

## Review

**Les Délices: *Myths and Allegories* at Tregoning & Co. (May 14)**

by William Fazekas



In the last few months, it has been this reviewer's pleasure to hear several Baroque chamber ensembles, some locally based, some visiting. The format was usually the same — a violin, maybe a wind or two, and the usual continuo pairing of harpsichord and viola da gamba. Although they describe themselves as "established" groups, a quick reading of the ensembles' histories and performers' bios reveal that they are groups with fluid personnel — the players often living in geographically distant locales — arranged around (and by) one or two director/members. In other words, something between a "pick-up" ensemble and what in arty rock circles would be called a "dream band." As for the programs: a series of short pieces organized around some uniting feature — a common nationality, or theme, or such. Most of these ensembles have been quite good, the concerts quite enjoyable.

This past Saturday evening, we heard Debra Nagy and her band Les Délices in a gallery concert at Tregoning & Co. on Cleveland's near west side. Save for the addition of a singer, the Philadelphia-based soprano Clara Rottsalk, their recital — a program of French music entitled "Myths and Allegories" — fell completely in line with the format above. And yet — "Myths and Allegories" was as close to perfection as a concert can come. Les Délices, which has just come to the end of their second season as an entity, continues to deliver suave performances of interesting and unusual repertoire. Ms. Nagy has spoiled us Clevelanders, and we have been un- or only scarcely aware of it.

Ms. Nagy plays the baroque oboe. She plays it very well. She also surrounds herself with equally fine instrumentalists who "play well with others." For "Myths and Allegories", these included Julie Andrijeski on violin, Emily Walhout on viola da gamba, and Peter Bennett on harpsichord. "Myths and Allegories" was organized around early 18th century French works referencing Homer's *Odyssey*, and opened fittingly with the full instrumental ensemble in the Overture to the opera *Ulysse* by Jean-Féry Rebel, a typically

French work which contrasts a bouncy, not-too-slow slow opening with a zippy fugue. The highlights of the program were two solo cantatas: *Les Sirènes* by Thomas-Louis Bourgeois, and *Le Sommeil d'Ulisse* by Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre. Now French cantatas of the era were quite different from their Italianate counterparts: the recitatives and arias less differentiated from one another (the recits were often *accompagnato*), the music moving seamlessly from one to the other. *Le Sommeil* was a particularly fascinating work, with a description of thunderstorm (a recitative with a simultaneous violin cadenza which Ms. Andrijeski played with remarkable virtuosity) and a placid lullaby for the ship-wrecked Ulysses (for which Ms. Nagy swapped out her oboe for the more dulcet tones of an alto recorder.) Ms. Rottsalk is a fine soprano whose huge voice — operatic without ever resorting to vibrato, powerful without ever crossing over into shrillness, and capable of being reduced to a delicate *pianissimo* — filled the small gallery but never overpowered the instruments. She sang the wordy French poetry with precise diction and a sense of conviction in the text.

Mr. Bennett played a solo piece, *Les Cyclopes*, one of the virtuosic character-pieces by Jean-Philippe Rameau; and Ms. Andrijeski soloed in a sonata by Rebel. Although subtitled *La Fidelle*, the Rebel sonata was a minor-keyed work, full of mordant double stops and angular chromatic lines, which seemed more suggestive of gypsy passion than Penelope's long-suffering faithfulness.

The program closed with three short movements from the final scene of the Rebel opera, in which Penelope and Ulysses are reunited: two short airs separated by a buoyant instrumental Chaconne. The latter of the two airs, "Que c'est un plaisir extrême," — written in a minor key, which one wouldn't expect after two decades of separation — was a song of touching delicacy.

Tregoning & Co. is located on W. 78th St. on the west edge of Cleveland's trendy Gordon Square neighborhood — expect traffic jams on a Saturday evening. Inexplicably, the gallery was only about one-third full (the last concert there, which happened during a February snow storm, was standing-room only.) Large abstract canvasses in muted colors by Matt Dibble graced the walls, and a wine-and-cheese reception afterwards allowed the audience to mingle with the performers.

*Published on clevelandclassical.com May 17, 2011*