

# TAFELMUSIK

Elisa Citterio, Music Director

Blair Williams, Narrator / Actor

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By Morgan Luethe

For around forty years, Tafelmusik has been recognized as a renowned institution of Canadian music-making, with performances of theirs being the highlight of many a concert season in this country. Once again, the group made this clear in their latest appearance in Edmonton which brought the inextinguishable music of J.S. Bach to a grateful audience. At the beginning of what's proved to be the harshest sustained cold snap of the winter season, Tafelmusik's program brought some much-needed warmth and satisfaction into the venue. This is the second time in a few years that the ECMS has managed to bring Tafelmusik's highly engaging artistry to our local stage and, with such a consistently high caliber of performance, we can happily expect the group's many returns in the future.

The night's program, which could be accurately described as a 'Bach buffet' featured a wide range of the master's works variously for solo instruments and chamber ensemble as well as chorus and orchestra. The evening's selections were well-balanced in their orientation as well, drawing from equally important sacred and secular sides of Bach's output. Tafelmusik opened the concert with the rambunctious *Sinfonia* of the Cantata 249a, also known as the *Oster-Oratorium (Easter Oratorio)*. Similar in tone and pace to the sky-tearing chorus of the better-known *Weihnachts-Oratorium (Christmas Oratorio)*, this movement bears all the edifying hallmarks of the triumphal side of Bach's religious music; exuberant trumpets over busy accompanying string lines, each holding their own in a rollicking, upbeat tempo. For contrast, an arrangement of the opening *Adagio* from the Sonata BWV 1005 followed with its poignant and profound strains. As a listener, this juxtaposition of the respective 'public' and 'intimate' natures of these two pieces lighted upon the real greatness present Bach's unmatched way of awing under all instrumental guises. If the orchestral forces of the preceding *Sinfonia* had been powerful in its unbridled enthusiasm, the opening movement of this work (originally composed for solo violin) was no less arresting – perhaps even more so.

The music that followed adhered to a similar pattern of balance between more introverted selections for soloists or small groups of instrumentalists, and bits of larger orchestral works of which the inexhaustibly fresh third *Brandenburg Concerto* (BWV 1048) was featured, sandwiching between its two movements an adapted *Adagio* borrowed from "*Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten*". By the halfway point of the night's performance, it was clear that Tafelmusik had gone to careful lengths to make the most of a concert program devoted entirely to the music of a composer who lays claim not just to a sprawling musical output, but to *bona fide* masterpieces across each of the genres in which he dealt, as well. It speaks to this group's knowledge and expertise regarding Bach's music, that such a compelling programmatic structure was assembled out of such a wealth of material without straying too far in any one direction of his oeuvre.

As has been the format of Tafelmusik performances in recent years, the music performed is meant to illustrate an overarching narrative (revealed by an orator in between selections) and vice-versa. At their last Edmonton appearance, Tafelmusik utilized a multimedia approach to building a story throughout the program and it was effective; no doubt realizing the engagement potential in contextualizing the

music in this way, the same concert format made this evening special also. In between selections biographical anecdotes of Bach were given which not only served to add depth and narrative colour to the music they were couched in. Likewise, listener appreciation for the music itself was heightened by these efforts. A background slideshow revealed aspects of not only of Bach's own life, but of life in the high Baroque period in general, giving special insight into the societal and technological pulse of the period. Such an immersion highlights a compelling human aspect to Bach's music and grounds it, in a way; while the works themselves are stratospheric and borne out of a genius mind that soars far beyond means of measurement (no doubt), the visual and narrative aspects of the show served to remind the audience that, like everyone else, Bach dealt with the mundane aspects of daily living also. Given the relative toil and difficulty of life in general at that time, it's all the more miraculous that Bach's output is not only so expansive, but consistently the work of a master craftsman. Audiences benefit from this sort of all-encompassing experience. Having actively sought out concerts given by other period performance ensembles it's interesting that Tafelmusik, in my experience, has been the only group of artists so far who embrace this multifaceted approach to an evening. The orchestra has pulled this off successfully in previous concert series and continues to do so, reflecting their interest in educating their audience and offering an expertly woven concert storyline to further enliven the music they present.

In the second half, similarly varied selections of music continued to plot Tafelmusik's great Bach survey, beginning with an arrangement of some of the composer's most familiar music, the serene soprano aria "*Schafe können sicher weiden*" from Cantata 208/9. Special highlights from this part of the night included the hearty red-blooded *Gavotte* from the *Orchestral Suite* BWV 1068, as well as an adaptation of the famous aria and some choice variations taken *Goldberg* set. As a pianist, this work, in whatever form it takes (since it lends itself so easily to a wide range of interpretation and original orchestration) has always resonated with me, as it has with many listeners both musical and otherwise. Noting this, it was especially enticing to hear two instances of Bach's own quasi-variations *on* the opening notes of the *Goldberg* theme itself (BWV 1087, 1087/13), evidence enough that the composer himself recognized this material as being of significant creative potential.

Rounding out the evening's features was a return to music drawn from the (arguably) most significant part of Bach's output, the sacred. Following another brilliantly adapted movement from one of the cantatas (props to Alison Mackay for the solid transcription work throughout the program) the concert was brought full circle, closing with a *Sinfonia* based on the opening movement of the Cantata BWV 11/1. A sturdy note to end an evening of solid music-making presented for an Edmonton audience via Tafelmusik's unfailing performance expertise and genuine devotion to (let's face it) the Baroque period's most important composer. The group shows no sign of wear; their concerts are always intelligently planned and originally conveyed, and this has translated into a well-deserved staying power that, in turn, hopefully means more country-wide tours in the future. Edmonton will be glad to hear them again the next time 'round.