

Les Délices: “Mozart in Paris” (Jan. 22)

by Daniel Hathaway



The 21-year-old Mozart planned to take Paris by storm on his second visit in 1778, but he chiefly succeeded in alienating colleagues and patrons alike with his arrogance. The composer fared far better on Sunday afternoon, January 22 at Plymouth Church, when Les Délices presented “Mozart in Paris,” a program that surrounded his Oboe Quartet with works by Gluck, Cambini, Duport, and Boccherini, all pieces that the

Parisian public might have heard in the French capital during that period.

Les Délices has begun venturing beyond its original territory of the French Baroque with programs of late Medieval music and, last fall, with repertory that convincingly interleaved American jazz standards with 17th-century art song. Sunday’s program represented the ensemble’s first foray into music of the Classical period, and a special roster of performers was on hand, including violinists Allison Monroe and Beth Wenstrom, violist Cynthia Black, and Montréal-based cellist Elinor Frey. Debra Nagy, Les Délices’ artistic director, traded up her Baroque oboe for a slightly more advanced classical model for the occasion.

The Overture and Chaconne from Christoph Willibald Gluck’s *Armide* allowed the quintet to demonstrate its tight ensemble from the first notes of the program — and revealed to anyone who equates the composer with his rather snoozy *Orfeo ed Euridice* that Gluck could craft scintillating music. Extreme dynamic contrasts and ebullient energy marked both selections, but the Chaconne was especially ornate and *gai*.

Giuseppe Maria Cambini, one of the colleagues that Mozart “threw under the bus” during his Paris sojourn, according to Nagy’s informative program notes, published more than a hundred string quartets. His attractive *Quatuor Concertant*, Op. 4, No. 6 is inventively melodic, and gives the viola and first violin some impressive virtuosic licks during its theme-and-variations finale.

The ensemble’s performance of Mozart’s *Oboe Quartet*, written a few years after his Paris sojourn, was clean and lean, Nagy blending beautifully with the strings and effortlessly dispatching the high F’s.

Elinor Frey contributed an engaging solo moment with Jean-Pierre Duport’s *Etude No. 5* for solo cello, simulating a duet between cello and continuo. Beautifully shaping its singing lines, she made an equally lyrical visit to the higher range of the instrument near the end of the piece.

Leaving the most astonishing work for last, Les Délices ended with a captivating performance of Luigi Boccherini’s *Quintet in d*. Eventful and full of odd twists and turns, the piece features stark dynamic contrasts, fancy oboe lines, and a wonderfully strange Minuet that sounds more like a waltz. The performers amiably toyed with its tempos and stretched its rhythms, giving a new view of Boccherini.

Les Délices drew a capacity crowd to Herr Chapel for this event, suggesting both that the ensemble is now attracting a large following, and that its expanded programming ideas are paying off. This concert was — as the group’s name suggests — delicious.

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