

Early Music: Aradia at the Music Gallery

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Nobody listens to Jean-Philippe Rameau. This is particularly unfortunate because without him, we'd still be writing music as a series of interwoven melodies instead of as chords and melodies. Most developments in music from the late 18th century on depend on Rameau's contribution to music, namely that music is made up of chords, rather than individual notes that happen to harmonize together. Mozart and Beethoven needed Rameau to develop the capital "C" Classical style. Charlie Parker inventing bebop? He needed Rameau's concept of chords to conceive of harmonic improvisation. Guitar tab in rock and pop music? Rameau again. You get the idea.

It's for this reason that I'm grateful, as a music geek, to Kevin Mallon for his bold decision to put on an all-Rameau and Leclair concert last Sunday, October 26, at the Music Gallery along with his band Aradia and soprano H el ene Brunet.

While Rameau was a brilliant thinker and gifted keyboardist, he didn't write that much music, and what he did write is often difficult to organize as a concert program. I'm thinking specifically of his operas, which require a full orchestra including a full baroque wind section, a cast of singers, and dancers for numerous dance suites. Not only would a North American ensemble find it incredibly difficult to stage a Rameau opera (baroque dancers and bassoonists are especially hard to find), but simpler works of his, like his solo harpsichord pieces and chamber works, were written for a harpsichord virtuoso with enough time on his hands to practice for months on end. It's not easy to find someone to do that for the sake of a single concert.

Mallon's solution was to bring in Brunet to perform Rameau's solo cantatas *Orph ee* and *Le Berger Fid ele* and find a re-orchestrated version of Rameau's *Pi eces de Clavecin en Concert* to perform with Aradia, trading the difficulty of staging a full opera for the risk of finding a singer who can carry a whole 20-minute vocal tour de force by herself and the problem of finding a powerhouse harpsichordist for the challenge of orchestrating virtuosic solo passages for a whole string ensemble and hoping they don't fall apart in the process.

It was a gamble, but it paid off for Aradia. Not only did Brunet prove herself to be a gifted singer with a natural voice for French repertoire and a vast emotional range, but the string band acquitted themselves very well. They handled an awkward orchestration and pulled off the rarest of achievements in classical music: putting on a fun concert of some very difficult but rewarding repertoire and giving a heartfelt tribute to a brilliant but very much neglected composer. Bravo.