

Tafelmusik

HOUSE OF DREAMS

Programme Notes

By Alison Mackay

Tafelmusik's *House of Dreams* is an evocation of rich and intimate experiences of the arts in the time of Purcell, Handel, Vivaldi and Bach. It is a virtual visit to London, Venice, Delft, Paris and Leipzig, where great masterpieces by European painters were displayed on the walls of five private homes. These houses were also alive with music, often played by the leading performers and composers of the day. Thus it was possible for visitors to drink tea in a Mayfair townhouse, observe how Watteau had applied his brushstrokes in the portrayal of a silk dress, and listen to Handel directing the rehearsal of a new gavotte.

The five historical houses are all still in existence and our project has been planned as an international collaboration with their present owners and administrators. Invitations from the **Handel House Museum** (London), **The Palazzo Smith Mangilli-Valmarana** (Venice), the **Golden ABC** (Delft), the **Palais-Royal** (Paris) and the **Bach Museum and Archive** (Leipzig) to visit and photograph the houses have allowed us to portray for you the beautiful rooms where guests were entertained with art and music long ago.

The title of the concert comes from the atmospheric description of the "House of Dreams" in Book 11 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In a dark cave where no cackling goose or crowing cockerel disturbs the still silence, the floor surrounding the ebony bed of the god of sleep is covered in empty dreams, waiting to be sent to the houses of mortals. The people, objects and animals in the theatre of our dreams are portrayed by the god's children, Morpheus, Phantasos and Phobetor, who are re-imagined as messengers of artistic inspiration in the context of our script. In the course of the performance, dreams enter the houses in many guises, first during Handel's music for the "Entrance of the agreeable dreams" from his opera *Alcina*.

Alcina, like *Messiah* and *Hercules*, was composed and rehearsed on an upper floor of the **London** house where **George Frideric Handel** lived for the second half of his life. The modest townhouse was built in 1723 as part of the new subdivision of Mayfair and Handel was its first tenant; as a foreign national, he was forbidden from owning property. The location at 25 Brook Street was a convenient distance from St. James's Palace, where he performed his official duties as the newly appointed Composer to the Chapel Royal.

The plan of the house was typical for row houses in London at this time. The kitchens were in the basement; each of the next two floors up had a front and a back parlour; the third-floor bedroom contained a fine crimson, canopied bed. We know these details from Handel's estate inventory, the legal document recording the value of his possessions at the time of his death. Estate documents are one of the most important sources of information about the contents and layout of all of our five houses, along with wills, private listings of paintings, and catalogues from estate sales.

Ten months after Handel's death, the London firm of Abraham Langford published an auction catalogue of 80 paintings and 64 engravings from Handel's private collection. This document came to light in 1985 and

revealed Handel to have been a dedicated and sophisticated collector of art. The Brook Street house contained works by many major English and Continental painters, including **Antoine Watteau**, **Marco Ricci**, **Jan Breughel the Elder**, **Canaletto** and **Rembrandt**. It is not possible in most cases to determine the exact paintings that were on the walls, but the titles and detailed descriptions in the auction listing allow for an appreciation of Handel's taste. He was attracted by the works of artists who had been active as set painters in the opera world, and he owned two paintings by Watteau called "conversations." These were genre works depicting men and women in theatrical dress, often set in the world of the Paris Opéra or Comédie. Two works which depict pairs of dancers and groups of instrumentalists have been chosen for our performance because of an important link between the Parisian dance world and the composition of the opera *Alcina*.

