

From the familiar to the obscure

Review Concert

CHAMBER PLAYERS

The Chamber Players
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music
Sunday

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The Chamber Players is the only surviving non-professional classical music ensemble that existed during the early 1980s.

In those days, classical music here was just about the newly formed professional Singapore Symphony Orchestra and a small handful of amateur groups. After a hiatus of almost 20 years, The Chamber Players returned under the leadership of engineer and French horn player Mervin Beng, becoming the mainstay of the Singapore Chamber Music Festival.

The festival is now run by the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music and The Chamber Players makes regular appearances with interesting programmes that juxtapose the familiar with the rarely heard, such as the one on Sunday.

Very familiar was Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, designated as a *Serenade In G Major*,

but which resembles a four-movement symphony in miniature. The ensemble brought out a rich string sound, unafraid to apply vibrato whenever possible.

Performing without a conductor, the players took their lead from experienced concertmaster Seah Huan Yuh, one of few professional musicians assisting the group.

The slow movement radiated warmth and even the tricky fast central section held little terrors.

The third movement's Minuetto flowed unabated, but the quicksilver finale was taken a tad too cautiously to be truly thrilling.

Rather unfamiliar was the *Viola Concerto In D Major* by Franz Anton Hoffmeister (1754-1812), a Germany-born Viennese better known as a music publisher and close friend of Beethoven's.

This innocuous and attractive little work gave much by way of display to young violist Jeremy Chiew, who lapped up every virtuoso turn with relish, including a couple of showy cadenzas. His tone was healthy and robust, putting paid to those violist jokes about violin envy.

The ensemble included two oboes and two horns which contributed to the overall body of sound in this Mozart-like work, which closed with a jocular

Rondo that stretched and extended the players' abilities to the max.

Very obscure was Bohemian composer Leos Janacek's *Idyll For Strings*, an early work from the 1870s before he developed his spare but immediately recognisable hallmark style.

The spirit of Dvorak looms over its seven movements, with a melodic charm that is hard to dislike.

Based on folk tunes and rhythms, its occasional irregular meters troubled the players at times, which was when the ensemble could have benefited from a conductor's baton.

The fifth movement's *Adagio* saw some of the best playing, a heartfelt plaint based on the Slavic *dumka*, a lament that distinguishes much of Eastern European musical tradition.

Despite the inherent difficulties, the general outcome was a positive and admirable one, enjoyed by the Kent Ridge faithful.

It was thus a pity that the ensemble briefly acknowledged the applause and then immediately broke rank and disassembled.

Milking the applause for the efforts of weeks of rehearsals is also part of showmanship and the concert game, something that musical amateurs can learn from the professionals.