

Les Délices: “Torchsongs Transformed” at Lakewood Congregational (Mar. 7)

by Daniel Hathaway



In 2016, Les Délices’ “Songs Without Words” concerts paired 17th-century art songs with jazz standards. This season, the (usually French) Baroque ensemble’s “Torchsongs Transformed” program has built on that idea.

On Saturday evening, March 7 at Lakewood Congregational Church, soprano Hélène Brunet joined previous cast members Debra Nagy (oboe), Mélisande Corriveau (viola da gamba), and Eric Milnes (harpsichord) in new pairings of French Baroque arias with 20th-century love laments.

This is a radical idea that can work superbly, since the theme of unrequited love is universal and knows no temporal boundaries. But you need musicians who can flip the stylistic switch and immediately segue from Jean-Baptiste de Bousset to Edith Piaf — or more strikingly, from Michel Lambert to Jerome Kern.

Happily, these musicians can make those transitions seamlessly. After the COVID-19 cloud passes, any bar or club that’s looking for a classy band should get in touch with this crew.

The program was organized as the narrative of a love affair that ran through all four seasons from spring to winter. A postscript, “Renewal,” ended the concert on a more upbeat note, pairing Lambert’s *Vos mespris chaque jour* with Kern’s *All the things you are*.

Inside that structure, the four musicians visited music by Marais, Charpentier, Charbanceau de la Barre, François Couperin, and Le Camus, probably never heard before in cahoots with *Misty* (Garner & Burke), *Summertime* (the Gershwins), and *Tomorrow is my turn* (Aznavour & Simone).

Linking French and American cultures, the ensemble presented Joseph Kosma's 1945 *Les Feuilles Mortes* both with its original words by Jacques Prévert and in its well-known English version (*Autumn Leaves*) by Johnny Mercer. (In the 2016 show, Nagy sang the Mercer version, but this time she deferred to Brunet.)

Hélène Brunet moved easily from the lyrical to the sultry, wrapping her fluid and alluring voice around every emotion. Mélisande Corriveau made the viola da gamba and the *pardessus de viole*, the highest-pitched member of the viol family, sound as completely at home in modern tunes as in period music.

Debra Nagy, who has tamed the Baroque oboe to the point where it bends to her every wish and nuance, played with extraordinary feeling, and Eric Milnes, who contributed silvery elegance to Baroque pieces and witty musical commentary to modern pop tunes, linked the diverse selections with imaginative improvisations.

Les Délices attempted to make a New England-style meeting house feel like an intimate club by enlisting designer Jeannette Mwaki to add theatrical lighting shining down from the wraparound gallery. But killing the lights in the auditorium made it impossible to follow along with the printed texts and translations. A small detail in an otherwise engrossing concert.

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