One of Handel's most popular Italian operas, *Alcina*, was premiered April 16, 1735 at Covent Garden. Shortly before, a read-through had been directed by the composer himself in the music room of his home. It was attended by Handel's great friend, Mary Pendarves, who later remarried and is now known as the brilliant letter writer and paper-cut artist, **Mrs. Delany**. (Her brother, also a great friend, had given Handel his *View of the Rhine* by Rembrandt.) Of the rehearsal of *Alcina*, Mrs. Delany wrote to her mother:

Yesterday morning my sister and I went with Mrs. Donellen to Mr. Handel's house to hear the first rehearsal of the new opera Alcina. I think it is the best he ever made, but I have thought so of so many, that I will not say positively 'tis the finest, but 'tis so fine I have not words to describe it. Strada has a whole scene of charming recitative – there are a thousand beauties. Whilst Mr. Handel was playing his part, I could not help thinking him a necromancer in the midst of his own enchantments.

One of several startling features of this letter is its date of April 11 – there were only five days between the first read-through at home and opening night at Covent Garden. It was certainly common for London opera composers to hold open rehearsals before the move into the theatre. There is a charming series of nine paintings by the Venetian painter **Marco Ricci** (who had come to London to paint opera sets) depicting tea-drinking friends, patrons and dogs attending rehearsals of this sort. One of these paintings forms a backdrop to our opening sequence and informs the placement of our continuo section in the first segment of the concert.

The premiere of *Alcina* featured dance music composed for the Parisian dancer **Marie Sallé**, whose diaphanous costumes and expressive choreographies, often featuring her brother as a partner, had created a sensation on the London stage earlier in the decade. She had made her debut at the Paris Opéra in 1721, placing her squarely in the world portrayed in **Watteau's** "conversation" paintings. The pair of dancers depicted in Watteau's *Plaisirs du bal* would have been virtuoso performers of the French gavottes and other dance forms used by Handel for Marie Sallé.

Handel also owned a painting of the ducal palace at the harbour entrance to **Venice**, a famous view by **Canaletto**, who had started his career as a set painter for operas by Alessandro Scarlatti and Antonio Vivaldi. Canaletto painted a number of versions of this scene, sometimes including the Ospedale della Pietà where Vivaldi was the music master. At this time La Pietà was a large red brick building, slightly west of and entirely different from the white marble church we see today.

A version of Canaletto's harbour scene was also hanging in the Venetian home of **Joseph Smith**, where Handel collected his forwarded mail when he was in Italy. Our performance makes the move from London to Venice through the portal of the painting: it appears first on the battleship-grey wall of Handel's bedroom and then in

the Grand Canal palazzo where it emerges on the red damask wall of Smith's *piano nobile* – the “noble floor” where Venetians entertained their guests a level up from the odiferous canal.

Joseph Smith, who had moved from London to Venice as a young man in 1700, became a merchant banker and wealthy trader specializing in wine, olives and dried fruits. In 1744 he was appointed British Consul in Venice where he continued to live until his death in 1770.

He lived just above the Rialto on the Grand Canal in a house known today as the **Palazzo Smith Mangilli-Valmarana**. It was famous all over Europe as a place of intellectual ferment and artistic activity. Carlo Goldoni, in the preface to his play *Il filosofo inglese*, which was dedicated to Joseph Smith, called the house the site of “the most perfect union of all the sciences and all the arts.”

Smith was a serious book collector with a magnificent library of printed books (including 248 printed before 1500) and rare manuscripts, including one of the oldest and most complete texts of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Anxious that his collection be kept intact after his death, he sold his books to George III in 1765 and they became a founding collection of the British Museum Library.

Consul Smith's reputation as a collector also rested on his patronage of Venetian painters. He became the agent for Canaletto in the 1720s, commissioning many paintings for his own palazzo and for English clients. His walls were covered in dozens of exquisite scenes of Venice, as well as works by old Italian masters. A large collection of the paintings as well as engraved gems and hundreds of master drawings and prints were also sold to George III and remain in the Royal Collection today.

Smith was a serious music lover whose collection of instruments used at house concerts was sold at auction in London after his death. His first wife, Catherine Tofts, was the English prima donna depicted in the version of Marco Ricci's “Opera Rehearsal” seen near the beginning of our concert. In the 1730s Smith acted as agent for the celebrated castrato Farinelli in connection with opera performances in England.

