

La Reveuse Ensemble serves up baroque delights

By Cecelia Porter,

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One of the ideals of baroque music was to move the listener's emotions. On Wednesday La Reveuse Ensemble, together with the American-born tenor Jeffrey Thompson, did just that at the French Embassy, edging close to opera in the group's virtuosity, inner energy and dramatic flair. Ace performers all, the Paris-based musicians served up a program of rarely heard 17th-century English songs and instrumental pieces. Besides Thompson, the instrumentalists included director Benjamin Perrot on the theorbo (a long-necked lute), Florence Bolton on treble and bass viols and Bertrand Cuiller on the harpsichord.

The program centered on the songs of the brothers Henry and William Lawes along with those of Nicholas Lanier and instrumental pieces by Daniel Norcombe, Thomas Tomkins, Christopher Simpson and John Playford. Written in the shadow of Shakespeare amid waves of political turmoil, the poetic imagery clung to metaphors and mythological allusions to the seductive power and pain of love, such as the pain of Cupid's arrows and the sexual lure of sirens and mermaids. Though oh so English, the music paid more than a passing nod to the extremes of passion, clashing harmonies and florid melodic style of Monteverdi and other Italian madrigalists.

Thompson and the ensemble didn't miss an opportunity to indulge in ravishing improvisations not written in the scores, coupled with a flashing declamatory approach to specific words. Focusing on the most emotion-laden moments in the poetry, the tenor combined wondrously extended embellishments and carefully measured body gestures to affirm the amorous poetic imagery and dramatic implications of the songs; these were sometimes couched in a declamatory manner, even some spoken lines; while his sensitive modulations of vocal timbre, tempo and volume intensified this effect.

The instrumentalists, too, clearly grasped every the dimension of baroque performance style with extraordinary technique, as in Norcombe's darkly elegant "ground," with its insistent repeated phrases in the continuo underpinning a single instrument's inventive variation.

For the audience, who wanted more than Wednesday's two encores, the evening was truly magnifique.