

# New shining lights

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## REVIEW/CONCERT

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### CELEBRATING SG50

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra  
Conservatory Concert Hall/  
Last Friday

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### Chang Tou Liang

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Within the coming week, the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra will undertake its first overseas tour, performing concerts in Macau and Hong Kong.

Its touring programme is a hugely demanding one and knowing what the young musicians led by principal conductor Jason Lai have accomplished in the past, its pre-tour concert in front of a Singaporean audience generated much interest and expectation.

The orchestra opened with the world premiere of Ho Chee Kong's *Empyrean Lights*. Its title refers to the aurorae or spectral phenomena that take place in the polar regions,

commonly known as the Northern or Southern Lights. It is a 17-minute-long etude for orchestra which taxes the strings enormously, with woodwinds and brass also given exacting solo parts.

Beginning quietly with a D minor drone not unlike the outset of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, solo instruments emerge from and return into a mysterious haze, gradually morphing into a dynamic force that is both serene yet majestic.

There are running string passages which bring to mind Sibelius, but the defining voices were the three trumpets that capped the work's final chapter. Only one stayed the course, its notes configured enigmatically to spell the name of Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, before gently expiring into the ether.

This has to be the most subtle and eloquent tribute to the nation's guiding light yet, and the orchestra responded to its rugged challenges

with admirable aplomb.

With time, some of its rough edges will be smoothed out, just as one begins to realise the impact of this moving music.

Completing the first half was Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto, given an articulate and elegant reading by Li Churen, a conservatory alumnus now pursuing her master's degree at Yale.

This is a more nuanced reading than the one she gave with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra at the President's Young Performers Concert three years ago. Having grown and matured in the interim, her version of the slow movement oozed lyricism while the finale crackled with unbridled joy.

Nationalist Finnish composer Sibelius' Second Symphony was the concert's longest work. This received a taut performance which dallied little yet gave a pervading sense of breadth and warmth in its duration, which was more than 40 minutes long.

The strings played a large part in conveying this impression and if the beginning sounded a tad diffuse, it soon grew in stature. The stark opening to the second movement, chilling in its intensity, similarly blossomed to a fiery fruition under conductor Lai's baton.

The Prestissimo third movement, with rapid string runs referenced earlier in Ho's work, gave the programme an overall feel of cohesion and symmetry.

Arctic illuminations and Nordic utterances went hand in hand here. The finale's heroic sweep with blazing brass was the rallying point for Finnish independence from Russian domination, not unlike a certain Hakka lawyer's lifelong and steadfast stand for the "little red dot".

A less well-sustained climax would have fallen flat, but Lai's charges never flagged for a second till its valedictory final chords.

In the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra and all associated with it, Singaporeans have good reason to feel proud.