Source: *The Straits Times,* pD10
Date: 31 October 2016

Splendid concert full of birthday joy

REVIEW / CONCERT

PERFORMERS(') PRESENT
Conservatory String Ensemble/Melvyn Tan (piano/director)
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Concert Hall/Last Friday

Marc Rochester

This concert celebrated four birthdays.

The first was the 10th anniversary of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory's concert hall and building on the campus of the National University of Singapore.

To celebrate this musical landmark, a week-long festival is being held and it includes an international symposium with the ambiguous title Performers(') Present, and this concert is its centrepiece.

The second birthday was Mozart's 225th. Not, perhaps, a particularly significant anniversary, but around the world, it is being marked by musicians and ensembles seeking out and performing various Mozart rarities.

The Conservatory String Ensemble (plus a couple of horns) joined in the Mozart 225 project by performing the little-known Divertimento In B Flat.

And this happy two-movement work marked the third of the birthdays. For Mozart wrote it in 1777 for the birthday of Countess Maria Lodron, a member of the Salzburg aristocracy, herself a gifted pianist and the mother of two daughters, both of whom were among Mozart's favourite pupils.

The Conservatory Strings, led by their first violinist Brenda Koh, caught the essence of this charming, graceful and elegant music in their neat and poised performance. The star of the show, however, was the wonderfully vivid horn playing of Mindy Chang.

The fourth and final birthday celebrated here was that of Melvyn Tan, who turned 60 earlier this month. Possibly Singapore's greatest musical gift to the world, Tan is known internationally as a pioneering performer on the fortepiano. Back in 1993, the English composer Jonathan Dove composed his Airmail Letter from Mozart for Tan and the fortepiano.

Using a theme from the B Flat Divertimento, the combination of fortepiano and strings (and a pair of horns), along with Dove's characteristically effervescent musical language, created a delicious, festive concoction which, given this glittering performance, had all the tantalising delights of a birthday cake glowing under the light of several dozen sparkling candles.

Disappointingly, the fortepiano was rolled away and a vast modern piano put in its place for Mozart's 14th Piano Concerto.

After the delicacy and brightness of the fortepiano, this sounded solid and cloudy, although Tan's deftness of touch and impeccable sense of style ensured that the performance remained true to the spirit of Mozart.

Tan's characteristically agile fingers were complemented in the Concerto by an equally agile pair of knees. They worked overtime as he continually stood up and sat down, standing to direct the ensemble (and occasionally play the piano) and sitting to play the piano (and occasionally direct the ensemble).

The result was a splendidly life-affirming and genial performance which was, as befitted the occasion, full of birthday joy.

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