

Les Délices to present “Concertos Comiques”

by Mike Telin



Finding ways to circumvent rules has always been a popular pastime. It has also often inspired creative genius. When Louis XIV put a stranglehold on entertainments such as opera and theater by enforcing rules designed to secure official monopolies, non-court composers and playwrights countered with Fair Theaters (*Théâtre de la Foire*), low-cost performances on the outskirts of Paris. The satirical plots regularly mocked the pretentiousness of the bourgeois by featuring servants who were far more intelligent than their bosses, or by poking fun at old men who chased after young girls.

On Saturday, May 7 at 8:00 pm at the Bop Stop and Sunday, May 8 at 4:00 pm at Plymouth Church, Les Délices will present *Concertos Comiques*. The program will include works by Michel Corrette, Francesco Corbetta, Joseph Bodin de Boismortier, and Jean-Joseph Mouret, performed by Debra Nagy (oboe), Julie Andrijeski and Scott Metcalfe (violins), Josh Lee (viola da gamba), and Simon Martyn-Ellis (theorbo and baroque guitar).

“Vaudeville is the name of this repertory, but it’s kind of a refashioning of the *voix de villes*, or songs or voices of the city,” Debra Nagy said during a recent telephone conversation. “It’s a little different from the way that we know vaudeville today. The word goes way back and even though it has been adapted to something a little different, you can see the trajectory.”

Nagy compared the *Théâtre de la Foire* to the activities at Huntington Reservation in Bay Village with its vendors, restaurant, theatre, and other forms of entertainment that speak to all types of people. In France it was comedy that reigned supreme, but to

circumvent the authorities, actors were required to mime their stories while the audience read cue cards and sang the actors' lines to well-known tunes.

“If a play was not affiliated with the official court theatre, actors were not permitted to speak their lines,” Nagy pointed out. “These plays were an audience participation thing. They knew the tunes — for example, *Go Tell Aunt Rhodie* or *Oh! Susanna* — and they would sing the text on the cards to those popular tunes. The plots were often very funny with coarse, often satirical humor, poking fun at everything from the opera to scandals in the aristocracy.”

In order to skirt the Court rules that governed the size of an orchestra, the plays needed to be accompanied by an ensemble of no more than six players. “If you had only a few people playing, it couldn't be seen officially as an orchestra competing with the entertainment that was happening in the city.”

Nagy said that the music featured on this weekend's *Concertos Comiques* is virtuosic instrumental music based on the popular tunes that were sung at Fair Theaters. “I wanted to end our season with an instrumental program of light, accessible music, which is why I put it in an informal, fun venue like the Bop Stop. The music is all about transforming simple, ear-catching tunes into something that is virtuosic and showy. That's not a common thing in French music — the French didn't believe in virtuosity for its own sake.”

Nagy said that a highlight of the program is Michel Corrette's *Concerto No. 25*, “*Les Sauvages*.” According to Nagy, “‘*Les Sauvages*’ is a fantastic tune that our audiences have heard several times in a few different forms. It was made famous by Rameau as a harpsichord solo piece. It was tremendously popular and there have been lots of variations written on the tune. The middle movement is also based on a popular tune from a comic opera from the 1750s. The last movement, based on the tune ‘*La Furstemberg*,’ is a wonderful set of variations. It's a real highlight of the concert.”

Les Délices will announce their 2016-17 season at these concerts, which Debra Nagy said promises to be the ensemble's most diverse season ever.

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