Joseph Smith's interest in musical instruments may have attracted him to the famous Vermeer painting now known as *The Music Lesson*, which he bought in 1742 from the estate of the Venetian painter Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini. Fifty years earlier the painting had been sold at auction as part of the estate of **Jacob Dissius**, a Dutch bookbinder with a small shop called “**The Golden ABC**” on the main square of **Delft**.

On April 14, 1680, Dissius had married a young Delft woman named Magdalena van Ruijven who tragically died after only two years of marriage. The widower was so badly off that he had to borrow money to pay for mourning clothes and the funeral. Yet the walls of his tiny house with its street-level bookshop were covered with one of the great treasure troves of Western art, for he had inherited 21 paintings by **Johannes Vermeer** from his wife. Vermeer had lived close by and had enjoyed the friendship and patronage of Magdalena's father and mother, Pieter van Ruijven and Maria de Knuijt, who had bought many of the 34 Vermeers known to be in existence.

Magdalena's estate inventory lists 11 Vermeers in the front hall of the Golden ABC, one in the kitchen, two in the basement, several others in unspecified rooms, and four in the back room, which also contained a chest of musical instruments and music books.

The young woman playing the virginals in *The Music Lesson* might have been playing a piece like *Engelse Fortuin*, the early 17th-century set of variations on the English tune “Fortune my foe” by the great Dutch keyboard composer **Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck**.

The music books in the back of the Dissius house might have contained later music from across the Channel, for throughout the 17th century the Dutch public had a high regard for English music, bolstered in the 1690s by the presence on the English throne of a Dutch king (William III of Orange) who employed **Henry Purcell** as his composer-in-residence and travelled to Holland with his English orchestra in tow.

Jacob Dissius died in 1695 at the age of 42 and was carried to the cemetery by coach and 18 pallbearers (a sign that he had begun to prosper). Six months later an announcement of the auction of the Dissius paintings with a number of their titles appeared in Amsterdam. We have chosen for our performance several of the paintings known to have been in the collection from the house.

The first half of the concert bears the subtitle of “**Triptych**,” partly because of the three houses joined by shared works of art, and partly because of the Vermeer triptych we have created with three famous tronies (character studies of expressive faces). When Jeanne Lamon and Christina Mahler met me in the Golden ABC this past September to play the violin and cello within the old rooms, it was possible to imagine the impact that the thoughtful gaze of these young women, forever captured in their youthful health by Vermeer, must have had in the little house which had lost its young mistress.

The second half of the concert, called “**Mirror Image**,” takes place in two houses where paintings and performances of music were reflected in large imbedded wall mirrors.

The **Palais-Royal** on the Rue St. Honoré in Paris, just north of the Louvre, began life as the principal residence of the theatre-loving Cardinal Richelieu, first minister to Louis XIII. There was a private theatre in the east wing of the building with sets and lighting designed by Bernini. When the Cardinal died two years after the opening of the theatre, the house was left to the crown and the theatre gradually fell into disrepair. In 1660 the young Louis XIV granted use of the theatre to Molière’s acting company and then to Jean-Baptiste Lully, who renovated it for opera performance. It became the venue for every Paris performance of Lully, Marais and Rameau operas for the next 70 years.

In 1692 the entire house became the property of the brother of Louis XIV, the Duc d’Orléans, known as “Monsieur.” His son Philippe became duke in 1701 and four years later Regent to the five-year-old Louis XV, great-grandson of the previous king.

