

# Young English orchestra's colourful Singapore debut

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## REVIEW / CONCERT

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ONES TO WATCH SERIES:  
AURORA ORCHESTRA – MUSIC OF  
THE SPHERES

Aurora Orchestra, Nicholas Collon  
(conductor), Pekka Kuusisto (violin)/  
Victoria Concert Hall/  
Last Friday

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### Mervin Beng

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This instalment of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music's Ones To Watch series, sponsored by the Shaw Foundation, brings Aurora Orchestra to Singapore.

The young English orchestra has won over many a young audience with its mix of innovative programmes, high energy and performance of major symphonic works from memory.

Aurora Orchestra's Singapore debut, billed as "an orchestral theatre programme exploring cele-

tial sounds and the cosmic order, enriched with choreography and visuals", fully lived up to its billing.

On-stage lighting, a video backdrop, taped narration and incidental musical, as well as a touch of on-stage choreography by musicians, were all part of this performance, loosely based on Pythagoras' metaphysical philosophy of Music of the Spheres (*Musica Universalis*) and his study of musical intervals and scales.

The concert began with Aurora's strings playing in pitch darkness, with neither score nor conductor.

Germany-born British composer Max Richter's *Journey Song* (CP1919) is a post-minimalist work that envisions the journey towards the first pulsar (CP1919), with music that pulsates and evolves as if it had a life of its own.

There were slight wobbles at the start, but the music steadied and ended in convincing unison.

The great pianist, Carl Czerny,

relates that the second movement of String Quartet No. 8 by Beethoven occurred to the composer as he contemplated the starry sky and thought of the music of the spheres.

The playing by the orchestra's principals was contemplative and controlled, if slightly subdued.

Finnish violin star Pekka Kuusisto's performance of Thomas Ades' *Violin Concerto* was a highlight of the evening.

Subtitled *Concentric Paths*, its three movements – Rings, Paths and Rounds – fit perfectly into the idea of planetary orbits and the circular relationship of musical intervals.

Nicholas Collon, who conducted the concerto, provided strong, sympathetic partnership from the orchestra.

Kuusisto's playing was typically Finnish, brilliant in a quietly understated way and energetic without excess.

His exquisitely introspective encore of Bach served almost as a closing movement to the concerto, bringing things back in a full circle.

The nickname of Mozart's *Symphony No. 41, Jupiter*, was not given by the composer, but likely coined by the impresario Salomon.

Watching and hearing what is generally considered Mozart's greatest work, performed by all but the cellos and basses on their feet, sans music stands, was a special treat.

Aurora Orchestra brought a vitality and concentration in performance that was easy to appreciate. The use of natural (valveless) horns and trumpets for Mozart added immensely to the tone colour.

A fully apt orchestral encore, David Bowie's *Life On Mars?* summed up the concert wonderfully.

With or without score, it was a night of clever programming and great music-making.