Torchsongs Transformed
the arc of an affair

Spring
Jean-Baptiste de Bousset: Pourquoi dous rossignol
Edith Piaf: La vie en rose

De Bousset: De mes soupirs
Erroll Garner/Johnny Burke: Misty

Marin Marais: Le Badinage from 4eme Livre de Pièces de viole
Marc-Antoine Charpentier: Sans frayeur dans ce bois

Summer
Luiz Bonfa: Manhã de Carnaval
Marais: Folies d'espagne
Piaf: La foule

Joseph Chabanceau de la Barre: Allez bergers
George Gershwin: Summertime

Fall
François Couperin: Air Tendre from 2e Concert
Couperin: Sicilienne from 7e Concert
Michel Lambert: Ombre de mon amant

Joseph Kosma/Johnny Mercer: Autumn Leaves

Winter
Marais: Prelude in a minor from 4eme Livre de Pièces de viole
Sébastien Le Camus: Laissez durer la nuit

Charles Aznavour/Nina Simone: Tomorrow is my turn

Renewal
Lambert: Vos mespris chaques jour
Jerome Kern: All the things you are

Hélène Brunet, soprano | Debra Nagy, baroque oboe
Mélisande Corriveau, viola da gamba & pardessus de viole | Éric Milnes, harpsichord

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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Hopefully, we’ve all encountered a truly great performer who makes it seem as though they’re singing directly – and perhaps only – to us. Such performers capture our attention, reel us in, make us listen harder or more intently. Sure, ideas and phrases will come across in their delivery, but perhaps the message also takes on new meaning or significance in the moment. Perhaps in a state of heightened awareness and engagement, we (as listeners) even experience the performer’s relishing of every word or syllable. The performance becomes intimate and personal, language dissolves into poetry, and ideas are transformed into art.

Speaking, sighing, whispering, pleading. Words or no words. As artists, every work, every phrase, and every note presents both a challenge and opportunity to communicate – clearly, expressively, sometimes exalted, sometimes inwardly – in the hope that the listener will be moved or transported; that they will feel all the feels. That’s what we hope for and are inspired by in tonight’s program, which explores the rich relationship between intimate, deeply-felt 17th-century French love songs (known as airs de cour) and 20th century torchsongs and jazz standards arranged for and improvised by the ensemble.

The program’s emotional journey follows the arc of an affair: from love’s first bloom in Spring (with tunes like Edith Piaf’s famous “La vie en rose”) through the endless days of Summer (George Gershwin’s Summertime and Luiz Bonfá’s bossa nova anthem “A day in the life of a fool”). Fall’s changing winds (Johnny Mercer’s “Autumn Leaves”) give way to Winter’s seeming desolation in anticipation of verdant renewal (Jerome Kern’s “All the things you are”). These 20th century anthems are interleaved with love songs by French Baroque masters Michel Lambert, Jean-Baptiste Lully, and Sebastian Le Camus, creating opportunities for listeners to hear all of the music differently in a work that is truly timeless.

Whether from the 17th Century or a time more closely related to our own, the love songs on tonight’s program are united by the intensity and universality of their expression. At the very least, feel free to approach the music from these two eras similarly: let yourself be taken by the harmonies, the mood or groove, the words, the way the song builds up or settles. But there’s more to the successful combination of these repertoires than that.

Several factors make this 17th–20th century juxtaposition work. Not only do the universal sentiments of love, longing, loss get similar treatment across the centuries, but 17th century French songs and jazz standards also share improvisatory traditions and an impressively rich harmonic language. One of the most fascinating and challenging elements of performing 17th-century vocal airs on instruments (besides the inherent difficulty in expressing the flow and sentiments of the texts) is the highly ornamented style of the second verse of a song, which was called a double. As one can hear from the second, ornamented verse deBousset’s De mes soupirs or Joseph Chabaneeau de la Barre’s Allez bergers, the rhythmic freedom and virtuosity of some of these doubles was almost impossible to notate. I’ve always been struck by the fact that notated doubles are not so different from how a transcription of a jazz solo can’t truly represent an artist’s performance.

