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Meet Tafelmusik's Alison Mackay

What is your role in the creation of the Galileo Project?

I've been playing the double bass with [Tafelmusik](#) since 1980 or so. Every year or two I'm lucky enough to be assigned a special project, working with the orchestra to put our core repertoire in a new context. In the case of the Galileo Project, I wrote a script, and working closely with our music director Jeanne, chose music to weave together with the narration. Then I worked together as part of a team with our designers and stage director to develop the visual aspects of the show.

How has the Galileo Project changed since it was first performed in 2009?

The excitement of playing the concert from memory hasn't dissipated but the sheer terror has! We've performed the concert so many times now that the music is getting more imbedded. When we come to play in Australia we will have just premiered a new memorized project, so our first Australian concerts will be a good test. We also adapt the concert in small ways to reflect the country in which we're performing.

How has the performance been adapted for Australia?

We'll be introducing a few southern hemisphere images and a short reading from Ray Norris's fascinating work on Aboriginal astronomy, *Emu Dreaming*. Our Canadian astronomical advisors have close colleagues in the scientific community in Australia. We are looking forward so much to meeting some of these friends and learning about the southern sky from them.

This is as much a piece of theatre as a concert. What challenges has this presented for the musicians?

We've definitely entered a new world of thinking about how we move and interact with each other on stage. Being freed from music stands has allowed us to experiment playing right out in the audience. Learning to walk and even climb steps while playing didn't feel too easy at first! Of course I get off easy playing the double bass and pretty much have to stay put.

What was the first record you ever brought?

It's a bit lost in the mists of time but I think it was a Bob Dylan LP.

What are you listening to at the moment?

I'm sorry to be so dull but I'm listening to nothing but the in-house recording we've made to help us memorize the music for our new project, "House of Dreams".

Music to the eyes

Classical music is luring new fans by lacing concerts with lush imagery.

When the Canadian ensemble Tafelmusik first performed *The Galileo Project* in their home town of Toronto, there was a party of astronomers in the audience. Their reaction was overwhelming. Many were moved to tears by the combination of baroque music with images of the night sky. It is a reaction that has been reproduced all over the world. Now Tafelmusik comes to Sydney.

The Galileo Project was developed by Alison Mackay, bass player and long-term member of Tafelmusik, as part of the 2009 International Year of Astronomy. The concert traces the legacy of astronomy in art and science, via Galileo, Sir Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler and Lully, Handel and Bach. The 17-strong period-instrument ensemble plays the entire program from memory, which frees the musicians to move around the auditorium. Suspended behind the stage is a giant, circular screen that becomes a portrait, planet or complete skyscape, illustrating the music and words.

The program has been so successful that Tafelmusik have taken it to the US, Mexico, China and Malaysia. In each location they aim to connect with the astronomy community, using local images of the night sky and hosting star parties – mass viewings through whatever telescopes can be drummed up from stargazing residents. For their Australian performances, they will incorporate images and text from *Emu Dreaming*, a book produced by the director of the Aboriginal Astronomy Project at Macquarie University, Ray Norris.

It sounds spectacular but is adding visuals just a prop, a gimmick to make classical music more palatable?

“No,” Mackay says, without hesitation. “It’s not that a concert needs to be livened up by pictures and narration. The repertoire is a proper concert, two 40-minute halves. The music and the images and the narration together become more than the sum of their parts... When you provide this new light on the music, it’s very exciting for the performers. It informs your performance and adds an emotional layer and that excitement communicates itself to the audience.”

Performing music with lighting and projections is nothing new. In 1909, Russian composer and famous synaesthete Alexander Scriabin wrote *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* for orchestra and a custom-designed light projector, controlled by the composer from a colour keyboard. However, the technology was crude and the work is rarely performed.

Fast-forward 100 years and digital technology has caught up with Scriabin's imagination: the technology-enhanced concert is fast becoming classical music's Next Big Thing.

It is not just Tafelmusik. Last year's *YouTube Symphony Orchestra* concert used multiple screens, video commentary and projections on the sails of the Opera House. In this year's Sydney Festival, *41 Strings* featured artwork projected on the ceiling of the concert hall and Sydney Symphony performed the soundtrack to *West Side Story* live as the film screened.

