

Les Délices to feature gambists in “The Angel and the Devil”

by Mike Telin



This week Les Délices, Cleveland’s French baroque music specialists, will present “The Angel and the Devil.” The program showcases music by the most famous pair of viola da gamba players of the eighteenth century, Marin Marais and Antoine Forqueray. Referred to respectively as The Angel and The Devil, their musical personalities will be brought to life by two modern-day gambists, Josh Lee and Emily Walhout. Oboists and

recorder players Debra Nagy and Kathryn Montoya, baroque violinists Scott Metcalfe and Ingrid Matthews will join harpsichordist Michael Sponseller and the dueling gambists in music by Jean-Féry Rebel, François Couperin and Marc-Antoine Charpentier.

The concerts will be held on Thursday, April 23 at 7:00 pm at the Hudson Library and Historical Society, Saturday April 25 at 8:00 pm in William Busta Gallery in Cleveland, and Sunday, April 26 at 4:00 pm in Herr Chapel at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights. (Musicologist Susan McClary will give a pre-concert lecture on Sunday beginning at 3:00 pm). A special, free performance designed for kids will be held on Saturday, April 25 at 3:00 pm at Plymouth Church.

I asked gambists Emily Walhout and Josh Lee to share their insights about the Angel/Devil aspect of the program.

Emily Walhout: I think Marais’ pieces are perfect little gems of balanced French music, full of grace, poise and beautiful tunes. When I think about his music I always correct my posture. I want to stand up and take a dancer’s pose. And his music is perfectly suited to the gamba — everything is so comfortable.

Josh Lee: Marais was Jean-Baptiste Lully's protégé, and I can't help thinking that a little bit of Lully rubbed off on him. I don't have a good sense of who he was as a person, but as a composer and musician he was top-notch. I do consider Marais to be the best teacher I've ever had. The music that we have of his today includes his fingerings and bowings — it's like sitting in the same room with him. Everyone talks about how sweetly he played, and his music is very melodious.

Emily Walhout: With the music of Forqueray, there is still the grace and poise but there's something less innocent. He shows more emotions. His music is technically more difficult, and the keys he chooses are a little more twisted and harder to grab under the hand. His music is not quite as comfortable to play as that of Marais. I feel like it's more devilish.

Josh Lee: Forqueray was presented to Louis XIV by his father, who was a violinist at court. At the time Forqueray was playing cello, and apparently was quite good. But Louis XIV said to bring him back when he learned to play the viol. He didn't choose to study with any of the gamba players at court, but instead went home to study with his father. That really comes through in his music and the technique that is needed to play it. Musically, Marais and his followers all had a similar technical and melodic language, and they all approached the instrument in a very particular way. Forqueray's music is something entirely different. Even at its most bucolic, his music is a lot more muscular.

Emily Walhout: Given the technical difficulty of Forqueray's music, perhaps his cello background did give him the chops to manage it.

When Emily Walhout and Josh Lee entered conservatory, they both had their sights set on becoming orchestral players, but they both quickly discovered their love for early music.

Walhout grew up playing the cello in Grand Rapids, MI, but discovered her love for baroque bass lines at the Oberlin Conservatory. "I also discovered that I liked playing in small groups. I like the idea of a few people coming together to engage in the Vulcan Mind Meld — going together for the same thing and making the same musical statement. Working with other people is part of what attracted me to early music. I also feel that I understand what to do with a bass line — how to shape it and how the harmony has a definite meaning and goal. Mostly I just enjoy it. It makes me happy, and I feel lucky to have discovered that.

"One thing that I have become more aware of is that the bowed bass line and the harpsichord or organ really do complement each other. You can't have one without the other. They make an interesting pair that works well together. If you leave out one or the other, it always sounds like there's something missing. I feel naked without the

harpsichord. And while baroque treble players don't often acknowledge this, it's the bass line player who really is in charge."

Josh Lee first encountered early music growing up in South Carolina. A friend played him a recording of music by Respighi and Peter Warlock, and he became interested in the source material for their compositions. He later enrolled at the Peabody Conservatory as a double bass major. "At Peabody you could take early music lessons for free. A lot of people in the Baltimore consort were teaching there, so I signed up for gamba lessons. When my bass teacher found out, he hit the roof and said, 'No way.' So I didn't go. Two weeks later the gamba teacher knocked on my dorm room door. She said, 'I'm Ann Marie Morgan. You've missed two weeks of your lessons, and I'm here to take you to your first one.'

"So I started taking lessons behind my bass teacher's back, and two years later I switched majors. My bass teacher was so mad! Besides sneaking around and hiding my baroque tendencies, the thing that really attracted me to playing the gamba is that it gave me a chance to cultivate my own personal style. I'm not a guy who likes to be told what to do. I also find the intellectual side of early music attractive. To me it's a creative, fulfilling challenge."

Although Emily Walhout and Josh Lee have both played with Les Délices for a number of years, this week's concerts mark the first time the two will actually share the stage together. "It's always been that I'm in one place and she's in another. We both also play with Tenet, but different projects involve different people," Lee pointed out.

"We've been alternating as the bass line players in this group for many years," said Walhout. "This is a wonderful opportunity for us to get together and be in the same room. And this program is so gamba-centric. It's a really great chance for us to show our stuff in the duos and accompanied solos. It's going to be really fun."

Do they feel there is any typecasting when it comes to the division of musical duties? "Not at all," said Lee. "I'm certain we will both have moments of being angelic and of being diabolical. Emily will play some solo Marais and I will play some solo Forqueray, but we will share the Marais *Les Folies d'Espagne* down the middle. So I don't think we're being typecast at all. I know that Debra didn't want to do that."

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