

**The live return of Les Délices:
“Of Gods and Heroes”
and a sense of the meta**

by Jarrett Hoffman



The next concert from Les Délices is indeed about gods and heroes, built around 14th-century songs referencing characters such as Jason and Medea, Ulysses and Circe, and Tristan and Isolde.

But if you're familiar with artistic director Debra Nagy, who makes a habit of crafting programs both musically and intellectually stimulating, you won't be surprised that there's more to these selections than just mythology.

The central idea behind the program — to be presented live February 25-27 in Shaker Heights and Akron — is something more meta. “The funny thing about these 14th-century translations is that they're not so much about the characters, but about seeing yourself in them, or contrasting your experience with theirs,” Nagy said during a recent Zoom call. “There's a sense of timeless relatability.”

That timelessness ties into another aspect of the program: the integration of contemporary poetry, including a new poem by former Ohio Poet Laureate Dave Lucas on commission from the ensemble. “A lot of his work draws on or is inspired by myth and storytelling,” Nagy said.

She first met Lucas through Les Délices' December 2020 program “Noel, Noel,” which featured Christmas-themed poetry including Lucas' *Three Kings*. That title references Epiphany, but when Nagy read the poem, her experience went far beyond that.

“It’s about being on a quest, following a star, and not knowing what you’re going to find when you arrive at your destination — but knowing somehow that you’ll be changed,” she said. “I found it so beautiful the way this idea of Epiphany was transformed into something with a universal connection. Dave’s poetry does a lot of that work.”

Universal connection. Timeless relatability. The link between his poetry and mythology was clear.



Lucas will recite his new poem at the start of the concert, where it will be underlaid with Machaut’s *J’aim mieus languir*. Elsewhere in the program, he’ll read 20th-century poems by W.S. Merwin and Linda Gregg, as well as the Medieval text that occupies the center of the program: Marie de France’s *Lai de Chevrefoil*.

The lai will be interspersed with music chosen to amplify its themes and characters, those star-crossed lovebirds Tristan and Isolde. The selections cover a range of emotion as well as authorship, from Machaut and Matheus de Perusio to that prolific figure by the name of Anonymous.

This interweaving also gave Nagy a prime opportunity to introduce greater variety in the program, moving away from the elevated and expansive ballade form, the preference in 14th-century France for such lofty subject matter as gods and heroes. She found works in lighter, shorter forms — instrumental pieces, virelais, and rondeaus — that would still occupy similar conceptual ground.

Of course, a major attraction aside from the programming is that the concerts mark the first live performances from Les Délices in nearly two years, when Nagy (Medieval winds and harp) and Lucas (narrator) will be joined onstage by Elena Mullins (soprano), Kim Leeds (alto), Jason McStoots (tenor), Allison Monroe (vielle), and Scott Metcalfe, (vielle and harp).

On Friday and Saturday at 7:30 pm, the setting will be Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights. And on Sunday at 4:00 pm, the program moves to Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Akron. Tickets are available [here](#).

Masking and proof of vaccination are required to attend (save time at the door and submit that in advance [online](#)). A filmed version will be released on Marquee TV on March 17.

“It’s an exciting prospect,” Nagy said of returning to live performances. “I think it’s something that audiences have been waiting for.” But she also realizes that some people are still staying home at this point in the pandemic.

“It’s sort of a trust experiment,” she said. “We’re creating something beautiful and original that requires no small amount of work and creativity — and faith on our part that it’s going to be an experience we can share with a really warm and receptive audience.”

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