Is this the way of the future? Frank Gehry, architecture's man of the moment, certainly thinks so. His latest concert hall, the New World Centre in Miami, is designed to bring concert presentation into the digital age. The main stage in the complex is surrounded by huge sails that act as both sound baffles and blank canvases to be filled with images – surtitles, program notes, close-ups and illustrations – from 14 high-definition projectors. The hall is intimate – only 748 seats – but sound and images are regularly fed live to “the Wall”, a 650-square-metre permanent screen on which all comers can watch and enjoy free concerts.

Alex Ross, writing in *The New Yorker* after the opening festivities in February last year, said, “the fusion of film and live music is so mesmerisingly seamless that I felt I was witnessing not just a technological forward leap but the emergence of a new genre.”

“It is a new genre,” says the general manager of the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Tim Calnin. “It's not going to replace concert-giving. We still believe in the power of the abstract art form of music. But when we're trying to reach more people and introduce them to that... purer side of the repertoire; this is a great way of doing it.”

In May, the Australian Chamber Orchestra's artistic director, Richard Tognetti, takes off to the north-west tip of Australia with composer Iain Grandage, a band of musicians, a director, cinematographer, cameramen and surfers to develop *The Reef*, a work that will integrate film footage and stills with music. It is the third iteration of the award-winning *Musica Surfica*, a work that has introduced the orchestra to a new audience.

Meanwhile, at Sydney Symphony, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* has already almost sold out, four months before the event. “It is a different audience but it's a big audience,” says the managing director of Sydney Symphony, Rory Jeffes.

Sydney Symphony has embraced technologically enhanced concert presentation with enthusiasm. As Jeffes points out, their performance of Holst's *The Planets* last year was accompanied by high-definition footage from NASA space probes and the Hubble Space Telescope. He is also excited by the potential to reinterpret major works such as *Tristan and Isolde*, for example, which video artist Bill Viola and director Peter Sellars restaged with London's Philharmonia Orchestra, using multiple screens and surround sound to create an immersive but, nevertheless, live experience.

And therein lies the key. Mackay, Calnin and Jeffes agree that visual pyrotechnics and digital artistry are not going to kill live performance any time soon. Jeffes says, “If digital experience were ever able to catch up with the live experience, then that would be the biggest threat to the current operating model of orchestras. But it ain’t going to happen.

“Nothing beats being in the hall. We’re doing four performances of Beethoven 9 this week and they’re all sold out – that’s 11,000 people. The music speaks to them in a way that is beyond images.”

Interview with members of Tafelmusik – part 1

Most of us know that Galileo was a seminal astronomer, a brilliant scientist, and a visionary. Less well-known is the fact that he played the lute. His father was an influential composer, and his circle of friends included Claudio Monteverdi.

The link between pioneering astronomy and Baroque music might have remained obscure if Canadian astronomer John Percy had not happened to be a subscriber and fan of the Toronto-based period instrument ensemble [Tafelmusik](#). From his post on the organising committee of the International Year of Astronomy in 2009, which was celebrating the 400th anniversary of Galileo's first use of the telescope, he approached the group. Would it not be good to put together an evening of music around this idea?

Alison Mackay, a double-bass player with Tafelmusik, had long been dreaming of creating an evening of music for which the musicians would all play from memory. In thastre Galileo idea, she saw an opportunity.

At first, music director Jeanne Lamon was sceptical. "I was one of the last people to think that there would be any point in learning a program by heart," she remembers. "But in fact I found that it has given us a relationship to the music and an intimacy with each other as players which is deeper than anything we've ever experienced with music stands."

Inspired by the idea of a program that linked astronomy and music, Tafelmusik teamed up with actor Shaun Smyth, stage director Marshall Pynkoski, and designer Glenn Davidson for a 7-day residency at Banff, Canada's utopic Rocky Mountains arts centre.

That time of intensive rehearsal, which culminated in a presentation attended by both music-lovers and astronomers, with a chance to view the night sky through historic telescopes for all, was the tip of the iceberg in terms of the work invested in the Galileo Project.

