

Red Dot Baroque illuminates with Biber's Mystery Sonatas

CONCERT

BIBER'S MYSTERY SONATAS

Red Dot Baroque
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory
Concert Hall
Feb 23

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Trust Red Dot Baroque (RDB), Singapore's only dedicated period instrument ensemble, to continue illuminating listeners about Baroque music. Beyond the familiar J.S. Bach, George Frideric Handel and Antonio Lucio Vivaldi, RDB has now unveiled the Mystery Sonatas of Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber (1644 to 1704).

Born in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), Biber was a virtuoso violinist who became the court composer of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg, a position famously occupied decades later by the Mozarts, Wolfgang Amadeus and his father Leopold.

Biber's most famous work was *Battalia*, a riotous reflection of the Thirty Years' War, but his *Mystery Sonatas* (or *Rosary Sonatas*) of 1676 come close. These comprise 16 works inspired by events in the lives of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. The *Mysteries Of The Rosary* include five Joyful Mysteries, five Sorrowful Mysteries and five Glorious Mysteries, before closing with a *Passacaglia*.

On the evening of Feb 23, 10 works were performed by six members of RDB and 10 students of Yong Siew Toh Conservatory.

None of the sonatas conformed to the "sonata form", which came much later, instead deriving from the Italian word "sonare", which means to "sound out". The short works were more like fantasies and dances which revelled in the art of improvisation.

The opening piece, *The Annunciation* – performed by Alan Choo (baroque violin), Leslie Tan (ba-



(From left) Leslie Tan (baroque cello), Gerald Lim (harpsichord) and Alan Choo (baroque violin) playing *The Annunciation*. PHOTO: ONG SHU CHEN

roque cello) and Gerald Lim (harpsichord) – served as a prime example.

Flashy flourishes from Choo immediately alerted one to the level of virtuosity involved, an attention-grabbing introduction leading to a set of variations, considered inventive for their time.

While the sonatas were meant for deep reflection and affirmation of one's faith, the creative spirit in Biber could not but help turn these into showpieces.

Preceding each piece was a short narration by Choo, reading from the Gospels. The ensuing sonatas became an exercise for six talented violin students in adjusting to the different tunings (called *scordatura*), thus rendering varying shades of colour and emotion to each piece.

The *Finding Of Jesus In The Temple* (in A major), played by Syu Cheng-yi, was a gleeful series of dances, contrasted by *The Agony In The Garden* (C minor), performed by Xu Zhuorui, a lament of

heartrending pathos.

The *Crucifixion* (G minor) was suitably dramatic and violent, with RDB's Placida Ho providing requisite fireworks in its variations.

A departure from the violin-cello-harpsichord combo was *The Assumption Of Mary* (D major), which saw Brenda Koh's violin accompanied by Tan's cello, Mervyn Lee on baroque guitar and Vanessa Irwanto on harp. The transformation was a stark one, the earlier formalities turning into a joyous folk dance with seemingly happy-go-lucky vibes.

It was left to Choo, alone on violin, to emphatically complete the set with the *Passacaglia* in G minor (*The Guardian Angel*). Built upon just four descending notes (G-F-E flat-D), a mighty edifice was erected with its series of short variations, looking forward to Bach's famous *Chaconne* composed about 40 years later.

One may surmise that without Biber, there might have been no Bach.