

## Webern, Schumann cast in new light

### Review Concert

#### A CHAMBER EVENING WITH WEBERN AND SCHUMANN

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory  
Conservatory Concert Hall/Last Friday

#### Chang Tou Liang

The first of two concerts devoted to the music of Anton Webern and Robert Schumann by faculty and students of Yong Siew Toh Conservatory with musicians from the Orchestre des Champs-Élysées (OCE) was an evening of chamber music. No two Austro-Germanic composers could be as different as Schumann (1810-1856) and Webern (1883-1945), although both are considered giants of classical music for different reasons.

Schumann represented the epitome of early Romanticism, whose works fused musical and poetic sensibilities in an indelible way. He died in an asylum for the insane, from syphilis contracted in his unbridled youth.

Webern, a disciple of Schoenberg, furthered the cause of atonality and serialism, influencing a generation of 20th-century composers. He died at the end of World War II after an American soldier mistook him for a black marketeer and shot him.

Schumann's congenial *Andante & Variations* Op. 46 opened the gig in a rarely heard version for two pianos, two cellos and horn. Most of the work came from pianists Ho Kai-Li and Jeong Han Sol, with counterpoint and ornamentation added by cellists Christopher Mui and Mao Cheng Yu.

A most interesting aspect was the contribution by OCE's Pierre-Antoine Tremblay, who performed on a natural horn, which uses no valves (he coolly assembled and disassembled its pieces of coiled brass tubing through the course of the work).

The warmth of Schumann was tempered by the chill of Webern's single-movement *Piano Quintet*, composed in 1907 under Schoenberg's tutelage. Taking off from Romanticism's last legs, tonality was stretched to its seams with pianist Thomas Hecht and T'ang Quartet's gripping performance filled with angst and nervous tension. After traversing a multitude of dissonances, it finally settled on the reassuring home key of C major.

A return to less rarefied air was Schumann's *Three Fantasy Pieces* Op. 73 for clarinet and piano. OCE clarinetist Nicola Boud's mellow and creamy tone was a pleasure to behold, with pianist Yap Sin Yee's lyrical accompaniment an equal to match.

After the interval, conductor Adrian Chiang led nine conservatory students in Webern's *Concerto* Op. 24. This compact work was a textbook example of tone rows employed in serial music.

A tone row is a sequence of 12 notes in a chromatic scale played without repeating a single note until the row is completed. This randomness added to the mystery of the sounds produced, especially when heard on different wind and string instruments and piano. Chiang and his charges displayed confidence and conviction in this experiment of spatial orientation and tonal colour.

The final work was Schumann's familiar *Piano Quintet In E Flat Major* Op. 44 with OCE members Marion Larigauderie (violin) and Catherine Puig (viola) partnering violinist Orest Smovzh, cellist Wang Zihao and pianist Albert Tiu. This was a breezy performance that had everything one could hope for – passion in the opening movement, drama in the march-like slow movement with shifts of mood and emotion in its pages.

The *Scherzo*'s scalic runs were breathtakingly negotiated, but it was the finale's grand display of contrapuntal mastery, combining themes from both first and last movements in a heady confluence, that impressed most. The players' love for this music was indisputable and this was not lost on the audience which readily responded in kind.

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#### WEBERN & SCHUMANN

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The Austro-Germanic coupling of music by Anton Webern and Robert Schumann continued for a second evening with a concert by the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra conducted by Jason Lai.

Early in Webern's output were his larger orchestral works, which were opulently orchestrated besides being his least forbidding.

His *Passacaglia* Op. 1 carried off from the final movement of Brahms' *Fourth Symphony*, which had been written in the form of a *passacaglia*. The theme comprised just eight notes, crisply played by pizzicato strings. What ensued was a continuous set of very short variations on this eight-note ground bass, which got increasingly complex as the work progressed.

What conductor Lai got out from his young players was clarity and precision, which became more admirable as the textures got increasingly dense. The underlying pulse never flagged and there were excellent violin solos from concertmaster Hong

Mengqi, summing up the overall high level of playing.

The orchestra was joined by five members of the Orchestre des Champs-Élysées for the Schumann works, beginning with exemplary partnership for Singapore-born British pianist Melvyn Tan in Schumann's *Piano Concerto In A Minor*.

The piano was placed forward of the orchestra, instead of alongside it, and this enhanced its projection. There was no chance of Tan being submerged by orchestral forces.

Here was no run-of-the-mill reading as Tan chose to heighten the tension of his solos by varying accents and phrasing, bringing out more bristling and even unexpectedly prickly aspects of the classic.

Purists may be scandalised as they have yet to encounter Schumann in such rude state of health, but there was no denying its vitality, which emerged in the treacherously tricky finale as pure joy.

Witnessing Tan's elan in his final act as artist-in-residence at the conservatory was a jubilant culmination of sorts. Clearly ecstatic at the audience's reception, he played two lovely encores – Schubert's *filigreed Impromptu In A Flat Major* (Op. 90 No. 4) and Schumann's *Traumerei*.

The second half opened with Webern's transcription of the *Ricercata* from J.S. Bach's *A*

Musical Offering. Once again, the orchestra displayed a keen understanding of its counterpoint with clearly defined lines brought out vividly.

Woodwinds and brass distinguished themselves in this piquantly orchestrated number, a showcase of Webern's *klangfarben*, or tonal colour.

French horns also had a field day in Schumann's *Third Symphony*, also known as the *Rhenish*, but that was only part of the story.

Conductor Lai's taut and tidy account did not stint on the music's grandeur, which can sound overblown and stodgy under less inspired minds.

The opening chord was out of the first bar of Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* and the first two movements were distinguished with broad striding sweeps. Emboldened, the slow movement's lofty edifice, the composer's vision of *Cologne Cathedral*, was illuminated with glorious sunshine.

The finale began with a gentle amble and soon built up a head of steam as the forces rallied to a glowing end.

Schumann has been maligned as an orchestrator; his art was a direct extension of Beethoven's and he clearly knew what he wanted to achieve.

This performance delivered his intentions on a silver platter and made nonsense of those prejudices. More power to the young orchestra for being persuasive myth-busters.