

Les Délices to present live premiere of “Song of Orpheus”

by Mike Telin



Prior to Les Délices’ premiere of “Song of Orpheus” in a video format in October of 2021, bass-baritone and composer Jonathan Woody told this publication that he was excited when the ensemble’s artistic director, Debra Nagy, asked him to compose a new work for the program. “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.”

This week Les Délices will present the live premiere of “Song of Orpheus,” a program of musical works inspired by the Orpheus myth. The concert features French mezzo-soprano Sophie Michaux and Jonathan Woody in cantatas by Rameau and Courbois, as well as excerpts from Telemann’s opera *Orpheus*. The program will also include Woody’s *By Much Love Betray’d*, a trio sonata that traces the arc of Orpheus’ life.

Performances take place Friday, March 8 at 7:30 pm at the Akron Civic Theater, Saturday, March 9 at 7:30 pm at Inlet Dance @ Pivot Center, and Sunday, March 10 at 4:00 pm at Disciples Cultural Arts Center. Tickets are available [online](#).

During that 2021 interview Woody 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 *By Much Love Betray'd* comes from."

For the work's 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." Read the full interview [here](#).

I caught up with Jonathan Woody by phone in rural Connecticut, where he was preparing for performances with The New Consort, and began our conversation by asking if any changes have been made to *By Much Love Betray'd* since the release of the video.

Jonathan Woody: I haven't changed the piece at all. In the last couple of years I've been pretty busy working on new commissions and had several premieres. It's interesting because with each new piece I write, my compositional language changes a little bit. It evolves, I learn some lessons, and try to improve on what I've done before.

So going back to the piece that was written two years ago is definitely going to serve as a snapshot of where I was in 2021 in terms of the kind of choices I was making as a composer. Maybe it's the same, maybe not. It's hard to say until I hear it and I get myself back in that headspace.

I will say that I was happy with how the piece came out because it was one of the first that I wrote strictly for an instrumental ensemble. It was a fun challenge to explore how you can tell a story without words and still move the plot along. Now I have written several more pieces in a similar vein, so it'll be interesting to go back and see if I'm still happy with what I did.

Mike Telin: How does it feel to finally be able to perform it live, from beginning to end, with you and your colleagues in the same room?

JW: This was a program that I really loved from the time we started talking about it. So I was thrilled to write a piece that fit into the program. Even if I hadn't, music from this time period is really special to me — and a lot of fun to perform. But to be able to actually do it all together in one room and with an audience is going to be really cathartic, since the last time was under all these complicated circumstances.

MT: How many works have you written since By Much Love Betray'd?

JW: I have to say that it's been a prolific time, so I'm not sure I can even give you an exact number but at least another half dozen. The project I'm doing here in Connecticut is also a premiere of a new piece that I've written. This one's entirely vocal — it's for six unaccompanied voices. So every day is a sort of balancing act of looking forward to what I need to be doing and how much work is happening right in front of me that I need to be doing.

MT: You also delve into contemporary music?

JW: That's right. One thing I like is that many of the groups that commission me are groups I perform with as well and that are made up of people who dabble in both — they enjoy doing historical performance and contemporary music, which means that I can sort of blend the genres.

The piece that I'm working on right now for The New Consort is based on the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* by Robert White, which was written almost 450 years ago. I've used some of the same musical language as White, but I have also incorporated a 21st-century musical language that hopefully fits into the same sort of context and emotional state. So that's one of the fun challenges of being a composer — finding a way to blend your ancient influences and your modern influences.

MT: I look forward to hearing "Song of Orpheus" live.

JW: It's always a nice experience when I'm in Cleveland, and I'm particularly looking forward to working with Les Délices again, and hearing this work that I haven't had a chance to come back to since it was completed.

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