

Les Éléments (The Elements)

JEAN-FÉRY REBEL

B. April 18, 1666, Paris

D. January 2, 1747, Paris

Premiered September 27, 1737 at the Académie Royale de Musique in Paris.

Scored for two flutes, two oboes, one bassoon, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, harpsichord and strings (approx. 25 minutes).

Jean-Féry Rebel was the second and most famous of three generations to serve in the French court from 1661 to 1775. His father, Jean Rebel, entered the royal chapel in 1661 singing under the direction of Jean-Baptiste Lully. When Lully noticed the music talents of eight-year-old Jean-Féry, he tutored him in violin and composition.

From 1699 to 1733, Rebel held several positions in the court of Louis XIV and at the Opéra. He joined the Opéra in 1699 as violinist, and then assumed additional jobs as harpsichordist (1702-15), *batteur de mesure* (lit. “time-beater”, the emerging role of conductor) (1715-c.1727) and *maître de musique*, or Music Master (c. 1727-33). Along with his Opéra duties, he also held positions at court. He was both member and then leader of the King’s 24 Violins (1705-17), and Chamber Music Composer (1718-27). His chamber works, trio sonatas for violin and continuo, were among the first sonatas composed in France.

Though his only opera, *Ulysse*, was not the success he had hoped for, his dance music was extremely successful. Rebel was the first to choreograph dance outside of dramatic works, composing works in a new genre, the “choreographic symphony.” *Caprice* (1711), the first of such works was choreographed for the famous Mademoiselle Prévost. Others, notably *Les Caracteres de la Danse* (1715) and *Les Éléments* (1737), were choreographed for the most famous women dancers of the period.

Les Éléments, Rebel’s last composition, was his most ambitious and striking work. Dedicated to the Prince of Carignan, one of his powerful patrons, this work is a ten-movement choreographed tone poem depicting the formation of earth’s elements (earth, water, fire and air) from cosmic chaos. Though they were originally composed and performed separately, the movement *Le Cahos* (“Chaos”) later became the introduction to the dance suite *Les Éléments* and are now published and performed together.

Because of its originality and harmonic daring, *Chaos* is considered a musical masterpiece of the time, and compared to Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (1913). Yet, while the first Paris run of Stravinsky’s work incited riots, one Paris arts journal claimed *Les Éléments* was received “in the judgment of the greatest Connoisseurs, (as) one of the most beautiful symphonic works in this genre...”

Chaos begins with an unheard of dissonance, sustaining all seven notes of the D minor scale in one harsh chord. After a short silence, one hears the formation of elements pulsating into existence. Each is introduced as melodic themes that are developed together in later movements. “Air” appears in a high register wind tone suspended above the chaos. Slow, flowing scales depict the appearance of “Water”. “Fire and Earth” enter together at opposite ends of the register: “Fire,” the shimmering violins dancing with “Air,” float above the

rumblings of “Earth’s” bass section. As the four elements develop, interweaving throughout their seven appearances, the rhythmic “Chaos” diminishes.

Most of the succeeding movements are based on dance forms. *Loure* is for “Earth and Water”; *Chaconne* for “Fire”; and *Ramage* for “Air.” As “life” appears in this work, Rebel inserts birdsongs into *Ramage* (Birdsongs) and *Rossignol* (Nightingale). The *Tambourins*, also labeled “Water”, contain shifting phrase lengths. The final three movements, *Sicilienne*, a languid canon, *Rondeau* (*Air pour l’Amour*, or “Song for Cupid”), and *Caprice*, are assigned no element associations.

This is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of Rebel’s *Les Éléments*.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Rebel, *Les Éléments*, Christopher Hogwood conducting the Academy of Ancient Music, L’Oiseau Lyre B0010027.

Program notes by harpist Kelly Yoakam, master’s candidate in Musicology at Michigan State University.