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A Tale Of Two Cities That Shared Music And Coffee

By STEPHEN CERA

With the background of relentless war engulfing Syria, a bit of historical and cultural context can be as bracing as, say, a well-brewed cup of Turkish coffee.

That jolt was provided by an imaginative multi-media presentation of Toronto's Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra in Koerner Hall last weekend. "Tales of Two Cities: The Leipzig-Damascus Coffee House" revolved around the central role of the coffee house in the worlds of both 18th Century Leipzig and Damascus, uncovering cross-cultural influences between two cities which sit 3000 km apart.

Despite the distance, in the 18th Century the two places evidently had much in common. Both lay at the crossroads of ancient trade routes. Both were hubs of intellectual activity. And both relished the "stimulating properties and restorative powers" of coffee and music in their coffee houses, where the finest musicians of each city performed.



*Maryam Tollar
Photo by Bruce Zinger*

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The thoughtful presentation was conceived, programmed and scripted by Alison Mackay, the double bassist of Tafelmusik, Toronto's period-instrument orchestra which has toured internationally and recorded prolifically. The Tafelmusik players performed the entire lengthy program expertly and from memory -- a remarkable feat.

If one feared a stylistic clash between the Baroque selections played by Tafelmusik, and traditional Arabic music played by the Trio Arabica, such a fear proved unfounded: these elements were knitted together in a fluid presentation. The script, including readings from primary sources, was narrated by Alon Nashman, a Toronto-based actor. The production was enhanced by a theatrical set and array of visual projections reflecting architectural jewels of Europe influenced by the Ottoman empire. The script built historical bridges, returning to the motif of the coffee house -- a venue for entertainment, socialization and cultural uplift in both Leipzig and Ottoman-era Damascus.

The musical program included Baroque selections by Telemann, Handel, Torelli and J.S. Bach, led by Jeanne Lamon of Tafelmusik, interspersed with haunting Arabic music performed by the Trio Arabica: vocalist Maryem Tollar; percussionist Naghmeh Farahmand, and oud [sic] player Demetri Petsalakis. [An oud is a Middle Eastern ancestor of the lute.] There were also dynamic percussion improvisations, and *Tish Nign*, a haunting Klezmer melody that was performed by two Tafelmusik violinists. It all came together with a flowing continuity, the musicians moving freely both on and off the stage, and Nashman animating the proceedings in a vivid style that just occasionally went over the top. His role as story-teller bound together the disparate musical accents, which sounded against the shifting backdrop of screened projections (designed by Raha Javanfar) showcasing images of both historic sites and domestic settings.

The overall effect was an enhanced appreciation of Middle East culture in general, art and architecture in 18th-Century Damascus in particular, and the many links between Ottoman and European civilizations. While those 18th Century societies were scarred by violence and intolerance, this program suggested, poets, musicians and artists still sought common ground with people of other traditions. Fast forward to today, when the citizens of Leipzig and recent arrivals from Damascus strive to find ways to accommodate each other's cultures -- a reality that underscores the timeliness and topicality of the Tafelmusik presentation.

With concert programmers continually searching for new ways to reach audiences, this enterprising concept could serve as a signpost. It blends elements that are entertaining, educational, musically rewarding and visually arresting.