



Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra chief conductor Wong Kah Chun at the Beethoven Im Garten concert at the Singapore Botanic Gardens last Saturday.
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A prelude to better times with Beethoven

CONCERT

BEETHOVEN IM GARTEN

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory
Orchestra
Botanic Gardens Shaw Symphony
Stage, last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

The skies over the Botanic Gardens had been overcast for most of the afternoon.

Distant thunder rumbled and one wondered whether the concert Beethoven Im Garten (Beethoven In The Garden) would take place if it rained.

Then, at six, the sun emerged from the shadows and a cool breeze swept over the audience of a thousand, masked and in socially distanced groups on their picnic mats.

Instead of the stormy fourth movement of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, the weather change evoked the heartwarming fifth movement, a song of thanksgiving.

The symphony to be heard this evening was, however, Beethoven's Symphony No. 4 In B Flat Major (Op. 60) – not the most popular of his nine masterpieces.

German composer and critic Robert Schumann described it as a “slender Grecian maiden between two Norse giants” – flattering, albeit in an oblique way.

Beethoven Im Garten began in 2018 as an initiative of the German Embassy in Singapore with young Singaporean conductor Wong Kah Chun, presently chief conductor of the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra.

Back after a two-year hiatus, it was Singapore's first full orchestral concert outdoors with international participation since the pandemic began.

Performed by the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra – Wong's alma mater – and augmented by 10 members from Germany's Dresden Philharmonic, it was a welcome

start to a raft of concerts made possible by relaxed Covid-19 rules.

The audience was still segregated, with many (including this listener) located far back in the rear, separated by a 50m stretch of no man's land.

It was no picnic either, as food and drinks were not allowed, and the audience had to be content with listening to one of two speakers blaring out the music while observing the proceedings through binoculars.

The symphony soon got under way after the obligatory speeches, and Beethoven's music rarely disappointed.

Did one know that the slow introduction of the first movement employed a variant of the Fate motif of his famous Fifth Symphony? Now slowed down till barely recognisable, it served as a launching pad for the movement's exciting main section.

The energetic start was followed by a masterly slow movement built

on waves upon waves of sound. Contrast was provided by the scherzo's somewhat ungainly lurching, but Wong's taut direction ensured the ensemble kept in sync.

The finale was a perpetual motion in fast tarantella rhythm, a breathless ride in which every player became his or her own virtuoso musician.

Wong then spoke about how the pandemic had affected the lives of young professional musicians, and how this concert was a harbinger of better times ahead.

The concert closed with the exhilarating final movement, Saltarello Presto, another fast and swirling dance from Mendelssohn's Fourth Symphony, better known as his Italian Symphony.

The skies had darkened again, but the weather held up for a stirring conclusion.

• The concert is available to stream at str.sg/whot