Composer Profiles

Jean-Baptiste Lully
Born: Florence, Italy – 1632
Died: Paris, France - 1687

Biography
Known as the premiere composer of French opera in the 17th century, Jean-Baptiste Lully was not even a French subject until 1661. Born in the Italian city of Florence where the beginnings of opera also took shape, Lully was the son of a miller and brought to Paris at the age of 13 as pageboy to a noblewoman. He then studied guitar, dancing, violin, and composition when he met the young king Louis XIV at the age of twenty. Lully composed some music for the king, who immediately gave him a position as Composer of Instrumental Music. Under his leadership, orchestras added winds to the existing string section, and performers learned how to play the opening note of a piece exactly together, which would become the model of future orchestras to this day. In 1661, Lully was made Superintendent of Music and Composer of Chamber Music to the King, becoming a French citizen in that same year. Lully was granted the opportunity to gain a monopoly over the then-infantile form of opera when he acquired the Académie Royale de Musique (later the Paris Opera) from its previous owner, Pierre Perrin (Perrin being sent to debtor’s prison in 1671). He therefore gained complete control of all opera composition in France until his death in 1687.

Works
Lully brought the Italian style of opera to the French court, along with many of the techniques used in Italian opera, including bass continuo, aria and recitative, and musical continuity with alternation between solo, ensemble, and orchestral passages. Lully’s operas were based on the older form of the ballet de cour, including the concepts of unifying all the scenes into a common plot and promoting the glory of the king. Even Louis XIV portrayed some of the characters in Lully’s operas, particularly those of strength, such as Apollo or Hercules. In his opera Alceste, Louis played the character of Alcide, a French interpretation of Hercules. In most of Lully’s operas, the music is usually centered on a single tonality and contrasts each scene by a rapid shift in harmony, accomplished by a downward scale in the bass, called a “chute”, or “fall”. From 1673 to his death in 1687, Lully produced one opera every year, granting him unparalleled success in his career and a title of nobility in 1681.

Suggested Listening
Opera: Alceste
Opera: Armide