

Toronto's Tafelmusik promises unique take on Bach in upcoming performance

Ensemble's double bass player, Alison Mackay, created latest piece, J.S. Bach: The Circle of Creation

Fresh off a wildly successful tour of Australia and New Zealand, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra is back in Toronto and gearing up for another big creation that turns classical music on its head.

Tafelmusik's upcoming piece, J.S. Bach: The Circle of Creation, was created by the ensemble's double bass player, Alison Mackay. It will mark the third installment in a series of sorts which sees the orchestra forsaking the usual formal performances familiar to classical music aficionados in favour of a livelier show.

"It's more theatrical than your typical show," said Mackay. "The orchestra plays the entire score from memory, which is not unusual for a typical concert but it's very unusual for a Baroque orchestra."

In addition to the performers swaying more freely to the music, The Circle of Creation will feature narration and visuals that bring audiences back to Leipzig, Germany in the time of Johann Sebastian Bach.

"It's kind of the anatomy of a concert in Bach's time, along with what goes into preparing a Tafelmusik show," Mackay said of the visuals.

The narration will be provided by Canadian playwright Richard Greenblatt of 2 Pianos 4 Hands fame, and while the multi-media performance will offer plenty to please the senses, the music of Bach will be front and centre.

"Johann Sebastian Bach is a favourite composer for all the musicians in Tafelmusik," Mackay said. "He's kind of like our Shakespeare."

Tafelmusik's recent trip down under saw the orchestra perform a similarly-styled performance, titled House of Dreams. That show earned rave reviews, with The Circle of Creation likely to be equally well-received, both among lovers of classical music and those less familiar with Bach's oeuvre.

"We want to convey to the audience our excitement about the music of Bach," Mackay said. "It's music you can turn to in moments of joy and moments of sorrow, though it's really the joy that comes through here."

Of course, along with the joy comes the adrenaline that comes with performing without a safety net. The complex works of Bach can be difficult to pull off even with sheet music in front of the performers, so preparing for a show without that insurance made for plenty of extra hours of rehearsal.

“There’s definitely not much margin for error,” Mackay said. “It’s very demanding, but we worked hard at it.”

Mackay is a longtime Annex resident, and noted the likenesses between the neighbourhood she calls home and Leipzig in Bach’s day and age.

“Leipzig, in his day, was about the same size as the Annex is now and it had about the same population,” she said. “It was the trade fair centre of northern Europe, where two famous old Roman roads intersected, one leading from Rome to the Baltic Sea and the other from Santiago de Compostela in Spain to Moscow.”

“It would be like having a road from New York to the North Sea and another one leading from Vancouver to Halifax met at Bloor and Spadina.”

Bach-era Leipzig was also highly populated by artisans and craftspeople, which is mirrored by the Annex’s own status as one of Toronto’s most artistically-rich neighbourhoods.

J.S. Bach: The Circle of Creation will be performed at Trinity-St. Paul’s Centre from Wednesday, May 6 through Sunday, May 10 and on Tuesday, May 12 at the George Weston Recital Hall.