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Baroque Venice summoned at Gladstone Hotel

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CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Toronto's most-recorded classical musician hasn't spent much time in front of local audiences.

But that changed Wednesday as violinist-conductor Kevin Mallon and four members of his Aradia Ensemble returned to live music-making at the Gladstone Hotel.

Baroque-era music is the group's specialty on 30 recordings made for the budget Naxos label. Aradia is currently a third of the way through recording 10 albums of music by Antonio Vivaldi.

The concert was unusual. With a capacity crowd facing six artists on stage, it felt intimate. Most of the musicians were informally dressed, and Mallon provided informative intros to most pieces.

Joining him was Tafelmusik violinist Christina Zacharias, violist Marika Holmqvist, Katie Rietman on cello and Paul Jenkins deftly switching between organ and harpsichord continuo. There were two guests: mezzo soprano Marion Newman and fine arts professor Leslie Korrick.

The evening's theme was "Eyes on Baroque," showing us period paintings to help convey the cultural sensibilities of Venice in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Korrick cited Tiepolo's *Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew* as a particularly striking example of the Baroque-era love of drama and immediacy.

The music was by Claudio Monteverdi, Dario Castello and Barbara Strozzi, as well as Vivaldi, and the musicians responded in kind, delivering strong performances.

Newman sang Vivaldi's powerful *Stabat Mater* and mini-cantata *Clarae stellae, scintillate*. She has a distinctive, dusky voice that suggests drama with every note, while never managing to toss off Vivaldi's technical challenges with any sort of panache.

Her performance was workaday rather than memorable.

The idea of including the visual element was excellent, but Korrick's input felt too much like an Art History 101 class, and easily added 30 minutes to the already substantial program.

Mallon and Aradia next return to the Gladstone on Sept. 17 for a "Virgin Baroque" program that will include olive oil tasting.

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