

Strong showing by new blood

REVIEW / CONCERT

PRESIDENT'S YOUNG PERFORMERS CONCERT

Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Jason
Lai (conductor), Bernice Lee (oboe),
Jade Tan Shi Yu (mezzo-soprano)
Victoria Concert Hall
Last Friday

Mervin Beng

For this year's President's Young Performers Concert by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), the honour of playing for President Tony Tan Keng Yam and Mrs Mary Tan fell on oboist Bernice Lee and mezzo-soprano Jade Tan Shi Yu. And both gave strong performances of demanding 20th-century works.

Richard Strauss' Oboe Concerto, completed in 1945, calls for a fearless soloist who is able to carry the extended lines and sustain listeners' interest through the three movements, which are played without a break.

Lee, a recent graduate of the Yong

Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YST) and currently pursuing a Master of Music at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, produced a sweet, rounded tone and her delicate playing impressed immediately in the opening phrases.

The recitative-like section in the second movement and short cadenza were beautifully conceived and delivered with graceful control.

Like the preceding Strauss Oboe Concerto, Elgar's Sea Pictures was an uncompromising choice for Tan in her solo debut with the SSO. Currently in her final year at YST, the winner of this year's Conservatory Concerto Competition was unwavering through the five English poems that Elgar set to music.

The work was commissioned for performance by British contralto Clara Butt, who was renowned for her power and depth, and Tan proved well able to take on the parts of the music which were at the lower end of a mezzo soprano's range.

Each song was carefully nuanced, with the third and final songs, Sabbath Morning At Sea and The Swimmer, especially captivating.

She showed great ability in portraying emotion and meaning from the text and sang with excellent articulation – although her pronunciation was sometimes exaggerated.

Jason Lai conducted with suitable sensitivity, taking care that the complex orchestral parts blended well with the soloists, while allowing the orchestra room to play out when needed.

However, in spite of his efforts to manage this tricky balance, Lee was challenged with duets with an insistent clarinet in the Strauss concerto, while the Elgar was punctuated with overly enthusiastic harp entries.

In choosing the Strauss concerto and Elgar's Sea Pictures, the soloists, both in their early 20s, showed strong technical ability and excellent maturity in approach.

Lee's depth of sound and Tan's projection were stretched on occasion by the works, but young wind players and singers typically develop more gradually in these areas compared to string players.

There is little doubt that both have the potential to carve out significant musical careers in the years to come.

Brahms' second symphony is a rather heavy piece to follow an already substantial first half, so the comfortable tempos that Lai chose were welcome. His reading of Brahms' most pastoral symphony had a sense of contentment and dignity.

The ensemble was steady and loud sections were uplifting without sounding strained.

Lai chose to use a large ensemble and filled the stage from end to end.

But a smaller orchestral force might have been better, as the transparency of sound needed for the inner movements of the Brahms symphony and much of the Strauss concerto proved hard to attain at this performance.