

Orchestral institute delivers classics from the Americas with exuberance

CONCERT

AMERIGO-ROUND

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory
Orchestral Institute
NUS University Cultural Centre
Feb 2

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The latest concert by the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestral Institute had a decidedly American slant.

Evident in its peculiar title, the name comes from Florentine explorer and navigator Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512), who had, at the turn of the 16th century, voyaged from Europe to the Americas.

The “New World” was a term coined by him, and the newly discovered continents – North and South – were in turn named after him.

The carnival atmosphere, also suggested by the title, opened with Leonard Bernstein’s Overture to *Candide*, his operetta based on Voltaire’s satirical novella.

Conducted by Jason Lai, the orchestra leapt into its ebullient pages with a fearless abandon, bringing out its bubbly Rossinian wit. The tricky syncopations, not least in the *Glitter And Be Gay* segment, were brilliantly pulled off.

Next stop was George Gershwin’s very boisterous Cuban Overture, composed after a holiday in Havana, which incorporated local musical idioms, particularly the rumba, and motifs from several popular songs.

Percussion and brass sections were made to work overtime, their efforts paying off handsomely in this exuberant performance.

Aaron Copland’s *El Salon Mexico* followed, with scents and aromas south of the border being celebrated. From indolent siesta to joyous fiesta, the music luxuriated in excellent solos from trumpet

and clarinet.

The work soon gathered pace and erupted into a full-blown dance, with terrific thumps on the timpani at the climaxes for good measure.

Incidentally, all three American composers were of Jewish ancestry, from Massachusetts (Bernstein) and Brooklyn (Gershwin and Copland) respectively.

How they captured the infectious rhythms and irrepressible flavours of the vernacular with such skill and seeming authenticity, relived by this young orchestra, seemed almost incredulous.

The concert’s second half had no borrowed music, instead opening with three dances from Spanish composer Manuel de Falla’s ballet *Three Cornered Hat*.

It was the Spanish conquest of the New World which brought its characteristically rhythmic music over to the Americas.

In the *Neighbour’s Dance*, *Miller’s Dance* and *Final Dance*, one soon got the essence of Latino music, and it really did not matter which side of the Atlantic it was from.

If the last dance was hustling and bustling from the very outset, living Mexican composer Arturo Marquez’s very popular *Danzon No. 2* was a slow boil.

Opening with just solo clarinet, piano and claves (two wooden sticks struck against each other) and quietly accompanying strings, the music seemed to emanate from some soporific cantina. Its gradual awakening to rude health was what made this reading tick.

Soloists stood as they performed, and with time, the standing groups got larger as the music gained in volume and momentum. Eventually, the entire string section stood up, and with a loudly popping shower of streamers, the enjoyable Americas-themed extravaganza was brought to a sonorous close.