

MUSIC

Tafelmusik takes inspiration from an 18th-century Roman party host in *The Harlequin Salon*

By [John Terauds](#) Special to the Star
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Insomnia is a curse, unless you can get creative inspiration in those endless dark hours.

Oboist Marco Cera was on tour in China with Toronto's Tafelmusik Orchestra a couple of years ago. During a jet-lagged, sleepless night, he had a thought to put together a soirée about musical society in Rome at the start of the 18th century.

That idea is now ready to be presented as a full program by Tafelmusik, titled *The Harlequin Salon*. It runs Jan. 16 to 20 at Trinity-St Paul's Centre.

“While in Italy, I had seen a book by a caricaturist,” Cera recalls. It was the work of Pier Leone Ghezzi (1674-1755), a painter for the Vatican who enjoyed making quick sketches at home.

Ghezzi lived in a palazzo. He loved to entertain and he loved music. This meant that all of the great composers and performers of the day were invited to come to one of his home concerts while in Rome.

These days, hosts post a quick selfie with their famous guests. Ghezzi would create an ink sketch. The little artworks, which became known as caricatures, were must-have souvenirs. You were a nobody in Roman society if you hadn't been caricatured by Ghezzi.

“These sketches contain a wealth of information about how people dressed, about the instruments and posture,” says Cera, who also happens to be an accomplished visual artist.

Unlike most Tafelmusik programs, *The Harlequin Salon* also features some theatre inspired by Italian *commedia dell'arte* as well as video projections to accompany the music.

The program intersperses Baroque chamber music by Antonio Vivaldi and his contemporaries with opera arias by Nicola Porpora, Leonardo Vinci and Giovanni Battista Pergolesi.

And because opera was a big part of musical life in Rome, it includes the Toronto debut of soprano Roberta Invernizzi. She is a dazzling, veteran interpreter of Italian Baroque opera.

Cera reminds us that women were forbidden from singing opera in public in Italy at the time. Private concerts were the only place they could shine. Faustina Bordoni, the great soprano of the day, was the subject of one of Ghezzi's caricatures and was recently commemorated in an album that Invernizzi recorded in Italy.

There is a crack team of theatre professionals helping Tafelmusik out with *The Harlequin Salon*. This includes actor Dino Gonçalves, who is playing the slapstick role of Harlequin.

"In his memoir, Ghezzi talks a lot about his servants causing trouble and stealing instruments," Cera explains. "I decided to connect this with Arlecchino." This stock character from earlier Italian theatre is a playful troublemaker. Harlequin weaves himself into the show through short comedic sketches known in the genre as *lazzi*.

The show has been a labour of love for Cera for the better part of a year. "Now we have to put it all together in one week," he smiles. The oboist will be onstage to play his instrument, of course, but he will do so dressed as Ghezzi, the evening's host.

"I will also be sketching live onstage," he says, trying to capture the moment just as it would have happened in Rome 300 years ago.

And thanks to nights of insomnia, Cera has also had plenty of opportunity to practise his caricature skills with a pen.

See tafelmusik.org for more information on *The Harlequin Salon*.