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A Singer's Notes 74: the Gamba and  
the Voice — Bach and Marais

by KEITH KIBLER • JULY 7, 2013 • PRINT-FRIENDLY



*André Bouys, Portrait of Marin Marais, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra National de Paris*

This was a marvelous concert. It had plenitude; there was abundance in it. It was partly the thought-out programming, as always with Dan Stepner's concerts. But it was also the richness of experience, the ease of it. The viola da gamba gives the sense that around the straight narrowness of the tone, there is something else, full of suggestion. The instrument itself conjures you into listening twice—first to the actual sound, and then, almost against your will, to something else it puts into the room. The viol always seems a private confidant. I have heard Laura Jeppesen perform a great many times, and her playing on this occasion was more fluent than ever, and spoke intimate truth. It made a pact with the listener, a faith that something important was being said.

Much the same can be said about the singing of Dominique Labelle. I have often admired the poise of her performing—the ideal balance she gives us between passion and precision, and word and music. Some performers battle with style – blow it away you might say. Others enslave themselves. Ms. Labelle finds a way to stay within it, inhabit it, and this locating itself is a passionate act.

It was excellent to enjoy a half program of the music of Marin Marais, including excerpts from his opera "Semele." Pleasant though these were, Marais still seems to me a composer who is completely wedded to his instrument. The viola da gamba produces a kind of composition in this composer that is very like singing, the intense evocation of the personal being its home.

Superbly beautiful also was the playing of the Air from the Bach Suite no. 3, performed in memory of Mary Ruth Ray, one of Boston's finest freelancers. The tenderness that the Aston Magna players brought to it, the ease of their bowing, made it sound new-minted. And if this were not enough, there was an energetic performance of the Bach "Jauchzet Gott" cantata from Ms. Labelle and Baroque trumpeter Josh Cohen. All in all a first-rate concert, a highlight of my summer.