

Les Délices' elaborate, entertaining *Aesop Project* (Nov. 22)

by Peter Feher



In the 1670s, Louis XIV commissioned a series of 39 fountains for the Gardens of Versailles, each modeled on a story from Aesop's Fables and intended for the education of the king's young son, the Dauphin.

The Aesop Project, the latest community offering from Les Délices and artistic director Debra Nagy, is slightly less ornate but

just as inspired. Cleveland's ever-resourceful period chamber ensemble partnered with local puppeteers and poets for this family-friendly program teaching music and morals.

After touring Northeast Ohio schools earlier in the week, the project received a public performance at the CMA Community Arts Center on Saturday morning, November 22. Children, parents, and committed patrons of early music sat down for the 35-minute show, surrounded by spectacular displays of costumes and props from the Cleveland Museum of Art's annual Parade the Circle celebration.

It was familiar territory for Les Délices. The group first played alongside puppets in its 2022 opera production *The White Cat*, working with designer (and Parade the Circle artist) Ian Petroni to bring a little-known 17th-century fairy tale to life. Petroni returned for *The Aesop Project*, along with a few animal figures that featured in the feline drama.

Fashioning a fresh experience out of the creative materials on hand is very much in the Baroque spirit. *The White Cat* itself was a pastiche, assembled by Nagy from musical bits and pieces — including several antique French songs, given new English lyrics to narrate selections from none other than Aesop. Excerpting those numbers, which served as interludes within the opera, seemed a natural next step.

But knowing Nagy and Les Délices, a framing device was still called for, and so “The Bremen Town Musicians” by the Brothers Grimm came to structure the project. The tale of four traveling animals and the lessons they learn along the way was updated in verse by former Ohio poet laureate Dave Lucas, the better to be interspersed with Aesop arias.

With a wagon in tow, the puppets — a donkey, a dog, a cat, and a bird, operated chiefly by Petroni and dancer Kenya Woods — proceeded splendidly to the stage area and then took turns telling fables. Soprano Elena Mullins Bailey sang the simple action of each episode in lilting phrases, while actress Mariah Burks made genial introductions and summed up every story with a strong lesson.

The small cast showed scrappiness and ingenuity in equal measure. Petroni and Woods slipped on ears and a painted paper shell to race around in “The Tortoise and the Hare,” and later the cat donned a magnificent mane to star in “The Lion and the Rat.”

Meanwhile, the musicians of Les Délices — Nagy on oboe and recorder, violinist Shelby Yamin, cellist Rebecca Landell, and keyboardist Mark Edwards — kept up a steady soundtrack. Choice movements from Georg Philipp Telemann’s *Don Quixote* Suite underscored much of the journey. Animal noises came courtesy of Heinrich Biber’s *Sonata Representativa* and its barnyard of Baroque effects, from fluttering trills for the bird to slinking slides for the cat.

With one royal exception, Aesop has surely never sounded so extravagant.

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