

## Les Délices contemplates what makes us human in “A Moment’s Oblivion” (Feb. 23)

by Stephanie Manning



“How wretched to forget,” sings the son in *A Moment’s Oblivion* — a character whose father now struggles to recognize members of his own family. “For all we were forms who we are.”

But the miracle cure that restores his father’s memory turns out to be a more fraught solution than it appears. Such is the conflict at the heart of Les Délices’ recent commission, with music by Viet Cuong and libretto by

Cleveland poet Dave Lucas. The early music ensemble’s latest program surrounded the world premiere of *A Moment’s Oblivion* with more musical opportunities to reflect on the complex, and sometimes contradictory, emotions that make us human.

François Couperin’s sunny *La Visionnaire* opened the February 23 concert at Westshore Unitarian Universalist Church in Rocky River, as it had the previous day at Heights Theater in Cleveland Heights. Baroque oboist Debra Nagy, violist da gamba Rebecca Landell, and violinist Shelby Yamin all smoothly absorbed their sounds into that of Mark Edwards’ harpsichord. The listeners’ attention was naturally drawn into specific moments — like the calming melodies of the violin and oboe — like a photograph where the edges are tastefully blurred.

The other purely instrumental work, Marin Marais’ “Le Labryinthe” from *Livre 4ème*, provided a kind of wordless meditation after Cuong’s piece. Rebecca Landell stepped into the spotlight here, supported delicately and unobtrusively by Mark Edwards. Her viola da gamba carefully adorned the music with trills and scales, like the intricate gold patterns on the black and red harpsichord behind her.

Tenor Nicholas Phan joined the quartet for *A Moment’s Oblivion*, inhabiting the characters of the Chinese myth from a book he read as a child. With a beautiful straight tone and clear enunciation, he skillfully embodied the devastated son, desperately searching to relieve his father’s dementia; the crafty scholar, who promises a miracle

cure; and the father himself, who emerges angry at his family for ripping away his blissful state of forgetting.

The natural-sounding libretto, penned by local poet Dave Lucas, fit together so effortlessly with Cuong's music it was hard to tell which came first. The lyrics were projected on the wall behind the stage, a welcome choice, though it was a pity the printed booklet didn't also include the text. (Les Délices later remedied this and made it available [here](#).)

Each syllable typically corresponded to just one note, letting the words flow with little repetition. In contrast, the instrumental parts repeat often, with different textures and melodies often reappearing at key symbolic moments. The oscillating oboe rhythm from the scholar's opening then returns at the closing, before the final words implore: "Let us remember, lest we all forget."

The quintet of Phan, Nagy, Yamin, Landell, and Edwards journeyed through two more cantatas, both by Michel Pignolet de Montéclair. *La Bergère*, which swapped oboe for recorder, created a pastoral atmosphere both figuratively and literally, with calming instrumental interludes and lyrics of contemplation amid flocks of sheep.

*Le Dépit généreux* ended things with an angstier atmosphere, accented by Phan's melismas and Nagy's beautifully unblemished oboe tone. Like the father in *A Moment's Oblivion*, the narrator of this piece also has something they wish to forget — in this case the betrayal of an unfaithful lover. Love and memory, perpetually intertwined, for better or for worse.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 27, 2025.*

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