"In my 30 years of directing Tafelmusik, this is the best-prepared music we've ever presented," says Lamon. Anxious about their capacity to memorise the music, the players added extra "play dates" to their rehearsal schedule, meeting wherever and whenever they could – including, memorably, the abandoned ballroom of a Canadian railway hotel at midnight – to run through the music.

"We were joking the other day that if we had Alzheimer's, the last thing we would forget would be the music from the Galileo Proect, because it's so deeply embedded in our cells now," Lamon observes. "All that painstaking work paid off."

Interview with members of Tafelmusik – part 2

Tafelmusik and the Galileo team created a performance that breaks the boundaries of conventional formats. With projected images of historical and contemporary astrological observations, a broad and engrossing narration from Smyth in a wide range of different characters, and a fastidiously choreographed series of musical performances that use the entire space of the concert hall and become a kind of dance in themselves, *The Galileo Project* tells the story of humanity and the universe, from Galileo's thrilling discoveries and unjust imprisonment through to the free, enlightened future that he predicted.

'Alison did a brilliant job of putting this program together,' Lamon enthuses. 'It appeals to people who love music as well as people who are interested in science. It is so well paced and beautifully interwoven that it never feels didactic. People in the audience see it as a joyful experience; some are moved to tears by the beauty and breadth of the experience.'

In a glorious coup at the end of the evening, Smyth reads from German astronomer Johannes Kepler's 1619 *Harmonices Mundi*, in which the laws of planetary motion are given harmonic expression. Kepler attributes a small melody to each planet, and the musicians of Tafelmusik weave these into Bach's *How brightly shines the morning star*.

'Kepler's idea is that the celestial orbs create their own music, and are in harmony with each other,' explains Mackay. 'The night sky inspires so much wonder that it's not surprising people thought of expressing that in terms of music. And we wanted to finish the program with Bach, because Bach seems the most appropriate expression of wonder at the achievements of the human spirit.'

It is this double sense of awe, at the magnitude of the universe and at the magnificence of human creation, that gives *The Galileo Project* its grandeur.

'You're on this little speck called Earth, and you're just a little speck on this speck,' says Lamon. 'It makes you feel very small and very human and very vulnerable, but it also makes you feel very privileged to be a part of it.'

Galileo, in his 1632 *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, comments on both the wonder of the night sky and the greatness of the achievements of the human spirit. 'And actually, that's what we're doing for the entire two hours,' says Smyth, 'showing what humans have created. Against the backdrop of the universe, you come down to the speck that we're on. And then you look at the incredible discoveries that

have been made, the music that has been written, and the artistry of the musicians on stage – counterbalancing those two things are part of what the program is about.’

Far from fizzling out when the 2009 astronomical anniversary was over, *The Galileo Project* has gained a life of its own, taking Tafelmusik as far afield as China. But this Musica Viva tour will be more than just the Canadian ensemble’s Australian debut. It will also be the performers’ first chance to see the Southern Cross. And they will, they insist, be rushing out to search the sky for the new constellation after each concert.

Shirley Apthorp © 2011

Music review: Tafelmusik

Recently the West's Arts Editor Stephen Bevis, commenting on the definition of art in the context of Cottesloe's Sculpture by the Sea, wrote, "(Art) can be high-minded polemic and debate, pure escapist entertainment or lots of time-wasting jibber jabber."

True. But at its best it can also be an entertaining yet strongly educative experience. As I'm sure last Thursday night's Musica Viva audience found Canadian Baroque orchestra Tafelmusik's The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres, a combination of music, astronomy, theatre, photography, video and literature that's literally out of this world.

Devised by the orchestra's bassist Alison Mackay for the International Year of Astronomy in 2009, The Galileo Project features music from the time of Galileo, Kepler and Newton by composers such as Monteverdi, Vivaldi, Lully, Handel and Telemann performed beneath a large circular screen onto which are projected dazzling celestial photographs, mostly taken through the Hubble telescope, and animations.

Music and images are further linked by Canadian actor Shaun Smyth's recitations from the works and letters of Shakespeare, Ovid, Galileo and many others to form a circular narrative that weaves together art, science, history and biography. More circles and ellipses are manifested in a large floor pattern representing the signs of the Zodiac and in the skilfully choreographed movements of the musicians as they turn on their axes or orbit their colleagues in complex overlapping patterns, the whole time playing from memory on historical instruments.

