

YST Orchestral Institute struggles with Schoenberg, recovers with Rachmaninov

CONCERT

ONE ALWAYS RETURNS

Yong Siew Toh Orchestral Institute
Conservatory Concert Hall
Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

The unusual title of this concert comes from a 1948 essay penned by Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg titled *On Reivient Tournours*, or “One Always Returns”, where he described composers returning to the art of their forebears and past masters for inspiration.

For this “father” of atonality and the avant-garde, that meant a return to writing music with fixed tonal centres, the most notable being his riotous reworking of Johannes Brahms’ First Piano Quartet.

Far less well-known is Schoenberg’s *Concerto For String Quartet And Orchestra* (1933), an expansion of George Frideric Handel’s *Concerto Grosso In B Flat Major* (Op.6 No.7).

He scored this for string quartet as the concertino group, accompanied by a big orchestra with full complement of strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion.

One wished this performance by the T’ang Quartet and Yong Siew Toh Orchestral Institute conducted by Jason Lai were more consistent.

Despite the foursome’s advocacy, all its hard work was submerged in a deluge of orchestral textured molasses.

What the original for just strings and continuo achieved in sheer economy could not be matched by its bloated iteration.

Many fine details of Schoenberg’s fussy new content for the quartet were simply swamped or rendered inconsequential when they struggled in vain to stand out.

Even the supposedly festive Hornpipe that closed the busy four-movement concerto sounded

unbalanced and off-kilter.

A far better reward was reaped in Sergei Rachmaninov’s *Symphonic Dances* (Op.45), the exiled Russian composer’s final work.

Nostalgia for his homeland influenced his late music, by the 1940s considered hopelessly conservative and anachronistic for its age.

The first movement’s flickering opening was sensitively handled, then emphatically punched out chords heralded its striding main theme, more of a march than mere dance.

There was a major solo for alto saxophone, lovingly voiced by Michellina Chan, its mellow melody borne by pangs of homesickness.

Just as relevant was a return to the defiant quote from Rachmaninov’s *First Symphony* (1897), then thought to have been destroyed after its disastrous premiere, now sounding retiring and resigned.

Lai and his charges judged its denouement perfectly.

The second movement’s ghostly waltz was taken at a deliberately broad tempo, a faded reminiscence of bygone ballroom scenes from Tolstoy.

That made absolute sense as its rapid gathering of pace towards the end provided just the right push of momentum for the finale’s inexorable ride.

Here, the chants of Russian Orthodoxy, with quotes of *Dies Irae* (Day Of Wrath) and Rachmaninov’s *Vespers* (Blessed Art Thou, Lord), were the driving forces as the orchestra surged to an imperious and triumphal close.

The tam-tam’s final crash had not subsided when applause rang out long and loudly.

As for the concert’s catchy title which inspired this programme, Rachmaninov sadly never returned to Russia. He died in 1943 in Beverly Hills, California, and his remains still rest in New York.



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