

Singaporean conductor brings German music home

Chief conductor of Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra Wong Kah Chun will showcase Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 at the Botanic Gardens



Mr Wong Kah Chun conducting the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra during the Klassik Open Air concert that attracted 65,000 people. Instead of a baton, he is holding a sparkler like the audience as night falls over the park.
PHOTO: STEFFEN OLIVER RIESE

Neo Hui Min
for The Straits Times, in Nuremberg

After treating 65,000 people at an open-air concert in Germany to the wild music of a Singapore thunderstorm and a folk song performed by children in Ang Mo Kio, Mr Wong Kah Chun is planning to bring home a very German symphony in exchange.

On Saturday, the chief conductor of the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra and five key members will partner students at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory for a performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 at the Botanic Gardens.

"This is a kind of cultural dialogue between Singapore and Germany and this is what I really stand for as the chief conductor of the Nuremberg Symphony and as a Singaporean - Germany is where I studied and it's where I now call my home, and Singapore is of course where I was brought up," Mr Wong, 32, told The Straits Times.

The young conductor had caught the attention of major orchestras after he won the prestigious Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition in Germany in 2016.

He is the first Singaporean and one of a handful of Asians to be named chief conductor of a European orchestra.

"If I say the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory is like a parent because it brought me up - I studied there for four years, learning and growing - then the Nuremberg Symphony is like a partner, we're growing together over the next few years."

The concert will be sort of a return leg to Singapore after the Nuremberg Symphony's Klassik Open Air in the German city in August, for which Mr Wong included recordings of a Singaporean rainstorm and Ang Mo Kio children singing the Malay folk song, Dayung Sampan, in the three-hour-long programme.

Among the Nuremberg musicians who will travel to Singapore are the concertmaster (the lead violinist), the principal cellist, the principal clarinetist, principal horn player and the associate principal violinist.

"We have the very very best from Nuremberg to mentor the students of my alma mater," said Mr Wong, explaining that the professional musicians will spend time individually with the students.

He said he picked Beethoven's No. 7 because "it's such a joyful piece in A major in the first movement and ends in the finale with such a rousing dance that everyone will get the feeling of standing up and dancing."

"It's like going to Zouk, it's like going to St James Powerhouse when I was a student," he said, chuckling, adding that for the encore, the orchestra has prepared a surprise.

He hopes a large crowd will attend the concert, which is presented by the German Embassy and the conservatory. "I believed very strongly that for this concert, we have to do it in the Botanic Gardens," he said.

"Maybe to some people, it's not as prestigious as performing at the Esplanade, but for me, this was the only way you can get a big audience."

"This is the best way for the music to reach out to the heartlanders, to my parents living in Jurong. Maybe they won't go to the Esplanade, but they might go to the Botanic Gardens."

Little in his family background offered hints of the heights he would reach in the musical world.

The eldest of three boys born to a childcare teacher and a retired army regular, he discovered Western classical music when a form teacher recruited him and his classmates to join the brass band in primary school.

It sparked a lifelong passion.

Mr Wong, who is not married, said he felt a "chemistry" working on previous occasions with the Nuremberg orchestra, which led him to accept the position as chief conductor, a post which he officially begins when the season opens on Sept 22.

"Of itself, it's a prestige to be associated with this orchestra, but the musicians have such a warm and creative and inquisitive way of getting into the music," he said, that "they inspire me".

"They make me a better musician. Officially, I'm the musical boss, but really we have a relationship where we're working together."

"I know I'm very young, they know I'm very young. There's no need for me to try to make an impression just because of ego or insecurities, of which there aren't any."

Having completed his master's in 2014 in Berlin's Hanns Eisler Musikhochschule, Mr Wong already speaks some German.

The reception in Nuremberg has been only positive, he said, noting that people are "very kind" in welcoming him to the community.

Mr Wong will also be the guest conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra for the ensemble's Chinese New Year concert.

While his work keeps him abroad, he returns regularly to Singapore to work with children in his community initiative, Project Infinitude, exposing them to classical music they might not have a chance to listen to.

In the southern German city of Nuremberg with a population of about half a million, he is examining possibilities of starting projects with children too.

The orchestra's rehearsals are open to the public and school classes have signed up to attend.

Despite the educational projects, he said he "struggles with the word education or charity work because I don't see this so much as such".

"I just want to share my love for music with as many people as possible. That could be education... Maybe it is what it is, but I don't see it that way. It's just a way for me to spread the music to as many people as possible," he said.

"For example at the Botanic Gardens... if among the thousands who turn up, there is a small number of people, a handful of children who decide that music is something amazing and they want to know more about it, then I'd imagine that I'd be quite a happy person," he said.

"It's just to open a little door, a little window to curiosity, to imagination, to creativity in as many people as possible."

• The free concert, Beethoven Im Garten: Celebrating German-Singaporean Connections And Friendship will be held at the Singapore Botanic Gardens' Shaw Foundation Symphony Stage this Saturday, at 6pm.

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