Certainly on this occasion - Tafelmusik's first ever concert in Australia, which fact was marked by including images of the Southern Cross and references to Aboriginal astronomy in the program - the effect was breathtaking and so far removed from the staid, stuffy atmosphere of many classical music concerts as to be in a class of its own.

Of course the Australian Chamber Orchestra has been working along these lines for years - witness projects such as Musica Surfica, Peter and the Wolf with Peter Garrett and the collaborations such as that with photographer Bill Henson and sound artist Paul Healy.

But by working from a premise oriented towards both education and entertainment and by having performed the show entirely from memory countless times throughout Canada and the US, as well as in China, Tafelmusik and Smyth have now achieved a degree of fluency, freedom and coherence that made this performance something very special indeed.

Led from the violin by Tafelmusik's musical director Jeanne Lamon, strings and winds together with harpsichord, baroque guitar and lute painted a musical picture every bit as vivid as the images of planets, stars and galaxies on the screen, their sense of

ensemble and indeed pure delight reinforced rather than impeded by the complicated choreography which even required them to perform in the aisles - a rare treat for those sitting nearby.

Smyth was just as animated and engaging, the mythological tragedy of Phaeton, who insisted on driving the chariot of the sun for a day and nearly destroyed the earth in the process - an early environmental warning - and the sadness of Galileo's persecution and incarceration by the Church superbly related.

So, can one really define art? Maybe not, but you sure know it when you see it. And this was art.

Heavenly music

- by: *PAUL HOPWOOD*
- From: [The Australian](#)
- March 02, 2012 1:06PM
- **Tafelmusik, The Galileo Project**
Perth International Arts Festival, Musica Viva. Perth Concert Hall, March 1

THE Galileo Project, presented by the Canadian baroque chamber orchestra Tafelmusik, was developed by the orchestra's double bass player Alison MacKay to mark the year of astronomy in 2009, the 400th anniversary of the year in which the great Italian astronomer first turned his telescope to the night sky.

In a welcome departure from the traditions of classical music concerts, a wide selection from the music of the 17th and 18th centuries is woven into a story of planets, stars and astronomers presented by genial narrator Shaun Smyth.

The entertaining script is drawn largely from contemporary sources, including extracts from Galileo's diaries and letters by Isaac Newton's assistant.

Throughout the evening beautiful images of the planets, stellar nebulae and distant galaxies are projected from a luminous circular screen behind the performers.

Astoundingly, the entire concert was performed from memory. Unfettered by scores and music stands, like a band of troubadours the 17 musicians were free to move around the stage, even to dance.

Far from being a gimmick, in each case the staging reflected tangible aspects of the music, bringing certain solo voices to the fore and allowing others to occupy the background.

Momentary duets became conversations between players. A chaconne featuring two intertwined solo violins became first a duel then a game of chase. At times the violins left the stage and stood among the audience.

From a musical point of view this was a performance of the highest quality. Perhaps because the music was memorised, the ensemble was exceptionally tight and rhythmically accurate. It is a rare delight to hear an orchestra of period instruments - strings and continuo supplemented by oboes, bassoon, and baroque guitar/lute - played with such subtlety, mastery and commitment.

Music and astronomy were perhaps at their closest near the concert's end, the awesome beauty of J.S. Bach's sinfonia, based on the Lutheran choral tune 'How brightly shines the morning star', perfectly matching the awesome majesty of images of immense clouds of interstellar gas and the birth and death of stars.

Through subtle drama, physical gesture and sheer musicianship, Tafelmusik capture the energy, emotion and joyful spirit of the baroque. These are concerts not to be missed.

Focusing on heavenly bodies

Tafelmusik over the moon to be touring, Janet Wilson writes.

The phrase "music of the spheres" conjures up something mystical, beyond the comprehension of earthbound creatures. But, in fact, *musica universalis* is an old philosophical concept concerning proportions in the movements of celestial bodies, not something actually audible, but a harmonic or mathematical concept. From the time of the Greek mathematician Pythagoras and the philosopher Plato, theories about the movement of heavenly bodies have been propounded.

