



Music from on high: Tafelmusik's Galileo Project

"Interdisciplinary" is one of those buzzwords that cultural critics frequently apply to work generated by members of Generation X or the so-called Millennials (the umbrella term that encompasses anyone born after the mid-'80s). It's easy enough to create no-brainer mash-ups between digital media, but there's something much more remarkable about art projects that cross not only cultures, disciplines and *also* centuries.

Artists in more conservative fields are often loath to take such risks. That's why the Toronto-based [Tafelmusik](#) Baroque Orchestra deserves kudos for *The Galileo Project*, their latest programme, which runs through Sunday (Jan. 25) at [Trinity-St. Paul's Church](#) in downtown T.O. Inspired by the International Year of Astronomy, the presentation (calling it a concert doesn't do it justice) brings together heavenly visuals (they encompass everything from Hubble deep space photographs to images from the workbooks of Renaissance-era scientists and philosophers), restrained choreography, well-chosen textual excerpts from the likes of Ovid and Kepler and the stunning baroque compositions Tafelmusik is famous for performing so well.

Programmed by bassist Alison Mackay (who's been responsible for some of the Baroque Orchestra's most innovative evenings of music), *The Galileo Project* comes out of intensive workshops at the [Banff Centre](#). The time and care taken in developing this ambitious project shows: it's breathtaking.

Those captivating visuals -- Orion's belt, then Jupiter, then a comet flashing by -- are projected above the stage, on a circular screen that appears to be mounted on a massive vintage globe stand. On its own, as a piece of sculpture, the set-up is striking, and it shows the gentle humour that runs throughout the *Galileo* program.

In order to most effectively showcase these images, the lights must be dimmed. As a result, the Tafelmusik players have taken it upon themselves to memorize every work in the programme -- an almost super-human feat. The task may have been exhausting, but the payoff is huge. That process of memorization, the tricky mnemonics and extensive rehearsals it takes to commit such complex compositions to heart, has caused the members of the orchestra to absorb these pieces on a particularly profound level. You can almost see the music running through their bodies as they play -- a factor underscored by Marshall Pynkoski's judicious choreography, which uses the Trinity-St. Paul's space in very clever ways. During one section devoted to the historical Dresden Festival of the Planets, a quartet of violinists sneak up to the balcony, where folks in the nosebleeds were tickled to witness such an intimate performance of the Allegro from

Telemann's Concerto for 4 violins in D Major. The airy, jaunty runs echoed out over the balcony and down to the main floor, where the rest of the orchestra looked on in pure delight.

In between Tafelmusik's soaring performances of celestially-inspired works by Telemann, Rameau, Lully and Monteverdi (the pieces from his opera *Orfeo* are just gorgeous), theatre actor Shawn Smith appears to recite texts about the moon or share well-scripted explanations of Galileo's work, life and times. On paper, that narration might strike you as forced or stilted, but Mackay has been so careful in her selection of these excerpts and has so seamlessly woven them into the programme that they almost feel like a different kind of musical interlude.

With The Galileo Project, Tafelmusik and their various collaborators have succeeded in teasing out thrilling links between artists and thinkers and providing new insights into these fine centuries-old works. Smith's poetic descriptions of constellations changing with the seasons, for example, provide a perfect frame for Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Suite des quatre saisons* (Dances for the four seasons) -- for the first time, I felt like I could actually hear the icy, brittle nuances of winter, or the lush, rich textures of summer. The achievement here is enough to make the stars weep.

--Sarah Liss