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Unconventional brilliance

REVIEW / CONCERT

TRIO SURPLUS
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra Hall/Last Friday

Marc Rochester

This hour-long concert featured four hardcore avant-garde works all composed within the last 50 years.

The earliest was Serenata Per Una Satellite by Bruno Maderna (1920-1973), written to celebrate the launch of the first German space satellite in 1969.

As if to acknowledge the extreme antiquity (in avant-garde circles) of the work, it was played twice.

The first version, given at the start of the concert, ended with a manic xylophone solo from percussionist Olaf Tzschoppe.

The second version, coming at the end, concluded with an even more frantically supercharged piano solo from Daniel Lorenzo. The third member of the German-based Trio SurPlus, Christian Kemper, conducted both performances.

Perhaps conducted is not quite the right word.

His role was more one of coordinator, standing in front of the nine musicians and describing with his outstretched arms great circles, which sometimes resembled the hands of a clock and, at others, the fascist gestures of Maderna's native Italy.

The seven extra players had been drafted from Singapore's premier modern music ensemble, Opus Novus, and four of them were also involved in the programme's other "old" work, by the American Morton Feldman (1926-1987).

Dating from 1976, Routine Investigations is typical of Feldman's almost deliberately throwaway approach to composing – basically getting instruments to make a noise for a while and then stopping.

On this occasion, the players may have done all that Feldman asked of them and more, and in an astonishingly effective way.

Along the way, they showed a hugely impressive level of corporate virtuosity.

Kemper's real place in Trio SurPlus is as the oboist. And if a trio made up of piano, percussion and oboe seems not just dangerously unbalanced but also seriously weird, then their avowed aim to create a repertoire from new and unknown composers yielded impressive fruit here.

Local composer Peter Edwards responded to the challenge with a piece called Ionobia, which spent its time getting both piano and oboe to do things pianos and oboes do not usually do (including, in the case of the piano, loading up the music stand with more loose and floppy pages of manuscript than it could safely handle).

Edwards knew how to get the strangest and most exotic sounds out of the instruments – enhanced by a few knocks from the percussion – and once he had done that, he wisely stopped.

Not so for German composer Jorg Birkenkotter whose elusively titled Cross-mapped (l.b.n.l.a.h.) was brilliantly effective in combining the three instrumental groups (Tszshoppe had at his disposal a battery of percussion running well into double figures), but rather outlived its interest quotient.

As a programme revealing both brilliant instrumental virtuosity and unconventional creativity, this was in a class of its own.

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