

Apt celebration to usher in the Year of the Dog

REVIEW / CONCERT

VISITING ARTIST SERIES

Ni Hai-Ye (cello), Liu Jia (piano)
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory
Orchestra Hall/Last Thursday

Marc Rochester

Singapore's classical music scene is getting back into gear following the extended silence through the Chinese New Year holidays.

The first significant concert in the Year of the Dog featured, appropriately enough, a Chinese cellist and a Chinese pianist.

Born in Shanghai in 1972, Ni Hai-Ye has spent much of her professional life in the United States and has been principal cellist of The Philadelphia Orchestra since 2006.

Perhaps unusual for an orchestral cellist, she knows how to build a good solo programme. Opening with one of Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words, she introduced her mellow and lyrical tone with its generous vibrato.

Whether this was quite the right sound for Beethoven's more assertive third Sonata later is a moot point. Such fulsome tone turned the middle movement into something akin to a clog dance – although who is to say that this is not what Beethoven intended all along?

Ni's partner in the recital was Beijing-born Liu Jia.

Excellent pianist as she is – and few soloists could ever ask for someone more alert and sensitive – it was clear from the Beethoven that they are not regular musical partners. Small points of disagreement along the way gave a slightly un-

kempt feel.

But it was a partnership that also yielded interesting results in David Popper's Suite of six character pieces, *Im Walde*.

Every cellist has heard of Popper. Virtually nobody else has. He did much to promote the cello as a solo instrument in the 19th century by writing large numbers of display pieces for it.

Im Walde is not often heard in its entirety (cellists prefer to play the more picturesque movements in isolation, especially the grotesque *Gnome's Dance*) and does rather scrape the barrel musically to fill its 25-minute playing time.

It was fun to watch Ni's virtuoso antics, but even more so to listen to Liu's colourful piano scene-setting.

The austere, terse and dry wit of Hindemith's Sonata for unaccompanied cello suited neither Ni's sound nor her musical personality. But, as all good programme builders do, she left the best for last.

Shostakovich's Cello Sonata – written shortly after his marriage and even more shortly after his divorce – is a complex work with occasional bouts of slapstick humour, passages of deep affection, moments of deep sorrow and crazy, manic dances. Ni used every trick in the cellist's armoury to bring out the Sonata's vast range of colours and emotions.

She exuded soulfulness in the opening bars, raised the temperature with the Whirling Dervish second movement, plumbed the depths of despair in the tragic third movement and brought it all to a breath-taking end when – this time in perfect unity – piano and cello delivered the perfect coup de grace: a deliciously throwaway ending.