

BAROQUE

Ensemble brings lots to the tafel

by Alex Browne

Arts Reporter

Tafelmusik has been described as a national treasure—and rightly so. There is a rightness about the approach of this Canadian ensemble to music of the Baroque period, which stops this side of gimmickry in trying to recreate performance practices of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Whether it's fair or not to other practitioners, Tafelmusik manages to make sense of the music in a way that transcends love of pattern for pattern's sake—and tends to spoil one for other ensembles' performances of Baroque repertoire.

It's an approach that again wooed and won subscribers of White Rock Concerts series, treated to a dessert tray of Baroque confections Oct. 29 at White Rock Baptist Church.

Believers in 'serious music' and those who hold that a gold standard of surface polish and precision must be applied to works by Handel, Vivaldi, Bach and Telemann, may decry Tafelmusik's sometimes eccentric, always endearing interpretations. But, then, the rarified air

of the conservatory has always been at risk of making its own stylized, highly technical creation of the material; not unlike the excesses of zeal in competitive ballroom versions of the waltz, which suggest automations rather than breathing dancers responding to music.

At the root of Baroque music are works created by flesh-and-blood people for other flesh-and-blood people—and the realization that this is what makes Tafelmusik stand out as a Baroque orchestra.

One of the greatest earmarks of the group, aside from using actual period instruments (or meticulous recreations) has been an insistence on lower tunings authentic to the period, rather than standard tunings of the modern concert hall.

Tafelmusik has replaced the literally taut brilliance of the modern string orchestra with a mellow funkiness, deep bass sonorities and awareness of rhythm (as opposed to simply metre) that suggests that, yes, this just might have been a pop music of its own day and age.

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ENTERTAINMENT

Ensemble delivers precision

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Which is not to say there is anything sloppy about the performances shaped by Tafelmusik's inspired director and principle violinist, Jeanne Lamouche—as a

disciplined *Concerto grosso in B-flat Major* by Handel demonstrated.

But as well as precision, the ensemble offered a *vivace* full of interesting textures, including the solo tone of violinist Linda Melsted, a *largo* of exquisite grace and sombreness highlighted by the expressive oboe of John Abberger, an *allegro* in which contrapuntal lines were woven a fine and seamless whole, a *vivace* with a sense of courtly dance and a sprightly concluding *allegro* notable for the cohesion of the strings.

Vivaldi's *Concerto for violin in F Major* took greater risks. The success of Tafelmusik's interpretation of the piece (popularly known as *Fall* from the *Four Seasons*) was largely a matter of taste—taking Vivaldi's own descrip-



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Browne's Tone

tive sonnets to heart, Lamouche presented Melsted's violin thoroughly in the role of tippy guest at a harvest celebration, a solo that, while well-achieved, almost bordered on a vaudeville turn.

Compensating somewhat, the succeeding *adagio* made the most of Vivaldi's soft violin passages and diminished harmonies, bringing a delicious quality of creepiness to the piece.

Tafelmusik's felicitous touch in backgrounds also buoyed Dominic Teresi's busy, percussive solo in another

Vivaldi showcase, *Concerto for bassoon in A minor*. The ensemble created a seductive rhythm in the opening *adagio*, indicative of Tafelmusik's understanding of the material as popular music.

The orchestra's version of Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3* made much of the composer's gimmick of throwing musical snippets from instrument to instrument and section to section, but more important to me was how nimble and airy the concluding *allegro* was, and how such furious bowing could be accomplished with such lightness of touch.

We are fortunate, indeed, music of this calibre is presented regularly on the Peninsula by White Rock Concerts.

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