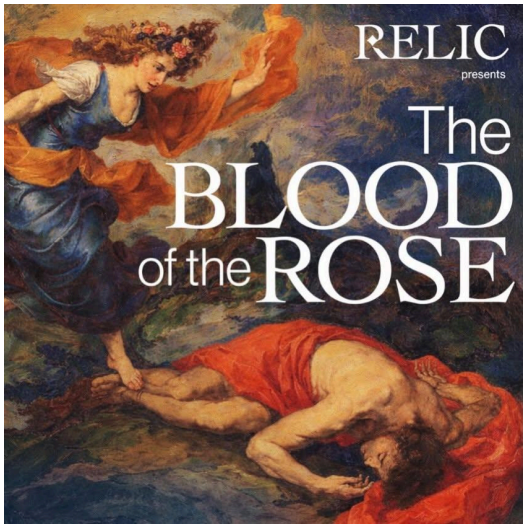
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Relic journeys with Venus and Adonis in "The Blood of the Rose" (Sept. 30)

by Stephanie Manning



For the New York-based Baroque chamber orchestra Relic, a program themed around an opera requires a deliberately operatic presentation.

Although there were no singers, sets, or costumes present in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art on September 30, Relic combined an intriguing collection of music with a suggestion of scenes and characters, topped off with a few dramatic readings. This curated experience told a short, cohesive story in a little over an hour.

"The Blood of the Rose," the ensemble's latest program, is based on *La púrpura de la rosa* by Tomás de Torrejón y Velasco. The first opera ever to be performed in the Americas, it tells the mythological story of Venus and Adonis, whose romance ends in a tragic demise engineered by Mars.

Relic had a keen ear for bringing together music that fit the emotional highs and lows of the opera's story while preserving the connection to Spain and Latin America. Velasco was Spanish, as was his librettist Pedro Calderón de la Barca. During each of the eight sections, violinist Rebecca Nelson read out portions of Calderón's libretto — enthusiastically delivered and precisely timed with fun moments of music from her colleagues.

Unfortunately, the specifics of the musical selections were lost to the Cleveland audience, as the printed program didn't include a complete listing of pieces with libretto and section titles. (The full program book can be found on Relic's website.) While the experience was still enjoyable, this felt like an oversight for those interested in exploring the music more deeply.

After the libretto set the scene for each section, the music mirrored the action. The fifth section, "The Garden of Love," featured celebratory dance music to symbolize the nymphs rushing out to greet Venus on her return. Mateo Romero's *Entre dos mansos*

arroyos featured lovely dialogue between the strings and percussion before joy turned to terror in "The Death of Adonis," where a wounded boar strikes down Venus's mortal lover. The laments in this section included multiple pieces by Tomás de Torrejón y Velasco, including a selection from the original *La púrpura de la rosa*.

While the instrumental ensemble included a relatively standard instrumentation anchored by strings and harpsichord, a few of Relic's additions stood out. Percussionist Luke Rinderknecht contributed a refreshing variety of sounds all evening, particularly in "The Wrath of Mars," where he used shakers and castanets in music by Romero and Antonio de Literes. In that same section, violinist Toma Iliev gamely assumed the musical role of Mars during the dramatic opener, the anonymous Portuguese "Batalha de sexto tom."

Georgeanne Banker did double duty on two instruments, nicely supporting the bass and cello with the bassoon and venturing more into melody using the recorder. She first pulled out that instrument in the second section, "Venus Falls in Love," for a light, inquisitive melody accompanied by guitar and cello in "Pastoreta Ypeché Flauta" (an anonymous selection from the Codex Martínez Compañón).

Joyous notes from the recorder also ornamented the final selection, Domenico Zipoli's *All' Offertorio* (arr. Matthias Maute), which capped off "The Lovers Ascend." With Venus and Adonis now enthroned, their story came to an end, as did the concert. After announcing that they will soon be recording their previous program "The Odyssey" (which they performed in Cleveland in January), Relic then sent us off with one more dance.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com *October 8, 2026*

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