

# Definitely the Opera

I have seen the future of the baroque concert, and it is programmed by Alison Mackay.



*Safe Haven / Tafelmusik. Photo by Jeff Higgins*

January 21, 2018

I've read good things about Tafelmusik's multi-media, through-themed concerts, but did not know how special they are until I finally went to one this Friday. *Safe Haven*, programmed again by Tafelmusik's double-bassist Alison Mackay, takes on the theme of refugees and immigration this time. Pitfalls are many around the topic – sentimentality, didacticism, forced parallels, the idea that it's incumbent upon art to fix historical injustices – but they were masterfully avoided. The multi- in its multi-media nature came from the video and lights (Raha Javanfar,

projections & Glenn Davidson, lighting) and spoken text (researched and written by Mackay), with musical pieces tailored in.

Mackay spins the main thematic thread across the countries and continents while also remaining faithful to the orchestra's preferred musical era, roughly the baroque style era between Lully on the one end (d. 1687) and Vivaldi (d. 1741) on the other. An extraordinary number of composers are on the program, many more than can be heard during regular Tafelmusik concerts because in most cases, single movements are played rather than the pieces in entirety. (And why not; didn't, as Lydia Goehr argues, the 'musical work' as we understand it today emerge at around 1800 with Beethoven?) There are a few forays into our own time and among our contemporaries. A photo or two early on (the US-Canadian border crossing under snow, say), a recurring quote ("no one puts their children in a boat / unless the water is safer than the land", the verse by Warsan Shire, young Somali-British poet), and at the very end the true story of a Newfoundlander who rescued a boat full of Tamil refugees thirty years ago.

The program itself is knitted into an almost narrative, pieces of music woven into the historical episodes described, often directly tied to the specific people named. The Huguenots had to leave France for England for reasons of religious persecution, the Jews had to leave Spain for The Netherlands, Catholics had to leave England and Scotland for Poland, the Roma had to keep moving through Europe even then, and all the while the slave trade is happening across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Africa is here important part of the narrative and is given voice in the musical program, with Diely Mori Tounkara's solos on the multi-string plucked instrument from Mali called *kora*, which sounds a bit like a love child between cello and harp. Plus, the knockout lady percussionist Naghmeh Farahmand added beat to some of the western pieces, and absolutely blew the roof off with her solo on the Iranian daf.

Reading the script was the singer Maryem Tollar. She also sang the two vocal pieces on the program, "Or sus, serviteurs du seigneurs" by Goudimel and Bourgeois in old French and "A la salida de Lisboa" in Portuguese. The voice is non-operatic, which is exactly what was needed in the context – she naturally switched from the speaking mode to singing as a cabaret mezzo. It was simple, and intimate, and right. The

only thing that perhaps wasn't ideal is that during the reading segments she would overemphasize most of the adjectives and add dramatic enunciation to her words where this wasn't called for. But not too big a deal, ultimately — and not everybody is a trained actor, *c'est pas grave*. She aptly navigated the microphones, the bows, the chairs and the other musicians—the narrator moves around a lot—and also played the tambourine in the final number with everybody taking part.

Which was Corelli's legendary **Allegro** from Concerto grosso in D Major, except rearranged as a jam session between the instruments of the west, east and south with the percussion coming in loud and clear (Toller and Farahmand). A total burst of joy, ear-to-ear-grin ending to an emotional evening that was poignant and playful in turns and so smartly plotted out.

There's one more performance left — at the big hall of the Toronto Centre for the Arts on Tuesday, January 23. Unmissable.