Before 1514, Copernicus developed his theory that the sun was the centre of our solar system and that the planets revolved around it, a heretical idea, according to the Catholic Church, but one that Galileo Galilei later embraced. In 1627, the German astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler had published his *Rudolphine Tables*, containing calculations of planetary orbits, and in 1632 Galileo published his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*.

The consequences of this event form the story told in a fascinating program to be presented by the Canadian baroque ensemble Tafelmusik at Llewellyn Hall on March 8 as part of Musica Viva's 2012 series of concerts.

Advertisement: Story continues below

Tafelmusik violinist Cristina Zacharias spoke to me about this exciting piece of theatre.

"One of our wonderful subscribers, John Percy, is an astronomer and he approached our bassist, Alison Mackay, to float the idea for us to do a concert in honour of Galileo because some of the music in our repertoire – Monteverdi and Merula – comes from the time of Galileo," she says. "Percy thought it was a natural connection to make and it got Alison's wheels turning."

Mackay then created the program in co-production with the Banff Centre, with stage direction by Marshall Pynkoski and production design by Glenn Davidson, to celebrate the International Year of Astronomy in 2009.

Since then the production has toured to China, Malaysia, Mexico, US and Canada. Now Tafelmusik is making its first tour to Australia, bringing The Galileo Project to Perth, Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane and Canberra.

Not only will the audience hear the wonderful music of baroque composers played on authentic instruments by the ensemble, but the performance will take place in front of a specially built set onto which spellbinding images, mainly from the Hubble Space

Station telescope, will be projected. The engaging story will be narrated by actor Shaun Smyth.

"It's a beautiful set," Zacharias says. "You almost feel as though you're actually looking through a telescope.

"The images used are almost all photos. There are a few animated images but most of them are from the Hubble telescope, although there are some very beautiful images taken from the ground."

As well as music by Merula and Monteverdi, there will be works by Rameau, Handel, Zelenka and Bach, "and actually one small movement by Telemann and a little bit of Vivaldi," Zacharias says, "altogether about 15 short pieces that Alison Mackay has pulled from different times and different European countries during the baroque period and that suited the program perfectly.

"In the case of the strings, most of us play original instruments. Violins tend to last a long time but the wind players are all playing modern day creations based on instruments that did exist. My violin is from 1776. It's a Kloz, an original German violin from a town near the Italian border."

The core ensemble, including violins, violas, cellos, a bass, a harpsichord and two oboes, consists of 17 musicians, "and we'll all be there," Zacharias says enthusiastically.

Tafelmusik's busy performing calendar includes about 50 concerts a year in Toronto as part of a home subscription series and anything from five to 10 weeks a year touring. There are education and artist training activities (which will be part of the Australian tour as well) and a longstanding partnership with a baroque opera company in Toronto, Opera Atelier. "We perform two baroque operas every year with them," Zacharias says.

Recording is also a big part of the ensemble's musical life.

"I believe the most recent recording we did was our 76th," Zacharias says. "That's been a very important part of our artistic output and creating Tafelmusik as who we are today, because when you're in recording sessions it really distils what you're trying to do so clearly when you have the mikes on and you really want to get it just right. Just a few weeks ago we launched our own record label, Tafelmusik Media. We'll have both CDs and DVDs, including one of *The Galileo Project*, for sale at our Australian concerts."

This unique concert comes to Canberra just at the time when the outstanding exhibition, Handwritten, from the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, in which sections of original manuscripts by Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo can be viewed at the National Library.

Tafelmusik The Galileo Project: Concert review

THERE can't be many music groups with an asteroid named after them, but there aren't too many bands, either, like Canada's greatly-acclaimed Baroque and early music specialists Tafelmusik.

Ten years in the making and more of an event than a concert, Musica Viva's 2012 season opener hit heady heights with their performance of the Galileo Project, incorporating a celestial slideshow of more than 70 astounding images of planets and stars.

The project, linking the Italian scientist's life and work with the music of his time through a cleverly-scripted narrative, was devised by Tafelmusik's double bass player Alison Mackay in 2009 to mark the 400th anniversary of the invention of Galileo Galilei's telescope.

It is not commonly known that the great man's father was a composer and lutenist and one of the most respected musicologists of the 16th century. Galileo himself played the lute and counted Claudio Monteverdi among his friends.

