

Les Délices celebrates fifteen years

by Mike Telin



Anniversaries are an opportunity to reflect and to forge new adventures. When Debra Nagy set out to plan Les Délices' 15th season, she wanted it to be “familiar and extremely ambitious.”

Les Délices will launch their season next week by taking the award-winning SalonEra series to another level. On Saturday, September 23 at 3:00 pm at Heights Theater, audiences are invited to attend the debut of *SalonEra Sessions* with a program titled *Songs for Social Justice*. The 75-minute concert and conversation, hosted by Nagy, will feature countertenor Michael Walker and tenor Haitham Haidar, who will explore

themes of identity and representation, struggle and resilience, and community and belonging. The event will be recorded, edited, and released as a SalonEra episode later in the season. During the program Walker and Haidar will be joined by Nagy (oboe), Rebecca Reed (cello), and Brian Kay (lute and oud).

“SalonEra has had an interesting evolution — it was born during the pandemic at a moment when we could not gather and make music together. And many audience members have said how much SalonEra meant to them during that time,” Nagy said during a recent conversation. “As the pandemic wound down we wanted to get away from the remote collaborations that were part of the initial series, so we started thinking about how we could create and capture on-location performances, and what if audiences could experience it in-person? It’s a great opportunity to get to know these artists through their conversations and interactions.”

Michael Walker and Haitham Haidar are members of the Kaleidoscope Vocal Ensemble, a collective of top-tier singers who represent a wide range of identities and experiences — and who are passionate about representation in the classical music realm.

“Haitham is Lebanese/Canadian and Michael is African American, and I think that *Songs for Social Justice* is a beautiful and interesting way to see the overlap in the Venn diagram of identity, vocation, and repertoire,” Nagy said.

When they began talking about the program, both singers expressed a desire to include 17th-century lute songs. “The music of John Danyel and John Dowland and the idea of sorrow and pain is something that they not only identified with, but that also has resonance with the Negro Spiritual. Haitham is also going to sing songs in Arabic, which is his native language. For him, representing that part of his identity in his concerts is very important.”

The music on the program ranges from the “Nigrasum” from Montiverdi *Vespers*, to 17th-century lute songs, as well as spirituals and Lebanese popular songs in Arabic. “I think it will be an extraordinary display of humanity. I know how Michael and Haitham view this music and their vocation in relationship to queer identity and racial identity, and I can’t see how the experience of coming and listening could be anything but moving. I think the myth that we want to dispel is that early music is by and for Eurocentric perspectives.”

Les Délices’ season will continue the following week when the full Kaleidoscope Vocal Ensemble joins them for a program titled *The Pow’r of Musick*. “It’s a program that celebrates the music of Purcell, and includes selections from *Hail Bright Cecilia* as well as works by contemporary composers Caroline Shaw, Sydney Guillaume, Jonathan Woody, and Brandon Waddles.”

Performances are on Friday, September 29 at 7:30 pm at Lakewood Presbyterian Church (a pre-concert conversation with Debra Nagy and KVE Director Arianne Abela begins at 7:00 pm) and Saturday, September 30 at 7:30 pm at Kulas Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music (a champagne reception will follow the performance). Click [here](#) for tickets and [here](#) to read the program notes.

“Fifteen years is great,” Nagy said, adding that she’s been able to stretch her wings as a curator in addition to being a performer. Her work has been recognized with a 2022 Cleveland Arts Prize (Mid-Career) and the 2022 Laurette Goldberg Prize from Early Music America. “But I learned many years ago that there is no point where you can rest on your laurels — every program has got to have its appeal, and you are constantly developing relationships.”

SalonEra Sessions will continue on February 17, 2024 at 3:00 pm at the Heights Theater with “Inside the Goldberg’s.” Harpsichordist Mark Edwards and pianist Dror Biran explore Bach’s work and consider the unique challenges and opportunities that Bach’s music has for us all. Click [here](#) to view the entire season of events.

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