

“I want us to do a dance project at the school on Rameau. With drums... You happy to run it, OK?” Crispin Woodhead sometimes has a wonderfully persuasive way of asking a question that isn’t actually a question! Of course I was delighted and convinced it could work, but not everything was immediately apparent...

A room full of teenagers... And 300 year-old music by Rameau... How’s that going to go I wondered? As we went along to our first Year 10 GCSE Dance lesson, we kept our intros to a minimum. Crispin’s on Louis XV and mine on baroque opera and dance. And then we went straight to check out some YouTube clips.

“Here is what some other groups have done with Rameau dance” I said. “Yeah, that looks ok”. Unphased and instantly engaged, it was actually the easiest sell ever. We then talked more about opera, music and the historical background to what we were about to embark upon. Young hearts and minds can connect instantly with music if you don’t erect barriers. By bypassing intimidating labels and associations (put there by scholars and musicians themselves, tragically), it can therefore only be that *perception* is such a destructive block in everyone feeling that *all* music is theirs to enjoy.

We tried a few dances and then the kids had a vote, and chose this one from *Les Indes Galantes*. They already had some pre-arranged ideas worked out, and they showed them to us. The OAE only moved into the school at the beginning of September, and just three weeks later we had a room full of children dancing to Rameau!

The project grew.... 1, 5, 10, and finally 18 musicians, and while staying true to Rameau, the choreography and music morphed and evolved hand-in-hand. And we settled on a final version for their GCSE assessments.

And then another boost. Budget was approved to record a film. “We’re going to get a top lighting director (Simon Mills), and some very posh gear”, Crispin said. “And spend a day filming it!”

Our production meeting was remarkable. This wasn’t a case of Zen Grisdale (film maker), Crispin and I explaining what we were going to do. The meeting was wonderfully dominated by the kids. Now we all knew each other better, they were increasingly willing to healthily disagree, taking from us only what sat well with them. Every voice was heard, ideas chewed over and then, firmly but kindly, a few important definites were established.

With everyone finding the project radical and stimulating, this first group have certainly shed any tags of being ‘guinea pigs’, and have set the bar very high. We’ve already recorded the audio for a future dance project and helpfully, Rameau, plus Lully and Purcell, wrote an awful lot of dances. And so it would be very nice indeed if these collaborations became a regular fixture of a long, happy and most rewarding partnership between Acland Burghley School and OAE.

Adrian Bending, January 2021.