Soprano Dominique Labelle joined 16 instrumentalists led by violinist Daniel Stepner for the third concert of Aston Magna’s 41st summer festival on Thursday night at Brandeis University’s Slosberg Auditorium. The program will be repeated Friday at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, and Saturday at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington.

Artistic director Stepner’s imaginatively designed program juxtaposed two of Bach’s most popular works with what amounted to a retrospective of music by the less well known French Baroque composer Marin Marais.
Marais is not entirely unfamiliar to local audiences; not long ago I reviewed in these pages Duo Maresienne’s performance of several of his works here.

As Stepner explained in pre-concert remarks, Marais is best known to modern concert-goers as a rather opportunistic young royal musician in the 1991 film *Tous les matins du monde.* But this was hardly a historically accurate depiction of a composer who, like his contemporaries François Couperin on the harpsichord and Bach on the organ, was the greatest living exponent of his instrument: the now-rare bass viol or viola da gamba.

Laura Jeppesen, who demonstrated her seven-stringed French gamba during the pre-concert presentation, was thus the star of the first half. She, together with Stepner, performed difficult passagework with grace and aplomb in Marais’s G-minor Passacaille and his famous *Sonnerie de Sainte Geneviève.* But what really impressed me was the exquisite and seemingly effortless performance of the equally difficult but quieter prelude and allemande in C from Marais’s third book of viol pieces. These were accompanied solely by a large lute or theorbo, played sensitively by Catherine Liddell. Although the latter tended to get covered up in other selections, here the two created a quite special sound, resonating with complete clarity in Slosberg despite the rather full house.

As the final segment of the first half we heard selections from Marais’s fourth and last opera *Sémélé,* premiered in 1709. This work, on the same subject as Handel’s secular oratorio *Semele,* lies stylistically between the earlier French operas of Lully and the later ones of Rameau. Having performed under Lully at the Paris opera from the 1670s onward, Marais knew the style well, and as director of the ensemble since 1706 he knew the latter’s capabilities.

Like other works of the period, *Sémélé* follows conventions familiar to listeners who know Lully’s music from performances such as BEMF’s 2007 production of *Psyché.* But it has lusher vocal and instrumental writing, including colorful solos for the winds and virtuoso passages for the strings that anticipate things that Rameau would write several decades later. These
include a vivid depiction of an earthquake near the end of the opera, which was played with perfect ensemble to brilliant effect.

Unfortunately, I must again, as I did last week in comments on Rockport’s Play of Daniel, complain that listeners were given no texts or translations for vocal music in which the words are paramount. In this case the program did not even specify which selections from the opera we were hearing. If it were not for the complete vocal score of the work from 1709 that is available online at the increasingly indispensable website imslp.org, your reviewer would not have been able to tell you exactly what we heard.

What we did hear, after the overture, was, first, “Goutons ici les plus doux charmes,” sung by a Priestess of Bacchus during the opera’s prologue. This grand aria or ariette—one of the first in French opera—will surprise anyone who imagines that French Baroque music is any less virtuosic than contemporary Italian works. Its vocal coloratura, which was both expressive and brilliant in Labelle’s performance, is echoed not only by the violins but by a florid trumpet part that might have reminded some in the audience of Purcell. As Stepner explained earlier in the evening, however, practical considerations led to his re-assigning the trumpet line here to the oboe, which was played capably by Stephen Hammer.

This was followed by a brief sarabande, “Quel bruit nouveaux,” in which the Priestess welcomes the god Apollo. References in the poem (by Lamotte) to “pleasing concerts, harmonious sounds” aptly described the ravishing sound here of the winds and upper strings. The final selections, from the opera’s concluding divertissement, included the astonishing earthquake music. Here Labelle sang both the exclamation “Ciel! quel bruit souterain,” originally for chorus, and Semele’s final speech, “Peuples, rassurez vous, Jupiter va apparaître.” Echoing the close of Lully’s Armide and anticipating that of Götterdämmerung, this as well as the brief closing prélude for the orchestra was done smashingly.

The second half consisted chiefly of Bach’s Second Brandenburg Concerto and his Cantata 51 (“Jauchzet Gott”). Between them we heard the famous
Air from Bach’s Third Orchestral Suite. The latter was played in memory of Mary Ruth Ray, founding violist of the Lydian String Quartet and until her death last January chair of Brandeis’s Music Department. (Wandering around the building, I noticed that her name is still on her door.)

Stepner, a long-time colleague of Ray, led the violins in an unusually sensitive playing of the florid melody. Listening, as seemed appropriate on the occasion, to the inner as well as the outer strings, I was struck by the execution of the viola part. Bach is supposed to have enjoyed playing the viola in ensembles, and although the instrument is usually neglected by composers, he often, as here, gave it opportunities for real expression. These were taken, elegantly and without ostentation, by the three players, who included Jeppesen as well as long-time Aston Magna violist David Miller and Barbara Wright.

In the concerto, as Stepner pointed out, Bach gives one of the four solo instruments an unusually challenging part: the trumpet, which was played by Josh Cohen. Cohen played on the right, facing sideways toward Stepner (leading the ensemble on the left). The trumpet therefore did not blast outwards at the audience, which would have been a disaster in Slosberg’s close space (there is no stage, and the front row of seats is only steps away from the performance area). Nor did I sense any balance problems between Cohen and the quieter recorder (played by Christopher Krueger) or Hammer’s oboe. I’ve mentioned in the past the use of so-called vent holes by modern players of the so-called natural trumpet, so this was not exactly a Baroque instrument. But the difficult part was played with complete command and control.

It’s hard for musicians to find anything new in this much-played piece, and I can’t say that this performance shed new light on it for me. The multiplying of players on the so-called ripieno string parts may, as is often the case, have contributed to a slight heaviness in the quick outer movements. This might, however, have been due to the equally common tendency to sound every beat with practically the same emphatic articulation. In the quieter, trumpet-free slow movement, I thought I might have heard a slight
relaxation in a passage that could be set off as something a bit special (it begins at the exact center of this Andante). But in the absence of any strongly projected nuances, I’m afraid that this performance confirmed the impression of the movement as seemingly “formless,” as Joseph Orchard put it in his program note.

Labelle, who sang Marais with the requisite attention to French Baroque declamation and ornamentation, returned at the end for Bach’s “Jauchzet Gott.” This work—which may well have originated much earlier than the 1730 date given in the notes—is not really a church cantata but rather a German equivalent of the eighteenth-century Latin solo motet; Mozart’s *Exsultate, jubilate* is a late example. It is, in other words, a display piece for a solo soprano, here joined by an equally virtuoso trumpet and strings.

This is a spectacular work, and it received a spectacular performance. Labelle’s singing left every note clear, even in the quick arpeggios at the end of the final Alleluja. The quieter arioso and aria at the center of the work were beautifully phrased, with fine playing here as well by continuo cellist Loretta O’Sullivan (Michael Beattie was the capable keyboard player throughout the evening, here accompanying on organ). I am not a fan of the modern fashion for standing at the end of any exciting performance, and even in a superb execution (such as this one) Bach’s cantata is more thrilling than deeply moving. Yet this was a discerning audience, and no one could fault the majority who rose to their feet at the end of this dazzling performance.