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SCRUTINY | Tafelmusik's Safe Haven Entertains, Informs And Delights With Music, Story And Visuals

By John Terauds on January 19, 2018



Photo by Jeff Higgins

Safe Haven, presented by Tafelmusik Orchestra and Guests. Trinity-St Paul's Centre. January 18, 2018. Repeats to January 21, plus January 23 at George Weston Recital Hall.

Tafelmusik Orchestra has emerged in recent years as not just a purveyor of good concerts, but a weaver of fascinating stories that edify and educate as well as entertain. One of their best is also their newest creation, *Safe Haven*, which had its premiere at Jeanne Lamon Hall, Trinity St Paul's Centre, on January 18.

It is a multimedia show, using the period-instrument orchestra, three guests, narration and video projections. Its subject is refugees and how they have improved and enriched every society and culture that has welcomed them over the past four centuries.

What could be a mishmash of ideas, or a sledgehammer swinging at us with a heavy political or emotional message, turns out to be a lively eyeopener on history as well as music. Bassist Alison Mackay's brainchild is a jewel box of shiny, enticing treasures that unfold seamlessly over two hours (including intermission).

Since this is Tafelmusik, let's start with the performances, led by new music director Elisa Citterio. Digging deeply into the repertoire of the 17th and 18th centuries, we heard French, English, Deutch, German and Italian music that somehow reflected the story of how migrants and refugees influenced the culture in each country.

For example, we heard the Sinfonia from *Cantata 156*, which shows off the oboe, imported to Germany by Protestant members of King Louis XIVth's court orchestra, who were forced out by the Roman Catholic monarch. We heard how the ever-inventive Georg Philipp Telemann was influenced by Roma musicians forced north into Poland and Prussia.

And we witnessed an electrifying performance of "Winter" from Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, with Citterio showing off her remarkable bow technique as the soloist. The paper that Vivaldi's work was printed on came from a Protestant ex-pat Frenchman in London. It was the same Venetian paper that supplied scribes around the world, including Africa.

(We even had the pleasure of seeing former music director Jeanne Lamon on stage again. She was filling in for violinist Patricia Ahern, who had slipped on a patch of ice the day before and fractured her wrist. I asked worriedly about her condition and was assured that it is a relatively simple fracture that doctors expect will heal within about six weeks.)

The musical pleasures intensified further with the help of Malian expat musician Diely Mori Tounkara, who demonstrated the wonders of the *kora*, a 21-stringed instrument held in the lap, resembling a cross between a lute and a harp. Also on stage were vocalist (and the evening's narrator) Maryem Tollar and Iranian-born percussionist Nagmeh Farahmand.

Each of the three guests had a chance to show off their instruments and talents in solo pieces. Then they joined the orchestra in an improvisatory way to create an enchanting hybrid sound. It was the best kind of cultural fusion at work, right before our eyes.

That is the very essence of what cultural life in Toronto should look like at the beginning of the 21st century.

The narrative, which included the influence of slaves forcibly displaced to new lands, contained numerous, “did you know?” moments that helped bring home the point that refugees have been with us for hundreds of years, thanks to the bad decisions of silly rulers. It also reassured us that what we might initially fear as strange, foreign or even threatening, in reality, broadens our perspectives and open our hearts to new passions and loves.

It’s crazy to think that one concert could achieve so much. But it does.

Leaving the event with a smile on your face is pretty much guaranteed.