

Cross-continental orchestra serve a treat

REVIEW / CONCERT

ORCHESTRE DES CONTINENTS

Esplanade Concert Hall/Wednesday

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Orchestre des Continents is a new international orchestra formed by students from three tertiary music institutions – the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, University of Music Lausanne and Geneva University of Music.

It gave its debut in Singapore under the baton of renowned Swiss conductor Thierry Fischer, and will perform at the Paleo Festival in Switzerland on Sunday.

Music is a truly international language, and thus with only a few rehearsals, the orchestra truly impressed at its first showing.

The concert opened with Swiss composer Michael Jarrell's 3 Etudes De Debussy. These are not just mere orchestrations of Claude Debussy's late piano works but re-imaginings for orchestra.

How the piano's sound world and idiom translated so seamlessly into orchestral textures was the work of a master.

The added layers of sound were sensitively realised – from the shimmering number For Repeated Notes, through the languor of For Contrasted Timbres (where muted woodwinds and brass stood out), to the virile athleticism of For Chords, where the exertions of the original piano pieces were all but forgotten. Young Swiss-Chinese pianist Louis Schwizgebel then took centre stage in Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto.

Although he took his time to ravish the work's opening series of chords, his was not an idiosyncratic look at a familiar warhorse.

Neither did he feel the need to over-exert himself in order to be heard above the throng. This resulted in certain spots being submerged by the ever-willing orchestra.

His musicality came to the fore in

the lyrical slow movement, where the climax was gradually built up, with the best moment coming when the piano truly sang while accompanied by just strings.

His mercurial fingers distinguished the finale, which was unfailingly exciting, and he was even allowed a minor lapse in the seemingly easiest of spots.

This performance scored far higher in poetry than Denis Matsuev's running roughshod over Rachmaninov with the London Symphony Orchestra last year.

No symphony was performed, but eight movements from Prokofiev's ballet Romeo And Juliet provided the meat for the main course.

No longer considered fodder for orchestra pit bands, these have become bona fide concert showpieces requiring all-round virtuosity.

The orchestra's prowess was immediately stamped in the Morning Dance and Juliet As A Young Girl, with playing of pinpoint precision and the ability to adapt to myriad shifts of dynamics.

From rowdy crowd scenes to a playful and winsome portrait of the tragic heroine, conductor Fischer kept his players on high alert in the music's many nuances.

Extreme violence crushing and dissonances were delivered on triple-forte in The Death Of Tybalt and Montagues And Capulets, both bringing out the loudest brassy climaxes in the hall's reverberant acoustics.

The orchestra luxuriated in Romeo And Juliet Before Parting, which was the famous balcony scene, where its rapturous revelries soon evaporated for the sorrow of Romeo At Juliet's Tomb and The Death Of Juliet.

Seldom has string-playing portrayed so acutely a sense of loss, such that the concertmaster's calming violin solo provided an oasis of equanimity.

Performances like these from Orchestre des Continents send a strong signal that the future of classical music for the world is indeed in good hands.