



Music Review: Orchestra's new show marries music with visuals

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There's a new trend catching on and bringing change to the tradition-bound classical music world. Orchestras and other classical performers have started to realize that audiences are increasingly drawn to a mix of artistic experiences. While there may be nothing wrong with a standard-format concert, it's a bonus if there's something to look at as well.

Three years ago, Toronto's Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra staged *The Galileo Project*, its first big multimedia show. And on Wednesday night at Trinity-St. Paul's Centre, it treated its audience to a big screen experience called *House of Dreams*.

Like *The Galileo Project*, this new concert was the brainchild of Tafelmusik double-bass player Alison Mackay and was built around a unifying theme. And both shows were developed and work shopped at Alberta's Banff Centre before their subsequent Toronto premieres.

House of Dreams is built around five historic houses in five European cities: London, Paris, Delft, Venice and Leipzig. In part, it's an exploration of the role music played in domestic life in the 17th and 18th centuries. Works composed by Handel, Vivaldi, Sweelinck, Purcell, Marais, Bach and Telemann were the musical substance of the production.

But these five houses also had significance in the realm of visual art – and this is where the big-screen projections come in. For instance, the little house in Delft once contained 21 paintings by Vermeer. Venice's Palazzo Smith Mangilli-Valmarana was famous as a home for art and music. And the London townhouse owned by Handel was decorated with canvases by artists including Canaletto and Watteau. All this art was projected in glorious colour on a huge gilt-framed screen while Tafelmusik played interspersed with narration by actor Blair Williams. His script, by Mackay, was full of juicy details about life in these houses, the culture of the era, and even manufacturing and trade. (Who knew that linen, mirrors and raisins all had fascinating economic histories?)

The sum-total of all these elements was like a documentary film brought to life: high quality eye-candy and a guided trip through Europe rolled into one, for the price of a concert ticket. But it was also an evening of excellent music-making. To perform *House of Dreams*, the Tafelmusik musicians had to memorize two hours of music. Rather than leading to shaky or uneven performances, this seemed to be liberating – resulting in secure and cohesive performances, even when the players were wandering all over the stage.

The musical selections also allowed some of the Tafelmusik musicians who aren't often heard in a solo capacity the chance to come to the fore. Lucas Harris's solo on the theorbo (a long-necked lute) – the largo movement from Vivaldi's *Lute Concerto in D Major* – was a nice surprise from a musician who's usually buried in the back of the band. Similarly, harpischordist Charlotte Nediger was heard all by herself in Sweelinck's *Engelse Fortuin*.

The allegro movement from Vivaldi's *Bassoon Concerto in E Minor* gave bassoonist Dominic Teresi a chance to shine. And charming pair of "duelling oboists" (John Abbeger and Marco Cera) was heard in several works.

Thanks to the discreet staging of Marshall Pynkoski, the smooth editing of projections designer Raha Javanfar and the elegant simplicity of production designer Glenn Davidson's big gilt-edged screen, *House of Dreams* looked much easier to put together than it no doubt was.

It would be a fine thing if a wider audience could see this unique piece. And as Tafelmusik recently launched its own digital label, Tafelmusik Media, it's probably just a matter of time before *House of Dreams* is available on DVD.