

Les Délices to premiere Jonathan Woody's *Much Love Betray'd* on Orpheus program

by Mike Telin



No mythological character has inspired musicians more than Orpheus. Legend has it that his music was so powerful that trees and mountains bowed in his presence — his song so beautiful that he convinced the ruler of the underworld to allow him to bring his love Eurydice back from the underworld.

The legend will be brought to life on Thursday, October 7, when Les Délices debuts “Song of Orpheus” on Marquee TV. The program features rarely-heard cantatas by Jean-Philippe Rameau and Philippe Courbois performed by Hannah De Priest, soprano, Jonathan Woody, baritone, Shelby Yamin, violin, Debra Nagy, oboe, Rebecca Reed, gamba and cello, and Mark Edwards, harpsichord. The program will also include the premiere of Woody’s canata *Much Love Betray’d*.

The online-only event will remain available on demand through November 6. Click [here](#) for tickets.

Woody’s performance resumé includes two national tours with Apollo’s Fire, and appearances as soloist with period groups including the Boston Early Music Festival, Tafelmusik, Trinity Wall Street, New York Polyphony, Bach Collegium San Diego, and New York Baroque Incorporated. But he is also a leader in the historical performance performer/composer movement.

During a recent telephone conversation, Woody said that his dedication to keeping the early music canon alive can be traced back to when he was a student of musicologist and historical performance pioneer Bruce Haynes. “I was lucky enough to have him as a professor at McGill University, and he definitely engendered the mentality that the canon of early music could remain alive, and that we had the power to continue to add to it and make it something that wasn’t just stuck in the past.”

Woody said that he was excited when Les Délices artistic director Debra Nagy asked him to compose a new work for the ensemble. “She asked if I would write something for their traditional forces of oboe, violin, gamba, and harpsichord. I loved that because as a singer, so often people ask me to compose vocal works. To get to write something that doesn’t have a vocal part was a fun challenge for me.”

The composer noted that most of the music recounting the Orphean legend centers on the more familiar parts — his journey to the underworld to rescue Eurydice, their escape, and her ultimate demise.

“Since so many early music pieces tell that portion of the story, I thought, why don’t I try to capture some of its other interesting aspects. Particularly when he goes up to Mount Parnassus and is given a lyre by the god Apollo, and takes it back down to share with the world. That’s where the first movement of *Much Love Betray’d* comes from.”



The movement begins with a viola da gamba solo. “I’m not sure what a lyre sounded like, but to me a viola da gamba feels like it can occupy the same musical space. The music is based on a very simple scale figure that conjures the gift of music in its simplest form.”

The middle movement is inspired by what Woody called the big moment in the story. “Orpheus has already gotten permission to return with Eurydice, and the oboe and the violin represent those two characters. There’s some joy and frivolity because they are on their way out.” To depict Eurydice’s death, Woody said he turned to a traditional early music technique. “It’s a chromatic ground bass that musicians can then embellish and elaborate on top of. I see that as Eurydice slowly being pulled back into the underworld.”

For the final movement, Woody said that he chose a part of the story that “doesn’t get talked about,” Orpheus’ death at the hands of the maenads. “They get tired of him complaining about losing his love Eurydice and they just kind of tear him apart. In Greek mythology, stories don’t usually end happily, so I wanted to convey that with an homage to the music from the first movement. The main musical figure is also a scale but in double and quadruple time, which I see as Orpheus’ limbs being ripped asunder.”



Woody said that he loved the challenge of capturing the different qualities of the four instruments and discovering idiomatic ways to use them. “I play the flute and in the past few years, a lot of Baroque flute, so I do have an understanding of wind instruments. Strings on the other hand are further away from my area of expertise. So with violin and gamba, it was a challenge to make sure I was writing something that was both playable and enjoyable to play.”

The baritone described Philippe Courbois’ *Orphée* as a delightful piece. “I didn’t know it before Debra programmed it, and in fact, I didn’t know his works at all. So this is a wonderful discovery.” Woody’s favorite moment is the recitative before the final aria, in which Orpheus is granted the ability to leave with Eurydice, only for him to turn around and watch her disappear.

“The way Courbois structures that recit is a stroke of genius. There’s this ethereal quality as if Eurydice is a ghost. Then at the end, the harmony almost drives you into the grave — it’s that spirit of the finality of it all. As a composer and as a singer, I am blown away by how the piece is crafted. Courbois is my new favorite composer.”

As a singer, Woody doesn't limit himself to early music — he is also an ardent performer of new music. He has premiered Ted Hearne's *The Source*, and has given the New York City premieres of Missy Mazzoli's *Breaking the Waves* and Du Yun's *Angel's Bone*.

“There's so much going on in the world of classical music, and I like to show that it can deal with all kinds of subject matter, and can sound all kinds of ways.”

Woody noted that in *Angel's Bone*, there are only a few moments of classical music in the traditional sense. “There are so many musical references that Du Yun has been able to cohere into one powerful work. You find Chinese opera, Gregorian chant, cacophonous percussion moments, musical theater, and references to pop and new wave.”

That brought us back to how we began the conversation, discussing Bruce Haynes. “I think all of the canons can continue to be alive. I'm not one that thinks we should get rid of Puccini or Mozart — it's about continuing to expand the canon.”

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