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Tafelmusik's Tales of Two Cities joins East and West over coffee

By ROBERT HARRIS



Toronto audiences have become so accustomed to the spectacular and varied multimedia extravaganzas cooked up by the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra's resident storyteller, Alison Mackay, that we sometimes forget how unique they are. Here are members of a great baroque orchestra, playing at the peak of their form for two hours, having memorized the entire concert, prowling around the

stage in seemingly carefree abandon, supported by text, images and a clever storyline. It's no wonder so many of Mackay's creations have been performed for audiences around the world – there's really nothing like them.

Mackay's latest effort opened on Thursday – *Tales of Two Cities: The Leipzig-Damascus Coffee House* – and it may be the most profound of them all. But it's rough in spots, with a stubborn, not always predictable shape. In the end, that became its strength, because the topic it chose to delineate – the shifting, complex, tense relationship between East and West, is not easy or smooth. In the end, we witnessed a phenomenon that was unexpected and powerful – the joining of two peoples through the universal need for human communication, and the power of musical utterance. A power that transcends culture, almost transcends history.

Mackay uses as her cultural glue, the introduction of coffee into both the East and West in the 17th and 18th centuries, so that the coffee house eventually becomes a centre of Arabic culture in Damascus, but also a centre of Western culture in Leipzig, Germany. To represent the West, we had the Tafelmusik orchestra; for the East, Trio Arabica, vocalist Maryem Tollar, percussionist Naghmeh Farahmand and oud player Demetri Petsalakis.

The concert got off to an interestingly ecumenical start, with Farahmand drumming out a rhythm that eventually became the basic pulse of a Telemann overture, but often the Western and Eastern sounds passed each other in musical space without ever touching. Subtly, we were reminded that cultures are often stubborn partners, with clearly defined parameters and content.

However, as if by some Mackay magic (she's done this on more than one occasion), that changed in the second half of the concert. Even though it seemed Damascus had been temporarily forgotten as Tafelmusik alone took the stage at the beginning of Part 2, it was the power of story and storytelling that provided the cultural enmeshing. Narrator Alon Nashman skillfully told two stories in the second half – first by reading from *Don Quixote*, with music by Telemann as accompaniment, and then telling a tale of Scheherazade from *Arabian Nights*. This was accompanied by the most stunning

musical moment of the evening, the superb Tollar singing, a capella, *Afdihi in Hafidhal Hawa Ow Diy'a*, a solo that transcended cultural barriers, a passionate, soulful, heart-rending bit of intense emotion that reached every person in Koerner Hall, Eastern, Western, whatever.

Tollar's solo was only one of several phenomenally inspired bits of music-making on display all evening – another example of correspondence between cultures. We humans like to display, we like to achieve perfection in music-making, and it really doesn't matter who we are in this regard or where we're from. So we were treated to a passionate and wild Aisslinn Nosky just killing a movement from a Telemann Violin Concerto. We revelled in the rhythmic acuity and abandon of an improvised solo by Farahmand. Tafelmusik's wind trio – oboists John Abberger, Marco Cera and bassoonist Dominic Teresi were crazily virtuosic in a Handel Trio Sonata.

So, in the end, when narrator Nashman reminded us that at this very moment, people from Damascus were bringing their culture with them to Leipzig, as refugees from a brutal conflict, we were able to place the fact into a more complex, serious and realistic context. As we've seen, the integration of two different cultures is not easy, as much as we would like it to be. However, because of Mackay and Tafelmusik and Trio Arabica, we were given some hope on Thursday night that there may be more that unites us than divides us, if we are willing to search for it.