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Constantinople rises again in MB1800 series

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Constantinople performed Sunday at Corpus Christi Church in the Music Before 1800 series.

The Baroque era is the founding inspiration for the New York-based concert presenter Music Before 1800, and within that realm director Louise Basbas and her team have developed a complementary specialty: cross-cultural exchanges that gave rise to music from the late Middle Ages onward.

Past concerts at MB1800's home venue, Corpus Christi Church in Morningside Heights, with groups including Ars Longa, from Cuba, and Música Temprana, from Amsterdam, bore witness to how migration from the New World to Africa and the Americas — whether for commerce, religious conversion or bloody conquest — yielded hybrid forms of music with a vitality and freshness embodying these collisions.

Sunday's performance at Corpus Christi by the Canadian ensemble Constantinople, in collaboration with soprano Suzie LeBlanc, was another strong entry in an informal series that plays graceful accompaniment to MB1800's mission of presenting pure baroque.

A Montreal-based group of period instrument players led by an Iranian-born musician, Kiya Tabassian, Constantinople researches and performs music that originated in the mingling of West and East in the centuries when that fabled home of the Ottoman Empire — Istanbul today — was both a rival and trading partner of the great European capitals. Sunday's program, called "Metamorfozi," consisted of music from an era of cooperation between the Ottoman Empire and Venice. The composers represented, including Claudio Monteverdi, Giovanni Girolamo Kapsberger, Barbara Strozzi had personal, professional or musical ties to 17th Century Venice.

The program notes, by French-Canadian musician François Filiatrault, offered this interesting disclaimer: "The several modes of culture exchange that brought Ottomans and Europeans closer together did not include music." But detente with the Turks wasn't just about coffee consumption and imported fabrics. "[S]ome characteristic intervals and vocal ornaments, as well as the military rhythms of the Janissaries and various percussion instruments, made their way into Western compositions," Filiatrault writes.

Constantinople was adept on Sunday at teasing out those Eastern influences, particularly with Tabassian playing setar — an Iranian lute with a treble-y timbre — and percussionist Patrick Graham on a variety of hand drums. Michel Angers on theorbo and baroque guitar, Pierre-Yves Martel on viola da gamba, and David Greenberg on baroque violin anchored the music — Italian dance tunes and story songs — in its Western classical core.

The quintet on Sunday had an able partner for their musical excursion in fellow Montrealer LeBlanc, an Order of Canada recipient better known in her country but by no means a stranger to American audiences. LeBlanc was an appealing if not overpowering, voice and presence, and a supple interpreter of conversationally sung recitatives such as Monteverdi's "Si dolce è il tormento," ("So sweet is the torment") and Strozzi's "L'Eralcito amoroso." The latter came with no translation offered for its title, but the air of impassioned heartbreak and unrequited love was impossible to miss in LeBlanc's expressive singing.

The simple, descending chord sequence of "L'Eralcito" was played by Angers on theorbo — imagine a harpsichord strung with nylon instead of iron, and frets instead of keys — and the quintet followed that song with an instrumental selection in a similar vein — a "Caponna" by Kapsberger that segued into a "Ciacconna" by composer Andrea Falconieri. These conjoined pieces were sometimes striking in their chordal and melodic similarities to contemporary rock progressions. Maybe it's not a stretch to say Lennon and McCartney were channelling 17th Century Venice when they wrote "Dear Prudence." Cadenzas for viola and percussion — showcase solos for bass and drums, essentially — on some of Kapsberger's compositions bolstered the impression that Constantinople wasn't running away from any rock-music influences that might be inferred from the song selections. And Tabassian on setar was prolific, and thrilling, as a soloist riffing off of his bandmates' basso continuo.

At the suggestion of Basbas, Constantinople added a pair of Christmas-themed songs to the "Metamorfozi" program, and on Sunday they were performed with varying results. Of the two, "Navità di Christo," ("The Birth of Christ") by Biagio Marini, sounded less rehearsed, less fully inhabited, than the haunting "Hor ch'è tempo di dormire," ("Now it is time to slumber") by Tarquinio Merula.

The former exuded joy but seemed to miss the sense of awe and reverence for its subject matter. The latter more than made up for it. Sung from the perspective of a Mary who is able to peer into the future and see the suffering that awaits her infant son, "dormire" was positively haunting. Over a repeated half-tone note interval, LeBlanc evoked both maternal tenderness and existential dread. ("This pretty face/Ruddier than a rose/Will be sullied by spit and cuffs./With torture and great suffering.")

The concert ended on a less mournful note, with Strozzi's "Amor Dormiglione," (no translation offered, but "Sleepyhead Cupid" comes close). The song contained a playful, almost stuttered refrain, and a light, comic touch in addressing what could either be the torment of one-sided love or the frustration of sleeping beside an uncooperative lover.