

# Loud ovation for 'million-dollar trio'



Violinist Qian Zhou, pianist Albert Tiu and cellist Qin Li-Wei have been playing together for more than a decade. PHOTO: ONG SHU CHEN

## CONCERT

### PIANO TRIOS

Qian Zhou (violin), Qin Li-Wei (cello)  
and Albert Tiu (piano)  
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory  
Concert Hall  
Last Thursday

## Chang Tou Liang

Over 70 years ago, a piano trio comprising violinist Jascha Heifetz, cellist Gregor Piatigorsky and pianist Arthur Rubinstein, all immigrants to the United States and stars in their own right, was hailed as the "Million Dollar Trio". That group was short-lived because of personality clashes between the violinist and pianist.

Singapore is fortunate to have its own million-dollar trio, resident at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, which has proven far more enduring. Violinist Qian Zhou, cellist Qin Li-Wei and pianist Albert Tiu, conservatory professors and local musical celebrities, have been performing together for more than 10 years. Their well-attended concert of three Russian piano trios further sealed the threesome as the land's premier trio.

The evening opened with Dmitri Shostakovich's Piano Trio No. 1 in C Minor (Op. 8) from 1923. An early student effort which straddled past and present musical traditions, its morose mood was typical of Romantic-era Slavic pathos, while chromatic themes strained the limits of tonality.

Over Tiu's piano chords, Qin's cello plaint was the opening voice, later joined by Qian's equally pleading violin entry. Together, they were a tightly-knit unit that traversed with aplomb the music's peaks and troughs.

It was Qin who had the peachiest melody, in a glimmering fantasy-like episode, with fairy-tale lightness that seemed to forget the travails before. The best case possible was made for a promising work that signalled Shostakovich's future greatness, looking ahead to his ground-breaking First Symphony of 1924 to 1925.

In common with the Shostakovich, Sergei Rachmaninov's Trio Elegiac No. 1 in G Minor (1892) was also a teenaged work cast in a single movement. The young man was in the thrall of mentor Tchaikovsky, his influence evident in the music's brooding melancholy.

Although it was Tiu's piano chords which introduced the main theme, it was again Qin whose opening statement is best remembered.

Avid interplay between cello and piano would later come to fruition in the far better-known Cello Sonata, also in the same key. Lyrical at every turn, the melodic interest also carried by Qian's violin had a parallel with Rachmaninov's art-songs or romances. This passionate performance was the perfect prelude to the concert's main event, Tchaikovsky's sprawling Piano Trio in A Minor (Op. 50) of 1882.

Playing for almost 45 minutes, this was a fitting memorial to pianist Nikolai Rubinstein, who had earlier disparaged Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. Almost identical in mood and demeanour as the earlier Rachmaninov, the mournful strains of its opening movement (Pezzo Elegiac or Elegiac Piece) were intense yet moving.

Despite its longeurs and repetitiveness, the work was held together in large part by Tiu's indefatigable pianism. Unlike the panned piano concerto, there was simply no respite for him.

The second movement's Theme and Variations, by contrast, had a salon quality, delighting with variations which took the form of a music box dance, waltz, mazurka and a massive fugue to boot. And when there seemed no end to the revelry, the opening solemnity returned, symbolic of a life cut short at its prime.

Seldom has a work that finished on a quiet received such a loud and long ovation. The added treat from the trio was an encore in Ukrainian violin student Georgii Moroz's delightful arrangement of Elgar's Salut D'Amour, which had the audience in a rapture.