

Ditching sheet music, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra plays from memory

On stage for a rehearsal at the Bloor Street church they call home, the members of Toronto's Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra start up a Bach sinfonia. The musicians are standing, without chairs, music stands or sheet music; liberated from this architecture, their bodies sway and their eyes sparkle, infusing the old music with an impressive new energy. It's as though the complex 18th-century composition were being played by a band of East Coast fiddlers. In these hands, Bach's music feels more alive than ever.

The feat is possible because the orchestra is playing from memory. Each musician in the 17-member ensemble has memorized his or her part so it can be performed without sheet music. It's the third time the internationally renowned orchestra has tried such a thing, always for the same reason: It takes hours of extra work, but an upright and mobile orchestra is key to the company's multimedia, storytelling concerts that also feature a narrator, a script, visual images and video.

"I had the feeling if we didn't have music stands we would be forced into a new relationship and that, at a performance level, it would just bump us up," says Alison Mackay, the double-bass player who has created these concerts, including J.S. Bach: The Circle of Creation, this week's show about how the instruments in Bach's orchestras were constructed.

"It is not that I think the audience is ADD and needs bells and whistles to enjoy the music. A lot of the music we do is storytelling," she says, pointing out that much of the baroque repertoire was originally composed for opera and ballet.

She was already experimenting with narration to tell the stories behind the music when Tafelmusik received a commission to create a concert to mark the 400th anniversary of Galileo's telescope in 2009. During a residency at the Banff Centre, the orchestra worked up a show about Galileo that relied on performing an entire evening's worth of music from memory.

"None of us, that first time, knew if we could do it at all," recalls oboist John Abberger.

Memorizing a solo, which musicians would typically do in school even if they never become soloists, is one thing, Abberger explains: You are playing a complete melody. Memorizing one orchestral part in a whole, especially if you are playing the harmonies or bass line, is quite another. "You really have to know which note follows each note," he says.

He and his colleagues have developed all kinds of tricks over the course of three memorized projects. Early in the process, the orchestra records the music so the players can rehearse privately to a soundtrack; many of them also listen to it on headphones as they go about their day, while others sing their parts to themselves. Then they get together in small groups to test each other and provide each other with their cues.

“Some people try testing themselves by writing out the notes on manuscript paper. That’s the real test,” said violinist Patricia Ahern. She also videotapes herself playing the music so that she has a visual record of the bowing instructions that a string player will often mark on sheet music during rehearsals.

The musicians are all paid as soloists to recognize the extra work involved, but that doesn’t really cover the private study required.

“It’s a huge gift from the members of the orchestra to the orchestra to spend hundreds of hours learning it,” Mackay says.

All the memory work has paid off handsomely, however; The Galileo Project was an international success, as was House of Dreams, about Baroque painting, which followed it. Mackay, always intrigued by the handmaidens of art forgotten by the history books, has now produced a show about the circle of artisans who built the instruments on which Bach’s music was originally played.

“This was a chance for the orchestra to do this incredibly intense preparation with the music of this composer who is our favourite,” she said. “He is our Shakespeare.”

Mackay has written a script that begins with the myth of Mercury catching a tortoise, hollowing out its shell and building the first lyre, and continues to track the development of musical instruments in 18th-century Leipzig, the German trading centre where Bach lived in the last decades of his life. The show is narrated by actor Richard Greenblatt and illustrated by various historical images as well as video showing contemporary instrument-builders. The orchestra will provide a whole evening’s worth of Bach, including one of the Brandenburg Concertos and some lesser-known works.

Tafelmusik is a period-instrument orchestra, but Mackay happily concedes there is nothing the least bit authentic about this exercise.

“It’s very unhistorical,” she says. “In Bach’s orchestra, they hardly would have rehearsed ... and they certainly never memorized anything.”

Today, classical soloists sometimes play without sheet music, but the practice is very unusual in the period-instrument movement.

Yet, the musicians say the technique is both bonding and liberating for the orchestra.

“Tafelmusik already plays like a string quartet, without a conductor, but this was connected on a whole other level. It makes you more aware of the music,” said Abberger, who feels he has learned a lot about the structure of Bach’s compositions from the exercise.

It should also prove engaging for the audience, as the musicians move about and even off the stage, bringing the music – and its physical aspect – directly to them.

“You see me without the barrier [of the music stand]; you see the whole body; you see the differences between what it takes to play the oboe, the violin, the bass. You see the flow of the music,” Mackay said.

Viola player Stefano Marcocchi, an Italian who just joined the orchestra this season, was intrigued by watching one of the memorized concerts on video before he moved to Toronto: “They were looking so free, so musical. It was like a dance.”

And so he took up the challenge and, in the space of one year, has memorized not one concert’s worth of music but three – because Tafelmusik has also been performing the two previous concerts on international tours.

So, could Tafelmusik use the memorized technique more often?

“We could never have every concert memorized. It takes way too much time; it takes six months of practice, hours and hours,” Ahern says.

But Abberger laughs and adds: “Unfortunately, Stefano is proof we could do more than one concert like this a year.”

J.S. Bach: The Circle of Creation continues to May 12. See tafelmusik.org for more information.