

Les Délices conjures Arcadia in high quality (Oct. 20)

by Stephanie Manning



Arcadia: that mythological Eden, that utopian natural paradise. The members of Italy's Arcadian Academy, established in the late 17th century, aimed to replicate that pastoral life via the arts. And on October 20, Les Délices sought to do the same, by performing the music of composers from the Academy and beyond.

"Arcadian Dreams," a program featuring soprano Hannah De Priest, gave the Harkness Chapel audience a taste of the early music

group's next recording. In fact, the musicians were gearing up to get in the studio the very next day — and they delivered a suitably high-quality performance in the process.

Not every piece involved De Priest, but in those that did, the vocalist made for a magnetic presence. The lovely opener, Louis Antoine Lefebvre's *Le lever de l'Aurore*, immediately drew connections to the Arcadian theme with its lyrics about nature and young love. The soprano's sweet voice easily blended with her colleagues: violinists Shelby Yamin and Kako Boga, cellist Rebecca Landell, oboist Debra Nagy, and harpsichordist Mark Edwards.

De Priest's delivery remained impeccably polished, without scrubbing away any emotional texture. This was further proved in George Frederick Handel's *Mi palpita il cor*, where the soprano brought her acting chops up a notch in the recitative sections and added some extra intensity for the acrobatic melismas.

The performers bobbed their heads and smiled, clearly enjoying themselves — especially during Arcangelo Corelli's *Sonata Op. 5, No. 12*, "La Folia." In the absence of voice, Shelby Yamin proved De Priest's equal, leading the trio with clear sound and minimal vibrato. Rebecca Landell's cello made a few turns in the spotlight, as did Mark Edwards' harpsichord.

Edwards remained a reliable background presence all evening, though the later *Sonata in d minor*, K. 213 by Domenico Scarlatti (a member of the Arcadian Academy, as was Corelli) allowed Edwards more individual expression.

As a prelude to the final piece, the Scarlatti led smoothly into Jean Philippe Rameau's *La Berger fidèle*. Once again, De Priest made it easy to get swept up in the story. As she sang about a shepherd pleading to the goddess Diana to save his beloved, I thought of the word "plaintive" even before looking down to read that this section was called "Air plaintif." The shepherd's searing emotions stir the heart of Diana, as the soprano did for the listeners, and ultimately it appears that the lovers will be reunited.

Sunday's performance was presented as part of the 2024 Early Music America Summit, which filled the venue with some extra early music devotees. Debra Nagy, also Les Délices' artistic director, became visibly emotional during her remarks, emphasizing the importance of Harkness Chapel to her personally (as a Case Western grad) and for the early music scene at large (as the venue for the now-retired series Chapel, Court & Countryside).

Interestingly, the elegant, neo-Gothic structure itself was originally a memorial. The Harkness family funded its construction at the turn of the 20th century, after the untimely death of Florence Harkness Severance. Perhaps the family hoped that when Florence passed over into the next life, an Arcadia-like paradise would be waiting on the other side.

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