As artists, we have also been inspired by the flexible “voices” of our period instruments (i.e., there’s a certain freedom in having fewer keys!) and are eager to find ways to play tunes that are a part of our contemporary world (much in the same way that 17th-century instrumentalists adapted vocal airs to their instruments). That said, we have chosen the 20th century works very carefully. We’ve sought out tunes that not only allow us to stretch technically and expressively, but also use harmonic sequences and repeating bass patterns that still feel reasonably natural when played on period instruments.
The French airs that I’ve chosen for this program are by the greatest songwriters of the age. Michel Lambert (1610-1696) published the first book of airs with basso continuo engraved in France in 1660. Widely recognized as the greatest singing teacher of his age, Lambert’s 330 surviving songs represent only a small fraction of his output.

Vos mespris (a rondeau constructed over a 4-note descending ground bass) endures as one of Lambert’s most famous and satisfying songs while Ombre de mon amant (shadow of my beloved) is a prime example of the composer’s rhetorical sensibilities with its chromatic ascending bass line and pleading cries for help. Sébastian le Camus creates a similarly intimate and deeply-felt experience in Laissez durer la nuit (let the night go on). Marc-Antoine Charpentier’s Sans frayeur (free from fear), on the other hand, is a bright and playful chaconne-based air.

Jean-Baptiste de Bousset’s tender and languid airs such as Pourquoi doux rossignol (another ground bass) and De mes soupirs (of my sighs), however, represent the next generation of song composers. Though little-known today, de Bousset (1662-1725) was noted for the “true expression of the words, his noble, natural and pleasing melody, and his variety, astonishing given the size of his output.” Having composed 875 songs over the course of his career, his oeuvre is ripe for rediscovery.

Whether one is talking about love – or great music-making – chemistry is key. I feel privileged and grateful to have been making music on and off with harpsichordist Eric Milnes and viola da gamba player Mélisande Corriveau for over fifteen years. I absolutely love working with them and we speak a common language when it comes to spontaneity, improvisation, and making magic happen onstage. I’m thrilled to include soprano Hélène Brunet on this project, who floats effortlessly between genres and will likely steal your heart along the way.

Inspired by oboist and scholar Bruce Haynes’ observation that “authenticity is not a product of the instrument being played, but of the musician’s sense of style,” I hope you’ll find that Torchsongs Transformed combines written and improvised music – new and old – in ways that feel authentic and fresh.

— Debra Nagy

PERFORMER BIOGRAPHIES:

Les Délices (pronounced Lay day-lease) explores the dramatic potential and emotional resonance of long-forgotten music. Founded by baroque oboist Debra Nagy in 2009, Les Délices has established its reputation for unique programs that are “thematicall-concise, richly expressive, and featuring composers few people have heard of.” The New York Times added, “Concerts and recordings by Les Délices are journeys of discovery.” The ensemble’s debut CD was named one of the “Top Ten Early Music Discoveries of 2009” (NPR's Harmonia), and the group’s performances have been called "a beguiling experience" (Cleveland Plain Dealer), "astonishing" (ClevelandClassical.com), and "first class" (Early Music America Magazine). Since Les Délices’ sold-out New York debut at the Frick Collection, touring highlights have included Music Before 1800, Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, San Francisco Early Music Society, the Yale Collection of Musical Instruments, and Columbia University’s Miller Theater. Les Délices also presents its own annual four-concert series in Cleveland art galleries and at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights, OH, where the group is Artist in Residence. Les Délices has been featured on WCNP, WCLV and WKSU in Ohio, WQXR in New York, NPR's syndicated Harmonia and Sunday Baroque, and had their debut CD featured as part of the Audio-guide for a special exhibit at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (Watteau, Music,

**L'Harmonie des saisons** was founded in Granby (Quebec) in 2010 by multi-instrumentalist Mélisande Corriveau and internationally renowned New York-born harpsichordist and instrumentalist Eric Milnes. Focusing on the repertoire of early music and performing on period instruments, the ensemble is the recipient of the JUNO 2016, Canada's Best Classical Album of the Year - vocal art, for its first title "Las Ciudades de oro" (The Golden Cities), released under the ATMA Classique label.

