

BELSIZE BAROQUE

Catherine Martin
Director

Splendour and
Sonority:
French Baroque
and Beyond

Lully
Rameau
Muffat

Sunday 21 September 2025, 6.30 pm

St Peter's Church, Belsize Square,
Belsize Park, London, NW3 4UY

www.belsizebaroque.org.uk



Splendour and Sonority: French Baroque and Beyond

This evening's concert draws us into the world of French Baroque spectacle – music conceived not only for the ear but also for the eye and the imagination. French opera and ballet in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were grand affairs: glittering displays of dance, song, mythological storytelling, and orchestral colour. At their heart was a particular richness of sonority, often supported by multiple inner string parts. French orchestras of the time frequently employed two or even three viola lines, creating a sumptuous, velvety texture quite unlike the leaner sound of their Italian contemporaries.

The rest of the orchestra was often divided between melody instruments (with violins, flutes, and oboes all playing the melody together) and bass-line instruments (bassoons and any type of string bass), leaving the violas to carry the harmony. This way of conceiving an orchestra, specific to France at the time, has more in common with a band than with our contemporary idea of a symphony orchestra. To honour that tradition, tonight's programme includes suites from Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Philippe Rameau, masters of the French stage, alongside a work by Georg Muffat, a composer who consciously bridged the gap between French and Italian styles and who also wrote in a five-part string texture with divided violas.

We may not be able to recreate the pomp and glamour of the Paris theatre, but we hope to conjure up some of the fantastical worlds that once dazzled French audiences.

But why do we make a distinction between French and Italian opera? Opera was predominantly an Italian art form, and across most of Europe it was performed in Italian and modelled on Italian styles. In London, for instance, operas were always sung in Italian and often featured visiting Italian singers. Paris was the exception: the French rejected Italian models and cultivated their own unique tradition. French opera typically combined recitatives and arias with ballet, and placed a greater emphasis on stage spectacle than on virtuosic display. Italian opera often revolved around a sequence of showpiece arias, but French opera tended to build gradually: an act might begin with a solo voice and a few instruments, then expand into full ensembles of singers, dancers, and orchestra as the drama intensified.

This meant that French opera contained enormous amounts of instrumental music, and it was here that composers such as Rameau lavished their most inventive ideas, creating detailed soundscapes to heighten the stage drama.

Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687): Suite from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*

Ouverture – Act 2 Deuxième Air – Canarie – Marche – Act 5 Premier Air – Act 5 Deuxième Air – Chaconne

Jean-Baptiste Lully, court composer to Louis XIV, perfected the genre of comédie-ballet, in which music, spoken drama, and dance were seamlessly woven together. *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670), created in collaboration with the playwright Molière, is a satirical comedy about a wealthy middle-class man aspiring to aristocratic manners. Lully's music sparkles with wit and theatrical flair: the suite includes elegant dances, lively interludes, and comic character pieces, all infused with the rhythmic verve that defined the French style. The five-part string writing (two violins and three violas, plus basses) produces a luxurious blend of colours – an instrumental texture that was the envy of Europe. Lully's music remained central to the repertoire long after his death, setting the benchmark for the next generation of French opera composers.

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764): Suite from *Les Indes Galantes*

Ouverture – Musette – Air – Air Gratieux – Gavottes – Adoration du soleil – Danse

Few works capture the colour and exoticism of the French Baroque more vividly than Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes* (1735). This was only his third opera, although he was already in his fifties:

Lully's operas remained so popular that it was difficult for a new composer to make his voice heard. Rameau's first opera, *Hippolyte et Aricie*, caused a storm among the devoted Lullyistes, who found his harmonies daring, even shocking. That work stretched performers to their limits, forcing him to temper some of his boldness in later operas – though not for long.

