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Rameau (Une) Symphonie Imaginaire

A wealth of beautiful music but, with the best will, this is no symphony

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Marc Minkowski's desire to conjure a Rameau symphony is understandable. It is disappointing not to have a contribution to this genre from the finest 18th-century French composer and undisputed master of orchestration. Attractive as the notion is, it cannot succeed: we have at best a *divertissement* bringing together a representative selection of orchestral music from across Rameau's output. With the exception of the expanded orchestration of *La poule* no instrumental ensemble movements free of theatrical associations have been mustered here.

This live recording has a frisson about it and Les Musiciens du Louvre create a sound that blends and blooms in the Théâtre de Poissy. The sophistication of the 'Ouverture' to *Zaïs* is calculated to elicit gasps of admiration from the audience. It oozes theatricality, as does the stately 'Scène funèbre' from *Castor et Pollux* and 'Orage' from *Platée* that follow. Minkowski has chosen music that contrasts well on many levels, and it is notable that the largest number of items comes from *Les Boréades*. The decision to include the orchestration of *La poule* was perhaps a mistake (while maintaining a spritely tempo, Minkowski allows the bass instruments to become predatory). Are we meant to note the allusion to the original harpsichord piece or not?

There were French composers of symphonies at work during Rameau's latter years but they were clearly of another generation and subject to very different influences. Rameau's idiom was essentially ceremonial and restricted to courtly dances, and this limited the scale on which he worked and his development of melodic material. The *rondeau* format of which he was so fond depends on recurring musical material rather than its reinterpretation. Although there is a wealth of beautiful music exquisitely orchestrated on this disc, it isn't, alas, symphony music in the contemporary Italian or Germanic sense.