

## THE ENCHANTED FOREST

The pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles taught that the primordial forces of *philia* and *neikos*, love and strife, act continually on the four basic elements or roots (*rhizomata*) of the world: fire, air, water and earth. Love binds the elements into wholes, while strife tears them apart so they can be assembled anew. Medicalized by physicians like Hippocrates and Galen, the elements also provided an influential vocabulary of human self-understanding, for the early physiologies and psychologies were elemental: the proportions of black bile (earth), phlegm (water), blood (air), and yellow bile (fire) in a body accounted for its state of health and the turn of its passions.

Elemental thinking was friendly to the baroque mind. Baroque art is, so often, an art of motion, and the elements are never at rest but rather in constant combination and recombination. The sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, for instance, turns cold marble into fire, and composers like Handel and Telemann depicted the ebb and flow of water. The four classical elements also provided a theme for the last and most adventurous of **Jean-Féry Rebel's** (1666–1747) “symphonies” for ballet, works that helped to win dance a place on the public stage independent from the theatre and court. After studying with Jean-Baptiste Lully, Rebel had come to occupy a position at the center of French musical life as one of the 24 violons du roi, a musician of the royal chapel and a leading figure in the opera orchestra. As a composer, Rebel was on the cutting edge, being among the early French composers to cultivate the sonata genre and to integrate Italian elements into French music.

Rebel's works for dance (unlike his operas) met with tremendous success in their day. *Les Éléments* takes the form of a dance suite preceded by a prelude entitled “Le cahos” (chaos) in which Rebel sought to depict, in his own words, “the confusion that reigned between the Elements before the instant in which, subjected to invariable laws, they took the place prescribed for them in the order of Nature.” The dissonant cluster that begins the piece—a chord composed of every note in the scale—is avant-garde, but Rebel's audiences would have recognized an aesthetic rationale rooted in the idea of mimesis, or imitation: a chord that squashes together all the materials of tonal music mirrors the undifferentiated mass of matter before the ordered creation of the cosmos (in more recent cosmological terms, a kind of pre-Big Bang compression of the universe).

Over the seven parts of the prelude (for the seven days of Creation), different kinds of musical motion representing the four elements separate themselves out and are gradually drawn into a harmonious concord. For earth, there are heavy repeated notes in the bass instruments; for water, flowing scales in quarters and eighths; for air, high tones and trills in the flutes; and for fire, the lightest and most volatile element, darting runs and tremolos in the violins.

The subsequent dances carry forward this link between each element and a characteristic style of motion. The loure, a slow dance with pastoral associations, combines the heavy elements of water and earth, whereas the violin passagework in

the chaconne is all swooping tongues of flame. (The chaconne's origins in Spain and its often being danced with castanets can only have intensified its fiery ambience for French listeners.) "Ramage" (chattering) and "Rossignols" (nightingales) both evoke birdsong, and the score specifies that the two tambourins are for water—which may account for the second tambourin's bubbly bassoon part.

The dance spectacles of Paris also inspired the creation of **Francesco Geminiani's** (1687–1762) *Enchanted Forest* music. Established in England as a violinist and teacher, Geminiani continued to make entrepreneurial visits to France, and it was a Paris impresario, Giovanni Niccolò Servandoni, who commissioned music from Geminiani to accompany a pantomime entitled *La forest enchantée*, which had its premiere in the Tuileries palace's "Salle des machines" in the spring of 1754. Geminiani's original music for the pantomime is lost, but the composer recast it twice, first in a new score with the title *La selva incantata* and then in a publication entitled *The Incharned Forest*.

*La forest enchantée's* story is drawn—like those of so many baroque madrigals and operas—from Torquato Tasso's epic *La Gerusalemme liberata*, a tale of the first Crusade. Servandoni's pantomime follows an episode late in the poem in which Godfrey of Bouillon, the crusader commander, and his army are frustrated in their attempts to gather timber for siege engines by fearsome spirits inhabiting the forest at the behest of the sorcerer Ismen.

The enchanted forest, shown by both moonlight and daylight, provided Servandoni, (a noted illusionist) with ample opportunity for spectacular effects. From their first efforts to fell the woods crusader soldiers are frightened off by specters, thundering sounds and the calls of fierce beasts. Only when Renaud (Rinaldo), the Achillean hero of the tale, can overcome both the enticements of the forest (dancing nymphs with musical instruments, an apparition of his sometime paramour Armida) and its last desperate threats (a *mélée* of giants and cyclopes) by striking an ancient myrtle tree with his sword is the spell lifted. The enchantments melt away, and the workers "destroy at last this redoubtable forest, and make the trees fall under their redoubled strokes."

Servandoni's pantomime seems to have had a certain ambivalence: it reveled, with all the wondrous artifice of the baroque stage, in the weird magic of the forest while celebrating, on the level of narrative, its disenchantment and destruction. For listeners today, Geminiani's wonderfully evocative *Enchanted Forest* music, rooted in the concerto grosso tradition, preserves the aura of enchantment rather than the specificities of the plot—an elemental cloud of possibilities from which new stories can take shape.