Les Indes Galantes is an opéra-ballet rather than a continuous drama, with a prologue and a sequence of self-contained acts exploring the nature of love across the world – in Turkey, Persia, Peru, and North America. Rameau was less concerned with ethnographic accuracy than with creating a kaleidoscope of musical styles to suggest the richness of the wider world. The dances range from tenderly lyrical to rhythmically infectious, often with novel instrumental touches that delighted Parisian audiences.

The suite performed tonight highlights his orchestral brilliance. Listen for the bassoons – Rameau loved them, and they appear right from the overture. Notice the range of musical sounds Rameau employs, from the bagpipe drones of the *musette* to the flutes painting a picture of the sun (*Adoration du soleil*) and the piccolo flutes in the final dance, one of Rameau's most famous melodies.

Georg Muffat (1653–1704): Sonata No. 4 in E minor from *Armonico Tributo* *Grave – Balletto – Adagio / Presto – Menuetto – Adagio – Presto*

Georg Muffat is one of the great cosmopolitan figures of the Baroque. Born in Savoy, he studied in Paris with Lully, absorbed the Italian concerto style during his time in Rome, and worked across the German-speaking lands. He is notable for the very detailed performance instructions he provides in some of his published works, which were intended to help German musicians with the idiom of the French dance style and include detailed rules for the tempo and order of bow strokes in various types of movement. Although few of us in the orchestra have read Muffat's instructions in detail, we are fortunate to be guided by Catherine Martin, not only as our director but also as an expert in this music. With her insight, we feel confident that our performance comes close to Muffat's intentions.

Muffat's *Armonico Tributo* (1682) is a landmark collection of five large-scale sonatas that anticipate the concerto grosso later made famous by Corelli. Like his French models, Muffat divides the violas into two parts, thus enriching the texture, while shaping the music with Italian clarity and structure. Including Muffat alongside Lully and Rameau not only highlights the grandeur of French music in this period but also reminds us how influential the French style was across Europe.

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764): Suite from *Castor et Pollux*

Ouverture – Entracte – Air pour les athlètes – Prélude tendre – Premier Air – Entrée d'Hébé – Tambourin – Sarabande – Gavottes I & II – Chaconne

Returning to Rameau, *Castor et Pollux* (his fourth opera, first staged in 1737, revised in 1754) was hailed in its day as a masterpiece of French opera. It tells the mythological story of the twin brothers Castor (mortal) and Pollux (immortal), whose devotion leads to their transformation into the constellation Gemini. The story follows Pollux as he journeys to the underworld to save his deceased brother Castor. It begins with a prologue that celebrates the possibility of art which can only happen in a time of peace, setting up the broad thematic arc of the opera (from war to loving reconciliation). The opera ends with the fantastical *fête de l'univers* ("Festival of the Universe") in which the stars, planets, and sun celebrate Jupiter's decision to immortalise the twins as they are received into the Zodiac as the constellation of Gemini. With its cosmic ending, the opera has even been described as the first "science-fiction" opera.

Our suite presents instrumental highlights that capture the opera's dramatic power: noble overtures, dances of elegance and poise, and orchestral interludes that bristle with energy. Rameau's bold harmonies and colourful orchestration reveal him as one of the most adventurous voices of the eighteenth century. In this opera he manages to integrate the dance sequences directly into the drama – for instance, in Act 2, the chorus and dancers become the horde of demons refusing

Pollux's entry to the underworld. The demon music was apparently enough to send at least one other composer mad – poor overlooked Jean-Joseph Mouret was heard singing this chorus in the madhouse before his death, at least according to legend.

We have selected music from both versions of the opera, and also some of Rameau's reorchestrations from 1754, when musicians had become a little more accustomed to his substantial demands. A special mention goes to our bassoonists, who are really put through their paces: by the 1740s, Rameau often used groups of bassoons at the top of their range to act as extra viola lines or to provide counter-melodies to the violins. This represents orchestration in the modern sense – the use of instruments not just for variety of colour but to add important layers to the composition only possible with that specific timbre. We have also observed that, particularly in his later works, Rameau does not care what key the music is in, and expects the instruments of the time to execute whatever he throws at them. Listen for the leaping air devoted to the athletes, and the deeply moving *Prélude tendre*, which seems to reach for the stars.