Actor Shaun Smyth read excerpts from letters and transcripts of Galileo's trial when he was denounced for heresy. Also woven into the program were the lives of two other great figures in astronomy - Isaac Newton and Johannes Kepler, whose theory that the planets "sing" led him to notate each of their tunes.

These were adroitly worked into Bach's *How brightly shines the morning star* and the Sinfonia from the cantata *We thank you, God, we thank you* which closed the evening.

Before that, unhindered by music stands and performing an 80-minute program from memory, the group was free to wander in an intricately choreographed routine, at times orbiting the stage like the planets projected on the screen behind them, at others fanning out into the auditorium.

Under their music director of 30 years Jeanne Lamon, the 17 musicians took the audience through some glorious slices of Vivaldi, Lully, Rameau, Monteverdi, Purcell, Handel and Telemann - along with some of their lesser known contemporaries.

All of this was neatly held together by the versatile Smyth with excerpts from Shakespeare and, on a lighter note, an amusing anonymous astronomical drinking song which foreshadowed Monty Python's *Philosophers Song* by 200 years.

The project has been performed all over the world and Tafelmusik added a southern hemisphere element to this tour with a beautiful extract from the Dreamtime, *Emu dreaming*, which showed how the Aboriginal people were able to track the transit of Venus.

Spirited delight of ancient analogy between music and cosmos

City Recital Hall, March 5

The towering figures behind this concert were Galileo Galilei, the great astronomer persecuted by the Inquisition for speaking beautiful truths about planetary motion, and Isaac Newton, who evolved eternal laws of motion from those truths.

Around animated readings by actor Shaun Smyth from these pillars of discovery, Tafelmusik, with director Jeanne Lamon, offered musical tributes, impressively playing the entire program from memory, and moving around the hall like attendant spirits. Only Bach's appearance at the end, with the chorale setting and sinfonia *Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern*, placed the music on the level of these giants.

The rest, appropriately enough, was in the spirit of tablemusic, played with engaging spirit and fluency. Buoyancy and natural musical ease was the defining impression of the evening, even when intonation frayed towards the end of the performance.

That buoyancy erupted like a starburst at the start in two movements from Vivaldi's Concerto for 2 violins in A major, opus 3, no. 5. Lully's opera *Phaeton*, after Ovid, warns of over-reaching astronomical ambition when the young son of Apollo takes dad's celestial chariot for a spin, and music by Monteverdi, Merula and Marini was interspersed with descriptions of Galileo's house arrest. The solace he took from playing the lute was captured with expressive freedom in an affective performance by lutenist Lucas Harris of a piece by Michelangelo Galilei.

The second half recreated parts of a spectacular Baroque extravagance, a month-long festival of the planets commemorating a royal wedding in Dresden in 1719 in which music by Handel, Telemann, Zelenka, Rameau and Lully (by then dead) played a part.

A century earlier, the German astronomer Kepler had revived the ancient concept of the harmony of the spheres, which draws analogy between planetary motion and the ratios of musical intervals.

Tafelmusik's performance of the Bach chorale tellingly intersplined Kepler's fanciful intervals for each of the known planets (depressed by the miseries of the Thirty Years War, Kepler gave Earth a mournful semitone).

Today it is easy to find the ancient analogy between music and the cosmos naive. This concert endowed it again with spirited delight and wonder.

This concert is repeated on Saturday at 2pm at City Recital Hall, Angel Place

Tafelmusik's Australian tour reaches halfway point

It's hard to believe that Tafelmusik's Australian tour is already half-way through. Having already performed in Perth, Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra there are still concerts in Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane to come.



Alison Mackay and Jeanne Lamon with Professor Ray Norris at an Amadeus Society function

The tour has been a busy one. As well as their public concerts orchestra members have appeared on Andrew Ford's The Music Show on ABC Radio National, and chatted to Marie Nicolson, Christopher Lawrence and Margaret Throsby on various ABC Classic FM programs. Emma Ayres even declared that Tafelmusik are not allowed to leave Australia as they're just too good. If Tafelmusik's blog is anything to go by the musicians certainly seem to be enjoying their tour and are making an effort to see the sights and try local restaurants, so perhaps we could win them around to this idea yet.



