

Arts Beat

The Culture at Large



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Star-Studded Early Music in Toronto

By [JAMES R. OESTREICH](#)

TORONTO — Sometimes you get lucky. I came here to see how the Toronto Symphony was faring a decade after its troubled times, and that, it turns out, would have been satisfying enough.

But the timing also allowed me to catch up with the [acclaimed early-music ensemble Tafelmusik](#) at the Trinity-St. Paul's Center, a converted church near Toronto University, on Thursday. [And it was a superb evening: a revival of the group's magnum opus, "The Galileo Project,"](#) created in 2009 to celebrate the International Year of Astronomy, tied to the 400th anniversary of Galileo's development of the astronomical telescope.

Since 1609 was also the year Monteverdi's landmark opera "Orfeo" was published, and since Galileo was, in the narrator's words, an "amateur member of a professional family of lute players," many musical avenues were open, and the project — programmed and scripted by Alison Mackay, Tafelmusik's double-bassist — took most of them. Especially in the first half, the program offered some of the Baroque era's choicest morsels, including selections from "Orfeo" and from Lully's "Phaeton."

The second half, with the added agenda of representing composers involved in what the narrator called "the most famous arts festival of the 18th century," the Festival of the Planets in 1719, celebrating a royal wedding in Dresden, had drier moments in works by Georg Philipp Telemann, Jan Dismas Zelenka and Sylvius Leopold Weiss. (The 32 oboists and bassoonists of the festival were gamely represented here by 2 oboists and a lone bassoonist.) But the culmination came — as it only could, in an event steeped in intellect and imagination — with Bach: the Sinfonia from the Cantata No. 1, "How Brightly Shines the Morning Star," introduced by snippets from Kepler's "Harmony of the Worlds."

All of this was woven into a theatrical production designed by Glenn Davidson and directed by Marshall Pynkoski. The narration incorporated texts by and about Galileo and Newton, poetry by Ovid and Shakespeare, and modern commentary; and a stream of colorful astronomical images were projected onto a round screen, as if viewed through a giant telescope.

The actor Shaun Smyth was an excellent narrator, and in an anonymous 18th-century “Astronomical Drinking Song,” a purposefully mediocre singer. He and the players not anchored to large instruments moved about the stage — sometimes circling in orbits, occasionally breaking into near-dance, always interacting with one another — and occasionally wandering into the auditorium.

That **the musical performance, through it all, was of the highest order** hardly needs saying. **As usual Jeanne Lamon, Tafelmusik’s music director, led from the violin.** Charlotte Nediger, on harpsichord, and Ms. Mackay, on bass, were also solid presences, and **the bursts of virtuosity were too widespread and numerous to list.**

But what was truly remarkable, for a band of 17 playing a kaleidoscopic variety of repertory, was that it was all done from memory: necessarily, given the almost constant movement and the occasional semidarkness. It said much for the professionalism of the enterprise that an understudy, replacing an ailing violinist, could step seamlessly into the mix.

This production, which has traveled to China and Malaysia, to Mexico and California, and is bound for Australia, the Netherlands and Spain, has yet to find its way to New York. That can’t happen soon enough.

“The Galileo Project” is repeated on Friday and Saturday evenings and on Sunday afternoon at the Trinity-St. Paul’s Center; tafelmusik.org.