

**Les Délices to present “Folly of Youth”
with guest soprano Shannon Mercer, Feb. 20 & 21**

by Mike Telin



Remember being young and thinking you were immortal: never believing that your actions could have tragic consequences? This weekend Les Délices will explore the “Folly of Youth” on Saturday, February 20 at 8:00 in Harkness Chapel and Sunday, February 21 at 4:00 pm in Herr Chapel, Plymouth Church. The program will pair George Frideric Handel’s youthful cantata *Tra le fiamme* with French Baroque works that recount the stories of Icarus and Phaeton — young men who dared to fly too close to the sun. The weekend will also include a 45-minute free Family Concert on Saturday beginning at 3:00 pm at The Bop Stop.

“The program is a vocal workout, but I’m looking forward to it!” exclaimed Canadian soprano Shannon Mercer during a telephone interview. “There’s a youthful frivolity to it, and the French works all have a lot of drama.”

The text to Handel’s cantata *Tra le fiamme* explores the concepts of fatal attraction, temptation, pleasure, and exhilaration. Mercer, who will be making her Les Délices debut at these concerts, said the work is highly ornamented in its depiction of flight, feathers, and butterflies.

“As an audience member, I can tell if a performer is or is not connecting to the text,” said Mercer. “And composers like Handel wanted the text to reach the people, so they could identify it with their own experiences. To do that, you can draw on things from your own life: remembering what it’s like to be young and carefree, and thinking that nothing can harm you. Which is what Icarus is doing when he says, ‘I’m going to be fine, don’t worry about me.’”

The program will also include instrumental and vocal music from Jean-Baptiste Lully’s *Phaëton*, an opera about the proud son of Apollo, who abandons his lover Theone for Libye, the daughter of the king of Egypt. The program will conclude with Louis Le Maire’s *Hebé*, which tells a tale of youthful exuberance. Mercer especially looks

forward to performing these works with French texts. “Being Canadian, I am bilingual. I think singing in French is so much fun because it doesn’t take a lot of internalizing to understand the text. It’s always a joy to sing in a language that you totally understand.”

Mercer also looks forward to reconnecting with her colleagues Debra Nagy and Kathryn Montoya (oboe and recorder), Julie Andrijeski and Scott Metcalfe (violins), Josh Lee (viola da gamba), Simon Martyn-Ellis (theorbo and guitar), and Michael Sponseller (harpsichord).

“I’ve worked with all of them and they’re all fantastic. This is going to be fun because with the early music scene in North America, performers are always running into each other. It’s like family you haven’t seen for a while and you pick up where you left off. It’s always such a pleasure to work with these people because they are the best. And it’s a very virtuosic program for them too. That’s what makes these pieces so interesting: the vocal parts are so ornamented, and on top of that, you have very ornamented instrumental parts as well, so there’s a lot going on.”

While I had [Shannon Mercer](#) on the phone, I asked her when she was first bitten by the singing bug.

Shannon Mercer: Most singers find their footing later in high school, but I was an early bloomer. I sang in church choirs and a music group in my village. I started taking lessons at the age of seven when a woman who was retiring from the group told my parents that she was interested in taking me on as a student. My parents, who were musical but not aficionados, said OK. So that’s how it all started.

Mike Telin: You grew up outside of Ottawa?

SM: Yes, in the small town of Manotick, Ontario. I’m the youngest of five and everyone still lives in that area. I’m the only one that flew the coop.

MT: What made you leave?

SM: I left to attend McGill University for vocal performance. While I was there I joined all of the early music groups I could find, because there were a lot of opportunities to perform. That’s how I became known as an early music singer, and Montreal has a thriving early music community.

MT: You are quite accomplished in a variety of musical styles.

SM: That's true, I thrive on versatility (laughing). After McGill, I attended the University of Toronto's Artist Diploma program in opera for a year. Then I entered the Canadian Opera Company's Young Artist Program. At the same time I continued to sing early music, which led me to contemporary music.

MT: I saw that you'll be performing the role of Pamina in Magic Flute later this year with Calgary Opera.

SM: This will be my fourth time performing that role, but I haven't done it since 2008. It will be interesting to revisit it now that my voice has matured.

MT: Why is it that so many singers regularly perform both early and contemporary music?

SM: To sing early music, you need to have a lot of versatility, and you have to be open to doing a lot of different things, like using vibrato as a color, singing straight tone, or using different extended techniques. Early music singers also have to learn repertoire very quickly, and they tend to have lighter voices which are a little more agile. All of which you can apply to contemporary music as well.

MT: Many critics applaud your acting ability during your concert performances like these with Les Délices.

SM: I've been talking to my colleagues about how they teach singers to have a connection to the text, and to internalize it without having had that experience themselves. I've always been able to go there without feeling vulnerable. While I am not these characters, I am putting myself out there emotionally and I think that a lot of young singers are afraid of doing that.

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