

Les Délices & Blue Heron in *Lessons of Love at Plymouth (Jan. 19)*

by Daniel Hathaway



Romantic love has worked its magic and wrought its afflictions on humankind in similar ways throughout history. Last weekend, Cleveland's Les Délices joined Boston's Blue Heron to chronicle how 14th-century European composers addressed that subject.

The matrix for the collaboration between the ensembles was the celebrated *Roman de la Rose*, whose earliest layer by Guillaume de Lorris dates from ca. 1230. Widely disseminated in manuscript copies and later in printed editions, it counsels a young man about how to manage the pains of longing after the unattainable. The secret is enshrined in the allegorical form of Lady Hope or *Esperance*, who counterbalances the vicissitudes of Fortune.

On Sunday, January 19 in Herr Chapel of Plymouth Church, countertenor Martin Near, tenor Jason McStoots, and baritone Sumner Thompson formed various combinations with instrumentalists Mark Rimple, Debra Nagy, and Scott Metcalfe. The 75-minute program featured music by Machaut, Galiot, Solage, Matteo da Perugia, and Pierre de Molins — along with several pieces by that shy but prolific Medieval composer Anonymous and arrangements and elaborations by Nagy. From time to time, Nagy and Metcalfe doubled on harp, and Rimple and Nagy on voice.

The music of Machaut and his contemporaries is a special, rarefied repertoire that observes its own rules of harmony and texture. Some of the works heard on Sunday, as Scott Metcalfe writes in his excellent program notes,

are made in the rhythmically complex style that was enabled by refinements in musical notation developed in the latter part of the fourteenth century. The best music in this style, later dubbed the Ars subtilior (the more subtle art) is jazzy, at once hard to grasp and intoxicating: its complicated rhythms are precisely specified but the effect is loose, improvisatory, and spellbinding.

Highlights of the afternoon were many, but Jason McStoots' engaged and expressive solos in Machaut's *Je vivoie liement* and the Anonymous *Esperance qui en mon cuer s'embat* stood out, as did Nagy's virtuosic recorder playing in Matteo da Perugia's *Andray soulet* and her attractively buzzy contributions to several works on the *douçaine*. Late in the program, Mark Rimple's striking lute solo in Pierre de Molins' *De ce que foul pense* from the Faenza codex turned heads.

The program began and ended with pieces blending voices and instruments — the Anonymous *Je languis d'amere mort* and Machaut's lovely *Rose, liz, printemps verdure*, both testaments to the versatility and musicality of the performers.

Given the wealth of period illustrations available, projections would have been a welcome feature of this performance, not only for historical context and to create a narrative, but also to facilitate following along with the texts. But the opportunity to visit expert performances of the music of such a unique period in history was extremely rewarding, and held one's attention from beginning to end.

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