

MUSICAL TORONTO

May 24, 2016

SCRUTINY | The Allure Of Coffee Merges East and West In Tafelmusik's Latest Multimedia Programme

By JOHN TERAUDS

Tafelmusik's provides a risky, yet rewarding multimedia spin on music from 1700's Leipzig and Damascus.



Tafelmusik: "Tales of Two Cities: The Leipzig-Damascus Coffee House." L-R: Actor Alon Nashman (seated); Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra (standing); Trio Arabica (lower right). (Photo: Bruce Zinger)

Tafelmusik: Tales of Two Cities: The Leipzig-Damascus Coffee House at Koerner Hall. May 22, 2016.

Tafelmusik bassist Alison Mackay has through the simple virtue of boundless curiosity, become a pioneer in reimagining the concert experience in multimedia and multi-disciplinary ways. Her most recent project, shown at Koerner Hall this past week, and with one more Toronto performance remaining, is in many ways her most risky — and most rewarding.

MUSICAL TORONTO

Sunday afternoon's performance at Koerner Hall was a flawless affair, musically as well as aesthetically, making it possible to appreciate the craft as well as the content behind Tales of Two Cities: The Leipzig-Damascus Coffee House.

The conceit behind this programme, which features members of the period-instrument Tafelmusik Orchestra (including former music director, violinist Jeanne Lamon) as well as Trio Arabica, is how two different cultures can find something in common. In this case, it's a cup of coffee that leads us into a 17th and 18th-century world of international trade, multiculturalism, music made among friends, and the charms of good storytelling. The conceit is staged using Tafelmusik's now-trademark mix of instrumentalists moving freely about the stage, video projections, theatrical lighting, and a narrative voice.

The big challenge was integrating the cross-cultural element in a way that whets our appetites for more information on these stories while also providing musical entertainment value.

Mackay, Tafelmusik and their guests succeeded on all counts. So much so that it is worth seeking out a ticket in their upcoming performance at George Weston Hall on Tuesday(May 24).

The music of the Arab world, based on different theoretical as well as aesthetic principles than Western music, does not lend itself easily to integration in a programme that also includes European Baroque fare, but the interleaving of Western and Arab worked very nicely as narrator Alon Nashman (with Maryem Tollar translating the opening and closing texts) presented a fascinating caffeinated story.

The audience discovered the coffee introduced to Europe came from Yemen. Leipzig, Germany and Damascus, Syria were both at the intersection of major North-south and East-west trade routes, so had early exposure to coffee and were pioneers in the development of a communal coffee culture both daytime and nocturnal. People congregated in coffee houses to socialise, listen to stories, and make music.

The programme became a sampler of those stories and music, while also serving up a tasting menu of historical tidbits that show how much interchange between East and West had existed along the trade routes, centuries before Fed Ex and Amazon.

Tollar was the vocal star, singing songs from different Arab traditions with powerful confidence. Her Trio Arabica colleagues, percussionist Naghmeh Farahmand, and oud player Demetri Petsalakis, provided impeccable accompaniment (with Tollar often playing the qanun while singing, as well).

MUSICAL TORONTO

Marshall Pynkoski's stage direction seemed a bit constrained, given the size of the Koerner Hall stage, but it never felt too busy or fussy. Glenn Davidson's lighting and Raha Javanfar's video projections blended with the narrative seamlessly.

The Tafelmusik players had turns to showcase their string and wind talents. Especially memorable moments came from solo turns by violinist Aisslinn Nosky and, in a rarity for his underappreciated instrument, violist Patrick Jordan. But all of the music, all played from memory (a remarkable feat in the orchestral world), was impeccably performed.

The music on the programme was also well chosen, neatly underlining and enhancing the story that was being told around it.

As is the case every time Tafelmusik dusts off the work of Georg Phillip Telemann, I couldn't help but be amazed not just at the quality of his instrumental writing, but at his stylistic variety and invention. This being Leipzig, we also had some choice samples of J.S. Bach to appreciate, as well as pieces by Claudio Monteverdi, Jean-Baptiste Lully, George Frideric Handel and Giuseppe Torelli.

At one point, Nashman spoke of how the people of Leipzig and Damascus both worshipped beauty, and asked — with the 21st-century's knowledge that Leipzig was reduced to rubble during World War II, as so much of Syria is today — what remains of that beauty now?

The answer? Words and music, so lovingly remembered through the comfort and camaraderie of a good cup of coffee. It's a gentle message of humanity, at a time when we need it as much as ever.

At the close of the programme, Mackay and her colleagues even found a way to integrate an Arab song (which had a straightforward metre) with a rollicking Ritornello by Telemann. That musical merge was as brilliant as the cultural merge that had preceded it.