

THE TASTES REUNITED • Les Délices (period instruments) • LES DÉLICIES (56:06) Available at www.cdbaby.com

F. COUPERIN La pucelle. L'astrée. Les sylvains (arr. de Visée). P. D. PHILIDOR 5th Suite. CLÉRAMBAULT La félicité. DORNEL Oboe Sonata. CORBETTA Caprice de chaconne. CHAUVON 6th Suite
Tastes Reunited
Audio CD

Chamber recitals based on les goûts réunis, “The Tastes Reunited,” remind us of a prominent 18th-century debate that raged between French and Italian characteristics in music. From our perspective more than 200 years later, much of the emotion was tied up, as is often the case in such matters, with encoded arguments on other subjects: patriotism vs. internationalism, egalitarianism vs. the traditional social orders, etc. But leaving all that to one side, there remains the introduction of Italianate dances, cantabile and simplified rhythms, and Italian Baroque forms, such as the aria da capo, the Corellian concerto, and trio sonata, to French Baroque music. The concert on this album includes several composers whose attempts to combine what some once saw as irreconcilable musical viewpoints did nothing to settle the issue, but resulted in some fine and diverse music.

So we have the very French-sounding Cinquième Suite of Philidor (that's Pierre Danican Philidor, not his better known cousin François André, the notable opera comique composer and world renowned chess player), with a grave, deliberate Prélude, proud-stepping Allemande, sadly lyrical Sarabande, and clever Gigue. Couperin le grand supplies the first piece on the album, the rhetorically brilliant La pucelle—French folk-like tunes such as the one that furnishes the Air, cheek-by-jowl with an Italianate Gigue—while L'Astrée, the last selection on the program, transcends such distinctions by putting its international elements to work in a six-movement trio sonata that combines fancy, learning, and expressiveness to an extraordinarily high degree.

François Chauvon, a student of Couperin, is rarely heard in concert or on record. His seven-movement Sixth Suite features a broadly appealing Allemande, a memorable Fantasie that plays games with

accented off-beats, an amiably garrulous Courante, and a frivolous, all too brief Gigue. Louis-Antoine Dornel's background as an organist may inform the fine fugal movement in his Oboe Sonata—the earliest known example of a solo sonata for the instrument. The work's inspiration seems to partake less of France than a combination of Italy and Germany, with an austere but attractive air simply marked Gravement, and a Gigue that engages in cordially imitative discourse with the viola da gamba. Clérambault's trio sonata, *La félicité*, recalls Corelli in its harmonic sequences and rapid passagework, but occasionally interrupts its rhythms in a manner that hearkens back to a more elastic French tradition.

You'd expect any concert of this sort to furnish some additional aural variety, and that's provided by a pair of solo pieces. Couperin's *Les sylvains* is a natural for de Visée's theorbo arrangement, given the original's use of lute style *brisé*, while the variations in a *Caprice de chaconne* for guitar by Corbetta juxtapose a similar lute approach with the strummed Italian fashion to glorious effect.

Les Délices is a Cleveland-based ensemble specializing in the French Baroque. They are led by oboist Debra Nagy, with an extremely fluent technique and strong breath support. The upper part of her instrument's register (more difficult to play on a Baroque oboe, such as Nagy uses—a 2005 reproduction of a 1690 original) possesses the reedy brightness of the high tenor in French vocal music. She employs both fast and slow vibratos for occasional tonal color, and finds an effective and natural-sounding middle ground for frequent ornamentation between those who propose treating it at the basic tempo as an extension of the thematic line and those who rush through it as quickly as possible.

Nagy is joined in the pair of Couperin trio sonatas by violinist Scott Metcalfe, furnishing a good match for her in elegance, spryness, and leanness of sonority. The rest of the ensemble consists of gambist Emily Walhout, harpsichordist Lisa Goode Crawford, and theorbo/guitarist Lucas Harris. All five play with the intense awareness of each other common to the finest early-music ensembles, where the excitement of discovery (and there remains much to be discovered in French Baroque chamber music) and joy of

music feeds on itself.

There are many felicitous details that could be pointed out in each band on this release. I'd especially note the firm but subtly elastic rhythmic support of the continuo; the lean, focused tone, so different from the lush approach one sometimes encounters that works against the music; the degree to which rhetorical pauses are properly invoked as an expressive aid, without any horror vacui; and the basic tempos of the opening movements—slow but flexible in the Couperin and Philidor, exhibiting none of the abrupt dash that some Baroque performers employ, presumably in reaction to earlier, historically uninformed readings.

My only criticism of this release is the tight slip sleeve it comes in that can potentially lead to scuffed discs. But it's a mild concern, and easily remedied. I hope it'll be the first of several such albums from Les Délices. The disc is available from cdbaby.com, and for download from digstation.com. Barry Brenesal

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