

Tafelmusik

JEANNE LAMON CELEBRATES 30 YEARS WITH TAFELMUSIK



On the occasion of Jeanne Lamon's 30th Anniversary as Music Director of Tafelmusik, we sat down to chat with her in November about the past three decades.

Tell us about arriving at Tafelmusik in 1981.

I was living in Boston and was really feeling the missionary zeal of period instruments. It had begun to catch on in Europe where I studied, and I came back to North America to find that few people owned period instruments or knew anything about it. But I was asked by Kenny Solway and Susan Graves, the founders of Tafelmusik, to come and direct a programme – they were trying out different people in their search for a Music Director. By coincidence, my sister had moved to Toronto a few years before, and this was my first chance to visit, so although I knew nothing of Tafelmusik, I said, “Sure, I’ll come!”

To make a long story short, they hired me as director. What it meant was coming in and training a lot of enthusiastic local players who had no previous experience playing period instruments. There were a handful of players who were trained

period players, most of whom are still here: Charlotte Nediger on harpsichord, Alison Mackay on bass, and Ivars Taurins on viola (in addition to being the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir director, he was a violist for many, many years). And Christina Mahler arrived with me – they needed a cellist as badly as they needed a music director!

Somehow Kenny had managed to convince the world that there was a fully-formed orchestra, and had lined up concert dates in places where we have never played since, including dates in New York City’s Alice Tully Hall and Boston’s Jordan Hall. He did it just by telling them, “We’re great!” ... and yet we didn’t even really exist! And when we did start to exist we weren’t great yet, so it was quite an amazing start.

What convinced you to stay?

Before coming to Toronto I had been a freelancer. I was often hired to be concertmaster, and my job was to make the orchestra sound as good as possible so that the conductor could focus on interpretation. Each time we’d start from the beginning and everything sounded horrible, and we’d work and work to try to get it to sound better. By the end you’d have a great sense of accomplishment and everybody felt very positive about what we’d achieved together. But then, next thing you know you go back to the beginning again with another group. It’s like Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill only to have it roll back down so that he has to do it again – my musical life felt a bit like that.

So even though we weren’t great the first year I was here at Tafelmusik, we could build on what we’d achieved – putting a programme together we’d work very hard and we’d get it to a certain point, and we’d perform, and then we’d start the next programme from where we left off, so we weren’t starting from square one. It’s so satisfying to work with a consistent group of musicians who are all committed to making music and making it just a little bit better, always. And that hasn’t changed.

That’s the beauty of Tafelmusik – we have consistency of players, so we can constantly build our own sound, our own interpretation — what we did last week will inform and improve what we do this week. It’s a cumulative thing, and I think it has exponential benefits.

Over the years, you have brought Tafelmusik to the attention of the world and have sustained this with regular touring and recording. What's the secret?

If you mean what's the magic ingredient, I think that consistency is it. That we do as much as we do together is unique in the early music world: I don't think any other period orchestra performs as much as we do. And because we have this job to offer, we can attract really good musicians. The collaborative way we work together in rehearsal is extremely positive because people feel that their input matters. And their input does matter – if any one person stepped out it would really be a significant loss to the whole. We're a musical family and everyone is very positive about wanting Tafelmusik to be the best it can possibly be.

It's well known that you're passionate about training younger musicians. Why is this work so important to you?

I love working with people that age – that age being mostly university or post-university, so between 20 and 25 or 30. I just love that moment in their lives when pennies are dropping left, right and centre. They've had a lot of music training already, but they're suddenly realizing all kinds of things about how they perform or what they'd like to do ...

I'm very passionate about the music and I feel that there are still a lot of misunderstandings about baroque and classical music. I really love setting the record straight on that and turning people on to what the music is really about. I believe that anybody who actually experiences – especially firsthand, not just hearing it done on period instruments, but actually playing or singing it stylistically – will never want to go back, because it's so absolutely inspiring. It's so much fun to watch that process and to be a part of it — a lot of light bulbs going on, a lot of "Eureka!" moments, a lot of "Aha!"

You have attracted attention from high profile artists, such as Kent Nagano and Bruno Weil, who have forged an ongoing relationship with Tafelmusik. Why do you think these relationships are important for an ensemble like Tafelmusik?

We work with quite a number of guest directors, and Bruno and Kent are certainly important ones. I think it's an important part of our success. It keeps people stimulated, it keeps us all learning, it keeps us all growing. If you only eat potatoes, it's not so great! With music, it's the same thing: you need to vary repertoire and you need to vary approaches. We always learn something from these experiences: we take things from each guest director or soloist, and they become a part of our vocabulary.

How is it that you chose *Hercules* as your "anniversary gift"?

I love opera, I love Handel, and I love Handel operas. I love the oratorios too. But I especially love the secular Handel pieces that are so able to capture, with the simplest music, the human condition in all of its frailties – pride, jealousy, rage. Handel can do that better than just about anybody.

Handel wrote a lot of oratorios based on biblical stories, and they're all in English, and a lot of Italian operas. But there are two pieces, *Semele* and *Hercules*, that fall into neither of those categories, that fall in between. They're both in English, which makes them accessible in a very direct way to Canadian audiences. But they have dramatic story lines that are operatic in nature, and lend themselves to semi-staged concert performances, such as we're doing. *Semele* is quite well known, and although not technically an opera, it is performed by major opera companies – in fact, the COC is doing it this spring. But *Hercules* is almost never done, and I'm not sure why. The music is equally good, though it's very different. *Hercules* is a darker tale ... I think it's a very psychological plot. It's all about character development, and is a perfect vehicle for Handel. It's the first time I've performed the piece – and what better way to celebrate an anniversary than by unwrapping something new!

You've got a great cast – and there are reports that you've been rehearsing via Skype in some cases!

I had a Skype rehearsal yesterday! That was my first, and I don't think it'll be the last. Allyson McHardy is playing the jealous wife, Dejanira. Allyson lives in Toronto, but is in Paris working with the Paris Opera for an extended period, so it's been very hard for us to get together. Now I'm arranging for Marshall to have a Skype date with Allyson. It's a new adventure for both of us!

And yes, we have a wonderful cast and I think it's going to be really fun!

You're also taking choir rehearsals – is this the first time you've directed the choir?

It is, which is going to be wonderful. They're a wonderful choir as you know, and I think it will be absolutely delightful to work with them. I think of it as a 30th anniversary present to get to know them a little bit better.

What is your biggest wish for Tafelmusik's future?

My biggest wishes are that the working culture never gets jaded or sullied in any way, and that we continue to grow and enjoy playing music together.

Happy Anniversary Jeanne!