

# Ethereal beauty meets harmony

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## REVIEW/CONCERT

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### INTERSECTIONS

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra  
Esplanade Concert Hall/Tuesday

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### Chang Tou Liang

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There are good reasons Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in the National University of Singapore is known as “Asia’s international conservatory”. Its students and staff are a representation of the world’s diverse cultures, and despite being an educational institution of Western classical music, it projects the feel of East-meets-West in its pursuits.

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra’s pre-tour concert, led by its British principal conductor Jason Lai, also proudly paraded that internationalism. While the programme was for a large part English, it also showcased significant home-grown talent.

Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *Fantasia On A Theme By Thomas Tallis*, written for only strings, opened the concert on an ethereal high.

The ensemble was subdivided into three “choirs”, each with separate parts, but together they coalesced with a vast cathedral-like sonority that belied its relatively modest size. With one voice, this string chorus radiated waves of warmth and burnished beauty.

Standing out were the quartet of soloists, led by violist Wei Jun-Ting and violinist Kong Xianlong, which formed a concertino group as if playing in a baroque concerto grosso.

This concept of standalone voices backed by a larger body of musicians also extended into young Singaporean composer Chen Zhangyi’s *Concerto For Erhu, Zhongruan, Percussion And Ensemble*, which received its world premiere.

This quasi-impressionist work harnessed woodwinds and brass, hitherto unused in this concert, as backing for three soloists playing Chinese instruments. Likie Low (erhu), Sulwyn Lok (zhongruan) and Yuru Lee (Chinese drums and marimba) were conservatory students, majoring in composition, audio arts and sciences and percussion respectively.

This could have been a recipe for balance disasters, but Chen’s deft scoring ensured each instrument maintained its voice amid spirited accompaniment, besides coming together for precious brief moments.

After the intermission, William Walton’s *Violin Concerto* was given a rare airing with Qian Zhou, the conservatory’s head of strings, as impressive soloist. Written for violinist Jascha Heifetz, the 1939 work fused technical daredevilry and unabashed Romanticism with 20th-century accents.

Bittersweet melodies in the first movement were the perfect foil for the witty and mercurial scherzo.

Qian dealt with these wide shifts of dynamics with much flair, besides evincing a firm, robust tone and impeccable intonation. Just as importantly, Lai’s young charges coped well in these capricious mood swings, alternating bracing sarcasm with disarming sentimentality.

On this form, the conservatory orchestra is set to do the nation proud in its coming visit to South Korea.