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Les Délices to explore fourteenth century avant-garde on January 17 & 18: Part Two

by Mike Telin

On Saturday, January 17 at 8:00 pm in William Busta Gallery, and on Sunday, January 18 at 4:00 pm in Plymouth Church, Les Délices, in collaboration with Blue Heron Ensemble, Scott Metcalfe (left), director, will present a fascinating concert entitled *Fourteenth Century Avant-Garde*.

The performances will feature Les Délices regulars Scott Metcalfe (vielle & gothic harp) and Debra Nagy (recorders & douçaines) with special guest artists Martin Near, countertenor, and Jason McStoots, tenor. On Sunday, Metcalfe will give a pre-concert lecture beginning at 3:00 pm.

We continue our conversation with Les Délices founder and artistic director Debra Nagy, who explained that the program, which is divided into five sections, explores the close connections between mathematics, science, symbol, and sound in late-fourteenth-century France.

Song as object

"The three pieces that we chose for this section are beautiful 'high-concept' works. They are songs about being songs and the texts tell you how to perform them."

Nagy feels that Guillaume de Machaut's *Ma fin est mon commencement* is the perfect way to begin the program. "We toyed with the idea of ending the program with it as well because the text is 'the end is my beginning.' The piece itself is a palindrome. When you consider that none of this music was composed in score — so you can't really see the vertical relationships which today are so important to us — the idea that it actually sounded like music is just kind of staggering."

The set continues with Jacob de Senleches' *La harpe de melodie* and Baude Cordier's *Tout par compas*. Nagy explained that the subjects of the songs are embodied in the score. "In a manuscript fragment that survives at Chicago's Newberry Library, Senleches' *La harpe* is in the shape of a harp – harp strings standing in for staff lines – along with unique note shapes and different-colored inks that transmit subtle instructions regarding rhythm. And *Tout par compas* ("with a compass I was composed") has great visual impact – various texts and tributes are inscribed within circles at the four corners of the page. Certainly this score, and others like it, were never meant to be sight-read, but for puzzling over."

Perfection in nature

"Although this section ties into religion a little bit, it is all secular music. There is a lot of symbolism with flowers and the Virgin Mary as the ideal woman and lover. *Belle que rose vermeille* is the perfect example of the rose's symbolic fluidity: it may symbolize profane love at one moment and the Queen of Heaven (the Virgin Mary) at another. In Machaut's four-voice rondeau, *Rose, liz, printemps*, the rose and lily evoke the purity, sweetness, and the fleeting quality of springtime."

Nagy explained that ***Patience is a virtue*** is all about courtly love and ***Triumph of reason – Music and Mathematics*** explores reason and logic as it relates to mathematics. "It kind of trumps the sacred organization that we spoke about last week where everything divides into three. As Suzoy's ballade *Pictagoras* implies, the composers of the fourteenth-century avant-garde saw themselves as inheritors of musical and intellectual traditions stretching back to the Classical philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras. Matheus de Sancto Johanne's *Sience n'a nul annemi* ('Science has no enemy but ignorance') is apt even in our own time. While the piece is far simpler rhythmically than *Pictagoras* and thus not overly "scientific," it is rife with challenging harmonies."

The concerts conclude with ***Carnal pleasure – or the birds and the bees.*** "This section of the program features some wonderful pieces that include onomatopoetic sounds, like bird calls: the Nightingale (*rossignol*), Cuckoo (*cucu*), and Lark (*alouette*). The birds and the bees are also a metaphor for exactly what you think it is. The set is meant to be a lot of fun."

Nagy says that she and Scott Metcalfe have worked on the program since this past fall, and narrowing down the pieces was a difficult task. "There's so much music that we both would love to do, but there is only room for so much in any one program. It's also going to be really fun to perform this program in Bill Busta's Gallery. I'm always inspired by the work that Bill presents. It's also the place where I first got the idea of 'song as object.' I've always been inspired by the exhibitions in his gallery and this seems like the perfect marriage of the abstract, ephemeral and modern conception, even if it is from a long time ago. And I just love that."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 13, 2015.
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