

Reaching for the stars with out-of-this-world program



*The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres blends music, words, choreography and image projections.*

## **Tafelmusik's latest commemorates 400th anniversary of Galileo's telescope**

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CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

You don't expect to find members of an orchestra in space, either literally or figuratively.

Yet that's where Tafelmusik is right now. Members of the city's baroque orchestra have stuck their heads beyond the clouds and into the stars.

Thanks to the fertile imagination of bass player Alison Mackay, Tafelmusik presents a program dedicated to the great Galileo Galilei in honour of the official Year of Astronomy.

This year marks the 400th anniversary of Galileo's development of the astronomical telescope. This is also the time when opera and the baroque style of music were born.

Starting on Wednesday night at Trinity-St. Paul's Centre, audiences will see a multimedia concert that blends music, words, choreography and image projections of the solar system.

The idea is to kindle the awe and wonder people in the 17th and 18th centuries felt as scientists discovered man's place in the universe.

Mackay has developed several multidisciplinary programs in recent years, like the Sacred Spaces, Sacred Circles and Metamorphosis festivals with husband David Fallis, as well as a multicultural take on *The Four Seasons* for Tafelmusik a few years ago.

*The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres* was sparked by a suggestion by University of Toronto astronomy professor John Percy nearly two years ago to program a concert in honour of the 400th anniversary of Galileo's telescope.

With the encouragement of Tafelmusik music director Jeanne Lamon, Mackay developed her ideas and assembled a creative team that includes set and lighting designer Glenn Davidson, Opera Atelier co-artistic director Marshall Pynkoski as choreographer, renowned Canadian astronomical photographer Alan Dyer and actor Shaun Smyth.

The final polish was applied last week at a development workshop at the Banff Centre near Calgary.

"There is no light pollution in Banff, so I thought it would make an ideal place from which to see the stars," says Mackay.

Mackay tells of how visitors to the *Galileo Project's* premiere last Friday night were invited to peer at the clear night sky before and after the concert, thanks to telescopes set up by faculty from the University of Calgary.

Toronto's night sky is obliterated by lights, so audiences here won't get the same kind of eye-on-telescope thrill. But the set and projections are the same.

One element of danger audiences may not recognize is in how the music itself is being presented: the orchestra will play the entire program without sheet music.

One of Mackay's goals was to have the approximately 75 minutes of music played by heart, so that the musicians are free to move around the astrologically themed stage floor and into the audience.

Mackay describes how terrifying the prospect of learning music by heart was to many members of the orchestra. This is, simply, not something orchestral musicians ever do. A soloist making a mistake can easily be brought back on track, but it's different when this happens inside an orchestra.

It took about two months of intense work. The program includes baroque-era greats such as J.S. Bach, Claudio Monteverdi and Antonio Vivaldi, but not all of the pieces come from Tafelmusik's existing repertoire. The music from Jean-Baptiste Lully's opera *Phaeton*, for example, has probably never been heard in Toronto before.

"We started having these informal memorizing parties and sessions on people's own time," Mackay recalls, smiling.

In Winnipeg, at the end of the orchestra's western tour in November, someone found an empty ballroom at the Fort Garry Hotel after the evening's concert. "Everybody just got together up there at 10 o'clock at night and we played through the program," Mackay relates.

"I think everyone found it very moving."

It is Mackay's hope that listeners will feel the same way.

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Just the facts:

**WHAT:** The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres

**WHERE:** Trinity-St. Paul's Centre, 427 Bloor St. W.

**WHEN:** Jan. 21 to 25 (various times)

**TICKETS:** \$15-\$72 at 416-964-6337 or tafelmusik.org