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Musicians from Germany's Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra with their chief conductor Wong Kah Chun (centre).
PHOTO: ULF BREUER

Beethoven's pastoral sounds in the park

Toh Wen Li

The leafy environs of the Botanic Gardens will form an apt backdrop to Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony on Saturday, painting a musical picture of ripples in a brook, cuckoos and (hopefully not literally) the arrival of a storm. The free outdoor concert, known as Beethoven im Garten, will see musicians from Germany's Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra and students from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music perform Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, as the work is also known.

The concert series, now in its second year, is an initiative by the German Embassy in partnership with these two institutions. Last year's drew more than 6,000 people and was a relaxed affair, with many sitting on picnic mats in front of the Shaw Foundation Symphony Stage.

The Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra's chief conductor Wong Kah Chun, 33, is in town with 16 members of the Nuremberg Symphony, who will conduct masterclasses for the Yong Siew Toh students and rehearse with them.

"The Nuremberg musicians get to work with the finest (students) in Asia, and the students will be able to play side by side with master musicians," says Wong, who adds that the concert will bring "the highest quality of classical music" to the Botanic Gardens.

The Singaporean conductor turned heads when he became the first Asian to win the prestigious Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition in 2016. But he is not resting on his laurels.

"I'm very aware that conducting is a marathon, not a sprint," says Wong, who started his appointment at the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra in September last year.

"I've got the door open because of the competition, but I now need to spend the next 10, 20 years getting to know the music, the culture, so well – so that at 60 years old, maybe I can start to say that I am a conductor. Right now, I'm just a 'baby'".

The Beethoven im Garten series came about quite serendipitously, after German Ambassador Ulrich Sante and his wife saw Wong conduct Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 at the Esplanade.

"The power and energy he brought to the orchestra is something I had never seen before," says Dr Sante. "We were delighted to learn about his strong German background after the concert and that kick-started our 'love affair'."

On the decision to launch the concert series, he adds: "(Singapore and Germany's) excellent business-to-business and government-to-government relationships can grow and prosper only if they are complemented by a strong basis of people-to-people ties."

While in Singapore, the Nuremberg musicians will also perform for and interact with children at Child at Street 11, a non-profit child development centre in Ang Mo Kio.

The Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra's principal cellist Ariel Barnes, who is also in town for the concert, says: "I hope it raises awareness of really how similar we all are... I think it's beautiful that this exchange is taking place, especially considering the political climate we are seeing now in the major world powers."

The Beethoven im Garten series will next year feature a special staging of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to celebrate the composer's 250th birthday.

BOOK IT/ BEETHOVEN IM GARTEN

WHERE: Shaw Foundation Symphony Stage, Botanic Gardens, 1 Cluny Road

WHEN: Saturday, 6 to 7pm. Picnic grounds are open from 5pm

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: Concertgoers are advised to take public transport. www.facebook.com/events/1256609761176508/

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