

Overdue showcase of major works by home-grown composer Ho Chee Kong

CONCERT
PROJECT RE-IMAGINING
YONG SIEW TOH ORCHESTRAL
INSTITUTE
Conservatory Concert Hall,
Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

Ho Chee Kong was the founding Head of Composition at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory from 2003 to 2017. No fewer than four of his composition students have received the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award, including Chen Zhangyi, Wong Kah Chun, Emily Koh and Diana Soh.

This concert was a long overdue showcase of three major orchestral works written over the last 15 years by one of Singapore's most notable composers.

Performed by the Yong Siew Toh Orchestral Institute helmed by founding conductor Chan Tze Law, the retrospective sequence from most recent to earliest work was an intriguing one, united by newly scripted verses by Ho himself.

The premise was that of an individual undergoing an existential crisis, searching deep in the past in order to secure the future.

The latest piece was *There And Back* (2019), a double concerto for erhu/gaohu and cello, premiered by violinist Siow Lee-Chin, cellist Qin Li-Wei and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) led by Yeh Tsung.



Gaohu player Li Baoshun (left) and cellist Qin Li-Wei played *There And Back*, a double concerto. PHOTO: YONG SIEW TOH CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

For this version, the plaintive voice from huqin soloist Li Baoshun (concertmaster of SCO) and the more throaty offerings from Qin's cello were well matched in a gripping tug-of-war between slow and fast episodes.

The music evoked vast scenic landscapes and a vibrant dance of the earth, unfolding like some cinematic epic.

The Sisyphean struggles, intimated by the orchestra's toils, may be summated by Ho's verse, "trudging forward but yet always returning".

The most moving part was its peaceable close, with house lights dimmed and orchestra silent, hearing both instruments retire together harmoniously as one voice.

What followed was *Passage – Fantasy For Cello And Orchestra* (2012), arguably the greatest cello concerto by a Singaporean composer to date. It was composed for the 2012 Singapore Arts Festival as a prequel to Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite Of Spring*, premiered by Qin and the Orchestra of the Music Makers conducted by Chan.

This performance united both soloist and conductor, reliving its primaevial outlook as dark and intensely inward-looking. Bitter and dissonant, this was a study of recurring nightmares and the wasteland of the soul.

Qin's exacting solo bristled with unremitting levels of tension, countered by the orchestra's attempts to de-stress, sounding neo-classical or jazzy at times.

All this culminated in a massive cadenza, worthy of the best of Shostakovich, before the solo being left hanging in the air (and awaiting Stravinsky's solo bassoon to take over).

Closing the trilogy was *Of Passion And Passages* (2008), a traditional three-movement symphony written for the 40th anniversary of Keppel Corporation and premiered by the Singapore Symphony Orchestra under Lim Yau.

This was the most optimistic-sounding of the three, with a celebratory purpose in mind. Pomp and ceremony were the order of the day, but distinguished with a more reflective theme that memorably returns at the end.

Soothing strings coloured the slow movement while percussion dominated the finale's perpetual motion, but it was a solo trumpet's flourish and grandstanding close which completed the romp.

That was a musical way of saying "no matter what life throws at you, there will always be hope".