

MUSICAL TORONTO

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Tafelmusik and Vesuvius Ensemble blur lines between folk and art music

Simplicity is a virtue in concert programming, but Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra and Ensemble Vesuvius proved to an enthusiastic crowd at Trinity-St Paul's Centre on Thursday night that even an impossibly complicated concert can exceed its component parts with the right chemistry. The successful alchemy in question was a fusion of art and folk music from Naples and its environs. Tafelmusik focused on the city's most famous Baroque instrumental and opera composers — people like Alessandro Scarlatti, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi and Leonardo Vinci.



Toronto's two-year-old Vesuvius Ensemble brought the folk component, distilled from several centuries of song from a tradition that is still alive and thriving in the shadow of Mt Vesuvius. So many people make a point of drawing distinctions between the formal nature of art music and the informal, frequently unwritten and improvised traditions of folksong. But, as the layers of Thursday night's programme unfolded, it quickly became clear how close the ties between these two very different Neapolitan traditions are.

Much credit needs to go to the people who planned this programme, which came with 12 full pages of translations and notes, but was delivered with no spoken introductions from the stage. The quality of the performances was so good, and the performers themselves so committed to their respective arts, that the details paled next to the pleasure of experiencing their art. It was particularly heartening to see members of Tafelmusik crossing over to the folk side, participating in the cross-section of folksongs with a lineage that leads clearly to the 19th century Neapolitan songs made world-famous by several generations of Italian singers. Tafelmusik violinist Christopher Verrette, at one point, turned himself into a folk fiddler. At another, the whole orchestra joined in on a classic call-and-response ballad. The Baroque specialists, under the leadership of violinist Jeanne Lamon, did a fine job with their art music, introducing the audience to the less-known charms of Naples-based composers like Gian Carlo Cailò (1659-1722) and Francesco Durante (1684-1755).

Vesuvius Ensemble, fronted by charismatic Neapolitan-raised (now Toronto-based) tenor Francesco Pellegrino and backed up by lute master Lucas Harris and multi-instrumentalists Marco Cera and Ben Grossmann, packed all the natural ease of an Early Music consort, bonding the audience from their first, improvised song. This programme, much of it made up of music that may not have been heard in concert in this city before, is utterly beguiling, and will make more than one person wonder why everyone can't make the crossover between art and folk look so effortless.