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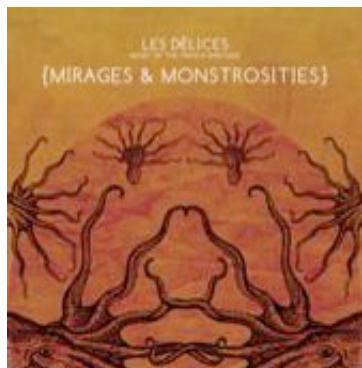
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Review

Les Délices: "Mirages and Monstrosities" at the William Busta Gallery (October 30)

by Nicholas Jones



Opera dominated the world of the French baroque, delighting court and capital with its strange combination of the fantastic, the noble, the grotesque, the beautiful, and the expressive. The theatricality of opera permeated this weekend's Halloween-themed presentation of "Mirages and Monstrosities," the opening concert of the fifth season of concerts by Debra Nagy's group "Les Délices," which specializes in music of the French Baroque. With its mastery of baroque style, the group delivered a program of instrumental music that needed no sets, no singing, no costumes to transport us to the strange world of the French 18th-century imagination.



The opener was a suite from Rameau's noted opera *Platée*, which tells of a love that was a mirage (Jupiter, it seems, for some devious marital scam, pretends to make love to a water nymph named Platée; the poor girl, not very beautiful, is fated to be left at the altar). Nagy and her group gave us a dramatically emphatic rendition of Rameau's lithe and startling music, filled with the sounds of the frogs and insects of the water nymph's boggy home and the slippery deceits of Jupiter (I assume the latter was represented in the overture's lush and sliding suspensions).

Supporting Nagy here and in the other concerted pieces was a small band comprised of the fine violinists Julie Andrijeski and Karina Fox, and a continuo section (Josh Lee, viola da gamba, and Michael Sponseller, harpsichord). The ensemble was strong, the three treble instruments working with and against each other and the continuo like the best jazz musicians. The group plays at French low pitch (A = 392), considerably lower than even standard Baroque pitch; the resultant sound is rich and mellow, without any loss of sparkle, perfect for an intimate space.

Saturday's performance was hosted by the William Busta Gallery, inaugurating brand-new gallery space next to Busta's former galleries on Prospect. The new space holds a good-sized audience — a little more than a hundred, I think — and is an excellent venue. It was a joy to hear such intelligent and scintillating chamber music surrounded by the kind of serious and compelling visual art that Busta consistently hangs — the colorful, dripping abstracts of Matthew Kolodziej, fascinating acrylic night and city-scapes by Timothy Callaghan, and the haunting fiber-paintings of Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson.

As Nagy explained, the group likes the joy of discovering something new: in this case, an almost unknown "symphony" — more like a quartet — by François-André Philidor, a member of a musical dynasty in the baroque and (according to the program notes) the finest chess player in Europe at the time. In a more classical mode than the Rameau, this piece was also more graceful, and should not remain neglected. Its gorgeous opening phrases, led by the oboe, reminded me of Ennio Morricone's haunting pseudo-Baroque music from the film *The Mission*.

In the breaks between ensemble pieces, the continuo players became soloists. Harpsichordist Sponseller gave us a whirling world of fantasy in the unaccompanied harpsichord piece, *Le Vertigo*, by Pancrace Royer. His playing is at once forceful, witty, and intelligent. Gambist Josh Lee took center stage for one of Marin Marais' masterpieces, *Le Labyrinthe*. This long, virtuosic solo (with unobtrusive harpsichord accompaniment) seems to represent the journey of a single protagonist, whose simple "walking" motif, a little ascending and descending scale figure, appears again and again. Is he in the labyrinth of the Minotaur, or — as Lee suggested — the courtly gardens of Versailles? We can't know, but the music makes it abundantly clear that in his journey he encounters some pretty strange and creepy sights. I couldn't decide whether I was most reminded of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Disney's *Fantasia*, or *Harry Potter*. Lee played with great expressiveness, sometimes spooky, sometimes easy and unconcerned, sometimes almost heartbreakingly sad and lyrical.

Les Délices gave us one piece that could never have been put on the 18th century operatic stage — Marais' bizarre depiction of a gall-stone operation, played by Lee and Sponseller and narrated in spine-chilling French by Nagy herself (without oboe). The viola da gamba follows the operation step-by-step

with brief representations of what must have been a harrowing experience in the absence of anesthetic — the patient's shudder of fear at seeing the operation table; his determination to go through with the operation; the tying down of his legs and arms; the incision and removal of the stone; the flow of blood; the exhaustion at the end. The piece can be performed as a mere quirk, a kind of ghastly joke. But the intensity of Lee's playing here made it something more than that, a reflection on medicine and mortality.

"Mirages and Monstrosities" ended with a little piece by Michel Corrette, a *Concerto Comique*, that appropriately dissolved all these serious and grotesque concerns with a bit of courtly baroque fluff, exquisitely tossed our way by this stellar group.

We have reason to be thankful for the concerted and complementary work of training and encouraging such performers and entrepreneurs, at the Oberlin Conservatory, at Oberlin's Baroque Performance Institute, and at CWRU. Who would have thought, twenty years ago, that today greater Cleveland would have such a wealth of early music ensembles?

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