

Mix of new music boggles the mind

Review Concert

TREE LINE

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory New Music Ensemble
Esplanade Recital Studio/Last Sunday

Chang Tou Liang

The performance of new music in Singapore used to be an extremely irregular affair, with the odd New Music Forum organised by the Singapore Arts Festival or Singapore Symphony Orchestra held sporadically, or whenever the inspiration or inclination arose.

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory New Music Ensemble, founded by conductor Chan Tze Law in 2007, has however completely changed the scene, guaranteeing musical mayhem no fewer than twice a year.

Its latest concert conducted by the indefatigable Chan takes its title from Toru Takemitsu's *Tree Line* (1988), the earliest work on the programme and also the most traditional. His stock-in-trade sound is soft, subtle and lush, with wisps of melody floating above a bed of zen-like stasis and stillness. The alternating use of flute and alto flute, piano, celesta, harp and marimba, never all at once, was a clear indication of how finely calibrated his recipe was. It concluded with an off-stage oboe played by Bagaskoro Byar Sumirat gently receding into the distance.

The helpful programme booklet compiled by Eric Watson provided short interviews with each of the living composers. When asked what their compositional styles tended to favour, two composers cited harmony, melody, rhythm and tonal colour while another two unanimously opted for energy.

Malaysia-born Adeline Wong, now lecturing at the conservatory, had all of these in *Synclastic Illuminations* (2005), originally written for the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra. Its title was inspired by a Kurt Vonnegut novel, where sound, like the time travellers in the story, emanated with pulsatile and percussive bursts at the speed of light. An excitingly violent but exuberant ride tapered off in placid calm, with the solo piano trailing in its wake.

In the ubiquitous Chen Zhangyi's *Walks On Water*, there was a return to the delicate aesthetics of Takemitsu. This time, the obligato piano dominated, where Clarence Lee churned out ripples upon waves in a piano concerto in miniature recounting the messianic miracle of Jesus Christ levitating on the Sea of Galilee.

If there were a soundtrack for a nightmare, Timothy Tan's *Hypertuba Magna* would be it. The lanky composition student operated a laptop computer which generated a morass of pre-recorded sounds, accompanied by eight instrumentalists. A drum banged out an insistent rhythm while the other instruments screamed out for attention.

There was no tuba part, as the composer's title was a metaphorical quest for the *Urbemensch* of instruments, which this most experimental and provocative of works proved is the hyperactive imagination of the composer himself.

Narong Prangcharoen's *Echoes Of Silence* (2010), a fast-paced and fluid work, was prompted by the legacy of the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall in upper New York State, home of the Albany Symphony Orchestra. Short quotes from Borodin's *Second Symphony* and Stravinsky's *Symphony Of Psalms* (both related to the years which the bank and orchestra were founded) were worked into the musical fabric. There was no silence, only distant echoes from the past in this unlikely Thai-Russian-American inspiration.

Seventy-five minutes of music passed in a flash. The heterogeneity of new music was as wide-ranging as it was mind-boggling. Its proselytisers and Esplanade's *Spectrum* series are doing a fine job; all it needs is an inquisitive and open-minded audience to reciprocate.