

Beauty of Bach unveiled

REVIEW / CONCERT

BACH CANTATAS WITH MASA AKI SUZUKI

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory

Thursday

Chang Tou Liang

Eminent Japanese Bach scholar and conductor Masaaki Suzuki was back with another round of Johann Sebastian Bach's music with students of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory.

As with last year's concert, the Ong Teng Cheong Professor of Music 2016/17 – an endowment that requires him to teach at the conservatory – again drew a full house, with an audience keen to experience baroque music in the tradition of period performance practice.

Although well-established in the West, this tradition is gradually gaining a foothold in Singapore, thanks to more young musicians formally studying its practice – enhanced by visiting luminaries such as Suzuki.

This concert showcased two of Bach's 200-plus cantatas, with both halves opening with purely instrumental music.

Concertmaster Ryo Terakado, one of the world's great baroque

violinists, sat down for the Violin Concerto In A Minor (BWV.1041) as freshman Zhang Yuchen performed the solo.

Zhang's was a very confident account, well-articulated with little vibrato. He projected well and was superbly supported by the small Conservatory Chamber Ensemble taking cues from Suzuki's very precise direction.

Suzuki became soloist in his own arrangement of Cantata No. 35, cast in the form of a three-movement Organ Concerto In D Minor.

Appropriating and recycling pre-existing works (and often other composers' music) into new pieces was common practice in the 18th century and the result was an enjoyable outing on the conservatory's new Garnier chamber organ.

The outer fast movements were adapted from purely orchestral movements called sinfonias (which had prominent organ solos anyway) and the slow movement was a lovely aria that showcased organ and Masamitsu San'nomiya's oboe da caccia (the antique "hunting oboe" with a curved tube) in lovely counterpoint, accompanied by just double-bass.

The main courses were the sacred cantatas, with Ach Gott, Wie Manches Herzeleid (Ah God, How Many A Heartache) BWV.3 performed in

the first half. Here was the message that only God was the answer to the heart's woes, for those who believed it.

The choir of 18 voices (16 students and two faculty members) was a pillar of strength in the opening and closing choruses.

Soloists were drawn from these voices. Baritone Jeong Daegyun was a standout in *Empfind Ich Hollenangst Und Pein* (Although I Fear Hell's Angst And Pain), with tenor Fang Zhi following up strongly in the succeeding recitative.

The duet of soprano Suyen Rae and mezzo-soprano Lu Pei-Yun blended prettily in *Wenn Sorgen Auf Mich Dringen* (When Cares Press Upon Me).

The concert concluded with *Alles Nur Nach Gottes Willen* (Everything According To God's Will) BWV.72, an affirmation of one's faith in the divine.

Another excellent choice, with two choruses and a showcase of solo arias, it was the turn of soprano Li Wei-Wei to shine in *Mein Jesus Will Es Tun* (My Jesus Wants To Do This), shading mezzo Lu's more tentative *O Selger Christ* (O Blessed Is The Christian).

Regardless whether one adheres to Bach's religious beliefs, it was the sheer beauty of the music that was transcendent.