Because Rameau's works were for a long time available only in unusable heavily edited nineteenth-century editions, much of this music is still rarely heard today. We are grateful that so many libraries, such as the Paris archive, are making original manuscripts available online so that groups like ours have the opportunity to perform this extraordinary music.

Programme notes by Richard Austen
Design/layout by Andrew Welsh

Putting on performances, running workshops, and maintaining our scholarships all require funds. Concerts alone cannot cover the costs of these and we receive no regular external funding. All of the administration is carried out by unpaid volunteers. We hope that tonight's concert will inspire you to donate to the orchestra, which you can do very easily via the link. Thank you for your generosity. www.justgiving.com/campaign/belsizebaroque



Catherine Martin read music at St Anne's College, Oxford, completing her postgraduate studies with David Takeno at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, on the Advanced Solo Studies course.

During this time, she became interested in historical performance, playing the baroque violin alongside her modern violin studies. Catherine spent twelve years as a member of The English Concert under the direction of Trevor Pinnock, before leaving in 2005 to take up the post of leader of the Gabrieli Consort and Players. In 2010 Catherine was also appointed concertmaster of Die Kölner Akademie in Germany. She has been the leader of the orchestra of the Early Opera Company since its inception in 1994.

Catherine was invited by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in 2012 to coach the players on baroque and classical repertoire. She also runs

weekend workshops and concert performances with many amateur baroque orchestras and modern chamber orchestras who wish to know more about the field of historical performance. Catherine has a particular interest in Norwegian folk music, playing the hardanger fiddle.

In 2003, Catherine joined the Salomon String Quartet as second violin to Simon Standage, with whom she also plays trio sonatas in Collegium Musicum 90. Catherine appears on many recordings; for Deutsche Grammophon and Winged Lion with The Gabrieli Consort and Players, EMI with Ensemble Galant, and Chandos with I Fagiolini. She teaches historical violin at the Royal College of Music in London.

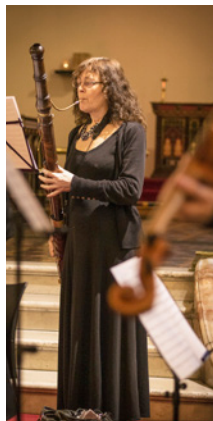


Photo by John Watson



Photo by John Watson

Belsize Baroque

The orchestra comprises music professionals, music students and amateur players. Our amateur musicians come from many different walks of life, and our players in general come from all over the world. Many musicians who joined us as students over the years have gone on to successful careers in top orchestras. Since 2016 the generosity of supporters has in addition made our formal scholarship programme possible.

Over the past two decades, we have been privileged to work with renowned directors and many talented musicians. We have performed many large-scale works with numerous choirs, and have given performances in aid of charities, as well as working with the Handel House and the London Handel Festival. Our first concert at St Peter's was on 22 June 2013, since when we have been orchestra in residence at the church, enjoying the support of its staff and the local community.

Belsize Baroque Orchestral Society Ltd is a registered charity (number 1108596) and company (number 5267265). The orchestra can be hired for orchestral or choral concerts and other events, and is delighted to assist other charities. www.belsizebaroque.org.uk; Twitter: @Belsize_Baroque



Belsize Baroque would like to thank the Richard Link and The Rofeh Trust for their generous donations in support of the orchestra, and the churchwardens of St Peter's for their assistance.

