

Tafelmusik's performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony reminds me why I fell in love with music in the first place

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- Conductor Bruno Weil
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We critics are supposed to criticize – that's our job. But on Sunday afternoon, I found myself unable to complete my critic's task, because too many tears were dampening my face. Every so often, you come across a performance that renders you powerless to resist, that sweeps you away with it, that reminds you of why you fell in love with music in the first place.

Such a performance was Tafelmusik's *Ninth Symphony* of Beethoven, presented this weekend at Toronto's Koerner Hall. Under the masterful direction of conductor Bruno Weil, with a stellar group of soloists and the impeccable Tafelmusik Chamber Choir, an ultra-familiar masterpiece came to life as though for the first time, spilling its powerful magic throughout the hall.

A hundred years separate the *St. Matthew Passion* of Bach (Tafelmusik's more usual fare) and Beethoven's *Ninth*, a hundred years in which the political and moral and spiritual life of Europe underwent a profound revolution. The intense, internal, but stable world of Bach's deeply felt Christianity gave rise a century later to a dynamic, rootless world, constantly in motion, but searching nonetheless for truth and harmony. Beethoven's *Ninth*, with an arc that begins with the chaos of Genesis and a conclusion in the *Ode to Joy*, is, in the end, a profoundly religious work. It is Beethoven's *Messiah*. It just celebrates a different Supreme Being than Handel's, a God that is more universal.

Perhaps the substantial religious nature of the *Ninth* is why Tafelmusik's Baroque-era band did it such justice. The orchestra was more than just in good form. It was committed to the music and to the performance in an almost superhuman way. We always talk about an orchestra playing as one person, animated by the same mind and spirit. It seldom happens. On Sunday night, we were awarded a first-class demonstration. Winds and brass were in fine balance; second violin parts, usually buried, were clear and revelatory. The sheer physical energy the orchestra engaged in playing a still very taxing piece was impressive.

To conductor Bruno Weil must go a lot of the credit for the superb performances. Weil is a no-nonsense kind of guy when it comes to Beethoven (he has performed now all nine symphonies with Tafelmusik). He set quite brisk tempos for all four movements of the symphony and, more to the point, kept those tempos consistent throughout the movements (with very few exceptions), with almost fanatically disciplined precision. No slowing for the dramatic parts, no shading of tempos to make a musical point, the result was a *Ninth* of intense propulsion, full of the drama that Beethoven clearly intended to be its hallmark, shapely and taut. Weil never allowed the plot of the music, its musical coherence, to falter.

And then, in the final movement, where Beethoven most obviously channels the religious music of his past, and sets what can only be called a secular chorale, the famous *Ode to Joy*, the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir (superbly prepared by director Ivars Taurins) and a fine group of soloists took the performance to a new level.

For all its fame, the last movement of the *Ninth* can be something of a mess – the vocal writing is a nightmare to sing, the size and scope of the music can degenerate all too easily into unsubtle noisy celebration, there are dangers aplenty. Weil and his colleagues circumvented them all. The opening shard of pain that begins the movement wasn't overplayed. The *Ode* itself was performed with an unearthly hush when it first appears in the cellos and basses. The four soloists, especially soprano Sigrid Plundrich (a last-minute replacement for Ruby Hughes) made musical sense out of their difficult parts. And the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir, powerful and effective, shaped the music of the words they were singing so naturally that the meaning of their texts shone through.

At the end of an emotional performance, while they were taking their bows, Sigrid Plundrich noticed a banner unfurled in the balcony of Koerner Hall. "We Love You, Sigrid," it said. As she looked up, she wept. She wasn't the only one.

Unaccountably, stubbornly, Bloor Street looked the same as we exited the hall as it had looked when we entered. But it wasn't – because the ability of art to transform us and the world around us had just been proven once again. It was a powerful demonstration.