

A Program of French Baroque from Early Music New York

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

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In Baroque music concerts, German and Italian composers get almost all the attention, and for generally good reasons: Bach, Handel and Vivaldi, to name three. But every now and then a period instrument band turns its attention to France, as Frederick Renz and his Early Music New York ensemble did on Saturday evening at St. James' Church, and reminds listeners that this less fully explored corner of the repertory has a freshness and a vitality that invite deeper acquaintance.

Mr. Renz, leading the expanded, orchestral incarnation of his flexible ensemble, began with "Les Éléments," a 1737 work described by its composer, Jean-Ferry Rebel, as a "Simfonie Nouvelle," but, which to modern ears, is an idiosyncratic cross between a suite and a symphonic poem.

Probably because the French court was so partial to dance, composers developed a distinctive lexicon of rhythmic moves (dotted figures, most famously, but also quick alternations of slow and fast passages) as well as the passion for tone painting that drives "Les Éléments." The work begins with a long Overture in which the elements — earth, fire, water and air — are bound together in primordial chaos, fighting to extricate themselves.

Chaos, depicted in brashly dissonant chords, opens the score and returns between episodes given over to each of the elements. The rest of the work is given over to dance movements, some about the elements, others more abstract.

Mr. Renz also led two suites from Rameau ballets: "Les Fêtes Héb  " (1739) on the first half, "Les Paladins" (1760) to close the concert. In these, rhythmic fluidity is more central than pictorialism. Yet the Rameau's orchestration — the low woodwind drone in the Musette en Rondeau of "F  tes," the forceful string writing in the "Air de Furie" in "Paladins" and the generally regal sense that pervades both suites — is irresistible.

The program also included Antoine Dauvergne's Concert Simphonie (Op. 4, No. 1), a 1751 work striking for its quick alternations of major and minor passages and its gracefully spun phrases. Mr. Renz's ensemble — strings, woodwinds, natural horns and harpsichord — gave all these works spirited, tightly unified and texturally transparent readings.

A further helping of works drawn from this well would undoubtedly have an appreciative audience, but that will have to wait. Next season this ensemble's two orchestral concerts are devoted to Telemann and Haydn (although the competing New York Collegium is opening its season in October with a Lully program).