

Les Délices' Bewitched:
“Sensational” Online Concert

by Timothy Robson



“Bewitched,” the first subscription concert of this season by Les Délices, can be summed up in one word: sensational. In her introductory remarks, director Debra Nagy talked about the “Embracing Change” theme of the season and completely rethinking the concert experience for streaming. The detailed planning was in evidence throughout the program. “Bewitched” was not just a concert; it was a carefully planned musical film, with elements of drama and music appreciation, all in support of the inspired program choices featuring Medea and Circe, two famous witches (or sorceresses, if you prefer) of classical antiquity.

The performing environment was completely changed, with the five performers in a circular formation on two large rugs that created a playing area in the middle of an otherwise empty chapel at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights. This gave the video producers the opportunity for creative camerawork — moving in, around, behind, and above the performers — and lighting that often reflected the light or dark aspects of the music. The recorded sound was excellent. Although the chapel is quite a resonant room,

it sounded as though the audio engineers added a bit more reverberation to the acoustics, enhancing Les Délices’s already-cohesive sound.



In addition to director Debra Nagy, who played Baroque oboe and recorder, the other instrumental ensemble members were Julie Andrijeski, violin, Rebecca Reed, cello and viola da gamba, and Mark Edwards, harpsichord.

François Couperin’s ensemble sonata “La Française” from *Les Nations* opened the program with its several contrasted sections, often involving dialogues between instruments. This performance was tight in ensemble and sound. The camerawork made it possible to see the instrumentalists communicating with each other through their eyes, lending even more nuance to their playing.

The Couperin set up the first of two French Baroque solo cantatas that formed the central pillars of the show: Louis-Nicolas Clérambault’s *Medée*, and *Circé* by the seldom-heard composer Colin de Blamont. The two sorceresses were related: legend has it that Circe was Medea’s aunt. Both inflicted horrifying penalties on their opponents. Medea killed her children to avenge her husband Jason’s infidelity, while Circe unleashed all the monsters of Hades — plus a whole lot more — on her husband Odysseus. Each follows

the usual form of the solo cantata: recitative alternating with arias of contrasting moods, sometimes with shorter ariosos that bridge the gap between recitative and aria.



The talented soprano Hannah De Priest possessed the dramatic and textual requirements for this complex music. Declamation was followed by rage, with complex coloratura. But in more introspective moments, her voice was light and lyrical. The instrumental ensemble was also attuned to the various moods, with excellent continuo and obligato support in the arias. Blamont's cantata was even more virtuosic and dramatic than Clérambault's. English subtitles were provided for both.

It may have been accidental, but the movements of the Clérambault seem to have been filmed at different times of day. Sometimes sun shone through the windows, other times it was black as night outside. If it was serendipity, the light and dark appropriately matched the cantata's moods.

Mark Edwards's performance of Pancrace Royer's *Le vertigo* was arresting. Royer was of the same generation as Jean-Philippe Rameau. He was well-known in his day, but his music has largely slipped into obscurity. *Le vertigo* did indeed leave the listener dizzy in its constantly changing musical moods, its single melodic lines interrupted by the chattering of rapidly repeated chords. A feeling of capriciousness often plunged into despair. A sudden staccato chord at the end created a feeling of unease and incompleteness.



The show was preceded by a recorded conversation between Debra Nagy, Case Western Reserve University classics professor Timothy Wutrich, and Cleveland Museum of Art curator Seth Pevnick. The discussion provided a fascinating context for the bewitching cantatas.

If “Bewitched” is a sign of things to come, I can recommend without reservation the remaining concerts. Les Délices’s, and especially Debra Nagy’s, imaginative thinking about the concert as a television/video experience paid off. Other performing organizations could also benefit by considering what best represents their offerings not performed live in the concert hall. Maybe some of this new thinking could even inform future live performances.

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