

Thrilling glimpse into classical ensembles' future



The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestral Institute, conducted by Jason Lai (left), presented a rare programme of Walton and Brahms. PHOTO: CHAN CHEN

CONCERT

ORCHESTRAL INSTITUTE: WALTON & BRAHMS

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory
Orchestral Institute
Conservatory Concert Hall
Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

It cannot be overestimated how Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, has impacted and transformed the face of classical orchestral music in Singapore.

Scores of music students who graduate every year have joined the rank and file of the Singapore Symphony and Singapore Chinese Orchestras, Orchestra of the Music Makers, re:Sound Collective, T'ang and Concordia Quartets, besides forming the nucleus of Red Dot Baroque. And who would have thought that one alumnus, Wong Kah Chun, would become the chief conductor of the Halle and Japan Philharmonic Orchestras?

It has been fascinating to observe the conservatory's orchestra perform over two decades, first led by Chan Tze Law, later Wang Ya Hui and now its present conductor Jason Lai.

The Orchestral Institute, as the ensemble is known, performed a

rare programme of 20th-century English composer William Walton and 19th-century German composer Johannes Brahms, names not often juxtaposed in concert.

Conductor Lai explained that the works were united by a quality of soulfulness, besides having quiet and sublime endings.

Walton's Cello Concerto (1957) was considered unusually conservative for its time, a period of obligatory atonalism and avant-garde experimentation.

Over a gently throbbing accompaniment, soloist Zhu Zeyu coaxed out its lyrical melody, imbued with nostalgia and sorrowful reflection, through long-breathed lines.

The transparent and chamber-like orchestration was well-observed, and Zhu's virtuosity began to shine through, becoming more apparent in the mercurial and acerbic central movement.

Its dissonances were no more spiky than Prokofiev or Shostakovich, and the cellist as nimble vocalist and untiring athlete was truly put to the test.

Zhu passed with flying colours into the finale's Theme and Improvisations, calling for more colour and imagination. He delivered all through to its ethereal close.

Brahms' Symphony No. 3 In F Major (Op.90) is the "Cinderella" of his four symphonies, by virtue of it

being his least celebrated.

Opening expansively, its main subject was inspired by a motif from his late mentor Robert Schumann's First Symphony. Despite deploying a smaller orchestra, the ensemble created an all-round big sonority, impressing at the outset and later storming through the development with real passion.

By contrast, the second movement ambled by leisurely without slackening on its vital pulse.

The lilting third movement was the very embodiment of nostalgia, and while its central section dragged a little, a French horn solo gratefully marked the return of what must be one of Brahms' most memorable melodies.

The finale began furtively but then sprung to life, tautly marshalled by conductor Lai. Its narrative was also thrillingly whipped up to a tumultuous climax.

Eschewing a blazing conclusion, a final brass chorale heralded the symphony's opening theme, now retiring to a calming close. In this work, the orchestra demonstrated emphatically that less means more.

Curious about what Singapore and South-east Asia's future orchestras might look and sound like? Go to Kent Ridge – home of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory – and watch this space.