



A starry night



The Tafelmusk Baroque Orchestra's concert celebrating Galileo is a multidisciplinary performance featuring music, images, an actor doing readings, choreography and a little post-concert stargazing.

Steven Mazey
The Ottawa Citizen

Audiences will see stars before, during and after the show when Toronto's Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra performs at Dominion-Chalmers Church Friday night.

Tafelmusik's The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres brings together music, visual images, readings and even some choreography to mark the international year of astronomy and the 400th anniversary of Galileo's astronomical telescope.

As part of the concert, presented by the Ottawa Chamber Music Society, the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada will present a display of astronomy images, telescopes

and meteorites at the church. After the show, the audience will be invited outside to look at the moon and stars through telescopes set up in the church parking lot.

When Tafelmusik performed it in Toronto last month, a few weeks after finishing it at the Banff Centre and premiering it there, Toronto Star music critic John Terauds described The Galileo Project as "one of the best, most imaginative shows based on classical music seen here in years ... a mesmerizing treat for the eyes, ears and heart.

"The biggest wonder of all is how integrated the music, words and images are ... the audience is left with a true taste of the awe, wonder and optimism that people felt in the 17th and 18th centuries. It's hard to come back to Earth when it's all over," he wrote. Take a bow, Alison Mackay.

Mackay is a veteran Tafelmusik bass player who developed the project and has overseen other multidisciplinary projects that orchestra director Jeanne Lamon likes to offer as an occasional change of pace from the traditional concert format. (Lamon will not direct Friday's Ottawa concert, which will be directed by musicians from the ensemble.)

Mackay says the concert started with a suggestion from University of Toronto astronomy professor John Percy, a Tafelmusik subscriber who had seen other orchestra performances that had involved actors. He suggested something similar could be done around Galileo.

The resulting performance includes images of the solar system by Canadian photographer Alan Dyer that are projected onto a screen behind the musicians as they perform, and an astronomy-themed stage set and lighting design by Glenn Davidson.

Between pieces, actor Shaun Smyth, who plays Galileo, offers readings from Galileo's letters and books and other writings from the period about the planets. He also performs an 18th-century drinking song about astronomers.

The music for the concert comes mostly from Galileo's era and later, including a Vivaldi concerto for two violins, music from Jean-Baptiste Lully's opera Phaeton, and music by Monteverdi, Purcell, Telemann, Rameau, Handel and Bach. Galileo played the lute and came from a family of lute players and composers, and the concert includes a lute piece by his brother, Michelangelo.

Although part of the concert includes music that was performed in Dresden in 1719 as part of an arts festival celebrating the planets, Mackay says most of the pieces don't have a specific connection with astronomy. She says she chose other music, including excerpts from Monteverdi's Orfeo, simply because it was written in Italy at the time Galileo would have been working.

"A concert like this is a change of pace that brings something a little bit different to the experience of music," she said from Toronto.

"My hope is that it puts the music into a deeper context. The music itself is very much front and centre, but it gives either an emotional or historical added dimension, something for the audience to reflect on while we're playing."

In an unusual twist to the concert, Mackay says she and her fellow musicians are fulfilling a longtime dream by performing the concert from memory, rather than from their music stands. While soloists usually perform from memory, it's almost unheard of for orchestra musicians.

It allowed for some modest choreography for the musicians, created by Mackay and Lamon and refined by Opera Atelier co-artistic director Marshall Pynkoski. The musicians move around the stage into different formations between pieces, and sometimes during pieces. Some of the musicians even dance as they perform a dance excerpt from the opera Orfeo or move into the audience and perform there.

"Because we're freed from our music stands, it allows us to explore things you don't normally see in concerts and to explore new relationships with the audience," Mackay says. "There is a lot of circular motion, and people who've watched it from above have said it has a little of the atmosphere of planetary motion."

Mackay says it took the musicians a lot of rehearsals on their own time to get the music into their heads, but says the result was worth it.

"At first, it was scary. A lot of us hadn't memorized anything in years. But it's been incredibly exciting. Playing without the music has been very freeing. Some of our longtime subscribers said they really saw a new kind of freedom and excitement in our playing. The audience can see more of you and more of what you're doing, and I think it released something in all of us. We've always prided ourselves on our ensemble playing, but I think doing this has bumped us up to a new level."

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