

May 21, 2016

## Tafelmusik's Tales of Two Cities project transports audiences to Leipzig, Damascus

By WILLIAM LITTLER

Alison Mackay incorporates visual and narrative components to illuminate coffee-house culture in two of the major trading centres of the 18th century.



Alison Mackay, Tafelmusik double bass player, has created a new multimedia project called Tale of Two Cities: the Leipzig-Damascus Coffee House. (STEVE RUSSELL / TORONTO STAR)

When Charles Dickens wrote his Tale of Two Cities he had London and Paris in mind. Two very different places inspired Alison Mackay's new Tafelmusik production, Tales of Two Cities: The Leipzig-Damascus Coffee House.

Saturday night and Sunday afternoon at Koerner Hall, and Tuesday evening at the Toronto Centre for the Arts, audiences will be taken to Leipzig and Damascus to experience coffee-house culture in two of the major trading centres of the 18th century.

Leipzig, yes, but Damascus? “I thought it would be good for Canadians to be aware of what is in danger of being lost through the war in Syria,” Mackay, Tafelmusik’s intellectually curious double bass player, explains.

“When I was doing research for our previous project on Bach, Circle of Creation, I looked at the paper in Bach’s notebooks and became aware of an important collection of 18th-century watermarks in Damascus.

“Yes, there were connections between the two cities, both of them centres of scholarship as well as trade. Leipzig was even a centre for the study of Arabic, and a scholar who worked there was involved in translating the Bible and the Qu’ran.”

Although the coffee-house culture in the two cities differed, music was involved in both cases, along with public reading in Leipzig and storytelling in Damascus. Coffee, Mackay points out, made its way from Yemen to the first commercial coffee houses of Damascus before reaching Istanbul, Vienna and the rest of Western Europe.

Western Europe was able to return the favour in the 1730s, when the porcelain factories of Meissen began taking orders for coffee cups from the Islamic world to the tune of 30,000 a year. Mackay suggests the coffee may have been basically the same in Damascus and Leipzig but adds that even now it is a slang expression in the German city to refer to flower cup coffee: coffee that really is not strong enough.

The music was obviously different in the two cities and Tafelmusik has accordingly invited Maryem Tollar’s Trio Arabica to collaborate in its project, bringing mystical Sufi songs to a program in which Tafelmusik contributes music by Bach, Telemann and Handel.

Bach wrote a famous “Coffee Cantata” and often participated in music-making at Zimmermann’s Coffee House during his Leipzig years. And now that Germany has become a haven for Syrian refugees, today’s Leipzig coffee houses have even been decorated with scenes from Damascus.

Although she insists that music comes first in the four major multimedia presentations she has devised for Tafelmusik, Mackay acknowledges that adding visual and narrative components has created a new genre for the period instrument-playing Baroque orchestra.

It all began in 2009, the International Year of Astronomy, with an invitation from Canada’s Dominion Observatory to devise an arts event as part of the celebrations. The result was The Galileo Project, honouring the work of the late 16th-, early 17th-century astronomer, with R.H. Thomson narrating, and striking photos taken with the help of the Hubble Telescope augmenting the music.

Tafelmusik toured The Galileo Project internationally to such acclaim that an encore was obviously called for, leading Mackay to devise House of Dreams, celebrating Baroque art

through collections in five historical houses, including Handel's house in London, Bach's in Leipzig and a house in Delft (now selling pancakes) that had at one time played host to 21 of the 36 existing paintings of Johannes Vermeer.

Mackay pays tribute to the hundreds of hours her colleagues have spent, often in twos and threes, working informally to solidify the music in their memories. And she credits the directorial skill of Opera Atelier's Marshall Pynkoski for devising appropriate stage movement for them.

But she also takes warning from Jeanne Lamon, music director for *Tales of Two Cities*, who points out that to keep this way of working stimulating for the players new projects keep having to be devised.

Mackay estimates that *Tales of Two Cities* represents three years of work, beginning as usual with a year spent doing research at the University of Toronto's Robarts Library and including writing the script (this time narrated by Alon Nashman).

Calling such projects part of the Internet Age, she credits electronic communication with reaching scholars internationally, many of whom have become friends of Tafelmusik. After a Penn State performance of *The Galileo Project* a scientist revealed he had been one of the founding scientists working with the Hubble Telescope and Tafelmusik was using some of his own images.

"The most exhilarating and terrifying time of my life was when we did one of these projects for the first time," Mackay says. The terror has lessened now. The exhilaration continues.