The Palais-Royal became a sparkling centre of Parisian social life, with its beautiful gardens and rooms renovated by the architect Gilles-Marie Oppenord, who was charged with creating a magnificent setting for the Duke’s collection of 500 paintings. Now known as the Orléans Collection, it was in its time the most important private collection of art in Europe. The jewel of the palace renovation was a lofty salon and adjacent gallery covered in red damask with a huge mirror at each end, making the already imposing space seem twice as long. The mirrors reflected the dramatic scenes portrayed by **Titian**, **Tintoretto** and **Correggio**, many of which were derived from the stories in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

The *Metamorphoses* also provided the plots for many of the operas performed in the theatre. Thus it was possible within the walls of the palace, open on certain days to the public, to experience the stories from ancient mythology in visual art and on the stage. The night of the Duke d’Orléans’ 14th wedding anniversary was marked by the première of *Alcyone*, an opera based on one of Ovid’s tales about a loving marriage, set to music by the great viola da gamba virtuoso **Marin Marais**. The storm scene from this opera was famous for many years and was the first use of a double bass in French opera.

The style of décor and home furnishings found in the Palais-Royal spread across Europe as far east as the city of **Leipzig**, described by Goethe a generation later as “a little Paris.” Across from the St. Thomas Church, the signature of Goethe (who also made a pilgrimage to visit the grave of Consul Smith on the Lido) could be found in the visitors’ book of a beautiful house where a private collection of paintings by **Rembrandt, Holbein, Rubens, Lucas Cranach, Paolo Veronese** and **Pieter Breughel the Younger** was open to the public one day a week for two hours.

The art collection had been started by **Georg Heinrich Bose**, who had moved into the house in 1711. The Bose family became best friends to the family of **Johann Sebastian Bach** after the Bachs moved into the St. Thomas School next door in 1723; four of the Bose daughters became godmothers to four of Bach’s children. The Bachs and the Boses also shared a love of domestic music-making and scholars think it highly likely that the Bach family performed in the beautiful music room at the top of the Bose house. This room had its walls covered in large imbedded mirrors in French style and had a hidden musicians’ gallery, revealed when a movable ceiling painting was mechanically raised.

Details about the rooms, furniture and contents of the house are found in the family estate inventories. This is also true of J.S. Bach’s inventory, which lists his musical instruments, the titles of books in his library, his items of clothing, his furniture and his kitchen tools. This inventory is a still-life portrait of the rooms in his house, captured in words at the end of his life. Our programme uses meditative music for winds, arranged from an aria about the stillness of death from Cantata 135, to allow us to ponder three still-life paintings by **Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin** portraying objects of the type described in the inventory: a silver goblet, a smoking box, and a copper kettle.

House of Dreams ends with a review of our own newly acquired art collection as if visited in the museum of our mind’s eye. No imagined image or digitized projection can rival the experience of being in the same room with an original painting by Vermeer or Chardin. But we lovers of baroque music on original instruments can be grateful for the technology that allows us to step back into a time when Canaletto and Watteau were creating modern art and when visitors could spend an hour or two in a room full of delights for the ear and the eye.

HOUSE OF DREAMS STAGE SET

Several features of the stage set, which was designed by **Glenn Davidson** and built in the theatre department at **The Banff Centre**, have been inspired by historical features in the 18th-century Venetian residence of Joseph Smith. The collection of books, paintings, and other artifacts and artworks sold by Consul Smith to George III of England included a group of ornate gilt frames used for matched sets of paintings and mirrors. One of the frame designs still in the Royal Collection has been copied in the creation of our own framed projection surface. The floor design is a replica of the salmon and white marble tiles found on the ground floor of the Palazzo Smith Mangilli-Valmarana.

THE HUDSON’S BAY COMPANY SCARF

The European economy during the period of *House of Dreams* was greatly influenced by the profits from newly-formed companies trading in North and South America, Africa and Asia. Wealth from the Hudson’s Bay Company, founded in 1670, allowed middle-class people from Britain to embark on the Grand Tour and buy Italian paintings from dealers such as Joseph Smith. The company also injected capital into the Murano glass industry, buying

Venetian beads for the fur trade in Canada. We have used the centuries-old Hudson's Bay Company design to help identify Blair Williams as the history-loving, Shakespeare-reciting Canadian tourist who starts his own Grand Tour at Handel's house in London.

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