

Kleine Kammermusik presents 'Dialogue of the Graces'

Masters of Elegance and Grace

Steven Zohn

Now in its second year, the Early Music Series (www.philalandmarks.org/philalandmarks-early-music-series) of the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks (www.PhilaLandmarks.org) presents intimate chamber music concerts at two of its historical properties in the Society Hill neighborhood: the Samuel Powel House (1765) and the Hill-Physick House (1786). Each of the locally-based ensembles performs on historical instruments, and their collective repertory spans the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Thus the music correlates closely (and sometimes exactly) to the colonial and post-colonial settings in which it is heard. Contributing to the informal, salon-like feel of these concerts are the musicians' chatty remarks on the music, which soften the barrier between audience and performers.

The third of this season's four concerts featured [Kleine Kammermusik](#) performing on combinations of oboes, recorders, bassoon, cello, viola da gamba, and harpsichord. Their thoughtfully conceived program of French baroque works was performed with all the brilliance of execution and subtlety of expression that the music demands in order to make its full effect. This is art that invites the listener to revel in a delectable harmony, an elegant melodic contour, or a sensuous ornament rather than be grabbed by the lapels and thrust toward the next musical "event," as Italian and German music of the period tends to do. Perhaps this is why, in our increasingly hurried world, French music (and not just that of the baroque era) is frequently misunderstood and undervalued. The musicians of Kleine Kammermusik clearly appreciated, and were able to communicate, these moments of grace, innocence, and desire.

Miniature worlds of expression

Programming a series of miniatures – dances, songs, and character pieces that are often just a few minutes in duration – runs the risk of producing a disjointed effect for listeners, and this challenge was met with considerable ingenuity by organizing the music into three substantial sets, each beginning with differently scored rendition of the *Dialogue de Trois Graces* by the composer and singing teacher Michel Lambert. These lense-shifting moments not only allowed one to refocus attention, but also to consider how the pieces in each set conversed with one another. Some of the composers represented on the program – François Couperin, Jean-Baptiste Lully, and Marin Marais – are familiar to most fans of baroque music, but others, such as Louis-Antoine Dornel, Jacques-Martin Hotteterre, and Lambert, opened up unfamiliar musical vistas that were no less engaging.

All manner of dialogues

The overarching theme of dialogue played out via interactions between two treble instruments, treble and bass instruments, winds and strings, and even between composers – as with Henri d'Anglebert's arrangement of the famous passacaille from Lully's opera *Armide*, given a sensitive and virtuosic performance by harpsichordist Leon Schelhase. Frequent shifts in instrumentation injected welcome variety and required Geoffrey Burgess and Meg Owens to

switch back and forth from oboes and recorders, and Rebecca Humprey to replace her viola da gamba with cello midway through the concert. Thus the aural and visual qualities of these instruments were set in dialogue with one another. Burgess and Owens admirably balanced and complemented each other both tonally and expressively, a unanimity that was consistently matched by the continuo team of Humphrey, Schelhase, and bassoonist Stephanie Corwin. Corwin provided another of the concert's highlights in a rendition of Lambert's song "Ombre de mon Amant" (Ghost of My Lover), her wordless rhetoric capturing the exquisite grief of the song's speaker over the death of a lover.

In a kind of Russian doll effect, each musical set featured smaller groups of works by one or more composers. First came a Couperin suite drawn from dance movements the composer published in his famous *Concerts Royaux* and *Pièces de clavecin*; some movements were performed as harpsichord solos and others with a treble instrument and continuo. The second set featured a suite by Hotteterre for two recorders and continuo, while the third concluded with three works based upon a repeating bass pattern (a "splendid carpet overlaid with joyous grace and festive cheer," as noted in the program): the Lully passacaille mentioned above, another one by Marais for two trebles and bass, and a chaconne by Lully for the same scoring. This last work, meant to accompany comic dancing by the characters Scaramouche and Trivelin in the comédie-ballet *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (The Bourgeois Gentleman), provided a light-hearted ending to the program.

In keeping with the established format of the PhilaLandmarks series, the concert was presented without intermission and led to a meet-and-greet reception in which musical dialogues could give way to their verbal counterparts.

ARTICLE OVERVIEW

The third concert in the 2019 PhilaLandmark Early Music Series featured Kleine Kammermusik performing a program of French baroque chamber music. Steven Zohn reviews.

WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

Dialogue of the Graces. Music by Michel Corrette, François Couperin, Louis-Antoine Dornel, Jacques-Martin Hotteterre, Michel Lambert, Jean-Baptiste Lully, and Marin Marais. Geoffrey Burgess and Meg Owens, oboe and recorder; Stephanie Corwin, bassoon; Rebecca Humprey, cello and viola da gamba; and Leon Schelhase, harpsichord. Kleine Kammermusik. April 11, 2019 at the Hill-Physick House, 321 S. 4th Street, Philadelphia. Kleinekammermusik.com

ABOUT STEVEN ZOHN

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