

# Fitting tribute to Debussy

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## REVIEW/CONCERT

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CLAUDE DEBUSSY: MUSICIEN FRANCAIS  
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music  
Victoria Concert Hall  
Last Saturday

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### Chang Tou Liang

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Who were the great composers to transform music in the 20th century? Claude Debussy (1862-1918) would surely head the list.

This concert by the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, joined by seven members of Japan's Suntory Hall Chamber Music Academy, commemorated the 100th anniversary of the French composer's death.

In a well-curated two-hour programme, a cross-section of his instrumental and chamber music was explored chronologically.

These spanned his creative output, from early derivative pieces to his trademark "impressionism" (a term he despised) to simpler textures of later works. His was a unique harmonic language playing on colour and timbre, one that was highly personal, yet evolved over the years.

Pretty as his Piano Trio in G major sounded, from violinist Rodion Sychyshyn, cellist Wang Yu Qi and pianist Natsumi Kuboyama, it merely echoed the Belle Epoque's salon charm. It would take some years before arriving at the sinuous flute solo of *Syrinx*, hauntingly performed by Lu Yin, with a musky scent wafting from the circle seats above.

Its tonal ambiguity scandalised listeners, as did the opening of *Prelude A L'Apres-midi D'un Faune* (Afternoon Of The Fawn), heard on two pianos by Pualina Lim and Koh Kai Jie.

The sheer sumptuousness was matched by *Danse Sacree Et Danse Profane*, with excellent harpist Charmaine Teo partnered by 12

string players conducted by Chong Wai Lun.

These dances displayed a yin and yang that informed Debussy's music, sometimes sounding almost oriental, such as in *Fetes Galante* (Book 1) with soprano Li Wei-Wei and pianist Foo Yi Xuan in three songs. Similarly, the wistful slow movement from the String Quartet received a sensitive reading from violinists Yoko Ishikura and Zhang Zhou Yaodong, violist Ho Qian Hui and cellist Aya Kitagaki.

The piano featured prominently. Chang Yun-Hua polished off *L'Isle Joyeuse* (The Happy Island), inspired by revelry in a Watteau painting, while Steven Tanus delighted in the graceful rhythms of *Serenade For The Doll* and *The Snow Is Dancing* from *Children's Corner Suite*.

The piece de resistance was the central movement of *En Blanc Et Noir* from Adriana Chew and Gabriel Hoe (two pianos), where peaceful chords were intruded upon by the Lutheran hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, depicting German belligerence in this wartime work.

By Debussy's final years, he had gone back to his Gallic roots, espousing its musical virtues in the *Violin Sonata* (violinist Zhang and pianist Choi Woo Joo) and *Sonata For Flute, Viola And Harp* (Lu, violist Yugo Inoue and Teo). The latter's spare and transparent sonorities were to influence Toru Takemitsu, Japan's greatest composer, many years later.

A tribute from rival composer Igor Stravinsky, some 20 years Debussy's junior, was in order. The two had played Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite Of Spring* on piano and its opening dances were brilliantly re-enacted by the crimson-gowned duo of Luong Khanh Nhi and Muse Ye on a single keyboard.

To close, 23 musicians, led by conductor Wilson Ong, mastered Stravinsky's *Symphonies For Winds*, a memorial to Debussy, which made for a fittingly sonorous requiem.