

Seán Dagher's sea shanties return for Les Délices "The Mermaid"

by Stephanie Manning



Sea shanties might make you think of the ocean, not Lake Erie. But the freshwater ships that sailed the Great Lakes in the 19th century held a rich musical tradition of their own. So when Les Délices artistic director Debra Nagy found a song that mentioned Cleveland in the book *Windjammers: Songs of the Great Lakes Sailors*, she knew the group had to perform it.

"When I was learning it, I really fell in love with the tune," said Seán Dagher, a shanty singer and guest performer with Les Délices. The lyrics of "Red Iron Ore" tell the tale of a ship setting out from Cleveland to pick up some of the ore before returning home. "Debra found a different set of lyrics and melody than people usually sing. So it's nice to come up with something new with old source material."

After his special appearances with the group in March, Dagher returns to Cleveland next week for a regular season program with Les Délices "The Mermaid," a family friendly concert combining classical and folk traditions, visits Akron on April 25, Cleveland Heights on April 26, and Rocky River on April 27. Tickets are available [online](#).

Dagher, who plays a variety of string instruments including the Irish bouzouki (a form of the Greek instrument), also sang "Red Iron Ore" during his earlier visit to Cleveland. After the "Pirate Night" event at Market Garden Brewery, an audience member came up to him to share their own perspective. "He described his job on the ship, and it was basically word-for-word what the song talked about," Dagher said. "It was really neat to hear someone who had been there confirm the story."

Hearing from people about their personal experience is common for the singer, who spent the majority of last year on the road. He lives in Montreal, but I spoke to him in Alaska, where he's currently performing a one-man tour. "People talking to me afterwards enriches my experience," Dagher said. In turn, he becomes a conduit for

these stories when introducing that music to new audiences. “It’s an ever-growing body of knowledge that I have, so I can choose what to say to people as I’m introducing the songs.”

The upcoming Les Délices program, “The Mermaid,” pairs Dagher with soprano Elena Mullins Bailey, oboist Debra Nagy, violinist Allison Monroe, cellist Rebecca Landell, and percussionist Anthony Taddeo. Compared to the March performances, Dagher said, these “are gonna sound a little more classical, even if there are folksy elements such as myself.” One of the works explicitly tied to the concert’s theme is Nagy’s arrangement of Franz Joseph Haydn’s *The Mermaid’s Song*.

Dagher noted that the traditional folk depiction of mermaids is quite the opposite of the stereotypical pretty girl with a fishtail. The way the sirens are portrayed in Homer’s *The Odyssey*, leading the men to their deaths, “is more in line with the sailor’s idea of the mermaid,” he said. Even one of the more lighthearted shanties (also called “The Mermaid”) still tells the stories of doomed sailors. “They’re heading out to sea, they see a mermaid, and they know they’re gonna die.”

The vocalist said that teaming up with Les Délices has been an enjoyable experience. “I’ve worked with lots of different classical ensembles, and you don’t know what to expect going in — but these people were really fun to work with and to create the program with.”

He also appreciates Debra Nagy’s commitment to finding the oldest melodies and lyrics when working with historical material. “I like the idea of going back to the oldest ones, because you’re doing your own version rather than being influenced by the previous interpreter,” he said. That being said, every written account of a folk tune has already been interpreted in some way.

“The page is just a passageway that the tune has gone through. People were singing it or playing it for however long — decades, or centuries. And then some collector wrote down a version of it,” he said. “So you can’t consider any written version authoritative in folk music.”

When it comes to performing these tunes, one thing’s for sure — Dagher is going to get the audience to sing along. “It engages them, and I think it makes them realize that music is something we do together,” he said. “Even if some elements of the music might not be familiar to them, we’re all human — we’re doing this and we’re enjoying it, and they’re allowed to as well.”

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