Members of Tafelmusik at Fremantle's Little Creatures Brewery

Members of Tafelmusik have also spared time to give a private performance for Musica Viva's Amadeus society, generously supporting this tour, and meet with some of our corporate sponsors, as well as participating in pre-concert talks and post-concert Meet the Artist question and answer sessions. All in all, a busy but, we hope, rewarding tour!

Tafelmusik anyone?

Tafelmusik = table (or banquet) music, and has been used since the mid-16th century for music played at feasts and banquets.

AND ...

Tafelmusik = a Canadian Baroque orchestra specialising in early music, performed on period instruments.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE ...

197856 Tafelmusik = an asteroid discovered in 2004 and named for the orchestra.

You learn something new every day, don't you? But why am I sharing this particular learning of mine? Well, because this week we attended our first Musica Viva subscription concert of the year and it happened to be *The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres*, created and performed by Tafelmusik. It's been some time since I wrote about a music concert. As I've said before, I love music but am no expert. This concert, though, was one-of-a-kind and I can't resist sharing it with you, Whispering Gums style.

Baroque music was my first "classical*" music love – and so I was predisposed to enjoy this concert but I wasn't expecting to enjoy it quite as much as I did. The concert was a musical performance *something like* we've seen before with groups like The Song Company (and their *Venetian Carnival*). *The Galileo Project* was performed by 17 musicians and an actor. It incorporated music (of course), visual images, narration and movement. And, unusually for ensembles, the whole program was performed from memory. If there were any hiccoughs I didn't hear them.

So, why Galileo? Through the program and post-concert Q&A, we learnt that *The Galileo Project* was Tafelmusik's contribution to the International Year of Astronomy in 2009, which was the 400th anniversary of Galileo's use of the astronomical telescope. We were told that Canadian astronomers had a goal for 2009: that every Canadian would get to look at the stars through a telescope! I don't think they quite achieved that, but it never hurts to aim high.

Anyhow, the program. It was divided into sections:

- The Harmony of the Spheres I (Vivaldi)
- Music from *Phaeton* (Lully)
- Music from the Time of Galileo (Monteverdi, Merula, Galilei, Marini)
- Henry Purcell

- The Dresden Festival of the Planets (Rameau, Handel, Telemann, Zelenka, Lully, Weiss)
- The Harmony of the Spheres II (Bach)

The music was linked by a narration drawn from contemporary writings (by Shakespeare, astronomers/scientists – who also included Newton and Kepler – and musicians) exploring the relationship between science, mathematics and music. Galileo’s father, Vincenzo Galilei, was a lutenist. One of his interests was testing lute strings to find “the mathematical formulas that express the relationships among length, tension and musical pitch” (program notes). Galileo himself was also a lute player, as well as a mathematics teacher and astronomer.

The concert program contains extensive notes on how astronomy and music intersected during the period, including:

- the 1719 Festival of the Planets, which was a month-long event comprising operas, balls, outdoor events and special concerts designed to commemorate each of the known planets of the time – Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn**. Handel, Telemann and other musicians were involved in the Festival.
- Johannes Kepler’s *Harmonices Mundi* (Harmony of the World) in which he outlined his theory regarding harmonies (musical intervals and short melodies) that can be derived from planetary motion using mathematical formulae. The orchestra played some of these tunes from the planets.

Meanwhile, I’ll just dot point my highlights of the concert:

- the engaging rapport between the members of the ensemble. They clearly know each other well and enjoy playing together. That, or they are good actors!
- the gorgeous sound. Llewellyn Hall *should* have good acoustics but I have never noticed quite how beautiful the sound is until this concert. It was warm and lush but also oh-so clear.
- perfection that wasn’t cold and technical. They played from memory, they “orbited” or otherwise moved around the stage – and the hall – as they played their violins and oboes (which was impressive in itself but also enhanced our experience of the sound), and they made it feel spontaneous.
- the sensitive incorporation into the narration of an indigenous Australian story about tracking Venus, from the Yolngu people.
- beautiful, varied pieces of music played on authentic instruments.

We were told last year that if we only came to one Musica Viva concert in 2012, this should be it. We have, as usual, subscribed for the year, and we plan to attend them all, but this was a concert to remember. We hope Tafelmusik comes back.

