

San Diego Arts

Tafelmusik Baroque Brings the Galileo Project to La Jolla

Period Music and Astronomy unite in heavenly harmony.

By Kenneth Herman

Posted on Fri, Feb 5th, 2010

There was a time when both musicians and scientists could invoke the concept of “the music of the spheres” with straight-faced, serious intent. Ironically, it was the pioneer work of astronomers such as Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler and Sir Isaac Newton that eventually reduced “the music of the spheres” to mere poetic euphony.

But composers from Monteverdi to Rameau, who were contemporaries of these early astronomers, infused their operas, courtly dances, and festival extravaganzas with the mythical stories of gods and heavenly messengers who inhabited the starry cosmos that science was beginning to map and comprehend.

Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, Toronto’s accomplished 18-member period instrument ensemble, brought their program “The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres” to La Jolla’s Sherwood Auditorium Friday (February 5), providing the most imaginative, engaging, and spontaneous-sounding early music program I can remember attending. One factor that gave Tafelmusik’s performance such verve was memorization: every player knew every note by heart—there was nary a music stand in sight—which allowed the musicians to move as they played, to regroup, to process up and down the aisles, filling the auditorium with vibrant sounds always in motion.

But more than their clever choreography, which was fun for the audience to watch, this freedom meant that the musicians were really playing with each other, engaging in a degree of eye contact and responsiveness that is impossible when playing from a score on a music stand. Baroque counterpoint has never been quite so effervescent.

But the music was only part of the show. Suspended behind and above the band was a large circular screen onto which planets, distant galaxies, and star nebulae in brightest colors were projected to amplify the dramatic narrative about astronomy’s heroes and heroic aspirations. Shaun Smyth, a young Canadian actor, enlivened the script, which liberally quoted a wide sampling of period diaries, letters, and poetry, with a variety of accents and rhetorical flourishes. Alison McKay, who doubles as Tafelmusik’s sole contrabass player, created the marvelous script.

In the program’s opening section, accounts of Galileo’s celestial discoveries and subsequent silencing by the Roman Catholic Church for heresy were interspersed by the music of Claudio Monteverdi, Galileo’s exact contemporary, and that of his brother, lutenist Michelangelo Gabrieli. The strings of Tafelmusik gave the familiar—at least to Baroque opera fans—“Ritornello” from history’s first opera, Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, a spirited yet lithe vitality.

Lutenist Lucas Harris mined the deep melancholy and introspection of Gabrieli's "Toccatà," a spare lute solo that portrayed his brother's confinement following ecclesiastical condemnation. In the opposite mood, a "Ciaccona" from Orfeo, Harris strummed a Baroque guitar with a few violins, cello and fleet harpsichordist Olivier Fortin creating unexpected allusions to the sweet sounds of American country-western music.

In the flamboyant "Moresca" from Orfeo, members of Tafelmusik performed in a large rotating circle around their necessarily seated colleagues in the center of the stage (the harpsichordist and two cellists), suggesting planets in orbit around the sun and highlighting the exuberance of this dance. In a calmer mood with everyone standing still, oboist John Abberger gently intoned the song "See, even night herself is here" from Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, accompanied by a halo of violins and violas.

The scientific advances of Newton were represented musically by single movements of Jean-Phillipe Rameau with planetary allusions, e.g. "Entrée de Jupiter," an unusually bristling French Overture, and "Entrée de Venus," a sweeter reflection for strings alone. A stirring suite from Jean-Baptiste Lully's opera *Phaeton* also underscored Tafelmusik's sensitivity to the unique conventions of French Baroque textures and ornamentation.

My sole caveat about this superb program was the scattering of single, unrelated concerto grosso movements by G. F. Handel, G. P. Telemann, and Jan Dismas Zelenka in the second half. A single concerto grosso by any of these composers would have lent more gravitas and focus, something I imagine they aimed for with the two unrelated J. S. Bach movements with which the concert ended. The focus simply needed to come more at the heart of the second half. I did enjoy the oboes intoning the chorale theme from Bach's *Sinfonia to Wie schoen leuchtet der Morgenstern* (a church cantata) from the middle of the hall. Of course, Bach's "morning star" reference is theological, and not astronomical.

Kudos to Tafelmusik director and first violinist Jeanne Lamon, whose leadership was understated but undeniably effective. Only occasionally was she even playing in the front row of players, but she had clearly infused her authority throughout her instrumentalists: their unity and esprit never wavered.

To introduce "The Galileo Project," La Jolla Music Society happily though outside the box and invited Dr. Scott Kardel from the Palomar Observatory to present the pre-concert lecture. His upbeat overview of the history of astronomy in a gorgeously illustrated nutshell could not have been more audience-friendly.



Kenneth Herman

About the author: [Kenneth Herman](#) began his writing career as a music critic for the San Diego Union-Tribune and covered classical music for the San Diego Edition of the Los Angeles Times (1982-1992). He wrote "A History of the Spreckels Organ." and is currently Music Director/Organist for the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego and conducts the 60-voice San Diego Youth Choir.