



Tafelmusik tribute to Galileo out of this world

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The niftiest classical road show of the season rolled into Dominion-Chalmers Church Friday evening. It was called The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres. You might imagine that a title like that denotes an evening of experimental music, or at least something modern.

To the contrary, the concert was given by Tafelmusik, Canada's pre-eminent baroque orchestra. The most modern piece on the program was a tavern song from about 1800. The rest was written in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Instead of four or five complete works, as would be normal in a Tafelmusik program, there were 21 excerpts by composers from Monteverdi to Handel.

But that's not all. There was a wonderful script written by Alison Mackay who, when she's not writing scripts, plays the double bass in Tafelmusik. It covered Galileo's life and times and the general progress of astronomy in the 17th century, along with poetic reflections on the universe. It was delivered with style and energy by actor Shaun Smyth.

There were also projected images of stars and other astronomical entities that fit the text and the music nicely.

Every piece was played with a different placement of the musicians on stage. Indeed, they moved around in such complicated patterns, sometimes while playing, that it would have been almost impossible to have stands for their music. So every one of them memorized their parts for every offering. The very thought makes this listener, a former violinist, shudder.

Galileo established the astronomical potential of the telescope in 1609 and to help celebrate the 400th anniversary of the discovery, Friday's concert featured members of the Royal Astronomical Society with various exhibits during intermission and after the program. Among the items on display were some of the most recent high-tech instruments available to astronomers.

Before the concert there were telescopes set up outside of the church, but the sky clouded over during the performance, to the disappointment of nearly everyone.

So yes, there were all kinds of delightful bells and whistles to be experienced, but how was the music?

In a word, superb. Only a few of the pieces on offer had any obvious astronomical associations, but all of them were examples of the striving for the ancient ideal of bringing the music of the spheres into earthly reality. Some chaconnes and a passacaglia by the likes of Lully, Monteverdi and Marini were especially evocative of the tireless order and constancy of things celestial. One particularly interesting piece was a lute solo by Michelangelo Galilei, brother of Galileo. Both brothers were accomplished lutenists, as was their father.

The quality of the playing was outstanding, as it normally is with this orchestra. There were moments when one player or another seemed to be uncertain about what they were supposed to be playing for a beat or two, but such moments were rare.

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