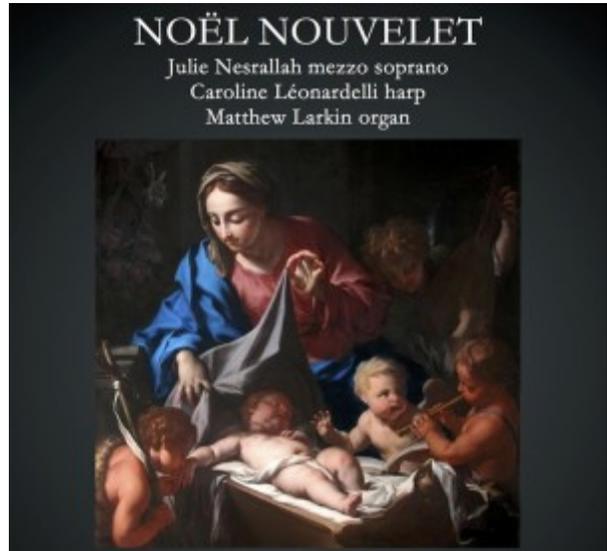


Noël Nouvelet

Caroline Leonardelli, harp; Julie Nesrallah, mezzo-soprano; Matthew Larkin, organ; Cen Classics, 2016 By Alison Young NPR
Rating 8 of 10



What does a harpist go through while preparing music for Christmas Eve? It's nearly guaranteed every church pew will be taken, crowded with regulars and with those who find themselves at only this one service in the entire year. What sort of music will create the mood, and maybe more importantly, what specifically do people need this night? I think it's solace, a safe space to quiet the mind, a place that opens their hearts to be touched by the holy spirit so they can bask in the wonder of the Christmas story.

The harpist is the gatekeeper for that feeling of anticipation that something wondrous will occur on this night, something sacred that separates the world of shopping, wrapping, decorating, and forced merriment from this chosen spiritual realm.

This is the impulse behind a very special Christmas CD, *Noël, Nouvelet* with harpist Caroline Leonardelli and friends. French-born and living in Canada, she has created a stunning concert/service of all French music with a very personal flair and fresh perspective that gives us a feeling of being a visitor in the hands of the most capable of guides.

The album opens with a carol that originated in the Anjou region of France in the 13th century, Henri Busser's setting of "Le Sommeil de l'Enfant Jesus" is a lullaby and pastoral in one, the harp delicately accompanying mezzo-soprano, Julie Nesrallah's richly spun—though oftentimes too static—voice. Meanwhile the delicate organ, played by Matthew Larkin, almost imperceptibly rocks to sleep the infant Jesus. This early 20th century piece reminds us how opera played a central role in French artistic life, and sets the tone for the entire program.

This operatic and theatrical approach finds its way into the lovingly set carols by Canadian composer Kelly-Marie Murphy. Ms. Leonardelli's expansive tone and smooth rubato is particularly stunning in "D'où viens-tu, bergère?" She paints the backdrop of a star-filled night of mystery and seems to coax the words from Ms. Nesrallah as though the two are symbiotic, perfectly balanced and in ensemble. It's breath-taking storytelling.

I found the inclusion of the organ works a stroke of genius. Cesar Franck's Pastorale ventures into a favorite sonic landscape of the French—nasal and unusual—conjuring the shepherds' awe as they followed the star. Mr. Larkin is the organist at Christ Church Cathedral in Ottawa where this recording was made and has set the tone for many-a-service. I was unable to determine which instrument he performed on, though from the website it would seem he produced some absolutely bewitching colors on a digital instrument.

Ms. Leonardelli shines in her solo moments, particularly in the set of variations on *Noël, Nouvelet* by Marcel Samuel-Rousseau. The work was composed for harpist Marcel Tournier, and certainly he makes the most of the harp's capabilities. Samuel-Rousseau was a director of two opera companies, and his music contains a specifically French flavor for drama and atmosphere. Ms. Leonardelli's greatest gift is in channeling these emotions into a musical telling. Yes, she has the chops of technique, tone colors, etc., but it's her phrasing that is so lovely. The pauses, even silence, before she makes a statement has you enthralled, right in the palm of her hand. A Christmas Eve with Caroline Leonardelli's performance will be one to remember for a lifetime.