

15th-century fun with Les Délices (Apr. 22)

by Stephanie Manning



In the same way that 21st-century music lovers might display their CD collection, more than 500 years ago, Isabella d'Este inlaid her favorite music in her wall.

That piece — Johannes Ockeghem's *Prenez sur moi* — kicked off Les Délices's recent program "Isabella's Renaissance," which celebrated the achievements of the renowned 15th-century art patron.

Whether by patronage, performance, or study, the music on this hour-long concert

was connected in some way to the Marchioness of Mantua.

The evening's six sections each included two to three pieces, often sandwiching instrumental works in between vocal ones for a sense of balance. Smooth and simple stage changes led the audience at Lakewood Presbyterian Church on April 22 to instinctively hold their applause until the end of each section.

All five performers proved flexible in dealing with so many moving parts. Debra Nagy switched between steady double-reed accompaniment (Jacob Obrecht's *Fuga*) to jubilant solos on a recorder-like instrument (Alessandro Montovano's *Chi se passe di speranza*) without breaking a sweat. Scott Metcalfe also had multiple instruments at his side, playing most of the first half on his rich, full-bodied vielle before switching primarily to harp later on.

Meanwhile, guest artist Anna Danilevskaia stuck with one of the primary instruments from the period, the vihuela d'arco. That instrument got its turn in the spotlight during section IV, "Private Pleasures," with three works written specifically for it. Danilevskaia and Metcalfe had fun embellishing the repeated melody in Johannes Tinctoris/Ockeghem's *D'ung aultre amer*, and the larger group brought a spirited energy to Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro's dance tune *Falla con misuras*.

It wouldn't be a Les Délices event without the extra-large lyric translation booklet — and the woman in charge of singing most of said lyrics was Elena Mullins Bailey, whose lovely soprano lent itself well to the space. In some of the earlier pieces, her voice was slightly overbalanced by the stringed instruments, but this was quickly remedied in works like Josquin des Prez's *In te domine spiravi*, which featured a plucked accompaniment. Antoine Busnois's *Le monde est tel pour le present* showcased her highest range. But her standout moment was easily Bartolomeo Tromboncino's *A la guerra*, where she seemed most engaged with the material, embodying the dignified ferocity of the lyrics (“To war, to war, for Love wants no more peace”).

Though guest artist Emma-Lisa Roux spent most of the evening adding texture to the ensemble as the lute player, section III — “Patronage” — was dedicated to her solo playing and singing. Her sweetly plaintive voice gave an intimate feeling to Marchetto Cara's *Per dolor me bagno il viso* as she gently swayed along to the music, her eyes half closed.

The final section featured the most animated pieces of the night. In the anonymous *A la cazza*, Mullins Bailey, Roux, and Nagy raised their trio of voices in celebration — not just of Isabella d'Este, but also of all that Les Délices accomplished throughout their 14th season.

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