

Les Délices visits 14th Century Avant-garde at Pivot Center (Nov. 24)

by Daniel Hathaway



As the historian Barbara Tuchman revealed in her book *A Distant Mirror*, the 14th century in Europe was both eventful and full of contradictions.

On the traumatic side, the Great Famine and the bubonic plague claimed a great swath of the population, the Hundred Years' War raged, and the papacy moved from Rome to Avignon in France, marking the beginning of the decline in influence of the Catholic Church.

On the positive side came the flowering of experiments in music, a subject that Debra Nagy and her Les Délices colleagues charmingly explored in their "14th Century Avant-garde" program on Saturday, November 23 at the Pivot Center on Cleveland's West Side, a converted 1919 building once used for making ships' sails and awnings.

The popular view of Medieval music, if there is one, holds that it's coldly mathematical and essentially crude. The fifteen works we heard arranged into five topics on Saturday and performed by Sophie Michaux, mezzo soprano, James Reese, tenor, Scott Metcalfe, vielle and gothic harp, and Debra Nagy, recorders, douçaines, harp and voice, proved otherwise.

Sure, "Triumph of Reason - Music and Mathematics" headed the fourth section of the playlist, but in general, Les Délices served up music of great wit, grace, and sophistication, even if some of its elements are foreign to our post-Renaissance ears (three-part writing, the handling of dissonance, harmonies based on fourths and fifths, cadences with double leading tones).

“Song as Object” presented works by Guillaume de Machaut, Jacob de Senleches, and Baude Cordier, who were fond of presenting their works in what we would call graphic notation: e.g. love songs in the shape of a heart.

“Courtly Love - Circles of Influence” included works by the ubiquitous Anonymous and the famous Machaut.



“Music and Mathematics” sounded a bit scary, but Johannes Suzoy’s *Pictagoras, Jabol et Orpheus* injected some lighthearted wit into the subject, and Matheus de Sancto Johanne’s *Science n’a nul annemi*, a jab at science deniers, sounds all too familiar seven centuries later.

The program ended with “Carnal Pleasure — or, The Birds and the Bees,” a topic that promised some steamy lyrics but actually made reference to avian tunes beginning with a jolly dance from the Faenza Codex.

The four versatile musicians provided a remarkable variety of sonorities and textures during this program, which ran just over an hour. The breathy medieval recorder, the buzzy douçaine, the expressive vielle, and a pair of gothic harps conjured up a colorful period soundscape.

Projections of text translations were very helpful once the lights were doused. While the acoustic of the gallery where Les Délices performed enhanced the sound of their medieval repertory, it was less well suited for the informal verbal remarks that help make the ensemble’s concerts so engaging.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 5, 2024

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