctuated by distant flickering of the harpsichord. The finale movement, “Fire”, is the most energetic and jagged in the set. The instruments attempt to ignite the fire repeatedly, emitting sparks and smoke.

-Theo Chandler