

## Preview: Les Délices — Jason McStoots to play Pierre Jélyotte in “The Leading Man”

by Mike Telin



Inspired by one of the 18<sup>th</sup> century’s most famous tenors, Pierre Jélyotte, Les Délices’s new program *The Leading Man* includes operatic excerpts of musical heroism, absurdist comedy, and ravishing beauty that were central to Jélyotte’s repertoire. In her program notes, Les Délices’s founder and director Debra Nagy writes: “*Jelyotte appears to have cultivated nothing but admirers. [His] contemporaries remarked on his range, volume, and the velveteen beauty of his tone. ... He had only to sing, and those*

*who listened were intoxicated. All the women went mad.*”

On Saturday, May 3, beginning at 8:00 pm at William Busta Gallery and in Herr Chapel at Plymouth Church on Sunday, May 4 beginning at 4:00pm (a pre-concert lecture by Dr. Georgia Cowart begins at 3pm), Les Délices performs a program of operatic excerpts by Lully, Boismortier, Leclair, and Rameau. The concert features the unique voice and dynamic stage presence of tenor Jason McStoots.

“I’ve wanted to do a program that features a tenor for some time,” Debra Nagy told us by telephone. “In particular I wanted to focus this program with Jason on the career of Jélyotte because Jason is also a fabulous comic actor. He has a very expressive face. And at the last Boston Early Music Festival he portrayed the role of Tabarco the clown in Handel’s *Almira* and he kind of stole the show.” In addition to McStoots, the program includes Debra Nagy, baroque oboe, baroque violinists Scott Metcalfe and Cynthia Black, viola da gamba player Josh Lee, and harpsichordist Michael Sponseller.

Nagy points out that Pierre Jélyotte was a major figure in the Paris opera. “Something that is uniquely French is that instead of having a castrato in the lead — they hated Italian

castrati — the hero or lead character was almost always a high tenor. The French were interested in a naturally produced voice and of course like with the Italians, a high voice is considered Heroic.”

Nagy also finds it fascinating that Pierre Jélyotte seems to have cultivated only positive publicity. “What I think is kind of remarkable about him is that usually singers are a personal taste. And if someone is very popular then inevitably others are jealous. There will always be some bad publicity, but there is basically no bad publicity. It appears that he was able to cultivate nothing but admirers.”

The music on the program was chosen specifically as a result of the research Nagy did on Jélyotte’s career. “I wanted to choose pieces that truly were part of his repertoire and that he made his reputation with. I also wanted to have a wide range of characters. So I worked hard to present some intimate music and some show-stopper arias. There is a lot of instrumental music as well. The challenge of putting together a program of opera scenes is that operas are ensemble pieces, so I had to create a scenario that is going to make sense with one person. For example the Lully is a soliloquy so that makes sense.”

Described by critics as “light and bluff, but neither lightweight nor bland, and with exemplary enunciation” and as having “a silken tenor voice” and “sweet, appealing tone” Jason McStoots has performed around the world and the US. In addition to his recent appearances at the Boston Early Music Festival, McStoots made his European debut in Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* and a Japanese tour of the *St. Matthew Passion* under the direction of Joshua Rifkin. He has appeared with such groups as Boston Lyric Opera, Pacific MusicWorks, Boston Camerata, Handel Choir of Baltimore, New Haven Symphony, Tragicomedia, and the Tanglewood Music Center. His discography includes recordings with Blue Heron and Cut Circle, as well as on the Grammy-nominated recording of Lully’s *Pysché* and on recordings of Charpentier, John Blow, and Handel with the Boston Early Music Festival on the CPO label.

I spoke to the very funny Jason McStoots by telephone.

*Mike Telin: You have some very big shoes to fill with Pierre Jélyotte.*

Jason McStoots: Oh my gosh yes, [laughing] there’s no pressure at all.

*MT: Were you familiar with him prior to this project?*

JMS: I had a passing familiarity with him. I have worked a lot with the Boston Early Music Festival and our main stage director, Gilbert Blin, is a historian of French baroque opera and theatre. And one of the singers that he had mentioned to me as someone to look

to for potential roles was Pierre Jélyotte. I looked at the Wikipedia page entry for him before, but when Debra suggested this concert to me I thought sure, this sounds great.

We're doing all of the great pieces that are particularly appropriate to me so I was very excited about it — though honestly, I am a little daunted by the task of filling Jélyotte's shoes.

*MT: What do you like about the program musically?*

JMS: I feel like I have a personal inclination toward French baroque music. It's so full and splendid and florid in a really engaging, elegant way that I appreciate quite a lot. It's obviously some of the best French baroque music you can do. But of the pieces we are doing, Rameau's *Règne, Amour*, the last piece on the program, is probably one of the most incredible French baroque arias for a tenor that one can sing. It's stunning! It's got all the best of the high Baroque with elements of classical style starting to come in. It's gloriously constructed and you get a chance to show off and get to sing in an engaged and intimate way as well. I think it is the plum of all of them but it is the plum amongst all of the beautiful berries on the program.

But Debra is one of the best in the world — all the work that she puts into her programs is staggering to me. What I appreciate is that even though there is a tremendous amount of scholarship behind what she does, it's still most importantly a chance to engage audiences and musicians in amazing, stunning and very different kinds of music.

*MT: Debra also told me that she wanted to work with you because of your great acting ability — like Jélyotte.*

JMS: It's very kind of her to compare me to someone like Jélyotte. She has primarily seen me on stage with BEMF where I am a pretty regular member of the company so she knew that I have the comedy in me. I think she's also had the chance to see me do some more serious and somber things as well. But I do get a lot of attention as a comedic actor and I appreciate that because I like making people laugh. But this program is a great chance to get to show off the different colors and ways that I have of engaging an audience.

*MT: You have a beautiful high tenor voice, but how would you describe it?*

JMS: In the traditional German Fach system of fitting your voice into the romantic opera roles, I usually think of myself as a light lyric tenor. But, the actual range of the seven different flavors of tenors doesn't differ all that much. Perhaps a step or two at the top and a step or two at the bottom end of the range. It really is about weight and color.

I can sing heavy and loud if I want to but my voice sits in a much lighter style of production and this voice type lends itself quite readily to Baroque singing. The funny thing is that I don't think people have a sense of what happens to the tenor roles as music progresses from Orfeo through to Verdi.

*MT: Tell me, what did happen?*

JMS: There was a big shift in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Paris when a Rossini tenor decided that he was going to sing his high notes in chest voice instead of head voice. There was a lot of press about it at the time. That was a big turning point.

And, if you think about modern pitch (440), nothing I'm singing in this concert is that high. It can look high on the page. We see music with a lot of written high C's and forget that the pitch level would have been a whole step lower than modern pitch. 392 is the standard pitch for French Baroque opera and we'll be performing these concerts at 392. Because of this, all the C's become B-flats and then it's much more in line with a Verdi kind of tenor range.

I also have a good bit of fast singing to do in this concert and if I were to approach that with a heavier production, I would need to sing at a much slower tempo. But still we have to project to the audience, so it is a lot like a normal tenor but kind of a leaner version.

We do have to learn to become good in both worlds, the head and the normal chest voice sound. But I am a tenor and 90% of the year I am singing parts that are just marked tenor.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 29, 2014.*