

SalonEra: Medieval Christmas

by Nicholas Stevens



Art often transcends without trying, remaining rooted in its specific regional, topical, or historical niche yet appealing well beyond. A humble central-German cantor became Bach, an observer of social posturing in a narrow slice of the gentry became Austen, an aerosol virtuoso known to tag lower-Manhattan walls became Basquiat.

Northeast Ohio's Les Délices has long been that rarest of beasts: a world-class organization so proud of its region (ours) and repertoire (distinct niches in pre-1800 music) that it never tries to be everything to everyone, paradoxically making a

strong case for a broad, curious international following. In the December episode of its SalonEra series, the ensemble embraces its strengths and community to marvelous effect.

“SalonEra: Medieval Christmas,” featuring Les Délices Director and woodwind player Debra Nagy along with members of Boston's Blue Heron and Cleveland's Trobár, debuted on the hosting ensemble's site on Monday, December 14. Performances and interstitial conversations were pre-recorded, with a live chat available afterwards.

The stream began in candlelit intimacy, with Trobár — vocal and instrumental musicians Allison Monroe, Elena Mullins, and Karin Weston — singing *There is No Rose of Such Virtue* a capella. Shed any preconceived expectations of Medieval music as emotionally blank: Mullins and Weston harmonized in Marian wonderment as Monroe gently held the low part.

In a conversational interlude, Nagy and Blue Heron's Scott Metcalfe discussed the latter's Christmas concerts. From one of the group's English programs, Metcalfe selected a video recording of the song *Ecce, quod natura* as exemplary. Pamela Dellal, Owen McIntosh, and Michael Barrett sang with a lovely ear for contrast, emphasizing

the word “behold!” Metcalfe and Nagy returned to explain typical forms of English carols next, joined by Monroe. None shied away from discussing rarefied musical concepts, neither condescending nor aloof.

Wintry as a snow-capped peak, the carol *Hail Mary, Full of Grace*, here performed on Nagy’s recorder, Metcalfe’s harp, and Monroe’s vielle, defied the fall scenery outside the filming location, Shaker Heights’ Plymouth Church. *Comedentes convenite* found the same three musicians switching to douçaine, the wind instrument on which Nagy is among the world’s few and foremost players, and paired vielles. Few pieces on the program had such arresting harmony. Next, the group swapped out Metcalfe in favor of Mullins, after discussing the distinctly early-music process of preparing a performing edition of the music to be played. Despite Nagy’s harp-playing mostly escaping the microphones, *Angelus ad virginem* sounded celestial, Mullins embracing a light vibrato at moments.

Technology remains a pure asset for SalonEra, not a hindrance: definitions popped up when Metcalfe introduced potentially new terms while explaining the subtleties of chorister-composer Du Fay. *Conditio alme siderum* sounded at once centuries old and immediate, like something from the rock band Fleet Foxes, in a rendition by Blue Heron’s McIntosh and Barrett, joined in uncanny synchrony by silken-toned countertenor Martin Near.

Blue Heron’s ventures remained in the spotlight as composer Kevin Allen joined the chat, explaining his fervent admiration of Catholic liturgical composers from Ockheghem to Bruckner. The subsequent excerpt from Allen’s new composition *Puer nobis nascitur*, to be debuted in full by Blue Heron in their own Christmas program, offered a promising blend of Renaissance-style counterpoint with appealingly modern harmony, tenor Jason McStoots and bass Paul Guttry weaving a divine raiment over the sackbut stylings of Eric Schmalz and Mack Ramsey.

For the end of the concert, members of all featured groups converged to discuss the bizarreness and excesses of medieval feasting, with music having the last word. *Noel, Sing We* and *Make Us Merry* concluded the program with a burst of energy. One could imagine doing a little dance along with these. After all, in quarantine, who can judge us?

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 5, 2021

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)