

# To Play *Les Arts florissants* Again

by William Christie

The adventure of Les Arts Florissants began in 1979. We had a dream: to restore the eloquence of a little-known and neglected heritage, that of French music from the 17th and 18th centuries, drawing on the works of Michel Lambert, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, Jean-Baptiste Lully, André Campra, and Jean-Philippe Rameau, to name but a few of the greatest. Of course, our repertoire came to include the great figures of the Baroque era — Italian, German, and English composers such as Bach, Handel, and Monteverdi — who were better known to musicians and audiences. But French music remained the neglected child of this repertoire. Giving it a voice once again, reviving its flavor after several centuries of oblivion, became my ensemble's specialty, and the beginning of a wonderful adventure for us.

Why was French music the last to be touched by the wave of rediscovery of the Baroque repertoire? Quite simply because it takes particularly knowledgeable and specialized musicians to know how to complete the scores of a Lambert or a Charpentier. Unlike Bach or Handel, French composers deliberately left their scores unfinished so that the performer could add their own phrasing and interpretation of the text, using the necessary ornamentation and rules of interpretation.

Today, I believe I can say that our pioneering work has achieved its goal. Over the past few decades, we have brought French music to the world's greatest stages. The operatic works of Charpentier, Lully, Campra, Mondonville, and Rameau are performed every year at the greatest opera houses in Europe and elsewhere, which is cause for celebration.

For this new production, we have chosen to combine two of our earliest discoveries, made more than fifty years ago: *Les Arts florissants* — an “opera or musical idyll,” to use Charpentier's own words — which gave its name to our musical ensemble; and another short opera, *La Descente d'Orphée aux Enfers*. These two pieces were written in the 1680s by Marc-Antoine Charpentier for his Parisian patron, Marie de Lorraine, Duchess of Guise. A cousin of Louis XIV, she owned a mansion in the Marais district of Paris, where concerts were regularly given by young musicians for her illustrious relatives and friends. There is no doubt that it was in this setting and for this elegant social gathering that *Les Arts florissants* and *La Descente d'Orphée* were performed for the first time; perhaps even by the same singers and musicians, given that these two works require more or less the same number of performers.

But there is more. In the early days of our ensemble, these pocket operas also served as a laboratory for what is now recognized as the “Arts Flo style.” They encapsulate all the ingredients

that make French music so unique: finely crafted dramaturgy, expressive emotions conveyed through the score, and above all, a particular emphasis on language and diction. It was from this starting point, from the in-depth study of these little gems of music and theater, that we were then able to tackle great lyrical tragedies such as Charpentier's *Médée* and Lully's *Atys*.

Performing Charpentier's *Les Arts florissants* is therefore more than a simple exploration of our repertoire: it is a return to our roots. Not only to celebrate the past, but to reaffirm the relevance of our project and its future. By entrusting the interpretation to the laureates of Le Jardin des Voix, we are putting into action our project of transmission, both of this repertoire and of the expertise we have acquired. Now these young singers from all over the world *want* to train in this music, they love it: that shows how much it has regained its eloquence, beyond borders!

## **Divine Concerts, Charming Harmonies, and a Thousand Delights**

*by Marie Lambert-Le Bihan &  
Stéphane Facco*

What a joy it is to create this Charpentier diptych with the new Jardin des Voix academy! "*Fleurissez doctes arts*" ("Let the learned arts flourish"): here is both a project, and a wish to encourage these young talents and pass on to them the pleasure of working on this repertoire where

allegories, nymphs, and gods rub shoulders with the Underworld and prodigies. Reflecting our lives and aspirations, these two works offer the opportunity to tell a single dream-story celebrating the mythical union of Music and Orpheus.

It is through the poetic power of these works and the vigor and personality of our performers, their bodies and voices, that we create the stage material. To ensure an enjoyable journey, we want the situations and visual codes to be clear, while taking into account the intrinsic lightness of these works. There is a variety of styles that involve fully embracing contrasts, be they musical, vocal, physical, rhythmic, or postural. Our aim is to exalt all that the French language allows in terms of expressiveness and lightness.

Tonight, we follow two stories: first, the glory of the arts celebrated by Music and saved from Discord by Peace; then, the myth of Orpheus with his enchanting voice, rescuing his Eurydice from the all-powerful Underworld. Through these tales, the one story we are celebrating is that of the triumph of art over our fate.

This emotional richness calls for sincerity and tenderness to better move us with a kiss, a tear, or a song. And may we marvel at the spectacle of youth! For the end of Orpheus's story leaves us, the chorus of spectators, overwhelmed by the charm of his voice, captivated by the unalterable desire to hear music again and again.

# About the Choreography

by *Martin Chaix*

Choreographing to baroque music means immersing oneself in the sounds and movements that have shaped the entire spectrum of today's dance, from the most classical to the most contemporary. It is a journey through time that evokes an era that continues to call out to us, to inspire us, to move us.

Working on these two major works by Marc-Antoine Charpentier – *Les Arts Florissants* and *La Descente d'Orphée aux Enfers* – I wanted to inhabit the sensitive space of their creation, to translate through movement some trace of their past, their life force, their poetic strength, and the delicate precision of the baroque touch, and to inscribe all this into a fully assumed modernity.

Through the journey woven by these two operas, imagined and conceived in collaboration with Marie Lambert-Le Bihan and Stéphane Facco, the dancing, singing, and acting bodies are part of a single impulse: binding some together, tearing others apart, yet always embodying the truthful gesture of characters rooted in today's world.

It is an invitation to rediscover, through the body, the contours and intricacies of this music, to inhabit the moment and reveal both the fragility and the power it holds.