

Les Délices
Morrison Chamber Music Center
April 25, 2021

Sonade
from *La Française* (1726) François Couperin (1668-1733)

Medée (1710) Louis-Nicolas Clérambault (1676-1749)

Vertigo (1746) Pancrace Royer (1703-1755)

Circé (1729) Colin de Blamont (1690-1760)

Hannah De Priest, *soprano*
Julie Andrijeski, *violin*
Debra Nagy, *oboe & recorder*
Rebecca Reed, *viola da gamba*
Mark Edwards, *harpsichord*



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Notes on the Program:

Tonight's program is filled with magical music. The harpsichord solo *Le Vertigo* by Pancrace Royer will take us to the brink of madness, while in the cantatas by Clérambault and Blamont, you'll hear witches slowly summoning demons, casting spells, shaking the very foundations of the earth, opening the gates of hell. Musical sparks fly, black vapors fill the sky, and the world at times is turned upside down.

Woman Scorned's heroines Medea and Circe loved deeply and passionately, exhibited devotion and loyalty, yet they were abandoned or otherwise rejected – only to respond with ferocious anger equal to their pain and guilt. Despite their furious displays, they have their human qualities – remorse and shame figure prominently in depictions of their psychological struggles. A connection to the supernatural or otherworldly and the use of magic or poison to manipulate or inflict harm is another common thread: the sorceress Circe offers Odysseus' men an elixir that will turn them into beasts while her niece Medée poisons her rival in love.

We begin our program with François Couperin's sonata *La Française* from his 1728 collection *Les Nations*. While its opening feels alternately mysterious and foreboding and full of wild, frenetic energy, it's the chromaticism, the shifting harmonies, and the seemingly infinite repetitions that remind us of "magical music," evoking diverse imagery from murky, shadowy darkness to swirling flashes of light.

The sorceress Medea once defied her father and gave up everything she knew out of love for the warrior Jason. She gave him glory and he married her out of guilt. As she explains in the opening recitative of Clérambault's *Medée*, "charmed by his false affection, I dared to betray my father and the gods." In fact, Medea aided Jason repeatedly in his quest to capture the Golden Fleece so that he could fulfill his own birthright as king of Iolcos. But, disregarding duty, glory, and Medea's love, Jason falls for a younger woman and plots to rid himself of his wife. In a bluster of sixteenth notes from the ensemble, Medea calls on vengeance, "Courons à la vengeance, dépit mortel allumez mon couroux" (Let's hasten to vengeance! Deadly anger, ignite my wrath).

But Medea is a complex character. The sequence of movements that begins with the rhetorical questions "Que dis-je?" (What am I saying?) and ends with "Mais quelle est mon erreur extrême?" (But is this my greatest error?) demonstrates not only her capacity for empathy, but also lays bare her recognition that in saving him she betrayed herself (For to save an ungrateful man, I betray myself). Newly resolved, a witch's fearsome invocation ("Cruelle fille des Enfers") full of savage repeated quarter notes and erratic flashes of energy sees Medea call to have the gates of hell opened and demons released ("Volés Demons") to wreak havoc upon Jason and his new love.

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Honestly, a normal cantata would end with a pithy lesson – a light song to wrap things up neatly for the listener (Blamont's *Circé* ends with two such airs). But this is not the case with Clérambault's *Medée*, whose text was penned by Marie de Louvencourt. I'd like to suggest that there's something of a feminist bent to Louvencourt's text: not only does she seek to humanize Medea, but she also chooses to overlook her most famous crimes: multiple murders and matricide. Perhaps most importantly, she makes no effort to apologize for or rationalize Medea's behavior with a moralistic closing air.

Medea's tale was played out not only on stage (Louis XIV's reign saw twelve productions of the story including Thomas Corneille's *Medée*, Charpentier's *Medée*, Lully's *Thésée* and others) and in living rooms (as in tonight's cantata by Clérambault) but also in real life.

In fact, seventeenth-century France's cultural imagination was consumed with an interest in magic, the occult, and witchcraft that spilled over from literature, art, and entertainment into real life: in the 1670s and early 80s a major murder scandal called the *Affair of the Poisons* gripped France. The sensational 1675 trial of Madame de Brinvilliers (who conspired to poison her father and brothers in order to inherit their estates) set off an all-out witch hunt that ensnared fortune tellers, alchemists, and their royal clients complete with swirling rumors, conspiracy theories, and forced confessions. All told, the affair implicated 442 suspects and resulted in more than 40 executions with intrigue reaching as far as the innermost circles of the King.

We close our program with Colin de Blamont's *Circé*. Blamont (1690-1760) served as director of the King's Music and (from 1727) as *Maitre de la Musique de la Chambre*. Despite the fact that he held major positions at court and received high honors (Louis XV awarded him Letters of Nobility – conferred upon only five composers), his music is little-known today.

Blamont continually revised the explosive, powerful music of *Circé*. It initially appeared in his first book of cantatas for voice and continuo. Six years later in Book III, Blamont reissued the piece with new obbligato instrumental parts. Finally, several manuscript pages (thought to be penned by the composer himself) were inserted into a single copy now at the national library in Paris, which transmit an instrumental prelude rife with dissonance and chromatic churning and turn the opening recitative into an emotional tour de force. It's this final, amped-up version that you hear tonight.

Blamont's *Circé* is consistent with eighteenth century depictions of her as a cruel and fearsome witch. Poet Jean-Baptiste Rousseau wrote the text for this cantata, which is replete with violent imagery including bloody altars, black vapors, and a hellish world turned upside down in which the earthquakes and rivers run backwards. In this cantata setting, *Circé* briefly asks for pity in the first aria, "Cruel auteur des troubles de mon âme," before committing herself to unabated vengeance. There's no sense of resolution for *Circé*; the two closing arias merely offer morals for the listener. First, love cannot be forced, and second, there's a natural cycle to life as well as love; once the love has gone, you can't bring it back.

Despite her cruel characterization here, the *Circé* of Homer's *Odyssey* was a comparatively benevolent figure. An awe-inspiring sorceress who famously turned men into beasts by

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means of magic potions, she is powerful but not fundamentally vengeful. It's out of admiration and respect for Ulysses that she consents to return his soldiers to their human forms, and she gives Ulysses crucial advice and guidance that aids him in the remainder of his journey back to Ithaca. Most notably, she willingly lets him and his men leave her island. Madeline Miller's recent novel goes several steps further in its humanizing feminist portrayal of *Circe* (Hachette, 2018) by casting the powerful witch as a misunderstood, vulnerable outsider and devoted mother.

For me, considering these powerful portrayals of Medea, and Circé has prompted so many questions. What does it mean that these strong female figures could be so demonized? Was it possible for women at the court or influential *salonnières* to identify with these characters and their characterizations? Are their compelling inner conflicts still misogynistic? I don't have the answers, but it's been a fascinating journey to contemplate them in the course of preparing this program. I hope you think so too.

– Debra Nagy