

Concert Report: Les Délices at Tregoning & Co. Gallery (February 20)

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With concert hall attendance declining, median age of audience members rising, and ensembles and institutions suffering financial crises, many classical musicians have responded by moving their performances out of the traditional venues -- concert or recital halls -- and, taking a cue from popular music styles such as Jazz or Folk, turning to more intimate performance settings such as nightclubs or coffeehouses, private house concerts, or small art galleries. Or perhaps I should say “re-turning,” since in many cases these were closer in nature and size to the environments in which the pieces were first performed.

This past Saturday evening, the early music ensemble Les Délices presented such a concert, at Tregoning & Co. Gallery in Cleveland’s Detroit Shoreway neighborhood.

Although directed by Cleveland resident Debra Nagy and based here in town, Les Délices is similar to many early music ensembles in varying its forces and players, and including musicians with residences and careers in other cities. Through recordings and tours, it has developed an international reputation. Besides Ms. Nagy on baroque oboe, the line-up on Saturday night included Clevelander Lisa Goode Crawford on harpsichord, and Scott Metcalfe and Emily Walhout, both from the Boston area, on baroque violin and viola da gamba, respectively.

Les Délices specializes in chamber music of the French Baroque. Musical life in France in the late 17th and early 18th century was a small world,

and many musicians knew one another, forming bonds of friendship and reverence, as well as jealousy and animosity. (Since most music was sponsored by the court or the church, jockeying for court appointments played a large role in these bonds.) For Saturday evening’s concert, Ms. Nagy assembled a very attractive program of works by composers writing -- either in homage or caricature -- about their peers.

The program opened with a sonata in c minor by Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, for the full ensemble. The intimacy of the setting became immediately apparent: tutti rests in the stately first movement had a chilling urgency, Ms. Nagy’s lyrical oboe tone and Mr. Metcalfe’s silvery violin balanced, but remained separate personalities, while the resonance from Ms. Crawford’s harpsichord built into a palpable sonic back-drop. Of course, this same intimacy meant that performers’ idiosyncrasies were plainly evident: Ms. Walhout has perfected the art of retuning her instrument while playing; and after each piece finished Ms. Crawford would unceremoniously plop the score on the floor behind her.

In the two brief works which followed, the composers -- and close friends -- Antoine Forqueray and Jean-Phillipe Rameau each drew musical caricatures of the other: the harpsichord played solo in Forqueray’s *La Rameau*, but was joined by obligato violin and viola parts in Rameau’s *La Forqueray*.

A suite by Louis-Antoine Dornel, originally written for flute but transcribed by Ms. Nagy for oboe, followed, and gave her opportunity to display playing that was at turns lyrical, plaintive, or sprightly. Ms. Walhout took the soloist’s turn in the *Tombeau pour M. de Sainte-Colombe* by the violist-composer Marin Marais, a funeral tribute (“tombeau”) written for his teacher Sainte-Colombe. A virtuoso performer on the instrument, Marais takes the viola da gamba into its highest register, yet Ms. Walhout never let the virtuosity of the part detract from the heart-wrenching pathos of the piece.

The full ensemble was reunited for the piece which finished the program, the *Apothéose*

de Lully by François Couperin, a programmatic suite of short movements in which the shade of the opera composer Jean-Baptiste Lully is escorted from the Elysian Fields up to Mount Parnassus, to take his place in heaven at Apollo's side, along with the Italian Arcangelo Corelli. The vignettes, being quite tongue-in-cheek, were cleverly introduced by one-line explanations by Ms. Nagy. Besides being a tribute to one of France's greatest musicians, Couperin was also metaphorically expressing his desire to reconcile French and Italian musical tastes, a theme in French music of the era which is explored in Les Délices debut CD *The Tastes United*.

Tregoning and Co. Gallery provided a perfect space for such a program, closer in size to the intimate salons and music rooms in which this music was first heard than even the modern recital hall: seating for about 35 meant that the audience was virtually in the performers' laps. Colorful abstract canvases by Tarrence Corbin covered the walls, and a wine and cheese reception was offered afterwards. It was announced that this was the first of several recitals planned for the gallery, a series we eagerly look forward to.