

TORONTO CONCERT REVIEWS

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TAFELMUSIK at its finest!

By DAVID RICHARDS



"Tales of Two Cities: The Leipzig-Damascus Coffee House"
Photo by Bruce Zinger

Anyone who came to the George Weston Recital Hall last night expecting a concert by the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra was in for a huge surprise. It was so much more!!! The thrilling dramatic program, *Tales of Two Cities*, is a scripted, multi-media, narrated, musical tour of Europe and the middle east in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is the brilliant brainchild of Alison Mackay, who researched and wrote the work, following up on her other successful multi-media productions that began with the Galileo Project several years ago.

Using the coffee houses of Leipzig and Damascus as the frame of reference, it is a well-crafted lesson about the history of the relationship between the two very different cities, the richness of Syrian culture, its influence on German baroque and the tragedy of all that has been lost in the present conflict.

The performance opened with Tafelmusik playing its way down the aisles toward the stage accompanied by Naghmeh Farahmand performing on a drum. It was as if it were a Leipzig street band heading to a coffee house gathering an audience along the way. This set the stage for Alon Nashman to tell the background story of connections between the Ottoman empire and Europe beginning with the origins of coffee in Ethiopia and Yemen. Using brilliant photography, video, and dramatic story telling, it followed the

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trade routes through the Middle East and across Europe until coffee houses sprang up in cities like Leipzig.

The music of Trio Arabica, performing traditional Arabic music was juxtaposed with the music of Telemann, Monteverdi, Handel, Torelli and Bach. The eastern influences on baroque music became very evident. After wonderful story telling from such classics as Don Quixote and Scheherazade that added hilarious moments to the evening, the work concluded with Tafelmusik and Trio Arabica coming together in a climactic and energetic finale.

Maryem Tollar sang with passion and conviction. Naghmeh Farahmand was brilliant with the complex rhythms and colours on her various drums. Demetri Petsalakis displayed virtuosity on his lute-like oud.

Mackay chose music that displayed Tafelmusik at its finest. Not only did they play from memory, but many of them were featured as soloists or in duets and trios. I particularly enjoyed their internal communication as they faced each other to perform as if performing for each other in a coffee house. It was a thrill to have Jeanne Lamon back directing the ensemble. She was clearly enjoying the evening thoroughly and her enthusiasm was contagious both on stage and in the audience.

One can only hope that this work will be repeated in upcoming seasons. It was for me, the highlight of Toronto's musical calendar this year.