First violins

Catherine Martin
Graham Nicholson
Rachel Ambrose Evans
Miranda Ford
Anthony Constantine

Second violins

Nick Hardisty
Christine-Marié Louw
Michael Jenner
Carsten Maass
Jenny Frost

Violas

Elizabeth Hart
Val Hudson
Roger Mears
Alistair Scahill
Deborah Miles-Johnson
Andrew Spencer

Cellos

David Winfield
Cai Waverly-Hudson
Paul Woodmansterne
Mary Walton

Violone

Magdalena Theurl

Harpsichord

Michael Strange

Theorbo

Quentin Miller

Harp

Jane Bliss

Oboes

Susan Cooksley
Craig White

Bassoons

Janice Chui
Hilary Ougham

Flutes

Richard Austen
Naomi Anderson

Recorders

Richard Austen
Susan Cooksley



THE OLD MASTERS IN NEW HANDS

Sheku Kanneh-Mason MBE plays on a cello by Matteo Goffriller, Venice c1700, the 'Ex-Goritzki', made possible by the Florian Leonhard Fellowship, and an exceptionally fine bow by Nicolas Maire c1855, lent by a private sponsor.



FLORIAN
LEONHARD
FINE VIOLINS

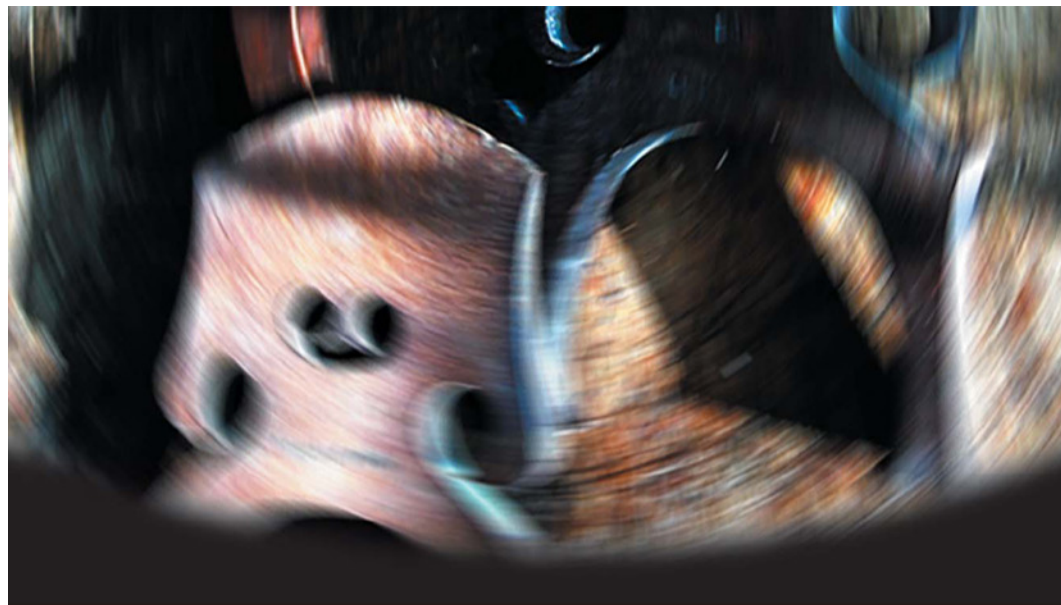
LONDON | HONG KONG | SEOUL | SAN FRANCISCO | NEW YORK

violins@florianleonhard.com | www.florianleonhard.com

Save the date! Our next concerts will be on Sunday 30 November 2025, directed by Nick Hardisty, and 18 January 2026, directed by Catherine Martin. Details will be available soon at www.belsizebaroque.org.uk.



Photo by John Watson



BRIDGEWOOD & NEITZERT

dealers, makers & repairers of good modern & baroque violins, violas, cellos, basses & bows

Expertise led by a passion for sound

Fine selection of instruments and bows

Baroque and Classical period instruments

Repairs and conversions

Tonal adjustments

Bow rehairing

Same day string mail order service

Advice, expertise and valuations

020 7249 9398

146 Stoke Newington Church Street London N16

www.bridgewoodandneitzert.london