

Chamber performance in the spirit of Bach's time

CONCERT

BACH'S ST JOHN PASSION

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music and Red Dot Baroque
Victoria Concert Hall/Last Saturday

Chang Tou Liang

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music began its Bach Cantata Series 10 years ago under its head of vocal studies Alan Bennett, later becoming an institution with regular appearances by world-renowned baroque music specialist Masaaki Suzuki.

Suzuki led the conservatory's vocal and orchestral students in unforgettable and historically informed performances of Johann Sebastian Bach's music.

The conservatory was also responsible for the education and

nurturing of young violinist Alan Choo, founder of Singapore's first professional period instrument band Red Dot Baroque.

This Lenten season would have seen Suzuki conducting conservatory musicians and Red Dot Baroque in a performance of Bach's St John Passion, a musical narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ according to the Gospel of John. Due to Japan's stringent Covid-19 restrictions, however, he was replaced by Choo, who led from the violin.

This was a chamber performance in the original spirit of Bach's time, with a choir of just 16 members, from which all the soloists were selected.

But what a sound they generated from the opening chorus Herr, Unser Herrscher (Lord, Our Ruler), which bristled with tension



and strife. Clearly, this performance would not be lacking in conviction and passion.

Musical passions aim to instil in believers a sense of awe and hope, buoyed by the belief in a God who punishes evil and ultimately delivers salvation to the faithful and penitent. The German texts

made no attempt to disguise this fact, helpfully aided by the English transliterations projected on stage above the performers.

The role of the Evangelist, who narrated the events through sung recitatives, was shared by tenors Daniel Chong in Part One and Bennett in the much longer Part Two.

Their clear delivery paved the way for a series of arias from soloists, including the excellent bass-baritone Gerard Lim, who portrayed Jesus with confidence and determined stoicism, and others in shorter cameos.

Ensemble work was incisive and tidy throughout, with players and

Musicians from Red Dot Baroque and Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music performing Bach's St John Passion. PHOTO: BERNARD MUI

singers responding readily to visual cues from leader Choo's chair. He was an ever-animated presence, moving freely with each beat, as if instilling into every note an infectious vitality. The absence of a podium conductor was never missed for a moment.

While dramatic fugal choruses stirred the hearts, the most intimate minutes were afforded in arias lightly accompanied by instruments from Red Dot Baroque, such as baroque oboes, flutes and violins in pairs.

A particularly moving moment came towards the end, with alto Cindy Honanta's sublime aria *Es Ist Vollbracht* (It Is Accomplished) with Leslie Tan's pensive viola da gamba (an ancient bowed instrument) in perfect counterpoint.

The two final choruses, *Ruht Wohl* (Be Fully At Peace) and *Ich Will Dich Preisen Ewiglich* (I Want To Praise You Eternally), might be on the subdued side, but their message was unmistakable.

This performance, greeted vociferously by a grateful full house that no longer needed to be socially distanced, would make fervent believers out of just about anybody.