* Using “classical” in its generic, not specific, meaning.

** Did you know that Uranus was discovered in 1781 by Sir William Herschel who was an oboist, organist, composer and amateur astronomer?

Tafelmusik's Australian tour nears its end

Tafelmusik performs the last concert of their Australian tour in Brisbane tonight, before heading off to New Zealand tomorrow for a performance at the New Zealand International Arts Festivals.

With a typical day consisting of a flight in the morning, rehearsal in the afternoon and performance in the evening we're pleased (if not a little amazed!) that the musicians have managed to squeeze in time to see the local sights. Tafelmusik's blog has lots more stories and photos of the group's tour "Down Under", including trips to parks, galleries, restaurants, and even a performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* at Sydney Opera House!

Three weeks away from home can seem like a long time but we're so glad Tafelmusik has been able to share their wonderful *Galileo Project* with Australian audiences. As has been noted elsewhere, bringing this ensemble to Australia has been a long time in the making and we're very grateful to the supporters both in Australia and Canada who have helped make this possible. We wish Tafelmusik safe travels to New Zealand and onwards to home.

Review: Music of the Spheres connects art and science

It seems strange that our knowledge of the world and our place in the cosmos is largely based on what has been observed of the heavens at night. Until we were able to observe the universe through a telescope we were flawed in our knowledge.

It was through the studies of individuals such as Galileo that we were forced to change our view of the world and our place in it. The Earth was no longer at the centre of the universe, the dead could no longer ascend into heavens and there was no Zeus or Apollo out there

Tafelmusik's The Galileo Project: Music of the Spheres was conceived as a celebration of the work of Galileo for the International Year of Astronomy in 2009 and brings together science and art to show the links between astronomy, music and the mathematical harmonies of the universe

The company creates an extraordinary production which uses a combination of music, astronomy, theatre, photography, video, mythology, literature and history to build a picture of the growth of music and astronomy in the 17th and 18th centuries

So we trace the history of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Kepler along with the music of a number of composers including Monteverdi, Vivaldi, Lully, Rameau and Bach.

While the orchestra plays there is a changing series of images are projected on a circular screen above the orchestra. These are all related to astronomy, including Galileo's drawings, images of the night sky and recent Hubble telescope images.

On stage between the various musical works Shaun Smyth narrated the history of modern astronomy starting with Galileo's experiments, his trial as a heretic and his legacy which was carried on by scientists such as Newton.

While this account is entertaining and cleverly presented it is the orchestra which shines. Composed of seventeen players they are all brilliant soloists in their own right. Together they are a stellar act.

Their performance is not your regular musical group like I Musici. These players rarely sit, they have no music stands and are on the move a lot of times even coming into the auditorium to play in the aisles.

They gave the early and baroque music a new sense of liveliness and meaning with their unusual playing. Much of the time the players were in groups of two or three, engaged in musical conversations which brought out the musical themes and structures.

They looked more like a cabaret group of fiddlers jamming together, smiling at the musical jokes, competing with each other for bravura performances or the classiest technique

The two cellists in the centre of the stage appeared to have their own, often private conversation with the cerebral, wry Allen Whear dueling with the more emotional, watchful Christine Mahler.

On a couple of occasion twelve of the players promenaded in a circle around the stage, replicated the movements of the planets, the cogs on a clock and the passing of the seasons.

When they played music by Lully from his opera Phaeton, Shaun Smyth told the story of the young man driving the chariot too fast and falling from the heavens as a comet. This was accompanied by a series of images which were remarkably like the recent dystopian film "Melancholia" in which a planet collides with Earth.

There was the occasional delightful solo with Lucas Harris giving a poignant performance of Michelangelo Galilei's (Galileo's nephew) Toccata for Solo Lute. There were also some great duos including one where a couple of violinists carried on like a classical courting couple.

Each of the players displayed an individual temperament and playing style which gave the concert a real sense of dynamism and engagement.

Musica Viva's chief executive officer Mary Jo Capps said it had taken 10 years to get Tafelmusik over to Australia.

The wait was well worth the while.

The concert will be repeated at City Recital Hall Angel Place on Saturday, March 10 at 2pm.