Canadian soprano Hélène Brunet is hailed by the critics as "a singer of tremendous quality" with "a voice of perfect beauty" and "sincere expression". Recognized for her interpretations of the works of Bach, Handel and Mozart, her repertoire extends from Baroque to the music of the 20th and 21st centuries. Hélène is a regular guest with reputed orchestras and ensembles across North America and Europe, notably with American Bach Soloists in San Francisco, with American Classical Orchestra at the Lincoln Center in New York City, with Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal and conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and Toronto’s Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra. Last June, she sang at the Festival Tage Alter Musik in Regensburg, Germany. Hélène was recently a prize winner at the Lyndon Woodside Oratorio-Solo Competition at Carnegie Hall in New York. The album Las Ciudades de Oro, where she is featured with ensemble L'Harmonie des Saisons, has won a Juno Award for best Vocal Album in 2016. Hélène is a recipient of a professional development grant from the Canada Council for the Arts.

Critically acclaimed for her “virtuosic, delicate and elegant playing,” Mélisande Corriveau performs on viola da gamba, cello, recorder, and is one of the few performers in the world specializing in the pardessus de viole. She is co-founder and Artistic Director of the ensemble L'Harmonie des saisons, whose debut CD release "Las Ciudades de Oro" (Cities of Gold) was the 2016 winner of the coveted Canadian JUNO Award, for best classical CD of the year in the vocal and choral category. Her recent duo release with harpsichordist Eric Milnes, "Pardessus de viole" featuring the 18th century French repertoire for the pardessus de viole, recently won an Opus prize from the Quebec Council of Music, was named among the 10 best classical discs of the year (2016) by CBC Radio, and selected as Classical CD of the Year by Radio Canada. Mélisande is a core member of ensemble Masques, Les Voix Humaines consort of viols, Bande Montréal Baroque, Sonate 1704 and Les Boréades. Her discography numbers over 40 titles on the ATMA Classique, Analekta, Harmonia Mundi, Paradizo, Zig-Zag Territories and Alpha labels.

A native New Yorker, Eric Milnes, is director of La Bande Montréal Baroque, and L'harmonie des saisons, Quebec. He has received critical acclaim for performances as conductor, organist and harpsichordist throughout North and South America, Europe and Asia with recent appearances at the Regensburg, Potsdam, Bremen, Utrecht, Bruges and Lufthansa festivals, at The Forbidden City Concert Hall, Beijing, on tour throughout Japan and at the International Baroque Festival, Bolivia. North American performances include Mostly Mozart Festival, Boston Early Music Festival, Berkeley Bach Festival, Santa Fe Festival, Montreal Festival and as conductor with Seattle Baroque Orchestra, Portland Baroque Orchestra, New York Collegium, and Les Voix Baroque. His latest CD release, Cuidades de Oro (sacred music from colonial New Spain) won the 2016 JUNO (Canadian Grammy) for the best Classical Album of the Year. ATMA Classique features him directing the recording of the complete Bach sacred cantatas - eight volumes are completed. He has collaborated in recording and performance with Gustav Leonhardt, Wieland Kuijken, Sigiswald Kuijken, Bart Kuijken, Andrew Parrott, Reinhard Goebel, and Christophe Rousset, among many others. He takes
greatest pride in the accomplishments of his daughters Mary Leah (Vanderbilt University, '15) and Hannah (Columbia College, '16).

“A baroque oboist of consummate taste and expressivity” (Cleveland Plain Dealer) with a musical approach that’s “distinctly sensual…pliant, warm, and sweet,” (New York Times), director Debra Nagy is one of North America’s leading performers on the baroque oboe. She plays principal oboe with the Handel & Haydn Society, Apollo’s Fire, and American Bach Soloists, and is a regular guest with other ensembles around the country. Following studies at the Oberlin Conservatory, Conservatory of Amsterdam, and Case Western Reserve University, Debra has received many awards for her creative and scholarly pursuits including first-prize in the American Bach Soloists Young Artists Competition, a 2009 Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a 2010 Creative Workforce Fellowship from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture. She has recorded over 30 CDs with repertoire ranging from 1300-1800 on the Chandos, Avie, CPO, Capstone, Bright Angel, Naxos, and ATMA labels, and has had live performances featured on CBC Radio Canada, Klara (Belgium), NPR’s Performance Today, WQXR (New York City) and WGBH Boston.